

## Global-Local Parodies in María Amparo Escandón's *Esperanza's Box of Saints*

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### **Globalization and Localisms in the U.S. Hispanic Context**

Jane H. Bayes, Nayereh Tohidi, Laura Guzmán-Stern, and Angela Bonavoglia have argued that globalization, migration, and mass media are transforming the relationship of women to religious authority. In the U.S. Hispanic context, this transformation is frequently expressed in popular religiosity, which has emerged as a site of political and cultural resistance to the homogenizing influence of globalization. Typically, popular religiosity emerges locally in community settings. As Virgilio Elizondo, Gastón Espinosa, et al. and Colleen McDannell have shown, the qualities of the "local" are usually emphasized because these faith expressions have their roots in the people's own history and are a source of power, identity, and acceptance not found in the institutional Church.<sup>1</sup> *Mujerista* theology, a women-centered and community-driven interpretation of Catholicism, represents a relevant example of this trend.<sup>2</sup> But perhaps one of its greatest expressions is the relentless reworkings of the Virgin of Guadalupe, a sacred icon that proliferates on candles, decals, tiles, murals, and folk art today, as it did in the 1960s under the influence of César Chávez's social activism and, more recently, in Chicanas' feminist writing.

In previous works, I have argued that Chicanas use religious narratives and iconography as a source of gender politics and healing; a medicinal story that heals, on the one hand the split feminine self, and, on the other, the demoralizing effects of colonization.<sup>3</sup> Some achieve this by rediscovering genealogies that transgress the official

teachings of the Catholic Church; others by putting flesh and affective presence back into the religious objects; still others through parody and gender performance.<sup>4</sup> In the present work, I will examine the role of popular religiosity in María Amparo Escandón's first novel *Esperanza's Box of Saints* (1997)—in Spanish entitled *Santitos*—which has been translated into twenty-one languages and is currently read in more than eighty-nine countries.<sup>5</sup> Specifically, I will address global-local parodies in *Esperanza's Box of Saints*, because this postmodern novel illuminates how the global-local nexus becomes political, forging new alliances and narrative identities within the current transnationalization of culture. In particular, I will argue that by privileging the global-local nexus Escandón creates an oppositional strategy to produce a gender critique that parodies the intersections of patriarchy, capitalism, and Catholic traditions of devotional piety, providing a new and liberating way of articulating marginality.<sup>6</sup>

### **Feminist Space Theories and the Global-Local Nexus**

Feminist geographers were the first to advance new theories on the relationship between space and society and the need to examine the global-local nexus. Doreen Massey's conceptualizations of space, place, community, and the articulation of the global-local nexus represent an example of such an approach. In *Space, Place and Gender*, she conceptualizes space as an "ever-shifting geometry of social/power relations" (4), arguing that the spatial can be seen as "constructed out of the multiplicity of social relations across all spatial scales, from the global reach of finance and telecommunications, through the geography of the tentacles of national political power,

to the social relation within the town, the settlement, the household, and the workplace”  
(4). Contesting David Harvey’s association of place with a backward-looking nostalgia (inevitably tied up with stasis and reaction),<sup>7</sup> Massey demonstrates that places have their character molded not only by what happened within that area, but also by the long-established and constantly changing relations with the world beyond:

if social space is conceived as constructed out of the vast, intricate complexity of social processes and social interactions at all scales, from the local to the global, then a place is best thought of as a particular part of a particular moment in the global network of those social relations and understandings. (“Double Articulation” 115)

Thus, for Massey the global has always been part of the constitution of the local, from which it follows that the specificity of the local cannot be made through contraposition against the world beyond:

The attempt to align “us” and “them” within the geographical concepts of “local” and “global” is always deeply problematical. For in the historical and geographical construction of places, the “other” in general terms is already within. The global is everywhere and already, in one way or another, implicated in the local. (“Double Articulation” 120)

Massey's arguments lead us to a relevant political implication, for if places are dynamic, ever-changing articulations of social relations, we all have been, at one point or another, in the position of migrants.

Following Massey, in *Questions of Travel* Caren Kaplan reminds us that "discourses of location can be used to naturalize boundaries and margins under the guise of celebration, nostalgia, or inappropriate assumptions of sameness (187).<sup>8</sup> Regarding this process of nostalgic mystification, she states that: "the 'local' is not really about a specific intrinsic territory but the construction of bundles or clusters of identities in and through the cultures of transnational capitalism" (159–60). Furthermore, Kaplan points to the paradox of the global-local nexus, warning:

This is, perhaps, one of the greater paradoxes of the global-local nexus: The local appears as the primary site of resistance to globalization through the construction of temporalized narratives of identity (new histories, re-discovered genealogies, imagined geographies, etc.), yet that very site prepares the ground for appropriation, nativism, and exclusion. (159–60)

Thus, for Kaplan, only if we can grasp the "local" (the concrete/the experienced) in a dialectical relation with the global (the abstract/universal hegemonies) can we begin to destabilize discourses of power and gender identities and to map, name, and establish particular feminist agendas that make a difference in concrete situations.

