

HOULIHAN, ERIN, M.A. *Who Would Have Thought It?: Space and Hybridity in Regional Chicana Literature*. (2007)  
Directed by Dr. Karen Kilcup and Dr. Alexandra Schultheis. 80 pp.

Postcolonial studies demand new ways of understanding identity and have developed concepts such as hybridity to address the needs of identities that resist stringent classifications. For Chicana literature, authors like Gloria Anzaldúa have emphasized the *mestiza*, or the hybridized identity, giving new meaning to what it means to live on the border. However, this hybridized border identity cannot exist without first acknowledging the theoretical and spatial aspects of the border. This essay argues that the hybridized border identity and the geographic border location are elements of identity that must exist simultaneously.

A prime example of a text that positions the hybridized identity in relation to geographical contextualization is *Who Would Have Thought It?* by Mexican-American regionalist writer, Maria Amparo Ruiz de Burton. In Ruiz de Burton's text, various forms of hybridity develop as the lines between North/South/West, citizen/foreigner, white/black/Mexican, rich/poor, and public/private blur. It is through the various regional spaces of New England, New York, Washington D.C, and Mexico that these hybridities develop, illustrating how an emphasis upon geographical locations can clarify the hybridized identity within a physical location.

HOULIHAN, ERIN, M.A. *Literary Humanitarianism and the Short Story: Understanding How Genre and Ethics Intersect in "The Gold Vanity Set"*. (2007)  
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Critical debate has arisen over the ethics of readers' approaches to texts about social injustices and human suffering. Scholars like Joseph Slaughter have asserted that an ethical approach to reading demands an exploration of the relationship between the reader and a text's suffering characters. Slaughter argues that to create the most effective empathy between reader and textual subject, readers should position themselves not as the sufferer but instead as "the humanitarian, the subject position of one who already recognizes the human dignity of the wounded and attempts to relieve the suffering." I extend Slaughter's idea one step further and assert that the reader should not only be conscious of his or her relationship to the sufferer, but also of his or her relationship to the text that tells the sufferer's story. In evaluating the latter relationship, an exploration of preconceived notions about form is critical. Specifically, interrogating assumptions about literary form can ultimately result in a more ethical interpretation of texts pertaining to human suffering and social injustices.

In exploring assumptions about literary form, I rely upon a genre whose very definition is based on form, the short story, a genre bears the weight of structural ideals such as brevity, totality, character development, and limited temporality. When one breaks down these assumptions, a greater reflective space, fewer representational characters, and a resistance to textual "mastery" can develop, stimulating a more ethical connection between the reader and the short story's characters.

I locate my exploration of short story reading in a work by Mexican-American writer, Maria Cristina Mena, entitled “The Gold Vanity Set.” On the surface, this particular story follows the many conventions of the short story form; however, these conventions also work against themselves, creating a stereotypical portrayal of indigenous Mexicans that simultaneously voices concerns about the oppression of this group. The ambiguous portrayal of this subaltern group makes “The Gold Vanity Set” a valuable story to consider when exploring ethical reading, for awareness of assumptions about form helps readers make sense of Mena’s textual ambiguity. My goal is not to propose a moral code for reading, but instead to explore the various ways that one might achieve a more ethical relationship to the text through the deconstruction of literary assumptions that can impede the realization of human rights and social justice for subaltern groups.

*WHO WOULD HAVE THOUGHT IT?: SPACE AND HYBRIDITY*  
IN REGIONAL CHICANA LITERATURE  
AND  
LITERARY HUMANITARIANISM AND THE SHORT STORY:  
UNDERSTANDING HOW GENRE AND ETHICS INTERSECT  
IN “THE GOLD VANITY SET”

by

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A Thesis Submitted to  
the Faculty of the Graduate School at  
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro  
in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts

Greensboro  
2007

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## INTRODUCTION

In the wake of political debates about current immigration policies and border control, a great deal of public attention has focused on the U.S.'s relationship with Mexico. Literary studies have begun to reflect this interest, resulting in the development of research like the *Recovering the U.S. Hispanic Literary Heritage Project* in Houston, Texas. I am indebted to this project and grateful for the work that various scholars like Nicolás Kanellos, Francisco Lomelí, and Jose Aranda have done to further interest in late nineteenth-century and early-twentieth-century Mexican-American writers. Without the work of these critics and many others, writers such as Maria Amparo Ruiz de Burton and Maria Cristina Mena might have been victims of literary amnesia, forgotten and neglected within the Latino/a literary canon. Fortunately, we now have a growing collection of information about these two valuable turn-of-the-century Mexican-American writers.

My own essays on these two authors contribute to this growing body of information by showing Maria Ruiz de Burton's skillful use of regionalism to frame the hybridized identity and Maria Cristina Mena's examination of Indigenous communities' human rights. Ultimately, these two authors demonstrate an ability to examine critically the tensions surrounding U.S./Mexican relations in the late 1800's and the early 1900's. Additionally, both Ruiz de Burton and Mena explore the hybridized Mexican-American

identity with sensitivity, attempting to understand how issues such as race, gender and class influence this potentially hybridized existence; this exploration both examines and complicates understandings of what it means to be a contemporary Mexican-American author. For these reasons, Mexican-American literary studies must continue to develop research on these two important writers, restoring them to their rightful place within the Mexican-American literary canon.



*WHO WOULD HAVE THOUGHT IT?: SPACE AND HYBRIDITY IN  
CHICANA LITERATURE*

“The present epoch will perhaps be above all, the epoch of space. We are in the epoch of simultaneity: we are in the epoch of juxtaposition, the epoch of near and far, of the side by side, of the dispersed.”~ Foucault

From the Israeli/Palestinian conflict over the West Bank to smoking/nonsmoking sections in restaurants, space has become a hotly debated subject in society. Foucault is right in labeling the present as “the epoch of space” (qtd. in Kort 3). As postcolonial studies have started to deconstruct previous indicators of identity such as history and language, many scholars have turned to space as a new medium to explore cultural identity. But space is not completely free of the problematic binaries that weigh down history and language. Like history and language, space too can perpetuate dominance and resistance, colonization and liberation, past and present, the oppressors and the oppressed. Foucault illustrates this problem when he dichotomizes space saying it can be “near and far,” or juxtaposed “side by side.” The present may be the epoch of space, but I argue that it no longer behooves society to put different spaces “side by side.” Instead, this is the epoch of the Third Space, border cultures, dispersion, and migrancy - spaces that are not comparable but mixed and hybridized. Homi Bhabha describes this new concept of space as “the overlap and displacement of domains of difference” and a space “in-between the rules of engagement” (2, 277). Our current epoch demands new “rules of

engagement” for those that are neither near nor far, but in-between.

One place to begin investigating this newly hybridized space is in the genre of Chicana literature. In this study, I first show the theoretical importance of imagined space for Chicana literature; in particular, I map the potential problems that can result from looking at hybridity without geographical contextualization. Through an analysis of the regionalist text, *Who Would Have Thought It?* by Chicana writer Maria Amparo Ruiz de Burton, I show how an emphasis on the third space can sometimes neglect the importance of physical location. Regional texts can show that physical landscapes and space do not contradict the idea of a hybridized identity, but instead clarify such an identity, giving it a physical location. Ruiz de Burton’s text illustrates how location can indeed have an impact upon the hybridized identity and should not be viewed as its opposition, but instead as central to its formation. However, before one can understand how regionalism coincides with border discourse, one must first understand why the in-between space has been such a reoccurring theme in Chicana literature.

### **Border Culture and the Chicana Identity**

Border studies and the metaphor of the border have energized recent Chicano/a studies (Aranda 33). Mary Pat Brady says that border studies have established a framework for negotiating how discourses like race, gender and sexuality influence the development of a Chicana identity (6). Within this in-between location, Gloria Anzaldúa says that Chicanas can relocate an identity that has been fractured by colonization,

migrancy, and dislocation (25, Brady 9). She describes the consciousness of the borderlands saying that “the U.S.-Mexican border *es una herida abierta* where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds. And before a scab forms, it hemorrhages again, the lifeblood of the two worlds merging to form a third country – a border culture” (25). Essentially, a border culture is one that lies in-between two others, a place of neither here nor there but a product of both.

While both border identities and hybridized identities inhabit an in-between space, there are distinctions between the two terms. To clarify my use of the terms, I look to the border as an in-between space that can be both physical and cultural. As Anzaldúa notes, it is both a physical “open wound” and also a cultural amalgamation of two worlds. Hybridity is a theoretical aspect of a border culture that Bhabha defines as, “the margin of hybridity, where cultural differences ‘contingently’ and conflictually touch, becomes the moment of panic which reveals the borderline experience” (296). However, border cultures are not always hybridized; nor are hybridized identities always inhabitants of a border culture. To define how hybridity is used in this study, I borrow from Bhabha’s definition, which says that hybridity is the “interstitial passage between fixed identifications” (5). It is the resistance of “primordial polarities” that eventually creates new identities once these polarities are broken down and hybridized (5).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> It is important to note that Bhabha’s definition of hybridity is far more complex than the scope of this paper allows us to explore. I use the simplified definition as a way to examine the ambiguous identities that develop when boundaries blur between national, regional, racial, class, and gendered entities. However, in addition to spatial aspects like in-between positioning, Bhabha’s definition of hybridity also has temporal, historical, and cultural aspects that are not necessarily stated but always present beneath the surface of its meaning. While not explored in depth in this essay, the temporal aspect of hybridity can be extremely useful in negotiating hybridized cultural regions. Specifically, Bhabha’s hybridity espouses a dismantling

The concept of hybridity often gets more attention than the physical border that allows such cultures to meet. This lack of attention to the physical border presents a potential problem for the Chicana identity that is essentially left in a postmodern wasteland. Regarding this lack of geographical contextualization Deepika Bahri says:

if the concept of hybridity is useful in undoing binaries and approaching the complexities of transnationalism...it also tends to avoid the question of location because it suggests a zone of nowhere and a people afloat in a weightless ether of ahistoricity. (80)

Anzaldúa's own work speaks to this idea of nowhere saying, "as a *mestiza* I have no country, my homeland cast me out; yet all countries are mine because I am every woman's sister or potential lover" (102). Anzaldúa's definition of *mestiza* allows for a certain cosmopolitan sisterhood, but it also advocates an identity that stems from "nowhere." In this postmodern age, it is easy to assume that hybridized individuals existing in "interstitial passage between fixed identifications" share an ahistorical, transient identity (Bhabha 5). However, we can essentially negate the very agency that hybridity grants if we assume that all hybridized identities are the same because they abide in a single in-between space.<sup>2</sup>

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of old notions of diversity in which regions are compared as separate and different entities; this historical breakdown is replaced with a new vision of hybridity called cultural diversity, in which regions are allowed to overlap, creating newness in the hybridized moment of cultural enunciation.

<sup>2</sup> I view hybridity as a way to understand how the Chicana identity inhabits the space between "primordial polarities" such as race, nationality, gender, and class. However, hybridity does not always mix these contradictory entities harmoniously. As Bhabha states, hybridity "is not a third term that resolves the tension between two cultures, or the two scenes of the book, in a dialectical play of 'recognition.'" (162). Sometimes, the exchange between cultural spaces is not "dialectical" but latent with power hierarchies as

Physical location can provide a geopolitical context that grounds cultures rather than letting them float in a cloud of hybridity, as Francisco Lomeli notes when he says, “region functions as an immediate identifier, a cultural matrix or insular feature to which people relate” (1:233). An emphasis on region also creates a more realistic view of border culture and the intense poverty and discrimination that defines such a culture, specifically on the Mexican side of the border (Castillo and Córdoba 16). Failure to focus on the physical qualities of border culture also risks making the Northern side identical to the Southern; even if both mix to form a hybridized border culture, one must still acknowledge the differences each side of the border brings to the discourse. Finally, focusing on the in-between space without considering physical location risks neglecting contemporary debates such as NAFTA and immigration policies that seem to be reinforcing physical difference, rather than emphasizing the hybridized third space (Castillo and Córdoba 4-16).

### **The “Self-Conscious Location” of Regional Literature and Hybridity**

It is clear that current hybridity studies lack a way of thinking that incorporates prevalent spatial issues like NAFTA and immigration policies within border studies.

Hybridity scholars might look to regional literature<sup>3</sup> as an example of writing that

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seen when the colonized’s culture hybridizes with the colonizer’s culture. In this sense, hybridity is not always politically progressive, challenging the dominant narrative to the benefit of the marginalized. It can also work against the Other’s identity, for example, when hybridity challenges the Chicana identity as a “fixed identification” (Bhabha 5).

incorporates both the hybridized in-between-space and physical location. Out of the many definitions of regional literature, two are especially useful for classifying regional works.<sup>4</sup> First, drawing from geographer David Atkinson's definition of "cultural geography," one can say that regional literature tries to understand "the ways people construct and make sense of their places and spaces...the ways that people enact identity, belonging, pleasure and difference throughout society" (xv). The usefulness of cultural geography lies in the term's reliance on culture. When studying how hybridized identities identify with regions, it is important to acknowledge the ways in which people define their spaces and the ways in which these spaces define and create their inhabitants' culture. In exploring Ruiz de Burton's text, "cultural geography" becomes a useful tool to measure the ways in which regions such as New England, New York, Washington, the U.S. South, and Mexico are both creators and products of characters' identities.

