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The Thin *Frontera* between Visibility and Invisibility: Felicia Luna Lemus's *Like Son*

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The historically entrenched gender-based division of western society is also part of the cultural heritage of the Chicano community. The diverse cultural, literary and religious symbols that have defined the female and male roles have been transmitted through the generations, creating a clear gender-based hierarchy within the group. This binary division, however, has left no room for those considered (extremely) deviant such as the LGBT community. The aim of this essay is to observe the way Felicia Luna Lemus's *Like Son* (2007) addresses issues of visibility and invisibility and the integration of a family past and a cultural heritage into the life of a young Chicano transgender person, in an attempt to render this group visible and voiced within the community.

Keywords: Chicano/a; LGBT; identity; literature; (in)visibility

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La delgada frontera entre la visibilidad y la invisibilidad: *Like Son*, de Felicia Luna Lemus

La división de géneros sobre la que se ha asentado la sociedad occidental a lo largo de los siglos está también presente en la tradición cultural chicana. Su construcción y transmisión se ha desarrollado a través de diferentes símbolos culturales, literarios y religiosos a lo largo de generaciones. En este contexto, otras realidades, consideradas anómalas, tales como la de la comunidad LGTB han quedado relegadas a una situación de invisibilidad y falta de reconocimiento social. El objetivo de este trabajo es observar el modo en el que *Like Son* (2007), de Felicia Luna Lemus, enfoca aspectos relacionados con la visibilidad y la invisibilidad, la inclusión del pasado familiar y la herencia cultural en la vida de un joven chicano transgénero, con el fin de dar visibilidad y voz a este colectivo en el seno de la comunidad chicana.

Palabras clave: chicano/a; LGTB; identidad; literatura; (in)visibilidad

Independiente fui, para no permitir pudrirme sin renovarme;
hoy, independiente, pudriéndome me renuevo para vivir.
Los gusanos no me darán fin—son los grotescos destructivos
de materias sin savia, y vida dan, con devorar lo ya podrido
del último despojo de mi renovación—
Y la madre tierra me parirá y naceré de nuevo,
de nuevo ya para no morir...
Nahui Olin's own epitaph

Most western social structures are based on an entrenched gender division, which is derived and supported by a, sometimes ancient, cultural tradition, religious heritage, as well as popular iconography and high and low forms of arts in general, particularly literature.[1] There is nothing new about this statement, and regardless of the obvious improvements in the sphere of gender relationships (especially for the historically subjected female community) in the last few years, this hierarchically arranged gender division is regarded as natural by many, both male and female. The Chicano/a community is no different, and this gender-based chain of command has led to the arrangement of the social and personal roles within the group and in the lives of each individual in the community. For women, the strongly ingrained cultural heritage of the group has constructed the female ideal as characterized by submission, docility, passivity and endurance, as opposed to the male ideal defined by honor, dignity, strength and leadership. In addition, historically, these male/female attributed roles clearly marked the internal social structure of the group, depriving women of any position in the economic, productive sphere of the socioeconomic arrangement of the community and the outside world, which has relegated them to dependent social and personal situations.

Today, the masculine/feminine *frontera* that has marked the socioeconomic and cultural heritage of the Chicano community has witnessed a process of redefinition as a consequence of the achievements of several communal and personal struggles and public artistic manifestations. Similarly, the endeavors of Chicano/a artists and intellectuals have permitted a constant redefinition of identity-marker concepts and symbols, such as the *frontera* and its more physical and conceptual manifestations. In this context, the first (r)evolutionary works of Chicana feminist scholars and thinkers—Martha Cotera (1976), Alma García (1977), Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa (1981), among others—need to be brought to the fore, as they opened up the way for the redefinition of gender roles and the redescription of traditionally constraining stereotypes, which gave voice and visibility to the silent and invisible community of Chicana women.

