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## Author

Ellison, Mahan L.

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## Writing the Cosmopolis: The Conceptualization of Community in Lucía Etxebarria's *Cosmofobia*

MAHAN L. ELLISON

Lucía Etxebarria's 2007 novel *Cosmofobia* centers on the lives and stories of the inhabitants of an apartment complex in Madrid's Lavapiés, a neighborhood grappling with its own diversity. Etxebarria has written a number of novels that situate her among the contemporary, urban Spanish writers that comprise the Generación Kronen.<sup>1</sup> Her works, such as *Amor, curiosidad, prozac y dudas* (1997) or *Beatriz y los cuerpos celestes* (1998) have received some critical attention, but there has not yet been a specific study done on *Cosmofobia*. Etxebarria's considerations of multicultural coexistence in the modern city within this novel should not be overlooked nor brushed aside. This novel approaches the issue from a variety of voices and viewpoints, stitching together a conceptualized whole of what it means to live in the urban, multicultural neighborhood of Lavapiés, Madrid.

Over one hundred characters participate in the creation of the narrative in *Cosmofobia*. The text is polyvocal, comprised of interviews, discussions, considerations or mere mentions, and this plethora of voices recreates a vibrant community struggling with attempts to define itself. Throughout the novel, the characters repeatedly assert that "el barrio es multicultural, no intercultural" (27). In this work, I examine how Etxebarria undermines this reductive premise offered by the inhabitants of Lavapiés by textually constructing an intercultural space that reflects an inclusive and interwoven social reality. I intend to show that, through a series of binary observations, Etxebarria presents a more optimistic view on the multiculturalism of the community than the one held by its (fictional) residents. Ultimately, the novel in its printed form becomes a representation of the apartment complex and its denizens, and Etxebarria describes an intercultural space that recasts the characters' cosmofobia into a vibrant, evolving community.

Through close readings of several selections from the novel, I will show how the narrator undermines the opinions of the characters and alludes to this more positive reality. The assertion that the community is multicultural and not intercultural is

ultimately untenable as Etxebarria joins together the multiple narratives. My analysis will examine three binaries observed in the text: the multicultural versus the intercultural, desire versus love, and the imagined versus the real. A consideration of these themes will highlight the dynamics at work in *Cosmofobia*, and will show how Etxebarria conceptualizes the cosmopolitan reality in this novel.

The work of Henri Lefebvre, Edward Soja, and David Harvey provides the theoretical framework that structures my analysis. “The fundamental conception” for both Harvey and *Cosmofobia*:

is of society as *process* – a process that strives to create the conditions for its own survival, but which is so mediated by social and spatial forms and institutions, that it creates within itself contradictions and paradoxes which are difficult of resolution. Urbanism is embedded in a social dynamic which is inherently unstable, that therefore is constantly reaching out to take on newer and newer forms. The modern metropolis is an unwieldy tension-creating thing. (Harvey, *Society* 51)

Lefebvre describes this *process* as “qualitative, fluid and dynamic” (42), and Soja offers the concept of “Thirdspace” as “a purposefully tentative and flexible term that attempts to capture what is actually a constantly shifting and changing milieu of ideas, events, appearances and meanings” (2). For Lefebvre, Soja, and Harvey, the dynamism of the urban is both chaotic and potential. Soja’s “Thirdspace” responds to the social processes at work in the city, theorizing a space that is “radically open” to diversity and the Other (107). The evolving dynamism of the city offers great opportunity for diversity and intercultural interactions. *Cosmofobia* creates a macro-view of the social space of Lavapiés; the novel realizes Soja’s “Thirdspace”:

the space where all places are, capable of being seen from every angle, each standing clear; but also a secret and conjectured object, filled with illusions and allusions, a space that is common to us all yet never able to be completely seen and understood...

*Everything* comes together in Thirdspace: subjectivity and objectivity, the abstract and the concrete, the real and the imagined, the knowable and the unimagined, the repetitive and the differential, structure and agency, mind and body, consciousness and the unconscious, the disciplined and the transdisciplinary, everyday life and unending history. (56-57)

Etxebarria’s Lavapiés is active and interactive, multicultural and

intercultural with the combined narratives of the characters creating a novel that reveals a positive “Thirdspace.” The pages of *Cosmofobia* are where “*everything* comes together” to create the “*Cosmopolis*, a globalized and ‘glocalized’ world city” (Soja 56, 21).

This project also draws on recent works in the fields of urban, race and cosmopolitan/multicultural studies, including works by Robert Ferguson, Michael Keith, Jon Binnie et al, and Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, among others. Their research on current urban trends helps to better understand the treatment of the cosmopolitan city within contemporary novels. This work will also examine the use of space in the novel either as a “contact zone”<sup>2</sup> of interaction or as one of segregation. Ultimately, I will consider the diegetic space’s interaction with the non-diegetic, an interaction which strengthens the affective power of the novel.<sup>3</sup>

Previous studies on Etxebarria have focused on gender issues within her novels.<sup>4</sup> These are, indeed, important aspects of her recent works, but I hope to contribute a multicultural and spatial examination of the construction of community in the urban space of modern Madrid. In the last decade, Madrid experienced, and continues to undergo, a rapid growth in its immigrant population and Etxebarria’s novel reflects this change. With her text *Cosmofobia*, Etxebarria approaches these themes in the Lavapiés neighborhood of Madrid, seeking to come to terms with a new definition of community – a new identity of what it could mean to be “Spanish” in an increasingly heterogeneous society. Etxebarria offers a novelistic consideration of Lavapiés as a “laboratorio de interculturalidad” (Gómez 1), which may indeed serve as a model for an entire nation. *Cosmofobia* engages with the “contemporary phenomena of immigration and ethnicity [that] are constitutive of globalization and are reconfiguring the spaces of social relations in cities in new ways” (Sandercock 43), and Etxebarria’s conceptualization of community in this novel is a valuable representation of the new multicultural Spain.