In a similar vein, in *Feminism and Geography: The Limits of Geographical Knowledge*, Gillian Rose posits that there are spaces and landscapes beyond those

imagined by the masculinist closures of geography. To illustrate, she examines spatiality imagined by some feminists, showing that it is not structured through masculinist claims to exhaustiveness. On the contrary, this spatiality is “multidimensional, shifting and contingent. It is also paradoxical, by which I mean that spaces that would be mutually exclusive if charted in a two-dimensional map—centre and margin, inside and outside—are occupied simultaneously” (140). Rose argues that this paradoxical sense of space—of being in two places at once—can serve as a strategy to resist the territoriality of masculinism: “The manipulation of the field of the Same/Other, being both separated and connected, the simultaneous occupation of both the centre and the margin, being at once inside and outside: all these discursive spaces depend on a sense of an ‘elsewhere’ for their resistance” (153–54). It is through this “elsewhere” of the paradoxical space that difference is tolerated rather than erased. Importantly also, Rose reminds us that space is so central to the subject of feminism because feminists use spatiality to identify oppressive spaces (where women’s bodies are constrained by a particular gender, class, race and position in the public or private arena) and to formulate epistemological priorities, which feminism have located in the personal, the body, the symptomatic, the quotidian, as the material sites where ideology is inscribed (142). As Massey’s, Kaplan’s and Rose’s arguments demonstrate, gender impacts mobility and produces location. In the analysis that follows, I will show how by traversing the global-local nexus María Amparo Escandón is able to deconstruct multiple systems of oppression and renegotiate gender identities, resisting in this way nativism and mystification.

***Esperanza’s Box of Saints: From Mystification to Parody***

*Esperanza's Box of Saints* tells the story of the young widow, Esperanza Díaz, who travels with her box of saints from her remote hometown in Mexico through the interstitial brothels of Tijuana to Los Angeles. The journey is inspired by St. Jude, the patron of desperate causes, who presumably appeared in her kitchen as a reflection in the door of her greasy oven, after her daughter Blanquita mysteriously seems to have died or disappeared from the hospital. Nobody believes Esperanza's conclusion that Blanquita is not dead, but instead has been forced to become a prostitute. But her conclusion is comically informed by a religious narrative that promotes faith-based actions and by a global culture of spectacle that feeds on the objectification of women's bodies. At the end of the novel, Blanquita herself appears to Esperanza in a rust stain on the wall of her bathroom, assuring her mother that she will always be there, whenever she may need her, from which Esperanza concludes that her daughter has become a little saint—her own personal saint. For this reason, when Esperanza moves to Los Angeles to begin a new life with her lover Ángel Galván, a soft-spoken winged pop hero wrestler, she takes the entire bathroom wall with her.

An allegorical reading of this plot posits that Esperanza's journey has a dual component rooted in a Judeo-Christian narrative. On the one hand, the plot evokes the saving acts of the God of Israel, who sent His people into exile in the desert, freed them from their enemies, and brought them to the Promised Land. On the other hand, it draws on the concept of a descent into Hell, through which the protagonist experiences the nature of sin, her own faith-based actions, and oppressive social systems. From the standpoint of gender, the location or dislocation of the protagonist as well as the

metaphors of displacement embedded in the plot (nomadism and diaspora) point to a strategy that interrogates and deconstructs static gender identities, for by traversing the borderlands of Tijuana and Los Angeles, Esperanza engages with multiple systems of oppression (capitalism, patriarchy, racial discrimination) that challenge the apparently stable gender identities she has experienced in her native Mexican village, Tlacotalpan.

As we will see in the analysis of the novel, it is by creating paradoxical spaces—in Rose's sense—that Esperanza can renegotiate and forge her own version of herself. Her new identity will be multiple, shifting, and unbounded, and will contest the home-woman-place connection.

Important as well is how Esperanza's journey is represented (the framing, coloring, repetitions of themes, motifs, and points of view) because these mediations cause us to think about the conditions of the U.S. Hispanic culture in general, and of the Mexican women living on the U.S. Mexican-border, in particular. The protagonist's journey is represented through several narrators, who speak in first and third person through diaries, confessions, and fragments of dialogues and performances. The importance of this popular collectivity, including bureaucrats, wrestlers, prostitutes and pimps, town people sitting in mass or waiting in line for confession, is that soon we realize that Escandón aims at representing popular identities, and that her main strategy of representation is parody.