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The gender-oriented struggle of Chicana feminists in the 1960s and 1970s aimed to make the female community visible in both mainstream and Chicano/a society, which kept them hidden in the name of traditions and community values. The iconography that shaped female identities—La Virgen de Guadalupe and her counterpart, La Malinche, along with the weeping, woman, La Llorona—clearly established the heteronormative binary gender division of the community between the vocal visible males and the voiceless, invisible females. The Chicanas' irruption into a voiced, visible reality encountered clear opposition from both Chicano male activists and Anglo feminists. In this context, Chicana feminists articulated a group-specific feminist discourse with which to holistically oppose the clear racist-sexist discrimination that they faced, although within this group, the circumstances of women who represented lesbian realities or of those who aimed to eliminate the binary gender division of Western thought became even more problematic. The struggle of these latter groups turned out to be extremely more complex as their vindications proposed a profound revision of clearly essentialized binary categories, such as sexuality and gender as well as those of race and class, even within the newly established Chicana feminist discourse. In this context, several feminist thinkers and critics demanded the inclusion of still silenced, invisible bodies, such as those of queer individuals. Thus, among others, Gloria Anzaldúa described a complex and inclusive Chicana identity in the shape of a *mestiza*, border identity (1987). Chela Sandoval, defined the idea of a "differential consciousness" (1991) which accounts for the need of decolonization and emancipation of Third-World women. Emma Pérez vindicated a specific "sitio y lengua" (1991), and Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa claimed the body as the performer of multiple identities and of a political agenda (1981). Despite the impact of these ideas, today, the implications of the term queer in these and other seminal Chicana feminist and/or lesbian texts and discourse need to be revised, as posited by Francisco J. Galarte, who argues that, from his experience as a "trans* identified Chicana/o feminist scholar":

> Chicana feminist politics has guided my identity development through the recognition that my freedom is intrinsically connected to the freedom of my hermanas. My survival has depended on the ways in which I saw my experience reflected in the words of Chicana lesbian feminist writing, and now, to my chagrin I feel as though I am no longer a part of that community. (2011, 127)

It thus seems pertinent to widen the significance of the term queer, as defined by the first Chicana theorists. Gloria Anzaldúa's notion of a "third space" that occurs in the border line may be well transposed to the new understanding of personal relationships in general and gender interactions in particular, and specifically of LGBT individuals (1987). However, her notion of queer as inclusive of all gender and racial situations or Moraga's "Queer Aztlán" (1999) did not explicitly address transgender Chican@s. In the wake of the several theoretical and social advances that have been achieved in the

field of LGBT studies—see, among others, the works by Sandy Stone ([1988] 1993) and Susan Stryker (2008)—the voices of the marginalized-marginalized, such as LGBT Chican@s, ought to find a space and a voice to challenge the gender norm through art and literature as well as other means. In this context, novels such as those by Felicia Luna Lemus, *Trace Elements of Random Tea Parties* (2003) and *Like Son* (2007), are essential for the performing and widening of gender-based social *fronteras* which constrain people of non-normative gender identities, and thus avoid "transgender Chican@s [being] the absent presence and the audible silence" (Galarte 2014, 129).

Among these more inclusive voices, Latina theorist Juana María Rodríguez describes queer as a concept that entails the

> breaking down of categories, questioning definitions, and giving them new meaning, moving through spaces of understanding and dissension, working through the critical practice of "refusing explication." "Queer" is not simply an umbrella term that encompasses lesbians, bisexuals, gay men, two-spirited people, and transsexuals; it is a challenge to the constructions of heteronormativity. (2003, 24)

In Lázaro Lima's words, the task that Rodríguez implies is complex because the political stance of naming oneself a "queer Latino" has obvious and manifold implications:

> Identificarse como "latino" en los Estados Unidos es instaurar una diferencia política radical que intenta contrarrestar las nocivas asociaciones socio-raciales que conllevan los apelativos "*illegal*," "*spic*," "*greaser*," u otros aún menos apetecibles, tanto como las vivencias marcadas por la subalternidad política de los sujetos que habitan estas designaciones en la esfera pública de la contemplación nacional. Cuando se trata de latinos que a su vez se identifican como *queer* la aseveración es aún más complicada, ya que esta sobreidentidad calificativa se articula privilegiando el hecho de que lo significativo de semejante postura identificatoria es contrarrestar la heteronormatividad y sus diseños racializados en el entorno estadounidense. Entendido así, "ser" un latino queer implica una postura política que enfrenta una hegemonía que rehúsa calificar lo "latino," mucho menos un "latino *queer*," como algo cuyo significado podría designar algo más que su asociación con la "ilegalidad" en la esfera pública. (2008, 959; emphasis in the original).[2]

[2] "To identify oneself as 'Latino' in the United States is to establish a radical political difference that attempts to counteract the harmful socio-racial associations that the names '*illegal*,' '*spic*,' '*greaser*,' or others of this non-appealing nature convey, as well as the experiences marked by the political subalternity of the subjects that inhabit these designations in the public sphere of national contemplation. When it comes to Latinos who in turn identify themselves as queer, the assertion is even more complicated, since this qualifying overidentity is articulated privileging the fact that the significance of such an identifying position is to counteract heteronormativity and its racialized designs in the US environment. From this standpoint, 'being' a queer Latino implies a political stance that faces a hegemony that refuses to describe the 'Latino,' much less a '*queer* Latino,' as something whose meaning could designate something more than its association with 'illegality' in the public sphere" (my translation).

