

JOSEFINA LÓPEZ' *HUNGRY WOMAN IN PARIS* (2009): A New Latina Chick Lit/Travel Narrative

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Hungry Woman in Paris. By Josefina López, N.J.: Rutgers, New York: Grand Central Publishing, 2009. 288 pages. \$12.99 (paper).

Hungry Woman in Paris is the first novel by Josefina López, author of the play (and later screenplay) *Real Women Have Curves*. It begins as its feisty protagonist, a successful young Latina journalist named Canela, drops everything—her job, apartment, and “Mexican-American Prince” fiancé—to move to Paris. Her abrupt decision is brought on by irreconcilable differences with her fiancé over their wedding menu, her dearly loved cousin’s suicide, and the sexist and incriminating gossip that occurs at the funeral. Making matters worse is her mother. Aghast after hearing rumors of Canela’s breakup, she confronts her daughter at the funeral, “hissing” at her that she really is crazy. As Canela recounts,

[She] couldn’t believe that despite all her hard work, all the guilt trips, all the bad advice about how women are nothing without men, how careers are not as important as family and children, all the scripts in her ‘Third World Woman as Servant’ file in her brain that she tried to install on my mental hard drive, I was not getting married in two months. (9)

Canela’s fiancé *is* a fine man and, as the young Chicano slang term “Mexican-American Prince” connotes, he is also a good-looking, successful professional (a

surgeon no less) who respects his mother, but these qualities do not necessarily mean that he is the right match for Canela—or that he will make her stifling sense of constraints disappear. Realizing that she cannot put up with the social expectations that are strangling her—and recalling that she has a paid honeymoon trip to Paris—Canela flees. When her vacation is over, she decides to stay in a friend's tiny servant's quarters until she figures out what to do next. A run-in with a beaming acquaintance who has just graduated from a prestigious cooking school for foreigners converges with Canela's realization that she cannot stay in Paris as an illegal, or *sans-papier*. This inspires Canela to enroll at *Le Coq Rouge*, the setting around which the novel is structured. Canela's wanderings and adventures in Paris cleverly occur across episodes that fall into sections subtitled "Basic Cuisine," "Intermediate Cuisine," and "Superior Cuisine," which signal the various stages she must master to earn her diploma.

A most witty contribution to Latina literature, *Hungry Woman in Paris* also playfully engages several popular trends in women's literature. It signals an engagement with "chick lit" and popular women's travel literature to which López brings a culturally specific lens. (I use the trim, trendy, and less canonical "lit" intentionally, aware that like this recent category of women's literature, Lopez' novel might easily be dismissed as frivolous and commodified.) *Hungry Woman* offers a fitting and timely expression of the experiences of modern, upwardly mobile, professional Latina misfits who, finding themselves at dangerous turning points and no longer able to compromise, determinedly step out of their lives to redefine their identities, careers, and relationships.

Lopez writes her novel in the first person voice, the result being that her protagonist Canela immediately engages readers. The narrator's chatty, fast-paced, self-disclosing style quickly brings to mind criteria outlined in *Border-Line Personalities* (Moreno and Mulligan 2004), a pivotal anthology about

this new generation that López' novel imagines as its audience: Latinas who dare to "dish on sex, sass, and cultural shifting." Like Canela, the anthology's contributors are college-educated, career oriented, upwardly mobile, and actively embrace their Latina heritage. Many also have hyphenated surnames and come from diverse nationalities, class backgrounds, and political orientations. Julia Alvarez describes work by this new generation as "sassy" and "hard-hitting" (Alvarez 2004, xiii), writing that refuses to shy away from venturing into a Latina's "*intimidades*," even when they involve shameful secrets, family fights, sexual escapades, or humiliating failures in the most sacred domestic spaces, like the kitchen (Alvarez 2004, xiv).

López' novel can also be read as representative of a female generation's struggle and often disillusionment with personal and professional successes (as measured by family connectedness, romantic relationships, careers, and activist orientations) that are supposed to lead modern Latinas to happiness and fulfillment. What we can read in Canela's difficulties and in the death of her cousin, Luna, is that these successes are either impossible to achieve or emotionally unfulfilling—leading them into depression and forcing them towards alternative paths and lifestyles.

