

**RE-CREATING DESIRE:
LOVE AND "BORDEROTICS" EN (LA) VIDA**

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ABSTRACT

Vida is a TV series created by Tanya Saracho, that premiered on May 6th, 2018, on Starz, receiving critical acclaim as well as the GLAAD Media Award for Outstanding Comedy Series in 2019. The series consists of a family narrative about two estranged sisters who return home in East Los Angeles after the sudden death of their mother, Vidalia. Vida, an affectionate diminutive for Vidalia, also serves as the name of the bar the mother has left as an inheritance for her daughters. The bar is a community gathering place in East L.A., a safe space where the Latinx characters can express themselves freely. *Vida* will open a new stage in the sisters' lives, an enterprise they will have to run with Eddy, who turns out to be not their mother's roommate as they originally thought, but her wife. Family secrets, personal stories and struggles, old and new romantic ties start to develop from that point on. A female centered narrative, the show highlights racialized women's sexuality as an ideological place located in the intersection of gender, race, class and sexual orientation. Using Susana Chavez-Silverman's concept of *fronterótica* as a tool of analysis, this article examines sexuality as depicted in the series and discusses the articulation of love and desire as represented in its female protagonists.

KEYWORDS: *Vida*, Latinx, Queerness, Spanglish, Fronterótica, Borderotics, Female-centered narratives, bilingualism.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Vida centers around Emma and Lyn Hernández, two sisters who have lived apart and reunite after their mother's death. Emma is a successful businesswoman in Chicago, while Lyn is focused on doing yoga and exercising, in this way taking care of her best assets: her body and her beauty. After the funeral, the sisters learn that their mother, Vidalia, was married to a woman, Eddy, with whom they will have to share their inheritance: a bar and the apartments located above the bar. The sisters react very differently towards such news; while Lyn soon grows fond of her mother's widowed partner, the older sister Emma completely refuses to acknowledge their union. The old building, located in Boyle Heights, represents a site of resistance against gentrification and Latino male-dominated culture.

As the creator and showrunner of *Vida*, Tanya Saracho has ensured a Latinx gaze for the show. "Latinx and women are the thematic elements at the core of her performances" (Higueras-Ruiz

et al 4783). The diversity within the writers room is responsible for the realistic representation of the characters and storylines. “Their knowledge and their background enabled them to create real and authentic characters, people from the Latino community that can portray accurately what it means to be queer and Latina” (Higuera-Ruiz et al 4779). Saracho also provides a politicized portrayal of gender identity and gentrification with intersectional queer and feminist themes. The politics of urban renewal show the social hierarchies based on race, class, gender, sexual orientation and religion within global capitalism (Elerding, Hill Collins & Bilge 150). This is best seen in the character of Marisol, who sees the white occupation of her barrio as the ultimate form of colonialism. The contrast of personalities between Emma and Lyn, as well as other female characters like Eddy or Marisol serve as a way for Tanya Saracho to represent the diversity of Latina women in terms of class, race, gender identity and sexual orientation.

2. AN EROTIC WHOLE SELF: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1. *Frontérotica*

Susana Chavez-Silverman develops the concept of “borderotics” or “*fronterótica*” in various articles in which she explores love and female agency in representations of subjectivity within Latina literature. She claims to have found “in the writings of women of color, especially those of Chicana lesbians [...] ‘a site of resistance’ in which the female body is neither fallen nor exalted, fragmented nor fetishized” (Velvet Barrios 215). Chávez-Silverman looks for counter-hegemonic narratives to re-imagine love and desire from a perspective that is not determined by phallogocentric views in the literary production of several Chicana authors. Her analysis seeks to comprehend the possibility or impossibility of a female place of enunciation that is not “inevitably contained by the master narrative even when, or, precisely because they attempt to position themselves against or outside the master's domain” (“Chicanas in Love” 33-34). That position is what she labels *fronterótica*, which does not serve “to heal the *brecha*” but to center “the deep ambivalence, the differentiation and hybridity, of the border” (Chicanas in Love 45).

It is within this place, the border re-signified in such a manner, from where, according to Chavez-Silverman, Chicana authors Sandra Cisneros, Ana Castillo, Alicia Gaspar de Alba and Cherrie Moraga, examined in her articles, textualize female desire and their differential “borderotics.”