Thus, identifying oneself as both part of an ethnocultural community with a strong culturally gendered tradition and, in particular, as a transgender person is even more complex and complicated, as many transgender people still exist underground, invisible to others. The cultural specificity of the Chicano/a~Latino/a community, however, is not the only drawback for transgender Chican@s~Latin@s in taking a step towards visibility, as the omission of this group from any political discourse is still obvious. In Viviana Namaste's words, even within the framework of an already grounded academic and philosophical field such as Queer Theory, there has been "a veritable explosion of essays, presentations, and books on the subject of drag, gender, performance, and transsexuality. Yet these works have shown very little concern for the individuals who live, work, and identify themselves as drag queens, transsexuals, or transgenderists" (2000, 9). As a proof of the contrary, today, texts such as those of Lemus prove that the personal experiences of individuals, even if in the form of fiction, are being brought to the fore and accounted for. Based on this assumption, the aim of this essay is to describe the means through which Frank (born Francisca), the main character of Felicia Luna Lemus's *Like Son*, challenges not only the construction of heteronormativity but also of the Chicano ethnic and cultural identity and proposes, in Sandra Soto's words, "a queer discursive analysis of racialized sexuality as an aperture (not an endpoint) onto the sometimes queer, at other times normative (most often, both) representations of race, desire and intercultural and intracultural social relations" (2010, 10). In this same line, the focus of the present reading of the novel starts from the idea that Jason A. Bartles proposes: "a queer Chicana/o identity does not privilege the ethnic over the sexual or viceversa. Neither precedes nor overshadows the other, nor can these two markers ever be sufficient for addressing the complexity of any identity" (2014, 112). The novel will gradually depict how the two aspects of the identity are inevitably linked and embodied in a main character whose life has evolved around the idea of hiding and not being seen, rejecting and not wanting to see. The personal evolution of the protagonist will encompass his gradual recognition of his complex identity, which is multifaceted and hence, essentially diverse, but mostly, invisible. In this sense, the concepts of vision~visibility~invisibility are the conceptual frameworks through which the ideological proposal of the novel will be analyzed, which will include concepts such as vision and the gaze as symbols of individual recognition and identity formation.

Felicia Luna Lemus is an author whose work portrays various and inclusive ways of understanding living with a Chicano/a identity, the cultural heritage of the community, family relationships, gender roles and identities. *Like Son*, published in 2007, is an account of the life of Francisca/Frank, a young Chican@ transgender person, whose father's death leads him to discover and uncover silenced, secret family stories. The stories motivate the young man to undertake an emotional as well as a geographical journey, and he experiences an inevitable link to a past that he did not consider relevant until that moment, a recognition which he considers to be a rite of passage into his new, self-chosen life and identity.

Before delving into its analysis, I consider it necessary to provide the timeline in which the plot of the novel evolves, to account for its chronological circular nature and for the evolution of the character from Francisca to Frank in the span of eight years. The novel opens with a short prologue, where a young man, Frank, is flying to New York from Los Angeles. It is March 5, 2003. Part one starts next, which takes the reader back to the year 1995. The setting is Los Angeles, and Frank (who was born a girl, Francisca), has just re-encountered his father after years of separation. Frank's mother had abandoned him when Francisca was only three years old. [3] When they meet again in the year 1995, the father is blind as a consequence of a degenerative disease and is in the final stages of his life, as a consequence of cancer. When he dies, Frank inherits a book of prose by Nahui Olin, a Mexican twentieth-century mysterious artist, a *retablo* with her picture and the keys of a safe deposit at a bank in Los Angeles, where he will find the letters that their parents wrote to each other when they were in love. After the father's death, Frank visits his mother, whom he had not seen in five years. She pretends not to recognize him, as he now looks as a young man and has turned into Frank. Frank then decides to move to New York, where most of the action of the rest of the novel will occur, and where he meets Nathalie, his partner after the year 1995 and opens a second-hand store. Part two of the novel is set in the year 2002, a few months after the September 11 attacks. It focuses on the complicated relationship between Frank and Nathalie, marked by Nathalie's abundant and unexpected absences and by Frank's continuous need to search in his past for answers and reasons to live his present in a self-delineated way. After one of Nathalie's absences, she proposes that they meet back at Temperance Fountain on March 5th, 2003—a date that takes the reader back to the prologue. Before their encounter, Frank decides to fly back to Los Angeles and consciously leave his past behind. For this purpose, he places Nahui's book and *retablo* at the safe deposit of the bank, he gives the love letters away to his mother and, finally, he buries his father's glasses. This end, which comes back to the prologue of the book in a circular way, foresees the achievement of a consciously delineated self, free from the weight of the past and eager to look at the future.

