**The thin frontera between visibility and invisibility: Felicia Luna Lemus’ *Like Son* (2007)*\****

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 LGTB community. The aim of this essay is to observe the way Felicia Luna Lemus’ *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, LGTB, identity, literature, (in)visibility

La división de géneros sobre la que se ha asentado la sociedad occidental a lo largo de los siglos está también presente en 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 el de 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, literatura, (in)visibilidad

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*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)

Most western social structures are based on an entrenched gender division, which is derived and supported by a sometimes millenary cultural tradition, religious heritage, popular iconography, and high and low forms of arts in general, particularly literature. 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 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 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 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 totally dependent social and personal situations.

Today, the masculine/feminine *frontera* that has marked the socioeconomic and cultural heritage of the Chicano community traditionally has witnessed a process of redefinition as a consequence of the achievements of several communal and personal struggles and public artistic manifestations from within and without the community that have revolutionized the circumstance of this group. Similarly, the endeavors of Chicano 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 (r)evolutionary works of Chicana Feminist scholars and thinkers 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/invisible community that women represented before this first revolution. Following this first wake, many contemporary Chicano/a writers are today paving the way for a new redefinition of (among others) the already redefined concept of the borderzone and borderland as a place of liminality and hybridity in which socioethnic, gender, cultural and artistic *mestizaje* can occur, establishing a remarkable and unlimited creative power. This new generation of writers and artists is struggling to make other than the male/female binary variances and *frontera* visible as a means of consolidating an all-inclusive, flexible, and individually designed 21st century Chicano/a identity.

The gender-oriented struggle of Chicana feminists in the 1960s aimed to turn the female community visible in a society (both the mainstream and Chicano society) that 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, enduring woman, La Llorona) clearly established the heteronormative binary gender division of the community between the voiced, visible males and the voiceless, invisible females. The Chicanas’ irruption into a voiced, visible existence encountered clear opposition from both Chicano male activists and Anglo feminist ones. In this context, Chicana feminists articulated a group-specific feminist discourse to holistically oppose the clear racist-sexist discrimination they faced; however, within this group, the circumstances of women who represented same-sex realities or of those who aimed to eliminate the binary gender division of Western thought became even more problematic. Their struggle turned out to be highly 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. Soon, voices such as Gloria Anzaldúa’s, who claimed a complex and inclusive Chicana identity in the shape of a *mestiza*, border identity, or Chela Sandoval’s, who described the idea of a “differential consciousness” (1991) which accounts for the need of decolonization and emancipation of Thirld World Women, or Emma Pérez’s vindication of an specific “sitio y lengua” (1991) or Moraga’s claim over the body as the performer of multiple identities and of a political agenda, as “Theory in the Flesh” (1981), are but a few of the (r)evolutionary steps taken by Chicana Feminist thinkers who paved the way for the inclusion of still silenced and invisible bodies, such as those of queer individuals. It is however relevant today to revise the implications of the term “queer” in these and other seminal Chicana Feminist and/or Lesbian texts and discourse, as posited by Francisco J. Galarte, who claims that, out of his experience,

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 an no longer a part of that community. (2014, 127)

It seems thus pertinent to widen the implications and inclusions that the term “queer” as proposed by the first Chicana theorists proposed. Gloria Anzaldúa’s notion of the “third-space” that occurs in the dividing line may be well transposed to the new understanding of personal relationships in general and gender interactions in particular, and particularly of LGTB individuals. Her notion of “queer” as inclusive of all gender and racial situations or Moraga’s “Queer Aztlán” (1993), however, did not explicitly address transgender Chican@s. In this context, and in the wake of the several theoretical and social advancements that have been achieved in the field of LGTB studies (Stryker, Stone, and others) the voices of the “marginalized-marginalized,” such as the LGBT Chican@s (lesbians, gays, bisexuals, and transgender), ought to find a space to “become” and to challenge the gender norm through art and literature as well as other means. In this context, novels such as Felicia Luna Lemus’, (*Trace Elements of Random Tea Parties* (2003) and *Like Son* (2007)) are essential for the performing and widening of the gender based social *fronteras,* which constrain people of non-normative gender realities, and avoid that “transgender Chican@s are the absent presence and the audible silence.” (Galarte 2014, 129)