Etxebarria’s focus on the Lavapiés neighborhood is a salient element of the novel. Mayte Gómez describes Lavapiés as “un lugar mítico, una manera de vivir, un estilo, una historia – una leyenda... tiene una personalidad inconfundible construida y aceptada por el imaginario colectivo de toda una ciudad y, posiblemente, de todo un país” (1). With this mythical introduction, Gómez asserts the importance of the iconic neighborhood in the Spanish collective imagination and also insinuates possible synecdochic implications for the nation. Lavapiés is a historically multicultural space in

Madrid, and, for a large part of this century, new immigrants came to this central *barrio* as their first stop. More recently, gentrification efforts have attempted to redevelop the neighborhood. Currently, capital investment is slowly forcing lower class, long-term residents and poorer immigrant communities out of the neighborhood. Lavapiés is a dynamic and evolving space, a “mental *and* material construct” (Elden 189-190), and an iconic space of culture and the multicultural.<sup>5</sup> Multiple cultural and financial forces are at play on its streets. The convergence of investment capital and multicultural immigration have created a unique spatial identity for the neighborhood, even though it is perhaps “a highly ambiguous notion” of community, the product of “the most intense social and political confusions... [and a] monumental testimony to and a moving force within the dialectics of capitalism’s uneven development” (Harvey, *Consciousness* 252, 251). Each of these dynamics finds expression in the pages of *Cosmofobia*, social alienation and urban confusion are re-presented within a macro-view of the community at large, emphasizing the *process* over the inhabitants’ individual *perceptions*.

In *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media*, Ella Shohat and Robert Stam suggest that “the concept of ‘multiculturalism’... is polysemically open to various interpretations and subject to diverse political force fields; it has become an empty signifier on to which diverse groups project their hopes and fears” (47). This problematic nature of the term allows Etxebarria to focus on interpretations between the ‘intercultural’ and the ‘multicultural’ in the Lavapiés neighborhood. Gómez is more specific in her articulation of these terms:

En los círculos académicos españoles, parece haber un acuerdo general en definir una sociedad multicultural como aquella en la que conviven diversos grupos étnicos, culturales y/o religiosos en un espacio común (convivencia que puede estar definida, simplemente, por la aparente ausencia de conflicto) aunque estos grupos no se relacionen, se influyan o se mezclen unos con otros, e incluso aunque exista cierto grado de segregación. Por otro lado, una sociedad intercultural sería aquella en la que existe una interacción entre diversos grupos étnicos y culturales, independientemente del carácter mayoritario o minoritario del cualquiera de ellos, y en la que todos esos grupos se sienten integrados a una sociedad común. (20)

*Cosmofobia* engages with both Shohat and Stam’s and Gómez’s conceptualizations of the multicultural and the intercultural as it

examines how a community projects their “hopes and fears” onto these terms, how opinions and experiences of life in a multicultural neighborhood also contribute to an understanding of the *intercultural*, and how Etxebarria seeks to define and interpret the daily reality of this heterogeneous neighborhood.

The novel develops almost entirely within the geographical confines of the Lavapiés neighborhood. This collection of stories told by and about the residents of the neighborhood includes over a hundred characters in its three hundred pages. The stories are conveyed in a variety of voices and styles that intersect and elaborate upon one another to the point of confusion; it is a polyvocal narrative. It is a kind gesture on the part of the author to provide a “*Dramatis Personae*” with a brief description of each character mentioned, however briefly, throughout the course of the novel. By providing additional biographical information not intrinsically woven into the plot development, this character summary serves not only to clarify, but also to contribute to the sense that these characters are (or could be) real people who inhabit the real, non-diegetic space of Lavapiés. The novel also reinforces the reality of the stories and characters by a section that acknowledges the inspiration for particular chapters and scenes, emphasizing that these characters may not be *real* but they are *realistic*. These additional sections connect the diegetic space of the novel with a real space – the non-diegetic space – outside of the novel, which I will examine below. The novel effectively interacts with both the lived and imagined space of Lavapiés.

The cast of characters comprises a range of socio-economic and cultural backgrounds. Recent immigrants such as the Moroccan Hisham contrast with the more Hispanicized children of immigrants such as the Hispano-Guinean Susana. Wealthy and famous Spanish pop icons like Emma Ponte and David Martín also share the pages with more subdued and introverted characters such as Antón and Isaac. The economic and cultural diversity of the neighborhood’s population serves to portray the transitional stage of Lavapiés – a traditionally poor, immigrant neighborhood experiencing processes of gentrification. The contrasts highlight the diversity of the neighborhood but also imply that it is a changing, dynamic space. Soja sustains that, “[c]ityspace is... literally and figuratively transgressed with an abundance of sexual possibilities and pleasures, dangers and opportunities, that are always both personal and political and, ultimately, never completely knowable from any singular discursive standpoint” (113).

Etxebarria responds with a heteroglossic narrative, recognizing

the “continuous deconstruction and reconstitution... [that reflect] a constant effort to move beyond the established limits of our understanding of the world” (Soja 126).

