

Carmen Nestares's *Venus en Buenos Aires*: Neocolonialist
Cyber-Romance, Virtual Lies, and the Transatlantic Queer

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Carmen Nestares's novel *Venus en Buenos Aires* (Venus in Buenos Aires) was published in 2001 by Odisea, one of the few Spanish publishers specialized in gay and lesbian themes. It also sponsors an increasingly popular annual literary award. Although *Venus en Buenos Aires* did not receive the award, it sold well and was reedited in 2003. Lucía Etxebarria endorsed the novel with a laudatory prologue, but she fails to point out one of its most innovative aspects, namely, the integration of the Internet and its lesbo-romantic possibilities as prime plot motivator. Furthermore, Etxebarria only refers in passing to the transatlantic nature of the lesbian affair and to the fact that in the novel the Argentinean capital is the exclusive site of sexual perversion: "The words 'Buenos Aires' are not synonyms for a city, or certain weather conditions, but for aberration and immorality" (Etxebarria 11). The following pages foreground what Etxebarria's prologue only suggests—the conjunction of lesbian love, cyber-romance, and a neocolonialist view of Latin America as the site of sexual deviance and excess in Nestares's novel.

Cristina, the main character in *Venus en Buenos Aires*, resides in one of Madrid's affluent neighborhoods. The twenty-three-year-old daughter of a wealthy businessman, she leads the comfortable and flashy life of the rich and spoiled. By chance she meets Maela in a virtual chat room. Maela is the pseudonym used by Adriana, a twenty-seven-year-old Argentinean, who lives in Buenos Aires and works as a secretary for a university provost. Cristina and Adriana's first conversation in the chat room is followed by more private con-

versations on email. Cristina gets to know Adriana only through writing and electronic letter exchange. The protagonist openly acknowledges that “[she] met Adriana through one of [her] passions: writing” (28). In the process of communicating with her Argentinean pen pal, she comes to understand that she is a lesbian. Later on, Cristina arranges a trip to Buenos Aires, to meet Adriana. Her “excuse” is to undergo cosmetic surgery, since she was born with a leporine lip that needs further medical intervention. Argentina, according to the novel, is famous for the quality and affordability of cosmetic surgery, so Cristina’s parents are willing to pay for the trip. Cristina, who travels to Buenos Aires with her mother and her mother’s friend, Rosa, keeps her relationship with Adriana a secret. Cristina’s mother, however, immediately becomes suspicious of the lesbian affair and tries to put an end to it. Ultimately, Cristina’s father instructs her to interrupt the post-surgery treatment and to speed up her return to Madrid. Soon thereafter, Adriana follows, but the lesbian love affair suffers under the open animosity it encounters on Spanish territory. Finally, Cristina travels again to Buenos Aires, this time by herself. She is determined to start a new life with Adriana and to ignore the prejudices of the old continent. The novel ends with the implied hopeful message that a “second conquest” of foreign reality will be more successful than the first.

Venus en Buenos Aires centers on a transatlantic, lesbian love affair that starts in cyber-space and culminates in reality. At first, the novel reads “innocently” as an uncomplicated cyber-romance fiction between a Spanish and an Argentinean woman. However, once the romance becomes physical when the lovers meet on Latin American soil, certain unsettling elements arise. Online, the Spanish and the Argentinean cultures, supposedly “united” by the same language, seem to intermingle easily and graciously. But offline, they are more conflicted. Furthermore, it becomes evident that the Spanish lover adopts a neocolonialist stance in the novel. From a distance she considers Argentina a land of capitalist promise and potential wealth, the bountiful provider of certain commodities, such as inexpensive cosmetic surgery and, more importantly, queer (s)exotica. Moreover, once on foreign territory, Cristina and her mother reveal a blatant lack of comprehension of Argentinean reality. Their defensive attitude reminds the reader of the hostility towards alien

cultures so common among colonizers. Hence this article focuses on the disturbing semantics of neocolonialist politics that lurks beneath neo-utopian transatlantic Lesbos and its “pseudo-democratic” online rhetoric. Cutting edge cyber-romance and unorthodox transatlantic lesbian sex do not divert the reader’s attention from the “persistence of colonialism” (Childs & Williams 5) in postcolonial times. To the contrary, lesbian cyber-romance, as depicted in *Venus en Buenos Aires*, plays a complying role within “the [post] modern theatre of neocolonialist international relations” (Slemon 3).

