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Author
Priewe, Marc

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Making a Home away from Home: Traveling Diasporas in María Escandón's *Esperanza's Box of Saints*

Marc Priewe

ABSTRACT

The novel *Esperanza's Box of Saints* (1999) exemplifies the representation and production of transcultural practices in the border zone between Southern California and Northern Mexico. It fictionalizes human and cultural mobility in "transnational social spaces" by employing themes and motifs often associated with diasporic narratives: travel, transculturation, memory, home. This essay analyzes the narrative construction of real and imagined diasporas that span across two nation-states, physically and culturally. Escandón's text can be read as a departure from earlier Chicana feminist and Mexican immigrant novels because it suggests alternative cultural formations, for women and men, in transnational circuits between Mexico and the United States.

One of the main constituents of everyday life and culture today is the growing mobility of capital, goods, people, and images across nation-state borders. This is especially the case for the urban border region that connects Southern California and Northern Mexico, where an increase in migration and border crossings during the last twenty years has led to the development and burgeoning of "transnational social spaces." These spaces owe their existence to new forms of migration, communication technologies, and cheap air fair, which have enabled an increasing number of people to remain in relatively stable contact with social communities that span more than one geographical location. As a number of researchers have shown, having one foot in Mexican, the other in U.S. society, is not necessarily a novel occurrence but is unprecedented in degree and, therefore, has salient consequences for cultural practices on both sides of the border (cf. Pries; Goldring; Glick Schiller et al.).

When studying cultural practices and artifacts in the transnational social spaces of Southern California, research on "diaspora" and "diasporic narratives" provides a useful reference point. The notion of "diaspora" facilitates a critical reading of cultural productions not only in terms of departure from one society or culture and arrival in another, but rather as articulations of multiple crossings and "dwelling-in-travel" (Clifford 36) between a plurality of physical and cultural locations. At first sight, the traditional definition of diaspora seems inapplicable to Chicana/os and Mexicans living in the United States: they are not dispersed across different regions of the world, many claim they live in, and not away from, their homeland (Aztlán), while others have assimilated to U.S. society and maintain little or no attachment to Mexico. A closer look reveals that a distinct history of diasporic experiences and consciousness—synthesized by the notion of *México de afuera* (Mexico abroad)—has had a profound influence on Mexican-American

cultural representations in the past and present (cf. Monroy). Another reason for choosing the notion of diaspora for analyzing Chicana/o cultural formations is that today, "Mexican" communities that maintain transnational economic, social, political, and cultural connections with their homeland can be found in almost every major U.S. city, not only in the Southwest, but also increasingly in other regions of the country.[1]

In order to counter the perceived loss of home and nation in the Mexican diaspora in the United States, many cultural articulations by Chicana/os and Mexicans residing in the U.S. attempt to resuscitate an "imaginary homeland" (Rushdie) through personal and collective memory. Although returning to Mexico marks both an important leitmotif in many Chicana/o literary and cultural texts, physical return often takes a backseat to a cultural re-turn: "a repeated turning to the concept and/or the reality of the homeland and other diasporan kin through memory, written and visual texts, travel, gifts and assistance" (Tölölyan 14-15). Engaging in what Benedict Anderson has identified as "long-distance nationalism," a number of Chicana/o narratives, e.g., films, novels, plays, and performances represent an ideological and cultural allegiance with, as well as nostalgia for, the homeland that often surpasses nationalist sentiments of their compatriots in Mexico. By doing so, these narratives tend to reverse the waning yearning for the national homeland in the diaspora either by claiming *mexicanidad* as a possibility for redemption or by deploying Aztlán as a symbol of territorial reclamation and ancestral memory.

By and large, however, diasporic Chicana/o cultural representations, especially those emanating from the urban border zone between Northern Mexico and Southern California, undermine singular allegiances by their dual orientation and overlapping loyalties to more than one national imaginary. As citizens of either Mexico or the United States, many Chicana/os and U.S. Mexicans, both in fact and fiction, consider themselves as members of transnational cultural and political communities that maintain pluri-local affiliations and a "multi-locational imagination generated by a system with many centres but no longer any specific national cultural belonging [...]" (Bromley 14). This facilitates the emergence of despatialized communities that exist first and foremost in the narratives and symbols of those who live in physical and cultural transit between two (or more) national sites. Entrance to this community is not so much based on political but rather on cultural citizenship (cf. Rosaldo 37). Even though everyday practices and lives are still grounded in a specific place, what is significant is that cultural experiences in, and representations of, the Chicana/o-*mexicana/o* diaspora are often marked by multiple and, at times, paradox national attachments and detachments.