The one-and-a-half-page introductory prologue presents an enormous amount of information, which locates readers in the time period (the year 2003), the setting and the current identity of the character. The protagonist is a young man of thirty, Frank, with a broken arm who has returned home to New York City and visits Temperance Fountain. When at the fountain, this reminds him of the fountain where his father had courted his mother "before they hated each other" (Lemus 2007a, 9). The symbolism of the fountain's name is clear. Temperance, synonymous with terms such as abnegation, constraint, control, mortification, sacrifice and self-denial, represents the way that

[3] From here on, I will name the protagonist by his male name, Frank. Whenever the female name, Francisca, is used, I will be referring to Frank's childhood and adolescence, prior to the year 2003, where the novel starts.

Frank (who was born a woman, Francisca, and lived through her childhood and part of her adolescence as such, before becoming Frank) had been living up to that point in his life: in a state of social and personal invisibility and rejection. Moreover, the historical symbolism and function of the Temperance Fountain should be pointed out, as these were conceived in the nineteenth century to provide people with clean drinking water and thus keep them from drinking beer, which was considered safer than the muddy water which was available for drinking. Their construction in diverse cities in the United States and the United Kingdom was part of what was called the Temperance Movement, which was particularly strong among women during the nineteenth century. The Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) was very active in denouncing and fighting against the use of alcohol among men, which they considered a deviation from the social norm.

All these historical implications can be well related to Lemus's choice to include these fountains as an important physical and conceptual element in her construction of the main character. They are presented as essential for the development of his family's emotional history line, and thus for his own personal development. The fountain in New York is also, we shall discover, reminiscent of another fountain in Mexico where a mysterious woman, Nahui Olin, fell in love with his grandmother, a past evocation which is revealed as the novel develops, and which foreshadows Frank's future of a recognition of a father and a family past he had not previously acknowledged. The latter will connect Frank to his silenced past and will hence help him construct a visible, visualized, alternative future. Thus, the importance of the prologue and the information conveyed in it sets the stage for the development of three of the main themes of Lemus's work: the individual concept of body, gender and sexuality; the sense of place and home; and the link to a cultural heritage and past that inevitably shapes personal identities and reinforces interpersonal relationships.

During a talk at the Harlem Fair in 2007 (Lemus 2007b, n.p.), Felicia Luna Lemus explained that her novel serves the purpose of "expanding the immigrant (Mexican-American) narratives, [...] bringing back into the core all of the stories that are basically pushed out into the corners and swept under the rug and not allowed entry." In this sense, novels such as those by Lemus are today crucial in challenging what Lázaro Lima (2008) sees as a direct association of the "queer latino" with illegality and, I would add, invisibility. Moreover, as the author herself explains, they challenge the intra-communal identitarian discourses which have left some voices, such as those of LGBT people, to one side and thus ostracized these individuals.

Frank's life is obviously marked by a different-to-the-norm approach to body and gender. The first page of the novel, which introduces him with a broken arm, becomes symbolic of his fragmented view of his own body and sexuality. Frank was born Francisca and his whole life, as described by him, has been marked by a constant assimilation and negotiation in terms of his gender identity between what *one is* and what *one ought to be* or between what *one feels one is* and *would like one to be*. Or in his own words, between