Linda Hutcheon defines parody as "a form of imitation characterized by ironic inversion, not always at the expense of the parodied text" (6); or, in another formulation, as "repetition with critical distance, which marks difference rather than similarity" (6). Importantly, according to Hutcheon, parody differs from satire (more moral and social in

its focus) in that “parody’s ‘target’ text is always another work of art or, more generally, another form of coded discourse” (16), including the conventions of an entire genre, or of the style of a period or movement. In the case of modern parody—Hutcheon states—“another context can be evoked and then inverted without a step-by step, pedestrian signaling of the entire form and spirit” (19). As we will see in this analysis, Escandón draws from three distinct coded discourses embedded in literature and popular culture (patriarchy, capitalism, and Catholicism), which typically have used women’s bodies as the material base for their gender oppression.

### **Gender Parodies/Gender Performances**

The centrality of gender in the novel becomes apparent when we think about the frequency of gender parodies we encounter as we read. My analysis of these parodies is informed by Judith Butler’s theory of gender performance in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. In particular, I use Butler’s notions of gender performance as an enactment of previously authorized narratives, as well as the notion of identity as an *effect* “of a rule-bound discourse that inserts itself in the pervasive and mundane signifying acts of linguistic life” (145). For Butler, identity is neither fatally determined not fully arbitrary, but a *signifying practice* that both restricts and enables new possibilities for gender identities:

The subject is not *determined* by the rules through which it is generated because signification is *not a founding act, but rather a regulated process of repetition*

that both conceals itself and enforces its rules precisely through the production of substantializing effects. (145)

Also key to Butler's theory is the idea that practices of parody can serve to produce *gender trouble* by performing *subversive body acts* ("the body in drag," for example), which exhibit the artificiality of the very distinction between a naturalized gender configuration and one that appears as derived or as a failed copy: "Just as bodily surfaces are enacted *as* natural, so these surfaces can become the site of a dissonant and denaturalized performance that reveals the performative status of the natural itself" (146).

In *Esperanza's Box of Saints* the performative status of gender becomes apparent through repetitive body acts, in Butler's sense, which are linked to, and result in gendered and religious narratives. For instance, the reader sees Esperanza repeatedly dressing up as a prostitute to find a job in the brothels where she hopes to find Blanquita:

She imagined how she would look if she were to pass as a prostitute. Thick eyebrows. She widened them with a dark brown pencil. The left eyebrow seemed a bit higher, so she broadened the right one. Too much. She had to add to the left one again. Then the eye shadow. Electric blue with golden glitter sounded just right. Maybe a dab of fuchsia right along her eyelashes. Mascara. A lot. Like tarantula legs surrounding her eyes. And the lips. Red. Blood red. She had a hard time following her lip line, but she wanted to make her lips seem fuller anyway. The hair, distressed. As if someone had been pulling it. She didn't see any hair spray in the tote bag, so she teased her hair with her fingertips. When she was

done, she stared at her image in the mirror. To her eye, she passed as a prostitute.

The question was, 'Is this the 'before sex' or the 'after sex' look?' (100)

Does Esperanza look like a prostitute? Is she a prostitute? Has she become a prostitute in the process of searching for her daughter? These are, of course, questions that point to the prime question of identity, which the author purposefully leaves open throughout the entire novel. Hence, a third person omniscient narrator states: "Esperanza was not selling her body. She was looking for Blanca. The selling and the killing didn't apply to her. But Cacomixtle didn't have to know what her intentions were" (85). Similarly, Esperanza's performance of prayers and devotional rituals—such as the construction and reconstruction of home altars at each of her locations—links her identity to a religious narrative of salvation. The compulsion to repeat—as Butler suggests—exposes the enforced performativity of these acts.

The phantasmatic status of gender identity is also exposed when other characters of the novel produce what Butler calls *gender trouble* through a hyperbolic exhibition of their body surfaces. For instance, to Esperanza, Doña Trini—the androgynous owner of the Pink Palace—looks sexually and genderly ambiguous: "when Esperanza gave her a closer look, she couldn't tell if Doña Trini was a man or a woman. She could have been a grandpa dressed as a grandma, or a manly grandma" (109). By contrast, Doña Trini's personal assistant, César, displays a campy over-the-top performance of gender:

She gave César a closer look. He was clearly a man. She could tell by the bulk between his legs, outlined by his tight black pants. But she sensed a certain

feminine side to him. It seemed as if he had stolen Doña Trini's femininity. Or maybe Doña had stolen César's masculinity. (112)

Likewise, Doroteo—the owner of the Fiesta Theater—represents “the body in drag” that, following Butler, reveals gender performativity:

He moved toward his painting in a delicate kind of way, like a feather floating in the air, or like a ballet dancer gliding weightlessly across the stage, every step carefully premeditated and rehearsed, or so it seemed to Esperanza, although she had never seen a ballet dancer in person. A pale lavender stretch silk shirt and white slacks revealed his firm, thin torso and tight buttocks. There were no men like him in Tlacotalpan. (168)

The same applied to Vicenta, the travel agent whose ultramasculine identity does not prevent her from being girly in love with Ángel Justiciero, who in the novel performs the narrative of Mexican professional wrestlers and folk heroes, such as Blue Demon or El Santo. Even the mesmerizing masculine figure of Ángel, who at one moment in the novel made innocent Esperanza forget to breathe (89), is recast as Cinderella (205).