While there is a clear feminist perspective in all of them, the way they reside in the border re-signified as a geo-sexual space is very diverse. From a position that plays with the essentialist trope of Mexicannes that Chavez-Silverman perceives as a “self-tropicalizing” tendency, through contested positions regarding the trappings of women’s roles within patriarchy, along with stances that embrace ambiguity and hybridity, to narratives that transgress in a definite way “la ley del padre” (Chicanas in Love, Chicana Outlaws). There is, nevertheless, a cultural landscape that they all share, populated by iconic Mexican and Chicana figures such as brujas or curanderas, the Virgin of Guadalupe, or La Malinche, that they have re-appropriated and taken as relevant references. And she concludes that the narrators and female characters of the above authors, whether butch, bisexual, or queer, out or coy, all inhabit a border space where erotic hybridity, fluidity and multiplicity are increasingly celebrated.

This diverse way of living in a *fronterótica* is also present in *Vida* through their female characters. From Lyn, who exploits her own heteronormative exoticization within the white culture, to Emma, who in the first season maintains a position of ambiguity in relation to the norms of the gender order, only to reveal herself as bisexual dominatrix in the second season, and finally Eddy, who breaks openly with the patriarchal law. Also very present in the series’ narrative are the iconic Mexican and Chicana figures mentioned above, through secondary characters as well as through cultural references.

2.2. *Queer Black (W)holes.*

Evelynn Hammonds discusses in her article “Black (W)holes and the Geometry of Black Female Sexuality” the concept of queerness as a theoretical tool to explore eroticism and Black sexuality. Inspired by Michele Wallace’s metaphor of the black hole to describe the invisibility of Black female creativity (Hammonds 126). Hammonds understands Black female sexuality as a (W)hole, which is not a silent void, as historically depicted, but a full and dense space. The starting

point of Hammonds' discussion is the theorization of "sexuality" and "subjectivity" within lesbian and gay studies. She argues that this field of studies has analyzed deeply the construction and development of both subjectivity and sexuality but has failed to acknowledge that the processes connected to their construction have been built upon the white normative existence. Consequently, Hammonds considers the articulation of queerness as a way of relieving the anxiety produced by the racially exclusionary practices of lesbian and gay studies and revises the literature on the term starting with Teresa de Lauretis. De Lauretis claims that the adoption of the term responded to the need to add qualifiers of race, ethnic culture, class, generation, as well as geographical and socio-political location to the labels, lesbian and gay. She also points out the lack of scholarship on the matter by people of color (viii). Within more recent theorization on the matter, Hamer-García subscribes Hammonds' statement about the whiteness of lesbian and gay studies and disagrees with de Lauretis' declaration of the non-existence of racialized authors within the field. On the contrary, he affirms, people of color reflecting in an intersectional way and engaged in their work with racialized sexuality "have been there all along" (*Queer Theory Revisited* 28).

Regarding Black women's sexuality, Hammonds explains that it has historically been depicted as an absence because it has been theorized over bodies already colonized; a historical narrative that begun with the production of the image of a pathologized Black female "other" in the eighteenth century by European colonial intellectual elites. Therefore, the development of a "politics of silence" from the part of Black women emerged as a counternarrative to fight the processes that pathologized the Black female body and the negative stereotypes around their sexuality. Through self-imposed invisibility Black women could find the safe space needed to hold their sexuality. And by projecting the image of a "super-moral" Black woman, they hoped to garner greater respect, justice, and opportunity for all Black Americans. But, as Hammonds explains, such a strategy did not bring about the end the negative stereotyping of Black women "Finally, one of the most enduring and problematic aspects of the 'politics of silence' is that in choosing silence Black women also lost the ability to articulate any conception of their sexuality" (Hammonds 136). She also highlights that Black feminist theory has emphasized the

repressive and dangerous aspects of Black female sexuality, whereas pleasure, exploration, and agency have gone under-analyzed; with the exemption of a few authors among whom she cites Audre Lorde. Lorde's writing, with its focus on the erotic, on passion and desire is an example of resistance, where Black lesbian sexualities can be read as one expression of the reclamation of the despised Black female body. Black women and women of color's sexuality and construction of subjectivity have been subsequently discussed in a great number of works among which Patricia Hill Collins' *Black Feminist Thought* and *Intersectionality* are most relevant. Hill Collins revises the history of alliances of diverse minority women and develops a genealogy of authors and texts that articulate the interrelation between sexuality, race, class and gender (Hill Collins & Bilge 67-87).