what he describes as "*I want. I want.* And then there was *I* must" (Lemus 2007a, 228; my emphasis). Likewise, his life has been marked by the (im)balance between aching absences (such as his father's during his childhood and Nathalie's in the present) and unwanted presences (as his mother's and stepfather's) in a kind of psychological and physical dividing line, or *frontera*, which has shaped his identity. In the first flashback of the novel, which takes us to 1995, the time when he re-encounters his father, Frank recalls how, in his childhood remembrances, his parents had never been together and how her mother—a prestigious Chicana plastic surgeon—had endeavored to make the still-a-girl Francisca deny the existence of her real father. Moreover, she had remarried a white man, Chip, who abused Francisca continuously. At that time, her mother's unwillingness to see or confront this abuse makes Francisca believe that it is her gender, which was female but she already felt it to be male, that makes her "suitable" for this abuse. These life experiences prove that the character's life has been a constant struggle between what is seen and what is not—chosen to be—seen: her/his gender and sexuality, her/his own father's existence and her/his stepfather's abuse. Similarly, the choice of a mother character whose work is linked to transforming people's physical appearance and her conscious and cruelly performed choice of not accepting her own daughter's need to become a boy, is a symbol of the lack of social recognition that transgender individuals still endure. Analogously, the construction of a blind, loving father who is unable to see him physically, reinforces this same notion of invisibility and denial. The need for hiding and pretending that Frank has constantly endured is reinforced by his father's current blindness, which becomes symbolic of his family's and society's rejection of different/differing individuals, such as himself. At their first encounter after years of separation, his father cannot see him and tells Frank (whom he assumes is still Francisca) about the cause of his blindness, he confesses that he is dying of cancer and pleas for companionship and love in his final days. This becomes the catalyst for Frank's understanding of the importance of the family line and tradition in one's quest for personal identity. Affected by a degenerative disease that Frank's future offspring may inherit, his father is presented as a social outsider whose sense of honor, dignity and cultural and ethnic identity prevents him from being part of mainstream society. However, his blindness and isolation from "normal" society becomes a tool through which the man constructs his own reality and defines the standards under which he lives, thus making the others, the mainstream, different. This involuntary negation of his daughter's transition into a male (as a consequence of his loss of sight) is representative of the deliberate rejection cross-gender individuals have endured throughout history. In the United States, even if there are accounts of the acceptance of and even respect for some Native American communities toward this collective, it was not until almost the last decade of the twentieth century that transgender people could speak up and demand some traces of visibility (Beemyn 2014, 5-7). In the case of the Chicano~Latino community, the facts show that the gender-based heteronormative hierarchy of the group's idiosyncrasy drives many transgender persons into oblivion,

invisibility and even poverty. According to a 2011 US report conducted by the National Center for Transgender Equality, "Latino/a Trans people often live in extreme poverty with 28% reporting a household income of less than $10,000/year. This is nearly double the rate for trans people of all races (15%), over five times the general Latino/a community rate (5%), and seven times the general U.S. community rate (4%)" (National Center for Transgender Equality 2013, 3).

The social circumstances of the main character are obviously better, as she has grown up in a well-off family with a socially successful mother. However, the beginning of part one of the novel—which is simultaneous with the beginning of the relationship between the father and the son—introduces the difficulties that Frank has had with accepting his reality outside the realm of the personal or with "coming out." Both father and son are described as physically wounded individuals; the father is blind and affected by a terminal cancer, and Frank lives in/with the wrong body, a fact that provokes a deep emotional wound for him. This is reinforced by a more serious difficulty, that is, a fracture in his relationship with the social world, be it family or society in general. The conversation that the characters have at the beginning of the novel extols Frank's feelings of loss, which is presented as a diametrically opposed stance to that of the father's relaxed matter-of-fact approach when speaking about his damaged body:

> "It's called retinitis pigmentosa," he said. The condition, he explained, caused degenerative eyesight and eventual blindness. And it skipped generations […] The blindness actively affected only males, my father said. But female offspring of the blind generation carried the gene and could pass the blindness to their male children. (Lemus 2007a, 23)

His father then tells him that he also has cancer, and Frank thinks:

> He mentioned it like it was some long-standing topic we'd discussed endless times before. The elephant my father tried to ignore sat himself directly on my chest. I was stunned. Confused. And speechless.
>
> "Anyhow, if you ever get pregnant," he said, almost cheerily, "there are options." […] "You could selectively abort," my father said, […]
>
> He found the left edge of the napkins, […] [h]e wrote a long tangled mess of totally illegible letters that he probably intended to read *artificial insemination* or *test tube baby*, but could have just as accurately read: *I'm a freak and you're a freak and the kid you have will be a freak show too*.
>
> "Really, Paquita, it's amazing what science can control," he said.
>
> There we were, living proof to the contrary. My chromosomes defined me as a daughter. And cancer was irreversibly sabotaging my father on the most essential of cellular levels. Our bodies were failing us in ways science could never entirely repair. (Lemus 2007a, 24-25; emphasis in the original)

