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De lo m?s lindo y de lo m?pobre: Transnational Borges and Sandra Cisneros

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De lo más lindo y de lo más pobre:
Transnational Borges and Sandra Cisneros

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy
in Hispanic Languages and Literatures

by

Audrey Harris

2016
ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

De lo más lindo y de lo más pobre:

Transnational Borges and Sandra Cisneros

by

Audrey Harris

Doctor of Philosophy in Hispanic Languages and Literatures

University of California, Los Angeles, 2016

Professor Héctor Calderón, Chair

This dissertation examines the influence of Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges on the writings of twenty-first century Mexican American author Sandra Cisneros, as well as how reading her work helps us better understand overlooked elements of his writings, including marginality, gender roles, sexuality and the rights to self-definition, agency and self-expression of women and women writers. Though Cisneros is one of the most popular women writers in the United States, the first Chicana writer to be published by a major New York publishing house and an important influence for a new generation of writers, she has been dismissed by many critics as not a serious writer, or primarily a testimonial writer. By linking her writing with Borges, I present her as a United States descendent of the Latin American literary tradition that gained worldwide acclaim during the so-called Latin American literary boom of the 1960s. This dissertation departs from representations of Cisneros as
solely a Chicana writer linking her instead to a north-south transnational, transborder literary tradition.

As we shall see in this dissertation, for decades Borges has been a literary companion at Cisneros’s side. From Cisneros’s interviews, we know that she had first read Borges beginning in high school in the late 1960s; her most recent publication, a collection of essays entitled *A House of My Own* (2015) features references to Borges as a major influence on her work. In a 2015 interview, Cisneros said that Borges “me dio permiso para combinar mitos y sueños y cuentos de hadas en mis cuentos.” T.S. Eliot, speaking on literary relationships across time in “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” asserts, “the past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past” (*Sacred Wood* 50). This dissertation will also examine how reading Cisneros—both her fictions and essays in which she directly references her readings of Borges’s work—in turn alters the way we read Borges. Additionally, it considers how themes raised in this early twentieth-century Argentine male writer’s work develop and change in Cisneros’s late twentieth and early twenty-first century Mexican American female imagination. These themes include gender role reversal during the advent of feminism and the emergence of women in the workplace in the twentieth century; popular and marginalized cultures; personal and collective identities; cultural hybridity and bilingualism.

This dissertation is comprised of four thematic comparative chapters that contribute to new understandings of both Borges and Cisneros. CHAPTER ONE begins the dissertation with the influence of the poetry and prose in Borges’s *Dreamtigers* (1964) on Cisneros’s highly acclaimed *The House on Mango Street* (1984). CHAPTER TWO has an urban studies focus through the literary representations of two Latin American capitals, Buenos Aires in Borges’s “Fundación mítica de Buenos Aires” (1923) and Mexico City in Cisneros’s *Caramelo* (2002). CHAPTER THREE is a reconsideration of Borges’s female-centered writings, including his translations of Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando* (1928) and *A Room of One’s Own* (1929), through Sandra Cisneros’s writings and
feminism. CHAPTER FOUR assesses elements of Buddhist spirituality in Cisneros’s twenty-first century writings gained in part through Borges’s writings on Buddhism near the end of his life. The dissertation will demonstrate that Borges remains Cisneros’s most important literary maestro with his influence felt in her poetry, fiction, and essays from adolescence in the 1960s through her recent *A House of My Own* (2015).
The dissertation of Audrey Harris is approved.

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2016
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INTRODUCTION

The Dance

“[C]omo chico pude observer en Palermo y años después en la Chacarita y en Boedo…en la esquinas lo bailaban [el tango] parejas de hombres, porque las mujeres del pueblo no querían participar en un baile de perdularia.”

Jorge Luis Borges, *Evaristo Carriego*

“He rolled back the Afghan rug, yanked me to my feet, demonstrated la habanera, el fandango, la milonga, and explained how each had contributed to birth el tango.”

Sandra Cisneros, “*Bien Pretty*”

“I wanted to leap across the table, swing from the punched tin chandelier, and force him to dance.”

Sandra Cisneros, “*Bien Pretty*”

If this dissertation were to have a cover, it would be a pen and ink drawing of this spectacularly odd couple, Sandra Cisneros and Jorge Luis Borges. In the image, the two dance a tango on a dark street corner, illuminated by lamplight. A silver-templed Borges of droopy yet inquisitive visage and lumbering form, wearing an impeccable suit, holds a curvy, raven-haired Cisneros, in a tight black dress and high heels, a colorful silk *rebozo* languishing over one shoulder and gold earrings dangling from her ears like pirate’s treasure. On Cisneros’s calf a knife is tucked into a leather strap. Meanwhile Borges, peering myopically at this younger woman who is both acolyte and master, gently tucks a flaming red rose behind her ear. This is the visual image for my reading of an intellectual encounter between these two lions of Latin American letters.

That they dance the tango is not incidental to the present investigation. A uniquely American dance, it was born in Buenos Aires sometime between 1880 and 1890 (shortly before the author’s birth, in 1899). “El tango y Borges nacen al mismo tiempo. Y se hacen de Buenos Aires,” writes Argentine journalist José Guillermo Ángel R.
In “Historia del tango,” included in his 1930 biography of a minor Argentine street poet, Evaristo Carriego Borges writes about both the sexual element and the bellicosity and machismo of the tango, elaborating “la palabra hombre, en todos los lenguajes que sé, connota capacidad sexual y capacidad belicosa, y la palabra virtus, que en latín quiere decir coraje, procede de vir, que es varón” (Obras completas I 263)—topics he takes up again in Historia universal de la infamia (1935), which is a catalogue of many virile bellicose men (and a woman).² Men always lead in the tango, yet women call attention to their figures and can subtly manipulate the dance, their partner, and his desire with their movements (Bergero 217-18). In the third epigraph to this chapter, Cisneros challenges the code of the woman as follower by writing “I wanted to... force him to dance” indicating a powerful female agency.

Another crucial element of the tango is its cultural hybridity, which reflects the mixed international urban climate into which it was born. Immigrants from Spain, Africa, Italy, and other parts of the world had flooded Buenos Aires by the late nineteenth century and together contributed to the birth and development of the tango. The arrabales in particular, were a racially mixed section of the city, racially diverse and characterized by the dances and rhythms of Afro-Argentine culture (Bergero 75-76). One of Borges’s quintessential tales of the arrabales, “El hombre de la esquina rosada,” takes place in a local brothel bar owned by Julia, “de humilde color,” (dark-skinned or Afro-Argentine) filled with Italians, “chinas” (women with Asian features or appearance) and an Englishman, drinking and fighting and dancing a rowdy tango (Historia universal de la infamia, 100).³ This side of Borges that delighted in marginal street

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¹ I refer to the story of “La viuda Ching, pirata” see CHAPTER THREE for summary and analysis.

² Both Borges and Cisneros interrogate the notion of machismo, strong in Latin American countries, by creating female characters who take on masculine qualities—what Michelle Tokarzyc calls the femme macho. See CHAPTER THREE.

³ René Mugica picks up on this element of the arrabales in El hombre de la esquina rosada (1962), the film version of Borges’s classic story, which paints the arrabales as dusty unpaved streets filled with people of criollo,
cultures and the immigrant experience comes into relief when he is brought into dialogue with Chicano literature and in this case Cisneros, who was raised in a poor neighborhood in Mexican Chicago and decided to celebrate that neighborhood in her first major book, *The House on Mango Street* (1984).

**Parallel Lives: Within and Between Two Worlds**

Borges lived his formative years in Europe for seven years from 1914-1921, sufficient time to instill in the emerging young writer a strong sense of a multinational identity. Borges was fond of recalling the many hours in his childhood reading with his British paternal grandmother, Fanny Haslam, who taught him her native language and cultivated his love of English literature, particularly the adventure stories of Robert Louis Stevenson; Edgar Allan Poe; Charles Dickens; Grimm’s fairy tales; Richard Frances Burton’s translation of *The Arabian Nights* (1885-8) and Oscar Wilde. He first read *Don Quijote* in English translation. Later, at the age of nine, he published his first translation, Oscar Wilde’s “The Happy Prince”—not coincidentally, his first publication trafficked in the English language. Later he delighted in travelling the world to give lectures, and ultimately requested to be buried in Geneva, Switzerland. He served as a Visiting Professor at University of Texas at Austin from 1961-62, and found inspiration in and also inspired many North American writers. In his famous 1951 lecture “El escritor argentino y la tradición,” he proclaimed that Argentine writers, rather than merely limiting themselves to regional and national subjects, “podemos manejar todos los temas europeos, manejarlos sin supersticiones, con una irreverencia que puede tener, y ya tiene, consecuencias afortunadas”

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4 See Note 5.

5 This love of English literature descended from the Haslam family. Fanny Haslam’s father, Edward Young Haslam, edited one of the first English journals in Argentina, *The Southern Cross.*
Hence Borges avails himself of many classics from Western literature, such as the Odyssey, the Iliad, and the Bible, often setting themes, ideas, or lines borrowed from them in stories set in something resembling the arrabales of Buenos Aires or the pampas.6

Sandra Cisneros travelled back and forth almost every year between Chicago and Mexico City until her adolescence, developing a fascination with Mexico and a life-long love of travel. Like Borges, Sandra Cisneros also grew up between two languages (though she writes in English while Borges wrote primarily in Spanish): American English and the yearned-for Spanish, that language that she associated with her father’s tenderness and with long summer vacations in Mexico City and Acapulco. English was the language of school, of teachers who made her feel tongue-tied, and of her mother’s anger. Her education was primarily in English, and as a child she was a voracious reader of English literature, encouraged by her mother who, Cisneros has later stated, was a frustrated artist and intellectual chained to the role of housewife and mother of seven children. Meanwhile, Spanish was the language of her father’s sugary-sweet endearments—mi cielo, mi vida, mi reina. Though she continues to write in English, increasingly her writing has come to mimic Spanish grammatical structures, so that readers know they are hearing someone speaking Spanish.

For Cisneros, a Chicana writer to claim English-language fairy tales and the Spanish language literature of Latin America as her literary inheritance flies directly in the face of those who would limit Chicano literature to the short history of Mexican immigration to the United States, (after Texas was annexed in 1845 immigration was mostly south by Mexicans who repatriated in Mexico; 1890 was when the first significant wave of Mexico-US immigration began) and geographically to the U.S. alone. In “El pachuco y otros extremos” (El laberinto de

6 Borges’s writings can and have been read in a post-colonial framework. See Edna Aizenberg’s excellent article “Borges, Postcolonial Precursor” in which she calls him a pioneer of postcolonial literature who paved the way for later writers from many postcolonial contexts including Salman Rushdie. In it she quotes Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin’s conclusion that postcolonial literature is often positioned ‘within and between two worlds’ (Aizenberg 22).
la soledad, 1950), Octavio Paz writes that, due to their history of displacement, of being, as he pejoratively claims, neither here nor there, Mexicans north of the border, or pachucos, have neither US nor Mexican culture. “Los pachucos no reivindican su raza ni la nacionalidad de sus antepasados . . . El pachuco ha perdido toda su herencia: lengua, religión, costumbres, creencias” (56). Cisneros and many of her contemporaries rejected this kind of cultural limitation; she instead positions herself both ‘within and between worlds.’

Cisneros has written that Borges “me dio permiso para combinar mitos y sueños y cuentos de hadas en mis cuentos.”7 He gave her the vision to set stories drawn from the Bible and the Odyssey in Chicago’s Latino barrios; Mexican myths and telenovela dreams in Seguín, Texas; and retellings of the Popol Vuh, Hans Christian Anderson’s “The Snow Queen” and the story of the Buddha in San Antonio. Since The House on Mango Street her writing has been symbolic, taking from a wide-ranging breadth of literary sources from European, North American, and Latin American traditions.

In high school as well as in college at Chicago’s Loyola University in the 1970s and later at the Iowa Writers’ Workshop, Cisneros read Latin American literature in English translation. There she met visiting writers from their International Writing Program who opened up a world of Latin American literature to her that she had barely begun to explore. Sandra Cisneros belongs to the generation of the U.S. “translation boom” that followed the original Latin American “boom” of the 1960s and 1970s. Among others, she read Juan Rulfo, Gabriel García Márquez, Manuel Puig, and Jorge Luis Borges. This was also a turning point for Borges, in terms of the hugely positive English language reception of his work in the United States, where almost over night he became a literary cult figure. Available translations of his work included: Ficciones (1962); Labyrinth (1962); Dreamtigers (1964); A Universal History of Infamy (1972); Selected

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7 Interview with Reyna Grande at ALOUD at the Los Angeles Public Library, October 28, 2015.
Poems 1923-1967 (1972); Other Inquisitions 1937-1952 (1975), and The Aleph and Other Stories 1933-1969 (1978). In those years, Cisneros was a loudmouthed Mexican American Midwesterner just beginning to make a name for her self on the local Chicago poetry scene. According to a 1982 autobiographical statement that she titled “Partial Autobiography” (with a nod to one of Borges’s famous essays), which she wrote for Wolfgang Binder who in turn borrows from her title for his Partial Autobiographies: Interviews with Twenty Chicano Poets, (1982) “she did not know she was a Chicana writer, and if anyone had labeled her as such, she would have denied it . . . Furthermore she did not know of any Chicano writers in Chicago, nor was she aware of the Chicano movement in the Southwest . . . ‘I felt I was Mexican,’ [she explained]” (cited in Calderón 171). However, while working for the Latino Youth Alternative High School in Chicago as a counselor and teacher, she began to feel a sense of identification with her roots and a sense of social purpose. Here, in this formative period in her life, living in Chicago as an emerging writer, and without any Chicano/a models for her work, she began to look South and turned to Borges for inspiration.

The Midwest Disciple Meets the Argentine Master

In A House of My Own (2015), Cisneros writes of her awe-filled visits to Borges’s public lectures in Midwestern universities during his tours in the 1970s:

I’m reminded too of the many occasions I was in the audience for the lectures of Jorge Luis Borges. Every time he came to Chicago, we thought it would be the last since he was so old. There would always be a huge wave of disciples, and un silencio enorme, a great silence, even before he opened his mouth and spoke. The master Borges was already an elderly man, and blind besides, which, as he himself admitted, inspired kindness…el maestro Borges sat on a chair and leaned, it seemed to me, on a cane. At
least he is leaning on a cane in my memory. He spoke of marvels, things that cause astonishment, labyrinths, mirrors, stories that leave you with your mouth open, because he liked to tell those kinds of stories….His work appealed to young writers. He was experimental and avant-garde…” (38)

Cisneros first began reading Borges in high school, and admired him as a writer of experimental fiction, as she also writes in the 2008 introduction to The House on Mango Street (xvi-xvii). There she states that Borges’s Dreamtigers (1964) was a main source of inspiration for that book.

CHAPTER ONE, “De lo más lindo y de lo más pobre: Writing the Self and the Other in Dreamtigers and The House on Mango Street,” explores the many thematic and structural connections between Dreamtigers (El hacedor, 1960) and The House on Mango Street (1984), as well as the way both self-referentially call attention to the act of writing. CHAPTER ONE shows both authors rejecting hierarchies and invoking a democratic notion of the self, descending from a North American tradition including Walt Whitman and Carl Sandburg. The chapter explores how both writers create a sense of otherness in their writing and how, writing from the margins, they begin to come to terms with that feeling of difference and outsiderhood. For Borges in part it sprung from his lifelong and worsening blindness, which fully descended in 1954, five years before the publication of El hacedor in 1960. Alfred Macadam, in The Cambridge Companion to Jorge Luis Borges (2014) even suggests that the short form of El hacedor is due to Borges’s now complete blindness and the subsequent adjustment in his writing methods (138). Thus what would become a very influential collection can be seen in part as born from physical disability.

CHAPER TWO, “Borges and Cisneros in the City: From the Margins to the Center,” draws on Beatriz Sarlo’s Una modernidad periférica (1988) to examine the depiction of the cultural and socio-economic margins and what Sarlo terms “la cultura de mezcla” in both
authors’ respective literary re-creations of the Latin American City. In both their works, popular American-born music, immigrant and working-class characters, and humble neighborhoods represent the essence of their respective cities, illustrating urban cultures nurtured by and within the margins. It considers the poetic imagination of the city through metaphysical images that animate and corporealize the city, employing Borges’s principle of magical causality from his famous essay “El arte narrativo y la magia” (Discusión 1932; “Narrative Art and Magic,” Borges a Reader, 1981). Shifting focus, this chapter looks at the thematic and structural similarities in Borges’s “El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan” (El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan, 1941; “Garden of the Forking Paths,” Ficciones, 1962) and her novel of Mexico City, Caramelo (2002). It also considers her Mexico City-based poem “With Lorenzo at the Center of the Universe” (Loose Woman, 1994), a poem about a romantic encuentro and desencuentro in the Pre-Hispanic heart of the city which directly references Borges’s poem “Delia Elena San Marco” (Dreamtigers). CHAPTER TWO also illustrates how Cisneros’s treatment of the mythical foundation of the city in “Lorenzo at the Center of the Universe” draws upon Borges’s famous poem “Fundación mitica de Buenos Aires,” (Cuaderno San Martin, 1929).

CHAPTER THREE, “Feminizing Borges: In the Company of Leonor Acevedo Suárez, Virginia Woolf, and Sandra Cisneros,” investigates Borges’s inheritance to a lineage of feminist thought: Victoria Ocampo, the great Argentine publisher who employed Borges to write for her feminist-leaning magazine Sur; Virginia Woolf, whom Ocampo commissioned him to translate; and Borges’s mother, Leonor Acevedo Suárez, a secret force behind his literary career. Cisneros also joins this group, as another writer of gender-bending characters who was greatly influenced by Virginia Woolf (the title of her 2015 book, A House of my Own, riffs on Woolf’s 1929 A Room of One’s Own). In CHAPTER THREE, Cisneros provides the historical context for the issue of feminism. A reading of this theme in her work coaxes out topics of sexuality and gender
buried within the writings of Borges, more circumspect and timid in the matters of the flesh than the sexually liberated Cisneros. Elsewhere the *maestro* takes the lead, lending Cisneros his technique of inventing a fictional story based on a historical footnote in “Eyes of Zapata” (*Woman Hollering Creek*, 1991), as Borges does in “El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan” as well as “La viuda Ching, pirata” (*Historia universal de la infamia*, 1935; “The Widow Ching, Lady Pirate,” *A Universal History of Infamy*, 1972).

CHAPTER FOUR, “In Search of the Latin American Buddha,” shows both writers turning away from the Catholicism that forms the dominant religious subtext in Latin America and seeking out Eastern thought, particularly Buddhism, for inspiration. In 2006, Cisneros wrote about Borges’s *Seven Nights* (1984) (originally published as *Siete Noches*, 1980) on her blog on April 26, 2011, stating that she read it seven thousand times, and that each time she read it, it changed her. Her 2015 essay collection *A House of My Own* is filled with numerous references to Borges’s *Seven Nights*, particularly to the essays entitled “Poetry” and “Blindness.” These references come paired with reflections on Buddhist principles; the central essay in *Seven Nights* is on Buddhism. Through Borges and Buddhism, Cisneros articulates a theory of transforming suffering into art. This chapter takes her into the most recent stage in her career, in which she has embraced peace activism, inspired by Thich Nhat Hanh, as one of her roles as an internationally renowned writer.

Together, these chapters comprise four interconnected comparative essays considering different aspects of the literary relationship between the two authors. There is a progression through them, from exploring otherness and marginality in the city in CHAPTERS ONE and TWO, to deep-seated issues of gendered difference in CHAPTER THREE, to finally seeking resolution for inner conflict and a path for the release of suffering through Buddhist principles in CHAPTER FOUR. In the conclusion, I consider how, both in terms of her choice of literary
influence and her decision to move to Mexico in 2015 with dual citizenship, Cisneros is now claiming her territory as Mexico and redefining herself as a transnational, transborder Latin American writer. It is time for a new interpretation of her work, one that incorporates, and invites her into, the great Latin American literary tradition that she has sought out and drawn from throughout her career.
CHAPTER ONE

De lo más lindo y de lo más pobre:

Writing the Self and the Other in *Dreamtigers* and *The House on Mango Street*

Cuentan que Ulises, harto de prodigios,
Lloró de amor al divisar su Itaca
Verde y humilde. El arte es esa Itaca
De verde eternidad, no de prodigios.

Introductions: The Meeting with the Mentor

Fittingly for a dissertation about a literary encounter between a writer and her mentor, I begin this first chapter with an analysis of two prologues, respectively of Borges’ *Dreamtigers* (1964) and Cisneros’ *The House on Mango Street* (1984) that narrate just such meetings. The introduction to *Dreamtigers* is a prose poem written in the style of a lucid dream, dedicated to the Argentine poet and journalist Leopoldo Lugones, (1874-1938). In the piece, the narrator leaves the sounds of the plaza behind him and enters the space of the library. The brief mention of his departure of the street (“leaving behind the babble of the plaza”) before the entry into the library (“the enveloping serenity of order, time magically desiccated and preserved”) is the first of a series of telescoping, a movement from outward in, from present to past (21). Borges first describes the room through physical and emotional sensation: “I feel, almost physically, the gravitation of the books” (ibid). He then looks to both sides and surveys ‘the readers’ momentary profiles,’ in an example of hypallage, where an adjective describing one object is displaced to another; it is his glimpse that is momentary, not the faces themselves. He describes them as illuminated by ‘officious lamps,’ and explicitly credits Milton for his use of this second hypallage. This clever wordplay introduces the destabilization of reality that sets the scene for

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8 The original work, *El hacedor*, was published in Spanish in 1960. I use the title of the English translation by Mildred Boyer and Harold Morland, because this is the version that Cisneros read and because of this particular text’s direct influence on *The House on Mango Street*. For the same reason, I recur to textual quotes from the same translation when the book is considered in light of its influence on Cisneros.
the clearly fictional journey he narrates, to Lugones’s office within the library, where he meets the dead author and presents the book we are about to read, to the master’s approval. Auto-reflexively, he describes his own construction of this fantasy: “at this point my dream dissolves, like water in water. The vast library that surrounds me is on Mexico Street, not on Rodríguez Peña, and you, Lugones, killed yourself early in ‘38” (21).

Thus Borges’s introduction to *Dreamtigers* begins with the entry into the writing space, the homage to the master, and the sense of an offering to an awaiting reader. It is written in a disarming first person, directed to the second person (Lugones, though the reader also feels included in this respectful address) creating an immediate sense of intimacy and verisimilitude. As Andrew Hurley writes in his annotated translation of Borges’s *Collected Fictions* (1999), Borges may have come to view Lugones, whom he and other Argentine avant-garde writers had attacked for his old-fashioned adherence to Spanish modernismo and French Symbolism, as a model. Writes Hurley:

> [I]n this introduction JLB [Borges] seems to recognize that while he and his friends were experimenting with a ‘new’ poetics in the first decades of the century, Lugones kept on his amiable way, and to admit that later he, JLB, had put aside some of the more shocking and radical of his notions of poetry in favor of a cleaner, less ‘poetic’ poetry, which Lugones would probably have recognized as much closer to his own. So the ‘son’ comes to see that he has come to resemble the resented ‘father.’ (*Collected Fictions* 543)

Hurley’s note underscores the sense of homecoming that Borges’s introduction conveys. The apprentice leaves behind the noisy streets and descends, into the musty but hallowed library, a place of infinite return. The *Lunario* that Borges makes reference to in the introduction, as an inspiration for his use of hypallage, alludes to *Lunario sentimental* (1909), Lugones’s third collection of verse. Like *Dreamtigers* it includes an assorted collection of short-form pieces:
while Borges’s book includes histories, vignettes, poems and stories, Lugones’s contains poems of varying length and meter, short stories, and short plays.

In her foreword to *The House on Mango Street*, Cisneros employs many of the elements of *Dreamtigers*’s opening salvo. She begins by referencing a photo of herself in which she’s sitting in her office in front of a typewriter: the entry into the writing space. She mentions the neighborhood outside—Chicago, 1980, Bucktown—and the masters who once populated it: “Nelson Algren once walked these streets. Saul Bellow’s turf was over on Division Street, walking distance away” (xii). Then she moves back inward, to the office and the ‘magical’ objects it contains, where she can “be quiet and still and listen to the voices inside herself” (xii).

Like Borges with his lucid dream, Cisneros describes the retreat into the writing space as a descent into the self and the imagination. She describes the office as her canvas: “walls white as typing paper” (xiv), just as, for Borges, the library is the place where figures of speech flourish, where influences burn bright and inspire. She stares up at the walls, “inventing pictures in the cracks in the plaster, inventing stories to go with these pictures” (xv).

In contrast to the economy of style and imagery and themes in Borges’s introduction to *Dreamtigers*, Cisneros evokes many worlds and several role models in her foreword, titled “A House of my Own,” to the 2009 edition of *The House on Mango Street*, one of whom is Borges himself:

> The young woman in the photo is modeling her book-in-progress after *Dreamtigers* by Jorge Luis Borges—a writer she’d read since high school, story fragments that ring like Hans Christian Andersen, or Ovid, or entries from the encyclopedia. ⁹ She wants to write stories that ignore borders between genres, between written and spoken, between

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⁹ Borges famously consulted encyclopedias for information on a wide variety of subjects. He also adopted a pseudo-scientific tone to lend a credible tone to his fictions and to question the meaning of truth.
highbrow literature and children’s nursery rhymes, between New York and the imaginary village of Macondo, between the U.S. and Mexico. (xvii)

By juxtaposing the idea of removing borders in her own writing directly with a reference to Borges’s experimental style, Cisneros suggests a way to read Borges as a writer who transcends and crosses borders, both geographic borders between North America and Latin America, and borders between fictional and non-fictional worlds—and suggests herself as his literary descendent in this respect. Interestingly, a number of critics have discussed Cisneros in similar terms. A 2015 NPR interview is titled “Sandra Cisneros crosses borders and boundaries in A House of my Own.” And Anna Marie Sandoval titled her 2008 article on Cisneros “Crossing Borders and Blurring Boundaries.” Thus Cisneros’s reading of Borges as a crosser of boundaries has in turn begun to shape the way she is also read. Alternately, by associating Borges with the concept of border crossing she self-consciously linked his geographies and topics to her interest on the borders, taking an active role in shaping him as one of her most important literary sources.

Experiments in the Short Form

In the introduction, Cisneros also describes the small pieces that make up the collection as “a jar of buttons, like the mismatched embroidery pillowcases and monogrammed napkins I tugged from the bins at the Goodwill” (xvi). Here she references the types of objects that might fill a trousseau, because as a girl she dreamed of having a place of her own to write “the way other girls dreamed of their weddings” (xii). Her reference to salvage and thrifting is also worth considering in the light of rasquache sensibility, also seen in the description of her apartment.

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10 She also brings Gabriel García Marquez into the conversation through the reference to Macondo, thus comparing her work not only with Borges but also a longer literary tradition centered around the so-called Latin American literary Boom.

11 Originally a derogatory term denoting lower class tastes, rasquache has been reclaimed by Chicano artists and thinkers as expressing an underdog sensibility, born of economic lack, that is also adaptable and resourceful and makes use of simple and recycled materials.
as filled with objects found at the Maxwell Street flea market: antique typewriters, alphabet blocks, asparagus ferns, book-baskets… birdcages, hand-painted photos… faded quilts, cracked vases, chipped saucers, lamps in need of love” (xii). Here, broken and abandoned objects are personified as orphaned beings needing care and refuge, demonstrating a sense of compassion that extends in Cisneros’s work to a wide array of marginal subjects, both animate and inanimate, including children, the poor, animals, and even words, particularly the vernacular, the hybrid, and the odd Spanish word or phrase, untranslatable, that she leaves intact, scattered throughout her pages. This elevation of the overlooked also becomes a comment on marginalized subjects in general, including the denizens of the barrio, the disenfranchised, the uneducated and illiterate, the abused, and the powerless (such as Esperanza, and the other poor immigrant residents of Mango Street). It is also, of course, a commentary on herself, born with a sense of lack: it is of course identification with suffering that creates bonds of empathy, an idea that can also easily be applied to Borges’s interest in the marginal and the lowly (like the narrator of “El hombre de la esquina rosada,” or the character of Emma Zunz). Cisneros guides the reader on a journey both physical and temporal in which she invites the reader to witness her encounter with not one (like Borges’s Lugones) but two important mentors. First, she describes a remembered encounter with Norma Alarcón, (1943- ) publisher of the independent Berkeley-based Third Woman Press that provided a forum for Cisneros and other Chicana writers. She describes the encounter in the first person so that, as in Borges’s sueño lúcido, past and present merge and linear time becomes irrelevant, replaced by a perpetual present. In the scene, Alarcón walks through the rooms of Cisneros’s apartment and writing space. With awed admiration, she asks, “You live here… alone?” (xxiii) The young writer proves

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12 See Chapter 3 for plot summary and analysis of “Emma Zunz.”

13 Borges and Cisneros’s concepts of cyclical time stem in large measure from Buddhist philosophy. See CHAPTER FOUR for Eastern thought in the work of both authors.
herself to the mentor, as Borges would have done with Lugones, defying expectations, stepping out from beneath her shadow. Cisneros addresses the next paragraph directly in the second person to Alarcón, as Borges directs his foreword to Lugones. She credits Alarcón for her encouragement, for introducing her to the Mexican writers Sor Juana, Elena Poniatowska, Elena Garro, Rosario Castellanos and for showing her “another way to be—‘otro modo de ser’”: “Until you brought us all together as U.S. Latina writers…until then, Normita, we had no idea what we were doing was extraordinary” (xxiv).

If Borges steps into the library from the noisy streets of Buenos Aires, which, along with the pampa, is a backdrop he will endlessly circle and mine, Cisneros steps into her apartment from the Chicago streets that smell of “beer and urine, sausage and beans” (xxiv)—the multicultural, Mexican-influenced and poverty and desperation-steeped urban milieu which she will paint in The House on Mango Street. Later in the foreword, Cisneros also mentions another backdrop to a subsequent office, at her house in San Antonio, which points yet further south: “Trains moan in the distance all the time, ours is a neighborhood of trains… [The San Antonio River] wends its way behind my house to the Missions and beyond until it empties into the Gulf of Mexico. From my terrace you can see the river where it bends into an S” (xxv). Here, the homecoming is to Mexico itself, that land she writes within and against, finding it both apart from and inside herself.

Writing about El hacedor in his “Autobiographical Notes” (1970), Borges stated that he did not know he had a book until Emecé editor Carlos Frías asked him for one. When Borges said he did not have a book to publish, Frías told him that all writers have a book; they just have to look for it. Borges went through boxes and put together brief prose pieces and poems, many from his time at the Revista Multicolor de los Sábados, at Crítica. The result was a diverse and heterogeneous collection that he called, in “Autobiographical Notes,” his most personal book.
Borges describes this book both as a collection of unrelated pieces, and as his best work. The refusal to succumb to the novelistic form reflects in a formal sense the thematic of many of his stories: a rejection and a refusal of the dominant hegemonic mode of representation and its accompanying worldview.

The desire to convey openness and simplicity, to write in an imperceptible manner, is a desire that Cisneros also expresses in her foreword. She writes that *The House on Mango Street* was born of experimentation:

[S]he experiments, creating a text that is as succinct and flexible as poetry… making each sentence serve her and not the other way round, abandoning quotation marks to streamline the typography and make the page as simple and readable as possible. So that the sentences as pliant as branches… (xvii)

The common thread between these introductions is the desire to experiment, to employ textual *bricolage* rather than one uniform mode, producing a highly intimate and personal text, to write simply, and to demystify the authorial voice through meta-textuality—by referencing their role as writer/author and inviting us into their process—and to write in an “imperceptible” manner, in Borges’s, or in Cisneros’s, writing that is “there to be admired by anyone, like a herd of clouds grazing overhead” (xvii). The aim is to achieve such simplicity that the reader may easily become the I or *yo* of the text.

**The Direct Address to the Reader: Echoes of Walt Whitman**

In a 1962 lecture entitled “The Achievements of Walt Whitman,” Borges writes about elements of Whitman’s style that have influenced his own. Chief among these is the apparent sense of transparency—“Of course, Whitman seems instinctive, and innocent, and thoughtless, and straight forward, and sometimes he even seems clumsy, but all that, as the Romans knew,
may be an effect of art” (Borges, *Texas Quarterly* 44)—and the intimate style of address to the reader. In the talk, Borges quotes from the end of *Leaves of Grass*: “Is it night? Are we here together alone? I spring from the pages into your arms. I love you, I depart from materials, I am as one disembodied, triumphant, dead” (44). He comments, “This is the bond of friendship that Whitman establishes between himself and the reader… Whitman enriched the act of writing, he set out deliberately to be both the writer and the reader” (Borges, *Texas Quarterly* 46-47). It is also the achievement of Borges, particularly in *Dreamtigers*. His humble submission of the text to Lugones’s approval is in fact a submission to the reader him or herself, an invitation to mutual identification. Cisneros goes a step further in her introduction to the 1994 edition of *The House on Mango Street*. Speaking of her narrator, she writes, “Am I Esperanza? Yes. And no. And then again, perhaps maybe. One thing I know for certain, you, the reader, are Esperanza” (xix). Here as elsewhere Cisneros indicates that her project goes beyond the fictional or even the autobiographical. She reaches out on a broad social level to speak to and inspire her readers to enact change in their lives. Thus she takes the speculative and philosophical ideas of Borges on the connection art creates between the writer and the reader and applies them to a project of social activism in which fiction becomes an attempt to write and transforms not only the material conditions of her life but that of her readers.

Simplicity of address and lexicon, humility of subject matter: these are two elements that can again be traced back to Whitman. Quoting Victor Hugo Borges writes in “The Achievements of Walt Whitman,” “‘I don’t believe in ‘common’ words and ‘fine’ words, I believe, as a Democrat should, in the divine equality of all words’” (Borges, *Texas Quarterly* 45). He also writes that Whitman, in his populism “imagined himself into a possible past, being at that moment, one of his readers….He speaks of Manhattan, of Niagara, of buffalo herds, and of having worked as a miner in California. These things belong not to his real life, but to that dream
life which is as real as any other of course. So Whitman’s I means not only Whitman the individual, but the reader” (47). Borges admiringly believes that Whitman set out to write democracy: “Other poets had sung of heroes, of Achilles and Beowulf and Sigurd, but Whitman said, in effect, I will sing the common man, I will use the common language, I will handle all words and I will make the common man feel that he is a part of my poem” (48). In his own writing, Borges writes both about the self, in a personal style reminiscent of Whitman, and about heroes and monsters from myth and history such as Ulysses, the minotaur, his grandfather the Argentine general, Perón, Homer, etc. (Consider stories such as “El hacedor”). He takes Whitman’s democratic vision, and filters it through the epic.

The Descent into Darkness

In both of these prologues, the author takes a journey inside the self. The literary encounter is both between the author and mentor and between the reader and the author, an invitation in and down. Both also take place in or allude to the nighttime: the brightly illuminated lamps in Borges’s library indicate that natural light has faded; he also quotes the following hexameter from the Aeneid: “Ibant obscuri sola sub nocte per umbras” (21): “They walked darkly beneath the solitary night through the shadows” (translation mine). Although Borges uses the line to illustrate the principle of hypallage—the act of walking is dark rather than the night; the night is solitary rather than the pair of travellers—the quote itself holds an important significance. First of all, the description of the solitary journey into night mirrors the narrative of the introduction. Borges walks in the darkening night, into the dark recesses of a library where he has an imaginary and solitary conversation with a dead author. It also mirrors the arc of the entire collection, which revolves around the solitary musings of Borges himself, about his own largely solitary and deeply subjective (and by the publication of El hacedor, blind) individual experience
of the world. Although the stories occasionally narrate two-person encounters (such as “A Leopoldo Lugones,” the encounters feel isolated. Clearly, Borges sets up a parallel partnership to the traveller and companion of Virgil’s verse between himself and his reader. Another important significance of the line rests in its context. It describes the moment when Aeneis and Sybil turn their steps toward the descent into hell, (not coincidentally, this is the second reference to a journey to hell, the first being the mention of Milton’s studious lamps from The Inferno). What to make of this pervasive allusion to hell? It is a parallel sub-world to the land of the living. It is a descent from conscious to subconscious, a journey into the darkness of self that reveals the illuminated world above. Darkness here is crucial; Borges, blind, set out like Homer to penetrate the darkness of his own vision; the corresponding darkness of the human psyche and soul are a recurring preoccupation, as is death. Borges seeks through these stories, not to ascend, but to descend. The romantic hero is an antihero, and darkness holds the key to his illuminating understanding of the world.

Cisneros states in her introduction the debt she owes to Borges. Like Borges, she mentions her debt to form, yet the thematics also hold a deep correspondence, particularly in pieces such as the introduction to the 25th anniversary edition of A House on Mango Street, which is a letter to her mother who has passed away (just as Borges’s “A Leopoldo Lugones” is a dedication to his dead mentor). Both are memento mori, reminders of death amongst the living. As in Borges, “the reader does not have a one-dimensional sense of reality” as past and present become blurred and figures of speech destabilize meaning. Her stories employ visual poetry and a series of hallucinogenic images, like those of Dreamtigers. In the introduction to The House on Mango Street, Cisneros writes that Borges inspired the form of the short pieces that compose the collection: “I remember I was trying to write something that was a cross between fiction and
poetry—like Jorge Luis Borges’ *Dreamtigers*, a book whose stories read like fables, but with the lyricism and succinctness of poetry” (xvii).

Like “To Leopoldo Lugones,” Cisneros’s introduction to *The House on Mango Street* ends with a descent into darkness and an acknowledgment of death. Night falls in a scene in which she leads her mother to the roof of the office where she writes; the two lie down together intertwined, as they had in the past. And the introduction concludes with a dedication to this same mother, so alive in this scene, stating her passing in 2007. Mention of death in this fashion is a strange and perverse way to introduce a collection. Yet, like *Dreamtigers*, the stories of *The House on Mango Street* explore death at every turn, as they also narrate a descent into the dark recesses of her mind. Journey and passage move in and then out and beyond. The microscopic holds within it the cosmic. And the journey to darkness yields the brightest illumination.