Canela struggles with depression throughout the novel and decides to use (then stop using) anti-depressants. Her diabetic cousin Luna, unhappy in the conventional married life that her parents pressured her into accepting, "sugarshocks" herself to death. Of course, this is not the fate that either young woman expected. At the funeral, Canela shares that, as little girls, she and Luna were "a pair of mocosas," devious little rascals with daring dreams. They swore never to marry or have children because they wanted to be free and aspired instead to travel the world and make history. And while everyone called Canela "crazy for wanting to be a journalist covering all sorts of dangerous

stories," (7) Luna supported her, even joining several adventures to catch a story (7). But when Luna began to date her very first boyfriend, her parents became fearful that "the neighbors were talking" and "married her off...before she got knocked up" (7). Unable to attend college, Luna became a housewife, after which "she got so depressed she gained weight and developed diabetes" (7). Then she could not get pregnant because of the health risks. Doctors warned it might kill her. After several miscarriages Luna became even more depressed; "her world kept shrinking but her body kept growing" (8). In the tiny suicide note that Canela receives many months later, Luna apologizes for not having Canela's courage to lead a different kind of life. But by then, Canela has made clear that in reality, Luna's "dreams were larger than life, too big to exist in this world in a woman's body" (8). With Luna's death, Lopez not only takes away one of Canela's sources of strength, she demonstrates how alienation, depression, and illness threaten a major pillar of Latina femininity and feminism—sisterhood. Grief over her cousin's fate also leads Canela to re-evaluate the choices that she makes in Paris and later when she returns home. With the specter of death, or "La Calaca" (as Canela nicknames her), and Luna's spirit by her side, Canela critically confronts her life again and again.

When the novel opens, Canela *is* hip and successful; but she is also lonely, lost, and very "hungry" for her mother's acceptance and, as she herself discloses, "for an adventure forbidden to me as a Mexican woman...for a world where women like me could be seen as creators and not just pieces of meat" (72). She misses her best friend. She also feels betrayed by her family's expectations, her country's politics (the Iraq war has begun and the HR4437 anti-immigrant bill is on the table), and a profession that repeatedly questions her activist immigrant Latina perspective as it censors her quest for truth. To find herself, Canela must break from the life she has achieved and wander until she comes to terms with her hunger. Such are the obstacles that preoccupy a new generation of Latinas.

López' novel can be classified across several genres and registers. Canela's travels reproduce recent trends in women's travel narratives like Elizabeth Gilbert's *Eat, Pray, Love: One Woman's Search for Everything across Italy, India, and Indonesia* (2007) and Frances Mayes' *Under the Tuscan Sun* (1997). Like the protagonists in these works, Canela runs away from both the United States and the stricter heterosexual convention of marriage—or its collapse—toward a more romantic, bohemian setting to pursue a spiritual practice or more balanced lifestyle. In *Eat, Pray, Love* the protagonist is a successful writer and divorcé who is fleeing dysfunctional relationships with men and battling depression. She seeks a more centered and fulfilling life by pursuing three things that give her sustenance and pleasure—food (eating, not cooking), language (learning to speak Italian), and prayer or meditation (through Buddhism). *Under the Tuscan Sun* (the book and popular movie version) features a successful editor and recent divorcé who, fleeing the humiliating dating scene of modern life, takes her best friend's place in a tour of Italy, buys a rustic villa on a whim, and inadvertently sets out to create a home and family on her own. Recreating a “home” as she remodels her villa, the protagonist discovers the art of living in Italy by building new kinds of connections with the people who enter her life. That such travels and practices often give way to the very hierarchies that define them, the capitalist infrastructures that allow them—not to mention the complications of language, loneliness, and residency requirements that plague them—is also typical of the “post-tourist” American travel narrative.

Two important further complications give Lopez' text its political edge, situating it according to its historical moment and feminist sensibility. First, Canela's travels and feelings for “home” are troubled by France's intolerance of a Bush-era United States and aggravated antagonisms towards Americans. Second, Canela's fantasy of developing a new talent and becoming an

accomplished and enticing chef is quickly shattered. Instead of seeing Canela flourish, she and her readers are reminded that her fantasy is actually rooted in an old sexist understanding—that a woman may have a successful career and prove “capable like a man” but cannot be successful as a sensual and creative woman if she is a failure in the kitchen. The illusion is ruined in the school itself by sexist assumptions about who can really be a chef. In this context, it is a relief that although Canela belly flops her way through cooking school, she graduates. It is the protagonist’s ultimately disruptive yet liberating trajectory in pursuit of her passions and across Paris that genders the work recognizably female, characterizing it inevitably as popular women’s travel literature.