The second definition of regional literature expands upon the notion of "cultural geography." Regional literature is not only deeply entwined with culture, it also critiques and challenges cultural norms. Critics Majorie Pryse and Judith Fetterley argue that

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<sup>3</sup> I wish to distinguish between regional literature and regionalism as a literary theory. In this study, I rely on regional theory to analyze how people and places intersect. However, my primary focus is on regional literature and the way it works as a genre to challenge stringent notions of space. I focus on regional literature with the hope that a new understanding of a neglected genre and its usefulness to literary studies might become apparent.

<sup>4</sup> It is important to acknowledge that the definition of regional literature is still widely contested. Some critics call the genre "local color" writing. Others relegate regional literature to categories of realism and naturalism (Fetterley and Pryse 4). For some, regional literature focuses on small-town life that invents "alternatives to national views" (Pryse 20, Allen 10). Different critics argue for regionalism's nationalistic attributes citing Federalism as the highest form of regional identification (Quigly 418). One of the most current debates facing regional literature is what role it plays in today's global community (Kowalewski 9). This debate becomes prevalent when trying to understand how hybridized, globalized communities connect with regional identities.

regional writers rework the concept of location, using it not only in the geographic sense, but also as a way to frame critiques about the positioning of marginal groups within society. They say that “while regionalist writers obviously invest in and commit to the specificity of place, they do not do so in a way that reifies or essentializes place, for place is also always a discursive location, an analytic, a subject position” (34). By framing geographic space as a discourse rather than a set concept, regional writers also challenge the notion of a solidified social positioning/location for marginalized groups such as “women, minority writers, provincials, sexual dissidents, and village dwellers...all of whom have been understood to be outside of the normative category of American readers and writers” (Foote, “The Cultural Work” 27).

Put simply, regional literature coincides with hybridity in two ways. First, they are both discourses “of self-conscious location” (Fetterley and Pryse 36). Regionalism makes us aware of a character’s geographic and social positioning; hybridity makes us aware of a character’s positioning in the “interstitial passage between fixed identifications” (Bhabha 5). Secondly, regionalism and hybridity are similar in the ways they both critique the establishment of concrete identities and instead advocate a more ambiguous identity formation (Fetterley and Pryse 11). Ultimately, regional literature not only gives hybridity a physical, geo-cultural context in which it can exist, it also parallels hybridity’s agenda in challenging static notions of identity. For this reason, I argue that regional literature is a tool that can help scholars understand hybridized identities such as Maria Amparo Ruiz de Burton.

Before delving into her texts, an analysis of her struggles as a Mexican-American female writer shows readers how one's regional connections can shape the hybridized individual's struggle for cultural belonging. As a member of the Mexican elite who later married an American soldier during the Mexican-American War, Ruiz de Burton was arguably a "product of competing colonial enterprises in Alta California" rather than the subaltern figure that Rosuara Sanchez and Beatrice Pita envision in their introduction to *The Squatter and the Don* (Aranda 87). Conceivably, it is more helpful to view Ruiz de Burton as a hybridized figure caught between two dominant forces than as a subaltern figure; Ruiz de Burton's strength as a cultural critic stems from her ability to stand on the periphery of two worlds, critiquing both from the distant "in-between" space she inhabits as a Mexican-American writer.

Ruiz de Burton's talent as a social critic is further enhanced by her implementation of cultural geography. Drawing from the various locations she inhabited during her lifetime, her texts outline how such locations can shape the surrounding cultures and how such cultures can mold regional identifications. For example, her novels *Who Would Have Thought It?* and *The Squatter and the Don* both explore the intensely exploitative, imperial U.S. movement westward that stemmed from the discovery of gold found at Sutter's Mill in 1849 (Aranda 92). Being a victim of conflicting land rights herself, Ruiz de Burton's works show how the imposition of Anglo culture altered the Mexican-American's self-image as California landowner (Aranda 95).

Another regional issue that greatly impacted Ruiz de Burton was the United States's Civil War. Her marriage to a military official allowed her privileged access to



government officials such as Jefferson Davis and Abraham Lincoln (Aranda 93). In *Who Would Have Thought It?*, these historical figures are present, but only as footnotes to support how the Civil War's regional identifications impacted the development of U.S. culture. Ultimately, the disunity between the North and the South provides a framework to explore a national culture that has become fragmented in its self-image.

While the United States struggles to unify its self image in the face of a pending Civil War, *Who Would Have Thought It?* shows a New England family engaging in a familial civil war once Mr. Norval agrees to act as guardian to an aristocratic Mexican girl whose mother was kidnapped by Indians. Much to the chagrin of Mrs. Norval who harbors a great distrust of foreigners, Mr. Norval agrees to take in this orphan named Lola. While in New England, we see the hypocrisy of a Yankee family that prides itself on being moral abolitionists. The hypocrisy of the Northern "moral" characters is further heightened when readers see the impetuous affair that Mrs. Norval has with the Reverend Hackwell. In direct opposition to Mrs. Norval's passionate and reckless affair, a modest relationship develops between Lola and Julian, the eldest Norval child.

As the Norval family begins to take advantage of Lola's inherited wealth, they relocate from New England to New York. Within this space, Ruiz de Burton dismantles the economic hierarchies of a class system, creating instead a more fluid, hybridized notion of class. While the Norval family resides in New York, Lavinia, Mrs. Norval's sister makes a geographic and social transition of her own when she chooses to become a nurse for wounded soldiers in Washington D.C. While writing within the regional space of Washington D.C., Burton deconstructs gendered spaces, specifically dismantling the

notions of a private, domestic feminine space in opposition to a public, masculine space. As Lavinia shuttles back and forth from various public, political offices to the privatized space of her familial duties in caring for her brother Isaac, we see a breakdown of gendered social positioning that eventually favors a more hybridized feminine/masculine space.

Through this fragmentation, Ruiz de Burton shows the fallacy of a unified nationalism. Instead, the U.S. becomes a place where cultures clash, mix, and hybridize.

### **Regional Relocations and Contradictions**

Atkinson's notion of cultural geography is especially useful when analyzing how the locations in Ruiz de Burton's text support hybridized identities and how hybridized identities can define spatial regions. Rosaura Sanchez and Beatrice Pita illustrate this dialectical relationship when they say:

The geographic mobility of the main characters takes us to the US Southwest, Massachusetts, New York City, Washington DC, several Civil War battlefields and Confederate prison camps, and Mexico as the novel shifts from domestic social spaces to public, primarily political and military spaces. Viewing the novel as a mapping of social geography will further allow us to reconstruct the boundaries between gender spheres as well as to see how the novel presents the limitations of liberal democracy and the emergence of consumer society in the Gilded Age. (xvi)

As the characters navigate through U.S. regions, marginalized regions like Mexico and the war-ravaged South challenge the concept of national unity and the right to unify under Manifest Destiny. Once these marginal spaces enter Ruiz de Burton's text, national space becomes less of a monolithic entity and more of the "discursive location" that regional literature explores (Fetterley and Pryse 34). As a discursive location that consists of a variety of spaces such as Mexico and the South, the notion of a US with a central location gives way to a potentially more hybridized national identity.

Despite the fact that Ruiz de Burton's text presents many social spaces as "discursive," some of Ruiz de Burton's ideas about social positioning/location are still contradictory. For example, contradictions develop when her texts critique U.S. imperialism while simultaneously upholding the European imposition of a foreign Mexican government (Aranda 88). This support becomes evident in *Who Would Have Thought It?* when Don Felipe, Lola's father, sides with France's imposition of the Austrian Maximilian instead of a Mexican leader during the Revolution.

Ruiz de Burton's conflicting interests as a Mexican-American also manifest themselves in racial hierarchies when she attempts to critique white superiority over the Mexican landowners, or *Californios*, while simultaneously asserting the *Californios'* superiority over indigenous Mexicans, or the *indios* in texts such as *The Squatter and the Don* (Foote, Regional Fictions 135). Within *Who Would Have Thought It?*, this mindset becomes evident when Lola's identity as "Spanish" becomes synonymous with white and thus superior to blacks and indigenous Mexicans. Dr. Norval makes this equation apparent when he says, "once and for all, let me tell you that the blood of that child is as

good as, or better than yours or mine; that is neither an Indian nor a Negro child” (25). In Ruiz de Burton’s novel, white and Spanish mix together, showing their ability to exist in a hybridized third place. However some critics say this is not racial hybridity, but Ruiz de Burton’s attempt to maintain her privileged position as *Californio* through racial categorization. Indeed, it is odd that Ruiz de Burton criticizes New England for its hypocritical stance on abolition while simultaneously asserting that Lola’s Spanish blood is equal to the whites’ but superior to blacks’ (McCullough 137). Her assertion of Lola’s Spanish blood leaves readers wondering, why must Lola’s blood be white to assert her right to humane treatment?

Critics Fetterley and Pryse say that racial privileging is indicative of the “white nationalism” that may have caused regional writers to “queer” or highlight the unorthodox characteristics of other characters in order to make themselves look white (281). While these critics may be accurate in their critiques of Ruiz de Burton’s privileging of the Spanish blood, it is important not to abandon Ruiz de Burton’s text entirely because of these critiques. One must account for the difficulty of separating Ruiz de Burton’s personal history as a privileged *Californio* from her textual creation; it is also notable that her book, while indicative of postcolonial studies yet to come, was still written nearly a hundred years before postcolonial studies became an established field. As such, Ruiz de Burton’s text does not perfectly anticipate all postcolonial constructs, but it is a good indicator of potential problems that come with inhabiting the third space. Ultimately, while somewhat contradictory in its critique of power hierarchies, Ruiz de Burton’s text represents many different ways of viewing the colonized identity and those

that lie in the hybridized third space. It is important to remember that “being caught in the midst of ambiguities” and contradictions can often lead to “multiple possibilities,” or new ways to explore identity formation (Ortega 83). For *Who Would Have Thought It?*, these ambiguities mean new ways of viewing the hybridized individual’s social positioning within formerly stringent social categories such as race, gender and class.

### **Regionalism and Nationalism**

In addition to hybridized and multifaceted individual identities, Ruiz de Burton also presents a fractured national identity for the United States. Within this section, I illustrate how Ruiz de Burton’s use of various regions such as the North, South, East, and West redirect the reader’s attention from a nationalistic agenda to regional locations. In doing so, the formerly unified U.S., becomes a hybridized space of various cultural and regional identities. Within this new discursive space, I show how elected officials and patriotism become tools for the development of regional identities, instead of a national identity, further destabilizing the vision of a culturally unified U.S. Finally, I explore how Ruiz de Burton’s use of regions outside of the U.S. like Mexico place the United States within a globalized, hybridized framework that challenges any notion of the U.S. as the imperial center of the Western World.

Ultimately, through her strategic use of regions to frame critiques of a monolithic national identity, Ruiz de Burton shows that the United States was anything but unified during a time when “racial, regional, ethnic, and sexual divisions” were “produced and

exacerbated by the Civil War, Reconstruction, increased immigration, Westward expansion, and the policy of Manifest Destiny” (McCullough 3). In Ruiz de Burton’s novel, set specifically during the Civil War, the North not only battles the South, but also the West as we see when Dr. Norval returns from a trip to California with a new family member named Lola. This new family member becomes a representation of Western space and all that is unknown about the territory; as such, she is always placed in opposition to Mrs. Norval, an embodiment of the model New England matron. Eventually, Lola becomes more and more accepted within the Norval family, showing that the United States is no longer simply the North and the South, but also a nation that must consider its increasingly complicated relationship with the West.

Within the obvious geographic tensions, readers can detect a subtler critique of a unified national space and a unified national identity when Ruiz de Burton depicts the government’s failure to unite its constituents under shared ideals. Instead of representing a democratic population, the novel shows a national population that is fractured in its definition of political representation. For Ruiz de Burton, the political representation of Civil War America is an unreliable representative body, one that lacks genuine concern for the well-being of its voters. In her description of the Battle of Bull Run, various political leaders come to watch the action from a nearby hill. When Julius Cackle realizes this, he says to the Honorable Le Grand Gunn, “you have seen it, and I hope you are satisfied, you and your friends, with the d-d fun you politicians have made for us all” (72). According to Julius, the politicians do not see the harsh ramifications of war that its participants suffer. To them, war is just fun and games, enacted for their amusement.

