

BOOK REVIEW

Illuminating Borderlands Spatial Stories in Marisol Cortez's *Luz at Midnight*

Cathryn Merla-Watson

Luz at Midnight. By Marisol Cortez. McAllen, TX: Flowersong Press, 2021. Pp. 442. \$18.95 (paperback).

Winner of the Sergio Troncoso Award for Best First Work of Fiction (2021), Marisol Cortez's lyrical and luminous debut novel *Luz at Midnight* (2020) elides discrete categories of genre in its exploration of environmental justice movements in San Antonio and south Texas. Cortez holds a doctoral degree in cultural studies and has forged her own path as a community-based scholar and activist. *Luz at Midnight* is an innovative form of community scholarship wherein the author merges fiction with memoir, testimonio, history, urban studies, and political science. Mainly narrated in third-person, this novel is organized into four sections, cohering chapters ranging in topics from political teatro to a budding romance, to the political geography of San Antonio presented in numbered "Research Notas." Such fusing of various voices, genres, and styles recalls Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La frontera: The New Mestiza*. As well, Anzaldúa's articulations of holistic epistemologies, evident in concepts like "facultad" and "mestiza consciousness," also animate *Luz at Midnight's* conceptualization of the environment and relations of power.

Luz at Midnight primarily centers on Citlali "Lali" Sánchez-O'Connor who has recently moved back to San Antonio with her young daughter, Nena, to work for the social justice organization El Centro. She has been hired to

develop a campaign against rising utility rates and a destructive new form of mining that ostensibly will wean Texas off its reliance on fossil fuels. Lali soon meets and falls in love with Joel Champlain, a local journalist struggling with his mental health who causes Lali to cut off lingering romantic ties with Nena's father, Hector. Moreover, it is Joel who, upon falling asleep underneath a footbridge next to the river "Ya Gna Wena," alluding to the Yanaguana, or the San Antonio River, is awakened by an old emaciated boxer-mix dog whom he immediately names "Luz," to whom the novel's title alludes. While rarely appearing in the rest of the novel, Luz functions as a coyote or trickster figure that prompts transformation, intuition and holistic perspectives, as well as the inciting of new rivers and landscapes—some of the novel's key tropes.

While *Luz at Midnight* traces a love story between Lali and Joel, it importantly illuminates the inner workings of grassroots or social justice organizations. It also focalizes the seemingly Sisyphean task of resisting extractive capitalism, whether it be through pushing back against neoliberal buttresses of city government or global corporations. Employing myriad defamiliarizing tactics, the novel is populated by diverse figures who are roughly based on real people from San Antonio's social justice scene who lead organizations such as El Centro, Alianza, and Viejos Against More of the Same or VAMOS (whose names are evocative of actual social justice organizations). While the novel foregrounds the efforts of these individuals and organizations, it eschews casting them in a purely idealized light. For instance, in chapter eleven "Heart of the Analysis," Cortez refers to infighting within El Centro as "feudal" in the way it (and other organizations) competes to get "sole credit" to secure funding and social capital, elaborating that "even the most inspired and aspirational [organizations]...come to self-protect against knowledge of their internal dysfunction and petty violence" (232).

Nor does Cortez romanticize la lucha, describing the reality of struggle against large government entities like City Power and Light (CPL), a thin disguise for San Antonio's City Public Service (CPS), in bleak terms: "Within neocolonial and neoliberal urban geographies it is grow-or-die that governs, the growth machine whose invisible longings manifest the city's visible transformations" (249). Here Cortez resounds a common grievance among activists in San Antonio and beyond, that neoliberal city governance has no room for the voices of the marginalized, most times operating below board with developers and corporations. This novel, in sum, does not promise neat solutions or happy endings. Following Anzaldúa, the novel proffers complexity and messiness, suggesting that collective reflection and remembering through the act of writing may chart a liminal space wherein to imagine and enact otherwise. As Anzaldúa (1987) writes, "Nothing happens in the 'real' world unless it first happens in the images in our heads" (109).

This novel, in sum, is speculative and deeply committed to a decolonial Latina feminist vision of ecology and human and non-human relationships. Due to this foregrounding of Latina feminist epistemologies, coupled with the hybrid and interdisciplinary aspects of *Luz at Midnight*, this novel would be an excellent addition to undergraduate and graduate courses pertaining to women and gender studies, environmental studies, ethnic studies, urban studies and human geography, literary and cultural studies, and political science.

References

Anzaldúa, Gloria. 1987. *Borderlands/La frontera: The New Mestiza*. San Francisco: Aunt Lute Press.