Hammonds, drawn by Wallace's metaphor, reflects on the idea of the Black hole and its assumed interior void, and as a former physics student adds that, in fact, there is not a void, but rather dense matter that we cannot see. Looking at the interior of the metaphorical black hole, at how Black female sexualities have been depicted, Hammonds maintains that it is necessary to think in terms of a different geometry. "Rather than assuming that black female sexualities are structured along an axis of normal and perverse paralleling that of white women, we might find that for Black women a different geometry operates" (143-144). This might require Black feminist theorists to either revise the Freudian paradigm more deeply and rigorously, or to disrupt it. Hammonds' work is intended to re-imagine Black women's sexuality "as a polymorphous erotic that does not exclude desire for men but also does not privilege it" (144). Therefore, she concludes, the concept of queerness has allowed her to explore Black women's sexuality as a place in which a new way of thinking about the sexual can be produced. Similarly, Licia Fiol-Mata (218), conveys that the concept of "queer" has enabled, despite difficulty, the eruption into discourse of multiple sexualities and genders, the possibility of fluidity, of gender nonconforming, or genderqueer, as well as of trans/cis man or womanhood. To inhabit that dense dark space is also, as we will see through the next section of this paper, the purpose of *Vida's* female protagonists.

3. ANALYSIS

3.1. *“The allure of the Latina wiggle”*

Lyn, played by the actress Melissa Barrera, is the younger of the Hernández sisters, who is presented as a very attractive but immature and self-centered woman. Her depiction as childlike is reinforced by the fact that she isn't financially independent and doesn't have a profession. Instead, she jumps from one relationship to the next looking for meaning in her life. Lyn embodies traditional ideas of femininity according to patriarchal Latino culture. Her identity is defined by her physical appearance and by her relations to the men with whom she is romantically involved: her white boyfriend Juniper, an occasional white lover called Jackson, Rudy, a Mexican-American upper-class councilman, or Johnny, her boyfriend from high school with whom she re-connects at her mother's funeral. It is through these men that Lyn brings stability to her life as well as financial well-being.

Lyn is very aware of her beauty and the power that comes from it. It has been a strong source of confidence for her that she has used to get what she wants. In one of her first scenes in the series, after fashioning a sexy outfit out of a T-shirt and taking a selfie, Lyn starts texting Johnny. Her flirtatious game relates to Susana Chavez-Silverman's commentary on the female character of “Never Marry a Mexican”: “Clemencia's childish, superstitious little game, freeze-frames Cisneros' narrator as the petulant, hot-headed Latina” (Velvet Barrios 221). In another scene, we see Lyn, Eddy and Marisol, Johnny's little sister, going through old pictures of Lyn in her dance costume. Marisol points out that those pictures reveal a lot about Lynn's character, a comment with a negative tone that Eddy reprimands alleging that “it's not her fault she came out bonita”, “like a mestiza Barbie” (S2Ep4). Marisol then admits that if beauty is the only thing one has “it is ok to milk it”. Lyn does not seem happy with this description of herself. In fact, the recent failure of her last relationship along with coming back home are making her reconsider many aspects of her lifestyle. She realizes that being beautiful is not enough to become the person she aspires to be, as she reveals to a neighbor: “I got nothing, Doña. I've done nothing for myself. The train passed me by, and I never even thought to get on it” (S2Ep4). When she discovers that Juniper, her ex-boyfriend, is already dating another

girl, she starts obsessively checking her Instagram page. Although she feels jealous, she won't admit it. Instead, she diminishes the girl's beauty. Lyn contributes to her own objectification by creating this sense of competition with another woman to be the one who is more desired by a man. Exploring and analyzing how the female body is implicated within the heteronormative project of both Anglo and patriarchal Chicano representations is one of the main purposes of Susana Chavez-Silverman's "borderología" (Velvet Barrios 215).