Lavy illustrates the disconnection between citizen and politician best when she says a prayer for those in the government. She asks God to “forgive *The Cabinet*, O Lord, and show them the mercy, that their hearts may not be so pitiless to the sorrowful and afflicted” (emphasis in original, 118). While much of Ruiz de Burton’s political critique is aimed at elected officials and their inability to represent constituents, *Who Would Have Thought It?* also works within a regionalist framework to critique rigid standards of space. Specifically by showing the inadequacies of political figures to unify a cultural identity within a national space, Ruiz de Burton creates a place where emerging regional identities can develop. For this reason, characters within the text value social contributions at the regional level instead of at the national level. For example, the narrator argues for citizens to stay “at home, plowing, or minding their cattle in the barn, instead of representing their constituents at the capital...and giving themselves airs at Washington” (55).

Just as Ruiz de Burton deconstructs the notion of a unified national space under political leaders, she also breaks down the idea of a unifying patriotism, ultimately enacting “an aggressive demystification of a series of national foundational ideologies” (Sanchez and Pita viii). In her text, the characters view patriotism with suspicion. Ruiz de Burton’s narrator illustrates this idea:

the doctor might say what he pleased about loving his country too well to have too much partiality for *one section*. They, the New Englanders knew better, and if the doctor had not felt too strong a partiality for the wicked South he would have stayed quietly at home, and then have gone and thrashed them back if they rebelled. (64)

We see patriotism breaking down when Mr. Norval is accused of spreading anti-Union rumors. Because Mr. Norval cries when he sees the Southern senators resign one by one from the Union, he is seen as a Rebel supporter, despite the fact that he gives the Cackle family money to establish Union regiments. The concept of patriotism is so foreign to the text's characters that any display of mourning for the loss of the Union is misconstrued as Rebel sympathy.

Ruiz de Burton's text further destabilizes patriotism as a nationalistic tool when Julian Norval is accused of sharing his father's anti-Union sentiments, despite being wounded several times in battle while fighting for the Union. Aside from Doctor Norval, Julian is one of the few characters in the text who understands what it means to fight for causes at the national level. Describing his beliefs, the narrator says, "but if they insisted on breaking the Union, and would not come to their senses except through the baptism of blood, then Julian deemed his cause right, and was ready to defend it with his life" (130). While Ruiz de Burton certainly works within the regionalist framework, challenging accepted spatial boundaries like a national space, one must not forget that within this challenge lies the potential to deconstruct the power hierarchies that dictate spatial boundaries. Specifically, Ruiz de Burton dismantles the superiority that the U.S. assumes over other nation-spaces when she places it within a hybridized, global community.

Illustrating this belief in U.S. superiority, the Cackles believed that "the Lord was bound to protect the Union, even if to do so the affairs of the rest of the universe were to be laid aside for the time being" (159). Yet, Ruiz de Burton shows that "the affairs of the rest of the universe" are not to be laid aside when she inserts the Mexican Revolution into



the text, showing that other countries' political affairs are just as important as those in the U.S. (Montes and Goldman 2). According to Amelia de la Luz Montes, "Ruiz de Burton writes within a Mexican/American literary landscape as well as writing upon it because she incorporates and intersects what is perceived as American nationhood with Mexican considerations" (Recovering 3:21).

Ruiz de Burton further illustrates the folly of a monolithic U.S. culture that assumes superiority over others through Mrs. Cackle, the neighborhood busybody. Mrs. Cackle says:

To me they are all alike,—Indians, Mexicans, or Californians,—they are all horrid. But my son Beau says that our just laws and smart lawyers will soon '*freeze them out.*' That as soon as we take their lands from them they will never be heard of any more, and then the Americans, with God's help, will have all the land that was so righteously acquired through a just war and a most liberal payment in money. (emphasis in original 9)

Other characters are derisive of Mrs. Cackle, labeling her as a hypocritical example of "Christian faith and patriotism" (9). Her name also lets readers know that she is not a character with whom they should sympathize. She is a "cackler," a negative product of the Manifest Destiny mind-frame. Instead of becoming a "Cackle" and dividing space into "their land" and the United States' land, Ruiz de Burton's text advocates a more ambiguous definition of national space. Within this discursive, hybridized space, regions are encouraged to develop hybridized identities and the U.S. is encouraged to interact

with other countries not as a dominating cultural force, but instead as a member of a global community.

### **“The Foreigner Within Us”: Dismantling New England as Cultural Center**

When dealing with issues of space, the question that appears again and again is who belongs in certain spaces? Ruiz de Burton’s novel shows that it is often difficult to distinguish belonging in clear-cut terms. Instead, we see identities becoming ambiguous conglomerations of foreigner/citizen, all within spaces that resist marked regional boundaries themselves. Within these blurred regional boundaries, culture as well becomes immune to a defining system of belonging. This immunity becomes evident when Ruiz de Burton’s writing dismantles the myth that New England has a monopoly on U.S. culture.

Returning to the binary between citizen and foreigner, Mrs. Cackle, Mrs. Norval, and the Reverend Hackwell believe that foreigners do not belong to the culture or to the space the New England characters inhabit. There is a fear of the unknown in the “foreigners;” as threatening social elements, they should be conquered. However, Ruiz de Burton’s text points out that at times, it is difficult to distinguish the foreigner from the citizen when delineating who belongs to a specific space. *Who Would Have Thought It?* deconstructs the notion of a single identity belonging to a single region, or a single citizen belonging to a single country. Instead, her text shows that the notion of foreigner/citizen

is often hybridized and that often, “the foreigner lives within us: he is the hidden face of our identity” (Kristeva 2).

One way that Ruiz de Burton blurs the lines of spatial belonging is through Dr. Norval. Although Dr. Norval is not a typical “foreigner” since he actually resides in his country of birth, he still is considered foreign because his ideas do not necessarily follow those of a typical New Englander. Describing Dr. Norval’s “unnatural liking of foreigners,” Mr. Hammerhard says:

he might have been a Roman Catholic, for all we know. That liking was also the cause of the doctor’s sending Isaac to be a good-for-nothing clerk in sinful Washington, among foreigners, when he could have remained in virtuous New England to be a useful farmer” (11).

From this we see that the U.S. native, Dr. Norval, becomes hybridized as both a native-born citizen and a foreigner with unconventional ideas. The region of New England enters the picture as the cultural space where his sense of belonging is called into question.

The boundaries between accepted inhabitant and foreigner further blur when even Mrs. Norval takes on some of the qualities she sees in “foreigners.” Mrs. Norval becomes a veritable “Yankee Popocatepetl” when her impetuous love for Hackwell makes her into one of the “irreverent women with foreign, loose notions” that she despises (174, 177). As Mrs. Norval’s impetuous ideas make her a foreigner to the “pious” New England region, it is ironic that the Spanish Lola becomes more of a citizen than anyone else as

shown by her skillful use of polite social rhetoric. When Lola refuses to tell Mattie her name, Dr. Norval tells Mattie that it is not because she does not understand English, “but not liking your manner, she disdains to answer your question” (21). Lola has the grace of a native speaker to navigate through any social situation and through her silence demands to be treated equally as a citizen, despite her Mexican birth.

Ultimately, with the blurred boundaries between foreigner and citizen, Ruiz de Burton shows that old ways of constructing belonging need to be dismantled. Specifically, we see that just because someone dwells in a certain region, it does not mean that he or she will be an active participant in the region’s culture. Likewise, just because one is born outside of a specific region, it does not mean that he or she cannot espouse many of the region’s cultural beliefs. In terms of the New England culture, this means that “foreigners” can now participate in this elite culture, dismantling its exclusivity. It also means that all New Englanders do not necessarily have a centralized, unified cultural identity if it is a composite of citizens and “foreigners.” Once New England loses its exclusive monopoly on culture, it can now be viewed in relation to other people and places, a relational view that Mrs. Norval is not willing to accept as the embodiment of New England culture.

Mrs. Norval claims New England’s superiority by comparing it to other “lesser” regions of the world. She feels that New England schools are superior to European schools and even Californian diamonds are nothing but shiny rocks compared to the diamonds of New England (9, 34). Mrs. Norval’s belief in the superiority of New England rocks becomes comical when considering that diamonds were not exactly New

England's biggest export. She also lauds New England as the country's moral core, nothing like "sinful Washington" or California with the "natives" that practice cannibalism (9). Mrs. Norval not only sees New England as the nation's cultural center, responsible for instilling values in the rest of the states, but she also views herself as the embodiment of this cultural knowledge. The text's narrator describes this view saying that Mrs. Norval is "the stately matron, always quoted by all her own and the surrounding villages as a pattern of womanly virtues and as a *pink of propriety*" (emphasis in original 134).

Unlike what Mrs. Norval wants to believe, Ruiz de Burton shows that this character is a far cry from a "pink of propriety" when she engages in underhanded dealings to secure Lola's money and prevent Lola's marriage to Julian. Illustrating her hypocrisy, Ruiz de Burton describes her by saying, "this highly proper, rigid stickler for decorum and the Presbyterian Church, derived a new incentive and zest in spending Lola's money" (254). Instead of being the perfectly moral mother, Mrs. Norval fails to represent much of the maternal image at all. When her plans to unite with Reverend Hackwell are thwarted she "indulged in abusive language! She was alone, though or at least nearly so, for she considered her half-dead son as incapable of hearing her, and in fact she had forgotten him for those few moments" (134).

It is bad enough that the "pink of propriety" uses bad language. Worse still for Mrs. Norval and the matronly culture she represents is when her anger causes the "best mother" to forget entirely about her dying son (194). When Emma describes Mrs. Norval saying "Mrs. Norval is a noble woman,—the best Christian, best mother, best everything

I ever did see; and what she does, she does actuated by the best and purest motives. She is perfectly unselfish, and she wishes us to do what is best for us all” and later compares her to the Virgin Mary, Lola responds by saying “Oh, what blasphemy!” (194). The blasphemy for Lola is not in speaking of the Virgin, but instead, comparing the Virgin to someone as lacking in maternal qualities as Mrs. Norval. Ultimately, if Mrs. Norval is portrayed as unfit to embody the ideal maternal image, then what does that say for the New England region that she represents, a space that views itself as the mother of national values and culture? Eventually, we see the location of civilization blurring between New England and Mexico once Dona Medina, the Mexican aristocratic mother, is described as one of the most civilized and maternal characters in the book<sup>5</sup>.

One of the greatest ironies in the text surfaces when it is not the Northern Mrs. Norval, but the Spanish Dona Teresa Medina that actually portrays the sacrificing Mother Mary and the ideal image of maternity (McCullough 149). Her purity is such that she does not wish to see her family after the shame of living for ten years with the “savages” (44). Dona Medina’s maternal sacrifices become evident when Dona Medina commits herself to the chief so that he would relax his hold on Lola, allowing for her escape (45).

In creating a Mexican woman as the maternal ideal, Ruiz de Burton deconstructs the

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<sup>5</sup> I recognize that “civilized” and “maternal” are terms that should be distinguished from one another to avoid problematic slippage between separate concepts of femininity. However, in nineteenth century women’s writing, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar note that such concepts were often intertwined and interchangeable. Not having to work, the “civilized” upper-class woman had the luxury of free time in which she could pass on her values and virtues to those around her. A working woman did not have this luxury, but could still “mimic the characteristics of such figures by making herself into a kind of proletarian Madonna who submerged her own interests in those of husband and children” (Gilbert and Gubar 290). If a working woman could not be “angelically delicate or gracefully regal” she could at least be maternal, bringing her somewhat closer to the civilized lady (Gilbert and Gubar 290). I choose to explore the notions of civilization and maternity in the historical sense using them as closely related entities, but also recognizing that such conflation should always be questioned.

notion of New England as the center for righteous, maternal, civilizing values. Suddenly, maternity is hybridized as a New England ideal that becomes Spanish in form. Illustrating this reversal of the immoral Latin American woman and the pious New Englander, Sanchez and Pita note that “it is through this counterpoised discourse of ‘latinidad’ articulated in *Who Would Have Thought It?* that the novel denounces Anglo-Saxon ‘barbarism’ and corruption during the Civil War era, turning the tables and refuting the standard stereotypes applied to Latinos” (lvii).

Aside from challenging New England’s role as the nation’s moral mother, Ruiz de Burton’s text also challenges New England’s abolitionist image and the idea that regions can have a monopoly on cultural concepts. Just as hybridized identities can be transient between many regions, cultural movements like abolitionism can also exist in a variety of spaces. Illustrating the myth of Northern abolitionism and racial equality, Mrs. Norval says that no New England white girl would be willing to wait on a black person when Dr. Norval mentions servants for Lola, negating the idea of a more egalitarian North. Additionally, Mrs. Norval’s attitude toward freed slaves shows that she is far from a civil rights advocate. Describing Mrs. Norval’s attitude, the narrator says that she “won’t give the previous slaves trying to raise money to free their family a penny” (47). When Lola arrives, she is treated no better than the freed slaves. Her status as a human being is compromised when she is compared to rocks and animals. It is as if she were equivalent to one of Dr. Norval’s fossils when Mattie cries, “Goodness! What a specimen” (15). Later Mattie says, “having exhausted the mineral kingdom, [Mr. Norval] is about to begin with the animal, and this is our first specimen” (16).

