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**Title**

Salsa Epistemology: Negotiating the Present and the Utopic in the Work of Erika Lopez

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“You just imagine good things happening and you make them happen.”

--Vida Boheme, *To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything! Julie Newmar*

It is Vida Boheme, the elegant Southern Belle drag queen played by Patrick Swayze in 1995's cult classic film *To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything! Julie Newmar*, that whispers these words to amateur drag queen Miss Chi-Chi Rodriguez, played by John Leguizamo. In this scene, which takes place in the tiny Midwestern town they are stuck in after a car malfunction, Vida tries to impart some wisdom on the younger, less refined Chi-Chi. Chi-Chi has fallen in love with a local town boy that believes her to be a woman and, overwhelmed by the prospect of being rejected by both him and the elder drag queens she wants so badly to impress, she is feeling hopeless. In response, Vida offers her one simple phrase: “You just imagine good things happening and you make them happen.” It is this phrase that I want to examine this chapter.

Vida's advice, though seemingly uncomplicated, represents a fundamental truth of oppressed peoples. When there is nowhere left to turn, one *does* just imagine good things happening and then make them happen. But how exactly does one do this? How does one know what sorts of things to imagine? Or when to stop imaging and start taking action? Furthermore, how does one know what sort of action to take to make these things happen?

This paper seeks to draw out the complicated relationship between the various parts of Vida's advice—between imagining and doing—in an effort to answer the following questions as they relate to oppressed subjects: How can we maintain a utopic vision of the future and take concrete steps in the present to enact it? How is it possible to

be both present in the moment and imagine the best for ourselves? How can we accept the moment we are in and envision/remember a time of equality?

In the larger work of my dissertation chapter, I take queer theory as a case study to argue for how the discipline can be used to negotiate what I term present-based resistance and utopic creation—that is, respectively, the act of resisting social norms in the present and the act of creating alternate utopian realities through art, theatre, or even sex. In the section I will read to you, however, I approach this issue through the lens of queer Latina literature, to argue that queer Latina writers negotiate the present and the utopic in ways that are telling for social movements as well as critical theory, through the use of “play.” It asks how queer Latina cultural producers use play to inhabit the space between resisting the reality of an antagonistic political climate and creating literary works that imagine utopian outlets. My larger dissertation sees play as a central tenet of what I term a “salsa epistemology,”—that is, an epistemology, or theory of knowing, rooted in Spanish Caribbean cultural production, just as its namesake—the musical genre of salsa—suggests.

Erika Lopez is a Puerto Rican-American graphic novelist, blogger, and cartoonist whose work includes several books published by Simon & Schuster and her own company, Monster Girl Media. Lopez has enjoyed a sort of cult following throughout her career, due in part to an irreverent writing style characterized by cultural critique in the form of vulgar, sexualized prose and images. For Lopez, as well as for a handful of other queer Latina performance artists and bloggers, complex social issues are most effectively discussed through wit, hyperbole, and a depiction of sexual excess. Indeed, in her work

Lopez has consistently relied on these literary devices to address everything from child abuse to poverty. If we characterize all of her literary techniques under the category of play—where play is defined as engagement with things as they are through the lens of what they could be—then Lopez’s work performs a critique of the present, even as it simultaneously removes its subject from the present and deposits her into utopia.

My use of the term “play” here is intended as a reference to both Maria Lugones’ elaboration of “playfulness” in social movements in “Playfulness, ‘World’-Traveling, and Loving Perception” and Jose Esteban Muñoz’s concern with “hope” as the methodology of the future in *Cruising Utopia*. Indeed play exists on both registers. It is simultaneously non-antagonistic and imaginative, malleable and non-conformist. Play shares many similarities with humor, since much play is funny, but yet not all humor is playful. By this I mean that not all humor is engaged with a critique of the present. In other words, some humor is escapist, but play is necessarily rooted in the present. As we are defining it, play does the difficult work of cultural critique while, simultaneously, not taking it too seriously.

Lopez’s 1997 graphic novel, *Flaming Iguanas: An All-Girl Road Novel Thing*, combines sketches drawn by the author with the story of Tomato Rodriguez, a bisexual half-White Quaker, half-Puerto Rican. The novel follows Tomato on her cross-country road trip on a motorcycle she has just learned how to ride, in an effort to find herself before reaching the West coast. We can begin by looking at Lopez’s use of play in her understanding of a rather serious feminist concept, intersectionality. Lopez expresses her take on this issue when she writes:

“I don’t feel white, gay, bisexual, black, or like a brokenhearted Puerto Rican in *West Side Story*, but sometimes I feel like all of them. Sometimes I want to speak in twang and belong to the KKK, experience the brotherhood and simplicity of opinions. / Sometimes I want to feel so heterosexual, hit the headboard to the point of concussion, and have my crotch smell like bad sperm the morning after” (28).