Lavapiés as a multicultural neighborhood is an assumed tenet of the text. It is obvious that “the banal demography of global city change brings together both different people and different cultures” (Keith 4). The widely varied backgrounds of the characters consciously try to represent all facets of the neighborhood. This diverse population consolidated in a neighborhood is aptly defined by the portmanteau of “glocalization” in that the text is grounded in a concrete space filled with a population from many global regions and ethnic or religious backgrounds (Keith 40). Even though Lavapiés may be *glocalized*, many of the characters of the novel voice frustration that while Lavapiés is *multicultural*, it is not actually *intercultural*.<sup>6</sup> A statement to this fact is repeated at least four times at different points in the novel by distinct characters. In the first chapter Antón says “el barrio es multicultural, no intercultural, eso Claudia lo repite a menudo” (27). Susana repeats Antón’s words in chapter three “[p]ero bien dice Antón que multicultural sí, pero intercultural no” (74). Amina says that “hay convivencia, no intercambio” (143), and it comes back to Claudia’s words in chapter six that it is, indeed, a “barrio multicultural, no intercultural” (155). These voices are not limited to a specific demographic within the cast of characters: Antón and Claudia are both ethnically Spanish, Susana is ethnically Guinean, but was born and raised in Spain, and Amina is the daughter of immigrants from Morocco. They represent what Lou Freitas Caton calls “a conundrum: a people desirous of canonical communality while continually facing unceasing variety” (2). The characters lament the lack of intercultural interaction in spite of the obvious diversity that fills their neighborhood.

The opposition of multicultural versus intercultural is the most prominent binary tenet that the characters repeat. Even though the novel’s characters insist on the distinction, Etxebarria undermines their statements through stories of life in the neighborhood to ultimately depict a community that is both multicultural *and* intercultural. This subversive premise is considered in the first chapter (the “introduction”) of the novel. After a brief anecdote of a personal story from the narrator, she writes that “[é]ste es un libro sobre oportunidades perdidas o ganadas” (11). This phrase comes between the anecdote of how her friend missed an opportunity to be in an Almodóvar film, a personal story about the ironies and possibilities of casual acquaintances and brushes with chance, an

example of a missed opportunity. The second half of the first chapter presents an observation of “mi barrio” (11) – Lavapiés – that offers readers a description of a public space and its use by the multicultural residents:

En el Caserón Grande se organizan todo tipo de actividades: grupos de autoayuda para mujeres, atención a la tercera edad, cursos de ajedrez, de español para inmigrantes, teatro para niños, seminarios de habilidades sociales y educación para adultos, clases de artesanía, talleres de ocio y tiempo libre, de salud mental transcultural, de orientación laboral, de legislación de extranjería, de radio... (11-12)

This exhaustive list of activities creates the impression of an active and *interactive* space at the heart of neighborhood life. The narrator goes on to describe the public park where she frequently takes her daughter and where “[m]i hija suele ser la única niña rubia... Los hay chinos, pakistaníes, marroquíes, de Bangla Desh, ecuatorianos, colombianos, senegaleses, nigerianos... Hay madres marroquíes y egipcias con velo y *yilaba*, ecuatorianas con vaqueros ceñidísimos, senegalesas con túnicas estampadas, y alguna española” (12). The description then focuses on children playing soccer and their physical interaction in the park and in the social service programs at “La Casita.” This careful, narrative observation is significant in that it considers:

[the] sites for coming to terms with ethnic (and surely other) differences... where dialogue and prosaic negotiations are compulsory, in sites such as workplace, schools, colleges, youth centres,... in which people from different cultural backgrounds are thrown together in new settings which disrupt familiar patterns and create the possibility of initiating new attachments. (Sandercock 44-45)

In this introduction to the Lavapiés neighborhood, the reader encounters a frenetic, active neighborhood brought together in the social space of the public park. Public spaces in the neighborhood are proof of the multicultural reality of Lavapiés.

The structure and contents of this first chapter set up the binary observations found throughout the entire novel. In the introduction, the narrator first shares an anecdote of missed opportunity, then describes the novel as being a story of “oportunidades perdidas o ganadas” (11), with her gaze ultimately falling on the interaction of the children of the neighborhood park. In juxtaposing these two



scenes, the narrator alludes to the play and interaction of the children as an “oportunidad ganada.” The children represent a future of possibilities, while the narrator’s personal anecdote represents a past that is not recoverable. This introduction of a binary structuring in the novel serves to undermine the neighborhood’s iteration that it is “multicultural no intercultural.”

Scenes of intercultural interaction abound in other sections of the novel, continuously attenuating the popular belief in cultural and social segregation. These instances include intimate relationships, such as the interracial relationship between Susana and Silvio or the fling between Hisham and Leonor Mayo, and also friendships such as the one between Susana and Antón or Yamal Benani and various people. The figure of Yamal serves as an important thread throughout the novel connecting people and cultures. He exudes a charismatic attraction to all who come in contact with him. Of Moroccan and Lebanese parentage, Yamal is sexually irresistible to both women and men, and his words are given biblical authority on all subjects. He appears in almost every chapter or story in some way. His presence is ubiquitous throughout the novel, and his powers are legendary; he is a “cosmopolite... skilled in navigating and negotiating difference” (Binnie 8). Yamal moved from Paris to Madrid to open a bar in Lavapiés, but he is also an aspiring artist. His bar becomes a space of intercultural interaction. It is a contact zone and a social space for the neighborhood “shaped out of relations that are simultaneously economic and cultural” (Keith 179). Michael Keith argues that these “economic ‘contact zones’ may be less glamorous than fashion, less cutting-edge than contemporary artistic expression. But they become a part of the cultural fabric that defines the constitutive heterogeneity [of a community]” (180). At one point in the novel, Yamal brings together in his bar “dos marroquíes y dos negros. Los cuatro hablan francés... Este tipo de grupos es raro en el barrio... pero ya se sabe que uno de los dones de Yamal es reunir a grupos de lo más variopinto” (97). At another point, he pronounces the last word on cultural difference to a group that is gathered at his bar:

No son ellos y nosotros, todos somos iguales. Estás hablando como hablan los americanos. Si dicen que nosotros somos diferentes, que no somos como ellos, que no sentimos como ellos, que no amamos a nuestros hijos como ellos... El marroquí del norte no es distinto al del sur; todos somos hermanos. No existe mi verdad o la del otro, sino mi verdad y la del otro. Y la violencia de estos chicos nada tiene que ver con que hablen español o francés,

tiene que ver con la pobreza, con la deestructuración, con tener lejos a la familia. (102)

His words echo Soja's criticism of Lefebvre's "reductionism in all its forms," explaining that:

the lure of binarism, the compacting of meaning into a closed either/or opposition between two terms, concepts, or elements. Whenever faced with such binarized categories (subject-object, mental-material, natural-social, bourgeois-proletariat, local-global, center-periphery, agency-structure), Lefebvre persistently sought to crack them open by introducing an-Other term, a third possibility or 'moment'... the first and most important step in transforming the categorical and closed logic of either/or to the dialectically open logic of both/and also... (60)

The importance of Yamal's words is again emphasized as the narrator admits, in the last few pages of the novel, that he represents "la esencia misma del barrio" (363). Yamal is a multi-ethnic individual, providing a space for intercultural interaction and actively discouraging social and cultural segregation. No other character receives the respect, admiration or textual space given to Yamal. The narrator treats him as a fundamental representation of the intercultural nature of the neighborhood. His charisma draws people from all backgrounds. This metonymic description of Lavapiés through the image of Yamal highlights the "centripetal force of integration" in the neighborhood (Gómez 35). His bar provides the space for intercultural interaction. He initiates and maintains interpersonal interactions with a variety of people. He is a consistent, recurring textual example of intercultural interaction and space.

The second conspicuous binary observation is that of desire versus love. This binary exposes the characters' core emotions and beliefs. Relationships that ultimately fail fill the novel. Love is portrayed as no more than an ephemeral emotion that serves little to no purpose, while desire propels relationships and interpersonal – as well as intercultural – interactions. Love lacks vitality and is ineffective, while desire is dynamic and actuates. References to love are few in the novel, and it is problematized early on by the recounting of Irene's mother's abandonment of her husband and children to live with someone else in Ibiza, "[q]ue no lo hizo sólo por amor" (19). The first introduction to love is complicated with other dynamics that ultimately separate people and families. Irene's mother abandoned her, her sister, and her father. She physically left

the neighborhood and went far away. By doing something “por amor,” Irene always considers that “su madre era una puta” (19). In this representation, love is a capricious and divisive force.

Love is presented in a more positive light in the situation of Miriam and Yamal, as they recount the story of their meeting in Paris years before. It is initially described as “un flechazo absoluto” (85), while later Yamal’s love “le introduciría [a Miriam] a través de besos que eran como túneles” (85). Grammatically, “su amor” is a one-sided reference to Yamal’s love, not a shared love. It is a minor point, but significant in the sense that the narrative emphasizes love’s individual characteristic; it is a one-sided emotion. Its affective powers are ephemeral. Within just a few pages their relationship disintegrates, and the chapter ends as Miriam contemplates that, “A Yamal no le ha vuelto a ver después de aquella noche que pasaron juntos. Él no volvió a llamarla y ella decidió que si él no lo hacía ella tampoco intentaría contactarle; se trataba de una cuestión de orgullo” (94). Love is ultimately impotent in creating interpersonal bonds.

Isaac and Claudia’s relationship again repeats this one-sided nature of love. The recounting of their story begins with their friendship from twenty years earlier. Isaac realizes early on that “Claudia era el amor de su vida” (204), but he goes about “seducing” her by inventing a false girlfriend whom he can complain about to her. The presentation of love comes hand in hand with isolation: “y además le hacía sufrir a él más que a Claudia” (204). Fortunately for Isaac, his tactics are successful and he begins a stable, but not very passionate, relationship with Claudia. In fact, they are presented throughout the novel in separate spheres, rarely are they seen together, and it takes Antón several months before he discovers that Claudia is in a relationship. Even love creates separate spheres that isolate the individuals involved. As their relationship continues, Isaac believes that they are drifting apart. He realizes that “estaba preocupado. Peor aún: estaba asustado” (206). He goes on to acknowledge that his love is based on nostalgia “como si estuviera enamorado de una Claudia proyectada” (207). However, in the midst of his concerns, he and Claudia attempt to conceive together. Even this most intimate process is isolating for them. Their efforts at conception and Isaac’s realization that they are emotionally distancing themselves represent a key point in the dichotomy between love and desire in this novel: love’s inability to bring people together finds its antidote in desire.

Desire emerges as the drive that connects people. Desire’s vital force becomes evident when the suffering Isaac visits Yamal’s bar.

Isaac goes to the bar under the pretext of being an art enthusiast, when in reality he only hopes to meet the famous bartender/artist. In their encounter, Yamal's charisma and charm captivates Isaac. Readers soon understand that Yamal's charisma stems from the fact that he understands his desire, which he relates to the Arabic word "*'al-Isti'dad*" (218). Yamal turns the question to Isaac, "¿Sabes cuál es tu Deseo?" (218). Isaac closes his eyes and is lead into a meditation on what his Desire could be. As he experiences an almost hallucinatory stream of images, he confirms that Claudia is indeed his Desire. Isaac leaves the bar and returns home where he is suave and tender, effectively seducing a surprised Claudia. One month later, Claudia discovers that she is pregnant and "Isaac tuvo la certeza total... de que la luna le había concedido su *'al-Isti'dad*" (222). Their newfound desire reunites them emotionally, close in a way that their love had been unable to do. With their example, the novel suggests that "love" leads only to brief, romantic entanglements, while "desire" has a profound power to connect, rekindle, and to survive quotidian difficulties.