Lola's "blackness" not only causes the family to treat her like a "specimen," it also gives them the idea that she carries dirt and disease. Mrs. Norval refuses to let Lola near Julian during his illness for fear that she will contaminate him. Describing the unusual spots on her skin she says, "but as the doctor says that she is not an Indian, then those ugly spots can't be accounted for, except on the theory that they are some disease" (107). Instead of tolerating racial difference, the New England Norval family actually reinscribes colonial rhetoric of seeing the Other as a threat to health and hygiene, ultimately compromising their region as a space that values racial equality. Anne McClintock illustrates this colonial mindset that views blackness as a threat to health in presenting a soap advertisement with the words "the first step towards lightening the White Man's burden is through teaching the virtues of cleanliness" sprawled across the top (33). The Norval women are actually closer to espousing this colonial way of thinking than the abolitionists' mindset.

Ruiz de Burton further shows that New England is not the center of virtuous abolitionism by juxtaposing it with the U.S. colonialism of Mexico and Western regions. The New England notion of moral superiority extends to the West as seen through the Norvals' discriminating opinions about Western inhabitants. Jose Aranda argues that the Norvals are products of nineteenth-century thinking that viewed Mexicans as "morally unfit to be citizens" (101). Lavana shows that she sees Mexicans as immoral and not to be trusted when she says that Lola "is a good Mexican, surely, and knows how to put the dagger to the throat" (180). Instead of seeing the Norval family as inhabitants of a region



that values racial equality, we see a family and their space as being superior only in their ability to espouse the colonial mindset.

Finally, Ruiz de Burton counters the New England-centric vision that gives the geographic region cultural superiority with descriptions of Rebel empathy. Ironically, it is not the virtuous, liberating North that supports freedom in *Who Would Have Thought It?* Instead it is the Southern general who works to free Isaac from the prison camp after the Union politicians in Washington abandon him to die. The Southern general empathizes with Isaac's state when, "casting a glance over Isaac's tattered garments and emaciated limbs, he thought how that poor fellow must have suffered, and remembered his own dreary life in Northern prisons" (269). According to Jose Aranda, Ruiz de Burton's text shows a New England that cared very little for the actual well being of its soldiers. Instead it was only concerned with maintaining its control over the South and its position as cultural center. He says that the Civil War is about "saving New England as the symbolic birthplace of America...civil war was nothing less than Manifest Destiny aimed at the South and the prize was a New England hegemony from coast to coast" (107-108).

Juxtaposing an empathic South with a selfish, insensitive North, Ruiz de Burton challenges the idea of New England as the standard for morality. Instead, she brings the margins of the West and the South to the center as new spaces of morality, destabilizing previous hierarchies of regional importance and encouraging a hybridized national identity (Bost 10). In terms of newness for this nation, it means that "the national narrative is the site of ambivalent identification; a margin of the uncertainty of cultural meaning" (Bhabha 239). Within this ambivalent narrative, marginalized communities can

now contribute to the national narrative instead of monolithic cultural entities dictating all standards of national morals.

### **Race, Class and Gender in Relationship to Cultural Geography in Ruiz de Burton's Text**

When Ruiz de Burton positions the South as the center of morality instead of New England, she challenges the previous hierarchy of regional superiority that New England assumed during the Civil War. However, one must not forget that the Civil War was not only about regional identification but also concerned with racial issues (Goldman 91). Drawing from the notion of cultural geography, this section shows how a racially hybridized identity like Lola's can be understood through a regional framework as she transitions through many social spaces. This transitioning not only speaks to racial hybridity, but also explores how gendered and class categories are dismantled as well.

Out of all the social categories that Ruiz de Burton challenges, the most prevalent is racial stratification. A primary example of the way that her text destabilizes stringent racial identifications occurs through Lola Medina's various racial identities. The blurring of her racial identities becomes evident as we witness the various spaces that she inhabits, each space redefining her racial identity a bit more. For example, when Lola lives with the Indians, her skin is black, but only temporarily, due to the black dye that the Indians made her rub on her skin to avoid being detected within their tribe. Lola says, "My mother was also made to stain her lovely white skin all black. Once, when the dye had

worn off our faces, we were followed by some soldiers who were encamping near our village. From that time, the Indians never permitted the dye to wear off our faces” (138). When Lola moves in with the Norval family, they view her skin as black and force her to sleep with the Irish servants, using the servant’s space to define her social positioning within the Norval household. Eventually, her social status and racial identification is redefined to white when she is allowed to relocate to her own room. Through this transitioning, readers see a Lola that is neither Indian, black, or white; instead, they witness a character with a transient racial identity that is manifested in various spatial locations.

It is not just the physical appearances of race that mix and morph in *Who Would Have Thought It?*. The text also demonstrates moments where racial behavioral stereotypes jumble together as well. As seen previously when Dona Teresa becomes the ideal maternal figure, Ruiz de Burton takes the stereotype of the Latina woman as morally impure and sexually charged and turns it on its head, ascribing such characteristics not to Lola, but to the pious New England Matron, Mrs. Norval. It is Mrs. Norval who pines for Reverend Hackwell before confirming her husband’s death. Hackwell describes Mrs. Norval’s affection for him saying:

She loved me—she says—for my virtues, eloquence, and edifying example as a minister of the gospel, and my patriotism in leaving my sacred calling to offer my services and my life to my bleeding country. She says all this to justify herself in her own eyes—the hypocrite—for being so ready to fall in love within two weeks after she heard of the death of her husband. (211)

Throughout the novel, Ruiz de Burton not only emphasizes Mrs. Norval's heightened passion, she conversely emphasizes Lola's moral and sexual purity. Lola never makes sexual advances towards Julian, despite their mutual amorous feelings. Nor, does she accept Hackwell's advances. When the New England Mrs. Norval resists behavioral mores and the outsider, Lola, adheres to them most stringently, we see how regional morality has given way to hybridized figures that resist stringent geographical classification.

While racial hybridity is arguably the most prevalent example of hybridization in Ruiz de Burton's text, it is impossible to consider this concept without at least a minor allusion to class and gender. While these cultural categories become producers and products of their regional locations, they also interact with each other, blending and hybridizing as determinants of identity. Showing the interrelatedness of such social categories within regionalism, Fetterley and Pryse say, "when we turn to examine regionalist texts...we find an emphasis on class that nevertheless at various points also raises questions of race" (297). In *Who Would Have Thought It?*, readers see various class and gender identities hybridizing as the characters travel through the specific regions of New York and D.C. Within these regions, stringent identities like divisions between upper/lower class and male/female spheres become blurred, contributing to the text's overall goal of using region to locate various hybridized identities.

In Ruiz de Burton's text, class is as fluid as race, shown through the characters' ability to rapidly change their class positioning. The formerly frugal Mrs. Norval suddenly becomes rich when Dr. Norval brings home a wagon of gold. Reverend

Hackwell becomes equally wealthy when he wins the affections of the now well-off Mrs. Norval. But the text's fluid class constructions are never able to completely distinguish themselves from racial categories. Mrs. Norval tells the Doctor that she has no interest in Lola's race. She only wants to know her position in the house and in society in general when Lola first enter the Norval household (20). Yet, despite her claim to ignore Lola's race, she still won't let Julian marry Lola because she is "black," even though she has a great deal of personal wealth from her mother. Additionally, race and class unite when Dr. Norval insists that people will not call Lola derogatory racial names, as long as she has money (32). The hybridity that develops here is not a merging of white and black or rich and poor but rather white and rich on the one hand and black and poor on the other. As ambiguous social constructions we see notions of class and race complicated rather than separated.

However, just because the social categories of race and class are difficult to separate, it does not mean that hybridized categories of identity lack foundational grounding. On the contrary, Ruiz de Burton, the cultural geographer, shows her readers that aspects of culture such as race and class can be understood within a regional framework. Specifically, Ruiz de Burton uses the region of New York to locate her critique of the American class system. In *Who Would Have Thought It?*, the Norvals go to New York once they access Lola's money. Describing this move, Hackwell says, "I think it is very natural for two young girls with plenty of money to go where they can enjoy it. Moreover, in NY they can make a more suitable marriage. Here, there is no one who either you or I would recommend" (121). According to Hackwell, one's class status

is determined through regional identification. If one wants to be in the upper echelon of society, he or she needs to be in New York. According to Mrs. Norval and Hackwell, the rich need to be surrounded by other wealthy people. Mrs. Norval does not understand mixing between classes as shown when she asks why Lola's mother stayed with the Western Indians. She says, "what was that rich woman doing among savages?" (27).

While Mrs. Norval tries to establish a homogenous class of privilege, Ruiz de Burton shows that the notion of an upper class located within a single region is pure myth. Instead of stemming from a centralized region of wealth, Ruiz de Burton demonstrates that wealth can come from a variety of different regions such as California, Arizona, and Nevada. In her text, the Norvals' wealth comes from "a tributary to the Colorado River," where Lola's mother finds "a very bright, shining pebble. She saw it was a large diamond, though only partly divested of its rough coating" (29). The irony of this source of wealth is that while Mrs. Norval uses it to sustain her image of wealthy New Englander, the riches are actually coming from the very "natives" of the Southwest that she belittles. Sanchez and Pita illustrate this deconstruction of the wealthy New Englander when they say, "the allegorical 'plunder' of the Southwest will create new millionaires back on the East coast and rapidly produce a number of social changes, putting to test and melting in the process a number of supposedly 'essential' social constraints" (xxiii).

Just as *Who Would Have Thought It?* deconstructs the notion of a central wealthy region, the text also breaks down the idea of a single gendered space in the face of malleable gender categories. In breaking down the rigid binary between the masculine,

public and the feminized, private space, we see Ruiz de Burton's regionalist agenda not only challenging specific spatial boundaries, but also the social hierarchies that sustain such boundaries. This navigation between domestic and public spaces begins with a discussion on how to raise Lola, in which Mrs. Norval says, "your next request perhaps will be that I give my consent to send Julian to help the Rebels fight our government" (67). At this point, the domestic issue of how to raise their adopted child becomes blurred with the public space when Mrs. Norval brings up the civil war. Noting this, Mr. Norval says, "why do you insist upon bringing on a political discussion between us?" (67). Ultimately, what develops within Ruiz de Burton's text is a "shifting between these parallel spheres, the political and the domestic" that "enables a transcoding of the two social contracts, metonymically related: marriage (the family formation) and the Constitution (the republic); each governed by its own conventions and boundaries" (Sanchez and Pita x).

As the domestic/political and private/public spaces blur and hybridize, we still see this hybridization located within the spatial framework. An example of the blurring between domestic and national occurs when Mrs. Norval's loss of control over her family parallels the country's loss of control over its Southern region. Specifically, as the country finds itself embroiled in Civil War, Mrs. Norval becomes the "Fallen Republican Motherhood" (Sanchez and Pita xiii). She loses Julian and Reverend Hackwell to Lola, Dr. Norval to Africa, and her daughters to the hedonism of D.C. At this point, she begins to inhabit the "interstitial passage between fixed identifications" as both country and matriarch (Bhabha 5). Since part of this hybridized identity stems from political

identification, it makes sense that *Who Would Have Thought It?* locates this hybridized identity within the Union's capital, Washington. From this regional location, one sees the blurring of domestic and public spatial boundaries

From the onset, Washington is introduced as a place where characters can question the stringent social mores of New England. New England's control over the country's behavior is as ineffective in Washington as Mrs. Norval is at controlling her "gang" towards the end of the novel. Unable to force her conduct codes onto her family in this space, "her gang of unbottled imps, no doubt laughed and skipped about in joy and clapped their hands, knowing that the madam would take them all to Washington, which is a city very congenial to all unbottled little imps, and where the jolly crew would have abundant fun" (148). Free in Washington to reject New England's standards of living, "unbottled little imps" like Lavinia are able to challenge the strict gendered spaces that they dwelled within as New Englanders.

Specifically, while in the region of D.C, we see Lavinia's identity as an inhabitant of the typically private, domestic sphere become hybridized once she enters the public, masculine realm of politics and warfare. Lavinia's journey into the public space begins when she hears the call to war, a call traditionally reserved for the masculine soldier. The novel says, "Lavinia's heart pranced like a war-horse at the sound of martial music, making the chest of the maiden resound with its galloping" (105). The spatial boundaries further disappear when Lavinia carries her domestically oriented tasks into the public realm, making goods for the soldiers such as "beef-tea and jellies and jams in the daytime, and lint and bandages and havelocks at night. They knitted a great number of



stockings also” (105). Lavinia finds a way to make her domestic goods political when they become supplies for Union soldiers.

Later, Lavinia denies her private, familial duties when she leaves the ailing Julian to care for soldiers in Washington, physically entering the public space of D.C. The private/public spaces further blur together when while in Washington, Lavy asserts her familial call onto the political world, struggling to rescue her brother Isaac from the politicians that wish to keep him imprisoned in the South. The novel’s tone is ironic when it notes that Lavinia cannot understand sacrificing her brother to the “wicked traitors” because “it is not expected that *ladies* would exactly appreciate those ideas, they being beyond their spheres of thought” (114, 115). Lavinia is indeed beyond her “sphere of thought” by inserting her domestic duties onto the traditionally male political space, but the irony we see in the narrator’s tone lets readers know that this transgression is not necessarily negative. Instead, Lavinia’s entrance into the political scene allows her to explore “the reality of the feminist intervention as both micropolitical and macropolitical” (Radhakrishnan 193). Hers is the hybridized gender identity in which domestic politics mesh with national politics, all within the geocultural region of Washington.