The first part of *Venus en Buenos Aires* draws its inspiration from a growing cyber-literary tradition focused on sexual revelation. The novel contains all the ingredients of such virtual out-of-the closet narratives. It depicts a main character that morosely falls in love, mesmerized by the written word and carried away by electronic mystification, as well as a mysterious and intriguing (female) interlocutor, who slowly reveals fragments of her life. The novel emphasizes the growing awareness of a repressed homosexuality. It also stresses the spiritual communion prior to bodily attraction and the “mere” bonding of the flesh. At first, cyber-space seems the ideal locus for (sexual) self-knowledge and romantic bliss. E-mail makes it possible to highlight only certain aspects of reality, while willfully obscuring others. These circumstances allow Cristina to concentrate on the intense, spiritual process of her sexual outing, as issues of gender and sexual orientation take center stage without the “distracting” interference and complications of “real” physiognomies and other identity markers such as race, class, ethnic origin, and cultural upbringing, which are equally inscribed on the body.

According to the rapidly increasing bibliography on virtual sexuality (Altman; Ben Ze’ev; Cooper; Coyne; Eyre; Hecht Orzack; Kendall; Maxwell; Springer), the most salient traits of cyber-sex, such as the voluntary detachment from reality, the liberating absence of the body, and the powerful presence of language as the creator of imaginary worlds and unrestrained erotic exploration, permit sexual self-knowledge and out-of-the-closet experiences. Although cyber-romance shares some of the characteristics of cyber-sex—namely, the aforementioned voluntary detachment from reality and the body, and the reliance on language as a powerful demiurge and creator of

alternative erotic worlds—cyber-romance ultimately seeks offline connection, while cyber-sex stubbornly clings to online isolation.

Since the radical absence of commitment remains one of cyber-sex's most cherished freedoms, cyber-sex "addicts" are usually careful to keep their real (sex) lives apart from their virtual sex adventures. In fact, statistics show that 84% of "cybersex compulsives" prefer to keep their activities secret (Cooper 16) and thus do not seek to meet their online sex partner offline. Accordingly, the majority of erotic short stories found, for example, in "Buscorelatos.com," the first search engine of erotic short stories in Spanish, recreate cyber-sex practitioners' reluctance to blur the boundaries between the real and the virtual world. At the same time, however, virtual isolation is never complete, nor is cyber-space as hermetic as one might want it to be. In fact, the erotic as well as narrative tension in cybernetic pornographic fictions stems primordially from their constant flirting with reality. The thrill lies in approximating reality as much as possible, without ever renouncing the sense of security and the lack of compromise generously bestowed on cybernauts who choose to have their love affairs in Cyberia. Technology's prodigious versatility makes such half-hearted approximation attempts possible. In fact, many cybersex virtual narratives depict at least two means of telecommunication. Such is the case, for example, of "Virtual Lust" ('Lujuria virtual'), one of the most popular short stories in Buscorelatos.com. The main character of this erotic cyber-narrative, who "enters a well-populated chat to fight boredom" (1), meets a certain Laura, and, from then on, "they keep dating on a regular basis, first, on the ICQ, and later, with the help of a program [that allows them to communicate] using their own voices" (1). On one occasion, the male cybernaut suggests to his lover that she visit an erotic chatroom with him and asks her forthrightly: "Do you want us to make love in this chatroom?" (1). Finally, the virtual lovers in this story meet in real time and space. Nonetheless, they make sure the luxurious hotel room remains completely dark in order to keep the anonymity cherished by virtual sex. Anonymity and lack of compromise in real life ultimately guarantee the continuation of the love affair in the virtual realm.

Like "Virtual Lust," *Venus en Buenos Aires* also refers to a combination of electronic means of communication. Cristina and Adriana

usually communicate by email, but they also meet in chat-rooms. In fact, their first encounter occurs in one of these cybernetic enclaves: "Adriana and I met through cybernetics. A telephone line was our matchmaker, and Adriana's nickname [in the chat-room], the first thing that appealed to me: Maela." (28). The next step is the exchange of photographs and phone calls: "Two weeks after having met Adriana, I decided to send her a picture through the computer, so as to cut short any chance of idealization. . . . Before a month went by, we decided to talk on the phone. This second step was much more important than the first [cybernetic step]. It was less cold, and more real, more intimate and direct" (35, 48). Although Cristina finally succeeds in physically traveling to Buenos Aires, both cyber-lovers know that they have to rely exclusively on electronic communication until their "real" meeting materializes: "Before we find the way to really meet, we only have email, our phone calls, and our conversations in the chat-room" (51).