In general, then, Chicana/o diasporic discourses and aesthetics are characterized by countervailing tendencies between emplacement and displacement, between (neo)nationalism and transnationalism. As James Clifford suggests, "diaspora discourse articulates, or bends together, both *roots* and *routes* to construct

[1] Rouse's sociological study on transnational social spaces and cultural relations in California is, to my knowledge, the first publication on the contemporary Mexican diaspora in California. See also, Gutiérrez 221-35.

[...] forms of community consciousness and solidarity that maintain identifications outside the national time/space in order to live inside, with a difference" (251). By the same token, diasporic Chicana/o cultural representations often mediate between destabilization and reaffirmation of nationalist discourses and thus engage in and produce dynamic contact zones between and within cultures (Kaplan 135).[2] By thematizing mobility, dis/location, and deterritorialization, Chicana/o diasporic narratives accentuate the importance of identifying a dynamic space of cultural, social, and political agency (Brah 208; Clifford 37, 247).

Furthermore, transnational Chicana/o diasporic narratives focus on the reconceptualization of home and locality by problematizing the "here" and "there" of lived experiences, identity formations, and cultural representations, by articulating what Roger Bromley calls a "condition of belonging simultaneously, mentally, psychologically and experientially, to a diversity of cultures" (7). As the following analysis hopes to reveal, María Amparo Escandón's novel *Esperanza's Box of Saints* (1999) exemplifies a transnational diasporic narrative by representing "home" neither as Aztlán nor as a specific locality in Mexico or the U.S. but instead as a cultural *transnation* that emerges by negotiating various norms, values, and aesthetics from multiple locations. The novel thematizes transplanted cultures by depicting individuals and collectives that are culturally and linguistically distanced from their countries of origin and destination and for whom the meaning of these terms becomes increasingly blurred.

Cultural Mobility: Dwelling and Traveling in the Mexican Diaspora

Esperanza's Box of Saints depicts the plight of an innocent, attractive, thirty-something Mexican woman, whose search for her daughter turns into a picaresque journey of self-discovery and cultural learning in the Mexican diaspora. After the local doctor informs the protagonist, Esperanza (Hope), that her daughter has died of a rare disease, the bereaved mother witnesses an apparition of San Judas Tadeo, the Mexican patron of desperate cases and lost causes. After the saint's appearance on the hardened grease of her dirty oven window, Esperanza is convinced that her daughter Blanca is still alive, must have been abducted, and is being kept as a child prostitute. Hence she travels from Tlacotalpan, her hometown in Mexico, to the seedy fringes of Tijuana and then to Los Angeles, where she searches local brothels and encounters a number of odd border zone characters. At the end of Esperanza's "veritable quest of quixotic proportions" (Hoffman 163), the heroine accepts the death of her daughter and decides to leave her Mexican hometown for a life with her newfound love, a professional wrestler, in Los Angeles. At the close of the novel, the protagonist's crisis of faith, caused by the

[2] A similar argument is postulated by Bahri and Vasudeva, who state: "Diasporic communities find themselves exemplifying multiple realities: reaffirming the nation of origin, marking the erosion of the nation-state, or responding to a new global order—or sometimes engaging in all three" (14). Cf. Werbner 5.

death of her daughter and by ambiguous clues from her saint, is resolved by creating a transcultural sense of self in and through travel.

Narrated alternately in third and first person (confessions, diary entries, letters, and prayers), Escandón's narrative blend of magic realism and romanticism offers insights into the ontology of sin and the nature of faith, but above all, the performance of identities in transnational circuits of mobility. By fictionalizing border-spanning spaces and the cultural practices they generate, Escandón's text interprets and extends Gloria Anzaldúa's notion of a "new mestiza consciousness." According to the Chicana feminist critic, life in the borderlands enables, if not necessitates, a wide and fluid range of cultural and linguistic crossings, which replace dualistic thinking and subject formations with inherently processual, relational, and performative identities (Anzaldúa 79). *Esperanza's Box of Saints* both appropriates and transgresses Anzaldúa's configuration of an inclusive Chicana identity by presenting a post-Chicanisma version of female consciousness in transnational settings.