**Exploring Otherness, Poverty, and Illness**

In *Nuevo mundo, mundo nuevo* (1948), Arturo Uslar Pietri writes: “Desde el siglo XVIII, por lo menos, la preocupación dominante en la mente de los hispanoamericanos ha sido la de la propia identidad…por un absurdo y antihistórico concepto de pureza, los hispanoamericanos han tendido a mirar como una marca de inferioridad la condición de su mestizaje” (65). He attributes this sense of inferiority to the craze for racial superiority that the Spaniards, on the heels of expelling the Jews and Moors, brought with them to America and practiced against *los indios* and anyone else who counted with indigenous blood. He also discusses the homogenizing impulse of the conquest, which sought to convert *el indio* into a Castillian Christian, “absorbido e incorporado totalmente en lengua, creencia, costumbres y mentalidad…tampoco lo lograron” (66). If this impulse was incompletely realized at best, it still left a sense of that which lay hidden below the surface, of a dark stain that might never be completely erased.
Borges’s *Dreamtigers* and Sandra Cisneros’s *House on Mango Street*, in addition to a shared formal aesthetic, both evidence a preoccupation with a personal identity in conflict or under attack, inflicted either from the inside or the outside. Regarding the theme of identity, in his 1960 Epilogue to *Dreamtigers*, Borges wrote: “A man sets himself the task of portraying the world. Through the years he peoples a space with images of provinces, kingdoms, mountains, bays, ships, islands, fishes, rooms, instruments, stars, horses, and people. Shortly before his death, he discovers that that patient labyrinth of lines traces the image of his face” (93). It is telling, then, about Borges’s own sense of self that many of the stories in *Dreamtigers* speak of acts of infamy, as well as doubles, often a victim and a betrayer who is well known and beloved to the betrayed. The idea of the self as an enemy, and of one who is fearful of his own image, its darkness and ugliness, emerges clearly.

Likewise, Cisneros has also written about the unwitting tracing of the self: “Usually when I thought I was creating something from my imagination, it turned out I was remembering something I’d forgotten or someone standing so close I couldn’t see her at all” (*House on Mango Street* xxii). Cisneros’s stories traffic in a conflicted sense of identity in which shame and self-loathing mix with a deep sensuality and a nascent awareness of the beauty of Otherness, a revelry in the unique experiences of immigrant America. In the introduction to 10th anniversary edition of *The House on Mango Street*, she writes, “[w]hen I teach writing, I tell the moment of discovering and naming my Otherness. It’s not enough to simply sense it; it has to be named, and then written about from there. Once I could name it, I wasn’t ashamed or silent. I could speak up and celebrate my otherness as a woman, a working-class person, an American of Mexican descent” (*A House of my Own* 128).

Notions of deformity appear from the beginning in *Dreamtigers*. The first story, “The Maker,” begins with a negation, set in the past, and featuring an unnamed protagonist: “He had
never dwelled on memory’s delight” (22). It unfolds that this unnamed protagonist, a clear double for the author, is going blind. Borges suffered from congenital blindness whose onset began in adolescence and fully overtook his sight in middle age; the theme of blindness appears repeatedly in his work as an affliction that must be reckoned with, and as a reality that renders other senses more fertile. First the protagonist-author cries out against it, but then he faces it, “with fear but also with joy, hope and curiosity” (ibid). The frank divulgation of disappointment and of a journey from resistance to acceptance establishes an immediate empathetic relationship with the reader, an immediate entry into suffering and survival. He closes the story with a hopeful note. After descending into memory, and pulling forth images from childhood and adolescence—images with a plausible sense of reality, a boyhood fight and the pursuit of a first love—they are also inscribed into myth and antiquity: the boy dreams he was Ajax and Perseus; the woman is the “first the gods set aside for him,” and awaits him in the shadow of a hypogeum (ancient Greek temple or tomb) (23). The story ends as the protagonist understands that “in this night of his mortal eyes into which he was now descending, love and danger were again waiting… [and] it was his destiny to sing” (ibid). Illness can be struggled through and confronted; the vocation of this poet is to tell of this transformation, in a way, to fight: “a murmur of men defending a temple the gods will not save” (ibid).

“The House on Mango Street,” the titular story of Cisneros’s book, also takes up the theme of disillusionment. The glorious destiny imagined by the narrator and her family involves a real house “with running water and pipes that worked…white with trees around it, a great big yard and grass growing without a fence. This was the house Papa talked about when he held a lottery ticket and this was the house Mama dreamed up in the stories she told us before we went to bed” (4). The contrast with reality is stark: the house they end up with is a boarded-window flat above a laundry-mat, stunted and deformed: “its small and red with tight steps in front and
windows so small you’d think they were holding their breath. Bricks are crumbling in places, and the front door is so swollen you have to push hard to get in…” (4) Images of dysfunction, decay and death prevail: “the Laundromat downstairs had been boarded up because it had been robbed two days before…the paint peeling, wooden bars Papa had nailed on the windows so we wouldn’t fall out” (5). It is significant that the first fictions Cisneros was told, as a child, had to do with the dream house envisioned by her mother: a reality materially altered from the one she lived in, a fantasy that would remove her from poverty, grime and disappointment. At the end of the story, Cisneros invokes destiny: “I knew then I had a to have a house. A real house. One I could point to” (5). To a reader familiar with her work, this destiny also implies the fulfillment of an artistic vocation; Cisneros was able to purchase her first house with the proceeds of her book sales. In this sense, both Cisneros and Borges use fantasy to transform material conditions they would wish to change. Borges’s flights of imagination give him eyes; broadening the social spectrum, Cisneros spins fairy-tales out of the raw materials she finds in Chicago’s barrios, uncovers treasure in junk shops and rummage sales, and finds epic and romance in the stories of immigrants and housewives, dishwashers and street criminals.

Both “The Maker” (“El hacedor”) and “The House on Mango Street” are titular stories of each collection. And both narrate an important transitional moment, in between childhood and adulthood, when the author/narrator learns an important fact about him/herself. Both are stories with simple plots about a moment in time that defines a person, and both contain epiphanies. For Cisneros, this moment comes when a nun from her school, passing her playing in the front yard, asks you live there? and the narrator points and nods, yes there, and decides that someday she will have a real house, one she can be proud of, and that it will be because of her doing. For Borges, the moment comes after a period of suffering upon discovering that he is going blind. One morning a man awakens and “he looked, no longer alarmed, at the dim things that
surrounded him; and inexplicably he sensed, as one recognizes a tune or a voice, that now it was over and that he had faced it, with fear but also with joy, hope, and curiosity” (22). Both stories explore the transformative potential of pain into the material with which one constructs a new life; in both, it is otherness, coupled with a sense of something missing or lost, which defines the artist and his or her sense of vocation.

That Cisneros paid close attention to *Dreamtigers* as she wrote *The House on Mango Street* is nowhere more clear than in her brief story “Hairs,” which clearly takes Borges’s clever “Toenails” as a model. These are both stories that move from the inside out, and with utmost economy from the microcosmic to the macrocosmic. They also both employ metonymy. In the Borgesian piece—one succinct paragraph with a page to itself—toes are personified as stubborn and industrial workers: “nothing interests them but emitting toenails, horny plates, semi-transparent and elastic, to defend themselves—from whom? Stupid and mistrustful as they alone can be, they never for a moment stop readying that tenuous armament” (26). Here Borges exhibits a playful attention to detail, and an almost childlike wonder in the odd workings of the human body in one of its humblest incarnations. Like Borges’s stubborn toes, the narrator’s hair in “Hairs” is “lazy. It never obeys barrettes or bands” (6). Meanwhile, her father’s hair sticks up like a broom, her sister Nenny’s is slippery and Kiki, the youngest, has “hair like fur” (*ibid*). Her description of these varied strands, particularly the curly and textured, alludes to her family’s mestizo ethnicity. In both stories, the elemental—toenails, hairs—expands outward, until at the end of the piece it encompasses the cosmic and the universal. Borges’s ultimate theme is death: “When I am laid away…they will still go on with their stubborn task, until they are moderated by decay” (26). Yet while Borges’s story voices a personal preoccupation with death, Cisneros’s “Hairs” transforms the form to meditate on community, human connection, and ethnic identity. When she describes her mother’s hair, the description of its curls turns to its sweet smell, the
feeling of being held by her as a child, and then the memory of sleeping next to her one rainy morning: “the rain outside falling and Papa snoring. The snoring, the rain and Mama’s hair that smells like bread” (7). What starts with a seemingly childish and capricious description of humble human matter becomes, subtly and unobtrusively, a lyrical tribute to familial love. Both stories elevate the childish and comment upon the way that the humblest objects can reveal elemental truths and experiences.

The Influence of Homer’s *The Odyssey*

In “Nueva refutación del tiempo” (*Otras Inquisiciones* 1954), Borges sets a reminiscence about the streets of his childhood in the midst of a philosophical inquiry into the cyclical nature of time. In the first part of the essay, he writes about the repetitious nature of human experience:

Consideremos una vida en cuyo decurso las repeticiones abundan: la mía, verbigracia. No paso ante la Recoleta sin recordar que están sepultados ahí mi padre, mis abuelos y trasabuelos, como yo lo estaré; luego recuerdo ya haber recordado lo mismo, y innumerables veces…no puedo lamentar la perdición de un amor o de una amistad sin meditar que solo se pierde lo que realmente no se ha tenido; cada vez que atravieso una de las esquinas del sur, pienso en usted. Helena; cada vez que el aire me trae un olor de eucaliptos, pienso en Androgué, en mi niñez. (243)

With his characteristic density and economy of prose, Borges packs a number of sentiments into this paragraph. First he discusses genealogy and repetitions through generations, with memory leading to unconscious mimicry. Next, he speaks about the repetitions of love and loss, in which patterns repeat ad infinitum, only to be recognized in hindsight as having been experienced before. He next writes of Helena—a likely reference to Helen of Troy, and to Ulysses’ journey in the *Odyssey*, a hero’s journey perpetually repeated in literature and psychoanalysis. He also
mentions the sense memory of his childhood retreat in Androgué, on the outskirts of Buenos Aires. In the poem “Ars Poetica” from *Dreamtigers*, he likens his sojourns to Androgué with Ulysses’ return to Ithaca: “They tell how Ulysses, glutted with wonders, wept with love to descry his Ithaca/ Humble and green” (89). Borges closes the paragraph with a mention of Heraclitus’s dictum: “no bajarás dos veces al mismo río,” which suggests that time changes us, so that we are constantly morphing into another (“soy otro”): “Heraclitus…the same and another, like an endless river” (*ibid*). In one of her direct allusions to the Argentine author, Sandra Cisneros repeats the same idea in a blog post dated April 26, 2011: “And so I read this essay as if for the first time, and like Siddhartha’s river, it was the first time, for I was not the same person.”

In “Nueva refutación del tiempo,” Borges writes of walking in a seemingly random direction after an evening meal, which leads him unconsciously to the streets of his childhood: “una suerte de gravitación familiar me alejó hacia unos barrios, de cuyo nombre quiero siempre acordarme…” (246) Like Ulysses, his road leads inexorably homeward. After admiring the humility of the neighborhood—“era de lo más pobre y lo más lindo”—he appears to move backward in time, to centuries before his birth: “la calle era de barro elemental, barro de América no conquistado aún…” (*ibid*). The moment leads to an epiphany regarding the nature of time and his personal view of the past: “una tapia rosada parecía no hospedar luz de luna, sino efundir luz íntima” (*ibid*). These personal reflections—“esto es lo mismo de hace treinta años”—lead Borges to the conclusion “[e]l tiempo…es una delusión: la indiferencia e inseparabilidad un momento de su aparente ayer y otros de su aparente hoy, basta para desintegrarlo” (247).

An interesting detail, declared both in “Nueva refutación del tiempo” and in “Arte poetica,” regards the idea of humility. In “Nueva refutación,” he writes of his beloved childhood

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14 This reclamation of a pre-conquest Latin America can be seen among many writers of the so-called Boom generation, including Alejo Carpentier, Carlos Fuentes and others.

15 By epiphany I refer to the concept as elaborated by James Joyce in *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916).
residence, “era de lo más lindo y lo más pobre” (240). And in “Arte poetica” he emphasizes the humble beauty of Ithaca, to which Ulysses yearns to return despite having been “glutted with wonders” during his journeys (89). Here he alludes to the genteel poverty of his own upbringing, which allowed the Borges’ to afford a modest summer home in Androgué. His interest in humility also bears a relation to the sense of democracy he expresses in “The Achievements of Walt Whitman”: “Whitman said, in effect, I will sing the common man, I will use the common language, I will handle all words and I will make the common man feel that he is a part of my poem” (47).

**Carl Sandburg and Chicago Street Orality**

Likewise, Cisneros does not shy away from the poverty of the Chicago she paints in *The House on Mango Street*. Like Borges, she is a flâneuse; *The House on Mango Street* could be described as a walker’s tour of a poor Chicago barrio. Lacking precedents to describe the hybridity of the mixed cultural milieu, she mixes English and Spanish and employs a child’s point of view to describe the bewildering juxtapositions of contemporary life on the margins of U.S. society. Like Borges, she seeks to write America, and only discovers the manner to do so through experimentation. Yet her America is the immigrant America, told from a female voice. Her populist vision seeks to incorporate the experience of the ‘common woman’ rather than the common man. Furthermore, the book forms a portrait and a reckoning of home. Her narrator passes through the streets of the city with an open curiosity that takes in details that others overlook and finds epiphanies in the mundane. Cisneros has acknowledged the Chicago poet Carl Sandburg as an influence; Borges has also written about Sandburg, most extensively in an admiring review of the American poet’s work that appeared in *Revista Hogar* (1936):
Las poesías de Sandburg están compuestas en un inglés que se parece a su voz y a su modo de hablar: un inglés oral, conversado, con palabras que no están en los diccionarios y que están en las calles americanas, un inglés criollo en suma. En sus poemas hay un juego incesante de falsas torpezas, de habilidades que quieren pasar por descuidos.

(Textos publicados 5)

The use of everyday vernacular language is a key feature of The House on Mango Street. Dr. Héctor Calderón, who knew Cisneros early in her writing career, reports that in social settings, particularly with young Hispanic students, she would write down their expressions and idioms in a notebook to later incorporate into her writing. She particularly loved words and expressions that reflect the dual identity of Mexican Americans. Examples of the use of vernacular proliferate in The House on Mango Street. Cisneros employs a sense of orality that, while influenced by Sandburg’s poetry, diverged from and extended his project through its bi-cultural multilingualism that also draws on the spoken tradition of Chicano poetry. The story “And some more,” for instance, showcases her technique, as described in her introduction, of omitting quotation marks to create a more streamlined interplay between narration and quotes, with the effect of immediate entrance into the characters’ world in which the reader experiences the conversation almost as a live interlocutor would. The following snippet gives a sense of the effect Cisneros achieves throughout the story:

You know what you are, Esperanza? You are like Cream of Wheat cereal. You’re like the lumps.

Yeah, and you’re foot fleas, that’s you.

Chicken lips….

Cold frijoles. Mimi, Michael, Moe…

Your mama’s frijoles.
Your ugly mama’s toes.

That’s stupid.

Bebe, Blanca, Benny…

Who’s stupid?

Rachel, Lucy, Esperanza, and Nenny. (37-8)

The naming of characters takes place in the narrator, Esperanza’s voice, while the rest is a dialogue between Esperanza and her sister Nenny. The insults provide a realistic commentary on children’s’ invective and parries: “Uh oh, Nenny, better get the broom. There’s too much trash in our yard today” (ibid). While the dialogue appears playful, the content reflects a brutal reality of urban poverty in which children replicate put-downs weighed on themselves and their peers by society at large: namely associations with trash, lack of intelligence, and filth.

Through the eyes of Esperanza, in *The House on Mango Street*, Cisneros writes the lives of marginal subjects found on the peripheries of mainstream society, narrating tales of immigrants who hide in fear in their apartments, afraid to speak English, of battered wives, of overwhelmed young mothers, abandoned children, illegal immigrants, and criminals. She illustrates Anna Marie Sandoval’s assertion that “for the Chicana feminist it is through our affiliation with the struggles of other Third World people that we find our theories and our methods” (220). If Esperanza is comparatively well off, the beloved daughter of a father who earns a living, a literate and intelligent student, she still locates her identity, as does Cisneros, in the struggles of the most marginal members of her community. As she walks the streets of her barrio, and seeks treasure in the Maxwell flea market, as she speaks English and Spanish with her friends and marvels at the lives of her neighbors, Esperanza begins to take on the mantle of the mestiza woman, her body becoming what Gloria Anzaldúa would call a borderlands that challenges strict dichotomies between north and south, the individual and the collective.
In *The House on Mango Street*, characters from every day elevate their worlds through myth, and are elevated through the eyes of the narrator, Esperanza. In the story “Cathy, Queen of Cats,” a white neighbor named Cathy mythologizes the neighborhood. She begins with herself, claiming to be related to the Queen of France. Then there’s “Joe the baby-grabber,” “two girls raggedy as rats,” and Edna, who “used to own a building big as a whale, but her brother sold it” (12). Cathy herself, so adept at pointing out the quirks of others, owns more cats than the neighbors can count, thus earning the nickname Queen of Cats. The story is a rumination on the role of words and gossip—on one person’s fictionalized snapshots of her neighbors representing her own limited viewpoint—in constructing a social map and in informing a child’s perceptions of the world. At the end, Cathy will move “a little farther north from Mango Street, a little farther away every time people like us keep moving in” (13) with ‘us’ referring to Mexicans. Fictions in the form of gossip are powerful in the way they mold the young narrator’s perspective, and she awakens to the need to fight back with her own version of reality—constructed through fictions of her choosing—in order to undo the myth of her own marginality.

**Fragmentation and the Search for a Center**

Both Borges and Cisneros also describe the possibilities of transcendence found beneath the rubble of the marginal neighborhoods they trespass. Often their characters find beauty and truth in art and myth, which infuses their existence to the point that it becomes indistinguishable from the visible and ordinary. These practices pertain to what Jameson describes as a type of ‘cultural revolution’ that often takes place during transitional moments in history. For Borges, that transition was to industrialism from the pre-industrial society of his ancestors, as well as the increasing urbanization of Argentina in the early part of the twentieth century, when rural dwellers associated with the pampa gravitated to the city, yet retained elements of pre-existing
codes and ways of life (the *compadritos* of “El hombre de la esquina rosada,” for example, are descendants of the older gaucho culture). For Cisneros, the transition resides in the process of internal colonization by which Mexican culture in the United States is subjected to the marginalizing and obliterating influence of hegemonic North American society. According to Jameson:

>S]ince the cultural monuments that have survived tend to represent the hegemonic class…there must be a restoration or artificial reconstruction of the voice to which they were initially opposed, a voice for the most part stifled and reduced to silence…the reconstruction of so-called popular cultures must take place from the fragments of essentially peasant cultures: folk songs, fairy tales, popular festivals, occult or oppositional systems of belief such as magic or witchcraft. (86)

So there is a recourse to the popular, the poor and the marginal, and the mythical within which both find a utopian vision that articulates a counter-hegemonic stance, a rejection of dominant hierarchies and systems of oppression.

Juxtaposition of the epic and the mythical with everyday life is a theme that recurs throughout *Dreamtigers*. In “Parable of Cervantes and Don Quixote,” Borges writes about the relationship between Miguel de Cervantes, “an old soldier of the king [who] sought solace in Ariosto’s vast geographies” and his literary creation Don Quixote, a man who

…unsettled by the marvels he read about, hit upon the idea of seeking noble deeds and enchantments in prosaic places called El Toboso or Montiel… For both of them, for the dreamer and the dreamed, the tissue of that whole plot consisted in the contraposition of two worlds: the unreal world of the books of chivalry and the common everyday world of the seventeenth century. (42)
Yet this distinction also wears away; Don Quixote, who sought refuge in myth, has himself become the stuff of myth and legend—today “no less poetic than Sinbad’s haunts” (ibid). Borges concludes with a philosophical argument and an *ars poetica*: “For myth is at the beginning of literature, and also at its end” (42). Cervantes begins his novel with a knight filling his head with literature and then setting out into a world which he peoples with his own imaginings; that knight ends up becoming one of Spain’s most famous myths, and one of the world’s most influential figures of fiction. In this sense, myth becomes a construction or transformation of reality; it is both a catalyst, and an ending point. Borges’s belief in the transformative power of myth may very well do with the transformative qualities of writing in his own life. Shy, blind, and not possessed of physical grace or beauty, too intellectual for what is generally known as charm, Borges gained notoriety and distinction through his writing, a medium through which he crafted a personal mythology which made his audience feel an intimate connection with him. Borges has commented that, despite the solitary nature of writing, in his later years he found that it connected him with thousands. Many of his characters—Shakespeare in “Everything and Nothing,” (Dreamtigers) Hakim de Merv in “El tintorero enmascarado Hakim de Merv,” (Historia universal de la infamia)—find personal transformation through fiction which dissipates once the fiction has ended, as if to leave no doubt of art’s direct yet illusory effect. In “Everything and Nothing,” Borges writes:

> Instinctively, he [Shakespeare] had already trained himself in the habit of pretending that he was someone, so it would not be discovered that he was no one… His playacting taught him a singular happiness, perhaps the first he had known; but when the last line was applauded and the last corpse removed from the stage, the hated sense of unreality came over him again. He ceased to be Ferrex or Tamburlaine and again became a nobody. Trapped, he fell to imagining other heroes and other tragic tales. (46)
Here Borges psychologizes the writer, as someone who slips in and out of his characters, feeling himself trapped in a reality that seems to him to be unreal or empty. The writer like the actor takes on the mantle of a character to ‘pretend that he is someone.’ He describes writing as ‘controlled hallucination,’ underscoring the fantastic in its relation to artistic creation, yet also describes the morning that Shakespeare felt “overcome by the surfeit and the horror of being so many kings who die by the sword and so many unhappy lovers who converge, diverge, and melodiously agonize” (47). Here we see the burden of authorship, a theme to which Borges alludes often, cautioning of the dangers and allure of a life lived weaving fantasy, lost to the theater of the mind. Finally, Borges closes the story by comparing the artist to God, as he does in “The Maker,” also from Dreamtigers. Additionally, he proposes the concept that man is dreamt by God: when Shakespeare pleads that God make him just one man, God replies, “Neither am I one self; I dreamed the world as you dreamed your work, my Shakespeare, and among the shapes of my dream are you, who, like me, are many persons—and none” (47). Though “Everything and Nothing” takes Shakespeare as its protagonist, it is clearly autobiographical, as is “The Maker”: the clue is that Shakespeare is only named in the last paragraph; the impersonal he sounds, throughout the story, like a veiled allusion to the self.

One of the most interesting elements of “Everything and Nothing” is the way Borges employs Shakespearean drama and poetry as literary theory—as he does in the “Parable of Cervantes and Don Quijote.” The Shakespearean concept of dream as alternate reality is a recurring concept in the story; Borges also mentions Shakespeare’s allusions to the multiplicity of the self: “Richard affirms that in his single person he plays many parts, and Iago says with strange words, ‘I am not what I am’” (46). This phrase comes from a passage in which Iago
explains his dissimulating nature. It is notable that Borges chooses two agents of darkness\textsuperscript{16} to express the multiplicity of the self: Richard and Iago. This particular affinity for the loner, the dissimulator, the denizen of dark spaces and a doer of dark deeds, is one we see throughout Borges’s oeuvre. Consider, to name two notable examples, “La casa de Asterión” (\textit{El Aleph}, 1949) which takes an up-close look at the mythical figure of the minotaur, and the assorted criminals whose stories Borges (re)tells in \textit{Historia universal de la infamia} (1935). This placement of the villain at the heart of many of his stories and as their most relatable characters can be seen to stem from that sense of Otherness so present in both Borges’s work. Iago’s words conjure a sense of the occult—\textit{I am not what I am}—and an oppositional stance to the hegemonic concept of the fixity of self (a concept which Borges elsewhere explores through Buddhism, see CHAPTER FOUR). According to Jameson:

\begin{quote}
the concept of good and evil is a positional one that coincides with categories of Otherness…Nietzsche demonstrated that what is really meant as ‘the good’ is simply my own position as the unassailable power center, in terms of which the position of the Other, or of the weak, is repudiated and marginalized in practices that are then formalized in the concept of evil. (117)
\end{quote}

Art, particularly as articulated through myth—“a discourse of decentered, magic-oriented, tribal social formations”—becomes the means of transforming or reconciling the self and the Other (Jameson 113).

In \textit{Dreamtigers}, Borges names two causes of transformation through art: the erosion between self and Other caused through an intimate relationship with his characters and audience (“Everything and Nothing”) and the sense of multiple selves generated by his authorial persona versus his private interior self (“Borges and I”). Cisneros takes a similarly meta-textual approach

\begin{quote}
\textsuperscript{16} I here adhere to Jameson’s assertion that Iago cannot be considered as a villain, but rather an agent of tragedy, which implies a failure of the world itself rather than a more limited denunciation of the shortcomings of any discrete character.
\end{quote}
to authorship in *The House on Mango Street*. She begins the first story with the impersonal *we*, and ends it by expressing her desire to one day own a house, a dream she has also mentioned in endless interviews. Her budding writer-narrator, Esperanza, is a thinly veiled version of herself, just as many of Borges’s characters, including Shakespeare in “Everything and Nothing,” bear obvious resemblance to him; thus there is a breakdown in the differentiation between author, narrator, and reader (as may be inferred from the impersonal *we*). For both authors, there is a bridging of the borders of the self, or what Jameson calls the “sense of psychic dispersal,” the “dissolution of an essentially bourgeois ideology of the subject and of psychic unity and identity” (Jameson 125).

This erasure of the borders of self, accompanied by “fragmentation…fantasy and projective dimensions, hallucinogenic sensations, and temporal discontinuities” (ibid) constitutes what Jameson calls “magical narratives,” which incorporate currents of Romanticism (particularly use of myth, fantasy and utopian vision) into modern literature (which he opposes to Realism). Yet the decentering of self serves different aims and stems perhaps from different motives in Borges and Cisneros. Critics have often described *The House on Mango Street* as a testimonial novel in the Central American tradition; it employs polyphonic testimony in that it appears to include the perspective of a number of subjects, despite the uniting thread of Esperanza as the principle character. Because she is more of a witness in many of the stories, she also takes on a pre-individualistic or morphing quality through her ability to access all the dark corners and private histories of the neighborhood, many of which reveal the hardships of urban poverty and offer glimpses inside the opaque lives of marginal subjects: thugs, single mothers, illiterates, immigrants, abused wives, adolescent girls caught in the crossfire of childhood innocence and adult sexuality. Cisneros herself writes in the introduction that *The House on Mango Street* incorporates the stories of students at Chicago’s Latino Youth Alternative High
School, where she taught for three years after attending the Iowa Writers’ Workshop. Thus the unfixing of the self in *The House on Mango Street* is frequently a social strategy that advocates for a greater sense of empathic collectivity within the colder and more rigid individualism of the urban global North.\(^{17}\) Elsewhere, however, Cisneros gestures toward the unsettling incorporation of other people’s lives into the self that appears so frequently in Borgesian narratives. For example, in “Born Bad,” Esperanza and her sisters, with a childlike fixation on the grotesque, mimic their disabled aunt by taking on her stunted movements and mannerisms: “we pretended with our heads thrown back, our arms limp and useless, dangling like the dead…we took turns being her” (61). They do this despite the affinity Esperanza feels for her aunt, who listens to her poems, so that both incorporate the Other into themselves, her aunt by listening, Esperanza by whispering her secret desires, expressed through poetry, into her aunt’s ear. This poetry expresses a sense of entrapment in the self and the body shared by both Esperanza and her aunt, whose incapacitation becomes a metaphor for her niece’s own sense of powerlessness: “I want to be, like the waves on the sea…but I’m me. One day I’ll jump out of my skin, I’ll shake the sky…” (60-1). After her aunt dies, Esperanza says that she and her sisters, guilty imitators, “began to dream the dreams” (61). Though these dreams are not explicitly stated, one may infer that they represent a continuation of their Aunt’s presence either through her memory or through displacement.

Meanwhile, the pre-individualistic quality of *Dreamtigers* is one of the most pronounced and unsettling elements of the collection. Borges does not follow one character continuously through various stories, although certain figures, historical (i.e. Shakespeare, Rosas, his great-grandfather, Cervantes) and fictional (i.e. Don Quijote) do recur. The short pieces of *Dreamtigers* have no unifying character, setting, or time period. In that sense, the identity of the

\(^{17}\) I draw upon José David Saldivar’s notion of the discord between a Latin American “cultura de convivencia” and “the cold and oppressive strictures of the urban global north” (156).
collection itself is fragmented, a fact which is augmented by the sudden shift in Part Two to poetry from Part One’s short prose pieces. Pieces such as “Borges and I,” which marks the end of the first half of the book, and “Poems about Gifts,” the first poem in the second half of the book, directly attack the notion of coherence of the self by stating that the self is also another. In “Poems about Gifts,” this realization provokes terror: “I grow to feel with a kind of holy dread/ That I am that other, I am the dead/ and the steps I make are also his” (55). The poem, which writes of his descent into the night of a ‘long blind library,’ likely alludes to Borges’ affinity with Homer, that other blind bard, although it gestures to broader philosophical notions of cyclical time and the immateriality of the self.18

In both stories, as in others, is a sense of the occult that defies hegemonic notions of discrete selves existing in discrete dimensions of time and space. Both gesture toward oppositional systems of belief in their dismantling of fixed and singular notions of identity and in their bridging of the past and the present, dead and living. According to José David Saldivar, Cisneros works with a “notion of redemption that implies an emphatic relationship to the past and a version of obligation linking subjects across time” (158). In both Borges and Cisneros, backward-looking subjects attempt to cross the border between present and past, thus loosening the grasp of a pervasive worldview that stubbornly insists on hard and discrete notions of time/timelessness, self/ Other, and materiality/ immateriality.

Having now established that The House on Mango Street and Dreamtigers both employ mythical and Romantic, pre-individualistic, transformative and oppositional visions of the self, we can see how this dispersed or fragmented sense of self manifests itself in literary worlds equally bereft of coherence. In these worlds, it is the artist, the outsider and the Other who, positioned on the margins of society, reveals the cracks and disjunctions in meaning. Both

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18 Aspects of Buddhist philosophy in both Borges’s and Cisneros’s writing are explored at length in CHAPTER FOUR.
authors employ moments of Joycean epiphany, a moment of artistic revelation that occurs in the context of everyday life and which produces knowledge disproportionate to the ordinary circumstances that precipitates it. Often, these moments take place near the end of the story, after which the narrative abruptly stops. For example, in the story “Dreamtigers,” Borges reaches the epiphany, after describing tigers, and childhood fantasies that have lingered into adulthood, that he is dreaming and thus, in the unlimited power of the dream-state, he can cause a tiger. The revelation is significant and allegorical: the artist dreams the world. Yet the next paragraph deflates the potential proffered by this idea: “Never can my dreams engender the wild beast I long for. The tiger indeed appears, but stuffed or flimsy, or with impure variations of shape…or with a touch of the dog or the bird” (24). Artistic power, first celebrated, turns out to have its limits. The artist is not all-powerful, and his creations are always deformed or sickly versions of what he would have them be. This is an example of what Jameson, taking Joyce as a point of departure, calls a “negative epiphany,” in which what might have once revealed meaning, instead reveals the absence or impossibility of the sacred when it collides with contemporary history, within which epiphany can only be illusory. He claims that the secular and reified nature of modern capitalistic society renders positive epiphany, “as the revelation of presence,” elusive (135). Thus, “the most authentic vocation of romance in our time…[is] its capacity, by absence and by the silence of the form itself, to …convey [a] sense of the radical impoverishment and constriction of modern life” (ibid). Another negative epiphany regarding art takes place in his story “The Yellow Rose,” in which the poet Giambattista Marino, trying to capture the essence of a rose in a poem, comes to the realization “that we may mention or allude to a thing, but not express it” and that books were not, “as his vanity had dreamed, a mirror of the world, but rather one thing more added to the world” (38). “Parable of the Palace” offers a more extended example of an elaborately-wrought story that ends with a negative epiphany. In architectural
prose, Borges describes a walk through an elaborate palace taken by an Emperor and a poet. After traversing its splendors, they stop for the poet to recite “the brief composition … [that] gave him immortality and death. The text has been lost” (44). Here we have the first negation; the promise of reading the poet’s immortal lines are denied the reader, and all that remains is hearsay: “there are some who contend it consisted of a single line; others say it had but a single word” (ibid). Here Borges illustrates the futility of the (nonetheless essayed) attempt to recapture the sublime. Next the reader learns that in this poem stood the palace, which is also a metaphor for the world, and that it may have disappeared as the poet uttered the poem (yet Borges couches this amidst other theories, not admitting the possibility of any one truth). He ends the story by reiterating the negative epiphany: the refusal or inability of the story itself to reveal the magical lines of the poet. Though the key to the universe is proffered, it dematerializes almost exactly at the moment of its offering. Significantly, it is a poet (a slave to the king, an Other) who reveals that the palace, the ultimate object of consumption, is inexistent, and it is the poet rather than the emperor who has the power to create and dismantle the world. Ultimately the story is a critique of a society of excess that hides its own lack of meaning behind hollow surfaces.

Many of the stories of The House on Mango Street offer similar promises of revelation followed by a concluding downbeat or negation that implies a failure of meaning. “Edna’s Ruthie,” for example, tells of Esperanza’s fascination with a neighbor woman, an adult shrouded in an air of mystery, whom Esperanza and the other children love because of her childlike sensibility; her alienation from the adult world links her to them, yet the reason for this exile is an enigma: is she disabled? Did she suffer a tragedy? The reason for her return to her mother’s house and her aimlessness and lack of employment are unclear and unimportant. To Esperanza, she comes to seem a kind of wise fool who might be able to convey important messages from the other side of the divide between childhood and adulthood. Yet, at the end of the story, Lewis
Carroll’s lines from “The Walrus and the Carpenter,” which she recites for Ruthie, are prophetic—“But answer came there none…”—because Ruthie’s concluding utterance, which also ends the story, is utterly mundane: “You have the most beautiful teeth I have ever seen” (69). This pronouncement at the end of the story only reveals a lack of meaning. Like the childlike Ruthie, Esperanza—the writer who has not yet become a writer and thus is only a seed—is another marginal character who is able to construct meaning only in illusory fragments.

That meaning is elusive and fragmentary is the premise of Borges’s “Paradiso XXXI, 108.” “We lost [Christ’s] features,” he writes, “as one may lose an image in a kaleidoscope forever…the profile of a Jew in the subway is perhaps the profile of Christ; perhaps the hands that give us our change at a ticket window duplicate the ones some soldier nailed one day to the cross” (Dreamtigers 43). He concludes that “perhaps a feature of the crucified face lurks in every mirror… perhaps [it] was erased so that God may be all of us” (ibid). Metonymy again appears here; Christ appears in fragments located in a pair of hands and a profile. The story consciously echoes an idea which appears in words attributed to Teresa de Ávila: “Cristo no tiene otro cuerpo que el tuyo y no tiene manos sino las tuyas. Sus únicos pies son los tuyos y tuyos los ojos con que la compasión de Cristo mira al mundo.” Indeed the story mentions Teresa in a list of mystics who claimed to have seen the face of Christ, along with Paul and John: “Theresa saw it, but she wasn’t sure of the color of its eyes” (43)—a clever allusion to her poem, in which Christ’s eyes belong to the addressee.

Cisneros’s story “Gil’s Furniture Bought and Sold” (from The House on Mango Street) offers a parallel view of the fragmentary nature of the sacred to “Paradiso XXXI, 108” and an exploration of space, critique of materiality, and exploration of the otherworldly powers of the artist as a locus of hidden meaning similar to that of Borges’s “Parable of the Palace.” Both “Gil’s Furniture” and “Parable of the Palace” employ an accordion-like sense of scale, in which
space expands and contracts. In “Parable of the Palace,” the palace grows and unfolds only to collapse at the end of the story. Similarly, the junkshop of “Gil’s Furniture” has a perisopic sense of scale in which space unfolds and then retracts, pointing to the world-building capacity of art. An inverse of the palace, the junk shop is completely dark except for paying customers. Yet within it Esperanza and her sister Nenny “look and see all kinds of things” (19), with the darkness implying a sense of the infinite and the promise of the unknown. The owner of the store is black, “and sometimes if you didn’t know better you could be in there a long time before you notice a pair of glasses floating in the dark” (20). His quality of disappearing into the darkness of the store, and the image of gold glasses, gives an impression of mystery and wisdom. His blackness signals his racial Otherness, and demonstrates Cisneros’s reinsertion of race into subjective identity (as she also writes the figure of the artist as feminine). Gil’s occupation as a junk shop owner indicates a position outside—even defiant of—mainstream capitalist society; he is a purveyor not of the new but of the old and recycled—of rasquache. That Esperanza never talks to him “except when she bought the Statue of Liberty for a dime” illustrates the story’s complex play with scale and metonymy (20). The character confuses a figurine (statue) for the actual Statue of Liberty, and the wordplay provokes an inquiry into the meaning of the original object, and the concept of the simulacrum.\(^{19}\) Within the microcosm of the junkshop, the owner’s magnitude takes on god-like proportions, as he sells her the Statue of Liberty. That the magical or the divine might be found in the junkshop indicates that the sacred exists in fragments buried within humble everyday places and people. The junkshop—what Foucault would term a

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\(^{19}\) The inclusion of the Statue of Liberty as an object found in the junkshop is notable yet ambiguous. Critics including James Nagle have written that Esperanza’s purchase of it indicate her desire for freedom and her willingness to pay a price for it. Yet there is also a possible ironic undertone: the promise of liberty has been discarded and comes cheap (a dime); the figurine is a merely replica, as liberty is a false promise for immigrants who face social and economic marginality.
heterotopia or a counter-site\textsuperscript{20}—is in fact a metaphor for Mango Street itself, which is poor, a place characterized by refuse and neglect, yet which unexpectedly yields up treasures to nurture the imagination. In fact, Mango Street, like the junkshop, is an artistically privileged place, exactly because of its position on the margins.

The sense of the fugitive and hidden nature of meaning appears at the end of “Gil’s Furniture.” A music box, ugly and “old with a big brass record in it with holes” opens up to unloose “a million moths all over the dusty furniture and swan neck shadows and in our bones. It’s like drops of water. Or like marimbas only with a funny little plucked sound to it like if you were running your fingers across the teeth of a metal comb” (20). Here, in a story previously confined to the visual, is an explosion of sensory experience: touch, sound, movement. In this brief moment, the natural world explodes into the otherwise lifeless setting. Like a fortune-teller’s glass ball, Gil’s music box is a magical object that opens, if only briefly, a window onto another dimension. The mention of a marimba evokes Central American music as well as West African roots, (the marimba was developed in Guatemala in the 17\textsuperscript{th} century from the African diatonic xylophone) underscoring the cultural ties between the black store-owner and Esperanza and her sister; it is significant that Gil and Esperanza and Nenny share an appreciation both for ‘junk’ and an artistic sensibility they demonstrate in their valuation of the music box, again illustrating Sandoval’s theory of the unified project of artists of Third World descent.