While this instance is the most explicit outlaying of the distinction between desire and love, desire is a recurring theme throughout the novel. Sexual desire is a strong motivating force that serves as an instigator for varied instances of intimate, carnal, intercultural interaction. It is true that many of these relationships are based on little more than physical desire: Antón's infidelity with the German girls, Leonor Mayo's brief relationship with Hisham, or Yamal Benani's various sexual liaisons. Returning to the words of Michael Keith, these interactions "may be less glamorous than fashion, less cutting-edge than contemporary artistic expression. But they become a part of the cultural fabric that defines the constitutive heterogeneity" (180).

Intercultural sexual encounters are highly intimate contact zones, not only social contact zones, but also physical ones. With plentiful examples of such trysts, the argument that Lavapiés is not *intercultural* becomes unsustainable.

These physical intercultural encounters are not untroubled. They are often temporary flings, crumbling at the slightest pressure. And yet, the *intercultural* affairs are just as problematic as the *intracultural* ones that are described throughout the novel. Both intercultural and intracultural relationships share similar problems and brevity. For instance, Antón has various sexual partners and difficulty with intimacy, and David and Livia's relationship is a continuous disaster. In this sense, intercultural relational problems are

normalized by parallel intracultural difficulties. *Culture* is removed from the equation as the problematic dynamics of interaction are generalized to the *interpersonal* level.

Therefore, Yamal represents not just an object of desire because of his “foreign” allure but because he is engaging and *personable*. He inhabits the social center of the neighborhood, where desire drives relationships. His bar serves as a contact zone for the neighborhood, and his personal charisma makes him irresistible. His ethnic origin as a minority in Spain, the force of his desire, and the desire that he elicits in others transform him into an incarnation of the “*esencia misma del barrio*” (363). Yamal Benani effectively symbolizes a cosmopolitan space that compels interaction between distinct groups of people, removing the cultural barriers that exist and transgressing them through personal interchange.

Desire’s role in overcoming difference and interpersonal or intercultural gaps finds explicit expression in Mónica’s hypothetical conversation with her girlfriend Emma Ponte. Her words come to symbolize the theoretical space of the neighborhood:

Y pensé que todo este tiempo hemos sido como dos nativos que vivieran en dos islas, situadas la una enfrente de la otra hasta que, un día, cada uno hace una balsa y se encuentran en el mar, en un islote equidistante. Uno puede ver perfectamente el contorno de la isla de la que el otro vino... pero el otro nada puede ver del origen del primero, pues una niebla le impide ver el horizonte, la isla que sólo puede imaginar a través de lo que el otro le cuenta.

El deseo es como niebla.

Todo es discontinuo en el deseo, todo se disuelve en el deseo.

(273)

These lines serve as metaphors of the multicultural space of Lavapiés. The neighborhood emerges as an intermediary space inhabited by both immigrants and Spaniards, one in which desire dissolves difference. Mónica’s observation reflects Lou Freitas Caton’s claim that, “In order to know someone who has been historically oppressed we must first clear away all that makes us different from that person. If not, we will mirror only ourselves, experience only our own ideology. In an effort to avoid miscommunication, then, we must strip ourselves of the ideology that forms us” (62). Desire draws people in close proximity together by obscuring the difference of past or the outside. Mónica’s metaphor of the fog-as-desire isolates individuals in a contact zone where interpersonal communication is necessary, and ideology from the outside society is obscured and irrelevant, again reducing the

cultural factor to the personal level.

The third pertinent dichotomy is that of the imagined versus the real. Etxebarria employs dramatic irony to undermine the beliefs of her characters in multiple passages where an individual believes one thing to be true, while there is actually an opposing reality. This subversion ultimately renders the characters' assertion that the neighborhood is "multicultural, sí, pero intercultural no" unreliable, forcing the reader to question this repeated phrase in light of the intercultural interaction that fills the entire narrative. Leonor Mayor subtly refers to this disjunction between imagination and reality when she asks the narrator, "¿Tú has oído eso que decía Rita Hayworth de que su problema con los hombres era que se acostaban con Gilda y se levantaban con Rita?" (260). Image and substance are distinct qualities, and Etxebarria emphasizes the superficiality of the former.

Leonor is an "[a]ctriz de cierto prestigio" (375) and her profession as an actress is an appropriate example of the divide between an imagined reality and an actual reality. In fact, one of the roles that she hoped to interpret was for a movie script that her then-husband had written titled *Cosmofobia*, a direct reference to the novel in which she is a character. This tie between movie and book obscures the contrast between *intra-* and *non-diegetic* space, especially when it is mentioned that Penelope Cruz, a real-life actress, will play the part in the cinematic version. This complication further highlights the distinction between script and reality, between what is imagined and what is real. When tied to the social milieu of fictional and material Lavapiés, this distinction highlights the dynamism of the urban reality. The novel draws on Lefebvre's triad of spatiality: "first, the *physical* – nature, the Cosmos, secondly, the *mental*, including logical and formal abstractions; and thirdly, the *social*" (12). An imagined (*fictional*) and real (*non-diegetic*) meta-narrative level parallels the imagined (*mental*) and the real (*physical*) within the text. The diegetic social interaction and the text's interaction with the non-diegetic contribute to a three layers of spatiality occupying the pages of *Cosmofobia* and the streets of *Lavapiés*. The third dynamic of the *social* produces a "cumulative *trialectics* that is radically open to additional othernesses, to a continuing expansion of spatial knowledge" (Soja 61). Therefore, the contrast between the imagined and reality, and between diegetic and non-diegetic, highlights the forces at play between persons and cultures both within the text and also beyond its pages, creating an open and evolving conceptualization of the community.