In the Anglo-American context Lyn is perceived as an exotic beauty, a stereotyped image that she herself has cultivated. In episode 4 of season 1 she meets Jackson, a white hipster who invites her to a party in one of his friends' mansions in the hills. Lyn immediately starts flirting and tells him about her project to create a cosmetic line: "Each lotion is named after an Aztec Goddess. The whole line is called Diosa". The stranger is immediately charmed by the way she says "diosa" with a Spanish accent. Chavez-Silverman perceives what she denominates a "self-tropicalization" tendency in certain female characters within Latina cultural production (Chicanas in Love 35) that can be connected with the scene described above. Lyn, adopting this practice, is reinforcing the dominant culture's images of Latinas. Isabel Molina-Guzmán has discussed extensively the "Latina look" on TV: Exotic, ethnically ambiguous, with dark long hair, and emotionally passionate (Latinas and Latinos on TV 17). The commodification of these features position Latinas as consumable bodies subject to the erotic gaze of the US (Dangerous Curves 11). And individuals participate willingly and unwillingly in the process (12). Embedded in this culture, later at the party, Lyn happily accepts a comment from one white girl about her ethnic features. "I am totally obsessed with your eyebrows...I keep telling my girl I want, like, Frida brows" (S1Ep4).

However, the same episode features a powerful moment in relation to Lyn's ethnicity. While she is by the pool with Jackson, she keeps looking at the maid, a middle-aged Mexican woman called Aurora. Lyn seems to be comparing herself with Aurora in terms of the racial perception that the white crowd might have of them. When Aurora is called to clean the vomit of the host of the party, the white girl says she feels sorry for her, but Jackson states that it "is what she is [there] for" (S1Ep4). The final scene of the episode is extremely

significant and revealing. A close up shot shows Lyn's tired face, her hair up, makeup gone: her beautiful features gain relevance. As the close up shot widens to a general one, we see she is sitting on a bus, and that the only other passenger is Aurora, the maid at the party, looking exhausted: both coming back to East L.A. Lyn seems to have come to the realization that within the context of white culture, her beauty makes no difference in terms of racial, and thus, social perception. The song "Maria Lando" plays as soundtrack. Susana Baca's lyrics speak to the political statement of the final camera shot.

On the contrary, the Mexican upper-class does not see Lyn as Mexican enough. When Lyn is invited by her new boyfriend, Rudy, an upper-class Mexican-American councilman to his mother's birthday party, she mocks Lyn's broken Spanish and lack of 'real' Mexicanes: "She does not speak Spanish?... Don't worry, darling. I don't blame you. I blame your parents" (S3Ep2). Her rejection of Lyn is directly connected to her cultural hybridity. Racial hierarchies and inner racism within the Mexican elites are discussed by Susana Chavez-Silverman in one of her articles: "Mexican class and racial prejudice against Chicanos... What could be more ridiculous than a Mexican girl that does not speak Spanish?" (*Gendered Bodies and Borders* 220).

Moving on to another aspect of Lyn's life, sexuality is one in which she exercises control and shows agency. Her sexual freedom has given her a reputation as a "puta" though, something that she is called by different characters in the series, mainly other women of the Latino community, like Marisol and Karla, Johnny's little sister and fiancée respectively who have interiorized the sexist idea that "only bad girls' enjoyed fun and games in bed, that is, fun and games that men invent with their rules" (*Xicanisma* 122). Alicia Gaspar de Alba also discusses this issue and points out that in "patriarchy, a woman's sex is the site of her deepest power, and also of her deepest weakness" (*[Un]framing the Bad Woman* 74). Lyn definitively uses her sexuality as a power but it is her sexual freedom what has gained her a bad reputation.

Continuing with Lyn's expression of her sexuality, it is important to highlight that she embraces it openly in all its possibilities. While she may identify as a heterosexual cis-woman she comments on her temporary sexual fluidity, which she considers a natural part of human sexuality (S1Ep3). On the other hand, her sexual practice is

not limited to normative heterosexuality. In the series, Lyn has sex with different partners, as well as in a group, with men and women. With her partners, Lyn does not adopt a passive, traditionally feminine, role. Quite the opposite, she is depicted many times as the active subject, even being the one who performs penetration on her male partner, Rudy, who adopts a more/passive “feminine” role. With Johnny it seems to be, a whole different story. He is the man that gets closest to Lyn, their deep connection goes back years. And while there is an obvious sexual attraction between them, whenever Lyn tries to describe her relationship with Johnny, she always articulates it as a bond that “goes beyond”, a type of connection that unites body, soul and mind. It is also thought-provoking that Lyn enunciates the word love only when referring to Emma and “mami”.