As soon as it begins, the magical interlude of the music box ends: Esperanza turns around and pretends not to care about the box, and then the owner closes it and declares that it is not for sale. As a representation of life’s spiritual and emotional dimension, as well as of a buried ethnic inheritance, the box becomes an object first of shame and then of frustrated longing. The

\textsuperscript{20} In his 1967 essay “Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias,” Foucault describes his idea of the heterotopia as “a counter-site…in which all the real sites that can be found within culture…are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted” (np). The junkshop can be viewed as an inverted mirror of an acquisitional society or as a space that represents the cast-off and marginal status of Mango Street.
message is clear: the sacred and the profound do not come with a price tag, and art can be produced from the humblest of materials.

Ultimately, the subject of both *Dreamtigers* and *The House on Mango Street* is art itself, its capacity for revealing Otherness and its origin in the margins. The characters in the stories described above—the junkshop owner, the poet, the child and the childlike—are all outsiders who exist outside mainstream culture and all in some way channel its paradoxes and inconsistencies while also unveiling the elusive nature of meaning. Both Cisneros and Borges imply that it is the job of the artist to be this Other, by standing outside of the values of global capitalism and focusing instead on its margins, and by seeking spirit over materiality in direct defiance of contemporary values. Their united trans-generational, transnational, and transgender project, is to articulate the voice of the Other, Borges from his position as an artist, a blind man, and a philosopher living in the early industrial age in an Argentina transformed by immigration and movement to the city, and Cisneros from hers as a Latina woman writer, intellectual, activist and itinerant citizen of Greater Mexico. As Borges writes in “Arte poética,” “of such is Poetry immortal and a pauper” (*Dreamtigers*, 89). Within this humble and transitory position lies the danger of departure but also the infinite promise of the unknown.
CHAPTER TWO

Borges and Cisneros in the City: From the Margins to the Center

¡Cuántas cosas iguales! El jinete y el llano,
La tradición de espadas, la plata y la caoba,
El piadoso benjuí que sahúma la alcoba
Y ese latín venido a menos, el castellano.
¡Cuántas cosas distintas! Una mitología
De sangre que entretejen los hondos dioses muertos,
Los nopales que dan horror a los desiertos
Y el amor de una sombra que es anterior al día.
¡Cuántas cosas eternas! El patio que se llena
De lenta y leve luna que nadie ve, la ajada
Violeta entre las páginas de Nájera olvidada,
El golpe de la ola que regresa a la arena.
El hombre que en su lecho último se acomoda
Para esperar la muerte. Quiere tenerla, toda.

Jorge Luis Borges, “México”

Let us return to the image in the introduction of Borges and Cisneros dancing the tango at night on a humble street corner. This time we will employ a bird’s eye view that takes in, first the Americas and then zooms in, to the red stars on the map that mark those two great urban metropolises, Buenos Aires and la Ciudad de México. In this chapter, Borges takes the lead, gently indicating the cortes to his younger companion. His writings suggest a blueprint for how to represent the mid twentieth-century Latin American city, from the humble, popular margins rather than the center. Because these capital cities represent their respective nations, the project of naming and defining them is a national and continent-wide one as well as an urban one; as Roland Spiller writes in his prologue to Borges-Buenos Aires: configuraciones de la ciudad del siglo XIX al XXI (2014), “Como otras ciudades latinoamericanas simboliza la idea de América Latina y lleva consigo las marcas del cambio histórico y epistemológico” (9). This is the external relationship, the painting of the physical context from both writers’ work, the twentieth century city of greater Latin America. With the gravitational, centrifugal force of their writing, both position their respective cities at the cultural center of the world.
Many excellent books have been written solely on the topic of contextualizing Borges within urban studies of early twentieth-century Buenos Aires, among them Spiller’s *Borges-Buenos Aires*, Adriana Bergero’s *Intersecting Tango* (2008) and Beatriz Sarlo’s classic *Una modernidad periférica* (1988). In the last, Sarlo writes of a Buenos Aires marked by, and written and defined from the cultural and socioeconomic margins, where popular culture such as the tango proliferated. She also refers to Buenos Aires as ‘una cultura de mezcla,’ and the emergence of the flâneur during the great population explosion of the early twentieth century, along with an economic boom and the explosion of street commerce, advertisements and neon lights proliferating the sale of bodies and products and disseminating a contemporary sense of alienation. Borges’s literary responses to these changing conditions of the cities include 1) the recourse to magical causality, 2) the detective-style narrative that treats the city as a labyrinth that must be navigated, and 3) the depiction of the margins, where new cultural traditions emerge out of the urban mixture, such as the tango.

Much less has been done to contextualize Cisneros with her portrait of la Ciudad de México in her Mexico City-based novel *Caramelo* (2002). What follows is a condensed summary of some of the historical and contemporary conditions that ground her Mexico City writings. “Más que una ciudad, es un país…”21 Borges’s quote very easily applies as well to la Ciudad de México, which he himself visited on repeated occasions in the 1970s and 1980s (giving rise to the poem in this chapter’s epigraph). With a population of over 20 million people, the larger Mexico City metropolitan area is often referred to simply as ‘México,’ alluding to its symbolic importance as the capital and international representative of the nation. The city’s recent history has included an unearthing of long-buried artifacts from its past which were literally buried under colonial rule. While the tunnels for the metro were being dug in the 1970s,

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21 Quote from *El tamaño de mi esperanza* (1926).
archeologists excavated the ruins of the Templo Mayor from beneath the Mexico City Cathedral located in the Zócalo. New constructions erected by the Spanish to erase traces of the Aztec pre-Conquest past, along with dirt and the passage of centuries had left these ancient artifacts to the forgetfulness of time. Since then, the destruction and reconstruction have only continued: José Emilio Pacheco has described Mexico City as the city of salamanders (*batracios*), people who continually rise out of mud and annihilation to imagine new lives (quoted in Caister, 4).

Discussing the transformations of the city during much of the twentieth century, Rubén Gallo, in the introduction to his *Mexico City Reader*, a collection of *crónicas* of Mexico City by prominent writers and scholars of the metropolis, writes: “entire sections of the city were razed to make room for new neighborhoods and new buildings, which in turn have been demolished after a few decades…a space that can be ‘renewed’ and wiped clean every twenty-five years, much as Mexico City has been since Aztec times” (12). Added to this is the admiring love relationship, mixed with nostalgia, of an immigrant daughter for the Latin American city, tantalizing and elusive beneath the shadow of the Global West, which characterizes much of Cisneros’s approach to Mexico City. She engages through her writings in the nation-building project of mythologizing the city, reconstructing it in words from her own cross-border perspective. The idea of *olvido*—forgetting—takes on a new meaning in Mexico City due to the conquest and the building over of the Aztec city. As Vicente Quirarte writes:

> Arrasados sus edificios civiles y religiosos; esclavizados y sojuzgados sus habitantes;

> segados los canales de la ciudad lacustre, la destrucción perseguía un objeto más: la

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22 The Mexican *crónica* is a hybrid between literary essay and urban reportage, Reading like a journal entry about the writer’s experience living in the city, a descendant of the original crónicas of conquistadors such as Bernal Diaz de Castillo (1496-1584), and maintaining a sense of an old world attempting to understand the new, in the language of the colonizers. Many crónicas provide a glimpse of a small slice of life or of a limited topic pertaining to the city, and they frequently acknowledge their own limitations in the face of the vastness of their chosen topic: Nestor García Canclini has mentioned the impossibility of representing the city except in fragments (quoted in Gallo, 29).
desaparición de la memoria...La llegada de los españoles modificaría no sólo la historia autóctona, sino daría un giro radical a su concepción del mundo. (17)

Thus to want to know Mexico is a process of reconstruction and unlearning. The search for self, for family and for love in Cisneros’s Mexico City writings involve a parallel process of uncovering, unknowing what she thought she knew about Mexico and herself.

Though born in Chicago, Cisneros travelled back and forth nearly every summer to Mexico City during her childhood to visit her paternal grandparents. Mexico City of the 1970s, the setting for Caramelo, was a city in full expansion; part of the so-called Golden Decades of the metropolis following the presidency of Lázaro Cárdenas. It was a great magnet for rural Mexican migrants seeking better opportunities. It grew as a so-called “ciudad mestiza,” with its southern neighborhoods becoming a home for Zapatistas who maintained a strong connection to the land and its traditions, and with the growth of immigration of country dwellers and indigenous people from Oaxaca, as well as other relatively minor cities such as Puebla and Veracruz. The modernity that was achieved as the city grew was an uneven one due to the yawning chasm between rich and poor.

In this chapter, I will look primarily at four of Borges’s texts, the metaphysical poems of Fervor de Buenos Aires, “Delia Elena San Marco,” (Cuaderno San Martín) “El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan,” “El arte narrativo y la magia” and “Fundación mítica de Buenos Aires” and consider how they paved the way for Cisneros’s representation of 1) the urban margins and popular ‘low’ barrio culture of Mexico City in Caramelo (as well as Chicago in The House on Mango Street) 2) exile and return in Mexico City in Caramelo and 3) the mythical
founding of the Latin American city, filtered through epic, in “Lorenzo at the Center of the Universe.”

Of Arrabales and Yuyos: “El hombre de la esquina rosada” and Fervor de Buenos Aires

A fifteen-year old Borges left Buenos Aires in 1914 with his family, and spent seven years away from the city before returning in March of 1921. He writes of his return that the city had grown: “it was now a very large, sprawling, and almost endless city of low buildings with flat roofs, stretching west toward the pampa” (57). He writes of the sprawl, which grew to house a growing poor population that migrated to the industrialized city in search of jobs in the early twentieth century, from other parts of Argentina as well as Europe, and collected on its outskirts. It is this poor western sprawl of the city—“algunos lugares que me eran emocionalmente importantes”—that furnishes the setting for his first major collection of poetry, Fervor de Buenos Aires, whose themes, as he later wrote, were “los atardeceres, los arrabales y la desdicha” (Obras completas I 17).

Borges chose the horizontal, low-roofed outskirts of the city rather than the vertical, internationalized center for many reasons, the first being that he grew up in Viejo Palermo and images of the arrabales populated his childhood imagination. It was a time of rapid


24 Borges’s nod here to the literary importance of the pampa is significant: in addition to the importance of José Hernández’s epic poem about the outlaw gaucho Martín Fierro (1872) to Argentine literature, Borges will build on the literary legacy of the pampa as the seat of Argentine national identity—a contested territory that will also reflect back on the divided life of the city itself. In his stories and essays, Borges weaves a picture of an Argentine identity situated in the marginal neighborhoods of the arrabales, where the pampa and its violent history meets the modern cosmopolitan city in the form of cuchilleros, gauchos and their descendents in urban form, who continued the tradition of physical violence to settle disputes.
modernization, which shocked Borges when he moved back to the city after spending his adolescence abroad. Cars and electricity came to Buenos Aires in the late nineteenth century, and along with the massive influx of immigration they were still revolutionizing the city landscape in the early decades of the twentieth century; Borges’s formative years were ones of enormous urban change. Borges writes of the social alienation that results from new technologies in “El Aleph,” in which Carlos Deneri describes the modern man as surrounded by telephone wires and machines, a man fully obsessed with emerging technologies and, inevitably cut off from other people. “Delia Elena San Marco” also describes social alienation in an increasingly congested and technologized city, as explored later in this chapter.

Fervor de Buenos Aires (1923), Borges’s first full-length poetry collection written after he returned to the city, is full of realist images of the shabby outskirts of Buenos Aires. Borges does not gloss over shabby details, but instead examines them as though they were clues to his own psyche. Buenos Aires also comes to represent the writer/narrator’s own interior emotional landscape. In the poem “Buenos Aires,” Borges draws the connection between shabby cityscape and an interior experience characterized by hopelessness and a sense of failure: “Y la ciudad, ahora, es como un plano de mis humillaciones y fracasos…No nos une el amor sino el espanto; será por eso que la quiero tanto” (28).

At the same time as he wished to represent the ordinariness of the city, he also exalted it, as though its humility made it all the more human to the young poet. Describing his return to the city, he stated in “Autobiographical Notes,” “It was more than a homecoming. It was a rediscovery. I was able to see Buenos Aires keenly and eagerly because I had been away from it for a long time. Had I never been away from it, I wonder whether I would ever have seen it with the peculiar shock and glow it now gave me” (62). It is only after his return from Europe that Borges is able to write Buenos Aires to his satisfaction; after touring and living in Geneva,
Zurich, Nîmes, Córdoba, Lisbon—that he learns what makes Buenos Aires different and that he discovers his own method for describing the American city; a method that embraces its colonial past, its hybridity, its vast wealth disparities, its poverty and its rapid, recent growth. He employs the language of discovery to parallel his rediscovery of his home city with the colonial project of naming and defining the New World. He returned to remake the city with his pen, from his own particular perspective.

Borges wrote *Evaristo Carriego* in 1930 as a tribute to the bard of the *arrabales* of that name. Carriego wrote about ‘el amargo pobrerío’ that formed Carriego’s single subject. About the benefits that Carriego found in writing poverty, Borges notes, “Carriego creía tener una obligación con su barrio pobre: obligación que el estilo bellaco de la fecha traducía en rencor, pero que él sentiría como una fuerza. Ser pobre implica una más inmediata posesión de la realidad” (OC 223-4). In his early books—*El Tamaño de mi esperanza, Fervor de Buenos Aires, Evaristo Carriego, Historia universal de la infamia*—Borges also embraced this idea for his own writing. The poor and the marginal neighborhoods and their denizens were his subject matter, and of them he made poetry; they formed the setting for his speculations about the nature of his country and the universe. In Borges’s hands, the *arrabales* took on mythic proportions (fittingly the street in Buenos Aires where he grew up, formerly known as Calle Serrano, is now named after him). His choice of topic for *Evaristo Carriego*, as he later wrote in “Autobiographical Notes,” was distasteful to his parents, who thought Carriego’s poetry bad. Perhaps they also disapproved because *Evaristo Carriego* was associated with the low-lifes, with street culture, and popular tango culture. However, the book focuses less on Carriego himself, as Borges later commented in “Autobiographical Notes,” and more on life in Palermo and old-time Buenos Aires, and he was able to look back on those elements of it with satisfaction.
In Borges’s first great short story, “Hombre de la esquina rosada,” which appears at the end of Historia universal de la infamia, the fictional narrator identifies with the marginality of the arrabales, because he himself appears to be marginal, poor and otherwise weak, easily overlooked. The story, set in a brothel during a milonga and narrated in the past and through the prism of memory, perfectly captures Borges’s description of the tango, in “Historia del tango” as a popular musical form transmitting “esa belicosa alegría” (264) that mixes violence and overt sexuality and an undercurrent of nostalgia. In the story, the narrator recounts a scene at a brothel of the arrabales in which men listen to music and dance with prostitutes. An outsider, the big tall duro Francisco Real, comes to challenge the local tough, Rosendo Juárez, who, suddenly cowardly, refuses to fight. Later, in “Historia de Rosendo Juárez,” he reveals his back story: raised by his mother, an ironing woman—perhaps from Entre Ríos, he does not know for sure, nor did he know his father, and he grew up “como los yuyos,” a nobody from the poor, racially-mixed arrabales, like the narrator in “Hombre de la esquina rosada.”

In “Hombre de la esquina rosada,” the narrator, humiliated by being pushed away and by watching Juárez flee, relates to his humble surroundings, projecting his emotions onto the landscape and seeing himself reflected in its elements: “Me quedé mirando esas cosas de toda la vida—cielo hasta decir basta, el arroyo que se emperraba sólo ahí abajo, un caballo dormido, el callejón de tierra, los hornos—y pensé que yo era apenas otro yuyo de esas orillas” (HU 106). Yet within the same streets, during the same story, he sees an abundance of beauty—a beauty required, his surmises, by the neighborhood’s very poverty: “¿Basura? La milonga déle loquiar, y déle bochinchar en las casas, y traía olor a madreselvas el viento. Linda al ñudo la noche. Había de estrellas como para marearse mirándolas, unas encima de otras” (ibid). This beauty, cosmic, natural, transcends the poor material circumstances of the people from the

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25 The story was published in English translation as “Streetcorner Man” in A Universal History of Infamy in 1972.
neighborhood—even appears to arise from it, because the simplicity of the surroundings allows
the sky and the music and the company to pulse with life and feeling. At the end of “Hombre de
la esquina rosada” the narrator, who has been treated like a nobody for most of the story, reveals
that he is the hero, and it was he that killed the interloper, Francisco Real, and took home the
local beauty, la Lujanera. In this story Borges captures the unique, irreplaceable atmosphere of a
rowdy Argentine milonga in a poor neighborhood on the outskirts of Buenos Aires. It is this type
of local scene that gives his early writings a distinctly local, regional and populist sensibility, in
which the common man prevails.

**A Yellow Street Weed**

Cisneros began writing *The House on Mango Street* at the Iowa Writers’ Workshop. During her time there, she became disillusioned in a class on Gaston Bachelard’s *The Poetics of Space* (1958) with the way the house of memory was being discussed mainly in privileged terms among her colleagues. While her mostly white fellow students wrote about the many roomed and gardened houses of their childhood, the houses she remembered, in poor urban barrios in Chicago, were small, mice-infested spaces on crime-ridden streets, her own house “a miserable bungalow” which, at the time, she longed to forget. She described feeling at that time in the privileged writing workshop that she was “a yellow weed among the city’s cracks” (cited in 10).

She began modeling her new book, *The House on Mango Street*, after *Dreamtigers*, as explored in CHAPTER ONE. Yet some of the elegiac tone as well as the poor urban setting of the poems of *Fervor de Buenos Aires* also appear in this first book. Consider, for example, the girl dreaming on the balcony of “Calle Desconocida” from *Fervor de Buenos Aires*:

> En esa hora en que la luz tiene una finura de arena, di con una calle ignorada, abierta en
> noble anchura de terraza, cuyas cornisas y paredes mostraban colores blandos como el
mismo cielo que conmovía el fondo. Todos—la medianía de las casas, las modestas balastradas y llamadores, tal vez una esperanza de niña en los balcones entró en mi vano corazón con lipidez de lágrima. Quizá esa hora de la tarde de plata diera su ternura a la calle, haciéndola tan real como un verso/ olvidado y recuperado. (*Selected Poems* 10)

Compare this dreaming girl in the *arrabal*, in the tender falling light of the afternoon—a vision bathed in sadness and nostalgia—with the following lines from “Marin,” about a beautiful Puerto Rican immigrant girl trapped in her aunt’s house in the barrio in *The House on Mango Street*:

“Marin, under the streetlight, dancing by herself, is singing the same song somewhere. I know. is waiting for a car to stop, a star to fall, someone to change her life” (27). As the narrator notes in the story, Marin was soon to be sent back to Puerto Rico, for being “too much trouble,” to the narrator’s disappointment. Like Borges’s forgotten, unknown street, and the unnamed girl dreaming on the balcony, Marin, as a poor immigrant female adolescent, is also consigned to poverty and anonymity, kept alive only as a wistful memory in the poetic imagination.

**Navigating Fact and Fiction in Detective-Style Narration: *Caramelo* and “El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan”**

In this section I argue that, in *Caramelo*, Cisneros adopts several key concepts from *El jardín de senderos que bifurcan* and adapts them to a female perspective in order to imaginatively render her personal experience of exile and homecoming to Mexico. These strategies, concepts, plot-devices include: 1) The interrogation of history through framing devices, 2) The mixing of factual events and footnotes within a fictional narrative, 3) An ancestral object or talisman that represents both the family and more broadly, contains a lesson about the nature of history itself, 4) Detective-style narrative, and 5) The journey to discover a personal and familial (and foreign) past.
“El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan” (the first Borges story to be published in English, in 1948) involves a Chinese professor of English, Dr. Yu Tsun, who is also a spy for the German Empire, who returns to his grandfather’s estate ostensibly to see his grandfather’s mysterious labyrinth, but really to assassinate Stephen Albert, the estate’s caretaker and historian, in order to convey a secret message, the name of the city that the Allies are planning to attack, back to Axis headquarters. However, in the process of conveying this message, the narrator learns surprising information about his own grandfather, Ts’ui Pên’s life work, in which he finds parallels with his own complicated, obscure, yet precise and all-consuming mission that will justify his life.

Cisneros has stated on numerous occasions that Borges is one of her literary influences. In “El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan,” Borges frames the story by first stating that the story that is about to follow is a statement by Dr. Yu Tsun, about an Allied offensive during World War I. Many elements of this introductory paragraph introduce doubt and destabilize the narrative that follows; the statement is about an event that is introduced as appearing in a historical text written by Liddell Hart. The text sends the curious reader on a hunt through the library that ends with the discovery that the actual title of the book is *A History of the World War, 1914-1918*. The introduction mixes such actual historical figures with fictional figures, such as Dr. Yu Tsun, whom Borges further compromises as a reliable source by mentioning that he is a *former* professor. The narrator writes that the mentioned bombardment, planned for July 24th, takes place on the 29th. Yet as Daniel Balderston has commented, the text, paraphrased here from the original text, differs from the original in crucial ways: Hart actually wrote that the bombardment was intended for June 29th but was later postponed until July 1 (*Out of Context* 41-42).

The reader soon discovers that the story traffics less in historic al facts and more in the nature of time, history, and genealogy itself, as well as the nature of historical inquiry and the
relationship between momentous world events and the personal lives of obscure or unknown individuals. The narrator, who is of Chinese-German descent, on his journey to the garden, makes several philosophical observations: 1) “me sentí, por un tiempo indeterminado, el abstracto percibidor del mundo,”26 2) “la tarde era íntima, infinita,” and 3) “un hombre puede ser enemigo de otros hombres, de otros momentos de otros hombres, pero no de un país” (Cuentos completos 150). The music he hears in this unfamiliar world is Chinese, the music of his ancestors, which is why, unconsciously, he gives himself over to it. The landscape is eerily otherworldly, as though the narrator were traversing the dimension of time as well as space: unfamiliar yet filled with clues to the narrator’s past: “el húmedo sendero zigzagueaba como los de mi infancia” (151). In the magical space depicted in “El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan,” manmade objects, objects associated with Chinese civilization, take on natural qualities: a paper lantern, for example, “tenía la forma de los tambores y el color de la luna” (ibid). The narrator’s search for the labyrinth culminates in the discovery that it is actually an experimental novel written by Ts’ui Pên, a garden of forking paths that allows for different outcomes in different permutations of time.

In “El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan,” the narrator imagines his great-grandfather’s labyrinth as

infinito...lo imaginé borrado por arrozales o debajo del agua, lo imaginé infinito, no ya de quioscos ochavados y de sendas que vuelven, sino de ríos y provincias y reinos… Pensé en un laberinto de laberintos, en un sinuoso laberinto creciente que abarcara el pasado y el porvenir y que implicara de algún modo los astros (Obras Completas I 869).

26 The return to his grandfather’s garden makes time indefinite, because he returns to the past. The concept of the abstract witness, removed from time, also bears connections with Buddhist principles of meditation and No-Self (See CHAPTER FOUR for more on Borges and Buddhist philosophy).
He is not wrong: in Borges’s formulation, a novel is capable of containing cities, countries, kingdoms, past and present: it contains buried inheritances from foreign lands; it contains the universe. When Albert finally reveals the text, it is stored in a tall lacquered cabinet.

In Caramelo, Cisneros borrows plot devices and concepts of family, history, and art from “El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan.” It is the metaphor of the rebozo, stored in a walnut armoire, that assures the literary detective that they have found the trail of literary influence she followed to construct the novel. In Caramelo, the rebozo is the totemic family symbol, like Ts’ui Pên’s labyrinth (yet different because the rebozo, unlike the novel, is a historically female art form), that provides the central metaphor for Cisneros’s reflections on the relationship between the self and one’s ancestry, history and art, set within a detective-style narrative. Cisneros has called Caramelo her nine-year novel (A House of my Own 235) and its structure, like the elaborate design of a rebozo, is labyrinthine, in its twists and turns, shifts in perspective and voice, unbelievable plot twists, dead ends, and warning signs questioning the veracity of its account.

As is the case with many of Borges’s stories, it is constructed around a mystery, as Cisneros reveals in her essay entitled “Natural Daughter” from A House of My Own. The root of the mystery is the whereabouts of her long-lost half sister, her father’s older daughter by her grandmother’s washerwoman, Luz (whom Cisneros names Amparo in Caramelo) with whom Cisneros and her siblings played when they were children, unaware that they were related. Like the novel, which also centers on this question, the essay “Natural Daughter” is filled with riddles and queries—on the nature of family, on mestizaje, on immigration—those who stay in Mexico and those who go, and the ties that bind them, or the rifts that set them apart—, on class, on responsibility—many of which lead Cisneros back to her memories of Mexico City itself, and her
interrogation of its secrets, which hide in plain sight, on the roof, in the form of an
unacknowledged half sister.

It is in the Basílica de la Virgen de Guadalupe that Celaya, watching the sea of humanity
file past to witness the tilma, realizes, “the universe a cloth, and all humanity interwoven. Each
and every person connected to me, and me connected to them, like the strands of a rebozo. Pull
one string and the whole thing comes undone. Each person who comes into my life affecting the
pattern, and me affecting theirs” (Caramelo 389). Elsewhere, describing her relationship with her
father and her grandfather, she writes “Him inside her, me inside him, like Chinese boxes, like
Russian dolls, like an ocean full of waves, like the braided threads of a rebozo,” before coming to
the conclusion that “we are all, like it or not, one and the same” (425). And finally, in the last
scene of the novel, a dance to celebrate her parents’ wedding anniversary, Cisneros describes all
the characters—“everyone, big and little, old and young, dead and living, imagined and real
high-stepping past in the big cumbia-circle of life,” here with the interweaving bodies of all of
the characters in the novel, be they famous, humble, fictional, real or mythological, replacing the
intertwined threads of the rebozo. The rebozo serving as a totem for the Reyes family on both
sides of the border. The rebozo is a unifying metaphor of Caramelo, which Cisneros returns to
frequently in order to tie all of its disparate narrative strands together, and to symbolize unity and
meaning: as the real-life Oaxacan shamaness María Sabina murmurs in the novel, “God is an
immense cloth that contains the universe” (193). Elsewhere, when Lala’s father comes to rescue
her in Mexico City, she is unable to speak; instead the only thing that comes out of her mouth is
“a thin, slippery howl, like raw silk unspooling from my belly” (395). Here again the raw
materials of fabric (thread) and those of stories (words) interchangeable. As in a treasured, many-
stranded rebozo, all stories unite in the character of Celaya, the loudmouthed storyteller/
detective of the novel who, like the narrator of Borges’s “El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan,” retreads the steps of her ancestors in order to understand herself and discover her own destiny.

*Caramelo* also opens with a framing device that foregrounds the unreliability of memory, of authorship and of the archive. Cisneros begins with an epigraph: “cuéntame algo, aunque sea mentira,” translated on the next page as “tell me a story, even if it’s a lie” (front matter). The quote is a potential allusion to the recursive text of the *Thousand and One Nights*, with its renewable wellspring of stories, and Scheherazade, the shrewd narrator who fends off death by captivating the imagination of the king, her would-be assassin, with her tales. Cisneros evokes the idea of literature or a story coming to take the place of life in the epigraph to *Caramelo*: “After all and everything only the story is remembered, and the truth fades away like the pale blue ink on a cheap embroidery pattern” (np). The idea that a story, or a succession of stories, can come to replace or encompass life is one that Borges develops in “Parábola del palacio,” in which a kingdom disappears after a poet expresses it into words. Writes Borges:

> lo cierto, lo increíble, es que en el poema estaba entero y minucioso el palacio enorme, con cada ilustre porcelana y cada dibujo en cada porcelana y las penumbras y las luces del crepúsculo y cada instante disdichado o feliz de las glorias dinastías de mortales, de dioses y de dragones que habitaron en el desde el interminable pasado. (*Selected Poems* 82)

Meanwhile in *Caramelo*, the rebozo becomes a symbol both of the inheritance of Mexican culture for the Mexican American narrator and of the novel itself. For both authors, the Latin American city, more than a physical place, becomes part of the writer/narrator’s consciousness, a geography of the mind that does not loosen its grasp, even amidst the nomadic travels of the writer/narrator. The effect in Cisneros is a reflection upon the immigrant experience, and the duality and simultaneity of living in the United States but descending from Mexico.
Literary Cartographies and the Mythical Founding of the Latin American city:

“Fundación mítica de Buenos Aires” and “Lorenzo at the Center of the Universe”

Borges brilliantly explores the relationship between cartography and literature in “Parábola del palacio” as well as in “Del rigor en la ciencia” (El hacedor) in which a map perfectly covers all the coordinates of the territory it covers. Finally, in the epilogue to El hacedor he traces connections between literature, cartography, and personal, inner geographies. From a post-colonial perspective, this is a fascinating approach for Borges, the citizen of a country with a history of outside colonization, to take. Wielding his pen, not through the violence of the sword like his forbearers but the strength of his argumentation and the reach of his expanding readership, he claims Argentina and Buenos Aires as his literary territory.

Cartography can be performed by invaders and rulers of a country in the attempt to define, name, and claim a space. It implies a type of intellectual ownership; it involves the staking of a claim on a city. Borges’s use of cartographical metaphors provides a map for other writers of Latin America and its diaspora for how to revisit and question the language of the crónicas, histories and travel narratives of Latin America, from national perspectives.

In one of the poems that made Borges a hero amongst his fellow Argentines, “Fundación mítica de Buenos Aires,” (Cuaderno San Martín, 1929) he imagines the city’s founding up to its present day state. He employs language that gestures back to the conquest of Buenos Aires: “¿Y fue por este río de sueñera y de barro/ que las proas vinieron a fundarme la patria?” (Selected Poems 52). The prow’s of the ships refer to the sailing ships used by the conquistadors to explore and conquer the Americas. Playing with cartographical language, he mentions the red star on the map where Juan Díaz de Solís, the Spanish explorer, met a famous end when in 1516 he was cannibalized by the locals: “su estrellita roja para marcar/ el sitio en que ayunó Juan Díaz y los indios comieron” (52).
Yet Borges quickly confounds this historical context by collapsing time; this will be no traditional historical recounting of the history of the Argentine conquest. Instead, he plays with epic conventions as he narrates a metaphysical history of Argentina from its founding to its present, and as he establishes the setting that will be his personal poetic vision of Buenos Aires: Palermo, with its street toughs and corner bars, its tangos and vacant lots. Thus a one-page poem that begins with the first conquistadors floundering on the banks of the Río Plata ends in a corner store with a card game, the bar having flowered before the reader’s eyes: “Un almacén rosado como revés de naípe brilló y en la trastienda conversaron un truco; el almacén rosado floreció en un compadre, ya patrón de la esquina, ya resentido y duro” (52). Borges explains the impulse to blend past and present in the last lines: “A mí se me hace cuento que empezó Buenos Aires: La juzgo tan eterna como el agua y el aire” (54). The verb in this last line, juzgar, indicates that Borges has through his own verbal conjuring reenacting the conquest and settlement of Argentina; he staked out his literary territory by painting its history through his own perspective. After his sojourn abroad, and after coming to terms with his literary destiny, Borges ‘recuperates’ Buenos Aires through poems such as “Fundación mítica de Buenos Aires.”

For Sandra Cisneros, la Ciudad de México is also a lost and recuperated city, due to her immigrant’s experience, the childhood visits and the long years of exile in the United States. Echoes of the verbal conjuring that Borges so masterfully employs in “Fundación mítica” appear in one of Cisneros’s most epic poems, “With Lorenzo at the Center of the Universe” (Loose Woman, 1995). As the Publishers Weekly review states, in this poem, “the worlds of language and life are one and the same” (“Loose Woman,” Publishers Weekly). The reviewer also notes “the almost mythic undertow of her language…it never weakens” (ibid). Like Borges in “Fundación mítica,” in “With Lorenzo at the Center of the Universe,” Cisneros employs epic
language to describe the mythical founding of the city, to contract and expand time like an accordion and bring the poem to her contemporary, interior experience of the city.

“With Lorenzo at the Center of the Universe” is a poem about a Mexican American woman saying goodbye for the last time to a Mexican lover in Mexico City. Yet the poem is as much about the narrator’s inside-outside relationship to a Mexican national identity as it is about the fleeting encounter between its two protagonists. In the text body of the poem, she names the location before she names the characters: “the zócalo at night and la Calle de la Moneda like a dream out of Canaletto” (60). The reference, to Canaletto (1697-1768) the famous painter of majestic Venetian canals and ships dating from shortly after the Age of Exploration, invokes images of European conquest (as Borges does with the ‘proas’ of “Fundación mítica”); just as quickly, she discards the reference to Europe as a fantasy: “forget Canaletto. This was real” (ibid). Then she turns to the ancient pre-Hispanic provenance of the Zócalo. Borges’s technique in “Fundación mítica” appears, of the ancient merging with the contemporary, of man-made edifices rising as if out of the earth, as if they were as eternal as the air: “the Cathedral smoky-eyed and still rising like a pyramid after all these centuries” (ibid). In the hazy darkness of the Zócalo, the contemporary Cathedral appears to rise like the now disappeared pyramid of the Templo Mayor (whose stones were famously repurposed by the Spaniards to construct the Cathedral). She then makes the geography a personal, inner geography, and stakes her claim on Mexico City: “This is the center of the universe, I said, and meant it. This is eternity…there was that kiss, just that, from the center of the universe. Or at least my universe” (ibid)(italics mine).

To continue the parallelism with “Fundación mítica,” the poem even includes an old-time drinking establishment, “La Hermosa Hortensia,” where the couple drinks that ancient pre-Hispanic Mexican libation, pulque.
Cleverly, and continuing the connection between the personal and the urban history, she writes “I remember you, querida flecha, and how all the words I knew left me. The ones in English and the few in Spanish too” (ibid). The lack of words here has three possible causes: on one level, they allude to the transnationality of the couple, with their disparate linguistic background, Mexican-Spanish and Mexican American-English; finally, the disappearance of the English and Spanish words also invokes the peeling back of time to the pre-Hispanic era before either language was spoken in Mexico. In the poem Cisneros postulates the Zócalo, center of the Aztec world, as the center of the Universe, replacing Spanish-speaking Spain, as well as English-speaking North America. She relates herself to that ancient center, as well as to the pyramids of the Templo Mayor, in the following line: “Earlier I’d been birthed from the earth when the metro bust loose at noon” (61). Though the line clearly refers to her exit from the underground Metro where it enters onto the plaza, it is also likely a reference to the discovery of the stones of the Templo Mayor there beneath the hubbub of European-style streets built after the invasion of Cortés, which were also ‘birthed from the earth when the metro bust loose’—discovered and excavated in the 1978 during the underground construction of the metro. The poem walks backward in time, and downwards in space, toward the heart of the city and of its protagonist. For her to claim she was birthed from the earth in the Zócalo is to claim Mexico as her birthright, a bold gesture for a Chicago-born Chicana. In an early interview about her project as a writer, Cisneros adopts a similar cartographic language in many of her writings of place. “I’m trying to write the stories that haven’t been written. I feel like a cartographer; I’m determined to fill a literary void,” she stated in an interview about the experience of writing Woman Hollering Creek. In “With Lorenzo at the center of the Universe,” she fills the void of the yearning for connection with a lost homeland by writing her personal mythification of Mexico City.
Narrating Encuentros and Desencuentros in the City

“[C]omo en el milagro del reconocimiento amoroso, la fundación de la ciudad fue una alianza donde conjugaron la voluntad, el azar y el milagro.”

Quirarte, Ciudad como cuerpo 22

The Ciudad de México is the obliquely referenced setting for one poem in My Wicked Wicked Ways (1992) “14 de julio,” in which a man kisses a woman on the corner of Cinco de Mayo and Independencia. The poem is a tribute to the open affection of Mexican culture, where two people can kiss on a street corner for no other reason than that it’s a Friday, uncautiously, “oblivious to the consequence of sorrow” (101). Here she appreciates the ‘simple affirmation,’ freely given, of people untimid in love, and a city filled with such moments of ‘public grace’ as opposed to the timidity and withholding she experienced in her own love affair, among “the half-dark who were unbrave”—with half-dark referring to Mexican Americans (ibid).27 The primary theme is one of missed connection, as the narrator laments the failure of that half-hearted relationship. The location, on the corner of Cinco de Mayo and Independencia, ironically reflects on this theme: the streets do not actually intersect, reflecting both Cisneros’s penchant for invention and the theme of disconnection.

“When Lorenzo at the center of the universe” explicitly references Borges—“…we said goodbye/ along two streets named after rivers. I/ fumbled with the story of Borges and his Delia/ When we meet again beside what river?/ But this was no poem…”28 (61-2) She refers here to “Delia Elena San Marco” from El hacedor, whose text reads as follows:

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27 According to Héctor Calderón, Mexican Americans are a group regarded “with condescension by Mexican nationals as pochos, inauthentic, Anglicized Mexicans”—Los desarraigados or uprooted ones in the words of Mexican playwright Humberto Robles Arena (181).

28 The Cuauhtémoc district, located south of the Centro Histórico and incorporating the impressive gold statue known as Angel de la Independecia, brushing against Chapultepec park, including the historic Paseo de la Reforma and encompassing the Juárez district, features a number of streets named after rivers such as Río Nilo, Río Po, Río Senas, Río Amazonas, etc. Here Cisneros cleverly links Mexico City’s streetscape to the philosophical preoccupations of ephemerality and eternity that Borges raises in his poetry.
Nos despedimos en una de las esquinas del Once... Un río de vehículos y de gente corría entre nosotros... cómo iba yo a saber que aquel río era el triste Aqueronte, el insuperable... Delia: alguna vez anudaremos ¿junto a qué río? este diálogo incierto y nos preguntaremos si alguna vez, en alguna ciudad que se perdía en una llanura, fuimos Borges y Delia. (Obras completas 282)

Both authors’ poems are written in the second person, directed to a love who is now absent—Delia who died before Borges saw her again, meaning he is speaking to her in the next world—hence his reference to the river Styx, where he will presumably see her again after death.