Like the heterosexual lovers in "Virtual Lust," the lesbian lovers in *Venus en Buenos Aires* find that their unquenchable desire for "real" bodies ultimately forces them to leave the virtual bedroom. Although in both narratives the couples predictably end up making "real" love in a "real" hotel room, however, the outcome is very different. The lovers in "Virtual Lust" carefully safeguard their anonymity, which makes the return to cyber-space possible. The lovers in *Venus en Buenos Aires*, on the contrary, openly disclose their identity, move to the real world, and therefore are forced forever to renounce hygienic cyber-sex and non-committal virtual liaisons with one another. A complex personal relationship enmeshed with neocolonial politics replaces cybernetic apolitical sex-utopia.

Venus en Buenos Aires chooses the stereotyped image of a rose to depict the lovers' longing for tangible reality and their unsuccessful attempt to resume virtual romantic bliss. To celebrate the anniversary of their first virtual month "together," Adriana sends Cristina a beautiful cybernetic present: "the painting of a red rose that filled the whole screen" (66). Shortly afterwards, Cristina responds to Adriana's treat with a dried out rose and a letter in which she tells her that "this is the same rose that [Adriana] had sent through the internet, and that she had dried and preserved the rose for her" (74). The image of an online rose suddenly transformed

into a tangible entity (although dried out, and, henceforth, without the vivid freshness of the virtual corolla) suggests an easy transition from Cyberia to the real world. However, the opposite—going from the real towards the virtual—is much more difficult, and the novel cannot find a suitable metaphor for the process. Since the Baroque period, the rose has symbolized a one-way trajectory that cannot be reversed. Its life goes from radiant splendor to decay and death, and, in postmodern jargon, from virtuality to reality. Consequently, when Cristina returns to Madrid, followed shortly thereafter by Adriana, both remain in a relationship unavoidably “soiled” with reality, in stark contrast with the limpid transparency of the virtual idyll. In a futile attempt to bring back spiritual connectedness and to save their relationship, Cristina turns on the computer and sits down to write an email to Adriana, although Adriana is sitting beside her in the same hotel room. The lovers left Cyberia in search of reality (in search of tangible bodies, physical love, and “real” cities), and now reality evokes their longing for Cyberia’s ethereal, ahistorical, and apolitical landscape.

While virtual space supposedly fosters seamless spiritual communion, real space ensures that bodily fusion is painful and highly unsatisfactory. First of all, Cristina’s mother immediately suspects that Adriana is a lesbian. She even hires a private detective to investigate Adriana. Furthermore, one of Adriana’s friends, driven by jealousy, resorts to a long series of intrigues designed to interfere with the love affair. Hence, the relationship becomes clandestine and tortuous, punctuated by nocturnal pilgrimages that unavoidably end in a series of sordid hotel rooms. The physical contact between the women reveals the “ugly side” of the transatlantic idyll and the ultimate falsehood of its virtual embellishment.

Renouncing Cyberia and entering the real world also has strong political implications, laying bare the stubborn survival of the colonial condition in Latin America and the neocolonialist attitude Spain still adopts towards its former colonies. This becomes clear when, accompanied by her mother and her mother’s friend, Cristina finally boards the airplane that brings her to her lover. In the scene that describes Cristina’s first encounter with Buenos Aires, one is reminded of the way Spanish conquerors and chroniclers reacted when confronted with the new continent. They obsessively com-

pared the “other” with their own reality: “Then we drove through more streets, and each one of them reminded me of certain areas I already knew: some looked like exact replicas of Madrid’s Gran Vía, while other places made me remember my leisurely strolls around London, or Oxford Street” (95). Since *Venus en Buenos Aires* is not a propaganda piece (as the old chronicles were, to a great extent), and since this particular narrator does not have to convince any king of the worth of his endeavors, Cristina is allowed to be candid and to speak with sincerity. According to her, “there was a factor which clearly diminished the beauty of the buildings: the dirt that impregnated the facades” (95). Thus Argentina is a bad—dirty and corrupt—replica of Europe.