3.2. *La Macha: “claiming one’s entire being”*

Emma Hernández, the older of the two sisters, left the neighborhood at a young age and has lived separated from her cultural roots ever since. Her character, played by Mishel Prada, differs radically from the traditional model of womanhood discussed previously when introducing her sister’s character. Rationality and a sense of order are the main characteristics that define Emma. She climbed the social ladder through education and has been focusing on building a solid career in Chicago that she never neglects: Emma is introduced to the viewer in a taxi to her mother’s funeral while checking work messages on her phone. And after the funeral, we see her having a Zoom meeting with her bosses, two white guys who show little sympathy for her grief. Nevertheless, she does not take personally the tactless comments, defends her right to take a break and manages the situation skillfully (S1Ep4). Moreover, she is committed to her responsibilities and offers to work remotely while she stays in L.A. The business arena is a terrain where Emma feels comfortable and confident.

As an experienced businesswoman, Emma takes charge of the legal issues pertaining to her mother’s estate, discovering that Vidalia was not up to date with her mortgage payments and owed a significant amount of money. Emma designs a plan to settle her mother’s debts that includes raising the prices at the bar as well as the rent of their

tenants. She also learns that Eddy and Vidalia's marriage is not legally recognized, a situation that could affect the validity of the will, which leads Emma to consider the possibility of cutting Eddy out of the inheritance. Emma's decisions come always from a practical and business mindset, what she has grown to consider "the voice of reason" (S1Ep2). Anzaldúa discusses this so-called voice, which is in actuality "white rationality": "the 'official' reality of the rational, reasoning mode which is connected with external reality, the upper world, and is considered the most developed consciousness"(Borderlands 59). As opposed to the world of business, in which Emma feels confident, the world of emotions is one she does not navigate well. While she shows up as a self-possessed person, her body language reveals from the first moment the inner conflict that coming back home implies for her. This dichotomy between rationality and emotions, between mind and soul, is the root of a submerged violence that forces the individual to live divided, and prevents them from being a whole (Anzaldúa 59).

Emma is very reserved and emotionally restrained to the point that she seems to lack empathy for the people around her, as is portrayed in various occasions in the show. Rationality and difficulty showing emotions have been traditionally traits representative of a hegemonic model of masculinity. A model that Emma seems to have interiorized as a means of surviving. Emma's gender performance sways between the both poles of the binary. Ana Castillo states that "sex roles are defined through costume and performance: clothes serve as a costume for enabling such behavior. Furthermore, costume is one thing. Performance without a script is another. The macho and the woman roles are carved in the psyche of humanity" (Xicanisma 131). Emma blends femininity and masculinity in different aspects of her personality, her sweet character wrapped up in a firmly and assertive way of speaking, the way she presents herself to others, dressed in stylish and minimalistic outfits that also allow us to think of her social status as well as her assimilation into a Eurocentric type of aesthetics, and finally her sexuality, that will be discussed later.

This apparent assimilation into the hegemonic culture is portrayed at the beginning of the series. Coming back to Boyle Heights after a long time away, Emma has a negative perception of the neighborhood in which she grew up. She thinks that many of