Meanwhile, Cisneros’s Lorenzo, still alive, is presumably a love from the past, never seen again. Both poems share philosophical concerns about time, eternity, and temporality. If Borges said that space is a function of time, love also in these poems appears rooted in that ephemeral space, a moment in time that dissolves into memory, which is also eternal. (Cisneros also uses the metaphor of a wisp of copal, recurring to a traditional incense used in sacred indigenous ceremonies, the vaporous, invisible smoke of the copal and the sublimation of the culture associated with its use reflecting the love’s elusive and unfixed nature as well as her sense of the tenuousness of her relationship to that culture).

Setting the stage for these two poems of love and loss is the vast transitional city. Mario Valdovinos writes that Borges narrates a desencuentro in "Delia Elena San Marco," also speculating on the transitoriness of humanity and the ephemeral character of the faces that appear and disappear among the multitudes ("Thomas de Quincey y los paraísos artificiales"). In both stories, it is the anonymity of the twentieth century city into which the beloved disappears, never to return. Valdovinos’s choice of the word desencuentros is apt though it has no direct English translation. They are dis-encounters: more than a temporary separation, the word indicates an unjoining or unlinking, as the rest of the texts confirm. Underlying them is the loneliness of the
narrator alienated in the vast and largely anonymous city, a space characterized as a labyrinth and a river, an entity that swallows up its inhabitants, who are interchangeable, whose time in the city is limited. The city itself becomes personified as an elusive lover: as Vicente Quirarte comments in *La ciudad como cuerpo* (1999), any poem written to one of the great cities is one of attainable love (30).

Borges’s choice of location for “Delia Elena San Marco” is the Plaza del Once, one of Buenos Aires’s oldest, busiest, most diverse and intensely commercialized quarters. Its name comes from the train station situated in its center. The station was in turn named for Once de Septiembre, the date the Estado de Buenos Aires separated from the rest of Argentina. The neighborhood was historically a center for Jewish migration; the Jews there worked as traders and producers of fabrics; additionally, the area has historically been a site of immigration from South Korea and Peru. The Corrales de Miserere, located in the barrio Once, was originally a farm, the site of the English invasions of 1806 and 1807, when the British were defeated in what became known as the Combate de Miserere. Finally, the plaza is the site of the mausoleum of Bernardino Rivadavia, the first president of Argentina. Borges’s specification of the exact location of the encounter with Delia Elena San Marco at this historically-significant plaza gives the poem a historically and politically charged tone; the love story becomes absorbed into the fabric of this history, and the account of two people and their parting takes on the quality of a moment in the city’s past.

The *desencuentro* Cisneros narrates in “With Lorenzo at the Center of the Universe” is due more to the population shifts of the Mexican diaspora than to contemporary technologies. In *American Encounters: Greater Mexico, the United States and the Erotics of Culture*, (1999) José E. Limón writes about the erotic cross-border relationship between the United States and Mexico. Discussing Cisneros, he states that her female characters often draw on the erotic
stereotype of the border prostitute, freely giving of sex, mistresses to white males (149).

However, he does not mention that in her stories and poems set in Mexico City, including *Caramelo*, “With Lorenzo at the Center of the Universe” (and to some extent “14 de julio”), she writes from the perspective of a Mexican American tourist seeking connection in Mexico City to an elusive love object.

The poem is characterized by duality, like “Delia Elena San Marco”: first there is the dualism and separation, marked by tension, of the two characters and then the division between the present—the now—and the eternal. Cisneros marks this divide by, in different places in the poem, mentioning the pre-Hispanic and the sacred, and elsewhere describing mundane material details of contemporary life, which she divides into the further dualism of night and day, as though she were describing two coexisting and overlapping dimensions of the city. The contemporary mercantilism of the Zócalo she describes in the following terms: “Bic pens embroidered with Batman logos, red extension cords, vinyl wallets, velveteen roses, pumpkin seed vendors, brilliant masons looking for work…the boy with the burnt foot carried by his mother, the smell of meat frying, a Styrofoam plate sticky with grease”(61). Amidst this hodgepodge, Cisneros highlights the use of artificial materials—plastic, vinyl, velveteen, Styrofoam—the old mixed with the new—pumpkin seed vendors and brilliant masons—and the mercantile aspect of the Zócalo, which by day is teeming with commerce.

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29 This theme can also be seen in other works set outside of Mexico City. Lorenzo, like Flavio in “Bien Pretty,” from *Woman Hollering Creek*, (1991) is an unavailable Mexican man onto whom the narrator projects her desire to unite with her Mexican heritage. With him she feels she might restore a piece of herself that she feels bereft of due to her geographical displacement from the land of her ancestors: “hadn’t it taken centuries for us to meet at the center of the universe and consummate a kiss?”(62) Yet as in “Bien Pretty,” the man ultimately proves unavailable and she is left on her own with that same exile’s sense of identitary incompletion. The difference in Cisneros’s Mexico City-set works is that the narrator is left with a connection to the city itself, which ultimately provides the identification she was seeking.

30 The informal economy in Mexico is a centuries-old practice that has always been part of the battle for survival in a country that, for many, offers limited financial opportunities. This phenomenon keeps alive the tradition of the ambulant street vendor in search of alternative markets: “La crisis económica que se antoja larga, hace al mexicano del fin del siglo, mucho más habilidos para obtenerlo indispensable y convertirlo en parca
and the temporary also plays into Cisneros’s characterization of Lorenzo. In a female response to Borges’s poem, in which Delia’s disappearance prompts a rumination first on the anonymity of the city and then on time and eternity, the man becomes a cipher for more universal ruminations on eternity, temporality, and space and time in the city. More specifically, he comes to represent the Mexican American’s exilic anxieties of separation and loss from Mexico, and about time passing and the city changing during one’s absence.

Later in the poem, the narrator admits that parts of the story might be fantasy: “I forget what’s real. I mix up the details of what happened with what I witnessed inside my universe” (62), also raising questions of perception and reality: Berkeleyan idealism recognizes no other reality than mental processes. By positing the Zócalo as the center of the universe and insisting on the primacy of mental processes and the negation of time—principles of Berkeleyan idealism she recycles and reworks from Borges’s “Delia Elena San Marco”—Cisneros illustrates a narrator attempting to realign her identity with Mexico. When the male love object refuses to allow himself to be appropriated for this purpose, the narrator appears to make the shift for herself, asserting her independent belonging to the city and its history: “see this Zócalo? Remember me” (63).

**Metaphysical Poetics of the City**

The definition of metaphysics that I will use here to describe Borges’s (and later Cisneros’s) poetic imagery, involves the problematization of the split between the mental and the physical.\(^{31}\) In his poetry, by blending mental states and physical images of the city, Borges creates a metaphysical poetics of the city, later emulated by Cisneros.
In Borges’s famous essay “El arte narrativo y la magia,” (Sur 1932) he describes his conception of magical causality as it applies in the novel, asserting that the best fiction, as opposed to the realistic novel, is governed by magical causality: “El milagro no es menos forastero en ese universo que en el de los astrónomos. Todas las leyes naturales lo rigen, y otras imaginarias” (82). The power of thought or imagination over human experience he derives from Schopenhauer and Berkeley. The world exists within perception; hence magic and superstition hold a valid claim as ways to conceive of the workings of the universe. As he writes expressing this view in a poem dedicated to the famous Buenos Aires cemetery where his ancestors were buried, “La Recoleta,” from Fervor de Buenos Aires, (1923) “solo la vida existe. El espacio y el tiempo… son instrumentos mágicos del alma, y cuando ésta se apague, se apagarán con ella el espacio, el tiempo y la muerte” (6). He writes that the honorable way to present life in fiction is not according to realistic causalities, as “el resultado incesante de incontrolables e infinitas operaciones,” as the realist novel might portray it, but as governed by magical causality, “donde profetizan los pormenores, lúcido y limitado” (82).

In “El arte narrativo y la magia,” Borges enumerates several techniques an author may use to impart a sense of magic. One of these is the authorial admission that the scene is one that is remembered, and thus mediated by the imagination. Another is metafiction: a calling to attention of the artifice of creation, casting into doubt the believability of the world created within the work, as he writes that Estanislao del Campo does in Fausto, using a single preliminary mention of stage sets to imbue with an “incómoda irrealidad las figuraciones del amanecer, de la pampa, del anochecer” (81). This suggestion of artistic artifice in an otherwise metaphysical concept of mental causation, which arises from the split between the material and the mental worlds. The problems that arise from this split are formulated as follows: “If thoughts and sensations belong to an immaterial or non-physical portion of reality—if, for example, they are changes in immaterial or non-physical substances—how can they have effects in the physical world? How, for example, can a decision or act of will cause a movement of a human body? How, for that matter, can changes in the physical world have effects in the non-physical part of reality?” (“3.5 The Mental and the Physical,” Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy)
believable literary world destabilizes the reader’s notion of reality itself, highlighting its magical possibilities. Another is the oblique description of magical characters or events, so that they appear natural to the reader.

In “Las calles,” from Fervor de Buenos Aires (1923) Borges illustrates a Buenos Aires on the margins disappearing into the sky and the plains: “las calles desganadas del barrio, casi invisibles de habituales, enternecidas de penumbra y de ocaso y aquellas más afuera ajenas de árboles piadosos donde austeras casitas apenas se avenutran, abrumadas por inmortales distancias, a perderse en la honda visión de cielo y de llanura” (4). The image concords with one of the models he sets forth in “El arte narrativo y la magia,” for the illustration of magic through means of haze and distance. These elements combine to create a magical, ethereal vision of a Buenos Aires dissolving into nature. He chooses the time when day becomes night, evening, and the quiet streets of the outskirts of town, to describe the city as the place of his soul; as he states in the opening line: “las calles de Buenos Aires ya son mi entraña,” a clear example of metaphysics (4).

Sandra Cisneros takes a similarly poetic approach to poor and working class neighborhoods in her Mexico City writings, excavating the profound in the city while also grounding it in details that fully explore the sensory experience of poverty with an empathy that links it to her narrator’s state of mind. For example, when Lala is happy, at lunch with her mother at a streetside restaurant, a broken table leg at an inexpensive lonchería in La Villa ‘dances’ until a napkin is wedged under it. When she shifts into explorations of the more exalted side of the city, its spiritual underpinnings, she also exposes the artifice of her craft in much the way Borges describes in “El arte narrativo y la magia” to remind readers that imagination shapes her world and that the use of imagination can transform material circumstances. Her description of the hill upon which is situated the Basílica de la Virgen de Guadalupe in the introduction to
“Tepeyac,” (Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories, 1991) echoes the dissolving evening light and magical sense of city blending into sky of Borges’s “Las calles”:

When the sky of Tepeyac opens its first thin stars and the dark comes down in an ink of Japanese blue above the bell towers of La Basílica de Nuestra Señora, above the plaza photographers…then Abuelito tells the boy with the dusty hair, Arturo, we are closed, and in crooked shoes and purple elbows Arturo pulls down with a pole the corrugated metal curtains—first the one on Misterios, then the other on Cinco de Mayo—like an eyelid over each door, before Abuelito tells him he can go (22).

In this passage, the bird’s eye perspective swooping down over perspective provides that hazy sense of distance that Borges identifies in “Arte de narrativa y de la magia.” The dissolving light washing over the mundane and concrete details of city life—metal curtains, the tlalpería, the vendors surrounding the Basílica closing up shop—echoes Borges’s illustration of the humble barrios of the city as places that retain a magical connection to nature and to eternity. Finally, the corrugated metal curtains like eyelids introduce the notion of the city as a body—a metaphor Vicente Quirarte examines in depth in his Mexico City crónica, La ciudad como cuerpo (1999). The image connotes a friendly intimacy with the city, as well as its animistic quality, alive with its own stories and qualities which predate and will outlast the writer—alive also with the miraculous, particularly in La Villa, the humble neighborhood surrounding Tepeyac hill and the Basílica of the Virgen de Guadalupe, where “long ago Juan Diego brought down from the cerro the miracle [the tilma engraved with the Virgin’s image] that has brought everyone, except my Abuelito, on their knees” (22).

Borges often compares the miraculous city itself to a poem: “Quizá esa hora de la tarde de plata diera su ternura a la calle, haciéndola tan real como un verso olvidado y recuperado” (“Calle Desconocida”10). The city itself as a poem also appears in “El sur”: “Desde uno de tus
patios haber mirado las antiguas estrellas,…el olor del jazmín y madreselva, el silencio del pájaro dormido, el arco del zanguan, la humedad—esas cosas, acaso, son el poema” (8).

Alternately, he conflates the lines of his verses to city streets, within which reside, he claims, national identity as well: “Hacia el Oeste, el Norte y el Sur,/ se han desplegado—y son también la patria—las calles:/ ojalá en los versos que trazo/ estén esas banderas” (“Las calles” 4). The city, its elemental qualities, the poem, and consciousness of the poet of the street, all come together in “Calle con almacén rosado” from Luna de Enfrente (1925):

el almacén tan claro como la luna nueva de ayer tarde. Es familiar como un recuerdo…¡Qué lindo atestiguarte calle de siempre, ya que miraron tan pocas cosas mis días!…no he mirado los ríos ni la mar ni la sierra, pero intimó conmigo la luz de buenos Aires y yo forjo los versos de mi vida y mi muerte con esa luz de calle, Calle grande y sufrida, eres la única música de que sabe mi vida. (36)

Among the interesting points about this poem is that the narrator claims to have seen neither rivers nor sea nor mountains, which we know to be untrue in Borges’s case. He fondly described swimming rivers in his youth in his autobiography, and certainly saw mountains when he lived in Geneva and the sea in Spain. The only explanation is that he takes the point of view of the common man in Buenos Aires. While Borges appears to be adopting a commoner’s voice, these last lines of the poem may well apply to him as well, and to the project he imagines for himself, having decided to settle for good in Buenos Aires, he commits that it will be the place of his soul’s music, that he will see and sing his life and death in its streets.

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32 Borges takes this position to its furthest limit in Evaristo Carriego, his tribute to the street poet of his family’s acquaintance, in which, as Helft and Pauls write in El factor Borges, (2000) “A través de Carriego, Borges reivindica la tradición de la milonga, el truco, el duelo de compadritos, el velorio barrial, lugares comunes que ponen en escena una manera conversada…de ser Argentino; el Carriego de ‘La canción del barrio,’ además, le sirve para postular que la literatura (la belleza, lo poético, esa suspensión de la vida) debe buscarse en los momentos no literarios de la cultura popular: un dicho intercalado en una mano de truco, una entonación de milonga, un lemo… llega a ser un poeta de la gente común, un poeta anónimo” (19).
The last line of Cisneros’s “Tepeyac” is about memory and about the passage of time:

“Who would have guessed, after all this time, it is me who will remember when everything else is forgotten, you who took with you something to your stone bed something irretrievable, without a name” (23). This honest invocation of memory establishes that the piece has been written squarely in the realm of personal perception, and that the relationship between girl and her grandfather have been inscribed upon the landscape she describes, including her melancholic ruminations on its process of decay; meanwhile the metaphor of the stone bed for the grave lends a poetic pleasure to the text, which should hold, according to Borges quoting Mallarme, a dreamlike sense of suggestion.33 Furthermore, this piece, which involves speaking to a grandfather in his grave, in the city in which the grandfather was born and buried and which the author has left but seeks to reclaim, in part through the process of writing itself, a writing that links a sense of self to place through the memory of generations—is thoroughly Borgesian (consider ruminations on the deaths of his forebears in Buenos Aires such as “La Recoleta”).

One of Borges’s greatest innovations is to animate inanimate things, a device which awakens the secret affinities of all things, to activate their metaphysical potential.

In “Calle desconocida,” the humble houses and inhabitants of an unknown street “entró en mi vano corazón con limpidez de lágrima.” Again, in “Patio,” there is the triangulation of nature, man-made structure, and narrator/ poet: “el patio es el declive por el cual se derrama el cielo en la casa… grato es vivir en la amistad oscura de un zaguán, de una parra y de un aljibe,” as well as the personification of inanimate objects, natural and manmade, which creates the impression of a city that is alive, animated by memory and the imagination.

In Caramelo, the real city and the dream city of the writer’s memory likewise fuse.

Cisneros’s description of the family’s first arrival in Mexico City also corporealsizes the city,
mixing external impression with physical sensation, as in the parallel lines “the rising in the chest, in the heart, finally. The road suddenly dipping and surprising us as always…a laughter in your chest when the car descends” (25). Laughter welling within her body will resemble a Mexico City parade. The white lines on the road will resemble sewing machine tape, connoting the image of driving along a bolt of cloth as it is being sewn. Cisneros also uses active and animistic images to animate nonliving things: “city busses and taxis glide alongside us like dolphins.” Conversely, the natural in the city will also resemble the human-made: “the twilight sky filling with stars like twists of silver paper” (26). The map of the road will end in an ‘x’ over her grandmother’s belly formed by her crisscrossed rebozo. Here as in Borges the written word comes alive in the city, in a play that weaves life and letters so that they are impossible to differentiate. It is a living city, half nature, half human-made, composed of verse, a city admittedly as much dreamt and imagined as it is real.

Sandra Cisneros’s Ciudad de México

Despite the ambitiousness of his metaphysical (re)writing of the Latin American city, Borges also kept things simple when describing Buenos Aires by limiting himself to a small handful of locations. In “El testigo,” (El hacedor) Borges wonders if his legacy might be only the image of a horse on the hill at the corner of Serrano and Charcas streets, (in Palermo Viejo where he grew up) here signaling how very limited the actual coordinates of the city that he covers really are. The locations of Borges’s Buenos Aires included: Calle Tucumán, Palermo Viejo, Adrogué, Plaza del Once, and Plaza San Martín. Because the locations of Borges’s Buenos Aires have already been thoroughly historicized by literary scholars, in this section I will limit myself to discussing the histories and contemporary atmospheres of a number of the locations that make up Cisneros’s Mexico City, some of great importance to the history of Mexico City, some of
more personal significance. These places include: the Basílica of the Virgen of Guadalupe and Tepeyac hill; la Villa and Calzada Misterios and Guadalupe, which comprise the much-frequented walk from Celaya’s grandparents’ house to the Basílica; Destiny Street #12 (based on an actual building on a street actually named Calle Fortuna, located in La Villa less than a half a mile from the Basílica); and the Zócalo in the Centro Histórico and the Hotel Majestic, located on one of its corners.

**Destiny Street (Avenida la Fortuna), La Villa and La Basílica de la Virgen de Guadalupe**

“When I go to Mexico [City], I always go to the Basílica of the Virgen de Guadalupe. I go past the house that was my grandparents.’ I always have a picture taken of myself in front of the recuerdo de Tepeyac backdrops.”

Kevane and Heredia, Interview with Sandra Cisneros, *Latina Self Portraits* (55)

Cisneros’s actual grandparents lived at #12 Avenida la Fortuna in La Villa, south of the Centro in Mexico City. Though already a poetic name, Cisneros renamed the street Destino—perhaps to allude to the fact that the narrator will seek her destiny in Mexico City. Avenida La Fortuna’s close proximity (roughly ten blocks) to the Basílica means that the teeming life of the landmark would have been omnipresent in the life of its residents. The streets are filled with the sounds of firecrackers and church bells, and frequently densely populated by masses of devotees, pilgrims, and foreign tourists.

The neighborhood is working class. Nowhere to be seen is the gentrification or influx of foreigners to be found in other parts of the city. According to Dr. Ariel Rodríguez Kuri, la Villa was originally just a sanctuary, disinhibited, a place for the devout and the curious to visit, celebrate and pay homage (personal interview). Later, in the 1940s to 1970s, México’s population boom brought development to the neighborhood, which grew significantly into the heavily populated residential neighborhood it is today. La Villa has always been a dry zone, its lands sterile and saltpetrous. Accordingly, those who have been able to afford to live there are of
lower-middle classes, which imbues the neighborhood, along with its proximity to the Basílica, with the popular and traditional sensibilities which are largely the domain of the lower and middle classes in the city. Like Borges’s Palermo, La Villa and the Basílica de la Virgen de Guadalupe are Cisneros’s working class symbols of Mexico City.

**The Zócalo and the Centro**

“Vivir en el centro no sólo era vivir en el corazón de la ciudad, sino latir en el centro del mundo… Mientras un caminante sacralice con su paso el Centro, el hombre como especie será el alma de la ciudad y las acciones ciudadanas se trasformarán en riutales celebratorios: quien sale a la calle vive una aventura, descifra el mapa de un tesoro, se enfrenta a los horrores del Apocalipsis o descubre la indomable fraternidad de su prójimo en la cotidiana travesía. Sólo así perdemos nuestra condición de humillados y ofendidos y hacemos de cada día una batalla donde sentimos que los dioses observan de qué modo enfrentamos su desafío.”

Vicente Quirarte, *Ciudad como cuerpo* (25-7)

Nowhere does Cisneros more succinctly explore the aesthetic contrasts of Mexico City, its layers of history and cultural identity—which André Breton famously called the most surreal place on earth—than in the scenes that take place in the Zócalo. As in a Roman city, the central space of the Zócalo is holy, with the rest of the metropolis radiating out from it. The design takes its cues both from Tenochtitlán and from Roman architecture. The Zócalo and its surrounding streets—particularly Calle Madero with its ice cream shops, museums, street musicians, and the Mirador, Mexico City’s tallest building—are frequented both by tourists, but are also beloved by *capitalinos* (residents of the capital) who on Sundays flood the streets.

The theme of the Zócalo as a physical and emotional battleground for the city finds expression in a scene in *Caramelo* in which Narciso, Celaya’s grandfather, runs through the streets of Mexico City at the end of the Revolution, where its culminating battles took place. Here again Cisneros portrays the Zócalo as the heart of the city, documented at the end of the Revolution, when a new sense of nationhood flourished. However, it brought with it a mixed

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34 The upper classes typically maintain an aloof distance from a popular Mexican identity, including such traditions as Christmas posadas, and spiritual practices such as church attendance, limpias, or consultations with Mexican indigenous *curanderas* etc., demonstrating instead a stronger affinity with European cultures and the global West.
legacy: During the Revolution under Carranza and Obregón, the city suffered drastic shortages of food and clean water, and several epidemics struck. Those who had work did not get paid; those without work risked being forced to join the army. Many, like Narciso, fled for the North in its wake, tired of conflict and wary of being conscripted again. Narciso’s emotional breakdown in the Zócalo indicates the moment before the split, when he will move north of the border. This moment is the origin, is the Cisneros family, of the two Mexicos, and will forever alter the course of their destiny.

The Hotel Majestic (Room 606) and its postcard-worthy location on the Zócalo are also the setting in Caramelo for Celaya’s impulsive and ill-conceived getaway with her spineless Mexican American boyfriend Ernesto Calderón, who runs back to the States for a more conventional and less-adventuresome girlfriend and abandons her there. If it were not already obvious that Cisneros’s goal, in this scene as in many others, is to plumb the heart of Mexican identity, the hotel’s location overlooking the Zócalo makes it abundantly clear. In this section of the book she reveals the hard lessons learned by a young woman coming to understand the dangers of Mexico’s overt romanticism, and the chauvinism with which it is intimately entwined. Again, as in “With Lorenzo at the Center of the Universe,” the attempt to script a perfect love story in the Zócalo fails. It is the Mexicana Americana narrator’s relationship with Mexico City itself that remains and flourishes.

In Voting at a Distance (1999), Silvia Herzog cites a Los Angeles Times-Reforma poll stating that 34 percent of Mexicans have worked in the United States at some point and 45 percent of Mexicans have family members in the United States. Furthermore, the majority of Mexicans living in the United States will return to their communities in less than two years” (cited in Calderón 169). Thus, according to Calderón, “tremendous migration is one of the fundamental characteristics of Mexico’s population at the beginning of the twenty-first
century,...[contributing to] a burgeoning binationalism, a porous border where there exists an infusion of labor and values across cultures” (170). A visitor to Mexico is likely to encounter many Mexicans eager to discuss their sojourns to the States, or to reveal family photo albums with pictures of Mexican American cousins from cities spanning North America interspersed among the rest. If most of the discourse about Mexican Americans has focused on the change that Hispanic migration brings to the United States, there has been less literary reflection on how these porous borders affect Mexican identity—how it becomes a nation of migrants and exiles, and, for those who stay north of the border, a land of myth, crystalized in time—an image that it continues to sell to tourists, enforcing its uneven modernity and encouraging it to maintain its old ways of life just as contemporary global industrialism leads it forward into the twenty-first century. In her Mexico City writings Cisneros reflects what Mary Pat Brady has called the “shifting terrains of power” between the United States and Mexico, encouraging a new understanding of the magnetic force of that vibrant city and its importance as one of the vital cultural and socio-economic epicenters of the Americas (cited in Calderón 243 n.6).

In this literary convergence between Borges and Cisneros in the twentieth century Latin American city, the focus has been on how Borges’s poetic techniques and choices for representing Buenos Aires find reflection in Sandra Cisneros’s Ciudad de México. The elements of the Mexican capital she brings out and explores—its historical founding, its diaspora, its contemporary dualities and hybridity, and her own personal and family memories of the city—are often represented in her work with a nod to the literary tactics of the maestro and his representations of the Latin American city—by turns humble, popular, nostalgic, timeless, majestic and mysterious—explored from the margins outwards. Through the comparison, the image of Borges as a chronicler of humble, popular neighborhoods and one who was deeply
interested in ‘la cultura de mezcla’ and immigrant life (as in “El hombre de la esquina rosada” and “El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan”) emerges with renewed energy.
CHAPTER THREE

Feminizing Borges: In the Company of Leonor Acevedo Suárez, Virginia Woolf and Sandra Cisneros

“I felt ashamed, quite early, to be a bookish person, and not a man of action.”
Jorge Luis Borges, “Autobiographical Notes”

“It was she (Leonor Acevedo Suárez) who quietly and effectively fostered my literary career.”
Jorge Luis Borges, “Autobiographical Notes”

“And like a blind Tiresia s, Borges spoke as a prophet to those of us who were writers.”
Sandra Cisneros, A House of My Own

In this chapter, Sandra Cisneros will take the lead as we sketch a tradition of feminist writing and thought that paved the way for one of Borges’s most remarkable stories, “Emma Zunz” (El Aleph, 1949). I will begin by examining a writer common to both of them, Virginia Woolf. I will read Orlando: A Biography (1928) and A Room of One’s Own (1929) and the ideas contained therein, as precursors to important themes of gender fluidity and female creativity in both of the works of Cisneros and Borges.

Virginia Woolf and the “Women and Fiction” Question

Virginia Woolf began A Room of One’s Own while she was writing Orlando, her fictional biography of an androgynous British aristocrat based on the life of her lover and fellow writer Vita Sackville-West. The two books are apparently dissimilar: one is an erotic romp through the centuries, following the exotic, luxurious life and loves and the creative awakening of a British Methuselah; the other an impassioned non-fictional inquiry into what Woolf herself described as the “Women and Fiction” question. Yet together they show how Woolf’s search to invent a tradition for women’s writing and to imagine a space in which women, liberated from
the traditional constraints of motherhood and domesticity, may be free to engage in the
traditionally male occupation of writing parallels her articulation of a new female sexuality,
likewise not restricted by gender roles. In Woolf’s formulation, writing is intimately linked to the
bodily self: “we write, not with the fingers, but with the whole person. The nerve which controls
the pen winds itself about every fibre of our being, threads the heart, pierces the liver” (Orlando
189). Woolf contends that writing is throughout history figured as a masculine act in which the
writer imposes his phallic pen on the paper and on the receptive reader, who is figured as
feminine. In the empowering vision Woolf presents in Orlando, the female writer draws on both.

Orlando is an update of the myth of Tiresias, who was born a man but became a woman;
according to Pericles Lewis, “Tiresias was a central figure in modernist attempts to explore
sexual identity, playing a notable role in Eliot’s The Waste Land” among other works (30). Its
single most significant event is the sex change that the protagonist, who begins the novel as a
man, experiences. After spontaneously changing into a woman, Orlando flees to Turkey, where
she is able to wear the gender-neutral clothes of gypsies, before returning to England, where she
begins to cross-dress, sometimes changing outfits multiple times per day to suit her various
appointments, some with a group of young prostitutes after whom she lusts. As a loose and
fantastical biography of Vita Sackville-West, the book functions as a frank and erotic exploration
of the possibilities and preoccupations of bi-sexuality. Near the beginning of Orlando, after he
has become a she, Woolf writes about the union of male and female qualities which the
protagonist is privileged to experience: “‘To refuse and to yield,’ she murmured, ‘how delightful;
to pursue and to conquer, how august; to perceive and to reason, how sublime.’ Not one of these
words so coupled together seemed to her wrong…” (122) Later, after Orlando has married, she
wonders if marriage, which she views as submission to the ‘spirit of the age,’ will mean that she
can no longer write. The ensuing description, of her writing in spite of her femininity, is frankly
sexual in its depiction of a woman wielding the phallic pen, and the union of sexual opposites in one:

She looked at the ring.
She looked at the inkpot.
Did she dare? No, she did not.
But she must.
No, she could not.
What should she do then? Faint, if possible.
But she had never felt better in her life.
‘Hang it all!’ she cried, with a touch of her old spirit,
‘Here goes!’ And she plunged her pen neck deep in the ink.
To her enormous surprise, there was no explosion.
She drew the nib out.
It was wet, but not dripping.
She wrote.
The words were a little long in coming, but come they did. (206)

Here, and later in *A Room of One’s Own*, Woolf elaborates a sexual theory of creativity in in the brain in which male and female unite to fertilize the writing process:

[I] sketch[ed] a plan of the soul so that in each of us two powers preside, one male, one female; and in the man's brain the man predominates over the woman, and in the woman's brain the woman predominates over the man. The normal and comfortable state of being is that when the two live in harmony together, spiritually co-operating. If one is a man, still the woman part of his brain must have effect; and a woman also must have intercourse with the man in her. Coleridge perhaps meant this when he said that a great
mind is androgynous. It is when this fusion takes place that the mind is fully fertilized and uses all its faculties. (107-8)

While writing *Orlando*, Woolf gave a talk at the all-women’s Newnham College titled “Women and Fiction” which formed the basis for an article of the same name, published in *Forum* in 1929, and then for *A Room of One’s Own*. One of the most imaginative and hopeful feminist tracts of its time or any, its overriding concern is the woman artist and the necessary conditions for her art. In it, she writes that women need 500 pounds a year and a room of their own to write. She also writes that the woman writer should not seek to emulate male writers but instead should invent a new tradition seeking “the development… of a prose style completely expressive of her mind” (104). She grounds her claims through women’s history, cultural politics and gender representation (Briggs 222). As part of this history she discusses Aphra Behn, (1640-1689) whom Woolf calls the first female writer to ‘make money by her pen.’ She also imagines a forgotten sister, Judith, for Shakespeare, as brilliant as he was but not given the opportunity to go to school: “She picked up a book now and then, one of her brother’s perhaps, and read a few pages, but then her parents came in and told her to mend the stockings or mind the stew and not moon about with books and papers” (*A Room of One’s Own* 51). Finally Judith steals away to London only to become impregnated by a stage owner and kill herself, for, as Woolf writes, “who shall measure the heat and violence of the poet’s heart when caught and tangled in a woman’s body?” (*A Room of One’s Own* 52) This combination of defiance, violence and death is one that repeats itself in the representation of the female artist in the twentieth century, whose bold choices against motherhood and domesticity and for freedom of expression amounted to a symbolic violence against the patriarchy, an absolute refusal, no matter the cost, to live a silenced life.
In a number of essays in which she develops her own ideas about women and fiction, Sandra Cisneros extends Woolf’s feminist vision to include women of different race and class backgrounds who go largely unmentioned in *A Room of One’s Own*. She adapts several of Woolf’s phrases to her use; her most recent memoir collection is titled *A House of my Own* (2015) and she writes frequently about her own journey, more arduous than Woolf’s who inherited her five hundred pounds from a deceased aunt, towards the economic self-sufficiency that allowed her to make her living ‘by her pen.’ As Jacqueline Doyle notes, echoing Woolf’s invocation of Shakespeare’s sister, Cisneros speculates about the writing aspirations of Emily Dickinson’s Irish housekeeper in “Notes to a Younger Writer”: “[Dickinson] even had a maid, an Irish housekeeper who did, I suspect, most of the household chores.... I wonder if Emily Dickinson's Irish housekeeper wrote poetry or if she ever had the secret desire to study and be anything besides a housekeeper” (Cisneros, “Notes to a Younger Writer” 75). Doyle also points out that Cisneros compares Emily Dickinson’s Irish housekeeper with her own mother, “who could sing a Puccini opera, cook a dinner for nine with only five dollars, who could draw and tell stories and who probably would've enjoyed a college education” (ibid). In her introduction to the 25th anniversary edition of *The House on Mango Street*, Cisneros also describes her mother as an unfulfilled artist:

She knows what it is to live a life filled with regrets, and she doesn’t want her daughter to live that life too. She always supported the daughter’s projects, so long as she went to school. The mother who painted the walls of their Chicago homes the color of flowers; who planted tomatoes and roses in her garden; sang arias; practiced solos on her son’s drum set; boogied along with the *Soul Train* dancers; glued travel posters on her kitchen wall with Karo syrup; herded her kids weekly to the library, to public concerts, to museums; wore a button on her lapel that said ‘Feed the People Not the Pentagon’; who
never went beyond the ninth grade. *That* mother. (Introduction to the 25th anniversary edition of *The House on Mango Street* xiv)

According to Doyle, “[i]n the extended filiations of her ethnic community (the narrator of *The House on Mango Street*) finds a network of maternal figures. She writes to celebrate all of their unfulfilled talents and dreams and to compensate for their losses” (10). And according to Rachel DuPlessix Blau, "[s]uch a narrative is engaged with a maternal figure and... is often compensatory for her losses...The daughter becomes an artist to extend, reveal, and elaborate her mother’s often thwarted talents" (93).35

Cisneros also takes a third world feminist approach to extend Woolf’s exploration of the loosening of gender identity as a way to allow for increased creative freedom. For this she turns to the influence of Gloria Anzaldúa, (1942-2004) author of *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987), a semi-autobiographical account of growing up on the Mexico-Texas border, which explores the marginalization of Mexican Americans caught in between geographic and linguistic spaces, paralleling it with the marginalization of queer people who find themselves in between the culturally defined roles of man and woman. In order to create a space for herself and others like her, Anzaldúa articulates a vision of Mexican femininity that weds the masculine and the feminine.36 She claims that the Spanish conquest stripped women of much of their pre-Colombian power by replacing the Aztec destroyer goddess Coatlicue with the docile Virgen de Guadalupe and imposing the ideal of *marianismo* (the Catholic cult of the Virgin Mary which holds chastity, passivity and maternal love as the highest values for women) on Latin America. Through Coatlicue, Cisneros seeks a creative force that allows her to express a personal gender identity that widens the idea of the feminine: “most days I, too, feel like the creative/ destructive

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35 Later in this chapter, in the discussion of Borges and his mother, we will also look at the ways that a son can also extend and reveal his mother’s literary talents.

36 In *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Anzaldúa writes, “[T]here is something compelling about being both male and female, about having an entry into both worlds...[I] am two in one body, both male and female. I am the embodiment of the *hieros gamos*: the coming together of opposite qualities within” (41).
goddess Coatlicue, especially the days I’m writing, capable of fabricating pretty tales with pretty words, as well as doing demolition work with a volley of *palabrotas* if I want to” (Borderlands/ La Frontera 166).

**Sandra Cisneros’s Strong Women Characters**

The quest to wed the male and the female in a more fluid gender identity can be seen throughout Cisneros’s fiction and poetry. “My Name,” from *The House on Mango Street*, is a rumination by the narrator on her name, Esperanza. She writes that it is associated with the feminine quality of patience: “it means sadness, it means waiting” and that it was also the name of her great-grandmother, “a wild horse of a woman, so wild she wouldn’t marry . . . born like me in the Chinese year of the horse—which is supposed to be bad luck if you’re born female,” because, she explains, “the Chinese, like the Mexicans, don’t like their woman strong” (10-11). The hybrid creature of the horse-woman signals that this woman is not an ordinary woman; she is different, stronger than ordinary women are supposed to be in Mexican culture. Not the female role model, but something unique, and potentially dangerous. While Esperanza writes that her great-grandmother was forced into marriage, she resolves to keep her horse nature free, and decides to rename herself something different, less feminine and passive, more gender-neutral and heroic: “Zeze the X” (11).³⁷

A number of stories in *Woman Hollering Creek* also feature creative women of color who eschew traditional gender roles. These stories introduce violence as a means to the enactment of radical social change—a rhetorical violence that also sometimes takes physical form. Two female artist narrators, of “*Bien* Pretty” and “Never Marry a Mexican,” angered by romantic betrayal, who seek their revenge through art, like creator-destroyer goddesses. In “*Bien* Pretty,”

³⁷ X also refers to Malcolm X, whom Cisneros has credited with inspiring an awakening in her about her own race and class issues, converting her into a revolutionary.
the narrator redraws a painting of Prince Popocatepetl and Princess Iztaccíhuatl so that the Princess watches down on the sleeping Prince, instead of the opposite. The story extends feminist criticism of a male pictorial tradition in which the landscape is represented as feminine, seen through the male gaze (Rose, 1992, 1993). In “Never Marry a Mexican,” the female narrator writes, “I leapt inside you and split you like an apple. Opened for the other to look and not give back…I saw you for what you are, when you opened yourself for me” (78). The active verbs she employs—leap, split, see—impart an agency to the female narrator that imply that she is an actor, rather than the acted upon; an explorer, rather than the explored.

Cisneros’s love poetry also frequently disrupts gender binaries. In “You my Saltwater Pearl,” from Loose Woman, she employs many different genders to describe her lover: “my mother, my father,… my tulip, my tin cup, my woman , my boy, to keep and be kept by…Take me like a boy…Mother of my heart,/ bastard child,/ sweet mama, sweet daddy” (21-22). She chooses the oyster presumably for its hermaphroditic nature: while oysters have separate sexes, they may change gender once or twice during their lifetimes. In “Love Poem for a Non-Believer,” she upends Octavio Paz’s paradigm of the female rajada by writing that both lovers “open like apple/ split each other in half and/ have seen the heart/ of the heart/ of the heart” (30). The poem can be seen as a precursor to the erotic turns of phrase in “Never Marry a

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38 Popocatepetl and Iztaccíhuatl are two famous volcanoes that preside over the valley of Mexico City. They are named for a prince and princess, who, according to Nahua myth, were separated after her father sent him to war in Oaxaca, presumably to die so that he could marry her off to another suitor. When Iztaccíhuatl discovered the plan, she killed herself to avoid marrying anyone other than her love. Upon discovering her, Popocatepetl took her to the mountaintop hoping to revive her, and there froze kneeling over her. While Popocatepetl is an active smoking volcano, Iztaccíhuatl is dormant and is said to resemble a woman lying on her back. The myth is a frequent subject of Mexican popular art. Cisneros rewrites the myth in “Bien Pretty” to make the woman the active and dominant presence in the narrator Lupe’s painting while the male reclines on his back in a passive posture.