While Lavinia’s hybridization of domestic and public spaces is not necessarily negative, it is also not an easy task to for her to accomplish. Despite Lavinia’s efforts to free her brother, she still faces patriarchal resistance from male politicians. The text illustrates this resistance saying, “Lavinia was becoming very tired, and was reflecting that no matter how much a woman, in her unostentatious sphere may do, and help to

do...after all she is but an insignificant creature, whom a very young man may snub, simply because he wears very shiny brass buttons and his uncle is in Congress” (146). But the novel ends showing that the patriarchal resistance is not entirely directed towards Lavinia as a female. Julian also struggles with the politicians who want to dismiss him from the army. Like Lavinia, he is unable until the very last moment to receive any personal attention from the government, facing mountains of bureaucracy and governmental red tape to have his dismissal order rescinded. In the end, one is left with the impression that the government is not so much a patriarchal weapon against Lavinia, but rather an organization that has lost its ability to listen to its constituents. Nevertheless, her marked journey into the public sphere is notable, especially when considering how she uses tasks honed in the domestic sphere to enter into the public/political realm. What remains after she defines herself as a Union nurse in Washington is a blurred boundary between the private and the public space, showing how Washington as a physical location can provide a space for hybridized metaphorical regions.

### **Regionalism as a Bridge for Hybridized Identities**

In her book, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Anzaldúa cites a poem by Gina Valdes that reads:

Ha tantísimas fronteras  
que dividen a la gente,  
pero por cada frontera  
existe también un puente.

There are so many borders  
that divide the people,  
but for every border,  
there also exists a bridge (my translation 107)

This poem presents physical location's ability to ground hybridized cultural signifiers. The bridge does not inhibit the third space's presence. Instead, it locates two contradicting cultures within a physical space. In a very similar way, regionalism, a literature about place and space, can give hybridized identities a place to negotiate their hybridity. Using regions such as New England, Mexico, New York, and Washington, Maria Amparo Ruiz de Burton sets up a framework to explore various hybridized identities caught between the polarities of nationalism, race, class, and gender. Beginning with an exploration of a country fractured by civil war and ending with analysis of individuals blurring social categories, the text's regions give such hybridized identities a framework in which country and characters can negotiate their hybridized existence.

While Ruiz de Burton's work is beneficial to Chicano literary studies, her ability to understand regional difference and simultaneously break down the stratifying categories of race, class, and gender makes her literary approach applicable on a broader level. She anticipates perfectly Bhabha's measures for evaluating global progress perfectly, exploring "how globalizing nations deal with 'the difference within' – the problems of diversity and redistribution at the local level, and the rights and representations of minorities in the regional domain" (xv). Ultimately, Ruiz de Burton's text serves as a valuable resource for understanding how hybridized identities can be

understood through regional identification. She shows us that after the monolithic structures fall, what remains is a space that where there are few absolutes, only a bridge of hybridity uniting formerly static cultural, racial, gendered, and economic hierarchies.

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## LITERARY HUMANITARIANISM AND THE SHORT STORY: UNDERSTANDING HOW GENRE AND ETHICS INTERSECT IN “THE GOLD VANITY SET”

Critical debate has recently increased over the ethics of readers' approaches to texts about social injustices and human suffering. According to Joseph Slaughter, “reading anticipates a sentimental revolution that might obviate the ordinary sorts of revolutionary violence” (3). Slaughter implies that through sentimental identification with literary characters, readers might use literature as a vehicle to foster an understanding of others that would reduce violent conflict. Slaughter further asserts that to create the most effective empathy, readers should not position themselves as the sufferer but instead as “the humanitarian, the subject position of one who already recognizes the human dignity of the wounded and attempts to relieve the suffering” (6). I agree with Slaughter's assertion that the reader needs to be conscious of his or her relationship to the sufferer to maximize an empathetic relationship. However, I assert that the reader should also be conscious of his or her relationship to the text that tells the sufferer's story. I propose that interrogating assumptions about literary form can ultimately result in a more ethical interpretation of texts pertaining to human suffering and social injustices. Ideally, this analysis will “work out ways of describing the social modes of existence of genres,” a mode of existence that is easily lost when critics focus too intently on formal studies and forget that art can also be a vehicle of social change (Pratt 92). When dealing with genres as social constructs, Jane Tompkins argues that readers should not seek the uniqueness of



textual works. Instead, one should look at how texts engage with a “storehouse of commonly held assumptions, reproducing what is already there in a typical and familiar form” (xvi).

Breaking down assumptions about structural form is no easy task for short story readers; the short story bears the weight of structural ideals such as brevity, totality, character development, and limited temporality. I argue that when one breaks down these assumptions a greater reflective space<sup>1</sup> can develop, stimulating a more ethical connection between the reader and the short story’s characters. While authors can certainly challenge “commonly held assumptions” about form by manipulating the reader’s expectations and creating different forms, the reader must participate in this conversation between text and author for these challenges to materialize. Without the reader’s reception of a text, there is no vehicle to transform the writer’s ideas into social practice. Tiffany Lopez says it best when she writes, “readers must also want to change the system...writing alone has limited impact” (Tricksterism 41).

Yet I believe that certain approaches to reading texts can make it easier to “change the system.” In analyzing how a reader’s textual analysis can affect the text’s ethical merit, I use poststructural theory to break down notions of short story form such as brevity and a reading experience that privileges immediacy. I also look at the dangers of “slice-of-life” thinking, specifically arguing against using short stories as a glimpse into the lives of suffering characters. I then argue that the condensed space of the short

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<sup>1</sup> By reflective space, I mean a mindset that is free of preconceived notions about form and open to the possibility of creating a more empathetic connection with the text.

story setting and the limited temporality should also be considered when evaluating how ethically a text portrays a character. For the purpose of this study, I rely upon a short story by Maria Cristina Mena called “The Gold Vanity Set.” Through an analysis of this story, I show how one can dissect its form to obtain a more ethical reading.

### **Moral, Cultural and Historical Foundations of “The Gold Vanity Set”**

“The Gold Vanity Set’s” brevity, character development, and temporality present a textual ambiguity that demands exploration. One must not only view Mena’s story as a particular work but also as part of the entire short story genre that can benefit from a discussion about standards of form. Norman Friedman has criticized short story studies as research whose lack of “an accepted set of procedures” has hindered its progress (12). Without a standard developmental protocol, or a way to categorize ideas about form, the short story has gained the reputation of being a “training ground and experimental genre” (Pratt 99).

In an attempt to redress the lack of analysis about short story form, I propose critiquing the short story form and its relation to the story’s ethical merit. I base my definition of “ethical” on Tina Chen’s research on ethical knowledge. Chen defines “ethical” reading as one that increases agency for the story’s characters and addresses questions such as “the nature of artistic responsibility,” and “feelings of empathy or guilt.” “Ethical” reading should also evaluate “the judgments we make as readers” and “the more difficult representational and political problems of literature” (161). Rather

than proposing a moral code for reading, I argue that readers' "codes" of form potentially undermine the very "human dignity of the wounded" that narratives may convey.

Additionally, many critics hesitate to claim an ethical code for reading since such codes may not even exist. It is arguable that true "ethical clarity" is often unattainable (Baxi 9); we as humanitarians will always struggle to find the "right" way to discuss others and answer the single question: "what rights ought human beings to have?" (Baxi 9). Ultimately, readers must always decide for themselves whether or not they wish to evaluate the ways they approach a text. No code can ever dictate such self-critique. However, a dismantling of historical assumptions about form creates a space in which readers can try to engage ethically with short stories if they choose to do so.

Short stories become particularly interesting for the reader seeking an ethical way to explore the rights of an oppressed group. As a genre that has always been examined in relation to the longer novel, it has often been marginalized because of its "lesser" length. Illustrating this marginalization, Mary Louise Pratt says, "relations of long to short coincide with relations of unmarked to marked, or major to minor, of greater to lesser, even 'mature' to 'infant'" (188). Marginalized because of their length, short stories may create a space for oppressed groups, fostering a mutual empathy that can create agency for both. Within this space of mutual marginalization, "there seem to develop dialectical correspondences between minor or marginal genres and what are evaluated as minor or marginal subjects" (Pratt 188).

Aside from offering a venue to explore the marginalized voice, those interested in human dignity will find short stories pertinent to discussions about humanity and its

cultures. “Cultures exist in the middle of short stories,” asserts Will Wright. They are ways to explain the unknown such as religion, destiny, and progress (146). Because they represent such varying aspects of human culture, short stories with their different forms and functions are somewhat difficult to define. For the purpose of this exploration, I differentiate the short story from general literature by defining it as “short narrative fiction in prose” (Friedman 15).

Specifically, I locate this study about “short narrative fiction in prose” within a story by Mexican-American writer, Maria Cristina Mena entitled “The Gold Vanity Set.” On the surface, this particular story follows many conventions of the short story form, such as brevity, focused character development, and a distinguishable textual temporality. However, it is notable how these conventions work against themselves, creating a stereotypical portrayal of indigenous Mexicans that simultaneously voices concerns about the oppression that foreign influence imposed upon this group. “The Gold Vanity Set” is also interesting for the way it works within strict publishing guidelines that ensure the mass appeal of literary stories, while concurrently challenging Mexican stereotypes that the masses demanded.

Utilizing literary forms that readers of the *American Magazine* and *The Century Magazine* would recognize such as romance and travel stories, Mena’s stories often had to conform to the standards of the magazines marketing her work (Doherty xi). Writing to engage an “Anglo audience with a passion for travel and the exotic,” Mena’s story, “The Gold Vanity Set” creates a picture of a quaint Mexican town. Within this town, the main characters Petra and Manuelo live a quiet life as workers in the local inn where Petra

serves drinks and Manuelo plays his guitar. This world is eventually disrupted by a loud group of American tourists, with Miss Young as their leader. After the tourists leave the inn, Petra finds Miss Young's gold vanity set, which she then offers up to the Virgin Mary in hopes that this deity will protect her from further domestic abuse. By giving her audience depictions of rural Mexican life, Mena captivates her readers with exotic descriptions of far-off places, only to shake them up with revolutionary depictions of Mexicans breaking out of their stereotypical molds (Lopez, Nineteenth-Century American 68). Within this ambiguous portrayal of the indigenous group, they become the exotic Indian stereotype and/or a revolutionary group that resists oppressive foreign influence, depending on how one interprets the work.

This ambiguous tension has only recently been attributed to Mena's work. After her first story was published in 1913, many critics rejected her texts because of the many indigenous stereotypes the stories presented. Specifically, during the Chicano literary revival of the 1960's, critics such as Raymund Paredes did not feel that her work modeled the appropriate opposition to stereotypes for the goals of the Chicano movement (Garza-Falcon 136). In the introduction to Mena's collection of stories, Amy Doherty writes, "because she wrote for a critical group of editors who expected an appealing version of life in Mexico, her stories were largely dismissed in studies of Chicano literature" (vii). This need to write Mexicans as easily definable stereotypes for American readers ultimately compromised her status in the Chicano canon.

However, Mena could not have anticipated the goals of the Chicano movement while writing in the earlier part of the twentieth century. Instead of reflecting proto-

Chicano ideals, Mena's work is a product of her cultural surroundings. Writing during what I call the "Greaser" phase of American stereotypes, Mena was working within a culture that produced films portraying Mexican characters as nothing more than delinquents and threats. From 1908 to 1914, Hollywood produced many films about relationships between Americans and Mexicans including *The Greaser's Gauntlet* (1908), *Tony the Greaser* (1911), *Bronco Billy and the Greaser* (1914), and *The Greaser's Revenge* (1914). During the early twentieth century, images of Mexicans as "vanquished villains and love-smitten ladies" prevailed (Cortes 55).

As part of a culture that accepted these stereotypical images of Mexicans, Mena might not have had the luxury of disavowing such stereotypes completely at the risk of losing her audience. Instead, she works within the bounds of such stereotypes and "distinguishes her stories by humanizing her characters, giving them dignity, and portraying them in complex ways rather than as merely one-dimensional caricatures" (Lopez, *Nineteenth-Century American* 68). By portraying her characters in "complex ways," I argue that Mena's work deserves to be reconsidered as a part of the Chicano literary canon based upon how her characters simultaneously uphold and resist stereotypical figures. Instead of viewing Mena's characters as essentialized figures that manifested Anglo desires, critics should value the ambiguity surrounding her characters for its ability to portray the cultural tension between Mexicans and U.S. inhabitants in the early twentieth century.