Of course, race and citizenship issues complicate this distinctly Latina travel narrative, especially when Canela finds herself in danger of becoming a “wetback,” ironically in Paris. Canela is not the stereotypical American traveler. She is traveling in a brown body marked by mestiza features that immediately flag her hybrid, intersectional identity. At times this identity affords her certain privileges, such as greater acceptance by, and communal contact with, the more marginalized residents of Paris. She forms alliances with several people including a Japanese woman who contracts Canela to purchase bags (Louis Vuitton no less) because a store is suspicious of highly enterprising Asian women; a Turkish woman who escapes from her distrustful and abusive husband; other sans-papiers and domestic workers in her building; and a young Arab man from the “hood” (whom Canela meets when interviewing subjects during a “riot” and with whom she becomes lovers until he turns on her for meddling in the life of Turkish women and a culture that is not her own). Notably, Canela is rarely “read” as simply an American traveler. At school or on the streets of Paris, she is confused for an Arab or hailed with an enthusiastic “Viva Mexico!” At other times, Canela *is* the “Ugly American” who is ignorant and speaks French badly. She also becomes the “hot Latina” or exotic female “other” that French

men—and women—want to seduce in order to fulfill racist fantasies. What becomes significant is that in all these instances, Canela's embodied experiences allow López to critique sexist and racialized hierarchies cross-culturally and transnationally. In this sense, *Hungry Woman* is more accurately a 'woman of color travel narrative,' in line with cross-genre works like Ana Castillo's *The Mixquiahuala Letters* (1992) or Gloria Wayde-Gayle's "How Not to be a Gringo: Experiences of Color and Race in Mexico" in Elaine Lee's edited collection, *Go Girl!: The Black Woman's Book of Travel and Adventure* (1997).

Yet, these women of color travel narratives are more serious in tone and critique. In its sense of audacity, irreverence, and play, López' novel shares more with Michele Serros' *Chicana Falsa* and *How to Be a Chicana Role Model* (see Serros' travel narrative essay "Let's Go Mexico!"). *Hungry Woman's* chapter titles—such as "Four Gossips and a Funeral," "Like Water for Canela," "I'll Always Have Butter," "Alive and Rotting in Paris," "Not Without My Bag!" "Boys in the Banlieue," "Last Mango in Paris," and "Canela's Feast"—express her playful, intertextual, multicultural, pop-Feminist style and characterize her work as representing a new generation of Latina "Chick lit" writers who boldly barrel their way across traditional conventions, expectations, and genres to express themselves more freely and in more popular forms. *Hungry Woman* is unabashedly trendy *and* commodified *and* provocatively sexualized, sharing many of the defining characteristics of this genre of popular women's literature that explosively emerged in the 1990s.

Like Canela, the typical chick lit protagonist is not perfect but flawed; busily grappling with her insecurities, she "elicit[s] the readers' compassion and identification simultaneously" (Ferriss and Young 2006, 3-4). Chick lit's narrative style facilitates its heroines' intimate relationships with readers through its strategic deployment of the first person and confessional disclosure

in the form of letters, diaries, and emails. Chick lit heroines are spontaneous and candid and often deploy self-deprecating humor—as they contend with their careers and work lives, modern sexual relationships, dynamic and even contentious friendships with other women, and the simultaneous pleasures and dangers of consumerism. And like Canela, chick lit heroines “feel caught between their postmodern, feminist lives and the prescriptions that still expect them to maintain a traditional feminine image” (Ferriss and Young 2006, 4-7). In short, chick lit concerns itself with the messiness of modern, middle class women’s everyday lives. Perhaps that is why despite the skepticism that it initially received, it has proven to be highly popular, incredibly lucrative, and surprisingly translatable, crossing divides of generation, ethnicity, nationality, and even gender (Ferriss and Young 2006, 2, 5-7). Although “it is indeed impossible to deny that the overwhelming majority of chick lit continues to focus on...young, white, and middle [class]” protagonists, chick lit by women of color is no longer new (Ferriss and Young 2006, 6, 8). In fact, Latina chick lit has acquired its own label, “chica lit.” And yet, as Ferriss and Young, the editors of *Chick Lit: The New Woman’s Fiction* note, a continuing characteristic of this new genre is that it provokes extreme responses—on the one hand, attracting the unquestioning adoration of fans, on the other, the unmitigated disdain of critics:

Reactions to chick lit are divided between those who expect literature by and about women to advance the political activism of feminism, to represent women’s struggles in patriarchal culture and offer inspiring images of strong, powerful women, and those who argue instead that it should portray the reality of young women grappling with modern life. (2006, 9, 12)

Indeed the very qualities that make chick lit incredibly popular and marketable—its “femaleness,” trendiness, consumerism, individualism and

independence, recognizable thematic concerns, modern sensibility, sexuality, and fast-moving style—make it difficult for some feminist readers to fully embrace as critically engaged literature.

Certainly, because *Hungry Woman* is not free of the uneasiness that this mix of characteristics now associated with chick lit tends to provoke, it also raises the same critical challenges presented by chick lit. Significantly, the flashbacks that Canela has throughout her misadventures in her cooking classes and across Paris open a window into her humble background, in turn allowing Canela and her readers to re-member and grieve over the histories and issues that make Latinas vulnerable. Throughout the novel, López engages with many pivotal issues seen elsewhere in Latina/o literature, such as lack of citizenship, immigrant experiences, Latina women's relationship with food (and sex), self-esteem and body issues, difficult daughter-mother relationships, and health issues like diabetes and depression. However, the book also at times takes on these issues so swiftly that it raises the question of how deeply readers should consider such issues.

Yet these experiences *are* successfully translated into a fluid and accessible form. In what might be considered the most exquisite and poetically rendered flashback of the novel, Canela recalls painfully clutching a cluster of grapes in her bleeding, little girl's hands as she runs through grape vineyards with her terrified migrant worker family—away from the migra. It is repackaged as the dreamy, sensual image of a cluster of grapes held in young lovely, brown hands to produce an alluring, “girly” book cover. The image is a triumphant symbol of the ability to draw from a painful history to produce creative and sensual works of art. But freed of any painful associations, this defining event is also cleverly and rather sacrilegiously transformed into a marketing tool. The quick and almost seamless recollection of Canela's past might read as demonstrative of how

successful, modern, upwardly mobile Latinas/os are today expected to recognize their past *and* quickly displace it so as to make others feel less uncomfortable. That transgressive 'truths' about Canela's sexuality and modern sensibility are delivered with an attractive yet potentially alienating "sex and the city"-like style complicates their representation; the work's frenetic, risqué reflexivity and the many racy sex scenes with multiple lovers do make matters trickier.

López' *Hungry Woman in Paris* dares to capitalize on the highly seductive and highly marketable expressions of Western pop culture and global travel to represent Latina experience in the chick lit travel narrative, a genre, whose expressions include trendy postmodern travel and literary conventions that *do* appear more privileged and more superficial and "sassy." But simultaneously this does not preclude the liberating aspects of the narrative and its critical engagement with central issues, themes, and tropes. At times the elements López embraces are so markedly crafted that the reader is prompted to wonder if, like Serros, she intentionally pokes fun at the superficial and capricious conventions that are supposed to define Latinas' authenticity and contemporary young women's modern, fast track "sex and the city" experiences. As Alisa Valdes-Rodriguez' novel, *The Dirty Girls Social Club* (2003), demonstrates well—conventions of femininity and ethnicity in chica lit can appear as highly constructed, even self-defeating, yet always to the effect of presenting them in varied and playful ways.

As Latina chick-lit and popular female travel-lit, López' novel is a work that simultaneously engages and disrupts multiple popular expectations. As Michelle Herrera Mulligan says of this new generation of Latinas, their work "is really about conflict... We are sexually experimental, sassy, and critical of our families and our heritage. Yet we're deeply conflicted about what that says about us and who we are" (Herrera Mulligan 2004, xxix). It makes sense then

that this work takes conflicted forms and provokes conflicting reactions—even as it *also* remains grounded in recognizable themes of Latina/o literature. As we see in López' novel, in the end, Canela returns to the United States and her crazy family. Clearly transformed by her adventure, she reconnects with her passion for writing and comes to terms with herself. Certainly, the final scene in *Hungry Woman* pushes past individualist female angst as Canela wheels her mother (now in a wheelchair) into a rally in the streets of Los Angeles and the two become part of a struggling, yet highly celebrated Latina/o collective.

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