The performative status of gender is also cast by Esperanza and Ángel, as they play the role of lovers as in a Latin American *telenovela*. For instance, in the following example they dance to the romantic *bolero Aventurera*, coming in and out of their roles, when Ángel accidentally falls down in the process of removing his garments:

The wrestling angel put his arm around her waist and began to slow-dance, as if they hadn't danced enough that evening. They moved centimeter by centimeter toward the bed. The candles' flames in Esperanza's altar grew to the size of lightbulbs. They flickered in excitement and painted the room with orange light. He kissed her. She kissed him back. He took off his cape and dropped it on the floor without worrying that the feathers would get damaged. She put her hands on his shoulders and slid them down his bare chest, each finger sensing his muscles like a snake caressing the terrain. He unbuttoned her blouse. She unbuckled his belt. He tried to pull down his shorts and his tights. They fit so snugly that he literally wrestled with them. He tripped and fell to the floor. He jumped back up on his feet in one graceful, agile move. (210)

The artificiality of the performance is also highlighted by the mirroring actions of *He* and *She*, the light effects supplied by devotional candles, and by a language that mimics stage directions.

Significantly, Escandón's critique is not limited to a universal category of gender since the writer acknowledges vast historical, class, racial, and ethnic differences among women of color living in the margins of dominant Anglo-American society. Geopolitical boundaries are erased by the protagonist, who traversing various geographical locations (La Curva and el Atolladero Motel Garage in Tlacotalpan, the Pink Palace in Tijuana, and the Fiesta Theater in Los Angeles), experiences what it means to be a woman living literally and figuratively in the borderlands. On the U.S.-Mexican border, Esperanza meets a marginal population that is not acknowledged by the hegemonic culture (the

women of the brothel—La Morena, Casimira, La Mojadita, la Flaca—César, Doña Trini, el Cacomixtle, Doroteo, Vicenta and el Ángel Justiciero); those whom Gloria Anzaldúa called *los atravesados*: “squint-eye, the perverse, the queer, the trouble-some, the mongrel, the mulatto, the half-breed, the half dead; in short, those who cross over, pass over, or go through the confines of the ‘normal’” (3). These are crucial characters because, as Sonia Saldívar-Hull explains in her analysis of the feminism of the border, “By invoking racist, homophobic epithets, Anzaldúa explodes the power that the dominant culture holds over what is ‘normal’ or ‘acceptable’” (211). Like Anzaldúa, I contend that Escandón focuses on these *atravesados*, as it is through them that the categories of race and ethnicity become visible.

The borderlands become a crucial space in the novel, for in this transnational geography identities become fluid, porous, and unstable, as reflected in the following passage:

Scott felt comfortable in a place where the confusion of identity created hybrid town names, like Mexicali and Calexico. Where Chinese ate their chili dogs with green tea. Where someone had the sauciness to print ‘Juan López-Smuggler’ on his business card. Where a dental technician brought up in Fairbault, Minnesota, could find her Latin lover in an illegal immigrant who came from a tiny ranch somewhere in Jalisco. (158–59)

Therefore, Scott Haynes, the rich judge from San Diego who has purchased the rights to Esperanza's sexual exclusivity, speaks of the borderlands as a privileged location, the space of true freedom to become or to reinvent oneself:

The United States wasn't the ultimate free country alter all. Mexico wasn't either. Instead, it was that piece of land where one met the other in an unavoidable frontal collision. But what he really loved about the border was that he could be a respectable, law-abiding, and law-enforcing San Diego judge and, in a matter of minutes, become an unidentifiable being sleeping in the arms of a prostitute, in a place where none care if what he did was right or wrong. (159)

In the case of Esperanza, her identity is culturally constituted in and through a language within particular discursive configurations that include folk Catholicism; but even this hegemonic discourse is challenged by the protagonist's location/dislocation in the borderlands.