Regarding this tension, the "Greaser" stereotype was really only a symptom of a much larger cultural strain between the U.S. and Mexico. During the era of Mena's

writing, the U.S. was continually trying to acquire more Latin American territory through the guise of “Pan-Americanism.” Acting under the authority of declarations such as the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, the Monroe Doctrine, and the Platt Amendment, U.S. businesses tried to expand into foreign trade (Lopez, Tricksterism 24). Critic Tiffany Lopez argues that the emphasis on foreign development was a way for the U.S. to divert attention away from domestic strife such as strikes, monopolies, and dissatisfaction with labor conditions (Tricksterism 37). Mena is not oblivious to the conflicts that arise from the U.S.’s neocolonial acquisition of Mexican resources. Her texts demonstrate sensitivity to the presence of foreign figures in Mexico. Much of her sensitive treatment of Mexican/U.S. conflict may even stem from her own existence as a privileged Mexican who immigrated to the U.S. during the Mexican Revolution.

While biographical information about Maria Cristina Mena is scanty, we can still confirm that her life was filled with as many contradictions and conflicts as the competing cultural forces around her. What is known is that Mena’s family had the resources to move Mena at age 14 to New York to escape the Mexican Revolution (Lopez, Tricksterism 24). Once in the U.S., Mena had the privilege of moving within literary circles with the likes of D.H. Lawrence and Aldous Huxley (Garza-Falcon 137). However, at the same time, Mena was confronting the negative images about Mexicans prevalent during her time and always aware of her status as a Mexican American immigrant (Lopez, Tricksterism 24). From this awareness about her ambiguous position in society, Mena came to represent a “position of transculturation,” dividing her time and her identity between her two cultural backgrounds (Lopez, Nineteenth Century American

64). Perhaps it was this cross-cultural existence that aided in Mena's ambiguous portrayal of her Mexican characters, as both stereotypical figures and as revolutionary figures that challenge such characterization.

As she manipulates stereotypical figures to challenge the "Greaser" image, Mena's text portrays the roles of Mexican women during the revolution, resistance to U.S. commercialism, Mexican social codes, classism, and prejudices against the indigenous (Doherty viii). In other words, Maria Christina Mena "anticipates stereotypes of Mexicans, even with complicity in some derogatory prejudices. [Her] narrative represents a complex approach to Mexican culture and class differences as well as to racial relationships" (Garza-Falcon 136). I would argue that Mena's text also engages in the complexity of gender roles during the Mexican Revolution. According to Lopez, Mena uses the female figure to show resistance and endurance in the face of colonialism (Nineteenth Century 70). The ambiguity of Mena's intricate portrayal of class, race, gender, and cultural nuances makes "The Gold Vanity Set" a good story to consider when exploring ethical reading. Deconstructing formal assumptions about the short story could create a framework to analyze Mena's textual ambiguity and could help restore Mena's place to the Chicana canon as a writer that challenges stereotypes of indigenous Mexicans. Furthermore, deconstructing assumptions about the short story form with respect to Mena's text might elucidate a more ethical approach to reading short stories in general.

However, before delving into how Mena's text elucidates the ethics of reading, it is beneficial to see a small sample of Mena's ambiguous writing at work and the tension



that results from such ambiguity. One of the most ambiguous moments in the text regarding the portrayal of Mexican Indians occurs when Miss Young, the American tourist, attempts to take Petra's picture. Miss Young sees the beautiful Petra and declares, "I positively must have her picture" (3). However, when Petra sees the "little black instrument," she rebels "with the dumb obstinacy of the Indian" (3, 4). Petra's "dumb obstinacy" can initially be read as the stereotypical behavior of an Indian that does not have the sense to pose for a harmless photo. However, Mena's language does not solidify this stereotype. Instead, the story's language at times toys with supporting Petra. Like Petra, readers do not know at first that Miss Young's photography equipment is harmless. It is only described as a "little black instrument" (3). How can we fault Petra for fearing an unknown object that we ourselves might not recognize? Furthermore, instead of being "dumb," Petra may be wise to resist the American technology that could potentially alter the stability of her rural lifestyle.

These questions are important to ask because they will help decide if Mena's text creates an ethical portrayal of indigenous Mexicans when her ambiguous language fails to give readers a true answer. To truly understand the ethical nature of Mena's text, one must dissect her slippery language and determine if the narrative voice functions to grant agency to Petra as seen when she is described as being "as strong as wire" (1). Is this an indication of Petra's strength and her ability to resist Miss Young's attempt to "capture" her image through technology? Or, is this voice objectifying Petra as a wire, a tool that can be used to construct the colonizer's ideal image of the typical Mexican? Does the narrator create an empathetic connection between reader and character by revealing

Petra's innermost thoughts as seen when Petra first encounters the vanity saying, "novelty of novelties to Petra! The largeness of her eyes, the paleness of her cheeks" (4)? Or, is this tone condescending and patronizing as it mocks the Petra's fascination with a seemingly trivial object?<sup>2</sup>

Mena's ambiguous language holds until the very end of the story when readers are still left wondering if Petra is a figure of mockery or of agency. The narrative closes with Manuelo singing, "into the sea, because it is deep, I always throw the sorrows that his life so often gives me" (11). Does this song mean that Petra should hide her sorrows in the sea and bear the beatings or does this song mean that Petra can rejoice because a greater force will manage her sorrows? Finally, in a story that exposes the suffering of a beaten wife, why is the abusive husband given the last word? Such a literary tactic asks if the narrator is any better than Manuelo with regards to silencing Petra's voice. Ultimately, it is up to the readers to decide what type of ethical merit they wish to attribute to this narrative voice.

The narrator's words are not only ambiguous in their portrayals of Manuelo and Petra; the lack of linguistic clarity extends to other characters as well, such as Don Ramon. In one sense, Don Ramon is portrayed as the affluent landowner as seen when

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<sup>2</sup> It is possible that the tone rendering "novelties of novelties to Petra!" is both condescending and agency-granting if one were to investigate Mena's use of ironic humor. Perhaps Mena presents Petra as infantile in her worship of shiny objects in order to hint at the opposite, that Petra is actually far more aware of the object's potential as a religious symbol than Miss Young will ever be. Humor is an aspect of Mena's linguistic ambiguity that deserves to be acknowledged and while the space of this paper does not allow for an extensive exploration of Mena's humoristic language, it does merit notice. Through Mena's use of humor we see the "subtext of anguish and frustration" that comes with writing for a "subordinate group in a culture that prides itself on equality," yet bases its measures of humanity on "stereotypes rather than human beings" (Walker x).

his tenants greet him with a “respectful: Viva Don Ramon” (3). However, Don Ramon becomes just another *peon* that the Americans use to facilitate their Mexican tour when the narrator says, “Don Ramon, the planter, had undertaken to escort these, his guests, through the pueblo, but had found himself patiently bringing up the rear of the procession” (3). Through the narrator’s ambiguous language, one can see that Don Ramon is the landowner and he is the peon. The difficult task at hand is deciding not only how we feel about the character but also deciding how ethically the text portrays this character, a task that might be aided with the help of a poststructural analysis.

### **Ethical Characterization Within a Poststructuralist Framework**

If one is to serve as literary humanitarian, he or she must first locate the human figures, or the “humanity” in the literary work. For this reason, I focus a great deal of analytical attention upon “The Gold Vanity Set”’s characters. Carlos Cortes argues that there are two types of images to examine when trying to connect with human literary figures. He says that the first image is the actual image of the character portrayed in the text. The second is the character’s image that the reader actually takes away with him or her from the text. Critic Victor Haines presents a similar vision when he says that a text offers two kinds of worlds to its reader. First, it offers the “physical embodiment of the text immediately present to the interpreter” (35); it also has the ability to offer an unrestricted world where the reader is free to re-imagine the text contextualized by history and culture (35).

The only problem, which both Cortes and Haines recognize, is that there is often a discrepancy between the formal textual images and the freer world that is open to cultural and historical consideration. Initially, having a world where the images are able to form within the confines of their textual borders seems beneficial for artistic development. More specifically, this pretend world allows for aesthetics without morality (Haines 36). Illustrating this freedom paradoxically restricted by form, Victor Haines says, “in these virtual worlds of innocence, there is only the positive goal of winning or enjoying; beauty is truth, truth beauty, that is all that can be known in such a closed world where there is only the innocent good and no evil in losing a game or failing to appreciate an artistic arrangement” (36). In this literary world, readers have no responsibility to consider the social impact of the text. While art for art’s sake offers a certain aesthetic appeal, Haines argues that this purely formal world is unrealistic to imagine since such worlds are essentially products of human creators. As such, literary texts can never truly escape the culture, history, and morality of the human artist (36). Furthermore, “humans are signifying creatures...human culture is a system of sign systems, and that the source and pattern for these systems is language” (Keeseey 350). Ultimately, Cortes and Haines ask, how can we understand these systems of language without acknowledging the human culture that sustains them?

Simply put, we cannot avoid acknowledging the humanity in art that humans create. For this reason, a reasonable place to begin textual analysis is with the characters that embody human cultures and their signifying systems. Yet, how does a reader find the appropriate balance between viewing characters as formal, literary tools and viewing

characters as representations of human suffering? With respect to the reader's role, how does one place himself or herself in the position of humanitarian without sacrificing aesthetics, or value aesthetics without sacrificing the text's social value?

Poststructuralism offers a solution to the discrepancy between formal analysis and the analysis that seeks to engage with characters as humans. By using poststructural beliefs to deconstruct assumptions about literary forms such as the short story, I hope to further the reader's ability to relate to suffering characters. But before one can see how poststructural analysis can aid the connection between character and reader, one must first address the notion that "the autonomous, rational, unified 'individual' posited by most philosophical systems is a fiction" (Keeseey 350).

Clearly, the idea of forming a connection with a literary character becomes more difficult if this character has a fractured identity. Illustrating this difficulty, Docherty says "the totality of a supposedly enlightened truth or real essence of character is denied as a result of the proliferation of narratives which contradict such a totality" (143) While the absence of a solidified self makes an empathetic connection more difficult between reader and character, this notion of a transient existence actually lends itself perfectly to an analysis of Mena's ambiguous portrayal of indigenous figures. Mena's simultaneous portrayal of the indigenous Mexican as the stereotypical "Indian" and as a figure that challenges such stereotype resists an essentialized indigenous identity. This resistance to essentialization allows the characters to exist "not as essences but in relation to each other through difference" (Docherty 140). When characters' identities are allowed to develop

through difference, not through an essentialized center, the reader is encouraged to reject the essential and seek the unique aspects of humanity that bring characters to life.

It is also important to remember that even poststructuralism can take the form of a textual assumption that merits deconstructing. Ultimately, readers must be aware that humanity can be lost in theory just as easily as it can get lost when readers approach texts with certain formal standards. I rely on it only as a reminder to avoid seeking textual “meaning” that could potentially limit the ethical portrayal of characters. To truly engage with a text’s characters, we must look directly to the source of their portrayal, the text. As Cristina Mejia says, developing an ethical relationship with other humans “is a task not for theory, but for genres such as ethnography, the journalist’s report, the comic book, the docudrama, and especially the novel” (xvi). I agree that when it comes to theory and texts, texts are the primary vehicle for enabling the reader to behave as a humanitarian. I would add, however, that the short story should also be added to Mejia’s list of texts that encourage an understanding of differences. With the many ideas of formal standards that readers bring to short stories, the story is one of the most complicated forms from the above list. However, “The Gold Vanity Set” shows us that when expectations about form are called into question, the short story can become an exceptional vehicle for fostering a human connection between reader and character.

### **Short Story Immersion**

Of the many expectations that readers have for short stories, brevity is probably the most prevalent. While no one can debate that short stories are by nature of a shorter length than novels, a critical question arises over what kind of textual distance this brevity creates for the reader trying to connect with the text (O'Rourke 195). Edgar Allan Poe praises short stories for their length, saying that the short narrative allows one to engage entirely with the story without having this immersion interrupted by "worldly interests." This lack of interruptions ultimately creates a certain "totality" for the short story (525).

However, I view this immersion in a slightly different manner; I consider the short story reading experience one that asks readers to "contemplate what they experience while experiencing it" (O'Rourke 201). This type of textual immersion demands contemplation as instantaneous as the reading experience itself. Instantaneous contemplation of suffering would mean decreasing the distance that the reader can create between him or herself and the characters' pain. Ideally, in Mena's story, this diminished distance could work to heighten the reader's connection with Petra's suffering and further enable the reader to empathize with her plight as an abused woman and as an objectified character.

However, while this lack of interruption may generate empathy, it could also result in an unethical approach to the short story interpretation by diminishing the reader's reflective space. I return to the initial example of Mena's ambivalent language as a way to show how a lack of reflective space for the short story could alter a reader's interpretation of the text. If one were to judge Petra based upon the reader's initial

perception, he or she would conclude that Petra is indeed reacting to the camera with the “dumb obstinacy of the Indian” (4). It is only when one takes the time to reflect on the subtleties of Mena’s text that Petra’s agency starts to develop as a character who resists the colonial control of a foreign power. Imposing their authority, the Americans “invade” Petra’s inn and take control of her environment when the patrons jump up to greet the Americans “like marionettes pulled by one string” (8). In seeing how the Americans assume power over her world, perhaps Petra is wiser than the rest of the “marionettes” for resisting the dominance that the Americans’ wealth and technology assert.