Disjunctions between what people say and what is true abound in the novel. Often, it takes the explicit form of lying, as is the case with Cristina, the anorexic. As an adult, she now hides her anorexia. Friends and family believe she has gotten help and has recovered. She simply tells them now that “fueron tonterías de chica, blablablas... Sí, claro, ahora estoy perfectamente, *miento*.... Ahora me aliento con mucha sensatez, *miento*. Lo mismo que digo siempre: *Miento*” (134, emphasis added). Here, Cristina consciously portrays a false reality for her family and friends, creating an imagined reality for them to believe. Unable to know the truth, her acquaintances must operate under false assumptions in their relations with Cristina. Similar are the memories that Claudia and Dora share when they reconnect on the bus after many years. They recount the death of Franco and the feigned public mourning of their parents, but the private celebration. In both instances, honest emotions are purposefully hidden, and the public persona is a false presentation. The juxtaposition of the real and the illusory is further emphasized in that Cristina and Dora, as young girls, swear secrecy on “El Baby Mocosete,” a doll that “meaba y soltaba mocos” (188). This very life-like doll copies the ugliness of reality but is obviously lifeless, which once again problematizes the representation of the real and the imagined. By emphasizing this disjunction between perception and reality, Extebarria forces the reader to explore both realms. Readers must engage in a reconceptualization of basic premises such as reality and the intercultural, and ultimately, community.

Other instances include Isaac lying to Claudia about having a girlfriend so that he could get closer to her and Álex hiding his love for David Martín. Instances in which reality is only misinterpreted also emerge, as is the case with David Martín and Diana. Their relationship begins to disintegrate as David feels that Diana is not being honest with him in her wish to have children. He previously made clear his objection to having children and thought that Diana agreed with him, but when he discovers her birth-control pills in the garbage, he loses faith in her and begins to distance himself from their relationship. It is only much later on in the novel that Diana admits that she had thrown her birth control pills away in an impulsive moment because she felt that they were making her gain weight. This misunderstanding brings about the end of their relationship and highlights how what they both believe to be true and what is actually true are two different things. Commenting on this break-up, the narrator explains, “las discusiones siempre tienen lugar en una tierra de nadie, entre lo que se dice y lo que no se dice, y [David] comprendió que Diana pronunciaba frases en voz alta y,

simultáneamente, decía cosas hacia dentro, pero sólo las segundas eran sinceras” (116-117). David’s own decision not to have children is called into question when he makes the choice to be the father of Emma Ponte’s child. Even though he will not have to personally take responsibility for this child, it undermines what he had pronounced “en voz alta.” Interpersonal communication is unreliable, and what is perceived does not always reflect reality.

David is later fooled by Livia as she uses him and he only discovers the truth about her afterwards; it is a truth that he resists knowing for as long as possible. Isaac’s work as a therapist for women from the neighborhood leads him to think that “las mujeres del barrio están dispuestas a creer mentiras porque andan ávidas de cosas gratas y placenteras como compensación a la vida tan perra que arrastran, a las interminables jornadas de trabajo malpagado, a las miradas de mal disimulado desprecio que se abaten sobre ellas en los vagones del metro” (202). Etxebarria suggests that the residents of the neighborhood are quick to believe things, even if they are not true, because they provide quick answers to a difficult living situation. The opposition between perception and reality show that “[t]he modern metropolis is an unwieldy tension-creating thing” (Harvey, *Society* 51). Ultimately, in understanding the novel as “Thirdspace,” the realities that the inhabitants of Lavapiés are “never able to... completely see and under[stand]” become revealed in the textual space “where all places are, capable of being seen from every angle, each standing clear” (Soja 56). The reader must incorporate these oppositions into a unified understanding.

The artwork of Alfredo Álvarez Plágaro and Yamal Benani in their *Cuadros Iguales* and *Cuadros Gemelos*, respectively, also highlights disjunctions between the real and the imagined. For one, the works represent two artworks created simultaneously that are “idénticos, pero distintos” (340). Yamal Benani conceptually copies Plágaro by creating his own *Cuadros Gemelos* and the text copies non-diegetic reality by involving Plágaro, a real-life painter, in the fictional narrative. Each “equal” or “twin” work is distinct due to “el fallo humano” (343), the same fault that leads to many of the interpersonal misunderstandings throughout the novel. Yamal Benani’s and Plágaro’s art create a rich and complicated picture of the ties between false reality, true reality, and the interpretation of both; fact and fiction are part of any narrative, textual or social. By examining these characters and their art, the narrator complicates the interpretation of realities, contaminating truth with fiction and fiction with truth. Discourse is ultimately unreliable, and the reader is forced to recognize interaction over social intercourse.