39 According to Octavio Paz’s misogynist description of the open and penetrable nature of women in the famous essay “Máscaras mexicanas” from El Laberinto de la soledad, “Las mujeres son seres inferiores porque, al entregarse, se abren. Su inferioridad es constitucional y radica en su sexo, en su ‘raja,’ herida que jamás cicatrizá” (10).
Mexican,” (previous paragraph) demonstrating Cisneros’s penchant for recycling and reworking her poetic language.

Cisneros finds in queer writers such as Anzaldúa as well as the South Carolina-born lesbian writer Dorothy Allison (Skin: Talking about Sex, Class and Literature; Bastard out of South Carolina) voices that give her permission to express the range and versatility of a female sexuality that re-conceptualizes gender categorization, and to explore what it is to be a woman without being restricted by patriarchal expectations of female behavior. Indeed she has described herself as a ‘female impersonator’ in an October 2015 interview with Tarra Gaines: “I’m a kind of female impersonator. Female impersonators really are more female than females. Females are restricted by patriarchal society. Female impersonators are not. Women have to be terrified of what men might say, or their mothers. ‘I can’t look like that; I’ll look slutty.’ But female impersonators don’t have to think like that” (Gaines, “Drag Queens, death, and Texas”). The term ‘female impersonator’ refers most often to a gay man who dresses up in women’s clothing; by applying the term to herself Cisneros implies a liberating sense of her own gender fluidity in which female characteristics can be donned and removed at will, but in which they will never limit or oppress her.

“Never Marry a Mexican” is an example of a story in which she explores the role of art as a tool for constructing alternatives to the patriarchal order in which women are not merely passive victims, but rather actors and agents. She does this by re-writing a much mythologized figure from Mexican history, Cortés’s translator La Malinche, as an artist, incorporating elements of her own autobiography, and imbuing her with fearlessness, agency, anger, and vindictive power.\(^{40}\) She weaves her own childhood memories, along with an affair with a white

\(^{40}\) The story of La Malinche is one of Mexico’s foundational narratives. Bernal Díaz de Castillo’s Historia verdadera de la conquista de la Nueva España describes her as an intelligent, beautiful and heroic woman who was among twenty young women to be given to the Spaniards as a gift during one of the first encounters prior to the conquest. The daughter of wealthy caciques from a town called Paynala, near Coatzacoalcos, she spoke fluent
man she had as a young adult, into the story. Fritz Lanham of the *Houston Chronicle* writes of this period of Cisneros’s life as follows:

As a 19-year-old junior, she fell under the spell of a creative-writing professor, a married man, whom she doesn't want to name. Naive and inexperienced, Cisneros thought she was being singled out for special attention when in fact, she says, she was merely an exotic ornament on the arm of this older man. Their affair, which dragged on for several years, ‘was also very destructive to me,’ she says. She thinks she fell into this trap in part because there were so few models for young women who wanted to be artists. “Some part of me really liked being bad,” she says. “It was better than being the Virgin of Guadalupe. There was no middle place.”

The anger from that relationship, and its residue, makes its way into many stories and poems: “I was angry about that relationship for maybe 20 years,” she says in the interview (Lanham, Spanish and was valued for her talents as an interpreter. After her father died, her mother married another cacique, and they decided to give her to some Indians from Xicalango, so that she would not claim the inheritance that they decided would go to their newborn son. In turn the Indians from Xicalango traded her to Tabascans who then gifted her to Hernan Cortés and his men, who used her as a translator and concubine, later mother to one of Cortés’s children and wife to one of his men. Díaz de Castillo portrays la Malinche as a selfless woman who later forgave her mother and half-brother when she met them, professed gratitude for having been converted to a Christian and for being able to serve not one but two men, and willingly turned over information about indigenous uprisings to the Spaniards. As Héctor Calderón writes in *Narratives of Greater Mexico*, la Malinche was branded as a traitor to her people during an upsurge in Mexican nationalism following the wars of independence, in *Jicotencatl* (1826), an anonymously-authored novel published in Philadelphia. The novel branded her the Mexican Eve; she is “characterized as an accomplice to evil, foreign influences that can corrupt and divide the nation. She uses her feminine guile to bring down the Indian nations” (Calderón 120). Later, Octavio Paz would call her ‘La Chingada’ in *El laberinto de la soledad* (1950) continuing misogynist depictions of her weakness and willingness to sell out to foreign invasion.

In response to this HIStory, Chicana feminists such as Cherríe Moraga (“A Long Line of Vendidas”) have reconsidered the myth of La Malinche in order to confront damaging gender roles in Mexican culture and in order to redefine themselves as women of Mexican descent, interrogating history and re-writing women’s roles and possibilities within it. Part of this critical feminist rethinking of La Malinche has been to embrace her status as ‘vendida’ or ‘sellout.’ In her essay “La Malinche” Moraga also admits to selling out to foreign influences, defying her traditional role as subservient to the man by choosing lesbianism (Calderón 127).

Cisneros’s unique [heterosexual, Mexican American, feminist] response is to ask: “where did her feelings go?” “Never Marry a Mexican” demonstrates a deep identification with this woman who bridges cultures and falls in love with a white man, only to be exploited and seek revenge. It places la Malinche on the couch, in a modern-day context.

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41 Cisneros invites the reader to take a biographical approach to her writing: “All the emotions my characters feel, good or bad, are mine,” (*THMS* xxiii). Many of her stories openly draw from her personal life and history, albeit embroidered.
“Novelist Sandra Cisneros Talks About Writing, Herself”). According to Lanham, one reason Cisneros talks about her affair today is “to warn college women against the blandishments of carnal and charismatic professors” (ibid).

Critics such as Sonia Saldívar-Hull have noted Cisneros’s re-writing of the Malinche story stretches back to adolescence and includes the relationship between the protagonist and her mother as one of its central elements. This bitter mother, angered against Mexican men by her father, pushes her daughter into the arms of a white lover. During the course of the story, the reader discovers that beneath the silence of this Mexican American woman, abandoned by her parents and exploited body and mind by white men, is self-destructive rage. Cisneros’s fundamental reading of her is of a woman who has been betrayed by her mother and later by Cortés. She creatively re-imagines her, through her own biography, as an artist who avenges herself against the man who wronged her.

“Eyes of Zapata”: Historical References, Imagined Characters

“Eyes of Zapata,” also from Woman Hollering Creek, is another story that revisits and revises the male-centric character of Mexican history, this time focusing on the Mexican Revolution, and it is the story that Cisneros and many of her critics have considered the crowning achievement in the collection: “a bold venture…[Cisneros] crosses the Chicano topics border into contested Mexican literary territory to re-create the hero Zapata and the event of Mexican history of the twentieth century” (Calderón 191). In it, she borrows the Borgesian device of taking a marginal character from a historical footnote and bringing them to fantastical fictional life, as he did with several figures otherwise resigned to historical marginalia in Historia universal de la infamia, such as “La viuda Ching, pirata,” based on Ching Shih, a female pirate whose story he discovered in the pages of Philip Gosse’s The History of Piracy.
Through these characters the Argentine author revisits historical context and tells it slant, from the fictionalized point of view of real-life figures whom the history books have relegated to footnotes, a Borgesian device that highlights the fictional and reconstructed nature of history. “El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan” is another important collection of his stories which feature invention based on historical events, and which incorporate factual footnotes that provide clues as to their historical underpinnings; it is often one of these historical asides that provide the initial seed from which Borges’s fictions flowered. Cisneros borrows this idea of mixing history with fiction, inserting factual footnotes into fictional tales, or inventing characters based on historical sources, from Borges, and makes it the starting point for a number of her most important works. Caramelo, for example, which is composed of eighty-six short stories intricately indexed with humorous titles at the beginning of the novel, contains numerous factual footnotes mostly from Mexican history, as well as a chronology of Mexican history at the end that combines history and humorous commentary on its anecdotes, minor happenings, and ironic reversals. The influence from Borges’s ironic rogue’s gallery Historia universal de la infamia, with its 131 whimsically titled subsections and its soberly documented list of historical sources at the end, is evident.

In Narratives of Greater Mexico, Calderón locates the main historical source for “Eyes of Zapata” in John Womack Jr.’s canonical biography of the Mexican Revolutionary general Emiliano Zapata, Zapata and the Mexican Revolution (1968). As Calderón shows, Cisneros took from Womack verbatim and put events and characters he cites into her own recreation of the life of one of Zapata’s mistresses, the fictional Inés Alfaro, narrating a revisionary history of nine years of his life, beginning in 1910 during the fighting of the Mexican Revolution and ending with his death in 1919. Cisneros invents the life of this woman—in the process challenging the
male-centric view of Mexican history—based a short passage in Womack’s text about Zapata’s frequent visits to his village retreat of Tlatizapán:

In the evenings he and his aides relaxed in the plaza, drinking, arguing about plucky cocks and fast and frisky horses, discussing the rains and prices with farmers who joined them for a beer, Zapata as always smoking slowly on a good cigar. The nights he spent back in his quarters with a woman from the town; he fathered two children at least in Tlaltizapán. (Womack 242)

Womack footnotes the passage by listing the names of Zapata’s “hijos naturales,” or those not born to his legal wife, Josefa Espejo. Of the ‘woman from town,’ Womack makes no further mention and does not name her; only the names of Zapata’s children interested him, while he allows their mother, Zapata’s mistress, to disappear from the historical record. In “Eyes of Zapata,” Cisneros rescues her from oblivion and brings her to fictional life. In the process, she legitimizes the life of ‘the other woman’ in Mexico where some men have historically maintained other families outside of their ‘official family.’ The role of mistress as a hidden or invisible figure is an obvious act of erasure of (primarily lower-class) women within patriarchal society; Cisneros attempts to right this historical wrong by naming her, giving agency and an important role within her historical context, while also voicing her pain. In other words, Cisneros invents a fictional heroine who can stand alongside the historical hero of Zapata. Like Borges, she finds the seeds for this heroine within the written page, (in this case Womack’s biography). Similarly, her effort calls into question the legitimacy of existing, canonical histories that privilege some stories over others and that also elaborate on historical facts employing the tools of literary invention (Womack’s book, for example, is filled with scenes that pay as much tribute to his writerly imagination as to his abundant research).
In addition to giving voice to a woman of Mexican history who has been forgotten, Cisneros also takes the opportunity in “Eyes of Zapata” to highlight the feminine aspects of the Mexican general’s character, portraying him as a dandy. She finds the materials for this portrait in Womack, who describes the general’s love of fine clothing and beautiful horses and saddles as follows: “as he made money he used it on [horses]—buying a new one, outfitting a favorite with a fancy saddle, outfitting himself to sit, worthily booted and spurred, on the shining back of the horse he most admired… he dandied up on holidays and trotted around the village and into the nearby town of Villa de Ayala on a silver-saddled horse” (6). Calderón writes that Zapata “dressed as a charro, with silver buttons,” (191) and quotes Vasconcelos’s description of Zapata in his finery from La tormenta (1937): “Zapata se presentaba en público vestido de charro, águila bordada de oro en la espalda, botonadura de plata riquísima y sombreros que se exhibían en los escaparates lujosos de la ciudad, valuados en miles de pesos” (quoted in Calderón 247). In “Eyes of Zapata,” Cisneros provides this description, from the eyes of Inés Alfaro, of watching over the sleeping Zapata, or ‘Milianito’ as she refers to him diminutively:

The scent of your skin, the mole above the broom of your thick mustache, how you fit in my hands. Would it be right to tell you, each night you sleep here . . . When I am certain you are finally sleeping, I sniff your skin. Your fingers sweet with the scent of tobacco. The fluted collarbones, the purple knot of the nipple, the deep, plum color of your sex, the thin legs and long, thin feet.42

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42 The story begins with an almost identical, similarly feminizing, description of the sleeping Zapata, with the addition of the following description: “the skin of the eyelids as soft as the skin of the penis” (Woman Hollering Creek 85). These descriptions are important because they are from the perspective of someone looking down on another who is in a vulnerable, even childlike position of sleep, emphasizing the inverted power dynamics between the female describer and male object of the gaze by highlighting the softness and tenderness of even his most masculine features, such as his penis. The eyelids also evoke the story’s title, “Eyes of Zapata.” While in history he is known for his stance awake upon a horse, his big handlebar mustache and hat, this story considers a more gender-neutral and poetic feature, his eyes, to show a different, more intimate and vulnerable side of the famous general.
I examine at leisure your black trousers with the silver buttons, the lovely shirt, the embroidered sombrero, the fine braid stitching on the border of your charro jacket, admire the workmanship, the spurs, the leggings, the handsome black boots. (110)

This view of the sleeping general, from above, places Alfaro in the powerful witnessing position, and Zapata in the feminine position of being objectified, handled, admired and surveyed in all his beauty and finery. Even the title of the story, “Eyes of Zapata,” feminizes him, again drawing on a feature surprising to find in an otherwise so masculine figure that Womack mentions in his history:

[Pe]ople always sensed a painful independence about him…once as a child he had seen his father break down and cry in frustration at a local hacienda’s enclosure of a village orchard, and that he had promised his father he would get the land back…If the story was apocryphal, still the determination that it chronicled did burn in his glance, and sometimes, though he was tough as nails and no one fooled with him, he did look near tears. (6)

It is this very human view that Womack presents of the famed Mexican general, and that Cisneros teases out in order to present a complex portrait of sex and gender relationships during the Mexican Revolution, placing it not within the typically all-male historical representation of events, but within a matrilineal context of mothers, daughters, wives and lovers, the hardships they experienced and the lessons they learned as a result of the conflict, including their own strength and self-sufficiency, as well as the sexual and economic violence the Revolution unleashed upon Mexican women.

In order to grant Zapata’s mistress an equal stature as himself, Cisneros makes her not just any ordinary woman: she grants her the powers of the real-life Mexican shamaness and
curandera María Sabina, (1894-1985) including the power to fly. This is how she discovers the whereabouts of her lover when he is not with her. It is how she ensures that he comes back to her, and, when he doesn’t, she converts herself into a tecolote and perches in the branches of a tree outside the house where he sleeps with his wife, to make sure no harm comes to him; here and elsewhere she positions herself vertically above him, in a position of power. Magical realism here serves the political purpose of lending agency—the freedom of flight, the power of height and vision—to a profoundly disenfranchised character, the woman (an indígena) who waits long lonely nights, abandoned, for a powerful man for whom she would be merely a footnote in his history of conquests, were it not for her surprising powers.

“Eyes of Zapata” tells a number of tragedies both personal and historical, not least of which is the betrayal of the general that led to his assassination. It also tells of the death of Inés’s mother, also a curandera, a sexually free woman who was murdered by the men of the village ‘for acting like a man.’ It also narrates the painful nights Inés spent alone, wondering where the father of her children had gone. The disenfranchisement of women in Mexican society is one reason that Cisneros postulates for the failure of the Revolution to live up to its ideals, for a society is only as strong as its poorest members, and fairness is won not in great battles but at home: “Don’t you see? The wars begin here, in our hearts and in our beds” (Woman Hollering Creek 105).

The resuscitation of historically passive female characters from history and myth, breathing into them a new voice and agency and life often by placing them in the creative role—La Malinche as artist; Shakespeare’s sister as an undiscovered genius; Zapata’s anonymous mistress as shamaness—is an important function of feminist literature, as are its response and postulation of alternatives to female victimization and erasure. As we will see in the discussion

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43 The source for her representation of Sabina, as she has stated in interviews, was Joan Halifax’s Shamanic Voices: A Survey of Visionary Narratives (Calderón 248). Again Cisneros elaborates fiction from existing textual sources.
of “Emma Zunz” at the end of this chapter, Borges wrote his own gender-bending, even feminist fiction as well, featuring a creative female heroine who also avenges herself against patriarchy. Having laid a foundation of twentieth century feminist and third world feminist thought through Woolf and Cisneros, we will now turn to re-read Borges himself, through a feminine lens.

Writing from the Womb

As for Cisneros, who wrote supported by her mother’s suppressed creative ambitions as well as supported by the female community of *The Third Woman*, the formative, intimate relationships with female figures in Borges’s life shaped his life as a writer. Picture Borges living with his mother almost uninterruptedly (except for a short-lived marriage) until her death in 1975, when she was ninety-nine and he seventy-six. Picture them travelling together to his university lectures and engagements, he leaning on her arm as his blindness gradually worsened. Her husband Jorge Guillermo Borges died in 1938. He had been a philanderer and she had been disillusioned near the start of the marriage (Williamson 202). She devoted herself to her son, and threw her all of her ambitions towards him. Picture her performing the important work of transcription by his side during his descent into blindness, opining on his projects, contributing her own labors, and even suggesting lines when his imagination failed him. She was translator in her own right of, among others, D.H. Lawrence’s “The Woman who Rode Away” (1925), William Saroyan’s *The Human Comedy* (1943), and William Faulkner’s *If I Forget Thee, Jerusalem* (1939). Picture Borges, settling down to write for the last eleven years of his life in his own ‘room of one’s own,’ in the apartment on Calle Maipú that he and his mother had shared: the writing study which, at Leonor Acevedo Suárez’s request, he situated in her bedroom, leaving her bed and everything else just as she had left it when she died. Picture him upon her death, returning to that room, that womb-like maternal space that nurtured his literary output, and
symbolically availing himself of his mother’s spirit as his continued his literary labors alone.

Often Borges and his mother resembled a writing duo, though his name received all the credit for her work. According to an interview with Borges, it was she who translated Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own* (Borges and Ferrari, *En diálogo* Vol. 2, 12), though it was credited to her son.\(^{44}\) It was published as *Un cuarto propio* by *Sur* in four installments from 1935 to 1936 (and then as a stand-alone text in 1956 a year after Borges lost his sight) and remains to this day the most widely read version of the text in Spanish. It was also his mother who furnished the last line to his story “La intrusa,” (*El informe de Brodie*, 1970) which he dedicated to her. According to Edwin Williamson’s biography, beginning in the late 1950’s Borges’s blindness precipitated an increased closeness between mother and son from which both benefited:

> [T]here can be no doubt that Leonor Acevedo blossomed through this association: reading aloud to Georgie stimulated her into developing her hitherto rudimentary English, and she would assist him in his translations, to the point where she was capable of undertaking translations in her own right. Her innate intelligence was thus allowed much freer rein than would ordinarily have been the case with a woman of her class and generation . . . (Williamson 342)

She was “her son’s secretary and business manager, his general guide and protector” as well as his social manager (ibid). Because she was unable to find productive outlets for her own intelligence and for the sheer force of her personality, she threw herself into reviving her dreams for personal and familial glory through her son; so, to some extent, did his maternal grandmother, Fanny Haslam, who taught him to read English from when he was a small child (Williamson 24).

\(^{44}\) According to his interview with Ferrari, conducted near the end of his life, Borges said about *Un cuarto propio*: “Ahora voy a confesarle, ya que estamos solos los dos, un secreto; y es que ese libro lo tradujo mi madre. Y yo revisé un poco la traducción, de igual modo que ella revisó mi traducción de *Orlando*. La verdad es que trabajábamos juntos” (Borges and Ferrari, *En diálogo* Vol. 2, 12).
Leonor Acevedo Suárez, like Milton’s daughters, is one of the great, largely uncredited amanuenses of western literature, a woman without whose dedication Borges would not have been Borges. Her literary ambitions did not go unrealized. They can be found animating his entire body of work, from early exercises published in his name to his last writings, carried out alongside her bed after she passed away. As he later commented, “I didn’t think I had the right [to move the bed]…It’s a way of stopping time a little, when I go back there I think that she’s in her room…waiting for me” (The Last Interview). This discussion is revealing in many senses: it shows that even after her death Borges’s mother held a strong sway over him, and that her will imposed itself assertively. It also shows his dependence on her: Borges in a strong sense seems to have needed to feel the presence of his mother with him as he wrote, even after she died. Symbolically, he wrote from inside her world.

After falling blind, Borges also began collaborating with other female writers, including Alicia Jurado, María Ester Vásquez, and María Kodama. Kodama described their writing process as follows:

[É]l era muy personal y me decía, por ejemplo: “Vea, María, vamos a cambiar esta palabra,” y luego ... “¿O usted prefiere la otra?” Si yo le decía “la otra” o “ésta,” él me decía: “¿Por qué?” Entonces yo le explicaba mis razones y él contestaba: “Bueno, voy a pensarlo.” A veces aceptaba, y otras veces me decía: “Usted tiene razón, pero yo prefiero ésta.” Éramos muy libres. (Castello, np)

In addition to working with her in this respectful and mutually creative manner, at the end of his life, Borges left his entire literary legacy in the hands of Kodama, whom he selected (having married her just a few weeks before his death) to make all decisions regarding future translations and publications of his work. He thus ensured that his work would continue to be determined by the presence and oversight of women.
Borges drew from a long line of female inspiration and support of his literary endeavors. He counted among his circle Victoria Ocampo (1890-1979) the legendary founder (in 1931) and editor of the enormously influential literary magazine *Sur* and of a publishing house of the same name, launched in 1933. Ocampo was a fan of Virginia Woolf and it was she who commissioned Borges’s important translations of *A Room of One’s Own* (*Un cuarto propio*) and *Orlando*. In short, in large part due to Ocampo’s friendship and influence, Borges was closely linked to the literary feminist movement in Argentina. Ocampo wrote frequent essays about women, published other female writers such as María Rosa Oliver and Ana Berry, and published reviews of the works of female writers such as Gertrude Stein, Gabriela Mistral, Anna de Noailles. The last issue of *Sur*, published in 1971, was completely dedicated to women. The dissemination of feminist thought, particularly from Europe, can be seen as one of the magazine’s most important missions, along with defining Argentine culture in the twentieth century in relation to Europe.

Many writers have viewed Borges’s work in a purely masculine context [“the word that best describes these essays is manly” (Capouya, “Reason without Brutality”)] or alternately accused him of misogyny (from Greek, literally the hatred of women). The story most used to make this claim is “La intrusa,” about two brothers who, having fallen in love with the same woman, decide to kill her in order to preserve their relationship with each other. However, I side with critics who view the tale, horrifying in its blunt violence, as critiquing rather than condoning misogyny. Williamson reads “La intrusa” as a veiled parable of Borges’s own relationships with women, bound to failure because his mother refused her approval. If one of the brothers is actually a stand-in for Borges’s mother, this illustrates perfectly that he viewed gender as divorced from the physical body, in other words as constructed rather than biological.) Some critics see a celebration of machismo in his tales of frontier skirmishes and knife fights, yet stories such as “El hombre de la esquina rosada” and “El Sur” problematize masculinity as much
as they glorify it. In each the hero strives to live up to impossible standards of physical courage, worrying that he has fallen short. Each ends in a fantasy of bravery that feels like an escape rather than an engagement with the problematic standards of male valor.

**Borges and the Androgynous Mind**

Leah Leone, discussing Borges’s translation of *Orlando*, writes that, despite having been anointed the major Spanish-language translator of Woolf, he did not interest himself in gender matters:

> Algunas cuestiones que se presentan en *Orlando* son equiparables a las inquisiciones de Borges: la circularidad del tiempo, la validez de la historia “oficial,” la ficcionalidad de las biografías. Por otra parte, la crítica del tratamiento de las mujeres, la duda sobre las diferencias inherentes entre los sexos, la bisexualidad y el travestismo hubieran sido temas de ambiguo interés literario para Borges. (italics mine) (224)

Leone’s argument overlooks the fact that 1) Borges agreed to translate Woolf in the first place, given her primary themes are feminism and bi-sexuality, and 2) his reluctance to speak about matters of sex and gender even if they weighed heavily on his mind. I argue the opposite. While Borges was circumspect on the matter of gender in interviews and his nonfiction essays, it is a prevailing concern in his fiction.

Herbert Brant, in his article “The Mark of the Phallus,” suggests a gay subtext in Borges’s writings by arguing that “La forma de la espada” is a veiled account of a homosexual desire. The story, published in *Artificios* in 1944, tells the story of a coward, John Vincent Moon, and the unnamed narrator, a soldier in the Irish Republican Army who rescues him, shelters him for nine days in the house where he is staying, and is then betrayed by him to the Black and
At the end of the tale, the narrator reveals ashamedly that he himself is Moon. Brant is most convincing when he argues for the effeminacy of Moon, rather than for the actual homosexuality of the encounter, which consists of a blandishment on the face by a sword: “the description of Moon specifically paints him as unmanly, effeminate and vulnerable” (29); he is “the physical embodiment of the unification of opposites, the conjunction of paradoxical dualities: feminine and masculine; unity and duality; love and betrayal” (32). Borges describes Moon as “flaco y fofo a la vez; daba la incómoda sensación de ser invertebrado” (OC I 886). This matches Canto’s description of Borges himself as soft in body and weak boned (24). A telling passage of “La forma de la espada” directly suggests that Borges identifies with Moon: “Acaso Schopenhauer tiene razón: yo soy los otros, cualquier hombre es todos los hombres, Shakespeare es de algún modo el miserable John Vincent Moon” (OCI 887). If as Brant argues, “the craft of fiction for Borges . . . is the unmasking of the reality lying below the surface of the false façade” (25) the reality beneath the surface is femininity: fictions such as “La forma de la espada” and “Pedro Salvadores” depict men who are not completely men—who are masculine in body but feminine in spirit. Whether or not Borges meant to imply a homosexual relationship in “La forma de la espada” is beyond the scope of this paper; Roberto González Echevarría, writing for the New York Times Book Review, states well that those who seek homosexual subtexts in Borges “apply Northern conceptions of sexuality to a man who, for much of his mature life, found a place in Hispanic society as a solterón, or old bachelor” (González Echevarría, “Man Without a Life”). It is the rich exploration of gender roles and deviance, alliances and betrayals, that charges his stories with an unexpected eroticism, much like Orlando, where the seamless shifting between male and female, the donning and removal of gender roles as though they were fine garments and the act of creating fiction liberated from the label of ‘man’ or ‘woman’
generate its erotic fizz. Sharon Magnarelli argues that Borges’s characters lack gender specificity: “Borges's works (like most master narratives) appear to be genderless in their focus on what is presumed to be that universal unmarked, uninflected (male) body” (5). 46 Yet if all are one, a doctrine Borges repeats throughout his work, how much more life-like and interesting to view that ‘one’ as gender-filled, teeming with passion and confusion. In them, the union and disjunction of male and female, the piecing together, un-puzzling and combining of gendered elements resemble his odd “dreamtigers”: “Aparece el tigre, eso sí, pero disecado o endeble, o con impuras variaciones de forma, o de un tamaño inadmissible, o harto fugaz, o tirando a perro o a pájaro” (Selected Poems, 74). As we will explore later in this chapter, Emma Zunz is a character who seeks out, confronts and fashions her femininity to her own use as the central drama of her life. Like dreams, gender identities in Borges’s fictions are mysterious and uncontrollable. They follow their own fantastical, ungraspable logic, and they reveal themselves in riddles, duplicities, false facades and cover-ups.

As Nancy Kason Poulson contends in “Del margen al centro: La voz femenina en la cuentística de Borges,” the female protagonists in his work are frequently strong, determined and heroic and embody qualities considered masculine by patriarchal culture. Mark Frisch goes as far as to contend that Borges opened a door for feminist thought:

His problematizing of the self and his undermining of the certainties of our knowledge open a way for the redefinition of the traditional feminine self. Stories with women characters such as ‘Emma Zunz,’ ‘El duelo,’ and ‘Historia del guerrero y de la cautiva’ as well as ‘Tlön, Uqbar, Orbius Tertius’ and some other short pieces show how Borges

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46 I disagree with this comment on two levels: first as it applies to Borges, as explained above, and second as it applies to ‘master narratives.’ Many classical narratives, such as the Odyssey, take the quest to forge an adult masculine identity as their central focus. In “Emma Zunz,” with its resonances of the epic journey tale and confrontation with the monster, Borges subverts this paradigm by feminizing it.
helps subvert the traditional sense of order and meaning and challenges the limitations Western society has placed on women. (96)

While Frish provides valuable insights into the links between Borges’s thought and feminism, he oversteps in making Borgesian postmodernism a pre-condition of contemporary feminist thought (which predates Borges by centuries). How instead might we conceive of feminist thought (learned through Woolf) as granting permission for Borges to write gender-bending fictions and to explore, though covertly, the issue of gender fluidity? And how does this issue tie into the complex gender identity that emerges through his biography? This chapter will consider him as a man with a fluid gender identity who felt deeply identified with women and issues of female authorship. 47

Borges’s most interesting female characters cross gender boundaries, and a peculiar eroticism emerges in stories where gender roles are exchanged. Consider his little-commented story “Pedro Salvadores,” from Elogio de la sombra (1969) in which the wife of a man who is to be imprisoned under the dictatorship of Juan Manuel de Rosas hides him in the basement for nine years. During this time she earns a living for both of them by sewing for the army. She also becomes pregnant with two children, causing her family to repudiate her. Meanwhile, he grows

47 The biography Borges a contraluz (1989), written by Estela Canto, paints a picture of Borges as a man endowed with many feminine qualities, nearly the opposite of the macho gauchos and street fighters who appeared with such frequency in his early writings. She describes his submissive relationship to his mother whom, even as an adult man in his forties, he called when he was out late to assure her of his whereabouts and report when he would come home. Regarding Borges’s character, Canto describes him as submissive and trapped by convention:

Por naturaleza y por circunstancias, Borges era un hombre sumiso. Él aceptaba el fardo de convenciones y las ataduras establecidas por un medio social presuntuoso, profundamente tribal, tosco y primitivo… No era un hombre convencional, pero sí un prisionero de las convenciones. Anhelaba la libertad por encima de todas las cosas, pero no se atrevía a mirar a la cara esa libertad. (17)

She also writes that Borges was terrified of sex; although she offered to have sex with him before marriage, he did not feel capable of it: “La actitud de Borges hacia el sexo era de terror pánico, como si temiera la revelación que en él podía hallar. Sin embargo, toda su vida fue una lucha por alcanzar esa revelación” (17). Biographers such as Williamson have traced back Borges’s fear of sex to a traumatic incident in his adolescence when his father, upon discovering that he was still a virgin at eighteen, sent him to a prostitute. Suspecting that the woman had also had sexual relations with his father, Borges was unable to perform and left humiliated. Canto describes his affect as extremely shy and easily embarrassed, in terms that suggest a certain effeminacy: “temía molestar, ser demasiado insípido” (29); “parecía avergonzado…no le gustaba ser entrometido” (29-30).
“fofo y obeso, estaba del color de la cera y no hablaba en voz alta,” (Obras completas II, 633) a description which closely mirrors Estela Canto’s blunt evaluation of Borges himself:
“regordete…con una cara pálida y carnosa…y una mano que, al ser estrechada, parecía sin huesos, floja, como molesta por tener que soportar el inevitable contacto. La voz era temblorosa…” (24) Beyond the physical, further parallels between Salvadores and Borges himself are unmistakable: Borges worked in a dark basement library for decades; his business affairs and his personal life were managed by a woman (his mother). He lived inside a woman’s world.

Pedro Salvadores’s wife, “fuerte y diligente,” maintains a relationship with a man who is utterly passive, whom she hides and protects from the world in that dark womb-like space beneath the house: “para que no la dejara sola, su mujer le daría inciertas noticias de conspiraciones y de victoria. Acaso era cobarde y la mujer lealmente le ocultó que ella lo sabía” (Obras completas II 633). As Kason Poulson writes: “La esposa es la intermediaria entre el mundo externo de la cruel represión política y la torre de marfil (el sótano) de la fantasía imaginativa en la que reside su esposo. En este sentido, se invierte el papel tradicional de la mujer dentro de las estructuras familiares.” (357)

At the end of the story, Borges subtly calls attention to the way that women’s contributions to history are erased and forgotten: the lands did not belong to Salvadores’s wife, whom we know only by her maiden surname, Planes, and neither is it stated what became of her. The story calls attention to this absence in the record without comment, but it marks it: the lack of comment highlights the question of who is included and who goes excluded from the historical record.

Critically unremarked is the subtle eroticism of “Pedro Salvadores,” which Borges suggests by inference: his wife is impregnated twice in the nine years of his imprisonment,
provoking a commotion among her family who believe she has taken a lover. What emerges is a portrait of a dominant, independent female, supporting the family, impregnated by a silenced and submissive man, to scandalous results. Although Borges leaves out the erotic scene of her descent into the dark basement and the arms of her husband, whom he describes “como un animal tranquilo en su madriguera o una suerte de oscura divinidad,” *(Obras completas II 633)* it looms, like the grotesque, lunar body of the man himself, in the story’s silences and elisions, ripe with sexual reversals, taboo and hidden desire. The story can also be read as a parable about the ways that a masculine spirit may be ‘housed’ within a woman’s form. The socially-constructed nature of gender and the erotic potential of gender role reversal reveals itself here and elsewhere in Borges’s fiction, demonstrating him as a writer who was aware of gender issues and who actively engaged them in his fiction. That gender role reversal is always accompanied in his fiction by a sense of darkness and danger (“La viuda Ching, pirata”) or else outright violence, (“Juan Muraña,” “Emma Zunz”) indicates his own ambivalence about the theme and its taboo nature for him.

Borges declared himself a feminist during an interview with Osvaldo Ferrari about his translations of Virginia Woolf *(Ferrari, En diálogo Vol. 2 12)*. He reports in the interview that *A Room of One’s Own* did not overly interest him because he already believed in the necessity of rights for women (which is why he says he gave it to his mother to translate). However, he says in the same interview that he did translate *Orlando*, with his mother as editor. One of the primary themes of the novel is the performative and constructed nature of gender roles, which Orlando dons and removes like garments of clothing, depending on what the occasion, the desires of the moment, and social propriety demand. So Borges translates such lines as follows: “Por diversos que sean los sexos, se confunden. No hay ser humano que no oscile de un sexo a otro, y a menudo solo los trajes siguen siendo varones o mujeres, mientras que el sexo oculto es lo
contrario del que está a la vista” (143). (“Different as the sexes are, they intermix. In every human being a vacillation from one sex to the other takes place, and often it is only the clothes that keep the male or female likeness, while underneath the sex is the very opposite of what it is above”) (143). In an interview, Borges praised the novel: “…Orlando es realmente un libro interesante…un libro muy, muy lindo…es un libro incomparable ya que yo no recuerdo ningun otro escrito así” (Borges and Ferrari, En diálogo Vol. 2, 12).

Furthermore, despite calling A Room of One’s Own the less interesting of Woolf’s works, he appears to nod directly to that text in “Everything and Nothing” from El hacedor (1960) published four years after the publication of Un cuarto propio. Writing about Shakespeare’s relationship with his characters, he indirectly states that, while Shakespeare’s body is that of a man, his soul has the capability to be, like his characters, female as well as male: “Así, mientras el cuerpo cumplía su destino de cuerpo, en lupanares y tabernas de Londres, el alma que lo habitaba era César, que desoye la admonición del augur, y Julieta, que aborrece a la alondra, y Macbeth, que conversa en el páramo con las brujas que también son las parcas. Nadie fue tantos hombres como aquel hombre” (Obras completas II 295) (italics mine).

In fact this passage of “Everything and Nothing” appears to illuminate Woolf’s assertion in A Room of One’s Own that Shakespeare has what she calls an ‘androgy nous mind’:

If one is a man, still the woman part of his brain must have effect; and a woman also must have intercourse with the man in her. Coleridge perhaps meant this when he said that a great mind is androgy nous. It is when this fusion takes place that the mind is fully fertilized and uses all its faculties. Perhaps a mind that is purely masculine cannot create, any more than a mind that is purely feminine, I thought. But it would be well to test what one meant by man-womanly, and conversely by woman-manly, by pausing and looking at a book or two. Coleridge certainly did not mean, when he said that a great mind is
androgynous, that it is a mind that has any special sympathy with women; a mind that takes up their cause or devotes itself to their interpretation. Perhaps the androgynous mind is less apt to make these distinctions than the single-sexed mind. He meant, perhaps, that the androgynous mind is resonant and porous; that it transmits emotion without impediment; that it is naturally creative, incandescent and undivided. In fact one goes back to Shakespeare's mind as the type of the androgynous, of the man-womanly mind, though it would be impossible to say what Shakespeare thought of women…(italics mine). Some collaboration has to take place in the mind between the woman and the man before the art of creation can be accomplished. Some marriage of opposites has to be consummated. The whole of the mind must lie wide open if we are to get the sense that the writer is communicating his experience with perfect fullness... The writer, I thought, once his experience is over, must lie back and let his mind celebrate its nuptials in darkness. (114-15)

Borges’s belief about his own writing—“que sus poemas y sus cuentos le eran ‘dados,’ que él los recibía de algo o de alguien, y que la obra de un escritor o de un artista, en última instancia, no depende de ese escritor o de ese artista sino de otra cosa, que lo trasciende”—parallels this sentiment, that the artist is not one but many, or all (Ferrari 9). Indeed Borges dedicated many stories to women whom he credited with inspiring or contributing to them in some important way.