The novel begins with a number of scenes depicting a sedentary life. In the beginning, the protagonist is firmly settled in the economic, cultural, and religious community in Tlacotalpan, where she works at a hardware store, lives as a devoted Catholic, and maintains close, though not unproblematic, relations to her friends and relatives.[3] Her refusal to cook traditional Mexican food—she knowingly spoils a recipe passed down from her mother—and to keep her kitchen spotlessly clean indicates her beginning rejection of the cultural stereotype of women as homemakers, thus anticipating her estrangement from Mexican culture even before she embarks on her journey to *el norte*.

After a lead she receives from a potential customer at the local brothel, Esperanza decides to travel to Tijuana to search for her daughter. The narrator describes a border town marked by mobility, where people are constantly in transit and where different flows of cultures merge with ostensible ease: "Where else can you find a bilingual Santa Claus? Or a Chinese restaurant that serves sweet and sour pork tacos?" (Escandón 91). Arriving in Tijuana, Esperanza is equipped with a suitcase and a cardboard box which includes an assortment of saint statues and prayer cards that testify to her "traveling faith." By its depiction of Esperanza's mobile spirituality, the novel ties in with cultural practices of many migrants for whom religion constitutes "baggage" that is taken along, undergoes transformation, and often serves as a means of diasporic connection to the community of origin. Moving from brothel to brothel, the protagonist begins "to set up a tiny altar on the night table" (Escandón 98); throughout the novel, the altar provides her with a sense of safety and home. As she travels to other locations, the altar grows in size, indicating her desire for homeliness and her attempt to counter her dwindling faith in Catholicism: the more she feels she is sinning by working in brothels,

[3] Tlacotalpan is located in the eastern coastal region of the Mexican state of Veracruz, close to the site where Hernan Cortés began his colonial endeavors on Mexican soil in 1519. In 1998 the town was chosen as a World Heritage Site, because "the urban layout and architecture of Tlacotalpan represents a fusion of Spanish and Caribbean traditions of exceptional importance and quality" (UNESCO).

losing contact with "her" oven window saint and transgressing the borders of cultural norms and values, the more elaborate her altar becomes. In addition, the altar serves as a fetish for her customers, who desire the purity, virginity, and goodness that Esperanza's ensemble of saints represents.

The traveling altar is not the only means by which the protagonist seeks to make a home away from home. While searching for her daughter in Tijuana, Esperanza writes a letter to her friend Soledad (Solitude), and its postscript testifies to the protagonist's nostalgic attachment to Mexican national culture: "By the time you get this letter you will probably be enjoying the Independence Day parade. I imagine you will be there, waving your little Mexican flag at the children in their school uniforms, marching down the streets and singing the national anthem" (Escandón 107). The word "imagine" evokes and echoes Benedict Anderson's often-cited notion of imagined community according to which a nation is not so much based on natural facts, but rather constructed by a multiplicity of cultural narratives and practices. For Esperanza, participation in her home community from the diaspora is relegated solely to the realm of the imagination. Her mental presence at home marks a counterpoint to the physical absence from her hometown and to her growing detachment from the Mexican national discourse, conveyed by the novel's omission of any reference to the protagonist's partaking in the festivities of September 16 (Mexican Independence Day).

Tying in with this dialectic of remembering and forgetting, the protagonist has not completely severed the cultural ties to her home community and does not reject her *mexicanidad* altogether. For instance, she plans to paint a *retablo* (a traditional Mexican religious painting) depicting the "reunion" with her daughter and to display it in her local church in order to testify to the workings of God. In addition, as the narrative unfolds, she is shown as a creator of border-spanning, transnational social spaces, evinced by her conversations over the phone with the priest in Tlacotalpan. The three long-distance confessions in the novel, in which Esperanza tells of her temptations, frustrations, and transformations, foster what Ulrich Beck has, in a different context, called "community-bonding through the sharing of risks" (163-64). The phone confessions, aside from a mere staying in contact with her hometown, also serve to morally instruct the protagonist en route to *el norte* and function as a central narrative device that helps the reader to learn about Esperanza's previous experience, world view, and motives through flashbacks.