In highlighting these examples of a disjunction between what is imagined and what is real, the author undermines the characters' abilities to speak with authority on their realities. If what they perceive and understand does not necessarily reflect what is real, then the most often repeated phrase that "el barrio es multicultural, no intercultural" (27, 74, 142-143, 155) can be called into question, especially in light of the fact that the novel contains many instances of intercultural interaction. Even Yamal Benani's act of copying the Spanish painter's idea becomes an intercultural act, one in which one culture has influenced the other. As she erodes at the characters' ability to speak for themselves, Etxebarria simultaneously offers a more positive message: that Lavapiés is, in fact, an intercultural space – perhaps one that is not understood or comprehended fully by its residents, but obviously both multicultural *and* intercultural. Leonie Sandercock proposes that this multicultural community of "intercultural contact and interaction" is necessary to a society because it "needs others to understand itself better, expand its intellectual and moral horizon, stretch its imagination and guard it against the obvious temptation to absolutize itself" (40-41). Yamal's bar as a site of social gathering, the interrelated lives and stories of the characters, and the ultimate intertwining of lives and narratives manifest that "cosmopolitanism is not simply a matter of the individual choice of free agents, but rather... it is *socially* produced" (Binnie 17). Lavapiés becomes an intercultural community not by individuals actively seeking to be intercultural, but rather by the sharing of a space that creates social interaction and interconnectedness. It is a site of "social practice" (Lefebvre 12).

The text contributes to an understanding of the authorial undermining of its characters. A pastiche of styles and voices comprise the narrative. The chapters and sections range from first-person narrations to third-person limited or omniscient narrators. Some sections are interviews, and the author names herself as a character also.<sup>7</sup> In the epistolary chapter "Las oportunidades perdidas," Mónica writes to an unknown person, stating "me atrevo a dar este paso, a enviarte estas letras" (273). At least part of the chapter titled "Los molinos de viento" is a replication of a recorded interview: "Probando, un, dos, tres... Me llamo Cristina. El apellido lo tengo que decir, ¿no? Vale. Pues me llamo Cristina" (133). The author inserts herself as a named character at the beginning and the end, but also maintains a presence as an assumed interviewer throughout the novel. The multiplicity of voices and styles in each chapter parallels the diverse inhabitants of the neighborhood. Just as there are multiple cultures and lifestyles in the neighborhood, so are

there multiple literary styles and narrative voices coexisting and interacting on the pages, contributing to form a cohesive whole. This forces the reader to consider “the iterative relationship between the activity that takes place in the spaces of the city and the narratives through which such spaces are made visible” (Keith 124). The text becomes a symbolic representation of the community. The stories interact with one another as *multifaceted* and *interconnected* text. Yamal’s frequent insertion in disparate sections, the gradual revelation of David and Diana’s misunderstanding, Amina’s series of relationships, among other examples, weave plot lines that intersect and connect the characters and stories told. The intertwining of the stories portrays in a textual format the interconnected lives of the inhabitants of the Lavapiés neighborhood. Michael Keith argues that examining the relationship between the text and its story is important because the reader must “consider *the way we look* and *the way we tell*, to privilege neither but to reveal the artifice of both” (80). The novel provides a macro-view of the community that surpasses the individual characters potential view.

Etxebarria’s text questions the reader’s perceptions of what is the reality of the story, and what the narrative hides. It subtly questions itself, and therefore calls on the reader to question basic assumptions such as the validity of the characters’ beliefs and opinions. The novel, therefore, becomes an interactive text and an appropriate symbol of an intercultural community. The real space of Lavapiés “lends a miraculous quality to thought, which becomes incarnate by means of a *design*... The design serves as a mediator – itself of great fidelity – between mental activity (invention) and social activity (realization)” (Lefebvre 27-28). *Cosmofobia* is the mediating *design*, calling upon its readers to question and re-envision the intercultural reality.

The narrator makes explicit efforts to reach beyond the textual space and to connect with the reader, further linking the imagined with the actual. The first and most obvious example is how the author inserts herself as a character in the first chapter and the last one. These inclusions serve as a parenthetical opening and closing of the text with references to a non-diegetic reality. The first chapter is narrated in the first person, directed forthrightly towards the reader, drawing the reader into the neighborhood described in the text. As the narrator offers a visual description of the neighborhood, she concludes the chapter in the second-person familiar: “Y como ya conoces el parque y la Casita, déjame que te lleve de la mano hasta

allí” (14). The figurative outstretched hand invites the reader in, bridging a gap between the text and the non-diegetic world. The narrator continues to insert the real world into the fictional text by having the characters interact with or discuss real celebrities, such as Pedro Almodóvar or Alfredo Álvarez Plágaro, Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg or Andy Warhol. For instance, Yamal’s copying of a real-life painter in his *Cuadros Gemelos* implies a mimesis of reality within the novel. These famous figures in a fictional text complicate the relationship between the intra- and non- diegetic, blurring the lines and emphasizing an interaction that further supports the *interactive* nature of the text and its message, creating a “Thirdspace” that highlights the positive qualities of the community that the inhabitants are unable to see.

In the final pages, the “Dramatis Personae” reminds the reader of the characters encountered throughout the text, helping the reader to remember them as individuals rather than merely passing names. Following the “Dramatis Personae,” the author also offers a section of chapter-by-chapter acknowledgements and notes, implying that many of the stories were based on real people and occurrences. The extra information provides character development after the narrative has reached its traditional end, further grounding the novel in a possible non-diegetic reality and emphasizing the urgency of the stories for the reader. The problems of the characters become realistic ones, tied to a reality that extends beyond the text. The narrative also subtly destabilizes the generic interpretation of the fictional that the author establishes at the beginning of the text by denying that “los casos narrados, los personajes y las situaciones que describo, no responden a la historia de ninguna persona en concreto” (8). The novel undermines its own terms of classification just as it undermines the words of the voices spoken in the novel. The text interweaves the narratives of the characters with the space beyond its pages. *Cosmofobia*’s interactive space effectively reproduces the multicultural and *intercultural* space of Lavapiés.