A certain reflective space also allows the reader to review his or her initial impression of Miss Young and the social hierarchies that she supposedly imposes. On the surface, Miss Young is depicted as the prototype of American femininity, a femininity that while subordinate to a patriarchal system, still dominates “lesser” females of the indigenous class. Once Petra obtains the vanity set, she tries to decorate herself in a manner similar to “the American *senorita* of the brave looks, the black box, and the golden treasure” (5). While Petra originally looks naïve and foolish for not understanding the “golden nest” with an “ivory tint and a puff,” further reflection reveals the opposite; Petra is actually the more worldly of the two women. Unlike Miss Young, who views the vanity set as an extension of her outward appearance, Petra’s “concept of it was not simple... Truly the gold treasure was blessed and the red paste was as holy as its smell, which reminded her of church” (5). Here, Mena subtly critiques “simple” analysis when she shows the depth of Petra’s religious fervor in contrast to Miss Young’s interest in her outward appearance. This social critique demands further reflection, much as the gold



vanity set demands further analysis as more than a cosmetic trinket. Without allowing a space for reflection on Petra's character, readers might miss the subtler critiques of foreign influence that Mena issues through Miss Young and the resulting agency that Petra develops as she subverts the hierarchy of civilized American over the "simple" indigenous Mexican.

Instead of thinking of the short story as a literary structure whose form denies reflective space, it might be beneficial to think the opposite, using the short story's brevity as a catalyst for further contemplation. According to Austin Wright, desire for additional reflection is inherent in the short story's nature. He says that the reader's need for completion and closure is always disturbed by the short story's rapid ending and by the many questions that a story might not have time to answer. These unanswered questions could perpetuate an increased desire for reflection from the reader (121). In "The Gold Vanity Set," we are asked to observe two different issues of social injustice. First, the text elicits a broad social critique about the many unethical ways in which those in developed countries (such as Miss Young) stereotype those in developing countries (such as Petra, Manuelo, and the other indigenous people in the inn). Second, the story leaves many questions unanswered about Petra's private life within her domestic space as an abused wife. For example, readers are left wondering, will Petra continue to be abused within this space? Will the Virgin's blessings protect Petra once the Americans leave town? Or will the vanity's magic as an offering wear off, returning Petra to the state where "her last memory going to sleep was sometimes a blow" (2)? Furthermore, will

Petra ever have the strength to resist Manuelo as she resists Miss Young's photography, or will she continue to endure the beatings "because he is my husband" (2)?

Unfortunately, the reader will never learn the answers to these questions since the short story's brevity prevents their development. But I argue that it is not the answers as much as the questioning itself that enables a more ethical textual analysis. Simply by asking whether or not Petra would leave Manuelo grants her the *potential* agency of doing so. According to Upendra Baxi, potential agency is an important part of human rights because "potentialities always mark the triumph of hope over experience even when the languages, logics, and paralogics of human rights also stand marshaled to authorize practices of mass cruelty on a global level" (4). Even though the "languages" of the story might lead the reader to think otherwise, viewing Petra's potential to leave a dangerous situation results in the inalienable right humans have to "protect themselves from what they consider unjust and define for themselves what their individual aims and ends are" (Brown 455).

Additionally, such questioning of Petra's agency might invite readers to engage in reflection about human rights on a larger scale. When the text positions two different ethical issues like the generalized violation of indigenous rights versus the more privatized violation of Petra's rights within her domestic space, it asks readers to contemplate how these two issues fit into the human rights agenda as a whole. This juxtaposition of individual vs. group rights becomes evident when Miss Young asks for Petra's picture. Don Ramón replies by telling Miss Young that Petra is "at your disposition" (2). With Petra at the Americans' disposal, her humanity becomes

synonymous with “tourist attraction,” which compromises her agency as an autonomous individual.

However, Petra’s agency is arguably compromised long before Miss Young’s arrival when Petra is forced to be at the “disposition” of her husband’s erratic and violent mood swings. By juxtaposing the Americans’ unfair treatment of Petra with Manuelo’s unfair treatment, the text asks us how these two power hierarchies may relate to each other. Essentially, we must decide whether women’s rights should be a separate issue within the human rights discourse or whether they have been “a neglected aspects of these global agendas” (Bunch 11). Through this questioning, the reader will have some investment in Petra’s future both in her representation of the indigenous figure and as an abused woman in the domestic space; this investment may result in a greater shared empathy between the reader and the textual characters, establishing the “humanitarian” relationship that Slaughter calls for in his essay.

Mena’s characters can easily be inserted into discourses on rights for indigenous figures and rights for abused women. However, while “The Gold Vanity Set”’s characters are participating in this discourse, it is important that readers do not make them representational figures of such conversations. To make Petra the quintessential abused wife and oppressed Indian is just as bad as perpetuating discriminating stereotypes. In order to avoid this sort of typecasting, it is imperative that readers maintain an awareness of how they insert characters into pre-existing molds. It is when these rigid standards of identity are deconstructed that the truly ethical textual interpretation will surface.

## **Symbolic Characters, Stylistic Compression, and Self-Reflection**

When dealing with the “compressed goal” that many readers equate with the short story’s plot, it is easy to compress characters as well into easy-to-manage stereotypes (May 64). The “compressed goal” of short prose means that more detail is generally given to plot rather than character “details that provide either a cross-section of life or fidelity to the external world” (May xvi, quoting Brander Matthews). It is especially difficult to resist this character compression when the narrative itself seems to objectify its characters for the reader. As we have seen in “The Gold Vanity Set,” Petra is described as being “as strong as wire...with skin the color of new leather” (2). Her qualities are utilitarian tools that will help the short story’s development but not necessarily her own development as a character. A more ethical interpretation of her character would not view Petra as a textual tool.

The empathetic connection between the reader and the text is further damaged when short story characters are objectified not only on a textual level as tools that help the story reach its “goal” but also on a meta-textual level once they are forced to become representational symbols of society’s expectations for certain groups. Because many short stories do not have the space to develop “extensive metonymic detail” that could perpetuate human-to-human empathy, analyses of short stories often relegate characters to symbolic functions, without considering potential alternatives for character development (May 66). Mena was often accused of creating representational Mexican characters to satisfy her American audience’s stereotypical notions of the Mexican

lifestyle (Doherty vii). Under this critique, Petra becomes the exotic and distant object of Mena's picturesque descriptions. Describing Petra, the narrator says:

Her eyes were wonderful, even in a land of wonderful eyes. They were large and mysterious, heavily shaded with lashes which had a trick of quivering nervously...her voice held a hint of barbaric roughness. The dissimulation lurking in that low voice and those melting eyes was characteristic of a race among whom the frankness of the Spaniard is criticized as unpolished. (1)

Mena's descriptions of Petra create a character with a mysterious, orientalized beauty that is both tantalizing and simultaneously threatening because of her "barbaric roughness."

The text's description of Manuelo also attempts to objectify him as a miniature article of entertainment, a veritable Mexican souvenir: "he had a profession, most adorable of professions, playing the miniature guitar made by the Mexican Indians" (1). With the narrator's words, Manuelo becomes an "adorable" and diminutive showcase for Mexican handicrafts. The reader hears the voice of Miss Young in the narrator's descriptions of Petra and Manuelo. The text objectifies them into consumer objects for the tourists' amusement and it is almost as if the text longs to create a snapshot of the characters for Miss Young's photo album. As physical objects, these two characters have lost their humanity and are now incapable of being "the individual ...that rights would empower and thereby produce" (Brown 456). It is up to the reader to explore their potential dignity as characters by refusing to accept these representational figures in lieu of textual people.

Additionally, if the text intentionally creates these stereotypical figures, the reader should consider the ethical nature of these representations, and what function they serve. This consideration is crucial to an ethical analysis of the short story because the “problematic of *representation*” is not only an issue in the short story but also part of the larger human rights discourse (Baxi 6, emphasis in original). Just as the humanitarian must be conscious of his or her representations of suffering people, readers must also be conscious of a text’s representational characters and how this representation has the potential to be consumed by the dominant discourse, denying the dominated a voice of resistance. If we question Petra and Manuelo’s stereotypical descriptions readers will see the dangers of looking for the representational figure. The story shows that by compromising a character’s humanity for the sake of a representational figure, the reader ultimately risks compromising his or her own humanity as well.

When Petra tells Don Ramón the story of “the miracle of how the golden treasure had yielded that which had made her lovely in the eyes of her beloved” and how the Virgin had made her husband “vow that he would never again maltreat her” Miss Young’s response shows she is unable to see Petra as more than a representational figure. She fails to see the spiritual “miracle” as a thing that would add another level of humanity to Petra and instead makes it an issue of alcoholism, a negative trait that allows her to maintain comfortable superiority over Petra. She replies, “well, I just love the temperance cause, but does she want to keep my danglums to make sure of this Manuelo staying on the water wagon?” (9). Ultimately, this lack of empathy or ability to connect with Petra’s human needs reflects badly upon Miss Young. Her capacity to form an emotional

connection with another human is negated and instead of Petra and Manuelo, Miss Young becomes the dehumanized, two-dimensional character of the text. Even the objects in the text themselves caution readers about objectifying characters. The religious medals of the Virgin that the indigenous Mexicans wear are not just pieces of tin and are not representational of an entire population's religious beliefs. Instead we see a figure that means different things to different characters; Petra looks to the Virgin to restore the safety of her domestic space and Manuelo sees the Virgin as a national symbol that "rules the hearts and lives of a people"(6).

In exploring representational characters, readers should not question how characters serve the text, but instead how the text can generate agency for these characters and why the text might portray them as representational if this portrayal is intentional. It is through this questioning that one resists doing potential violence to the text in two ways. First, it helps the reader avoid the tendency to force characters into the role of functional details for the story's greater goal, and secondly, it helps the reader to avoid harming the textual message if the use of representational figures is intentional. One particular way of avoiding the harm of representational figures involves an attempt to understand the characters as people. However, just as with the questioning of representational figures, the reader also needs to be conscious of the ethical problems that can go with attempting to "get to know" short story characters.

Due to the short story's brevity, readers often receive a great deal of background information about a character in a small textual space. For example, in "The Gold Vanity Set," readers learn all about Petra's childhood and her future livelihood in a few brief

sentences. The text describes her past saying, “when Petra was too big to be carried on her mother’s back she was put on the ground, and soon taught herself to walk. In time she learned to...carry her father his dinner” (2). Once she marries Manuelo and starts to work at the inn, the text further compresses Petra’s existence saying, “in six months she had formed the habit of all that surrounded her life” (2). The negative side effect of this abbreviated character development occurs when readers see this compression as more than a stylistic maneuver and believe that the condensed information is all they need to know about the character. Mena’s text asks readers to resist this essentialist thinking through Petra’s eventual ambiguity as a “modern” character. Initially, Petra is portrayed as the “traditional” indigenous figure with her “long, black hair... interwoven with narrow green ribbon” (2). However, as the text progresses, she becomes a hybridization of tradition and modernity; she wears Miss Young’s “modern” makeup and is decorated with a jonquil wreath that evokes indigenous traditions and Manuelo’s “passionate Spanish softened by Indian melancholy”(6). Petra’s hybridization as a traditional/modern character complicates the initial descriptions of her as the typical “Indito” (8) and makes readers wonder if it is possible to ever really “know” a character.

Even if one cannot possibly ever “know” a character, discussing the formation of the Other’s identity is still important; it can provide a space for discussing the reader’s own identity formation and how it relates to the Other (Chen 167). Ideally, self-critique would allow the reader to examine his or her own assumptions about form and to abandon such notions that would do violence to the short story. Mena, realizes the importance of self-evaluation for ethical reading and encourages it through the text’s



emphasis on mirrors. Amy Doherty says that the story's vanity set evokes the "dangers of misperception, of devotion to a materialistic ideal, and of ethnocentricity"(xlvi). Furthermore, it gives the characters "a vision of an alternative life, the tantalizing possibility of meaning, or the enjambment of signification by an image that cannot be captured or finally penetrated" (xlix). When Petra looks into the vanity set, she must reconfigure her identity as one that no longer looks like the ideal woman in Manuelo's songs. Describing this moment, the text says, "she had always imagined that she had red cheeks, like the girls in Manuelo's songs, some of whom even had cheeks like poppies" (4). Armed with the self-knowledge that the mirror offers, Petra shrugs off her preconceived notions of appearance, just as a reader concerned with ethical representations should shrug off his or her own historical conceptions about the short story's totality, symbolic characters, and condensed character development.