Popular culture, and especially music, is presented as another component with which the protagonist attempts to mentally recreate home in the diaspora. Listening to Mexican *boleros* reminds her of significant events and people in her life: her deceased husband, father, and daughter as well as those she has left behind in Tlacotalpan. The sad old songs serve as a remedy against loneliness for Esperanza because they tell of pain and hardship that seem much greater than her own. In addition, the songs are reminiscent of better times and thus help to put her current grief, caused by Blanca's death and her crisis of faith, into a larger perspective. In this sense, music enables the protagonist to access and (re)construct personal, as well as cultural, memory away from home.

Making a place for herself in LA's Pico Union district, a predominantly Latino neighborhood near downtown, Esperanza is surrounded by emblems of Mexican

culture, which again create an illusion of home in the diaspora. Significant in her growing awareness of the city are the local Spanish-language news broadcasts, which mediate what Mike Davis has called an "ecology of fear," caused by natural disasters, violence, and crime. At first, however, the protagonist is unable to map and experience the city in its totality: without knowing "the city or the bus routes" (Escandón 204), she can only become cognizant of and grasp her immediate vicinity. Insightful about Escandón's depiction of the city is that her narrative supplements sociological accounts of Los Angeles by fictionalizing individual experiences of city reality, experiences that are both site-specific and universal: "A neighbor banged on the wall next door. A gunfight in the alley went on for a few minutes. The police came and went. The trash truck made its usual annoying beeps and clanking noises. Daylight broke. The smell of someone else's coffee sneaked in through the window" (211). The short sentences in this passage add to giving the reader a specific sense of place in a global city marked by speed, compression, violence, and anonymity.

During her journeys through LA in search of her daughter and a job, Esperanza experiences a city that is in the process of morphing from being Anglo-dominated to a multi-ethnic space. Even though the U.S. mainstream is still present in Escandón's representation of Latino Los Angeles (linguistically, culturally, and economically), the text aptly depicts a space of and for otherness:

> The street looked like a street in Mexico. All the storefront signs were in Spanish. So was the music coming from huge speakers in nearly every cluttered store. People walking by spoke in Spanish. Newsstands sold magazines in Spanish. The smell of tacos floated on the sidewalk, luring people into tiny Mexican restaurants. But something made Broadway genuinely American. Perhaps it was the aura of brevity. Nothing seemed to last long there. Theaters had become churches. Churches had become swapmeets. She imagined the place in ten years, every sign in Korean, like the neighborhood next to hers. Then she thought of it in the recent past, when the language spoken there had been English, and, before that, Spanish. (Escandón 189)

This description of "Ellay's" spatial and social realities hints at the ongoing transculturation of Mexican, Anglo-American, and Asian cultures.[4] It claims that even in its "Mexicanness," the city is still thoroughly "American," because its internal and inherent mobility is marked by constant cultural transformation. The novel further suggests that the growing influence of non-white Angelenos causes the production of chimerical spaces in which alternative discourses intervene and dis-

[4] Introduced to replace concepts of acculturation and deculturation, which were postulated by proponents of the Chicago School of Sociology, the notion of transculturation offers a means of tracing different parameters and trajectories of two- or multidirectional cultural mobility in a variety of contact zones. By mapping cultural diffusions and interactions, transculturation enables a critical examination of "the uncertain voyages of signification" (Benítez-Rojo 2) in literary and cultural texts. In processes and representations of transculturation, heterogeneity often does not give way to a relatively smooth confluence of cultural practices; instead, certain differences and discontinuities persist. Because of the ambivalence of synthesis and symbiosis, fusion and juxtaposition, transculturation marks an epistemological and aesthetic principle underlying many narratives of/in diaspora.

rupt Euramerican cultural norms and values. Esperanza hence epitomizes how Latin American migrants arriving in Los Angeles are likely to encounter urban spaces characterized by the "doubleness" of local and non-local identities and life forms. This "zone of doubleness" allows ethnic minorities to inscribe and shape their environment in a way that often contradicts urban practices of other (non-Latino) residents in the Pacific Rim megalopolis (cf. Crawford).