The rest of this chapter will be devoted to the assertion that Borges himself both exercises and illustrates what Woolf terms the ‘androgynous mind,’ and engages in feminist thought and rhetoric, particularly in two stories featuring women with masculine qualities: “La viuda Ching, pirata” and “Emma Zunz.” One of the ways that Borges enters into female experience is through their historical oppression, which he links to other universal systems of oppression such as class
and political dictatorship: closing the portion of his interview that touched on Virginia Woolf, Borges comments, “[A]hora, parece que todos tenemos derecho a la opresión y al jadeo, ¿no?, también los hombres: desgraciadamente podemos conocer ese melancólico privilegio, que antes era propio de las mujeres” (Ferrari 14). This current of thinking about women’s experience, linking their marginalization with other systems of political oppression, appears in an essay by Victoria Ocampo entitled “El proletariado de la mujer,” from the 33rd issue of Sur, published in 1937:

La imposibilidad, para la persona, de nacer a su vida propia … es el destino de casi todas las personas…Cuando niñas les han poblado el mundo de misterios, de espantos, de tabú especiales para ellas. Después, sobre este angustioso universo que no las abandonará más, les han corrido de una vez por todas la cortina frágil, la prisión florida, pero hermética de la falsa femininidad. La mayor parte nunca encontrará escape. Desde ese momento viven con la imaginación no de una vida de conquista, una vida abierta, como el muchacho, sino un destino de vencidas, destino cerrado, que ellas no pueden modificar. (105)

The question of female powers of self-definition, as well as the question of femininity, makes its way into Borges’s small but striking number of feminist fictions. One of Borges’s stories explicitly relates the concept of female agency and creativity with the struggle to defy patriarchy, class oppression and authoritarianism: “Emma Zunz,” his most fully fleshed portrait of a female character. Emma, like Emily Dickinson’s Irish housekeeper imagined by Cisneros, is also doubly marginalized—a woman and an immigrant factory worker. The story examines the issue of gender fluidity in relation to power and agency. It also considers means and avenues for

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48 Borges was most likely referring here to the military regimes that ruled Argentina during the twentieth century including the recent presidency of Jorge Rafael Vidal (1976-1981) under whom thousands of dissidents were disappeared, as well as the demoralizing effects of fascist dictatorships in Europe and Latin America throughout the twentieth century.
female creativity: Emma is a character who accesses both female and male roles in order to ‘write’ her own history, to modify her ‘destino cerrado.’

“Emma Zunz” can be read as Borges’s most directly feminist character, one who embodies the idea of female authorship. Not only is Emma the heroine of this crime narrative, she is also the architect of the fictional story-within-the story which she constructs in order to obscure her crime. The story contains dual elements of, on the one hand, a member of the working class struggling against social immobility, and on the other, a woman defying social norms in her quest to fulfill her destiny. Perhaps not incidentally, the account, which is based on a true story, was a news item given to Borges by a woman (one of Borges’ love interests), Cecilia Ingenieros. In “Emma Zunz,” a female worker avenges her father’s suicide, which she blames on his firing by Lowenthal, the owner of the factory where they both worked. She does so by prostituting herself to a sailor, (though a virgin and horrified by sex) then uses the physical evidence of intercourse to pin rape on Lowenthal and exonerate herself from the crime of his murder, which she commits at the end of the story. The story is concomitant with a labor strike against the same Lowenthal, and the act can be read as one of proletarian defiance against oligarchy. If the idea of a female freedom fighter sounds like an anachronism in cultural and literary production of Borges’ time, it was. Misogynist representations of the femme fatale abounded in the film noir genre as well as in popular tango lyrics, at the height of popularity when Borges published El Aleph in 1949. Yet in “Emma Zunz,” he complicates this notion by tracing the tale of a woman’s crime to its social roots, rather than allowing her criminality to condemn her. He allows her, in effect, to create her own narrative of her crime. The moral relativism of the story opens the door to a re-examination of the femme fatale.

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49 “Emma Zunz” appeared in book form, amongst other stories, in Borges’s collection El Aleph in 1949. However, the story was first published in September 1948 in Sur. For a complete examination of misogyny and representations of the femme fatale in Argentine tango, see Bergero 195-206. Cisneros likely read it in English translation as it appeared in Labyrinths (1962).
One can imagine how Borges must have reacted upon hearing the story of Emma Zunz as related to him by Ingenieros: he would have been impressed by her feat of re-writing her own case, constructing the evidence in order to cover up her own crime. He views and portrays her as a writer. To further underscore his identification with her, the story incorporates a piece of Borges’s own autobiography: the horrifying sexual initiation with a prostitute he experienced at the insistence of his father, when he himself was a virgin and terrified of sex (Williamson 304). The view he held then and for much of his life of sex as degradation resonates in his portrayal of Emma. The story illustrates the link between Borges’s own psychology and a fearful, threatened sensibility toward sex that runs contrary to traditional constructions of (assertive) masculine sexuality; instead as Estela Canto’s biography attests he tended more toward what society constructs as a feminine (passive, vulnerable) experience of the sexual world.

Before approaching “Emma Zunz,” it is worthwhile to consider more closely the story of “La viuda Ching, pirata” from Historia universal de la infamia (1935) because it also presents a rebellious female heroine who fights the paternal order by exercising her own agency, constituting one of what I identify as Borges’s feminist fictions. The story makes several references to the “transfiguración” of its outlaw heroine, referring to the way she morphs between gender roles. Reduced to its essence, the story is about a pirate’s widow who, incensed by her husband’s murder by the stockholders of his ships, seizes control of his vessel, becoming an admiral, and leads a pirate rebellion against the Emperor’s fleet. At the time of her husband’s death, she is “transfigurada por la doble traición,” (14) a transfiguration perhaps presaged by the plate of poisoned *orugas* her husband eats, *orugas* being the larvae that later hatch into butterflies, just as the widow Ching grows into her full power over the course of the story (Franklin, “A Close Reading of Borges’ ‘La viuda Ching, pirata’”). Her strength comes from her sense of betrayal, which causes her to rally against the Empire that allowed her husband’s
destruction. A doubling occurs between herself and the husband into whose boots she steps. Her transfiguration is from wife into admiral, and, at least in terms of traditional roles, from female to male, a change that must occur in order for her to fulfill her destiny. The new admiral shows herself to be highly capable for men’s work, distinguishing herself through her methodical bureaucratic acumen and showing herself to be a skillful regulator of commerce as she dictates guidelines for the distribution of spoils. At the end of the story, when the widow finally submits herself to the emperor after years of struggle, she gains his pardon and turns to opium smuggling. Corruption reigns both within and outside the social order.

In the introduction to “La viuda Ching, pirata” Borges mentions two other gender-bending corsarias, the pirates Mary and Anne Bonney. Borges describes with a certain titillation the flame-haired Bonney’s splendid bust, and Ching’s oiled black hair that gleams brighter than her eyes; the images call to mind sirens that might adorn a ship’s mast. Yet beneath their feminine appearance lie powerful and bellicose personae; these are not just the dancing ship-maids of zarzuelas, but “mujeres hábiles en la maniobra marinera, en el gobierno de tripulaciones bestiales y en la persecución y saqueo de naves de alto bordo” (43). Borges writes that Mary Read “declaró una vez que la profesión de pirata no era para cualquiera, y que, para ejercerla con dignidad, era preciso ser un hombre de coraje, como ella” (43). Here Borges is investigating the nature of gender within the Aristotelian notion of character. In the Poetics, Aristotle writes, “it is possible for a person to be manly in terms of character, but it is not appropriate for a woman to exhibit either this quality or the intellectual cleverness that is associated with men” (26). Therefore, as Read expresses, a corsaria must be “un hombre de coraje” (ibid). In this quote she de-links the word ‘hombre’ from the physical and uses it solely in reference to character, indicating that its qualities may be displayed interchangeably amongst men and women.

Meanwhile, Anne Bonney also challenges gender roles. When her lover John Rackham is sent to
the gallows, she says deprecatingly, “Si te hubieras batido como un hombre, no te ahorcarían como a un perro” (44). The line, as Borges notes, is a variation of the reproach of Aixa, a powerful member of the Nasrid dynasty, to her son Boabdil after his loss of the Kingdom of Granada to Ferdinand and Isabella in the fifteenth century: “No llores como mujer lo que no supiste defender como hombre.” According to historical accounts, Aixa defended her kingdom against the Catholic Kings before its fall, and blamed the end of the last Arab empire in Spain on traitors who betrayed their country for money and property. Borges’ linkage of Anne Bonney, a pirate, to Aixa, a Nasrid chieftainess, illustrates his interest in those who exist outside the boundaries of hegemony: to those who believe that right is on the side of the social order, Bonney, Read, the widow Ching, and Emma Zunz all fall squarely in the camp of villainy. To the eye of patriarchal law, they are gender deviants who break the natural divisions between man and woman; consider in this context the following proclamation by the emperor against the widow Ching:

Hombres desventurados y dañinos… hombres en cuya ropa interior están figurados el fénix y el dragón, hombres que niegan la verdad de los libros impresos, hombres que dejan que sus lágrimas corran mirando el norte, molestan la ventura de nuestros ríos y la antigua confianza de nuestros mares. … Violan así las leyes naturales del Universo, de suerte que los ríos se desbordan, las riberas se anegan, los hijos se vuelven contra los padres y los principios de humedad y sequía son alterados . . . (15)

The first notable aspect of this dictum is that it refers to the pirates as ‘hombres,’ although their admiral is a woman; clearly, to be a pirate is to be a man. Yet it goes on to discuss the perverse nature of these “hombres”: they have mythological beasts embroidered on their underwear. The ‘hombres’ who bear these symbols, like the dragon and the phoenix they venerate, violate the laws of nature and deny the truth of printed books; they cause rivers to overflow, sons turn
against their fathers and cause the principles of dryness and wetness to exchange places. Clearly, one of these ‘natural laws’ is the principle of gender that the widow Ching deviates from. She has chosen not motherhood or domesticity, nor peaceful compliance and acceptance, but rather action, self-propelled mobility, and defiance against those who would suppress her will.

One of the classical male Borgesian heroes is a lonely and violent male outsider (“La casa de Asterión,” “El jardín de los senderos que se bifurcan,” “La muerte y la brújula” etc). In “Emma Zunz” and “La viuda Ching,” however, women take on the mantle of this hero, stepping into a man’s shoes when they have been emptied, becoming in a sense their double. They deviate from gender norms and travel to the limits of human endurance. In “Emma Zunz,” the limit is transgressed when she prostitutes herself to a monstrous Swedish sailor as part of her plan to pin rape on Lowenthal and thus exonerate herself; in “La viuda Ching, pirata” it is her ruthlessness in battle and her defiance of death when fighting the emperor’s fleet.

Perhaps the moment that most succinctly presages Emma’s own “transfiguration”—her crossing of the boundary between female to male and her transformation into the bold and defiant figure that she will become—is the moment when she withdraws the photo of Milton Sills from her bureau. Milton Sills (1882-1930) was a famous American film and stage actor, who often portrayed romantic heroes in popular “talkies” and silent films such as The Sea Wolf (1930), and Paradise (1926). In the story, Emma hides the death notice from her father under a portrait of Milton Sills that she keeps in her drawer. The mysterious appearance of Sills here raises an important question: why is the portrait hidden in the drawer, rather than hanging on the wall, where many young people keep images of screen idols? As a romantic hero, Sills likely represents Emma’s youthful aspiration toward heterosexual love, and her idolization of a male romantic hero, which parallels her earlier relationship to her father. Both represent the possibility of protection and security provided by a male figure. Yet the fact that she keeps both the image
of Sills and the note from her father stowed away in the drawer may represent a willful suppression of those dreams. Instead of marrying a male figure, she will replace him. She will never be a mother, never a wife: this is the radical choice she makes in the course of the story.

Through the character of Emma, Borges forcefully illustrates the ways in which his society fails both women and the working classes in an industrial society in which workers lured by promises of prosperity found poverty and exploitation in the fábricas. Zunz’s victim, Lowenthal, is the head of the factory where her father once worked. He allowed her father to take the fall for a crime he committed; subsequent to his imprisonment Emmanuel and his daughter fell in economic status from the middle to the working classes. When Emma says she has been raped, she is speaking of a metaphorical rape. The rapist is a metaphor for the tyrant, who is defined, by his desire to penetrate, to appropriate a body politic (Rivera-Taupier 72). In Lowenthal, the tyrant is the capitalist willing to exploit his workers for his own gain. Borges draws a direct link between misogyny, and class oppression. Likewise, he suggests a connection between the proletariat (Emmanuel Zunz, Emma’s father) and the violated woman (Emma). Though she refuses to strike in the factory, she actually, on her own, ‘strikes’ a fatal blow against Lowenthal. In that sense, she can be seen as a leader to the opposition party against him.

In “Nuestro pobre individualismo” (Otras inquisiciones, 1960), Borges writes, “El mundo, para el europeo, es un cosmos en el que cada cual íntimamente corresponde a la función que ejerce; para el argentino, es un caos” (34). He also states that, for Argentines, the worthies are “oscuros y anónimos” (ibid). For Borges, European literature affirms order, or decries the alienation of the person who falls outside of that order. Conversely, the Argentine hero fights against order, (with the implication, since it opposes the will of the hero, that that order is intrinsically flawed) (ibid). According to this definition, Emma Zunz perfectly fits the requirements of an Argentine hero: she struggles in obscurity; she fights against the established
order, both as a member of the proletariat and as a woman, confronting both the paternal and the
capitalistic order that govern modern Argentina. In the story, chaos is met with chaos; injustice
with injustice. Lowenthal’s death illustrates the way meaning collapses when right and wrong
have been placed in the hands of tyrants.

In addition to being a hero, Emma is a particularly Borgesian hero as both the writer and
protagonist of her own drama. The plot opens with Emma returning home from the factory and
receiving a telegram informing her of her father’s death. From the beginning, she understands
that the death of her father will become her life’s central drama and revenge her sole purpose: “la
muerte de su padre era lo único que había sucedido en el mundo, y seguiría sucediendo sin fin”
(564). She spends the rest of the day crying and mentally revisiting scenes from childhood,
which Borges describes with cinematic economy in flashes of images: summers in a cottage,
rounded windows of their small house in Lanús, the prison car that took her father away after he
was falsely accused of theft, and her father’s revelation, the night before he was taken to prison,
that the true thief was Aarón Lowenthal, the owner of the factory where he was once employed
and where Emma currently works. She does not allow her mind to rest that night, instead
forming a plan, which is perfected by the time “la primera luz definió el rectángulo de la
ventana” (565). Here, the image of a rectangle alight brings to mind a rectangular stage or a
screen illuminated in the dark. Like a screen director, she rehearses the forthcoming events.
Through the rest of the story, the plan Emma forms in the night will shape the unfolding drama,
turning thought into reality: “ya conocería los hechos ulteriores. Ya había empezado a
vislumbrarlos, tal vez; ya era la que sería” (564). After this early turning point, Borges will
furthermore begin to alternate between Emma’s script and what actually occurs, illustrating the
ways in which drama alternately is controlled by and escapes the author. As she crosses the patio
to his door, on the night she murders him, her lips mouth the words she plans to say to him
before she kills him. Writes Borges, “Desde la madrugada anterior, ella se había soñado muchas veces, dirigiendo el firme revolver, forzando al miserable a confesar la miserable culpa… Luego un solo balazo en mitad del pecho rubricaría la suerte de Lowenthal. Pero las cosas no ocurrieron así” (567). In the final moments, the actual events of the murder deviate from the script. She tells him about the strike and its leaders; he goes for a glass of water; when he returns she shoots him immediately; he begins to curse her, and so she shoots him again. Only once he is almost dead does she remember the accusation she has prepared: “He vengado mi padre y no me podrán castigar…” (567). However, writes Borges, “no la acabó, porque el señor Lowenthal ya había muerto. No supo nunca si alcanzó a comprender” (567). Borges’s focus on Emma’s planned speech refers to the principle of diction as laid out by Aristotle in the *Poetics*. Her desire to enunciate these parting words underscores two important aspects of the story: first, the ritual and performative nature of her act; and second her creationary role in the story.

If Emma is writing the script, she is also the principal actress. Writes Borges of her trip to the Paseo de Julio, the Buenos Aires street dedicated to bordellos and prostitution, “Acaso en el infamo Paseo de Julio se vio multiplicada en espejos, publicada por luces y desnudada por los ojos hambrientos…” (565). The mirror here serves its classic Borgesian reference to the multiplicity of the self. In the short essay “Borges y yo,” (*El hacedor*, 1960) Borges explores his own bifurcated personality, which converts him into two. One is the quiet observer; the other, is the actor, the one to whom things happen. Perhaps the greatest case to be made that Emma is a version of the author himself is that, in addition to being a writer, she is also a bifurcated character. Her demeanor is timid, quiet and gentle. She abhors sex, and refuses to join in

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50 The Paseo de Julio was the center of Buenos Aires’ prostitution district in the early twentieth century, and it is the street where Emma meets the sailor and beds him after leading him through labyrinthine streets and corridors. Borges also authored a poem titled “El Paseo de Julio,” (in the poetry collection *Cuaderno de San Martín*, published in 1929) in which he describes the street as ‘puerto mutilado sin mar,’ (perhaps a reference to sex that does not have reproduction as its goal, only soulless pleasure) its ‘sirena[s] muerta[s] y de cera’, its ‘inocencia terrible’ and it ‘espíritu no purificado, borrado.’ The poem cries out against the oppressive, soulless sexuality of the city.
conversations about men. When others in the factory join the strike, Emma “se declaró, como siempre, contra toda violencia” (565). Yet she is perverse; her persona as murderess belies a deep-seated anger, boiling beneath the surface, which is kindled by her father’s letter and culminates in Lowenthal’s murder. Contrary to her pacifist declarations, she does resort to violence. She prostitutes herself despite her fear of men. And like Borges, she is also in essence a writer. As he writes at the end of her story, “la historia era increíble, en efecto, pero se impuso a todos, porque sustancialmente era cierta” (568). Her view of the world becomes the version that triumphs.

At the end of *A Room of One’s Own*, Virginia Woolf presents a startling image, of Shakespeare’s sister rising from the dead to write:

> [I]f we face the fact, for it is a fact, that there is no arm to cling to, but that we go alone and that our relation is to the world of reality and not only to the world of men and women, then the opportunity will come and the dead poet who was Shakespeare's sister will put on the body which she has so often laid down. Drawing her life from the lives of the unknown who were her forerunners, as her brother did before her, she will be born.

(125)

The discourse of female liberation is inherently a monstrous one, as Woolf demonstrates here, as Borges illustrates in “Emma Zunz,” and as Cisneros embraces in her writing. The female writer is a freak, a rule-breaker, an assassin, self-destined to a life of solitude; in fact, she demands it. She defies the laws of nature; through the privileging of her artistic role over her reproductive one, she upends the question of the female drive. One possible final reading of “Emma Zunz” is as a living incarnation of her dead father, Emmanuel, returned from death to avenge himself
through her. She is the *hieros gamos*: both male and female. She is not hindered by the rules of propriety or by any expectation of how her life is to be lived, other than her drive for justice and revenge. She is not limited by forces that would seek to oppress her, because she is willing to live outside the rule of law.

In “Loose Woman,” Cisneros, who proudly announces that she is ‘nobody’s mother and nobody’s wife’ in her biographical materials, writes, “By all accounts I am/ A danger to society./ I’m Pancha Villa./ I break laws,/ Upset the natural order/ Anguish the Pope and make fathers cry./ I am beyond the jaw of law” (113-14). Michelle Tokarczyck writes that Cisneros depicts the *femme macho* in this poem, and to some extent has cultivated this image in her own life, though she is female-identified and heterosexual. Other examples of *femme macho* characters in her work include Clemencia from “Never Marry a Mexican,” who seduces her ex-lover’s son in revenge for his rejection of her, and Rosario de León of “Little Miracles, Kept Promises,” who writes, after she has cut off her long hair, “I’m a bell without a clapper, a woman with one foot in this world and one foot in that. This thing between my legs, this unmentionable. I’m a snake swallowing its tail… I’ve had to push the furniture against the door and not let you in” (*Woman Hollering Creek* 126).

It is clear why Cisneros would write such characters: because they are she. They mirror her own process of liberation from gender roles, which paved the way for her unprecedented success. In the tango between these two writers, Cisneros takes the lead. She forces the question: why was Borges writing about females that violate gender roles: female assassins, pirates, breadwinners, writers, artists, some of whom, like Emma Zunz, he appeared to identify deeply with? Why does he depict an English woman outfitted like a savage and drinking horse blood alone on a prairie in “La historia del guerrero y de la cautiva”? Borges steps back and yields to

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51 Borges tells a similar tale to this reading in “Juan Muraña,” in which the widow of a famous outlaw kills a man and insists—appears to believe—that it was her husband, returned from the dead, who did it.
her forward advance: the clear answer is that these women’s very existence upsets gender categories and thus represents freedom to create, invent, imagine and live one’s own truth, the freedom and power of the *hieros gamos*, of the androgynous mind. All of his female gender-benders—Emma Zunz, la viuda Ching, the wife of Pedro Salvadores, Juan Muraña’s widow—appear in contexts of political corruption and upheaval. All point to the political ills of their society—Zunz to the crisis in labor rights, Ching to corruption and illegal trade, Salvadores to the forced exiles of the Rosas regime, Muraña to poverty and tenant’s rights—and work to subvert these systems. In this sense, they throw into question the role of villain versus hero. In a corrupt and unjust society, the ‘villain’ might actually be a hero, the leader a tyrant or a crook (this is particularly true in Argentine history, which during Borges’s lifetime endured an unfortunate string of Fascist totalitarian dictatorships that suspended basic human rights and made a mockery of the legal system). In many of these stories, justice is only served when subject to the feminine principle.

Like Borges’s, Cisneros’s female firebrands all point to political systems of oppression. In “Eyes of Zapata,” Inés Alfaro’s account of Zapata, considered a ‘hero’ of the Mexican Revolution, paints him as a traitor to women; he lets his own lover starve when he goes off to plough other fields. Meanwhile, Clemencia’s pain in “Never Marry a Mexican” indicts an academic system in which professors take advantage of their students, in the context of a radically unbalanced climate of white male privilege. In “Bien Pretty,” Lupe’s painting calls attention to the historical privileging of men in positions of dominance in Mexican iconography and popular myth. But Mexican cultural identity and history suffers for being dominated by men; since the Revolution cynical male-dominated presidential regimes have consistently sown chaos, corruption, violence, and economic and infrastructural stagnation. It is when Lupe adjusts the
power balance in the painting, when she cuts Popo down to size with a well-chosen word (titling the work “El Pipi del Popo”) and puts Ixta in charge that it succeeds and becomes art.

As always with gender matters, the personal is the political. Cisneros has always walked the walk of a feminist, running away from home to live by herself, away from the shadows of her brothers and the demands of family convivencia. She has also refused to marry, not for lack of boyfriends, but so that she could preserve the necessary time to herself that being an international literary star requires. The highest praise she holds for anyone is to be una chingona, una mujer muy mujer, like Chavela Vargas. She has always fought to live by the pen, to live sola and to write. Borges himself, as Canto’s mocking physical descriptions of him attest, defied easy gender categorization: they described, if not outright monstrosity, a certain marked difference. (Cisneros’s description of him, after seeing him read, as a blind Tiresias follows suit). He was soft-limbed, intellectual, effete, and above all, a Mama’s boy. Only by recognizing that within this duality lay his true power, only by accepting the benefits and limitations partnership with his mother offered, would he be able to scale to the creative heights he did.
CHAPTER FOUR

In Search of the Latin American Buddha

I read Borges’ fabulous book *Seven Nights* for the seven-thousandth time, I think, and it seems to me a book I can never finish, because, as he says, a book changes each time we read it, because we change and are never the same person we were yesterday — "Each reading of a book, each rereading, each memory of that reading, reinvents the text." For me, reading and rereading this book is a form of happiness. It is an antidote to sorrow. It is medicine for my dying soul. It is a manner of being reborn.

And so I read this essay as if for the first time, and like Siddhartha's river, it was the first time, for I was not the same person. And it made me laugh out loud and run for my pen so that I might share this moment with you. I need only one intimate listener in order to write. For most of my life that listener has been anonymous, unknown. I have been known to flood like a Ganges. And I have been dry and dusty as the Rio Grande. I am writing to you today, my unknown intimate. Without you, I would have no reason to be.

Sandra Cisneros, April 26, 2011

Teacher and Disciple travel East

This chapter finds Borges and Cisneros, having faced the inner conflicts explored in CHAPTER THREE, both turning meditatively toward the Buddha, his path and his teachings, for inspiration. As Thich Nhat Hanh writes in *Being Peace*, (1987) a highly influential book for Cisneros, “Buddhism is not one. The teaching of Buddhism is many. When Buddhism enters one country, that country always acquires a new form of Buddhism” (84). I would add that this applies to individuals as well as countries; certainly Borges and Cisneros each found different ways to weave it into their unique mythologies. However, once again we find the master sharing his influence, and the student gratefully accepting and incorporating that influence and then forging her own path.

The epigraph to this chapter, which Cisneros posted in her blog, nods to Borges’s *Siete Noches* (1980) which she read in the English translation by Eliot Weinberger in a version entitled *Seven Nights* (1984). *Siete noches* is a collection of seven lectures given by Borges in the Coliseo de Buenos Aires in 1977, collected and revised for publication by Borges and his editor Roy
Bartholomew in 1979. The central essay, and the longest of the collection is “El budismo.” In it Borges expresses himself about Buddhism and its personal influence on his ideas at length. Ideas related to this essay can also be found in other pieces in Siete Noches, most notably “La ceguera” (“Blindness”), and also “La poesía” (“Poetry”). Against the editor’s expectations, Siete Noches resonated with readers and is one of Borges’s most often-quoted later books. While often terse in his essays, in lectures Borges allowed himself a freer range to postulate at greater length; it is perhaps this airiness, as well as its frankly personal subject matter that has so captivated his readers in this collection.

Borges’s Buddhism, like Cisneros’s, is born in the Americas, first discovered in literature: for him in the British poet Edwin Arnold and later the German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer, for her in the Vietnamese monk and peace advocate Thich Nhat Hanh, in the North American Tibetan nun Pema Chödrön and also, as this chapter will show, in Borges himself. Her statement that ‘we change and we are never the same person we were yesterday’ closely paraphrases the essay “Poetry,” from Seven Nights: “even for the same reader the same book changes, for we change; we are the river of Heraclitus, who said that the man of yesterday is not the man of today, who will not be the man of tomorrow” (77). This idea, that the person we are today is not the same as that we were yesterday or will be tomorrow, alludes to the principle that there is no permanent or fixed self, or the doctrine of No Self, the liberating revelation, descended from Hindu philosophy, that the inner self or soul (Atman) is absorbed in the whole, transcendent or universal self (Brahman) which as we shall see in this chapter is central to Borges’s work. In the epigraph, Cisneros writes of being reborn through the experience of reading the Seven Nights, alluding to the principle of reincarnation; in Qué es el Budismo, Borges writes, “Para el Buddha, cada uno de nosotros ya ha recorrido un número infinito de

52 I here quote Borges in the 1984 English edition of Seven Nights translated by Eliot Weinberger, which is the version Cisneros quotes from.
vidas, pero puede salvarse de recorrer infinitas vidas futuras si logra la liberación o nirvana” (35). She speaks of life as being a constant state of flux, an important concept for Borges, who often expressed the same idea through allusions to rivers, as she does here, and also invokes the principle of what he calls transmigración, tracing it back to Eastern religions, or the idea that the human spirit may take on different material forms: she floods like the Ganges, or is dry or dusty as the Rio Grande. And in the end, she improvises, following in the footsteps of her master and then using his methods to her own ends: she incorporates the Buddhist principle of interbeing to describe her interdependent relationship with her reader.54

While this chapter does not claim Borges to be a Buddhist, it seeks to illustrate the deep influence of Buddhist thought on his writings and on certain literary theories he developed which inform many of his most fascinating works as well as the worldview he demonstrates in lectures and interviews. It also seeks to prove that his manner of incorporating elements of Eastern thought into his fictions and essays has had a profound influence on Cisneros’s later works. In this case, it is the disciple, not the master, who is the believer: since the mid-1990’s Cisneros has consciously described herself as a “Buddhalupist” and speaks openly about her personal Buddhist practice in interviews, demonstrating a freedom with radical self-invention that Borges gestures towards in writing only. In a sense, as we will see in this chapter, Cisneros’s conversion to her own personal version of Buddhism, and her attempt to follow its principles in her life through social action and through the discipline of meditation, to follow the vision for her life

53 This points to an important distinction between the two authors’ interests in Nirvana; while Borges appears, in texts such as Qué es el Budismo and stories such as “El Inmortal” to privilege the idea of ending the repeating cycle of death and rebirth through enlightenment, Cisneros generally celebrates the notion of rebirth. This may have to do with the different stages of life at which each author came to their fullest interest in Buddhism; Borges for example wrote Qué es el Budismo at the age of 77, and delivered his lecture on Buddhism, collected in Siete Noches, a year later. Cisneros is 61 and has been writing about Buddhism for the last 22 years, since she was 39. It may also have to do with Cisneros’s more Catholic interest in the concept of resurrection (see her story “A Tango for Astor”).

54 Thich Nhat Hanh defines Interbeing as the principle that “I am, therefore you are. You are, therefore I am” (Being Peace’87).
she sees in her dreams, answers this question: what happens when a reader of Borges applies his breed of radical rethinking and reinvention of the world, to life itself?

Some Intellectual Antecedents to Borges’s Buddhism

In 1957 the Conference of Zen Buddhism and Psychoanalysis took place in Cuernavaca (Fields 205). The keynote speaker: the Japanese-American Buddhist scholar D.T. Suzuki, whom Borges cites frequently. 55 One of Suzuki’s contributions to the Western understanding of Zen was to universalize it: “As I conceive it…Zen is the ultimate fact of all philosophy. The final psychic fact that takes place when religious consciousness is heightened to extremity” (Suzuki 268). 56 By the latter half of the 1950s, Suzuki resided at the center of a veritable Zen movement in New York, where

the idea of Zen had become so popularized that it achieved the status of a fad.

[Commented Suzuki’s secretary in 1959] ‘Ultra modern painting, music, dance, and poetry are acclaimed as expressions of Zen. Zen is invoked to substantiate the validity of the latest theories in psychology, psychotherapy, philosophy, semantics, mysticism,

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55 Predating him as a major influence in disseminating Buddhism in Western thought was Carl Jung, who as early as 1934 wrote about commonalities between Zen Buddhism and psychoanalysis, namely the search for ‘wholeness’ and spiritual ‘healing’ and the similar roles of the therapist and Zen master as aiding in the patient’s quest for their attainment. In his introduction to Suzuki’s Introduction to Zen Buddhism (1949), Jung wrote “However one may define self, it is always something other than the ego, and inasmuch as a higher understanding of the ego leads on to self the latter is a thing of wider scope, embracing the knowledge of the ego and therefore surpassing it. In the same way as the ego is a certain knowledge of my self, so is the self a knowledge of my ego, which, however, is no longer experienced in the form of a broader or higher ego, but in the form of a non-ego (Nicht-Ich). Such thoughts are also familiar to the author of Deutsche Theologie: “Any creature who is to become conscious of this perfection must first lose all creaturelikeness (Geschopfesart), somethingness (Etwasheit) and self.” (13)

56 Suzuki has since been criticized for this universalizing view by scholars such as Hu Shih who believe that Zen or Ch’an movement is integral to Chinese Buddhism and must be understood within its historical context. Fascinatingly, according to Dharmachari Nagapiiya, Suzuki performed a kind of reverse Orientalism in which he incorporated what was of value in other religions such as Christianity in a universalized vision of Buddhism (and more specifically Zen). Borges performs a similar action in Easternizing Christian mythologies, as we shall see in this chapter.
freethinking, and what have you. It is the magic password at smart cocktail parties and bohemian get-togethers alike.’ (Fields 205)

It is this universalized Buddhism-in-translation that can also be found in Borges, who admits that he mostly grasped his understanding of Buddhism through European authors. Yet, unlike some artists who experienced their ‘Zen moment’ and then moved on, Borges developed a life-long interest in Buddhist philosophy that deepened throughout his lifetime and that infused his poetry, fiction, and essays. Before continuing to explore this topic, two important points must be made: first, as Borges writes, Buddhism presupposes Hinduism. So to speak about Buddhism in Borges is really to encompass many of Hinduism’s most important tenants. Second, although Borges explored various schools of Buddhist thought, he above all recurred to Zen.57

Borges’s most in-depth exploration of Buddhist ideas appears in the book-length treatise *Qué es el Budismo*, (1976) which he wrote with Alicia Jurado. The book investigates the historical legend of the Buddha, situates him within history, and discusses Buddhist cosmology as well as doctrines such as Transmigration, the Four Noble Truths, the Dharma Wheel (*la rueda de la ley*), and Nirvana, as well as ethical considerations of Buddhism. A delight to read, *Qué es el Budismo* is both scholarly and a quirky personal collection of Buddhist tales and quotes from Buddha’s sermons. Its lengthy bibliography reveals an idiosyncratic list of sources, some direct translations of Eastern texts, histories, and many synthesis and explanations written by European thinkers. The text is filled with accounts of mystical Hindu and Buddhist stories, such as the dream Siddhartha’s mother had of being penetrated by a six-tusked elephant the night of his conception, miscellanea, (Borges writes that, before becoming the Enlightened One, Siddhartha lived in a palace whose luxuries included a harem of 84,000 women) and intimate examinations of the teachings of the Vedantas and of the Buddha’s discourses and summarizations and

57 In *Siete Noches*, Borges expresses his approbation of Zen Buddhism above other schools as follows: “Yo tengo para mí que si hay dos budismos que se parecen, que son casi idénticos, son el que predicó el Buddha y lo que se enseña ahora en la China y el Japón, el budismo zen. Lo demás son incrustaciones mitológicas, fábulas” (86).
descriptions of their effects in the lives of his followers; to give one example, consider the following, which reads like a book of theology by a practicing Buddhist scholar, “Nuestra vida pasada es absorbida por el Todo; la paz y el alivio son la recompensa inmediata” (73).

**Borges’s Buddhism**

Although Borges is most commonly conceived of as an agnostic, he was a decidedly active one, a spiritual seeker who mined the world’s religions for the possible fantastical insights, metaphors and stories they might afford. Rebellious in turning against his mother’s Catholicism, he described himself as, like his father, a free thinker. Those who knew him well describe him as someone who sought and also disseminated spiritual knowledge and mystical experience. In *Borges a contraluz* Estela Canto describes some spiritual elements of his thinking and public persona as follows: “era una persona capaz de momentos místicos” (15) and “es un punto que se debe tener presente al analizar Borges: el realismo de sus observaciones, incluso cuando parecen abstractas y hasta místicas” (47). She also writes that he was valued for his spiritual presence by his lecture audiences: “La gente no lo veía como se ve a un gran escritor, un hombre excepcional, sino con la veneración que inspira un iluminado. Era la recreación de una situación religiosa, ese antiguo, olvidado sentimiento entre un bardo y su público. La gente no iba a una conferencia: iba a misa” (Canto, 164). Finally she affirms that his personal sense of the spiritual only grew with his blindness: “Muchos años después iba a decírmee que su mundo era un mundo de nubes blancas, a veces refulgentes; tal vez identificaba estos fulgores con su gloria” (165). These observations pertain to a general spirituality yet they indicate that Borges’s interest in spiritual matters was serious and deeply personal as well as intellectual and they set the stage for a deeper examination of one of the great objects of Borges’s inquiry: Buddhism.
Borges states in an interview that he first encountered Buddhist principles as a boy, reading *The Light of Asia* (1879) an eight-book epic recounting the life and philosophy of Buddha in blank verse by the British poet Sir Edwin Arnold: “the dewdrop slips into the shining sea,” (quoted in *Qué es el Budismo*, 24) which he read to mean “el alma individual se pierde en el todo” and which affected him so strongly that he says that the lines accompanied him always thereafter (*Diálogos* 96). As we will see at the end of this chapter, the doctrine of No-Self is crucial to Borges and repeatedly explored in his fictions and essays. Buddhist ideas were circulating in the intellectual and literary atmosphere in which Borges came of age: he comments that he heard of the concept of Nirvana, and that it fascinated him. The state of spiritual plenitude and all knowing was to become an ideal that would impel Borges throughout his lifetime. At the age of sixteen, he discovered Schopenhauer, an important influence in his work, and read that Schopenhauer declared himself a Buddhist. From there Borges read other Western thinkers who had in turn influenced Schopenhauer’s Buddhism: the German philosopher C.F. Koeppen, whose writings are also thought to have influenced Nietzsche’s references to Buddhism (Mistry 37); Max Müller (*Seis Sistemas de la Filosofía de la Índia*); and Paul Deussen, who began his *Historia de Filosofía* with a treatise not on Greece but on India. Borges concluded that Chinese and Indian thought were the wellspring of world philosophy: “todas las filosofías posibles, desde el materialismo hasta las formas extremas del idealismo, todo ha sido pensado por ellos” (*Diálogos* 97). Borges found elements of the Buddhist dharma, or ideas he could relate it to, in Schopenhauer, Deussen, Müller, Arnold, Tchuang Tsu, Heracles, Zenon and others. These experiences led him to begin to orient himself toward the East.

In a 2004 interview with Cristina Castello, María Kodama asserted that Borges felt a deep personal influence from his studies in Buddhism, as well as an intellectual interest: “él tenía una manera de sentir un poco oriental, por todo lo que había leído sobre esa filosofía, sobre
budismo, zen y sintoísmo. ¡Eso es la sabiduría...! Saber disfrutar de lo que nos acerca la vida.

“Qué importa el tiempo sucesivo / si en él hubo una plenitud / un éxtasis, una tarde...,” escribió en *Fervor de Buenos Aires*” (Castello, “Entrevista con María Kodama). Similarly, Jason Wilson, in his excellent biography, postulates that Borges was “temperamentally a Buddhist” (15) which resonates in everything from his prose style (simple, spare, and brief) to his habit of taking ruminative observant walks through the city to his adherence to a lifestyle reminiscent of the Middle Path: neither lavish nor austere, sober yet comfortable.