The transatlantic clash surfaces in the conversation between Cristina and Adriana’s father. He asks her if she likes Buenos Aires, and the following dialogue ensues:

‘Yeah, well... it’s not bad.’ ‘She doesn’t like it,’ Adriana answered, and I looked at her reproachfully. ‘Do you like Spain better?’ ‘Yes, I believe so.’ ‘Why?’ ‘Because I think life is better there; the economic situation is more favorable, and the purchasing power is higher.’ ‘You live with your parents?’, he asked. ‘Yes.’ ‘What does your father do for a living?’ ‘He owns a business.’ ‘In that case, you cannot compare the ways of life in both countries. Look at Adriana, she has been earning her own money for many years now and pays for all her things without our help. . . .’ I felt ill at ease, and did not understand why [Adriana’s father] was blaming me for my lack of financial independence. (162-63)

Even before Cristina’s first trip to Buenos Aires, however, Argentina appears as a “neocolonized” country that bears the pejorative stereotypes of the subaltern condition. First of all, Europe (Spain) “narrates” Latin America (Argentina) and not vice versa. From its superior stance as a powerful narrator, Europe/Cristina (perhaps a postmodern female and queer alter ego of Christopher Columbus?) by chance “discovers” America/Adriana during one of her cybernetic travels and, once again imitating Columbus, later decides to embark on a second journey, this time of “real” proportions.

Moreover, and exactly like pre-Columbian America, Argentina incarnates utopia, although of a very specific sort. For Cristina, the new world is the land of (medical) promise and affordable surgi-

cal dexterity, untiringly devoted to beautifying the western face and body, and, indeed, needs to repair her faulty European physiognomy that makes the “real” encounter between the two worlds possible. Only after the virtual romance seems sufficiently solid, does Cristina dare to tell her cybernetic lover that she was born with a leporine lip. Despite a series of surgeries, further surgical interventions are required in order to correct the congenital defect, and this gives Cristina the possibility of converting her medical situation into a reason to meet Adriana in the flesh, thanks to Argentina’s international reputation for affordable and competent plastic surgery: “At the end of March, an idea came to me. I was watching a movie, and in the commercials, I saw the advertisement for a cosmetic surgery clinic. I remembered that on several occasions I had heard people say that the best plastic surgeons worked in South America and, specifically, in Buenos Aires. My mind filled with light, as if a sudden spark of hope had ignited a fire. My brain was bubbling” (54). Interestingly enough, Argentinean plastic surgery, as the novel repeatedly stresses, only slightly improves Cristina’s physical appearance. When the nurse takes off the bandages, she looks at her “new” face for the first time and acknowledges she “had changed very little, if at all” (142). Back in Madrid, her father reiterates: “Your face looks as if they hadn’t operated on it at all” (18).

The stubborn enigma of the unaltered lips invites several complementary interpretations that contribute layers of meaning to the transatlantic neocolonialism inherent in the novel. A first reading suggests that the apparently unsuccessful operation is yet another means of denouncing Argentinean corruption, moral chaos, and political and economic stagnancy. For example, Adriana’s friends are invariably untrustworthy and psychologically unbalanced. Her prudish mother, surrounded by priests, occupies her time proselytizing and propagating dubious religious beliefs. Even the beauty of urban architecture is ultimately deceiving: the building that houses the clinic is “Victorian,” and has a “luxurious and very elegant lobby; the clinic itself, however, lacks such exquisite appearance” (103), with its “several worn out armchairs” (103) and its “synthetic hardwood floor” (103). Cristina’s surgeon is described as untrustworthy, and worse, as “a butcher, and a crook” (199).

However, Cristina’s comment, although apparently similar to

her father's, points in an entirely different direction. Although she recognizes that her physiognomy has barely changed, she also says that she is not surprised. Furthermore, she attributes her present tranquility and lack of surprise to the fact that she feels much more comfortable with her physical appearance and much less obsessed about it: "This new situation [of the surgical intervention in Buenos Aires] reminded me of what I had gone through years ago, after one of my surgeries. The main difference, though, was that this time I felt much more relaxed, because my physical defect had ceased to be an obsession to me" (142). Metaphorically, Cristina has finally come to terms with her sexual orientation. It is not by chance that she was born with a deformed mouth and split lips, which is a metaphor for her "queer" vagina, and the "abnormal" language spoken by her genital labia. Her father's stubborn disappointment with her unaltered face/lips means disillusion with Cristina's refusal to remedy nature's "aberrations," to become straight, or, at least, to crawl back into the closet.