A further case in point is the description of a migrant bar and dance hall in Los Angeles which is decorated with various icons from the U.S. and Mexico:

> The ceiling had Valentine's Day hearts and cupids. Saint Patrick's Day four-leaf clovers, pots of gold, and leprechauns. Mexican Independence Day flags and ornaments. Halloween witches and ghosts. Día de los Muertos papier-mâché skeletons and sugar skulls. Christmas stockings, piñatas, Santa Clauses, and reindeer cutouts. A whole year's worth of holidays reflected in the many mirrors that covered the walls. (Escandón 206)

This section resonates with Lacan's formulation of the mirror phase, in which the child desires to be, and identifies with, the image of coherence and unity in the mirror. In Escandón's depiction of fragments that achieve wholeness in their mirror images—creating what might be called a "transcultural gestalt"— a gap remains between the truth of fragmentation and the image of unity. The passage cited above also indicates that the text does not argue for a hybridity-as-synthesis of cultural emblems; rather, it projects transculturation as a combination of sameness and difference, in which certain elements merge without assimilating, and others remain juxtaposed.

This notion of merging without assimilating is also fundamental to the depiction of a travel agency in which Esperanza works after her arrival in Los Angeles. Specialized in currency exchange, the transfer of "migra dollars" and travels to Mexico, the agency is owned by Vicenta Cortés, a Chicana who "wore a baseball cap backward" (Escandón 189). While the reversed baseball cap can be read as a sign of Americanization, Vicenta is not portrayed as an assimilated Mexican American, but rather as a culture-conscious and self-confident Chicana. Her transculturation is indicated by her transgression of gender boundaries, evinced by her cursing, her having been mistaken for a man, and her love for Mexican-style wrestling in the U.S. Through Vicenta, Esperanza not only learns about, and eventually copies, a transcultural identity, but also develops a new sense of inter-American femininity by watching it in a woman whose "sense of self was so accurate that she could tell how many centimeters long her hair was on a certain day" (Escandón 199).

Toward the end of the novel, the protagonist further learns about transcultural subject positions when Angel, her newfound lover and future partner, informs her that he has been living in Southern California for over fourteen years. Esperanza answers: "'No wonder you're more gringo than a cheeseburger and fries.' 'Yeah, but with a lot of jalapeños. I can't just stop being Mexican, so I've become amphibious. I go back and forth from Mexican to American, depending on the situation'" (Escandón 224). Underlined by food metaphors, this conversation shows how the novel suggests that transculturation and the reinvention of the self in travel and diaspora can be empowering experiences of life in the borderlands. Yet, at this point of the novel, Esperanza is still immersed in the search for her daughter,

which precludes her from starting a new life in Los Angeles. The protagonist realizes that she has to return to the starting point of her journey and look for Blanca in her hometown. With the appearance of her daughter's image on a rust stain in her bathroom, Esperanza's quest comes to end: she has gained insight into spaces that lie between binary oppositions when she realizes that "Blanca is not dead. She is not alive. She's in that little space in between" (Escandón 244-45).

The themes of diaspora, travel, and transculturation are climaxed and underscored in the final episode of the novel. It is set inside Angel's pickup truck, who has traveled to Mexico to convince his love to return to Los Angeles with him. After Esperanza initially declines his proposal to move to *el norte*, she agrees on the premise that they take the memory of Blanca with them:

> They passed a sign that read: UNITED STATES BORDER 200 KILOMETERS. Esperanza's box of saints was in the back of the truck along with a couple of suitcases. Next to them, tightly fastened with ropes, was an entire wall from Esperanza's bathroom, complete with tile, sink, medicine cabinet, light fixture, toilet, pipes, and the rust stain. (Escandón 253)

The protagonist literally plans to construct a home away from home in Los Angeles, and the house (as metaphor for the self) will be built with American and Mexican parts. Taking the site and sight of Blanca's last apparition with her indicates a renewal of faith both in a customized religiosity and a transcultural identity. The text suggests that her future life in Los Angeles will not be a starting over in which the old is abandoned, but in which it is in part taken along to create newness.

The closing scene on the road to LA also underlines the liberating potential of travel, because it is tied to the ambiguity of cultural meanings: "She looked out the window. Rolling tumbleweeds barely scratched the smooth desert sand, leaving streams of incomprehensible hieroglyphs along their path, soon to be erased by the wind of the barren Sonora. She cuddled on Angel's shoulder and went back to her dream" (Escandón 254). Here, the transitory writing produced by the tumbling weed points to a salient theme of the novel: the fleetingness and ambiguity of meaning. In the end, the reader is left to wonder whether the protagonist going "back to her dream" means that she is falling asleep or that she is returning to her dream of a family and to her American Dream north of the border. Closing in, and with, transit, the novel hints at larger cultural practices of "dwelling-in-traveling" (Clifford 36) or, in other words, the provisional inhabiting of a site from which new forms of consciousness and identity scripts can potentially emerge.