These quotes summarize the core of the thematic structure of the novel, which portrays the inevitability of the hereditary line, both in the personal, physical way and in the sphere of one's origins of tradition and cultural heritage. The conception of time and intergenerational heritage presented in these lines aligns with Judith Halberstam's notion of "queer time and space" (2005). The scholar argues that the use of time and space from a queer perspective differs greatly from that of heteronormative standards, which are marked by generational heritage, heterosexual relationships and biological reproduction. The eruption of the AIDS epidemic, which directly affected gay communities, drastically altered the conception of time and space for gay men, who saw their life expectancies reduced and somehow targeted. On the other hand, the understanding of sexuality as a practice, devoid of the final heteronormative aim of biological reproduction, has favored the notion that "queer subcultures produce alternative temporalities by allowing their participants to believe that their future can be imagined according to logics that lie outside of those paradigmatic markers of life experience—namely birth, marriage, reproduction and death" (Halberstam 2005, 2). For Frank, his voluntary negation of the reproductive family line is representative not only of a challenge to heteronormative conceptions of time and family but also of his distress at having to delineate his future without a consistent personal/family past. Moreover, his awareness of the fact that he could breed a "freak" once again makes him question his social and personal role in his "broken" body within a broken family. As the novel evolves, through his awareness and recognition of his past, he constructs and imagines his future in a different "queer time and space" (Halberstam 2005). In this sense, his father's death represents the opening of a family past time and space for the protagonist, which will become symbolic of his reconciliation with his origins and his family's idiosyncrasy, always marked by difference and transgression. His father's legacy, both physical and spiritual, marks the beginning of the protagonist's quest for a time and space, "un sitio y lengua," of his own, in Chicana author Emma Pérez's words (1991, 162); one in which he can develop his own sense of self, which acknowledges not only his present but also his past and origins. Thus, the discovery of the emotional/spiritual relationship between Nahui Olin and his grandmother and the naturalness with which his father speaks about the love between the two women reinforces his father's attitude, which symbolizes an extreme sense of respect and open-mindedness performed by and through his blind, inclusive and non-gendered gaze. In this sense, recalling Yvone Yarbro-Bejarano's analysis of Lemus's first novel, *Trace Elements of Random Tea Parties* (2003), "the narration works within generational discourse in this context but does not predicate a future based on a 'legacy' of biological reproduction. In taking up the legacy of transmitted tales, Lemus troubles not only their linear temporality, but also its heteronormativity" (2013, 83).

The starting point of Frank's personal journey towards self-recognition begins with a profound change in the life of the character, bringing Frank closer to his father, but at the same time separating them for good. The newborn relationship, which culminates

in his father's death, represents the revulsive that catalyzes Frank's new approach to his present—symbolized by the public performance of his male gender—and his past, represented by his father and the heritage he has bequeathed him. In addition to his spiritual, ideological impromptus on Frank, in his will his father leaves him his old love letters to his mother and a portrait of Nahui Olin, which will lead Frank to understand and accept his past and integrate it into his present life and identity. The portrait of Nahui Olin, which appears on the cover of Lemus's novel *Like Son* (2007), is in fact a real portrait of her by US photographer Edward Weston, and provides the work with a sense of reality, which causes the reader to develop empathy and interest in both the historical character that becomes Frank's source of inspiration, and in Frank himself, as he is accompanied by the reader on his quest for a visible, self-chosen identity. Nahui Olin, born Carmen Mondragón (1893-1978), was an avant-garde poet and artist in the 1920s, and unlike Frida Kahlo and other artists of the time who are internationally respected today, she is not as well-known, even though her work was notorious, provocative and relevant before she opted to disappear in the 1940s, after her lover's accidental death. In Lemus's words, Olin was an outsider, someone "who did not play by the rules" and thus was "excluded from the narratives" (Lemus 2007b, n.p.). The parallelism the author establishes from making this historical subject visible and the journey toward visibility that Frank undertakes in the acquisition of a visible, palpable, voiced and social identity creates a direct link between past and present, reality and fiction, and thus constructs a sense of real fictionality which generates direct links between Nahui Olin's intense and different, non-normative emotional and sexual life and Frank's quest for self and social recognition.

The discovery of his family's past is accompanied by his need to escape the physical space in which he is trapped and to break the only family bond that he has left: his mother. The relationship between them is disastrous, as she represents all that Frank despises: greed, egotism and, uppermost, individuality. Moreover, his mother's desire throughout his life has been to make Francisca (as she never accepted Frank) hate his father. However, the father and son's recent reconciliation, and Frank's subsequent commitment to his father, encourage him to leave his oppressive mother. Thus, Frank abandons California, his past and the source of his limitations and flees to New York, a city that epitomizes freedom, individual choice and, in short, his present. Regardless of his desire to live in the here and now, he takes with him a "new past," which he uses as the structure upon which to create his new self, a self that his father, his grandmother and Nahui Olin facilitate. When his father dies, he says:

> "He's dead," I said.
>
> As I admitted this fact aloud for the first time, I was certain Nahui Olin reached to me, to my exhausted and totally senseless body. She held me. I cried. And cried some more.
>
> When no more tears came, I knew it was time. I'd take what my father had given me and go further than he'd ever know possible. (Lemus 2007a, 77)