### **Folk Catholicism within Paradoxical Spaces**

Folk Catholicism—with its material expressions of devotional piety, such as home altars, saints, "limpias," ex-votos, confessions, and family parties at the local cemetery—emerges in the novel as a practice of cultural and gender resistance. One of the most memorable examples is Esperanza's box of saints, which she sets up in every brothel she visits, as an ambulatory version of a home altar. As C. Gilbert Romero

explains in *Hispanic Devotional Piety: Tracing the Biblical Roots*, the biblical analogy of the home altar is Yahweh's tabernacle, which symbolizes a theology of immanence, of God in the midst of His people without the need of a mediator:

In the Hispanic home the home altar is the equivalent of the sacred shrine/holy mountain where God's presence is invoked. It is like a surrogate Sinai, where a covenantal relationship is established between God and his people, where there is mutuality of responsibility and commitment. It is at the home altar where, on occasions, the pact or bargain is struck. This pact is an exchange. For a favor—usually healing—granted by God, often reinforced through the instrumentality of a favorite saint, the petitioner will generally perform some penitential act. The mutuality of responsibility and commitment is effected at the home altar as it was on Sinai. (91)

Esperanza's fervent religiosity and journey are motivated by this experience of faith, traditionally associated with the Hispanic home. As Joan M. Hoffman states: "For Esperanza, faith is not an incomprehensible abstraction found only in holy books at mass on Sunday. Faith is an every, active, and participatory experience embodied by God's once-human emissaries on Earth—the saints" (163).

However, once Esperanza leaves her local village, one of her most significant expressions of faith, her home altar, is symbolically deconstructed as it becomes an object of curiosity and spectacle for the women of the brothels, an aphrodisiac for the

males that visit, and a pretext to recognize a gendered space where women's bodies are turned into commodities for representation and consumption.

The confinement and domination of women's bodies by the postmodern male gaze is best exemplified by Doroteo's theater, where Esperanza works in a desperate attempt to find her daughter:

The Sex-o-scope was installed at eye level. It was telescopelike tube that passed through the wall to the other side and had a lever attached to a support ring with five labeled stops: Window, Keyhole, Fragments, Kaleidoscope, and Zoom-in. Esperanza took a pick. On the other side was a tiny room with a bed and a dresser. A black woman polished her fingernails turquoise blue. As Doroteo pulled the lever to each different stop, Esperanza was able to watch the woman, first behind a semi-translucent curtain that outlined her silhouette. Then through a door's keyhole. Then multiplied by a prism. (172)

In Doroteo's theater, Esperanza's identity becomes multiple and shifting: at once a profoundly religious prostitute and a woman confined by choice, seeking her freedom. Furthermore, in this location we encounter paradoxical spaces—in Rose's sense—that serve as discursive strategies to resist the territorialities of masculinism. For instance, Esperanza's home altar is at once inside and outside of the religious context, for it is here that she seeks to strike a pact with God, while the exploitation of women's bodies, racism, and capitalism collide. By manipulating this spatiality in a multidimensional way,

the home altar becomes a location for gender resistance that the protagonist maneuvers to protect her self from becoming an object of public exploitation and spectacle:

An eye looked at Esperanza through the Sex-o-scope. The same eye that had been spying on her for the past two weeks. She wore a scant nightgown and read a wrestling magazine in bed, occasionally grabbing a tortilla chip from a bag. The altar had grown in size. More saints in frames. More crucifixes. Forty-two novena candles. Sixty-eight prayer cards. Nineteen statuettes of different holy figures. Three vases with carnations. A framed image of the Virgen de Guadalupe. Her glow-in-the-dark San Miguel Arcangel. There was barely any room left for her. (219)

Another favorite expression of folk Catholicism, penance, is also humorously portrayed in the novel. For instance, Esperanza, seeking to gain forgiveness for her daughter's alleged sins, offers Father Salvador to do penance on her behalf:

Forgive her, Father. Forgive my daughter for all the sins they're making her commit. I'll do the penance for her. Do you want me to walk with Coca-Cola bottle caps in my shoes? Should I crawl on my knees across town, choosing cobblestone streets, praying one rosary after another before the eyes on my neighbors? Or maybe I should stick needles between my fingernails, wiggle them until I bleed, and dip the tips of my fingers in lime juice. I'll do anything you tell

me to. I know you can't absolve through third party confessions, but what have you got to loose? (78)

These parodies of folk Catholicism, as well as the writer's manipulation of paradoxical spaces, suggest that even though Esperanza's search serves as a pretext to engage the reader in an exploration of the nature of faith—as Hoffman proposes—her journey also provides a strategy, through parody, to critique social discourses that manage women's bodies in order to impose gender oppression.

Beyond folk Catholicism, the official Catholic Church is also an object of scornful parody. From inversions of the Ten Commandments to a recoding of the Vatican (which in the novel becomes a reserved scarlet room where a Sacred Cow, Felicitas the Sixth, resides), the entire religious discourse is double-coded. For instance, referring to the Ten Commandments, Esperanza remembers a woman who triumphantly exclaimed that “thanks to a grammatical issue, only nine of the Commandments applied to women. Nowhere did it say, ‘Thou shall not covet thy neighbor's husband.’” (66). Similarly, we hear the people's church singing and praising the popular hymn, “Oh, Lord, You've seen my eyes and smiling You've said my name. On the sand, I've left my boat and by Your side, I'll find another ocean” (64), while Esperanza digs up the grave of her dead, but not really dead, child. The sacrament of reconciliation is also comically reversed when two men waiting in line for confession, realize the meaning of *neighbor*:

‘I wonder if we're all coveting our neighbor's wives all the time.’