In this excerpt we see Tomato dealing with the many identities she inhabits. As the daughter of a Puerto Rican father and a White, Quaker mother, Tomato inhabits multiple cultural realities. Although she acknowledges that no single identity suits her, she does not feel forced to choose between them. Rather she states “sometimes I feel like all of them.” For Tomato, the experience of her Latinidad cannot be prioritized over her whiteness. She goes so far as to state “sometimes I want to speak in twang and belong to the KKK.” Rather than reflect on her personal identity process at length, Lopez uses a shorthand to express her relationship to her own whiteness. When she writes, “Sometimes I want to speak in twang and belong to the KKK” she acknowledges her own relationship to the institution of whiteness as represented by the KKK, and her desire to inhabit that identity by speaking in twang. Lopez does the same for the institution of heterosexuality, which Tomato wants to inhabit by having heterosexual sex that leaves her “crotch smell like bad sperm the morning after.” Once again, we see that rather than run away from potentially oppressive identities such as whiteness and heterosexuality, Tomato instead incorporates them into her identity. In the rest of the chapter she later goes on to also incorporate her dark skin color, her lesbian desire, and her non-fluency in Spanish.

In the excerpt above, as in others, we see a Tomato that is able to take on the issue of intersectionality almost exclusively through a playful engagement with cultural norms. This is not, however, intended to avoid the complex identity issues that she struggles with. Rather, it is precisely through her wit that Tomato works out the complexities of her identity, coming to the conclusion that “sometimes I feel like all of them.”

Throughout the novel we also see Tomato engage playfully with notions of time. As she continues her journey to California and becomes more comfortable with the different parts of herself, Tomato is also facing a crushing fear of death that seems to remove her from linear time at certain points during the novel. Her obsession with death also breaks up the linearity of the narrative itself, as she does not experience an evolution on the subject throughout the story. As a result, we have a novel that follows the linear progression of most coming-of-age narratives in terms of identity—she does become more comfortable with herself—but at the same time allows the character’s fear of death to remain unresolved.

This unresolvability is intimately linked to play, including the play we have already seen in the novel’s rhetorical devices. If play occupies a liminal space in between the present and the utopic, and likewise between resistance and creation, then it is by nature opposed to resolution and fixity. In playfully addressing the issue of death, Lopez calls attention to this. After a brush with death by falling off of her bike on a muddy path one night, for example, Tomato reflects:

“I looked around me and saw only black./ I heard sounds like a faraway river, but I knew they were leaves blowing in the sky. For a tea bag moment, everything was as it was supposed to be. I breathed with the trees and felt separated from the

collective human consciousness: I didn't want to conquer anything, didn't want to build cheap aluminum developments or shopping centers. I felt I belonged and would've asked for permission to stay if I'd known how" (195).

For Tomato, this moment after falling off of her motorcycle acts as what Gloria Anzaldúa would call an "arrebato," or an "earthquake" that propels one out of linear time and narrative and into a liminal space of personal growth, in which she is able to stop her frenzied thinking for the first time since setting out of her road trip and appreciate where she is. She writes, "for a tea bag moment, everything was as it was supposed to be." While still maintaining her humorous outlook by using the phrase "tea bag moment," Tomato recognizes that for once she is fulfilled by the moment she is living. She goes on to commune with nature by breathing in the trees, and ultimately feelings "separated from the collective human consciousness." For Lopez the "collective human consciousness" can be equated to this tendency to displace oneself from the moment one is living, in an effort to progress toward a better future in the form of a progress narrative that pushes us to "build cheap aluminum developments or shopping centers." Tomato feels satisfied once she is able to escape this human consciousness, when she acknowledges "everything was as it was supposed to be." It is in this moment that Tomato experiences a utopian moment of peace from the identity processes that she deconstructs throughout the course of the book.

In general, Erika Lopez's oeuvre concerns itself with issues of the present and the utopic. As she so brazenly says in her most recent collection, *The Girl Must Die*, "Whatever doesn't kill you, will eventually turn you on." Indeed this is often the work of

social-justice oriented movements and literature—to consistently resist eradication without losing the ability to still be “turned on” by the world. Queer Latina literature, as exemplified in the work of Erika Lopez, has a unique ability to navigate this line between utopian creative outputs and serious social-justice oriented critique.

## Works Cited

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