Thus in the eyes of the narrator, the "failed" plastic surgery becomes the grand finale and happy ending to a perfectly successful coming out story that reads as follows: Cristina spent her entire childhood trying to correct a deformed lip. Forced by painful surgical interventions to forgo eating and speaking for long periods of time, she grew accustomed to not eating, and became an anorexic during her adolescence. She also became charmingly quick witted and outspoken to divert the attention from her parted lips. Eventually, even Cristina was able to disregard her misshapen labia, until foreign experiences on foreign soil (Cyberia, Argentina) forcefully brought back certain repressed memories, and literally rearranged her body and sexuality. First Cyberia and then Argentina restore Cristina's (sexual) life. The three months she spent abroad were, as she puts it, "the best three months of my entire life. During those three months I was born again. I was born when I was twenty-three years old" (20).

Cristina's experience relapses into clichés, particularly, into the faded stereotype of Spaniards looking elsewhere (beyond the Pyrenees, across the Atlantic, and within Cyberia) for sexual re-birth and erotic titillation. During the twentieth century (before and during Francoism), Spaniards traditionally crossed the Pyrenees

and went to France and northern Europe in search of sex and to explore fully any non-normative sexual orientation. Early modern Spaniards, eager to “faire les Ameriques,” found much pleasure in both complacent and resisting Indian beauties. Finally, postmodern Spaniards succumb to the newly invented attractions of cyber-sex and computer-mediated outings. But virtual erotic journeys do not keep westerners from cultivating “real” (sex)otic tourism. In fact, as Nestares’s novel indicates, one leads smoothly to the other. *Venus en Buenos Aires* is a logical outcome of “Venus in Cyberia.” The computer screen is the postmodern technological confirmation of Spanish modernity’s ingrained belief in the foreign origin of sexual deviance and excess, evidenced, for example, in the erotic novel-ettes written in the 1920s and 1930s in Spain, which enjoyed great popularity with an eclectic audience. These texts, like their cyber-equivalent, always stressed the foreign origin of its perverse characters and sexual sinners. Thus, lesbians usually came from France or from northern European countries, where women’s liberation movements had exercised their pernicious influence on the feminine spirit, and gays were to be found in Spain’s former colonies, particularly in Cuba. That island and other exotic, Latin American enclaves were homeland as well to hypersexual mulattoes and shameless, dark-skinned women. Spain’s erotic fiction thus partly supports the western conviction that heterosexuality is the product of civilization, while homosexuality, another sign of primitivism, is rampant among “savages.” As Terry puts it, “the creature called the heterosexual was fashioned as a positive and civilized counterpart to both the menacing pervert and the atavistic savage” (139). In fact, often, the pervert and the savage shared the same body.

Neither the relative novelty of transatlantic cyber-romance nor the outspokenness of queer-outing narratives makes the basic injustice of sexual prejudice and neocolonialism less visible, or aggravating. Cristina leaves Spain and goes to Argentina to pursue her exotic lover. And, as is usually the case with sexo-exotic tourist destinations, erotic freedom and deviant sexual practices go hand in hand with what westerners perceive as social backwardness and reactionary politics. The novel suggests that sexual excess and “freedom” (Cristina is surprised by the visibility and openness of the gay world in Buenos Aires) barely disguise the reality of a backward and

undemocratic nation, which has recently struggled with a militarist regime. Adriana herself, who seems so honest and uninhibited in sexual matters, appears to be much more conservative where politics are concerned. She proudly declares that she had been enrolled in the army and even reached the rank of lieutenant. When she takes Cristina to her room, she shows her “some of her pictures, her Army diploma, her gun, and her diary” (163). Shortly thereafter, the two women visit a war ship, where Adriana shows Cristina her enthusiasm for military weapons, particularly for canons, and offers detailed explanations of the complex war machinery.