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 and complicated 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)

Thus, identifying oneself as a part of a ethnocultural community with a strong culturally gendered tradition and a transgender person is even more complex and complicated, as many transgender people still exist underground, invisible to the others, in many cases. The cultural specificity of the Chicano/Latino community, however, is not the only drawback for transgender Chicanos/Latinos to take a step towards visibility, as the erasure 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, “In recent years, the field known as queer theory has witnessed a veritable explosion of essays, presentations, and books on the subject of drag, gender, performance, and transexuality. 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). However, today, texts such as Lemus’ prove that the personal experiences of individuals, even if in form of fiction, are being brought to the fore, and need to accounted for. Based on this assumption, the aim of this essay is to describe the means through which Frank, the main character of Felicia Luna Lemus’ *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 on the novel parts 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” (2104, 112). The novel will gradually depict how the two aspects of the identity are inevitably linked and embodied in a main character, whose live has evolved around the idea of hiding and not being seen, rejecting and not wanting to see. This two-sided reality of Francisca/Frank will prove the gradual recognition of the character’s complex identity, which in the above words, 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 include concepts such as the vision and the gaze as symbols of individual recognition and identity formation.

Felicia Luna Lemus is a novel author whose work, which is transgressive for many, portrays different and inclusive ways of understanding living with a Chicano 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 Chicana/o transsexual, whose father’s death leads him to discover and uncover silenced, secret family stories. The stories motivate the young boy 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 then and that he considers to be a rite of passage into his new, self-chosen life and identity.

The one and a half page introductory prologue presents an enormous amount of information, which places readers into the time period, the setting, and the present identity of the character. The protagonist of the novel is a man of thirty with a broken arm who is coming back home (New York City) and visits Temperance Fountain, which reminds him of the fountain where his father courted his mother “before they hated each other” (Lemus 2007, 9). The symbolism of the fountain’s name is clear. Temperance, synonymous with terms such as “abnegation, constraint, control, mortification, sacrifice, and self-denial” (thesaurus.com), represents the way Francisca/Frank had lived until the present: in a state of social and personal invisibility and rejection. Moreover, the historical symbolism and function of the Temperance Fountains should be pointed out, as these were conceived to keep people from drinking beer, which was consider safer than the muddy water which was available for drinking. Their construction and defense was part of what was called the Temperance Movement, which was particularly strong among women during the 19th century, and 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’ choice of the inclusion of these fountains as a relevant physical and conceptual element for the construction of the 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 reminiscent of another fountain in Mexico where a mysterious woman, Nahui Olin, fell in love with his grandmother. This past evocation unveils as the novel develops and foreshadows Frank’s future of a recognition of a father he had not acknowledged until that moment. The latter will connect Frank to his family’s past and will hence help him construct a visible, visualized, alternative future. Thus, the importance of the chapter and the information conveyed in it begins the development of three of the main themes of Lemus’ 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. Echoing Lazaro Lima’s words, Felicia Luna Lemus explains that the 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” (Harlem Book Fair, 2007). In this sense, novels such as Lemus’ are today crucial to challenge what Lazaro Lima deploys as a direct association of the “queer latino” as directly connected to 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 the LGTB ones, aside and ostracized.

Frank’s life is obviously marked by a different approach to body and gender. The first page of the novel, which introduces a boy with a broken arm, becomes symbolic of this 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 between what “it is” and what it “ought to be” or one “feels it is” or “would like it to be.” In his own words, *“I want. I want.* And then there was *I* must” (Lemus 2007, 228). Likewise, her/his life has been marked by the (im)balance between longed-for absences and unwanted presences in a kind of psychological and physical dividing line, or *frontera*, which has shaped his identity. Frank’s parents are divorced when the novel begins, and her mother (a prestigious Chicana plastic surgeon) endeavors to make Francisca deny the existence of her father. She remarried a man who abused Francesca continuously. Her mother’s lack of intention to see or face this abuse makes her believe that it is her gender that makes her suitable for this abuse. Thus, it is clear that Francisca/Frank’s life has been a constant struggle between what is seen and what is not (chosen to be) seen: her gender and sexuality and her own father’s existence. 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 daughters’ need to turn into a boy, is the 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.