Many important critics of Borges, such as Jaime Alazraki and Emir Monegal also identify Buddhism as an important driver of the Schopenhaurian philosophies that so fascinated Borges and influenced his work. According to Alazraki:

Las adyacencias del budismo y el idealismo se funden en la teoría de la Voluntad de Schopenhauer; significativamente éste tenía en su cuarto junto al busto de Kant un bronce de Buda y su teoría de la abolición de la Voluntad, como un camino para alcanzar la Nada liberadora, es la adaptación del Nirvana del budismo a la filosofía occidental: “La filosofía hindú,” escribió en *El mundo como voluntad y representación*, “retorna a Europa y producirá un cambio fundamental en nuestro conocimiento y pensamiento.” Borges, “lector apasionado de Schopenhauer,” según su propia definición, da cuerpo en su narración a la visión idealista del mundo según la formulación budista. (“Narrativa y crítica de nuestra Hispanoamérica 1978,” 9)

**Rebellion against Catholicism**

In “El Budismo,” Borges provides several reasons for admiring the Buddha: first, that he did not demand that his followers believe in his historical reality. Unlike Christ, who told his followers before his death that he would appear among them at any of their gatherings in
his name, Buddha said that he left only the law (Siete Noches 85). For Borges, skeptical, prevaricating and eclectic as he was in belief, unwilling to commit to any one system, yet curious about matters of the spirit, the Buddha’s non-insistence on belief struck a perfect balance. As he wrote, a good Buddhist can be a Catholic, “en cambio, no le está permitido a un cristiano, a un judío, a un musulmán, ser budista” (78). In “El Budismo” Borges discusses its “extraña tolerancia” (ibid) referring to his belief that Buddhism does not preclude other belief systems, and thus did not exclude a writer raised amid strong strains of Catholicism, (from his mother’s side) atheism (from his father) and Protestantism (from this maternal grandmother). Borges, writing under the shadow of violent totalitarian rule in Argentina that punished dissent to the maximum degree, as well as the specter of Nazism in Europe, also notes with appreciation the pacifism of Buddhism: “no ha recorrido nunca al hierro o al fuego, nunca ha pensado que el hierro o el fuego fueran persuasivos” (78). Borges also appears to admire the physical and emotional elements of Buddhist meditation: “Ser Budista es, no comprender, porque eso puede cumplirse en pocos minutos, sentir las cuatro nobles verdades y el óctuple camino” (79) (italics mine) and even the relief from mental activity that Buddhism promises its practitioners, in favor of the use of the body and soul to achieve understanding: “no se trata de comprender, se trata de sentirlo de un modo hondo, de sentirlo en cuerpo y alma” (78). Though he came to Buddhism through the study of literature he appears to appreciate Buddhist meditation’s potential for the calming of the mind. Another reason Borges undoubtedly found sympathy with Buddhist ideas lies in the fact that unlike Catholicism Buddhism does not exalt the family above bachelorhood as other major world religions do, in fact, to the contrary:

Para los místicos judíos, cristianos e islámicos, las imágenes que corresponden al éxtasis son, por lo común, de índole paternal o nupcial; para el budismo, el Nirvana es puerto de refugio, isla entre los torrents, fresca gruta, otra orilla ciudad sagrada, panacea, ambrosia,
agua que alpaca la sed de las pasiones, orilla en que se salvan los náufragos del río de los ciclos. *(Qué es el Budismo 46)*

Nirvana, the most exalted state of life, does not require family love; in fact, it is cultivated in solitude and flourishes amongst those who have let go of the thirst of passions.

About his own practice, Borges was circumspect. He states in “El Budismo” that he had a Japanese Zen Buddhist friend with whom he held long and friendly conversations, but as for himself, “Yo no estoy seguro de ser cristiano y estoy seguro de no ser budista” (29). According to Didier Jaén, “somehow, such a need to deny his connection with Buddhism seems to emphasize the relationship” (21). Jaén instead argues, “Buddhist principles, perhaps even more than Berkeley’s, are at the very center of Borges’ literary creations” and that his literary experiments with Buddhist thought, rather than mere games, seek instead to express universal truths (20). Indeed, in “El Budismo” Borges affirms his historical belief in the Buddha: “Creía, y creo, que hace dos mil quinientos años hubo un príncipe del Nepal llamado Siddharta o Guatama que llegó a ser el Buddha, es decir, el Despierto, el Lúcido” (79).

Borges weds Buddhist ideas with Catholicism in fascinating ways in several of his writings. For example in “La forma de la espada” he takes the idea of No Self, or that one man is every man, and shows its applicability to Christian dogma: “Lo que hace un hombre es como si lo hicieran todos los hombres. Por eso no es injusto que una desobediencia en un jardín contamine al género humano; por eso no es injusto que la crucifixión de un sólo judío baste para salvarlo” *(Cuentos completos 174).*

**Cisneros’s Spiritual Mestizaje: Wedding Buddhism with Popular Catholicism**

Cisneros, like any other Latin American author, also carries the cross of Catholic dogma: like Borges she links it to Buddhism in her own idiosyncratic manner. She has described herself
as a ‘Buddhalupist,’ and she combines her Buddhism above all with a popular Catholicism that is signature to Latina and Mexicana spirituality. This popular Catholicism is “a home-based non-cleric-led expression and celebration of faith… handed down through generations more by laity than through the clergy” and celebrated spontaneously and primarily in the home (Rodriguez 167). It is shaped by the experience of the Conquest of the Americas and by the trans-Atlantic fusion of cultures it produced:

[G]iven the pervasive role that religion and the Church had in the colonization of Latin America and the Caribbean, it could be argued that the impact that religion had upon other institutions such as the family was even greater than what it may have been elsewhere. A religion forged from the combination of sixteenth-century Spanish Catholicism and Indian religion would influence the faith of many Latina women. (Rodriguez 166)

According to Catholic theologian and scholar Orlando Espín, the experience of the vanquished Christ is central to a Latino spirituality that also sprang from the experience of vanquishment to colonial rule. Espín reads Jesus as the ‘vanquished neighbor,’ and “the human vanquishment of Jesus as the analogy of God’s being” (11). Furthermore, the importance of the mother as a kinder, more maternal parental figure than the authoritarian God, who often came to resemble nothing so much as the colonizer/authoritarian father, is another crucial element of Latino (and particularly Latina) spirituality. That the Virgen de Guadalupe is a mestiza makes her a key symbol for the mestizo race that is contemporary Mexico and its diasporic descendants in the United States. Latina spirituality, therefore, is categorized 1) by a strong female presence, and 2) by a daily experience of hardship and by a view of spirituality as a necessary aid in overcoming the difficult emotions that arise every day as a result of poverty and patriarchal domination. It does not rely on priests or Church hierarchy; rather its center is in the home and in the makeshift
alters to deities such as the Virgen de Guadalupe. Practice of popular Catholicism indicates resistance to assimilation as it defends traditional customs and beliefs and constitutes a unique way of life. Its importance can be seen in the fact that it permeates every aspect of its practitioners’ lives, so that religion becomes the fundamental prism through which life is viewed (see Rodriguez). This strong, independent and non-assimilationist Latina spirituality, combined and nurtured by her growing interest in Buddhism, has taken increasing importance in Cisneros’s life and writings in recent years. She is also part of a small but visible group of Latina writer-activists who incorporate Buddhist-style meditation into their spirituality: Ana Castillo, Norma Cantú, Denise Chávez and Daisy Hernández (who participated in Macondo, the writing workshop Cisneros founded in 1995 and led in San Antonio until 2012) are a few of her fellow “heirs to a legacy of hybrid spirituality in the Americas” (Delgadillo 198).

Cisneros reflects this mixed spiritual heritage with its more-is-more ethos by drawing upon an international multitude of spiritual figures. In “Little Miracles, Kept Promises” (Woman Hollering Creek) the young Rosario articulates a personal vision of the Virgen de Guadalupe that draws on her indigenous roots, (here she names Mexican indigenous goddesses like “Coatlaxopeuh, She who has dominion over serpents, Tonantzín,” etc.) her Catholic ones (“Nuestra Señora de la Soledad, Nuestra Señora de los Remedios…Our Lady of Sorrows”) and that connects her to divinities from other faiths: “When I could see you in all your facets, Buddha, the Tao, the true Messiah, Yahweh, Allah, The Heart of the Sky, the Heart of the Earth, Lord of Near and Far, the Spirit, the Light, the Universe, I could love you, and finally, learn to love me” (128). Here Cisneros articulates a truly North American spiritual vision that takes into account the breadth of exposure to different faiths afforded in any U.S. city. Rosario must feel that she is related to all of them, and excludes none of them, in order to feel truly comfortable embracing the Virgen de Guadalupe. Cisneros includes a similar list in “Un Poquito de Tu
Amor,” a story about her father’s death: “Papá, Buddha, Allah, Jesus Christ, Yahweh, la Virgen de Guadalupe, the Universe, the God in us, help us” (205). Here she adds her father’s spirit to the list of divinities she draws upon, incorporating ancestor worship into her conception of the divine marked by an international mestizaje.

This universalized, pantheistic spiritual vision, with Buddha as one of its primary figures, bears a resemblance in its panoramic spirit to Didier Jaén’s following description of the role of Buddhism within Borges’s own eclectic spiritual philosophy:

Often, when touching on Buddhist themes, Borges makes reference as well to western philosophical sources or to other literary and religious authors. Thus direct references to Buddhism or Hinduism, and the similarity of Borges’ ideas to their essential ideas, when seen within the total context of Borges’ literature, may be considered as part of a more comprehensive system of references which covers the entire "esoteric tradition" from Buddhism, Hinduism, Sufism, Neo-Platonism, Gnosticism, the Kabbalah, and Christian mystics, as well as Idealist philosophers such as Berkeley and Schopenhauer, and Transcendentalist writers like Walt Whitman or Emerson, whose works also have roots in oriental thought and religion. By the "esoteric tradition" is meant, roughly, the tradition which, throughout religion, philosophy, or literature, tries to convey the intuition of the fundamental unity of man and God, or of man and the underlying source of all that exists (a sort of Philosophia Perennis). (Jaén 19)

Transmigración

Borges elaborates his theory of transmigración in Qué es el Budismo as follows: “En el Indostán, la doctrina de al transmigración implica una cosmología de infinitas aniquilaciones y creaciones periódicas . . . Para el Buddha, cada uno de nosotros ya ha recorrido un número
infinito de vidas, pero puede salvarse de recorrer infinitas vidas futuras si logra la liberación o nirvana” (34-5). He begins by saying that although it appears fantastical, it is a doctrine that has been professed throughout the ages in different parts of the world (Qué es el Budismo 31).

(Similarly, in “El Budismo” he says that it appears to Westerners to be a poetic principle). To prove this he quotes the 6th century Welsh poet Taliesen: “He sido una gota en el río./ He sido una estrella luciente…He viajado como un águila/ he sido un barco en el mar…”(32). He again mentions several Western philosophers who have also incorporated the idea, (his interest appears to be more to contribute to a unifying theory of transmigration rather than to elucidate philosophical differences between them) including Plato, Pythagoras, and Empedocles of Agrigentum, whom he quotes recalling his previous lives: “I was a maiden, I was a branch, I was a deer, and I was a mute fish who leapt from the sea” (ibid). In “Nueva refutación del tiempo,” (Otras inquisiciones 1952) Borges employs transmigración as a poetic principle in his exploration of the negation of time and personality: “El tiempo es un río que me arrebata, pero yo soy el río; es un tigre que me destroza, pero yo soy el tigre; es un fuego que me consume, pero yo soy el fuego” (380).

Negation of Time and Personality

In his writings, Borges repeatedly questions the idea of an individual self; hand in hand with this negation of personality is his negation of linear time. All, in Borges’s world, is in flux. In this section I will first define both these concepts as they appear in Borges and indicate where he connected both ideas with Buddhist principles. I will then explore how both of these concepts

58 He ends on a pessimistic note of disbelief in the philosophical principles he has just expounded: “El mundo, desafortunadamente, es real. Yo, desafortunadamente, soy Borges.” However, as Borges himself stated about Buddhism, the question of belief or disbelief is irrelevant. What remains is the free reign that the principle of transmigración has given to his poetic imagination.
also form central features of Cisneros’s writings, and how she also connects them to a Buddhist worldview.

Regarding his disbelief in linear time, Borges quotes Bertrand Russell in his essay “Tiempo circular”:

…The situation would be analogous to a man who travels around the world; he does not say that his starting-point and his point of arrival are two different but precisely similar places, he says they are the same place. The hypothesis that time is cyclic can be expressed as follows: form the group of all qualities contemporaneous with a given quality: in certain cases the whole of this group precedes itself [An Inquiry into Meaning and Truth (1940) 102].

Later in the essay, Borges ultimately appears to privilege a variation of this theory in which time repeats itself with small variations. He quotes Marcus Aurelius, that all things revolve in the same orbits, and for the spectator it is the same to watch for a century or infinitely (Reflections II, 14). In El otro, el mismo, (1969) Borges wrote about the irrelevance of linear time: “¿Qué importa el tiempo sucesivo, si en él hubo una plenitud, un éxtasis, una tarde” (Selected Poems 169).

Borges linked the notion of non-linear time specifically to Eastern thought on a number of occasions. In Qué es el Budismo, he writes, “Como Schopenhauer, los hindúes desean la historia; carecen de sentido cronológico” (17); “A los hindúes poco les importa el orden de los hechos históricos o la sucesión de los reyes. Si les hacen preguntas, invitan cualquier contestación” (ibid) and “la verdad, por escandalosa que sea, es que a los hindúes les importan más las ideas que las fechas y que los nombres propios” (ibid). These quotes are important in linking Schopenhauer’s concept of the irrelevance of time with Eastern thought: once this connection has been established, the magnitude of importance of Eastern philosophy on Borges’s
most deeply held world views begins to take focus and one begins to see its influence of many of his most important works that negate time, both fictional and non-fictional.\(^{59}\)

The negation of individual personality—in other words the idea that one man is in a certain sense all men—is also a fundamental trope in Borges’s writing, one that often appears together with his negation of time. In *Qué es el Budismo* he writes, “la negación de la personalidad es una de los dogmas esenciales del budismo” (16). He also associates the concept with Heraclitus’s quote that a man can never cross the same river twice, for it is not the same river and he is not the same man:

En el *Visuddhimagga* (Camino de la Pureza) está escrito: ‘En ninguna parte soy un algo para alguien, ni alguien es algo para mí.’ Análogamente, un contemporáneo del Buddha, Heráclito de Éfeso, dijo: *Nadie baja dos veces al mismo río*, sentencia comentada así por Plutarco: ‘El hombre de ayer ha muerto en el de hoy, el de hoy muere en el de mañana.’ El Camino de la Pureza declara: ‘El hombre de un momento future vivirá, pero no ha vivido ni vive. El hombre del momento presente vive, pero no ha vivido ni vivirá.’ Para el budismo, cada hombre es una ilusión, vertiinosamente producida por una serie de hombres momentaneos y solos. (*Qué es el Budismo* 38)

According to Monegal, ‘La nadería de la personalidad’ is a throughline that runs throughout Borges’s work. He develops it in an essay by that name and also in “La encrucijada de Berkeley”: together these essays contend that “no hay un tal yo de conjunto” (quoted in Monegal 99). Consider “Paradiso, XXXI, 108,” (*El hacedor*) in which Borges writes, “El perfil de un judío en el subterráneo es tal vez el de Cristo; las manos que nos dan unas monedas en una ventanilla tal vez repitan las que unos soldados, un día, clavaron en la cruz. Tal vez un rasgo de la cara crucificada acecha en cada espejo; tal vez se murió, se borró, para que Dios sea todos”

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\(^{59}\) A non-exhaustive list of his works that question the linear nature of time include “Una nueva refutación del tiempo,” “Tiempo circular” “El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan,” “Ulrikke,” “La historia del guerrero y de la cautiva,” “La noche de los dones,” “El inmortal,” “Las ruinas circulares,” etc.
(OC 290). Christ might be in any man, he might be contemporary (despite having according to common consensus died over two thousand years ago). In the story Borges ascribes the idea of “un dios descabezado y disperso” to the Greek historian Diodorus Siculus. And the notion that the divinity may be found in any man can be traced to his interest in the Kaballah (Siete Noches 139). Yet, without the negation of individual personality and of linear time, Borges would not have been able to write “Paradiso, XXXI, 108.”

A reading of Borges’s key texts on the negation of personality and of linear time lead to two key ideas that, not coincidentally also form two of the central tenants of Buddhism: first the supremacy of the present moment, and second the idea that all people are one person, the essential interconnectedness of the individual with the universal.

The negation of linear time (with a preference for the present as a time that encompasses all times) as well as the favoring of the universal over the individual personality are both central to Cisneros’s work as well, and that both also appear in connection with references to Buddhist thought in her work. The epigraph to Caramelo, which evokes events from along-ago family vacation to Acapulco, is written in the historical present. This device places past and present in the same continuum: “We’re all little in the photograph above Father’s bed. We were little in Acapulco. We will always be little. For him we are just as we were then” (3). Cisneros describes this uni-planar view of time even more explicitly in the first sentence of her introduction to A House of My Own:

A long time ago, which was yesterday, I could tell time by the typeface on my manuscripts…I roamed about the earth and borrowed typewriters in Greece, France, the former Yugoslavia, Mexico, and throughout the United States…And everywhere I went, the poems or stories or essays I typed…reminded me, like passport stamps, where I’d been. (3)
Describing the borrowed houses and guestrooms she lived in, the grants she accumulated to make ends meet, she lists an accumulation of places, years, poems and stories, that all pertain to a yesterday that is also encompassed by the present, when she finds herself yet again at another desk, this one in her current house in Mexico. This expansive approach to time and geographical space—the sense that she has traversed vast territories, and that everything she has seen exists in the present, in her mind—recalls Borges’s “El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan”: “Después reflexioné que todas las cosas le suceden a uno precisamente, precisamente ahora. Siglos de siglos y sólo en el presente ocurren los hechos; innumerables hombres en el aire, en la tierra y el mar, y todo lo que realmente pasa me pasa a mí” (OC, 867).

Another piece from *A House of My Own*, “Who Wants Stories Now?” is the transcription of a speech Cisneros delivered in March 1993 at an International Women’s Day rally in San Antonio. It is a cry for U.S. intervention in the Yugoslav war and a call to end the attacks on Bosnian women, mostly written in the second person and addressed to her friend Jasna Karaula, who was then stuck in Sarajevo and whom Cisneros had befriended during a summer when she had lived there. In the speech Cisneros reconstructs her memories of the city and the time spent with Jasna as a way to call attention to the humanity of a city faced with obliteration. Cisneros describes an artifact from the past that exists in the present, testifying to the presence of a former self in a foreign land that is contiguous with the present:

If you go to the American Library on the Banks of the Miljacka River, there is a copy of T.S. Eliot’s poems with one page stained with a cherry that fell from a tree while I was reading it, I’ll show you the page…A woman is there. In the old part of the town, up the hill, up too many steps, in the neighborhood nearest the gypsy borough, on ulica Gorica, number 26. That house was once her grandmother’s, then her mother’s, then hers. (110)
Again, Cisneros links generations in place, calling to attention the layering of time that occurs in space, and describing a vestige or trace of a past occurrence that remains. The effect is a sense of a living past that co-exists with the present. The anecdote about the stain in the book in Sarajevo repeats twice in A House of My Own, in an incidence of repeating a similar anecdote with a small variation, rewriting one’s own material, that Borges also effects in his writings. This technique, which creates a circular pattern in his body of work, is related to and illustrates his theory of circular time.

In her foreword to “Who Wants Stories Now?” Cisneros writes that the speech was influenced by Thich Nhat Hanh’s Being Peace, (1987) which is the book she credits for introducing her to Buddhism. In addition to invoking circular time in this story, she also invokes the principle of No Self at the end of the piece, when she writes “A woman I know is in there. In that country. A woman I love as any woman would love a woman…And I hear that somebody. And I know that somebody. And I love that somebody” (112). Here she depersonalizes Jasna in order to make a plea to universal human rights: the right of any “somebody” to life and to freedom from persecution. The International Women’s Day speech demonstrates Cisneros’s entry into Engaged Buddhism, or the application of Buddhist principles to society and to helping others. In Being Peace, Thich Nhat Hanh writes about this concept:

The individual is made up of non-individual elements. How do you expect to leave everything behind when you enter a meditation center? The kind of suffering that you carry in your heart, that is society itself. You bring that with you, you bring society with you. You bring all of us with you. When you meditate, you do it not just for yourself, you do it for the whole society. You seek solutions to your problems not only for yourself, but for all of us. (47)

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60 Compare with two of Borges’s stories from El hacedor, “Mutaciones,” and “El testigo,” both about living remnants of the past that traverse the border between the past and present.
In the book, Hanh calls for people to engage in social action in order bring peace to the world. He suggests that, rather than expressing anger over the state of world events, people write love letters asking for peace: “Can the peace movement talk in loving speech, showing the way for peace? I think that will depend on whether the people in the peace movement can be peace” (Being Peace 80). In her speech, which is also a love letter to Sarajevo and to Jasna, Cisneros follows this advice. The latter half of her career, since finding Buddhism, can be seen as her attempt to leave behind anger and conflict (themes present in several stories in Woman Hollering Creek, such as “Never Marry a Mexican” and “One Holy Night,” which are particularly angry against Mexican men and against conditions of racial and economic oppression in the U.S.) and, following Thich Nhat Hanh’s lead, be peace. In a 2002 interview with Gayle Elliott about the political roots of her Buddhism and about its transformational effect on her life and writing, she has stated:

I feel like I’m a Buddhist revolutionary. I feel very Buddhist and very revolutionary at the same time. There are ways to be revolutionary without guns or violence. You can be a pacifist revolutionary. My weapon has always been language, and I've always used it, but it has changed. Instead of shaping the words like knives now, I think they're flowers, or bridges. When we're younger we react, and we don't think about how language is creating more violence. We're not aware as younger writers that our words can be bullets. Or maybe we're conscious of it, but we're conscious of it in a very rudimentary way. We don't realize the spiritual resonance of language because at that point in our lives, we don't realize that the spiritual encompasses everything. The older you get, the more power you have with language as a writer, which means that you have to be extra responsible for what you say, whether it's in print or in front of a microphone, because those words can go out and kill or go out and plant seeds for peace. I've been reading a lot of Buddhist
thought, but the Buddhist thought came along with circumstances in my life. I don't think that books are going to stay with you or that any kind of thought or philosophy is going to help you unless it comes hand in hand with the life lessons. The Buddhist thought came hand in hand with my acquaintance with my friend Jasna, in Sarajevo, and her silence for years because of the war and my inability to do anything, so many miles away, to help my friend; she was actually being held in a big city that was like a giant concentration camp. My own powerlessness drove me to finally speak when I was asked to do a speech for International Women's Day.

There are two main functions of American Buddhism today: the interior one, that belongs to libraries and inner reflection, and the outer one, that draws people out in the world to apply Buddhist principles to matters of social interest (Bodiford, personal interview). While Borges’s Buddhism was primarily of the former variety, Cisneros’s combines both: through peace rallies, the foundation of grants and workshops, through directly addressing political issues and relevant policy change in her speeches and other writings, she brings her personal study and understanding of Buddhism out into the world. Thus, while Borges may have been a chispa that helped spark her interest in Eastern thought, Cisneros has acted as a flame who works directly to remake her society.

Universal Stories and Tiempo Circular: “La noche de los dones” and “Natural Daughter”

Another Borgesian theme that draws both on the theory of the repetitious nature of time and the nothingness of self is that humankind has one or two stories that they are destined to live out again and again; universal stories that become the center of their lives and that are, in a sense, their only story. These narratives can be passed down through generations, or they can be relived within one individual’s life. He mentions this theme a number of times. In “El Evangelio según
Marcos” (El informe de Brody 1960) he writes, “También se le ocurrió que los hombres, a lo largo del tiempo, han repetido siempre dos historias: la de un bajel perdido que busca por los mares mediterráneas una isla querida, y la de un dios que se hace crucificar en Gólgota” (Cuentos completos 413). Another iteration of this idea is the person for whom one universal story is destined to become the center of their life, and that they will retell it for the rest of their days, until it ceases to matter whether the event actually happened to them or if it happened to someone else. Borges illustrates this second iteration in “La noche de los dones,” (El libro de arena, 1975). The story, remembered by an old man in a café in Buenos Aires, tells of an episode in his youth when he rode to the provincial town of Lobos to a bordello where he met a young woman whom they called ‘la Cautiva.’ Another man prompts her to recount her experience in an Indian raid (malón) when she was a girl, and when she recounts the story, “la muchacha habló como si estuviera sola y de algún modo yo sentí que no podía pensar en otra cosa y que esa cosa era lo único que le había pasado en la vida” (Cuentos completos 471).61 As she begins this story of unspeakable violence, she is interrupted, allowing the reader to infer what happened to her: that she was kidnapped and violated by the invaders, explaining the reason that she now can find work only as a prostitute. Meanwhile the infamous historical Argentine outlaw Juan Muraña and his gang enter the bar; later that night the narrator both sleeps with la Cautiva—his first experience with a woman—and witnesses Muraña being stabbed to death by a local police sergeant. One of the listeners remarks upon “el gran río de esa noche”—Borges frequently employs rivers to allude to the fluid nature of time and the unknowable course of life.62 At the

61 If we were to elaborate on Borges’s quote, we might say that only two stories have been told of women in Argentina: one who meets a serpent and tempts her husband to eat of the fruit of wisdom, thus condemning them and their offspring to a life of hardship, and one who is captured in an Indian raid as a girl, lives for a year or three with her captors on the pampas where she serves in sexual servitude, and, thus ruined for civil society, finds no other place upon her return than as a prostitute. Or we might add a third story to his diad of Christ and Odysseus, transcribed by missionaries and sung by philosophers who travelled to the East: that of a beautiful prince who, after witnessing death and sickness, leaves his palace, and sits under a Bodhi tree until he finds Enlightenment.

62 This interest in rivers likely stems both from the prominence of the Río Plato in Buenos Aires life, his memories of swimming in the Río Guayaquil as a young man during summers in Uruguay, combined with the
end of the story, the narrator articulates the theory that one or two universal stories can make up the center of one’s life, and that the experiences most deeply and personally felt—love, suffering, death—connect a person to all of humanity: “A todos los hombres les son reveladas todas las cosas o, por lo menos, todas aquella cosas que a un hombre le es dado conocer, pero a mí, de la noche a la mañana, esas dos cosas esenciales me fueron reveladas” (Cuentos completos 473).

Cisneros’s *A House of My Own* (2015) is a critically-acclaimed collection of autobiographical essays written between 1984 and 2014, many published, in venues including *Elle Magazine*, *Tonantzin*, (the magazine of the Guadalupe Cultural Arts Center) art museum catalogs, *Washington Post Book World*, forewords to her own books and those of other authors, lectures presented at university lectures, public speeches, and some unpublished. Each piece has its own preface, reminiscent of Borges’s frames for stories such as “La noche de los dones,” which lends a quality of distance to them, underscores the authorial presence, as well as the fictional elements of remembered narratives. These pieces record the latter half of Cisneros’s career, as she has increasingly embraced a spiritual point of view, and record both her life in San Antonio and her recent decision to move to Mexico. Many of the pieces contain insights into the writer’s life, and describe her struggles and insights both personal and professional as she has sought to allow her spirituality to inform her worldview and her writing.

In one of the stories from the collection, “Huipiles,” (2007) a Japanese woman tells her own story of being raped in San Cristóbal, and Cisneros writes that her memory of that story, told in a café like “La noche de los dones,” though this one in Mexico, is “as if it had just happened. As if she were still telling and telling her story” (56). Time and individual identity here become irrelevant because violence against women and the impossibility of forgetting are prominence of the Ganges in Eastern philosophy and the story of the river in the life of Buddha, as well as Heraclitus’s quote on rivers.
both timeless and universal. Here, Cisneros adapts Borges’s negations of time and of the individual in order to discuss age-old patterns of injustice.\textsuperscript{63} Similarly, in her essay “Natural Daughter,” in which she writes about the true-life antecedent of Candelaria, Innocencio’s unacknowledged daughter by the washerwoman Amparo, Cisnero’s real-life illegitimate half-sister, whom the family in Mexico has ignored and whom Cisneros tries but fails to locate, she writes, addressing the missing sister:

I want to see you, and I do see you, everywhere, in all the women I meet when I travel to Mexico or Bosnia or Italy. I see you in all the women, the poorest of the poor…a Rom woman [in Sarajevo] with terror on her face, standing on the curbside, ignored….The indígena in the Tepoztlán market begging me to please buy another bag of chocolate even though I’d already bought one…In Rome the Polish refugee knitting hats on the curb of Piazza Mazzini…the Peruvian nannies afraid to talk to me…the Asian women at Piazza Navona, silk scarves draped from her arms as if they were the goddess Kwan Yin, each desperately shouting lower and lower prices just to make a sale. (\textit{A House of My Own} 258)

Her mentions of women she has seen, in the course of years of travel, in cities across the world, unites them all to the missing sister she hopes to find, so that they become essentially the same. Whether or not they are actually her sister is, in a sense, irrelevant; they are united in suffering. In the story, all city markets converge in one market, all poor women in one woman.

\textsuperscript{63} The difference is that while Borges inserts doubt as to whether la Cautiva’s account was real or whether it happened to someone else, pertaining as it does to a common mythology, [and stories of the rapes of white women by Indians were used to justify genocide on the Argentine pampas, giving him good reason to question the veracity of tales that villainize the ranqueles] Cisneros passionately believes the woman’s account and seeks to assert its veracity. In this sense she is less interested in exploring violence against women as pertaining to the realm of mythology and more interested in documenting and publicizing it in a political conscious-raising effort to make it less socially accepted, less hidden and thus attempt to lessen its impact. While Borges constantly questions the line between fact and fiction, Cisneros is dead serious and always politically motivated when presenting stories of violence against women. This difference indicates that Cisneros’s borrowing of literary techniques and ideas, like Borges’s own literary borrowings, always eventually serve only her own ends.
Like Borges’s “La noche de los dones,” there is an element of ambiguity in “Natural Daughter”: at the end of the tale Borges writes “Los años pasan y son tantas las veces que he contado la historia que ya no sé si la recuerdo de veras o si sólo recuerdo las palabras con que la cuento. Tal vez lo mismo pasó a la Cautiva con su malón” (473). As Efraín Kristal comments, “As an adult [the narrator] cannot tell for certain if his first encounters with sex and death at the brothel were experienced or imagined, which turns the story of an individual whose experiences are archetypal into a vexed dream-like recreation of Argentine national beginnings” (164). Similarly, although Cisneros sees her missing sister in poor women in picturesque markets around the globe in “Natural Daughter,” none of them is really her missing sister. The idea of finding her and somehow compensating for her disinheritance is itself a fantasy. The story narrates the survivor’s guilt of the legitimate daughter who thrived north of the border, while her illegitimate half sister remained behind, almost certainly to a life of poverty and hardship. It is also a ‘vexed’ retelling of the Mexican American saga, the forced separation between parents and children, brothers and sisters at the border lines between what Américo Paredes called the ‘two Mexicos,’ the México found within the national republic and México de Afuera (3).

Indeed, suffering appears to be the key principle that has spurred Cisneros towards cultivating her spirituality: suffering due to international conflicts such as the Yugoslav war and the U.S.-Mexico border conflicts, and that due to internal pain, anger, and sadness. Cisneros addresses the root of suffering in Mexican spirituality as follows: “Are countries who have suffered the most, the cultures with the most spiritual wealth? Is there a correlation between aguantando, bearing pain, and soul? Is the transformation of pain into light the alchemy that creates soul? If that is the case, then by the measurement of soul spirit, Mexico would be a first World nation” (A House of my Own 352). In a 2003 interview with José Antonio Gurpegui, Cisneros discussed finishing Caramelo, which she wrote as a tribute to her dying father and to
his immigrant life, and getting a tattoo of a Buddhalupe (a figure of the Virgen de Guadalupe sitting in the cross-legged pose of the Buddha) on her arm:

This book was very hard for me to write, and I really thought that when I did this tattoo it was to mark a death and a rebirth. I think we have lots of deaths in our lives, and if we’re lucky we are reborn and if we’re not lucky we wander around with the walking wounded. Yo me morí con este libro and a new me is being reborn and part of the process of searching for a spiritual call in my forties is with pain. There are a lot of dolores in this book, because there have been a lot of dolores in my life, so this [tattoo] is sort of like to celebrate this book with something significant… and that was the Buddhism and the Virgen de Guadalupe that came into my life.

**La Rueda de la Ley in Borges’s “El Inmortal”**

Buddhist principles can be found in a number of Borges’s fictions. Daniel Balderston and Jaime Alazraki have found resonances with Buddhist and Hindu ideas “La escritura del dios,” including the principle of renunciation and the symbol of the dharma wheel. In his article “‘La escritura del dios’ de Borges: cómo escapa el encarcelado de su prisión ilusoria” James Holloway concludes that in the story the narrator retrospectively relates “cómo siguió el sendero del Buda y descubrió bajo su realidad aparente maya la verdad idealista de que el mundo es un sueño” (333). In this section I read “El Inmortal” as similarly narrating a version of the Buddha’s story, the path through suffering and the cessation of suffering, though the bulk of the story is apparently set in the ancient Roman Empire. Despite noting Buddhist themes in “El Inmortal,” Balderston writes in *Out of Context: Historical Reference and the Representation of Reality in Borges*, (1993):

As with the Buddhist and Kabbalistic readings of this story, I would object that the Hindu material is extraneous to the cultural system of the protagonist, and that the critic’s first
priority should be to establish the coherence of that cultural system. Parallel mythologies that are not founded on attention to the particulars of a given textual web (in the manner of Frazer, Jung, Campbell, and Cirlot) cannot but fail to aid in understanding the specific details of the text. (162)

What Balderston misses is that the globalized world in which Borges lived was decidedly not coherent. Borges was exposed to Eastern belief systems both through his own literary investigations and through his vibrant international set of acquaintances. Thus he mixed references to multiple faiths, time periods, and international geographies. One of Borges’s fundamental concerns was to represent the search for meaning within a human experience of multiplicity. As Borges himself stated in a 1981 interview with Seamus Heaney and Richard Kearney, “El hecho de no pertenecer a una cultura ‘nacional’ homogénea tal vez no sea una pobreza sino una riqueza. En este sentido, soy un escritor ‘internacional’ que reside en Buenos Aires” (Heaney and Kearney, “Borges and the World of Fiction”). The same can be said of Cisneros. She does not seek to portray one unified cultural context; instead she seeks to represent a glorious, ever-changing diversity in which individuals draw upon varied cultural paradigms to weave their own individual systems of meaning.

The concept of dukkha, suffering, unsatisfactoriness, the yearning for things to be other than they are, is central to Buddhism: it is the first Noble Truth. The Four Noble Truths are 1) suffering, 2) the origin of suffering, 3) the cessation of suffering and 4) the path that leads to the cessation of suffering (the Eight-Fold path). In the Pali Canon, which records the Buddha’s discourses (suttas), the Buddha is quoted to have said, “One thing and only one thing do I teach:

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64 Defined in the Buddha’s First Discourse (or the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta) as right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration. It is also known as the middle way.
dukkha and the cessation of dukkha.” In Qué es el Budismo, Borges writes about suffering in the Buddhist conception as follows:

¿Qué es el sufrimiento? El Buddha responde: “Es nacer, envejecer, enfermarase, estar con lo que se odia, no estar con lo que se ama, desear y anhelar y no conseguir.” ¿Cuál es el origen del sufrimiento? El Buddha responde: “Es la Sed (Trishna) que lleva de reencarnación en reencarnación, acompañada de delitie sensuales y que, ya en un punto, ya en otro, quiere saciarse. (42)

Borges writes about thirst and the suffering that arises from clinging to life in “El Inmortal” [the first story in El Aleph (1949) and its most ambitious], a parable that illustrates the Four Noble Truths. In the story the narrator, seeking eternity, feels profoundly lost until coming to a Buddhist experience of awakening near the end of the story.

“El Inmortal” takes place during the time of the emperor Diocletian (who ruled the Roman Empire from 284-305). The narrator, a soldier in the recently ended Egyptian wars, sets out to find the city of the immortals; on the way he passes through a hellish city of half-alive, uncivilized troglodytes. Though he conceives of the city of the immortals as a paradise peopled by gods, and assumes that the wasteland he passes through lies near its gates, he discovers that what he thought would be heaven, the place where no one dies, is actually a hell. After leaving the city, he experiences joy to find himself once again mortal. Acceptance of death and the passing of all things is the key to happiness; it is the traveller’s desire for immortality that brings him suffering: “Sentí en mi pecho un doloroso latido, sentí que me abrasaba la sed” (991).

Borges employs many images and metaphors in the story for the suffering produced by yearning for the unattainable: First, the traveller cannot sleep, “pues algo estaba combatiendo en mi corazón” (989). Something fights within him; he wants battle during peacetime. A passing rider (“con una ténua voz insaciable”) tells him that he seeks to return to a river on the other side of
the Ganges whose waters grant immortal life (ibid). The Ganges here functions as a sign that Borges is leading the reader into the territory of Eastern philosophy. The narrator, wandering in a desert, (a symbolic landscape of privation) not only experiences thirst but also fear of thirst. One night, he dreams of a well at the center of a labyrinth: “insoportablemente soñé [que] mis manos casi lo tocaban, mis ojos lo veían, pero tan intricadas y perplejas eran las curvas que yo sabía que iba a morir antes de alcanzarlo” (991). This unquenchable thirst makes the narrator’s life intolerable: in Section I of “El Inmortal,” the narrator thus encounters the First Noble Truth (“el sufrimiento”) and the Second Noble Truth (“la Sed que lleva de reencarnación en reencarnación”). At the beginning of Section II, the narrator symbolically dies and is reborn: “me vi tirado y maniatado en un oblongo nicho de piedra, no mayor que una sepultura común…Los lados eran húmedos. Sentí en mi pecho un doloroso latido, sentí que me abrasaba la sed. Me asomé y grité débilmente” (991). This coffin-shaped enclosure, with humid walls, represents at once his death and his rebirth, a nod to the Hindu-Buddhist belief in reincarnation.

The narrator ultimately discovers that the ‘immortals,’ rather than living surrounded by happiness and beauty, are the race of troglodytes that he discovers: grey-skinned, wild-bearded, nude, they subsist on the flesh of serpents and seem to him infantile in their bestiality and in their crude-seeming uncaring; they do not care whether he lives or dies; they attend to their physical needs and little else, seemingly insensate. While amongst them, the narrator also begins to devolve: he lies nude in the sand, he begs and steals. He states, “[l]a urgencia de la sed me hizo temerario” a second reference to fear provoked by a state of wanting. The narrator frequently mentions being in a state of disquiet and yearning: “la codicia de ver a los Inmortales, de tocar la sobrehumana Ciudad, casi me vedaba dormir” (991). Throughout, Borges incorporates sense references: the narrator wants to see the immortals, to touch the city, not realizing that the
repulsive troglodytes he sees are the immortals and that the confounding purposeless city whose labyrinths he traverses is their legendary city.

Borges sets the story amidst images of fire: the city of immortals is located in a burning desert; the narrator states, ‘me abrasaba la sed’; he describes the burning sand; elsewhere he states, “Las noches del desierto pueden ser frías, pero aquélla había sido un fuego” (994). The discourse of fire, from Buddha’s Fire Sermon, is one he sets alongside “La Rueda de la Ley” in the first portion of Section VI (“Doctrinas Budistas”) of Qué es el Budismo. Writes Borges about this sermon:

La vista, oh discípulos, está en llamas, lo visible está en llamas; el sentimiento que nace del contacto con lo visible, ya sea dolor, ya alegría, ya ni dolor ni alegría, está asimismo en llamas. ¿Qué fuego lo inflama? El fuego del deseo, el fuego del odio, el fuego de la ignorancia, el nacimiento, la vejez, la muerte, las penas, las quejas, el dolor, el pesar, la desesperación . . . (42)

The narrator of “El Inmortal” is inflamed with desire to see and touch the city, feels the desperate thirst to attain immortality, and is tortured by the cycle of death and rebirth which this quest chains him to.