More disturbing, however, than the insistence on Argentina’s (and Adriana’s) dark and violent past and the nation’s economic backwardness, is the emphasis on the dishonesty of Argentina’s citizens. Even before leaving Madrid for Buenos Aires, Cristina and her companions are worried about their safety and the reliability of the Argentinean service sector: “They had heard terrible things about Buenos Aires’ lack of security. . . . Before leaving, people told me that there had been many cases where false taxi drivers had taken tourists—preferably young women—to empty lots, and then raped and mugged them” (94, 92-93). Although nothing really bad happens to any of the Spanish visitors, personal interaction with Argentinean people turns into a generally disappointing experience. Even the doctor in charge of performing Cristina’s plastic surgery is a shady figure. First he is overly polite, welcoming Cristina and her companions at the hotel the day of their arrival and inviting Cristina to stay with his family until the post-surgical treatment is over. Later he invites the patient and her family and friends to dine at his house but rudely never calls to confirm the invitation. Moreover, he does not even apologize for standing them up. Analía, a closeted lesbian and Adriana’s “best” friend, is by far the most disturbing individual Cristina encounters in Buenos Aires. She histrionically shows excessive appreciation for Cristina, whom she barely knows, and at the same time insidiously criticizes her “close” friend Adriana. Moreover, readers learn after the fact that Analía has told Cristina’s mother about Adriana’s sexual orientation and has even disclosed the latter’s love affair with her daughter. Analía’s dishonest meddling with other people’s feelings and relationships mirrors a similar occurrence on the internet. There, a so-called Fiorella sud-

denly enters a chat and interferes with Cristina and Adriana's amorous dialogue. Fiorella, another Argentinean who lives in Madrid, is as obsessed with Cristina as Amalía. In other words, Fiorella is a virtual stalker in Cyberia, while Analía is a real stalker in Buenos Aires. Both are menacing figures, reminiscent of the muggers and rapists that the Spanish women feared they would encounter in America.

Once again, *Venus en Buenos Aires* falls into colonial prejudice, bringing back to life the ingrained stereotype of the mischievous native and its complementing opposite, the noble savage. While Adriana shares many of the latter's traits, particularly her exemplary moral integrity and good heart, her fellow countrymen appropriately fit the dishonest (real and virtual) "subaltern" stereotype. Cristina's mother and her friend Rosa represent the equally worn-out cliché of the colonizers, and their peculiar mixture of arrogance and fear *vis-à-vis* the colonized natives. Postmodern Europeans flock to Argentina attracted by the affordability of medical services and other commodities in the same manner early modern Spaniards sailed to the Indies for its gold and cheap labor force. Then and now, however, the dream of utopia gives way to harsh reality. Cristina's tearful and indignant companions rarely refuse to leave the hotel, and, when they do, it is only to seek the protection and advice of private detectives and consular authorities. They also harshly criticize what they consider Argentinean loose morals and treat Adriana with coldness and open contempt. Their exaggerated fear and anger are a symptom of chronic miscommunication. It never occurs to the two Spanish women that the language of authoritarianism and coercion through spying activities are not the most appropriate means to initiate a dialogue and deal with cultural and sexual "difference." The old imperialist mode of hostile detachment and forceful imposition prevails.

If it were not for the Latin American setting of its key actions, *Venus en Buenos Aires* would read as a perfectly conventional and even "apolitical" narrative that retells the double tale of sexual outing and healthy emancipation from the oppressive mother-daughter bond. But since a large part of *Venus en Buenos Aires* actually does occur in the Argentinean capital, the personal becomes political. The old, colonial empire casts its dark shadow over contemporary transatlantic Argentina. From the neocolonialist perspective of post-

modern Spain and of *Venus en Buenos Aires*, America/Argentina is still utopia, the dream of Europe, the land of plenty, the paradise of unrestrained sexuality, still naked and free from social conventions. But it is also the “dark continent” harboring obscure tragedies and terrorizing practices, in urgent need of European enlightenment. It is the site of boundless corruption, old-fashioned dictatorships, and endemic pre-modern social injustice. Finally, it is a giant dumping ground, constantly swallowing western residual matter: toxic waste, discontinued weapons, outmoded military dictatorships, and, last but not least, sexual outcasts. Accordingly, Cristina, newly-born into a lesbian identity and therefore a sexual outcast herself, is forced to return to Buenos Aires, since neither her family nor her Spanish friends seem able to cope with her new homosexual identity: she is “dumped” there, along with the other waste products.