At the beginning of the novel, Francisca is already Frank, and he has no contact with his mother (who has denied his existence and wanted to turn him invisible after becoming Frank). He reencounters his estranged father, establishing a connection that he had been obliged to deny and render invisible and non-existent. The need for hiding and pretending that Frank has constantly endured is reinforced by his father’s blindness, which becomes symbolic of his family’s and society’s rejection of different/differing individuals, such as Francisca/Frank. The novel begins with Frank meeting his father, his father’s confession that he is dying, and his plea 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 offspring may inherit, his father is presented as an outsider whose sense of honor, dignity, and cultural identity prevents him from being part of the accepted mainstream society; however, his blindness and isolation from “normal society” becomes a tool through which the man constructs his own reality and defines the standard in which he lives thus making the others, the mainstream, different. In the case of Francisca/Frank’s obvious “difference,” his involuntary negation of his daughter’s transition into a male body 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 and even the respect of some Native American communities toward this collective, it was not until almost the last decade of the 20th century that transgender people could speak up and demand some traces of visibility (Beemyn, 5-7). In the case of the Chicano/Latino community, the facts show that the gender-based heteronormative hierarchy of the group’s idiosyncrasy render many transgender persons into oblivion, invisibility, and even poverty. According to a 2011 U.S. report conducted by the National Center for Trans 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%)” (*Transvisible,* 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 the novel (which is simultaneous to 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 the father and the son are described as physically wounded individuals; the father is blind and affected by a cancer that is killing him, and Frank lives in/with the wrong body, a fact that provokes a physical wound for him. This is reinforced by a more important difficulty, which 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 the feeling of loss for Frank, which is presented in a diametrically opposed stance to the father’s tranquillity when speaking about his “broken body” and his disease. The text says:

“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 2007, 23)

Following this explanation, the father tells him he 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, .... He 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 2007, 24-25)

This quote summarizes the chore of the thematic structure of the novel, which portrays the inevitability of the hereditary line both in the more 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.” The scholar argues that the use of time and space from a queer perspective differs amply from that of heteronormative standards, which are marked by generational heritage, heterosexual relationships, and biological reproduction. After the eruption of the AIDS epidemic, which directly affected the gay communities, the conception of time and space was altered drastically for these communities, 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 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 of having to delineate his future without a sane and safe personal/family past. Moreover, his awareness of the fact that he may breed a “freak” once again makes him question his social and personal role in a broken family within a broken body. Through the awareness and recognition of his past, he constructs and imagines his future in a different “queer time and space” (Halberstam). 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,” in Chicana author Emma Pérez’s words (1991, 162), of his own in which he can develop his own self, acknowledging 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 reinforce the 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’ first novel (*Trace, 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 the transmitted tales, Lemus troubles not only its linear temporality but also its heteronormativity” (2013, 83).