‘The one I’d like to get into bed with is Mrs. Martinez. Her children look so happy, she must have awfully sweet breasts. And she’s not quite my neighbor.’  
‘Man, don’t you know that when Father Salvador says, ‘thy neighbor’ he means every married woman, not just the ones who live next door?’

‘He does?’(87)

More important, however, Esperanza’s journey takes her to a new position with respect to the Catholic Church for, upon her return to the village, not only does she question the efficacy of the dogma, but she reinterprets the entire miraculous event of the apparition of Saint Jude in her very own terms. Thus, when Father Salvador invites her to confess her sins, she replies: “At this point I’m even more confused about what a sin is and what isn’t. I am sure I have much to confess, but I didn’t come to do that. [. . .] I came to tell you that I found Blanca” (243). That Blanquita is not dead but has become Esperanza’s own personal saint is rather consistent with Esperanza’s personal experience with the saints who, as Hoffman claims, are “a curious combination of the divine and the utterly human” (163). Therefore, even though the religious discourse contains the rules that generate Esperanza’s identity, she is not fully determined by them since, in the end, through her locations and dislocations, Esperanza is able to readjust her identity.

### **Patriarchy and Capitalism in the Global-Local Nexus**

Esperanza’s position in Anglo-American territory reflects the position of other people of color, who share a kinship of institutionalized racism, class exploitation,

sexism, and homophobia. Hence, in the novel gender parodies invoke the global-local conditions of the characters, which are influenced locally by economic globalization. For instance, the pervasive languages of patriarchy and capitalism penetrate the material language of Ángel when declaring his love to Esperanza: “Esperanza you’re my Eveready, my Energizer, my Duracell, my Águila Negra. Marry me. I want us to have a baby boy. Or a baby girl. Or, better yet, twins” (227). In this exchange, patriarchy imposes the “motherhood mandate” using the language of the global market. The force of the market also inundates Esperanza’s box of saints, in which we find images in every size, shape and material. For instance, in the case of San Judas Tadeo, she explains: “I have his image in all kinds of forms. Inside an acrylic pyramid, on a keychain, in a plastic capsule to keep in my purse, on prayer cards of many sizes with different prayers printed on the back” (226). The massive proliferation of objects in the novel critiques the logic of the market, which stimulates their circulation and consumption while controlling and generating new forms of citizenship.

In other cases, motherhood as a local institution (encompassing local traditions, beliefs, attitudes, rules, and laws) is evoked and inverted. For instance, throughout the novel Esperanza is portrayed as a supermom with an exaggerated capacity to love and serve Blanquita, as we can deduce from the love notes she places every morning in her daughter’s lunch box: “*When the juice of this mango drips down you’re arm, think of how much I love you*” (34). The supermom imagery is ironically reinforced by the words of Scott Haynes, who having purchased the rights to Esperanza’s sexual exclusivity, wants her motherly love: “She was beautiful, but he had slept with many beautiful women before. She was candid. Tender. All the mother anyone could desire. She was a mother-

and-a-half. There was enough motherhood in her to keep plenty for oneself and still have some left over to give away” (160). Mocking cultural expectations, Escandón creates a protagonist whose supermom qualities lead her to becoming an independent, sexual, and empowered devout woman.

It is also important to note that Escandón uses the Mexican Mother *por excelencia*, Our Lady of Guadalupe, to introduce the material conditions of motherhood for women of color who live on the U.S.-Mexican border. Esperanza encounters the image of the Lady of Guadalupe in a mural, painted under a highway in a remote area of Los Angeles:

Suddenly, beneath one overpass, she came across a mural of the Virgen de Guadalupe. She was a glowing on a field of red roses, guarding a grave splattered with blood. A couple of guns lay on one side. And a list of names on the other, all unknown to her. On the top of the painting, black words over a green banner read: ‘We don’t forget you, Filiberto Esparza, fallen homeboy and friend.’ Esperanza immediately knelt on the side-walk. (188)

In this painting, the luminous field of roses described in the first Aztec narration of the Guadalupe event, the *Nican Mopohua*,<sup>9</sup> is framed by objects of violence that, in reality, bind the lives of Mexican illegal immigrants: a bloody tomb, a gun, and a knife.

Metonymically, the friend’s note and the list of unknown people point to the experience of familiarity and anonymity associated with immigration. This image is another ambulatory home altar, in which Filiberto’s body becomes the sacrificial offering for all

of those who have been annihilated by the oppressive social forces of the border. By framing the image of the Virgin of Guadalupe in this way, the social violence experienced by thousands of mother-immigrants becomes visible.