Although Argentina is willing to accept Cristina, the “madre patria” is peculiarly reluctant to embrace Adriana. Hence Adriana’s voyage to Madrid is the ironic reversal of Cristina’s first trip to Buenos Aires. The circumstances are similar: the arrival at the airport, the passionate embraces and love-making of the two women, their long strolls in the middle of the night on the streets of a never-sleeping city, and their hotel-bound sexual life. But Adriana’s adaptation to Spain is very different. Adriana never “speaks” (does the subaltern speak?, in Spivak’s famous terms) about the new reality she confronts. Unlike Cristina, who, as we saw, carefully chronicled Buenos Aires and drew constant comparisons with Europe, Adriana remains silent. Less accustomed, it seems, to look than to be looked at, to conquer, than to be conquered, the Argentinean lover adopts a strikingly passive attitude. She patiently suffers Cristina’s doubts and oscillating mind (should she stay with Adriana, or go back to her family? Should she move to Buenos Aires, or remain in Madrid?). And, being the “noble savage” she is, Adriana ends up leaving Cristina out of sheer generosity and self-sacrificing heroism, to spare her lover any further suffering. Clearly, Adriana does not engage in a dialogue with the “host” country, and the latter, in return, does not know what to make of its “exotic” guest. It is impossible not to think of the whole event as an uncanny recreation of imperialist Spain’s experiment with “imported” natives. Adriana, with her “colorful” sexuality and “foreign” accent, appears to be one of the

exotic Indians that Columbus forced to cross the Atlantic, so that they would learn “proper” Spanish. American Indians immediately became a living spectacle and a source of much wonder among Europeans. People’s interest in them as exotic novelty, however, faded with time, and like Adriana, many of them were forced to return to their land of origin.

At the end of the novel, Cristina follows her lover back to Buenos Aires in order to start a new life across the Atlantic. The old continent, it seems, remains indifferent to non-heteronormative forms of love. Cristina had tried unsuccessfully to remain in Madrid and to have her family and country accept her sexual orientation. When she verbalizes her wish, “I would have preferred to live in Madrid . . .” (250), her father responds curtly: “Well, I prefer that you stay in Buenos Aires . . . and lead your obscene existence away from us” (251). It is not as much the authoritative paternal voice, but rather the dynamics inherent in patriarchal (post)colonial views that send Cristina back to the “sinning” new world. As I pointed out earlier, residues of all kinds very often accumulate at the margins of the western world and the rational mind. Sexuality as the expression of a primitive, irrational urge—epitomized in the stereotypical figure of the hyper-sexual native—certainly falls within the category of physical and moral residue. And so do, to an even greater extent, “deviant” sexual variants and practices. Not surprisingly, and in accordance with such logic and dumping practices, the lesbian body depicted in *Venus en Buenos Aires* is forced to leave the heart of the empire and to relocate at its (post)colonial margins.

Cristina, like Columbus, embarks on a second “real” journey, which is her third voyage, if we count her first virtual trip. And, like the prototypical colonizer, Cristina also knows that she is coming back to a “feminized” territory, patiently waiting for her conqueror/lover. The postmodern twist of a conqueror that is female and lesbian, instead of masculine and heterosexual, as tradition dictates, is not strong enough to abolish the stubborn cliché that equates conquered land to woman and the female body. In fact, the combined motives of Cristina’s journeys to Latin America are always and exclusively a female body. First her desperate craving for Adriana’s body offline, after the body-less affair online; then the eager curiosity about the hidden pleasures of the narrator’s own body, and its

newly-discovered queer identity; and, finally, the strategic excuse of a “faulty” body in the form of a supposedly defective mouth/vagina in urgent need of surgical (and ethical) restoration.

Cristina discovers her own sexuality and the hidden possibilities of her body through the marveling, simultaneous exploration of Buenos Aires’s urban topography and Adriana’s sexual anatomy. Through such double exploratory adventures she finally comes to terms with the foreign landscape, her “misshapen” mouth, and her true sexuality, as strange to her as alien territory. But, while “queer” Cristina “finds herself” in Buenos Aires, her “straight” mother got utterly lost in it. Western heteronormativity is suddenly confronted with deviant sexual behavior. The empire, which needs the colonies to exist, nonetheless fears the rebellion and dark force of the latter. Moreover, in the midst of sexual deviation and colonial subjugation, the identity of colonizers and heterosexuals slowly begins to shake and crumble. As Beasley-Murray puts it: “colonialism itself always [induces] ambivalence among the colonizers about their own status [and identity], and the status [and identity] of their ‘civilization’” (177).