Once in New York, he meets Nathalie, who becomes his lover. They both admire and worship Nahui Olin as a symbol of their differences. Moreover, in Frank's case, his veneration derives not only from the symbolism of Olin as a radical historical figure but also because of her "deviated" past. Through the discovery and unveiling of Nahui's past, and hence his grandmother's, Frank understands his difference as originating from his family's unconventional performance of the normative codes of morality and identity. Nahui Olin, a woman in a constant process of transformation and regeneration, represents the image of a free woman, a transgressor and a precocious woman for her time: "The Earthquake Sun, Communist. Radical Feminist. Fucked whomever she wanted to. Here, there, and everywhere. Scandalized her barrio. And then slipped into obscurity by middle age" (Lemus 2007a, 109); however, Nahui Olin was born in the wrong time and the wrong place, and her personality and need for freedom suffocated those around her to the point that they made her transparent and invisible because they chose to become blind to her. The text explains: "Nahui was the real thing [...] She was so beautiful it hurt to look at her. It was too dangerous to take something so explosive, try to bottle it as iconography. Far easier and safer was to try and pretend Nahui never existed at all. But she did. Did she ever" (109). This is a similar experience to Frank's, whose mother tried to pretend he (rather than Francisca) never existed at all. It is also similar to the situation of Frank's grandmother, who tried to escape from Nahui's influence but whose real self and desire to love was awakened by Olin's kiss. And to that of his father, who also "slipped into obscurity" (109) and became blind, unable to see his "daughter's" differing difference.

The second part of the novel is marked by the September 11 attacks and the enormous emotional and physical fractures that they represented for the city of New York and its citizens. This second part also represents Frank's need to establish his identity, free from the obsessive influence of his family' past—and of Nahui Olin as a symbol—and in a more natural, cohesive and integrative way. At the same time, Frank must be liberated from his emotionally unhealthy relationship with Nathalie. The fracture of the city of New York, which symbolizes his invisible blending into the big city of difference, represents a fissure in her relationship with Nathalie. In it, they had constructed a fictitious life based on Frank's cultural heritage. Their obsession with Nahui Olin and their role play involving her and Frank's father becomes, for Frank, a confusing distortion of his past, present and thus, future. In this sense, Frank starts believing that his life and Nahui's are inextricably linked, and considers that his fate has already been decided for him, as it is Nahui's life that rules his. Their role play is taken to its limits by Nathalie, who starts wearing Frank's father's dark glasses, which upsets Frank. Nathalie's influence over Frank becomes clear, and Frank feels trapped by a past that has settled in the present through the obsessive need of his partner to possess and mold it into their present lives. Their choice aligns with Lee Edelman's notion of the lack of futurity for queer individuals (2004), as they are not able to fit into the reproductive system, which is what, in his view, ensures the future. Frank and Nathalie

become stuck in a past that they try to reproduce in their present without considering the future. Interestingly, Frank finds too many coincidences between Nahui's life and that which Nathalie is creating/constructing for them. He learns about Nahui's baby boy's death while he was sleeping, and imagines the similarities between his own mother and his venerated Nahui. He says:

> Unfamiliar images of Nahui as a mother skipped in and out of my mind, and I found myself thinking about my own mother. Like Nahui, my mother had also somehow managed to sleep through the death of her only child. […] Yes, of course I hadn't actually died like little baby Ángel, but an innocent and peaceful kid had been stamped out of existence just the same during certain miserable nights of my own childhood. To say I was deeply unsettled by the fact that Nahui and my mother had something so regrettable in common would be an understatement of vast proportions. I was horrified. (Lemus 2007a, 187)

Once he becomes conscious that he did not have a past or does not have a present relationship with his own mother, he awakens from the poisonous and insolvent present (Muñoz 2009, 30) he has been constructing with Nathalie and looks for a future of his own choice. This sudden demystification of his idol and her humanization is reinforced by his unease toward Nathalie, who continues using his father's glasses, which is the cause of a car accident in which she runs over George, the mailman, an event which is reminiscent of an accident his father had provoked when he got his driver's license renewed despite his vision problems. Nathalie's need to perform a fictional present life in the relationship aligns with the idea of the performativity of gender (Butler 1990), which is symbolized in Frank's own reality when he adopts a male gender configuration. In Frank's case, the fact of becoming and behaving as a person of a different biological sex is linked to his need to become invisible, both in the social sphere and in a more personal one. He does not want society to see him as a woman as a result of his need to hide and become invisible from his mother and stepfather. This step may align with social and political science scholar Sheila Jeffrey's highly polemic and essentialist idea that Frank wants to escape from what he feels is "the societal hatred and subordination of women and of lesbians" and adapt to the "valorisation of men" (2014, 119). His masculinization at this point could be read as conforming to the binary heterosexual standard, as he is reproducing and performing an obviously heteronormative type of relationship with Nathalie. In this sense, his inevitable sense of oppression when he understands the dangerous web in which he is trapped—a broken family and a broken, invisible self—encourages him to re-adapt all that reminds him of his past and start anew again in a new "time and space." He feels like a man and he is a man. Consequently, he goes through a process of conscious "disidentification," whereby he tries to "transform a cultural logic from within, always laboring to enact permanent structural change […] reworking those energies that do not elide the 'harmful' or contradictory components of any identity" (Muñoz 1999, 11-12). His escape from Los Angeles after the death of