### **Short Story Space, Time, and the Denial of Coevalness**

Due to a limited length that prevents movement through a variety of settings, many short stories tend to focus on a single space. I argue that the literary humanitarian should not try to explore how these spaces are "limited" but instead look to see the ways in which these spaces enhance or detract from characters' agency. Geographer Tim Cresswell argues that one of easiest ways to deny agency for a character is to force them into a "moral geography." Specifically, he cautions against Felix Driver's 1988 notion of "moral geographies," or the idea that certain "people, things, and practices belong in

certain spaces, places, and landscapes and not in others.” (128). For example, vagabonds do not have a space in which they can locate a specific morality and therefore are immoral. Another example is the idea that good women are supposed to stay in their home (Cresswell 130). Driver’s “moral geographies,” is just an example of how readers can assign a single meaning to a place/setting that may serve multiple purposes within a short story. If readers can get past the idea that a single space equals a single symbol or meaning, then the potential develops for readers to negotiate the many ways that a setting may or may not aid in a character’s agency.

Returning to Mena’s story, the single setting of an inn in rural Mexico actually allows for a space in which many different power hierarchies are negotiated and questioned. The inn is Petra’s domestic jail where she prays daily for the “‘beneficio’ of a more frequently sober husband” (3). The inn is also a place where she can distinguish herself from the other indigenous people who bury their “foolish Indian things” in the earth when she chooses to hide the vanity set on the roof (5). Paradoxically, while Petra uses the inn as a space to separate herself from the other indigenous Mexicans, it also reinforces her belonging in that group. When the Americans visit, Petra is included in the space that is “the sanctuary of violence...only dignified if it is evoked in its helplessness” (Monsivais 21, 31). This divide between “civilized Americans” and rural Mexicans becomes evident when Miss Young sees Manuelo push Petra. The narrator says, “A shiver and murmur passed through the American ranks, and Don Ramon addressed the young *peon* in vibrant speech in which the words, “*bruto*” and “*imbecile*” were refreshingly distinguishable” (4). After the scuffle, the inn becomes a space where

Manuelo is the “brute,” in direct contrast to the civilized Miss Young who signals for her gang to leave the primitive space after she deems it unfit for her presence.

While the text initially seems to privilege the civilized/uncivilized binary within the inn’s space, the inn simultaneously sets up the framework to turn such a binary on its head. Instead of the indigenous being dehumanized as lesser beings in the civilized/uncivilized binary, it is the Americans who take on animalistic qualities as they enter the inn. The text describes these “foreign” people saying, “the pueblo resounded with foreign phrases and foreign laughter in foreign voices. As a flock of birds the visitors kept together, and as a flock of birds appeared their chatter and their vivacity to the astonished inhabitants” (2). The emphasis of the word “foreign” lets the readers know that clearly, it is the Americans that are in the wrong space and the indigenous that are privileged as the local inhabitants. The “foreigners” are reduced to the animalistic quality of chattering birds as they “invade” the pueblo’s world (3).

After deconstructing all of the various meanings behind a short story’s space, it becomes obvious that readers cannot limit the setting’s meaning if they wish to maximize the text’s ethical potential. As with trying to understand short story characters, readers should not seek the Meaning of a place but instead see place as a framework that can enable a multiplicity of negotiations with power hierarchies. It is only in seeking a setting’s ambiguity that one may truly begin to understand characters as humans that reside in contradictory spaces.

Part of understanding how a single space can enable multiple negotiations of agency for a character involves contextualizing such space within a historical framework.

In exploring the short story, two critical points about temporality have already entered into the discussion. First, by nature, the *short* story has a limited amount of textual space compared to the novel. Secondly, this limited length often demands that authors “begin close to the end” (Friedman 18). Beginning “close to the end” does not often leave a large amount of space for developing the characters’ pasts and thus short story writers may be forced to condense characters’ histories for the sake of brevity. Russian Formalists also perpetuated this idea of the story beginning “close to the end” by defining the story as “a sequence of actions existing prior to and independent of a particular presentation of events” (May 63). According to these Formalists, the plot, or the “presentation of events” is what moves the text forward into the future; the “story” itself encapsulates the past. However, just because “the end” is always present, one should not think that the story is always already “ended.” This mindset can damage the reader’s ability to read a short story ethically by creating a temporal dichotomy in which the story is always “finished” and the reader is always in the present.<sup>3</sup>

As an anthropologist, Johannes Fabian critiques contemporary researchers who study groups in developing countries whose “primitivism” relegates them to the temporal past of the researcher’s privileged, “developed” present. His critique is not only applicable to anthropology, but can also be useful for reading the short story. According

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<sup>3</sup> I recognize that some would argue the opposite, saying that the short story’s limited space enforces a temporality that is always in the present since there is little room to emphasize past details or future development. This perpetual present might be one potential way to reach a temporal coevalness if both the story and the reader are always in contemporary time. However, I do not necessarily want to encourage a short story temporality that thrives on a negation of the past and the future. As section III argues, it is important to be conscious of the characters’ pasts and to ask questions that would engage the reader with their future development as *textual people*. For this reason, I only advocate an awareness of the dangers of temporal assumptions rather than prescribing a certain temporality for short story reading.

to Fabian, violence to the Other occurs when researchers “place the referent(s) of anthropology in a Time other than the present of the producer of anthropological discourse (31). Essentially, this results in a denial of “coevalness” or mutual temporality for the researchers and their subjects, as well as for readers and their texts. If the reader fixes the text in the past as something that has already ended, he or she will ultimately create a temporal distance that could impede engagement with the text. This lack of engagement could prevent the reader from connecting with the text as a humanitarian and could instead force the reader to look at the text and its characters as something from an(Other) time. This Othering of the text risks positioning its characters as the pitiable sufferers that Slaughter details in his essay. Essentially the reader will associate with the text through the privileged position of the present just as the human rights worker can associate with the sufferer through the privileged position of pity.

“The Gold Vanity Set’s” positioning of Petra as the “pitiable,” primitive Indian makes it easy for readers to fall into the trap of temporal distancing. The very first paragraph about Petra illustrates the primitive lifestyle of one who must “grind the boiled corn for the tortillas” and carry water to her father, a “barefooted donkey-driver” (1). Her life is difficult without the modern technologies that the privileged readers of Mena’s text may possess. Even the names of the characters within the text perpetuate a temporal dichotomy in which Miss Young’s name represents a youthful modernity of the privileged present while Petra’s could arguably represent petrification and the primitive past. Their names represent the false notion that views history as progress. In privileging Miss Young’s “youth” over Petra’s petrification, we see an example of how “the

historian's story is constructed within a pre-fab framework, the forward of an evolutionary theory of development that avoids the uncertain" (Garza-Falcon 34).

The temporal distancing of the past becomes paradoxical when the indigenous are portrayed as the primitive, "older" society that has not yet embraced the new industrial way of life and as uncivilized children that need the instruction of a more sophisticated society. This type of temporal distancing becomes evident when Don Ramon explains to Miss Young why Petra may have taken the vanity set saying, "these are children of the youth of the world, before the limits of 'mine' and 'thine' had been fixed" (8). For Don Ramón and Miss Young, the indigenous population consists of "children" that lack the civilized understanding of personal property. Miss Young further perpetuates the temporal distance between her and the indigenous population when she says "it's great fun to run into the twelfth or some other old century one day out from Austin" (10). Her temporal separation from the indigenous characters is literal as she associates herself with the modern Austin and the indigenous community with the twelfth century.

And yet, readers interested seeking a more ethical reading of time and textual coevalness will find that "The Gold Vanity Set" poses a certain resistance to temporal distancing even if characters like Miss Young seem to perpetuate it on the surface. When Petra becomes a hybridized version of modern and traditional values, her character contradicts the notions of set time in which tradition is associated with the primitive past and modernity with industrialism and commercial goods such as the vanity set. Furthermore, Petra challenges the idea that the more civilized "Americans" should be the more knowledgeable of the two when her wisdom about the golden vanity set's religious

potential helps her survive an oppressive domestic relationship; Miss Young for all of her civilized wisdom fails to understand the spiritual value of her “danglums” (9). Mena’s text essentially disrupts the binary that occurs when the privileged “humanitarian” attempts to understand the suffering characters through temporal distancing. Instead of representing a privilege of knowledge and power, we see that the “civilized” humanitarian is nothing more than someone that has had more access to “advantages, social structures, manners and conveniences” but is no more knowledgeable about ending suffering than the characters themselves (Monsivais 21).

The ultimate moment of coevalness or temporal equality occurs when the vanity set and the traditional shrine to the Virgin of Guadalupe become hybridized as two facets of a miracle that changes Petra’s life. Illustrating this moment in which separate temporal spaces break down between the modern vanity and the traditional indigenous religion, the text says, “it was by the miracle of Manuelo’s vow and its answer from the heavens that Petra’s mind grasped the unalterable faith that the golden treasure was a blessed thing, most pleasing to the Mother of Guadalupe” (7). In trying to attain an ethical reading of a short story, the reader should seek out moments of coevalness such as the hybridization between the vanity set and the Virgin instead of seeking ways to perpetuate temporal distances that could prevent the reader from understanding characters as humans deserving of dignity and equality.

Furthermore, it is important to remember that the pursuit of coevalness is not only about a mutual sharing of time for the viewer and the viewed, but also about allowing the viewer and the viewed to engage in mutual dialogue. Within this dialogue,

true coevalness can only be achieved if the subject has a voice to resist his position as subject. An ethical reading of a short story will seek to hear this voice even if it is not immediately obvious. If it is not there, an ethical reader will seek to deconstruct the many ways that a text denies such a voice. For “The Gold Vanity Set,” engaging in this dialogue means listening to Petra’s unspoken concerns about her relationship with her husband and her need for spiritual guidance. It is only when the subjected voice is allowed to narrate, that the reader can position himself or herself as the understanding humanitarian who can engage ethically with the text.

### **Why Should We Care About Ethical Engagement?**

When exploring a reader’s relationship to the text, it is easy to use phrases such as “ethical engagement” but the question that remains is how these phrases develop on a practical level for the text. More specifically, are we as readers actually “doing violence” to the text itself in trying to obtain an “ethical” reading? One potentially negative aspect of trying to obtain an ethical connection with the text is that readers assume too much power over a text by forcing it into an ethical dialogue.

However, I argue without seeking an ethical relationship with the text and continually questioning our reading methodologies, we risk becoming passive readers. Passive readers are the ones that commit the true sins of “textual violence.” For example, if one were to passively read “The Gold Vanity Set,” he or she would see it as a story meant to entertain audiences with a “passion for travel and the exotic, an audience which



sought a pre-packaged version of another country” (Doherty xi). Worse yet, this “travel narrative” may even perpetuate further oppressive colonial endeavors since many people thought that strange lands were more accessible through stories about “travel” (Garza-Falcon 34).

Unfortunately, this reading would not only deny the characters agency as subaltern figures, it would also deny the text agency as a vehicle to critique social injustices and oppressive stereotypes. In this case, the reader not only does a disservice to the characters within the text, he or she also risks denying the text its full potential as a multi-faceted social critique and possible vehicle for ethical contact between the suffering human and the humanitarian. In other words, ethical reading is not simply necessary for the “humanitarian” who wishes to engage ethically with the suffering characters in the text. An ethical relationship between the reader and the text is also vital for understanding a text’s cultural work and how it promotes social change.

We cannot forget that the reader, too, can benefit from knowing that he or she has the ability to promote social change. Instead of having “to wait for the strong to turn their piggy little eyes to the suffering of the weak,” we as readers can work to promote humanitarian efforts simply by acknowledging a character’s humanity (Rorty 78). Forming an empathetic connection with a textual character is by no means all humanitarians have to do to ease another human being’s suffering. However it is a start towards the “sentimental revolution” that Slaughter calls for in his essay (3).

Short stories might not be first on literary scholars’ list of “revolutionary” literature. The short story is especially lacking in revolutionary qualities as a genre

bogged down with historical assumptions about its form. The short story must be short. It must have unity. It must have characters that follow one developmental track. It must exist in a single space and it must be temporally past to the reader's present. The question that remains is, where is the room for "a sentimental revolution that might obviate the ordinary sorts of revolutionary violence" in the face of all of these short story "musts" (Slaughter 3)? The simple answer is that when readers force stories into stringent formal guidelines, the humanity within the story gets lost in preconceived notions about what the short story *should* be.

In Petra's case, forcing her to adhere to a short story's list of "shoulds" and "musts" would limit her agency to relieve suffering. She resists being reduced to a single "compressed goal" when she simultaneously embodies the modern and the traditional, the religious visionary and the victim of domestic abuse, the liberated and the oppressed. When we avoid forcing characters into a "compressed goal," we as readers can become aware of an agency that might not have been evident before. It is only in exploring this agency that we can become parts of the characters' lives "not in a shared relation to gods, kings, and heroes, but as participants in a common story" (Appiah 197). We must remember that it is never truly the character's story versus the reader's story. As equal "participants in a common story" readers can form the kind of sentimental connection with characters that Slaughter necessitates. It is through this connection that texts can reach their potential as vehicles of social change and the reader can attain his or her position as "humanitarian" attempting to understand human suffering.

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