Gender(ed) Transitions: Toward a "New" Chicana Consciousness

The exposure to multiple sexual partners and practices during her travel causes the protagonist to encounter her suppressed Other. That is, learning about women who sell their bodies and men who buy the illusion of love, Eperanza revises and extends her own sense of femininity and eventually re-discovers her dormant sexuality. It is important to note that the narrator's depiction of the world of sin is neither condescending nor condemning. Rather, the narrative tone is characterized

by a tongue-in-cheek sense of humor, as is exemplified by the description of a house of ill repute in Mexico, which, according to rumors, "was the headquarters of an anti-Catholic movement designed to keep priests busy listening to confessions and distracting them from the movement's ultimate goal: to create instability in the Church" (Escandón 79). Here, as in other sections of the novel, the narrator hints at the hypocrisy of the Catholic Church, which denies and suppresses the existence of an institution that is known by everyone in town. At the same time, the protagonist's refusal to discard her Catholic faith altogether can be read as an indication that Catholicism was, and continues to be, marked by a "doubleness" of rigidity against otherness, on the one hand, and a relative openness towards indigenous cultural practices, on the other.

Esperanza's career in the "love business" starts with cleaning up rooms and beds that have been used by prostitutes and their customers. After a couple of days she is not so much disgusted with the work, as might be expected from a woman of purity and virtue, but she "wondered if passing as a prostitute would be a better way to know where Blanca might be. Men tell their secrets to prostitutes. Perhaps she could be one for a while. She could blend in" (Escandón 82). The text aims to convince its reader that the heroine merely plans to pass as a sex-worker, rather than choosing prostitution as a profession. Instead of becoming a fallen angel, she manages to narrowly elude the men who desire her and, throughout the novel, remains both insider and outsider to the perilous world of prostitution in the borderlands. The protagonist is, in fact, well aware of the moral predicament that comes with her decision to pretend to be a sex-worker: according to the conventional script of womanhood in her culture, Esperanza sins by exposing herself to men. In addition, she is constantly forced to lie about her identity and "references" in order to work in the brothels and justifies her choice of acting like a prostitute by claiming that it serves the higher goal of finding her daughter. The narrator, who rarely intervenes to comment on events or characters, makes sure to inform the reader that "Esperanza was not selling her body. She was looking for Blanca" (Escandón 100). Instead of reproaching the prostitutes for their ostensible immorality, the text points out the tragic psychological and economic circumstances that have coerced women into selling their bodies.

The last "house of sin" in which Esperanza works is a sophisticated peep show in Los Angeles. She takes a job at the "Fiesta Theater," where men come and secretly watch women perform everyday rituals in small rooms through "Sex-o-scopes" (Escandón 172). By changing their rooms into miniature classrooms or kitchens and pretending to be teachers or housewives, Esperanza and her co-workers enact the Hollywoodean paradigm of simulation and make-belief. Furthermore, the "violation of intimacy" (Escandón 173) provided by the peep show somewhat parallels the church ritual of confession: both share a similar intrusion of privacy and a similar performative construction of the self.

What Esperanza learns from meeting various sex-workers is that in order to survive her journey through hitherto unknown territories, cultures, and occupations, she has to continuously reinvent herself. The protagonist realizes, and ultimately adopts, the strength, power, and agency of the prostitutes. In contrast to Church doctrines, Esperanza experiences that sin is a matter of perspective and that love

and sex are not the same. By talking to and befriending other sex-workers, she becomes aware that it is not only men who leave women (as she has frequently experienced in her hometown), but that women are able to play an active role in male-female relationships. The new insights mark an important stage in the self-discovery and spiritual growth of the protagonist. Symbolized by the cutting of her hair, the protagonist's change and development is underscored when the narrator states:

> As Flaca [a prostitute] clipped away, Esperanza felt weightless for the first time in thirteen years. She hadn't cut her hair since Luis was killed in homage to him. Her hair had been the one feature he adored the most. But he was dead. Now she looked in the mirror and she didn't see a widow anymore. [...] The image reflected in the mirror was of a woman Esperanza didn't know existed, or could. (Escandón 136)

Here, the reflection in the mirror seems to indicate that the protagonist has become a "transcultural gestalt," one that has emerged out of the summation of different cultural components and gendered identity scripts. And the novel underlines the potential power of a transcultural femininity when Esperanza defends herself against a sexual transgression by Cacomixtle, one of the Mexican men she has met in Tijuana and who has followed her to LA. Being able to convert her psychological growth into physical strength, the protagonist literally and metaphorically breaks free from the traditional (Mexican) female role of submissiveness and inferiority toward men. In the victory over her potential rapist, Esperanza displays her masculine side, her ability to combine different facets of culturally scripted notions of femininity and her acceptance of violence as part of life in urban borderlands.

With its representation of a "new" transcultural womanhood, *Esperanza's Box of Saints* moves beyond the relative idealization of women and the representation of gender relations by Chicana feminist writers such as Ana Castillo, Sandra Cisneros, Cherrié Moraga, or Gloria Anzaldúa. For instance, the novel lacks a revision or rewriting of Mexican female legends, omitting an allegiance to indigenous female deities or legendary figures; instead, the protagonist follows orders from a white, blond Christian Saint. While this can be read allegorically as an alignment with the religion of the oppressor, the protagonist develops a customized spirituality that appropriates certain norms and values of the Catholic Church without exclusively adhering to its imposed morality. In addition, the novel refrains from a feminist critique of *machismo* that employs relatively flat male characters who are merely ignorant and abusive. Escandón's narrator delineates male diversity without denying or downplaying men's tendency to objectify women and act accordingly. The novel portrays a protagonist who refuses to blame men for visiting brothels, but rather shows understanding and sympathy for them. Overall, the novel depicts characters that represent a broader spectrum of maleness by accentuating violence, *machismo*, unhappiness, sensitivity, creativity, and same-sex preference.

Conclusion

Escandón's narrative focuses on a female protagonist who changes from local homemaker to transnational home-maker. The novel repeatedly emphasizes the close relationship between, and mutual dependence of, diaspora narratives and

transculturation in the border zone between Tijuana and Los Angeles. While it problematizes some of the "heres" and "theres" of lived experiences, identity formations, and cultural representations, the novel leaves out some of the more problematical aspects of transnationalism and migration. There are little, if any, references to the hardships of Mexican-U.S. border crossings or the mechanisms of racialization in the United States that lead to maltreatment and exploitation of migrants. Instead, the text suggests that the border can be crossed from South to North with relative ease. It can also be argued that the text remains aligned with traditional Mexican definitions of gender roles according to which women are, and can only be, either saints or whores. This either/or dichotomy is, however, only maintained on the surface of the novel. Using various transcultural symbols and characters, the text explores spaces and ways of living between culturally defined dualisms. Escandón's diaspora novel hence ties in with other diasporic narratives, because it negotiates and represents a condition of transnational mobility, of people on the move, who "will not be contained within the Heim of the national culture and its unisonant discourse, but are themselves the marks of a shifting boundary that alienates the frontiers of the modern nation" (Bhabha 164). That is, the novel exemplifies how diaspora consciousness can serve to undermine the influence and power of national discourses and cultures.

While it shares a number of similarities with other migrant narratives, *Esperanza's Box of Saints* departs from earlier Mexican immigrant novels, which are generally marked by a negative depiction of moving to the U.S. and which, by and large, romanticize Mexico, criticize U.S. society or focus on the acculturation of the migrant in *el norte* (cf. Ledesma 73-74). Escandón's novel thematizes hitherto neglected aspects in better-known fictional works by and about Mexican migrants, e.g., Villarreal's *Pocho*, Rivera's *... And the Earth Did Not Part*, or Cisneros's *Woman Hollering Creek*, by accentuating what is lost *and* what is gained in the act of moving between Mexico and the United States. The novel takes a different stance on the migratory process and its sociocultural consequences by exploring and representing new transnational cultural spaces which exceed the totality of their components. Created in and by the act of traveling, these spaces can, as the text suggests, offer new opportunities for developing a transcultural sense of self in border zones.

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