Postcolonial Argentina is a multi-semantic chronotopos, endlessly replicating the contradictory meanings attributed to colonial America. It remains the land of promise and possibility, constantly awakening imperialist greed. At the same time, it is nowadays more than ever an untiringly hybridizing force, a huge recycling facility where “imported” artifacts and concepts are refashioned according to native taste and adapted to domestic needs. It is an ever-flexible space, in odd contrast to the rigid stability of the old continent, an ever-undulating margin around a (trans)fixed center. In the wake of orthodox structuralist fashion, the old continent requires instability and queer undulation to add signification and significance to its own stability and solidness. Accordingly, when Cristina, a sexual outcast and residue from “straight” Spain, joins forces with Adriana’s Latin American queerness, she too adds to the distorted and therefore reassuring reflection of European heteronormativity across the Atlantic. Once again, empire and heterosexuality carry with them “espejos-esperpento” or image-deforming mirrors. These mirrors come in the form of colonies, homosexuals, and western human residuals furnished with leporine lips and labia; or, to be more precise,

they adopt the format of sexual perverts and physically challenged outcasts frolicking, rather than rotting, in colonial hell. Present and former straight colonizers always keep such mirroring devices at hand, so as to look into them whenever their national and sexual identity needs smiling reassurance.

The computer screen becomes yet another reflecting surface. Or, even better, it turns into the neocolonialist version of the colonialist mirror. For neocolonialist Cyberia is as political, greedy, and conquest-driven as (neo)colonialist Iberia was (and is). For example, Lévy identifies Cyberia with an imperialist enterprise, when he cautions: "the fear of cultural domination by the United States [via de internet] is not without some basis in fact" (223). According to statistical evidence, "English is currently the de facto language standard on the network. What's more, American institutions and companies are the largest producers of information on the Internet" (Lévy 223). In recent years, however, the presence of the Spanish language on the Internet has been rapidly increasing, hence, the English language monopoly and American hegemony in cyberspace has some serious competitors.

Lévy further argues that, despite the hegemony of the English language and American power,

the threat of uniformity is not as serious as it may appear at first sight. The technological and economic structure of communication in cyberspace is very different from film and television. In particular, the production and distribution of information is much more accessible to individuals and groups with fairly modest means. The issue of cultural diversity makes sense only in the context of the specific structure of the communication tools used by cyberculture. (223)

The concept of cyberspace as a democratizing realm, where cultural diversity reigns and where "individuals and groups with fairly modest means" (223) have access to the production and distribution of information, is fallacious in the context of Latin America and the Hispanic world, and even more so in the case of cybersex and virtual romance. First of all, in order to navigate virtual space, let alone to "cybercouple," one has to have a computer and a link to the Internet, which even low income North Americans can access through public schools and libraries, but is an unreachable luxury to economic dis-

advantaged Latin Americans and to many Spaniards as well. *Venus en Buenos Aires* offers an appropriate example of virtual accessibility as a measure of economic power. While Cristina comfortably navigates cyberspace from the privacy of her own room, Adriana does not have Internet at home, and therefore is forced to use the office computer to communicate with her lover.

In addition, the necessary full literacy—reading, writing, and typing—is mastered by only a few worldwide. Theodore Roszak rightly talks about “the chimera of computer literacy” (47). In cyber-romance and virtual sex, sexual attraction is exerted through skillful writing. In virtual space, the best writer is the best lover. Powerful imagination, excellent writing skills, and agile typing substitute for good looks and a charming countenance. To seduce is to write, hard, good, and fast! Accordingly, virtual sex and cyber-romance are possible only among fairly educated people. The Internet acts as a powerful social screening device, making sure, for example, that Cristina will only fall in love with someone of her own social class, financial status, and cultural level. Hence cyber-romance brings the relatively rich and fully literate middle class and above on both sides of the Atlantic closer to each other. Cyberia’s endless possibilities and pleasures remain far beyond the reach of the poor and the disenfranchised.

The virtual realm cannot remain pure and apolitical. Neocolonialist politics, social injustice, and cultural segregation permeate virtual reality just as they do material reality; an online rose generates an offline rose. Accordingly, if it were not for neocolonialist Cyberia/Europe, Cristina would never have discovered neocolonized Argentina/America. Thus cybernetic roses/loves are not less real or political than their real counterparts. Their supposed “purity” is a virtual phantasmagoria, a distorted mirror image, the sole product of frantic nostalgia and a new cyber-Platonism or “technological face to the Platonic universe” (Coyne 46). So far, no rose or transatlantic romance—be it real or virtual, baroque or postmodern—has escaped the soiled politics of (neo)colonialism.

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