The starting point of Frank’s quest, which begins a deep change in the life of the character, brings Frank nearer to his father, and concomitantly separates them for good, is marked by both characters’ physical imperfections and fractures. The new-born relationship that culminates in his father’s death represents the revulsive that catalyzes Frank’s new approach to his present (symbolized by his body) and his past, represented by his father and the heritage he has left him. In addition to his spiritual, ideological impromptus on Frank, his father leaves him his past love letters to his mother and a portrait of Nahui Olin, which will lead him to understand and accept his past and integrate it in his present life and identity. The portrait (a real, existent portrait by US photographer Edward Weston) and the character depicted on the cover provide the novel 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 Frank himself, who is accompanied by the reader in 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 popular even if her work was notorious, provocative and relevant before she opted to disappear in the 40s, after her lover’s accidental death. In Lemus’ words, Olin was an outsider, someone “who did not play by the rules” and thus was “excluded from the narratives” (Harlem Book Fair, 2007). The parallelism the author establishes from turning 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 “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 the only family bond that he has left: his mother. The relationship between the two women is disastrous, as she represents all Frank despises: greed, egotism, and uppermost individuality. Moreover, his mother’s desire throughout his life to make Frank/Francisca hate his father, their recent reconciliation, and the boy’s subsequent commitment to his father, encourage Frank to not care being far from his oppressive mother. Thus, Frank leaves California, his past, and the source of his limitations and flees to New York, a city that epitomises freedom, individual choice, and, in short, his present. Regardless of his desire to live here and now, he takes with him the “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. 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 come, I knew it was time. I’d take what my father had given me and go further than he’d ever know possible. (Lemus 2007, 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 as a representation of her “deviated” past. Through the discovery and unveiling of Nahui’s past, and hence his grandmother’s and his father’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 2007, 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” (Lemus 2007,109). This is a similar experience to Frank’s, whose mother tried to pretend he never existed at all. It is also similar to Frank’s grandmother’s situation, who tried to escape from Nahui’s influence but whose kiss awakened her real self and her desire to love her. And to his father’s, who also “slipped into obscurity” (Lemus 2007) and turned 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 an obsessive influence of his family’ past (and of Nahui Olin as a symbol) to a more natural, cohesive, and integrative identity. At the same time, Frank must be liberated from an emotionally unhealthy present relationship with Nathalie. The “breaking” of the city of New York, which symbolizes his invisible blending into the big “city of difference,” represents the break of the existence he had constructed in the city because his heritage is completely distorted by his and Nathalie’s obsession with Nahui Olin. In this sense, Frank starts believing that his life and Nahui’s are unavoidably linked and considers that his fate is decided for him, as it is Nahui’s life that rules his. They begin role playing, and it 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 the one Nathalie is creating/constructing for them. Thus, he learns about Nahui’s baby’s death as he sleeps 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 2007, 187)

Once he becomes conscious that he had not had a past or present relationship with his own mother, who had erased Frank from her existence and deprived himself of his own life and existence, he awakens from the poisonous and insolvent present (Muñoz 2009, 30) he had been constructing with Nathalie and looks for a future of his 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 causes a car accident in which she runs over George, the mailman, an event which is reminiscent of a past accident his father had provoked when he got his driver’s license renewed (despite his vision problems). Nathalie’s need for performing a fictional present life in the relationship aligns with the idea of the performativity of gender (Butler), which is symbolized in Frank’s own reality when becoming a man. 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 scape from what he feels is “the societal hatred and subordination of women and of lesbians” (2014, 119) 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 as 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). Just as his escape from Los Angeles had become a starting point for Frank (but had 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), he now decides to go to Chicago and leave New York City, a trip that becomes symbolic of an initiation rite once again. His train has an accident, and he is taken to the hospital, which is reminiscent of the beginning of the novel when he is described as having a broken arm. This accident, along with Nathalie’s second absence, pushes Frank to determinedly 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. Thus, he takes a plane back to Los Angeles where he places Nahui’s picture and book in a 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 free from 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 (…)” (Muñoz 2009, 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, provides the novel with 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 the detachment to what a Spanish name implies in terms of acknowledging one’s ethnic differences. In this sense, Frank represents a “melted” individual whose quest of identity is (ideologically) personal rather than overtly political; however, his awakening regarding the family’s past and hence heritage through the legacy of his father in the form of a story about Nahui Olin, a *retablo*, and a book activates a whole system of desire of merging 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 to that 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” that Lima describes, the challenge “to constructions of heteronormativity” that Rodríguez addresses, and ultimately, Frank’s “dual objective of seeing and being seen” (Danielson 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” (Danielson 2009, 4).

Lemus’ 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 and widening the ideological and artistic spectrum of the liminal border zone that Anzaldúa defined almost 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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