his father became the starting point for Frank, but ended up trapping him in another invisible, poisonous relationship with Nathalie, marked by Nathalie's symbolic and real control over their lives and by her unexpected various absences. Now, during one of Nathalie's sudden departures, he takes a train to Washington DC, to attend a state auction. The trip is once again symbolic of an initiation passage. His train has an accident and his arm gets broken. This accident pushes Frank to determinedly decide to leave the past behind and consciously begin again, adapting what he learned from his family history but without making it a source of oppression and suffocation as had happened to him with Nahui's presence and his father's heritage. He says: "I was overwhelmed with a sudden itch to run off and leave all adult responsibility and care behind. Fuck the accumulating debt and gray hairs of trying to run a shop and be a good boyfriend, fuck concerns over whether or not I want to be a parent someday, fuck haunting thoughts of Nahui's dead baby—fuck it all" (Lemus 2007a, 277). Thus he takes a plane back to Los Angeles where he places Nahui's picture and prose book in the bank safe, buries his father's dark glasses in the sand, and returns his parents' love letters to his mother, who does not even open the door to him. Feeling, now, free of his past, he returns to New York and his life with Nathalie, in an attempt to finally think of his alternative future, in the form of a "queer futurity that is attentive to the past for the purposes of critiquing a present" (Muñoz 2009, 18). Frank has thus experienced that "it is important to call on the past, to animate it, understanding that the past has a performative nature" (27-28).

The novel and its unique approach to issues that have been somewhat recurrent in Chicana literature in the last few decades, such as gender and ethnic identity and the need for reconciliation between the two, embodied in a character who lacks a clear and loud political agenda, but whose life choice is obviously political, offer an additional universal understanding of an individual's identity within a particular historical time and space. The protagonist's conscious choice of changing her name from the Spanish female Francisca to the Anglo male name Frank not only reflects the physical and personal dislocation that he feels but also his detachment to what a Spanish name implies in terms of acknowledging one's ethnic differences. In this sense, Frank represents a hybrid individual whose quest for identity is—ideologically—personal rather than overtly political. However, his awakening regarding the family's past, and hence his heritage, through the legacy of his father in the form of the story about Nahui Olin, a *retablo* and the book, activates a whole system of desire for the merging of his past into his present, to the point of becoming an obsession. The character only feels liberated and free to choose when he finally manages to re-adapt the past he had rejected at the time and start anew. His choice of a "sitio y lengua" (Pérez 1991), of a self-delineated identity that selects and rejects parts of his past and incorporates them into his present, is the embodiment of the "diferencia política radical" ["radical political difference"] that Lima describes (2008, 959), the challenge "to constructions of heteronormativity" that Rodríguez addresses (2003, 24), and

ultimately, Frank's "dual objective of seeing and being seen" (Danielson 2009, 13), of being and acting, and of "rerout(ing) old paths and forg(ing) new ones in the marginal interstitial spaces between nations, languages, genres, genders, and sexualities" (4).

Lemus's novel represents the tendency of many of the most contemporary and non-canonical Chicana authors to eliminate the boundaries that the strong ideology of the Chicano cultural nationalist movement spread and defended, which, with the passing of time, became normative and consequently, tradition. Thus, writers such as Lemus are provoking a renewed revolution within Chicano tradition and literature and are opening up and widening the ideological and artistic spectrum of the liminal border zone that Anzaldúa defined three decades ago. They are finding the space for the marginalized-marginalized, such as the protagonist of the novel, whose realities represent the complexity of the cohabitation between the individual and the community and the boundaries between the personal/political and the communal/political because "it becomes impossible to separate out 'gender' from the political and cultural intersections in which it is invariably produced and maintained" (Butler 1990, 4-5).

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