In many ways, the text comes to represent the urban reality of Lavapiés. The cultural estrangement that characters profess as a symptom of urban life has less to do with cultural segregation than with the mutual estrangement of “urban inhabitants [of the cosmopolis]” (Iveson 79). The disparate forces at play in the urban cosmopolis often result in “alienations... [that] confound and confuse each other so as to frustrate rather than facilitate coherent... action” (Harvey, *Consciousness* 254). The alienation that permeates interpersonal relationships inhibits the individuals of the community

from forming a coherent response to their concerns about intercultural exchange. When Antón, Susana and Claudia lament the lack of intercultural interchange, they ultimately fail to recognize positive examples that abound. It becomes apparent that the characters of the novel are struggling to adapt to new urban realities and the fact that to “live in a city is to live in a community of people who are strangers to each other” (Raban qtd. in Iveson 71).<sup>8</sup> Troubled interpersonal relationships mitigate the conception that race relations are bad. Intercultural tensions are normalized alongside interpersonal tensions. The cosmopolis is a confusing milieu and “[w]ithin that confusion, all kinds of other sentiments, illusions, and distortions can flourish. The ferment of discontent and opposition, of understandable and entirely reasonable misrepresentations, of unintended consequences, is always part of the urban brew” (Harvey, *Consciousness* 251-52). In the pages of *Cosmofobia*, Etxebarria recreates these discontents and misrepresentations, ultimately showing that the tie binding a community together is the reality of shared space, shared pages, and a shared neighborhood.

The three binary observations that operate in the novel – the multicultural versus the intercultural, desire versus love, and imagined reality versus actual reality – serve to reconceptualize understandings of community in order to point out the positive moments of intercultural exchange in a multicultural space. Etxebarria’s presentation of Lavapiés textually recreates a contact zone that leaves much hope for the future generations. In her examination of the multicultural versus the intercultural, she illustrates the space as one of intercultural connectedness and echoes Lefebvre and Soja in stating: “Si la interculturalidad no es el resultado de un proceso sino el proceso mismo, ella es la que define el ‘espacio público común’ en el que la integración puede tener lugar” (Gómez 34). She disproves the residents’ perception that it is only a multicultural space – a mere “diversity of the gaze, rather than a scene of discourse and interaction” (Sandercock 40). By focusing on the contrast between conceptualizations of desire and love, Etxebarria emphasizes that desire is a useful tool in bringing diverse groups together. She focuses on the impetus behind social change, the dynamic that foment exchange. Finally, Etxebarria’s presentation of imagined and actual realities serves as a stark reminder that perceptions are not always accurate portrayals of the truth. The novel maintains a positive view on the interpersonal and the intercultural that encourages tolerance and patience to create and maintain relationships. Etxebarria creates a “Thirdspace,”

“another mode of thinking about space that draws upon the material and mental spaces... Simultaneously real and imagined and more (both and also)” (Soja 11). This “Thirdspace” combines the narratives of a community, finding in their unity an intercultural space.

Over the course of its densely populated pages, Etxebarria’s recasts the neighborhood of Lavapiés. The parade of characters cohabit its pages as their stories network, intertwine and assume various forms and styles. The narrator interacts with and draws in the reader – “déjame que te lleve de la mano hasta allí” (14) – inviting the reader to become a part of the community through the textual space. The text acknowledges the problems of intercultural relations but reminds readers that problems lie not in cultural diversity but in the fact that estrangement is a product of urban life, “part of the urban brew” (Harvey, *Consciousness* 252). What ultimately matters is the sharing of a common space that brings individuals together in inevitable ways, be they social, carnal, or others. Just as the characters share a space in this fictional (though perhaps questionably so) representation of Lavapiés, so also their stories participate in a textual space, and this intercultural participation within mutual space is the conceptualization of community that *Cosmofobia* offers to the reader: all urban residents, no matter what culture they come from, are afflicted with *Cosmofobia* – the “morbid dread of the cosmos and realizing ones true place in it” (Etxebarria 5) – and an appropriate antidote for this phobia is replacing the fear with a conceptualization of space, the *polis* – Soja’s “Thirdspace.” *Cosmofobia* moves beyond the facile “binary observations” offering a vision of “other spaces that difference makes... new sites for struggle and for the construction of interconnected and non-exclusionary communities of resistance,” and these spaces the novel creates open “a Thirdspace of possibilities for a new cultural politics of difference and identity” (Soja 96). In her novel, Etxebarria provides a vantage point for understanding the community, so that hopefully by the end it is no longer “cosmofobia” but rather a solid appreciation of the cosmopolitan.

#### NOTES

1. Including such authors as José Ángel Mañas, Ray Loriga, Pedro Maestre, and Mancha San Esteban.
2. Mary Louise Pratt defines “contact zones” as “social spaces where

disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of dominations and subordination” (4).

3. By “non-diegetic” I refer to the physical world beyond the novel.

4. See Ferrán and Henseler and Martín for excellent articles that examine previous works by Etxebarria.

5. See Gómez and Feinberg for an extensive examination and history of Lavapiés.

6. In the novel, the popular differentiation between these two terms appears to stem directly from Mayte Gómez’s observations, considered on pages 5-6.

7. See Henseler.

8. Iveson begins his article with a short collection of quotes emphasizing the “co-presence of strangers [that] literally defines modern urban life”: Jonathan Raban, “To live in a city is to live in a community of people who are strangers to each other”; Iris Marion Young, “City life is a being together of strangers”; Richard Sennett, “The city brings together people who are different, it intensifies the complexity of social life, it presents people to each other as strangers”; and Zygmunt Bauman “City life is carried on by strangers among strangers” (Iveson 71).

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