### **Seeing Beyond the Literature/Pop Culture Binary**

As we have seen, *Esperanza's Box of Saints* draws heavily on pop culture, including soap operas, ballads, folk Catholicism, and wrestling. The sensibility of the masses, popular and melodramatic, dominates the narrative and offers mass culture as a relevant aspect of postmodernity. Moreover, as Francine Masiello argues in *The Art of Transition*, the use of pop culture can serve to reconstruct within literature the local within the global context (14). The examples analyzed above show that it is in this intersection of the global-local that the novel becomes more critically productive.

Even though *Esperanza's Box of Saints* draws heavily on pop culture, literature is also a target of Escandón's parody. Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, Octavio Paz, and Isabel Allende are among the writers parodied in the novel. The range of pragmatic ethos oscillates from scornful ridicule to reverential homage. For instance, Sor Juana's *Enigma 3*, functioning as epigraph and homage, anticipates and explains the main conflict of the novel. The narrative opens with it: "Which pain is so unequal in its effect, / that being of sorrows the most profound, / heals a deeper grief?" The question is answered 106 pages later in the novel, when the protagonist explains in a letter to her friend Soledad why she has left her hometown to search for her dead daughter:

*But please don't worry about me. I'm in good company (I brought all my saints along) and even if you don't believe it, I can take care of myself. I've done pretty good so far.*

*I already made it to Tijuana looking for Blanca. I have concluded that she was kidnapped for child prostitution and is in a brothel somewhere in this city. This must be really hard for you to accept, but if you think about it, it's a better option than her being dead and gone. (106)*

Here Sor Juana's text enters into a dialogue with pop culture, since the greater evil that remedies an even greater one is Esperanza's conclusion that Blanquita is not dead but has been forced to become a prostitute. The clash between Sor Juana's baroque text and Escandón's popular romance reveals that in both texts, the literary or the popular, women's bodies are equally oppressed. By (re)visioning the literary/pop culture binary in this way, Escandón explodes a cultural tradition that has kept noncanonic texts in the margins.

Another example of literary parody in *Esperanza's Box of Saints* is Escandón's treatment of Blanquita's organza dress, a central motive in Isabel Allende's short story "Una venganza." In Allende's short story, Dulce Rosa Orellano wears an angelical organza dress when Tadeo Céspedes rapes her at fifteen years of age. Years later, when after falling in love with her rapist, Dulce Rosa kills herself to avenge the death of her father, she wears the same organza dress. Evidently, Allende uses the organza dress as a leitmotif to signal the brutality of a society that simultaneously idealizes and damages women's bodies. The difference marked by Escandón's parodic imitation is that the

organza dress ends up ruined by Blanquita's third cousin, who at sixteen makes love to her boyfriend in a muddy sugar-cane plantation, without tragic consequences:

Soledad enveloped her tender preteen body with a white fabric, making her look like a child angel surrounded by a voluptuous cloud. [. . .] But now she was gone. Now Soledad would have to finish the dress for someone else, the sixteen-year-old daughter of one of Soledad's cousins, who would ruin the costume three summers later while being chased by her boyfriend in a sugarcane field, ultimately surrendering and making love with him in the mud. (33–35)

Thus, while Allende denounces the victimization of women's bodies in Latin America, Escandón's recoding serves as a comic rhetorical strategy to reclaim freedom for women's sexuality in the U.S.-Hispanic context.

Octavio Paz's representation of the female body as the book of the soul where the poet reads the universe is another "target" text of the novel. Deeply rooted in the Modernist tradition, Paz writes:

con los ojos cerrados,  
con mi tacto y mi lengua  
deletreo en tu cuerpo  
la escritura del mundo. ("Pilares" 336)

By contrast, Escandón's parody reads: "My skin had learned to read his fingerprints, his pore patterns, his hair follicles" (85). The imagery is the same, but the agent of the action is inverted, for the female protagonist, Esperanza, is the *subject* of the action, not the *object* of contemplation, and what she reads is not the sublime objectification of the female body but a comic account of a night of sex: "I felt tickled. I shivered to his touch. One twinge after another. But we did not practice gymnastics" (85). From this ridiculing imitation, the reader perceives new meaning; namely, a literary tradition that objectified women's bodies by appropriating any conceptualization of the subject, where "female" is defined as "not-male."