After the narrator discovers that the troglodytes themselves are the immortals and the burning plain and illogical nightmarish City of the Immortals, he awakens to the Buddhist rueda de la ley: “Más razonable me parece la rueda de ciertas religiones del Indostán; en esa rueda, que no tiene principio ni fin, cada vida es efecto de la anterior y engendra la siguiente, pero ninguna determina el conjunto . . .” (233) He recognizes the troglodytes then as an enlightened race: “Adoctrinado por un ejercicio de siglos, la república de hombres inmortales había logrado la perfección de la tolerancia y casi del desdén. Sabía que en un plazo infinito le ocurren a todo hombre todas las cosas” (ibid). They live by a circular understanding of time and by the principle
of karma: “Entre los Inmortales, en cambio, cada acto (y cada pensamiento) es el eco de otros que en el pasado lo antecedieron, sin principio visible, o el fiel presagio de otros que en el futuro lo repetirán hasta el vertigo. No hay cosa que no esté como perdida entre infatigables espejos” (235). The epilogue to the story also refers to the circular and repetitious nature of time: “all knowledge was but remembrance” (223). The narrator sees that the troglodytes have learned to spend centuries accepting the absence of meaning, the truth of suffering and the inherently flawed and illusory nature of the world: “Fácilmente aceptamos la realidad, acaso porque intuímos que nada es real” (232). He writes of the immortals that they dedicate themselves to a life of contemplative meditation: “No hay placer más complejo que el pensamiento y a él nos entregábamos. A veces, un estimulo extraordinario nos restituía al mundo físico. Por ejemplo, aquella mañana, el Viejo goce elemental de la lluvia. Esos lapsos eran rarísimos; todos los Inmortales eran capaces de perfecta quietud; recuerdo a quien jamás he visto de pie: un pájaro anidaba en su pecho” (234). This description resembles the kind of deep meditation that Suzuki describes in Essays in Zen Buddhism, (1949) (which Borges cites in his bibliography for Que es el Budismo): “One day while sitting, I felt as if my mind and my body were separated from each other and lost the chance of getting back together. All the monks about me thought that I was quite dead, but … I was frozen to a state of immovability while absorbed in deep meditation” (256). They also adhere to the middle path between asceticism and indulgence: “El cuerpo era un sumiso animal domestico y le bastaba, cada mes, la limosna de unas horas de sueño, de un poco de agua y de una piltrafa de carne. Que nadie quiera rebajarnos a ascetas” (ibid). As he begins to recognize their qualities and behaviors and assimilate them, he gradually reaches happiness: “Pensé en un mundo sin tiempo, sin memoria” (ibid); “pensé que acaso no había objetos . . .; sino un vertiginoso y continuo juego de impresiones brevísimas” (ibid). This image corresponds directly to his description in Qué es el Budismo of No Self: “Para el budismo,
cada hombre es una ilusión, veritinosamente producida por una serie de hombres momentaneos y solos” (37), and so clearly indicates that Borges was consciously working out Buddhist principles in story form in “El Inmortal.”

The narrator’s awakening can be seen in his joyous acceptance of his own mortality, upon leaving the City of the Immortals: “Al pechar la margen, un árbol espinoso me laceró el dorso de la mano. El inusitado dolor me pareció muy vivo. Incrédulo, silencioso y feliz, contemplé la preciosa formación de una lenta gota de sangre. De nuevo soy mortal, me repetí, de nuevo me parezco a todos los hombres” (236). Borges indeed employs the image of the droplet frequently to refer to the union of man with all men and with the divine. In fact the drop of blood, which awakens the narrator to a joyful awareness of his own mortality and to his connection with the sea of all humanity, gestures back to Sir Edwin Arnold’s poem about the life of Buddha, _The Light of Asia_ and the impactful line that first sparked Borges’s interest in Buddhism at the age of thirteen: “como la gota de rocío en el mar” (24). This line, among the last of the poem, describes the death of the Buddha, after he has attained Nirvana and decided to renounce life.

In _Qué es el Budismo_, Borges narrates the following tale about the Buddha, which appears to correspond to “El Inmortal”:

Recordemos la parábola hindú del viajero que recorre en el verano un desierto y que, al encontrarse con otro, le dice que está muerto de cansancio y de sed y que busca una fuente. El otro le indica el camino. Esa indicación no sacia la sed ni alivia el cansancio; es necesario que el viajero llegue personalmente al manantial. El desierto es el nacimiento y la muerte; el primer viajero es todo ser viviente; el Segundo es el Buddha; el manantial es el Nirvana (74-5).
The many similarities between this parable and the narrative of “El Inmortal”—the passing traveller who indicates the path, the journey through the desert, the expressions of thirst, and the ultimate attainment of Nirvana following a period of suffering and trial—suggest it as a strong possible source for Borges’s story, and that “El Inmortal” is a retelling of the Buddha’s story. That the story is set in ancient Rome serves to illuminate Borges’s assertion that the Buddha’s story is a timeless and universal archetype, applicable to any time and place: “El Buddha es una suerte de archetipo que se manifiesta en el mundo en diversas épocas y con diversas personalidades… el nacimiento y la enseñanza del Buddha se repiten cíclicamente para cada período histórico y Gautama es un eslabón en una cadena infinita que se dilata hacia el pasado y el porvenir” (Qué es el Budismo, 16). At the end of the story the reader discovers that the narrator was Homer and forgot he was Homer, thinking instead that he was a common Roman soldier. Borges ends with a reiteration of the principle of No Self: “Yo he sido Homero; en breve, seré Nadie, como Ulises; en breve sere todos: estaré muerto” (237).

As long as Borges is read, criticisms of his work will continue to be produced in a continuous series of echoes and repetitions, with variations. Efrain Kristal writes that “El Inmortal” is “about Homer who forgets he composed the Iliad and the Odyssey, and confuses his life with that of an uncultured Roman soldier” (161). Ronald Christ, who considers it the culmination of Borges’s art, writes that its main subject is the singleness of the authorial mind (192). Yet if there is a heart to this story, it is in the narrator’s attainment of enlightenment; its climax is the moment when he discovers that he is indeed mortal again. Unless one were to believe that Borges conjures merely for the sake of play, the spiritual references and implications
of the story should not be entirely overlooked for its intellectual bravura, as much as Borges himself may have sought to obscure them.65

The Four Noble Truths as Spiritual Medicine

Both Borges and Cisneros recognize the spiritually healing potential of Buddhism. In *Qué es el Budismo*, Borges writes, “las cuatro verdades—el sufrimiento, el origen del sufrimiento, la aniquilación del sufrimiento y el camino que lleva a la aniquilación del sufrimiento o sea el Óctuple Sendero—aplican al problema cósmico una antigua fórmula médica y corresponderían a la enfermedad, al diagnóstico, a la curación y al tratamiento” (41). Borges writes about the Zen principle of acceptance as a response to suffering in “Buddhism,” applying it to his own material circumstances as follows:

If I happen to have been born in Buenos Aires in 1899, if I happen to be blind, if I happen to be speaking these words to you tonight, all that is a result of my previous life. There is not a single fact of my life that has not been preordained by my previous life. This is what I call karma. Karma, as I have said, becomes a mental structure, a very delicate mental structure.

In every moment of our lives we are weaving and interweaving. What we weave is not only our will, our acts, our half-dreams, our sleep, our half-waking; we are forever weaving our karma. And when we die, another being will be born who is the heir of that karma. Deussen—a disciple of Schopenhauer, who loved Buddhism so much—tells how in India he met a blind beggar and became friends with him. The beggar told him: “If I

65 In his own Foreword that he wrote to Christ’s book, Borges commented, “I am neither a thinker nor a moralist, but simply a man of letters who turns his own perplexities and that respected system of perplexities we call philosophy into the forms of literature. The fact that in one of my stories the man is both the dreamer and the dream [here he refers to the Circular Ruins] does not necessarily mean I am a follower of Berkeley and the Buddha” (ix).
have been born blind, it is because of the sins committed in my previous life; it is just if I am blind. The people [in India] accept suffering” (69)(italics mine).

In “Blindness,” Borges appears to continue to extend Buddhist and Hindu principles to his own personal causes of suffering. He writes about coming to accept blindness and the tranquility this brings him: “blindness is a way of life, a way of life that is not entirely unfortunate…” (Seven Nights 120) He quotes the sixteenth-century Spanish Augustinian friar and lyric poet Fray Luís de León, “I want to live with myself, I want to enjoy the good that I owe to heaven” and continues, “if we accept that in the good of heaven there can also be darkness, then who lives more with themselves? Who can accept themselves more? Who can explore themselves more?” (ibid)(italics mine). Though Borges mentions a Christian heaven, his philosophy here again leans towards the East. In Qué es el Budismo, Borges frequently cites the Upanishads, the sacred Hindu texts that Buddhism also draws from. Consider this injunction, in the Chandogya Upanishad:

The self, indeed, is below; the self is above, the self is in the west; the self is in the south…a man who finds pleasure in the self, who dallies with the self, who mates with the self, and who attains bliss in the self—he becomes completely his own master; he obtains complete freedom of movement in all the worlds. (165-66)

This may appear contradictory to the doctrine of No-Self because of the focus on the individual, yet the Upanishads resolve this by saying that Enlightenment occurs “when the Whole has become one’s very self” (71). Furthermore, it is the self freed from desire whose discovery brings fulfillment:

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66 Borges quotes from the same poem in Qué es el Budismo indicating that, although Fray Luis de León was not a Buddhist, he found a connection with Buddhist thought in these lines:

*Vivir quiero conmigo,*

*Gozar quiero del bien que debo al cielo,*

*A solas, sin testigo,*

*Libre de amor, de cello,*

*De odio, de esperanzas, de recelo.* (52)
The self that is free from evils, free from old age and death, free from sorrow, free from hunger and thirst; the self whose desires and intentions are real—that is the self that you should try to discover, that is the self you should seek to perceive. When someone discovers that self and perceives it, he obtains all the worlds, and all his desires are fulfilled. (171)

In “Blindness,” Borges elaborates a theory of art on how to transform suffering into something eternal, like a poem:

A writer, or any man, must believe that whatever happens to him is an instrument; everything has been given for an end. This is even stronger in the case of the artist. Everything that happens, including humiliations, embarrassments, misfortunes, all has been given like clay, like material for one’s art. One must accept it. For this reason I speak in a poem of the ancient food of heroes: humiliation, unhappiness, discord. Those things are given to us to transform, so that we may make from the miserable circumstances of our lives things that are eternal, or aspire to be so. (121)

Here Borges elaborates an aesthetic spirituality for which he draws on Buddhist principles of suffering, acceptance, and transformation or enlightenment. The job of the artist in his formation is the process of turning the materials of suffering into art, as the narrator in “El Inmortal” finds the basis for joy in acceptance of mortality and no longer seeks happiness outside of himself. In “Blindness” Borges universalizes Buddhist principles on the Four Noble Truths—suffering, the cessation of suffering, and the path to Enlightenment—and bends them to his own personal aesthetic philosophy. This philosophy combines deeply personal lived experience with a doctrine

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67 This quest for contentment in the self can also be found in Cisneros: consider her introduction to “La Casa que Canta”: “Now at fifty-nine I feel quite content and whole just as I am. I love writing, I live alone—if one can call five dogs alone—and I am perfectly at ease as a pond of water. I desire nothing” (A House of My Own 112).
that was utterly foreign to him, and that satisfied his thirst for new and surprising sources of knowledge, his lifelong quest for contact with other worlds.

Cisneros appears to take up a very similar attitude toward suffering in her Afterword to *Have you Seen Marie?* (2012), an illustrated picture book she wrote while grieving in the wake of her mother’s death, in which the search for her friend’s cat becomes a cathartic experience of loss, grief, and ultimately connection with her community in San Antonio, her natural surroundings, and her mother’s spirit. Discussing the moment when, searching for her friend’s cat, she was lifted from grief and realized she had stumbled on the story for *Have you Seen Marie?* Cisneros comments, in a 2012 interview with Richard Wolinsky:

> The experience taught me to be present in the real Buddhist sense of paying attention to the moment. Once I woke up to what was going on around me, looking at a little girl who picked up the flier, just being astonished by how people reacted, I started thinking, “There’s a story here. Wake up. Start paying attention to what people are telling you. Look at the trees and flowers.”

In the same interview, she echoes Borges in “Blindness” about writing as a means of transforming darkness to light: “Once you can open yourself to joy, you feel as if you’ve transformed your sadness into illumination, which is really all that art is. All we want to do is transform the negative emotions into light. We want to compost them into light.” Here we can see Cisneros drawing on Borges and Buddhism as a way of conceiving her life and her art in a spiritual dimension.

*Have you Seen Marie?* is Cisneros’s retelling of the Buddha legend, set in contemporary San Antonio and told from a female, Mexicana-Americana perspective, wedded with Hans Christian Anderson’s fairy tale “The Snow Queen,” and also incorporating the principle of transmigration in which people, their spirits (in this case) or their karma (according to Borges’s
formulation) take on different incarnations, including natural forms.\textsuperscript{68} (For more on Borges’s elaboration of \textit{transmigración} see Section 3 above). The story, written for adults who are suffering the loss of a parent, illustrates Cisneros’s use of the theory of art, transforming darkness to light, that Borges outlines in “Blindness” as well as his playfulness in combining myth, philosophy, and dream elements, to create a very different kind of book than anything the master would have ever imagined writing. Just as Borges mixes Buddhist doctrine with other philosophical and geographic contexts, along with his own invention, in stories such as “El Inmortal,” Cisneros here mixes Buddhist philosophies with Anderson’s animistic landscape and with his themes of eternal life and redemption through love. In “The Snow Queen,” a young girl named Gerda loses her best friend Kay when he is captured by the Snow Queen, who enchants him and takes him to her Lapland palace (a metaphor for death). Though everyone else gives up hope for his return, Gerda goes off in search for him, and finds friends both human, animal and among the natural elements to council her and guide her on her journey to bring him back from his frozen kingdom. She discusses his death first with the sunshine and the sparrows, who tell her he still lives. Then she goes to the river that flows near their school to ask the river about his whereabouts. The river carries her off on her journey to find Kay, and as she ventures out, the sparrows sing to her to comfort her because she is very afraid, “Here we are! Here we are!” (\textit{The Snow Queen} 8) Gerda makes many stops on her journey, always aided by humans and animal friends whom she consults along the way, until she finally finds Kay. Her warm tears thaw his frozen heart, upon which the Snow Queen’s spell over him is broken, and together they return home. One of the key motifs of the story is that love can release, save and free the soul, and bring eternal life or immortality.

\textsuperscript{68} “The Snow Queen” was first published in 1844, in \textit{New Fairy Tales, First Volume, Second Collection}. (Danish: \textit{Nye Eventyr. Første Bind. Anden Samling}).
In *Have You Seen Marie?* the narrator, like a Borges character who travels and learns, sits by the river that runs behind her house in San Antonio during her own journey to find her friend’s missing cat, a journey which has taken her to visit and meet neighbors old and young, human, feline, canine and avian, many of whom help her along the way with words of comfort, clues, food or water. She asks the river, who addresses her tears, answering with a Buddhist metaphor about the drop of water that joins the sea:

Don’t you cry, *mamas*. I will take your tears and carry them to the Texas coast where they’ll mix with the salty tears of the Gulf of Mexico, where they will swirl with the waters of the Caribbean…the Aegean of Homer’s legend, the mighty Amazon, and the wise Nile…along the muddy Mekong and the sleepy Ganges . . . waters washing away the dead, and waters bringing new life, the salty and the sweet, mixing with everything, everything, everything, everything. (73)

Borges gestures towards this same principle of oneness with the universe at death through the metaphor of a sea filled with individual drops of water in *Qué es el Budismo*: “Después de la muerte, el alma liberada es, a semejanza de Dios, pura conciencia, pero no se confunde con Dios, que es infinito. Ésta es la doctrina de Ramanuja; otros afirman que las almas individuales se pierden en la divinidad, como la gota de rocío en el mar” (24). Cisneros’s unique contribution in *Have you Seen Marie?* is to wed Eastern philosophy with the fable of the Snow Queen, in which Gerda’s tears of love bring Kay back to the world of the living. Here, the narrator’s tears slip into the river and help lead to the realization that her mother’s soul is not lost; it has just united with everything. After raising her head from the river, the narrator sits under a tree, in tribute to the story of the Buddha.69 It is a huge ancient Texas cypress that grows by the river, an outsized

69 In a 2012 interview with Nina Terrero, Cisneros stated about this scene, “I thought about the moment when Buddha is enlightened by the river and of Hans Christian Anderson’s Snow Queen; all those beautiful stories that include rivers and animals. I knew in finding my own resolution that the river would be instrumental in finding transformation from darkness to light – and so the river would speak. And I know it will sound funny, but the actual
Texas version of the Buddha’s bodhi tree. She meditates: “when the swirling inside me grew still, I heard the voices inside my heart” (82). And then she hears her mother in all the elements surrounding her: the wind, the trees, the clouds, the stars and the moon all say, “Here I am, mijita,” like a Mexican American version of the sparrows in “The Snow Queen.” This moment, when the narrator feels the unity of her mother’s spirit with everything, with all the natural elements, is the moment of enlightenment in the story.  

While the narrator of Have you Seen Marie? achieves acceptance of (her mother’s) mortality, a Buddhist concept, through Buddhist-style meditation under a great tree, the content of her revelation actually incorporates a number of different belief systems, mirroring the river’s revelation that the narrator is connected with all of the cultures of the world. Have you Seen Marie? also connects with a pre-Hispanic Mexican view of death that views life and death as part of a broader cycle of existence, wedded with the rhythms of nature. In Mexican Día de los Muertos altars, the four elements of nature—earth, water, wind and fire—are typically represented, to illustrate this connection between human death and the elements of the earth. The story also illustrates a popular Mexican religious view of ancestors as figures whose spirit remains accessible to their living loved ones, converting into benevolent ghosts who comfort and inspire the living. Cisneros describes this view of death in “Vivan los Muertos,” (A House of My Own) in which a friend instructs her to call upon her grandfather’s spirit when she is afraid: “He’s a spirit. Next time you have a bad dream call your abuelito. Whenever you’re afraid, just call him. He’ll protect you” (72). Similarly, Cisneros’s mother’s spirit comes back to comfort

voice is modeled after the lovely Tejana waitresses at Taco Haven, a local restaurant here. The waitresses are very dulce and have a very sweet way of addressing you. You never know where inspiration will come from and I wouldn’t have imagined that the river would find its voice through these experiences.”

70 In “Acumal” (A House of My Own), a simple narrative about a family trip to Mexico, Cisneros narrates another moment when she felt a similar sense of enlightenment and connection with the universe. Again it takes place in the context of water, this time she is floating in the Atlantic near Tulúm: “I felt something that has come and gone in my life at odd times without my asking. A sense of detaching from myself, of sliding out of myself and connecting with everything in the universe. Of being empty so I could fill up with everything” (340).
her, transformed into the voices of the birds, descending from the clouds and the stars. This vision weds the popular Catholic belief in the abiding soul of the dead loved one with the Buddhist principle of transmigration in which her mother transforms into elements of nature. Above all is a spiritual view of union of the individual with nature and the divine. Cisneros discusses this belief in the interview with Wolinsky as follows: “I’ve come full circle finding God in clouds, flowers, and trees. To me, the Virgen de Guadalupe is just a vessel for me to recognize my own God within myself.”

Discussing the writing of *Have you Seen Marie?*, Cisneros elaborates her own aesthetic theory based on Buddhist principles of reincarnation according to which the self dies and is reborn: “In México when someone you love dies…it’s an opportunity to be reborn…I knew as I was writing this story that it was helping to bring me back to myself. It’s essential to create when the spirit is dying” (93). This theory articulates a vision of herself as an artist who must experience the whole cycle of human emotions in order to create. According to this theory, while builds on and imaginatively extends Borges’s thoughts on suffering and transformation in “Blindness,” artistic production itself thrives on the pain, symbolic death and rebirth that takes place within the author during times of grieving and pain, which is followed by reemergence as a symbolic new self, back into new life.

Cisneros tells a similar tale of personal rebirth in “A Tango for Astor,” delivered at a lecture in 2005 and included in *A House of My Own*. This time she weds Christian and Buddhist symbolism to describe a time when she used the pain of rejection to flourish into a mature writer. The story takes place in 1988, when she was thirty-three, (the age of Christ at his death) which she describes as “the year of my resurrection” after almost killing herself from a broken heart over a failed love affair. That year, she was reluctantly teaching freshman composition at Chico State. She narrates her meeting one of her great idols, the experimental Argentine tango musician
Astor Piazzola, whom she drove to see at a concert in San Francisco at the Great American Music Hall. After an embarrassing encounter in which all the eloquent lines she planned to deliver to him escape her, she leaves feeling foolish. Yet then “I put my head down to write…And when I raised my head, I had a new book of poetry…I put my head down again, and again when I raised it, another book, and again my body altered, so that I was no longer myself, but a woman staring at a woman from the other side of the water” (89). This concept of the new woman across the water again bears reference to Borges’s citation of Heraclitus: that one can never cross the same river twice because it’s never the same river and it’s never the same self.

“Bien Pretty” is the last story in Woman Hollering Creek (1991) and it gestures towards the increasingly spiritual direction of Cisneros’s career. The end of the story also draws on a combination of Buddhism and Borgesian allusion, specifically to the Heraclitian dictum that nature is in constant flux: “And every bird in the universe chittering, jabbering, clucking, chirruping, squawking, gurgling, going crazy because God-bless-it another day has ended, as if it never had yesterday and never will again tomorrow. Just because it’s today, today. With no thought of the future or the past. Today. Hurray! Hurray!” (165) This ending demonstrates the kind of ecstatic writing that in Cisneros is most frequently accompanied by a description of an all-one union with the divine, a present-moment awareness combined with a Buddhist sense of acceptance for the world as it is. Cisneros has written “the thing about Buddhism is that it takes you back to your family and your religious roots, so it can take you back to Catholicism. So I’m a Buddhalupista” (interview with Tokarczyk). Here, at the end of a story in which the narrator has been filled with dissatisfaction: with her job, with her move to San Antonio, with her unfaithful ex-boyfriend and doomed new romance, the narrator discovers present moment happiness, a sudden awakening that allows her to find joy exactly where she is. Part of this joy comes from a new understanding of her identity as a Mexican American woman living in San
Antonio: throughout the story, narrator Lupe has moved toward embracing the working-class Mexican culture of her adopted city, a place she initially dreaded moving to, yet which aids her in coming to a new less conflicted relationship with her own Mexicandia. As Héctor Calderón writes:

    [A]ll along Lupe was becoming a member of the Mexican community of San Antonio . . .

Lupe no longer frequented the cafés, galleries, and art houses of her San Francisco days…At story’s end, she has shed her bohemian identity for her more bilingual and bicultural working-class surroundings. During Lupe’s affair with Flavio, she frequented Woolworth’s, Kwik Wash, Mi Tierra Bakery, Torres Taco Haven, El Mirador restaurant, Casa Preciado Religious Articles, Centeno’s Mexican Supermarket, dance clubs such as Club Fandango, Salas’s Party House, and El Taconazo Lounge. (210)

She even begins to love the local wildlife, seeing the urracas (grackles, though she prefers the Spanish word) for their beauty rather than deploring the mess they leave behind, as others do:

    “Urracas closer to earth, starlings higher up because they’re smaller. Every day. Every sunset. And no one noticing except to look at the ground and say, ‘Who’s gonna clean up this shit!’”

(165) Another part of the joy she finds is coming to accept herself as a single woman after Flavio abandons her, rather than depending on a man for her identity: as Cisneros writes, echoing Borges on the duality of the artist self, “everywhere I go it’s me and me. Half of me living my life, the other half watching me live it” (163). This attitude, of finding the materials for enlightenment in the midst of messy emotions, amidst the mundane and sometimes aversive circumstances of every day life, resonates with the words of Pema Chödrön, whom Cisneros has cited as one of her spiritual teachers: “We already have everything we need…We are one blink of the eye from being fully awake” (3). According to Chödrön,
The basic message of the lojong (mind-training) teachings is that if it’s painful, you can learn to hold your seat and move closer to that pain. Reverse the usual pattern, which is to split, to escape. Go against the grain and hold your seat. Lojong introduces a different attitude toward unwanted stuff: if it’s painful, you become willing not just to endure it but also to let it awaken your heart and soften you. You learn to embrace it… (8)

Even Cisneros’s description of the sky in this passage resonates with a Buddhist perspective: “sky wide as an ocean, shark-belly gray for days at a time, then all at once a blue so tender you can’t remember how only months before the heat split you open like a pecan shell, you can’t remember anything anymore” (164). The ocean-gray sky here refers back to her description of San Francisco’s Ocean Beach, where she went to meditate when she was depressed; although upon her initial move to San Antonio she had found nothing to replace it, here she indicates that the Texas sky itself has become the subject of her meditation, reminding her that she is connected with everything. The description of being split open refers to the pain of heartbreak; the tender blue the tenderness of her pain where she softens to it and allows it to transform her. According to Chödrön, when something touches our soft spot, and we allow ourselves to open to that sense of tenderness, if we let things fall apart, with an open heart, then we can grow (8).

Thus this Eastward turn ironically brings Lupe Arredondo home; through the prism of Eastern thought she finds a deeper acceptance of her herself, her place, and her roots: as Calderón writes, “she has come away with an understanding of herself as a woman and artist, with feet now firmly planted in Mexican American south Texas” (210). Calderón has aptly titled his reading of “Bien Pretty,” “The Artist at Home/La Peregrina en su Casa.”

The last piece in A House of My Own tells a similar tale of enlightenment, wedded with creative inspiration; in this one, stories rather than drops of water find unity with the universe. In this piece, titled “Pilón: Infinito,” Cisneros remembers feeling dissatisfied and overburdened in
San Antonio, not knowing how she could write, suffering, until she remembered to listen to her dreams. And in her dream

…[S]he saw all around her were stories, some that the neighbor parking his car in his driveway gave her, one that was brought to her by the cleaning lady, one that her gardener plucked…To think! They had been whirling and flying all about her all along, and they were free for the taking. You only had to sit still, and down from the skies they fluttered and landed in your hair. Stories without beginning or end, connecting everything little and large, blazing from the center of the universe into *el infinito* called the great out there. (374)

And so we arrive at Cisneros now, deeply influenced by Eastern philosophy, having come to terms with her demons and inspired by a sense of connection with the universe and with the natural elements, and writing Buddhist-inspired Mexican fairy tales that draw from her dreams and from the voices that surround her, humbly accented Spanish and English, set squarely in the Americas. And we find her now in what she refers to as her ‘sanctuary,’ in her spiritual home south of the border where she may be free to dream and to write a new chapter in her career; in 2014 she returned to her maternal homeland of Guanajuato, a land where, as she says, again paying homage to Borges’s conception of time, “there isn’t a separation between the dead and the living, the past and the present. It’s *circular* time, not linear time” (interview with *Toledo Blade*) (*italics mine*).
CONCLUSION

Hacia el Norte y el Sur

“El caso equivaldría al de un hombre que da la vuelta al mundo: no dice que el punto de partida y el punto de llegada son dos lugares diferentes pero muy parecidos; dice que son el mismo lugar.”

Jorge Luis Borges, “Tiempo circular”

“Do not call it fixity, where past and future are gathered… there is only the dance.”

T.S. Eliot, “Burnt Norton”

The dance between Cisneros and Borges ends on the border, where it began. Through the comparison between the two authors, borders between the sexes, between America Latina and Latin America, between North and South, have disappeared like lines in the sand beneath the swiftly moving feet of two adept tangueros.

This work both situates Borges in his time and place, twentieth-century Argentina, and lifts him from this context. As Borges stated in his 1981 interview with Seamus Heaney and Richard Kearney, he is an international writer—of mixed descent, well travelled—who lives in Buenos Aires: “I myself am descended from Portuguese, Spanish, Jewish and English ancestors. And the English, as Lord Tennyson reminds us, are themselves a mixture of many races: ‘Saxon and Celt and Dane are we.’ There is no such thing as a racial or national purity” (Heaney and Kearney). He points out that his ancestors, like the vast majority of inhabitants of the Americas, came from many different races and nations. This multi-nationalism, his sojourns abroad and his immersion in different languages, above all his Spanish and English bilingualism, help him to play with language in unique ways, and to access and draw from other cultures. In “Kafka y sus precursores,” Borges writes that each author creates his precursors, and that they change because of him. For his precursors, Borges looked primarily to Europe, to the classics, and to English speaking writers. He refused to be categorized solely as a Latin American writer. While he was
engaged in the national literary project of his time to define Argentine national identity, his writing was also symbolic and timeless. Thus “La historia del guerrero y de la cautiva” links a founding Argentine myth, of the captive white woman on the plains, with the story of a Roman warrior. Simultaneously, it questions the entire assumptions of the myth, by portraying a captive who does not desire to return to civilization. At the same time, he was experimenting with foregrounding the fictional artifice of his work, providing an important basis for the work of Post-Structuralist thinkers such as Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, and Roland Barthes. As Roberto Gonzalo Echevarría writes, “Borges, without abandoning his appreciation of Argentine traditions, was producing stories that reached to the essence of writing itself” (97). Comparative literary studies are often employed to link post-colonial literatures with their European influences. However, Latin American literature may also be taken as a starting point in itself from which to consider other world literatures. Though Borges’s work is highly allusive, it also stands on its own, as the work of a brilliant philosophical and creative mind. Borges thus deserves to be considered as one of the generative sources of contemporary literature.

Just as Borges became more than just an Argentine national writer, this dissertation also argues that there is more to Cisneros than being merely a Chicana feminist writer. It lifts her out of the context generally assigned to her in literary studies, where Chicano writing is regarded as an ethnic branch of U.S. literature, like Asian American or African American literature. These fields are considered in isolation, both from their diasporic contexts and from mainstream North American literature produced by white authors. They are most often compared simply with each other, which promotes sociological and ethnographic readings but denies their participation in larger literary discussions. In this dissertation, her engagement with Latin American literature, with philosophy and Eastern thought, and with the project of writing Mexico City and other big
cities of the Mexican diaspora (particularly Chicago and San Antonio) come to the foreground and reveal new and underexplored sides of her literary ambition.

Due to this climate of marginalization, both literary and socio-political, Cisneros today pertains to a small but vocal group of American Mexican writers and intellectuals who are participating in a reverse migration back to Mexico, others include Héctor Calderón, Francisco Goldman and Daniel Hernández. The United States has created an increasingly inhospitable climate for its undocumented immigrants in recent years. In this context of disavowal and discrimination, it is unsurprising that many U.S. writers of Mexican descent find Mexico, the country their parents and grandparents fled, more welcoming than the country where they were born. In addition to hostile immigration laws as well the U.S.’s economic downturn since the Great Recession, family reunification is another big reason for this shift. As they travel between the two countries, North and South, they also redraw lines in the literary sand. Over the decades, Cisneros has gradually positioned herself closer and closer to the US-Mexico border, until she finally permanently relocated to Mexico in 2015. Gradually, she has become less Mexican American and more Mexican, less English and more Spanish, syntactically, in her work. Though she continues to write in English, increasingly her writing has come to mimic Spanish grammatical structures, so that the reader knows they are hearing someone speaking Spanish. She has also begun to incorporate more Spanish words that resist translation into English. She is becoming, by choice and inclination, more and more a Latin American writer. Her history, and her present, like many Mexican immigrants, involve a constant process of crossing and re-

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71 This literary migration is part of a larger trend in immigration patterns. According to the Pew Research Center, from 2009-2014, the United States experienced a net loss of 140,000 Mexican immigrants; during this time “more Mexican immigrants have returned to Mexico from the U.S. than have migrated here” (Gonzalez-Barrera, “More Mexicans Leaving than Coming to the U.S.”)

72 As the Costa Rican-born Mexican singer Chavela Vargas, one of Cisneros’s heroines, is frequently quoted as saying, “¡Los mexicanos nacemos donde nos da la rechingada gana!”
crossing the border, contributing to a continuous cycle of circulation of ideas and influences, from south to north and back again.

Like Borges, Cisneros also lifted herself out of her narrow literary context to produce literature that dialogues on an international level. Since early in her career, Cisneros has consciously positioned herself as a descendent of a Spanish language literary tradition. Besides Borges, she speaks of her contemporaries Argentine author Manuel Puig and Uruguayan Eduardo Galeano and twentieth-century Mexican writers, Elena Poniatowska, Carlos Fuentes, and Rosario Castellanos as well as the seventeenth-century Mexican nun Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz; on the other side of the Atlantic she pays grateful tribute to the Catalán writer Mercé Rodoreda and looks as far back as the Mozarabic Spanish poet Ibn Hazm. As a young woman, the first time she received a national writing award she decided to travel the world. Too scared at that time to travel in Latin America alone, she decamped to an island in Greece, and later lived in Sarajevo before the Yugoslavian War. Her idea of being a writer was to discover the world, like men did; she came back, like she had after her childhood journeys to Mexico, different. She was introduced to foreign world philosophies (her friend from Sarajevo, Jasna, introduced her to the writings of Thich Nhat Hanh, which later spurred her conversion to Buddhism). She began to think of herself as a citizen of the world, and to write like one. She was no longer just a poor Mexican American girl, in a house that would never get clean, living in a marginal neighborhood in Chicago. And she no longer wrote like one. Though Woman Hollering Creek deeply celebrates Mexican American culture, expertly mining its idiosyncrasies, it reaches the essence of art, meanwhile also traversing gender studies, philosophy, and psychological inquiry.

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73 Travel is a central theme for Sandra Cisneros, beginning in her early childhood when her Mexican father would pack up her family into a van and drive them south to Mexico City every summer. When they drove back up north to Chicago, to start school again in the fall, they were different, and they saw their difference. In a 2016 interview with Patrick Fort, she stated, “I think it was a great gift our father gave us, seeing the birthplace of our ancestors, and in return we saw the United States with new eyes. We saw ourselves with new eyes” (Fort, “Sandra Cisneros on Different Cultures”).
Socially-oriented and deeply rooted in its society, in a way that feels horizontal rather than vertical, her writing presents a personal and symbolic portrait of Mexican American life that also speaks to the relationship between art and daily life.

As Sandra Cisneros, quoting Borges, who was in turn citing T.S. Eliot, wrote in her blog in April 2011, “Each reading of a book, each rereading, each memory of that reading, reinvents the text.” Although Borges lived mostly through his library, and had a reputation for conservatism and reticence to engage in political issues, reading him backward through a liberal contemporary Chicana writer who was very influenced by his writing allows new possibilities to emerge from his work; her reading of Borges reinvents him for a new audience. In her richly-textured street portraits of humble neighborhoods in Mexico City can be seen something of his interest in *las orillas* de Buenos Aires, his investigations of the tangos and *cuchilleros* that early in his career provided him with a symbol of Buenos Aires. Because she openly declared herself a Buddhist, and linked Buddhist thought in her writing to quotes from Borges—even quotes from his essays, such as “Poetry” that do not explicitly mention Buddhism—the full extent of Eastern philosophy in his writing, and its profundity to his worldview, becomes clear. Because she wrote openly about embracing her masculine side, because she and other feminist writers and activists promoted a whole new body of feminist scholarship in the second half of the twentieth century, we can now look back to his writing and find hints of his feminine side, although that was not something he addressed in interviews; it was too outré for his time, and for his character, which was above all reserved. But the fiction tells a different story, one that readers may now be ready to encounter.

Along with Woolf, another important precursor for both Borges and Cisneros is T.S. Eliot (1888-1965), an American ex-patriot in England who became an English citizen, who, like Cisneros and Borges, experienced immigration and exile, who crossed and wrote across borders,
with the whole of the tradition he read. He was a writer who refused to be limited by notions of contemporary writing or by a North American literary tradition, just as Borges (1899-1986) conceived of himself as a writer who defied limitation in his reading and writing by the borders of Argentina, and as travel between countries, continents, languages and literary traditions have defined and enriched the writing of Cisneros (1954- ). Eliot’s Eastern philosophy-steeped Modernism and his theories of reader-response and reception, or the transformative potential of a text in the reader’s imagination, find reflection in the works of both Borges and Cisneros. A large part of a writer’s job, he asserts, is to read older texts and reinvent them, for “time past and time future…point to one end, which is always the present” (“Burnt Norton”). In “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” Eliot writes, “the most individual parts of [a writer’s] work may be those in which the dead poets, his [or her] ancestors, assert their immortality the most vigorously” (48). “Tradition,” he writes,

…cannot be inherited, and if you want it you must obtain it by great labor…It involves the historical sense…[which] compels a man [or woman] to write not merely with his [or her] own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his [or her] own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order. This historical sense, which is a sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal and of the timeless and of the temporal together, is what makes a writer traditional. It is at the same time what makes a writer most acutely conscious of his [or her] place in time, of his [or her] contemporaneity. (The Sacred Wood 49)

Although Cisneros writes in a simple style, conversational and intimate with the reader, (as Borges wrote so approvingly of Whitman) that style has been gained through the great labor of a systematic study of the writings of her chosen precursors. Her models are many; however
Cisneros has referred to no other literary ancestor as consistently and frequently throughout her career as Jorge Luis Borges. By linking Borges with her desire to be a writer who crosses borders—of form as well as national and geographic ones—she has consciously shaped him through her reading, reinventing him and transposing him to the U.S.-Mexico border (in this historic, conflicted and transitional moment in the history of U.S.-Mexico relations) which comprises her own literary territory. In doing so, she has claimed Borges as her tradition; his influence shines throughout her work, illuminating even its most contemporary aspects. In turn, she illuminates him through her readings, calling to attention and commenting upon his works for her audience as she draws upon and reanimates his literary spirit. Though separated by place and time, like the Roman warrior Droctolft and the late nineteenth-century English woman who found a home among the *ranqueles* on the Argentine pampas, both of whom defied their social conditioning to follow a secret inner affinity, “acaso las historias que he referido son una sola historia. El anverso y el reverso de esta moneda son, para dios, iguales” (“La historia del guerrero y de la cautiva,” *Cuentos completos* 258).
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