

YOLANDA GALLARDO. *THE GLASS EYE.*
HOUSTON: ARTE PÚBLICO PRESS, 2019. 145 PP.

Families are often the center of Latinx fiction. From Junot Díaz (Dominican Republic) to Judith Ortiz-Cofer (Puerto Rico) to Christina García (Cuba), familial interactions are the binding glue to these stories. Gallardo's novella also concentrates on a multi-generational Cuban family in the Bronx during, roughly, the 1950s. The stories, with their humorous tone, center most clearly on the women of the family (which has no specific surname). There is, however, no clear protagonist because the novella recounts varied incidents of inter-family drama. The closest to being protagonists are Antonio and Pepitón, a couple who own a bodega in the Bronx. The significance of the glass eye in the title is unclear since it's mentioned only in the first two pages and at the very end so that its symbolic value is lost.

Many of the family's stories in Gallardo's yarn fall into the kinds of incidents around stereotypical gender roles in the family that some people think define Latinx communities. For the most part, the characters accept and replicate in their daily lives these restrictive gender behaviors. There is the wayward son, the timid girlfriend, the hen-pecked husband and the domineering wife/mother-in-law, all portraying characteristics suited to 1950s popular and mass culture. What central plot there is concerns the mother's reactions to her son's rather diffuse presence. The beginning of the story concerns a stereotypical situation, how he is coddled by his ever-forgiving mother despite his many sexual conquests, none of which we see directly. The main conflict arises when he marries the daughter of another family whose matriarch, Esperanza, is rumored to be a witch. Once he marries the story follows the daily events of the two families, with side characters receiving all the narrative attention at times.

The beginning of the book is humorous, poking fun at the follies of characters like Carlotta, who “was a walking encyclopedia. She could speak on any subject, and only a fool who didn’t know better would challenge anything she said. On the other hand, she did dispute everything said by anyone else.” Clearly the humor focuses on characters’ flaws. Disturbingly, the women uphold misogyny and patriarchy quite often. Because the novel is told in omniscient narrative, with no character’s point of view, the statements that support misogyny are upheld by the narrative itself, rather than being observed or critiqued by an outsider. For instance, when the novel says how for the younger women “even a second-hand boyfriend was better than no boyfriend at all. None of them relished the possibility of being labeled a spinster,” the narration flatly states it as truth, without irony or narrative mechanism discrediting the sentiment. There are supernatural or magical realist elements which the women manifest spottily; sometimes supernatural things happen and at others a strictly realist tone dominates.

The novel is strongest, and most funny, when it explores how Latinx communities interact, especially through gossip. The two mothers-in-law are the strongest characters; many of the surrounding and other, more distant family relations, come and go at random, sometimes achieving prominence but more often than not just fading away.

The larger picture of Latinx migration to the U.S. is told glancingly through the Cuban family and the appearance of two Venezuelan characters near the end. There are several sections that explore prejudices between minorities, for instance Antonia’s animosity towards Italians. This is told in straightforward manner, using Antonia’s racist mockery that they talk in “yakkety-yak.” The incident, though, ends happily when both “yakkety-yakked to each other.” Also of deeper interest is an incident of police brutality but it is played almost for laughs. The politics inherent in Cuban migration in the 1950s are mostly ignored until the very end of the novel when two of the family men quarrel with the Venezuelans about Castro. Yet the narration is strangely divorced of references to Cuba. A thought provoking instance of a female character’s jingoistic patriotism towards the United States is, unfortunately, underdeveloped and only

appears near the conclusion. Also the end of the novel gives us more magical realist or *espiritista* events, for instance, a vengeful ghost only the women can see. The ending is abrupt “there were many fights and many happy times to follow” but the stories wrap up far too quickly and with many unwarranted turns in the characterization. This family drama might have been better as short stories, rather than this novella, which has no strong plot or clear development.

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