### **Conclusion: From Gender Politics to Politics of Location**

As a Mexican writer residing in Los Angeles, María Amparo Escandón recognizes—in a similar way as Gloria Anzaldúa and other Latina writers living in the U.S. do—the particular position of borderland subjects, such as Esperanza, who struggle against global economical, political and cultural hegemonies in the United States. Because Escandón is very much a part of the Mexican culture, she can penetrate its dynamic, in particular, the complexities embedded in the relationship between gender and religion. And because she has been a resident of Los Angeles for twenty-five years, she understands the struggles of the Mexican immigrant, as well as what it means to be part of a border culture. Therefore, in *Esperanza's Box of Saints* location becomes a critical tool to providing a perspective on gender issues, while the borderland turns into the site for a transformative practice, in which hegemonic concepts of identity, gender, motherhood, and spirituality become

unfixed and fluid; a substrate waiting for the emergence of new meanings. Undoubtedly, Escandón's protagonist navigates through a series of religious and gender narratives that simultaneously promote and limit her actions. But these restrictive social constructions do not hinder her from renegotiating a new identity in Los Angeles. After all, it is through this renegotiation that Esperanza's identity becomes multidimensional and shifting, including profoundly religious beliefs, intensely motherly practices, and a free sexuality. Thus, Esperanza's story represents how the paradoxical connections between the global and the local can transform women into agents of change, able to contest the processes that have turned them into commodities in the global market.

In synthesis, *Esperanza's Box of Saints* is a powerful example of how a contemporary female Mexican writer approaches popular collective identities, performative narratives, the role of visual artifacts (religious and secular) in identity formation, as well as the influence of a new economy of representation linked to mass market and the culture of spectacle. But, perhaps more importantly, *Esperanza's Box of Saints* represents yet another example of how, within a transnational culture, Mexican and U.S. Hispanic feminisms create alliances to challenge hegemonic representations of gender and culture.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See especially Elizondo's *The Virgin of Guadalupe: A New Creation*, Espinosa's *Latino Religions and Civic Activism* in the United States, and McDannell's *Material Christianity: Religion and Popular Culture in America*.

<sup>2</sup> See Ada María Isasi-Díaz' study *Mujerista Theology*, and Lara Medina's study *Las Hermanas*.

<sup>3</sup> I am referring to "La Virgen de Guadalupe y el feminismo transnacional de Ester Hernández" and "Disrobed: The Virgin of Guadalupe, Liberation and Social Justice in Chicana Artistic Productions". Other works include: "Religión, espiritualidad y cuerpos femeninos: La insurgente Virgen de Guadalupe de Yolanda López" (LASA, March 2006), "Parody and Gender Performance in María Amparo Escandón's *Santitos*" (52<sup>nd</sup> International Conference of Americanists, Seville, Spain, July 17–21, 2006) and "Disrobed: The Virgin of Guadalupe and Social Activism in Chicanas' Writing" (AILFH, October 5–8, 2006, Weber State University, Ogden, Utah).

<sup>4</sup> To mention a few examples: Ana Castillo's essay collection *Goddess of the Americas/La Diosa de las Americas*, Sandra Cisneros' *Women Hollering Creek and Other Stories*, and Yolanda López's series of paintings and collages on the Virgin of Guadalupe (*Victoria F. Franco: Our Lady of Guadalupe*, 1978, *Margaret F. Stewart: Our Lady of Guadalupe*, 1978, *Portrait of the Artist as the Virgin of Guadalupe*, (1978), *Nuestra Madre*, 1985–1988, *Madre Mestiza*, 2002, *Virgin at the Crossroads*, 2002). See

also Marie Christian's *Belief in Dialogue: U.S. Latina Writers Confront their Religious Heritage*. These works provide new ways of understanding women's bodies, gender, and religion, and challenge European and Anglo-American feminisms that have maintained a binary, minimalist discourse of Latina feminisms with the formula "marianismo"/"machismo".

<sup>5</sup> María Amparo Escandón is a Mexican writer residing in Los Angeles. She also wrote the screenplay of *Santitos*, released in 2001. To date, the film has received awards in fourteen Film Festivals around the world, and the novel is on the best seller list.

<sup>6</sup> On February 29, 2007, I had the opportunity to interview María Amparo Escandón in her house in Los Angeles. The interview, still unpublished, is entitled "A Parodic Journey of Faith and Subversion: An Interview with María Amparo Escandón." I am extremely grateful to Escandón for sharing with me published and unedited materials about her work, as well as for her tremendous hospitality. I have chosen the English version of the novel, because the writer stated that she writes her novels first in English and then translates them into Spanish. Currently Escandón teaches Creative Writing at UCLA. She recently published her second novel, *Gonzalez & Daughter Trucker Co*, also a delightful novel.

<sup>7</sup> See David Harvey's *The Condition of Postmodernity*.

<sup>8</sup> Kaplan offers the term "locale" to refer to "a specific form of spatialization in Postmodernity that creates networks, communities and identities" (157).

<sup>9</sup> For an excellent close reading of the *Nican Mopohua*, see Elizondo's *The Virgin of Guadalupe: A New Creation*, pages 5–22.

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