her old acquaintances and friends got stuck in the barrio, a place that she considers poorly-developed and populated with uneducated people. In fact, Emma criticizes Vidalia's pocho Spanglish, saying derogatorily that for her mother, "parkear" and "watchala" were actual words (S1Ep1). A certain amount of assimilation into the dominant Anglo culture and her light-skinned features contribute to her position of ambiguity within the Latino community. Molina-Guzmán discusses the complexity to categorize Latinas ethnically through racial markers that often seem "slippery" ("Dangerous Curves" 4), and comments on the possibility, for some of them, to negotiate these ethnic markers, that is, "to tenuously maintain their claims to whiteness" ("Dangerous Curves" page 11). Such possibility might have worked in Emma's benefit within the Anglo context of her professional life. In her attempt to improve the building's conditions, Emma hires a handyman called Baco Nava, who comes recommended by Eddy's circle. When she insists on signing a contract, Baco explains to her that, among "la gente" a handshake is more common to agree on work conditions; something she might be unfamiliar with since he assumes she is not from the neighborhood. Baco takes Emma for an upper-class white woman, which is not the first time that she has been perceived as such. And although Emma gets annoyed by it, Baco's response is relevant: "You're sort of putting it out there" (S2Ep1). Baco suggests that she shouldn't be pissed for being perceived as upper-class and white when her looks and the way she speaks seem to seek that perception. Something similar is suggested by Marisol, who has a fight with Emma after an argument related to "gente-fication" that ends with both of them spending some hours in jail: "How does one just, like, denounce their entire culture just so they can pass for white, huh?" (S1Ep4). At the opposite end of the spectrum, Nelson Herrera, a Latino real estate agent who approaches her to make an offer for her mother's property, sees Emma's cultural assimilation as something positive and as social improvement. Something to which he also aspires: "We took the nopal from our fore-heads" (S1Ep6). Interiorized racism within the Chicano community has been widely discussed by Cherrie Moraga from initial works as "La Güera" (Bridge 30) to *A Xicana Codex of Changing Consciousness: Writings, 2000-2010*. With such opposed points of view towards cultural assimilation and the

erasure of minorities, the show brings to light hierarchies of race and class historically rooted in American Latino communities, in this case in California. Ultimately, what makes people perceive Emma as “bougie” and white is an extension of her already ambiguous gender performance to her class and ethnicity.

Regarding her sexual identity, Emma manifests in varied occasions her reluctance to label herself. When Emma comes out “officially” to her sister, Lyn reacts saying that she always suspected she was a lesbian. But Emma immediately corrects her: “I don’t identify as anything, I am just me” (S1Ep3). On the other hand, it is relevant how both sisters agree how little they know about each other in that aspect. Ana Castillo points out this lack of communication among women about their sexuality:

In past generations, delivered as children into the grips of medieval-minded nuns, priests and pastors who warned us against auto-stimulation and its horrendous punishments and who regularly reminded us of our relation to Evil Eve, how could we acknowledge our sexual desire to each other? If one admitted sexuality, she was discarding the disguise she had worn as the “decent” woman, the “good girl”, and was revealing that underneath she was nothing more than a bitch in heat (Xicanisma 123).

Emma is a sexually active woman, but her encounters never lead to a personal relationship. In the same conversation in which Emma comes out to Lyn, she shows her the on-line profile of the woman that she just had sex with. When Lyn wants to know more about the date and its possible prospects, Emma says categorically: “I don’t do that... See people again” (S1Ep2). Emma’s sexual expression is depicted in numerous scenes in the series in which her sexual partners include lesbian women with diverse sexualities, couples, and also men; switching from passive to active roles in every case. Castillo discusses in “La Macha” the diverse roles that one person can adopt in the expression of their sexuality conveying that the same woman may be aggressive, or more passive and nurturing depending on the partner she is with, exhibiting both masculine or feminine associated behavior during the sex/relation (Xicanisma). The first episode of the second season opens with her having sex with a white man, her mentor and one of her bosses. She places the man as her

object of desire, showing agency and taking the active role in the sex-game. With her sex play, Emma challenges with the heteronormative pattern of objectifying women in sex, reversing the “impossibility in [patriarchal] society to [...] sexually objectify free heterosexual men” (Xicanisma 125). She also has sex with Baco, the handyman she hires. But in this case, the sexual role implies something very different for her. Baco complains that she uses him as a human dildo, and that, when they are done, he’s supposed to say “Sí, patroncita” and get lost” (S2Ep10). Emma realizes that Baco is right and acknowledging that she has been unconsciously reproducing the dynamics of power learned from her white heterosexual mentor, apologizes to him.

Emma has difficulty welcoming love into her life. This is connected to her childhood trauma and the assumption that her mother rejected her because of her sexual orientation. “Every single person that has violated my trust is no longer in my life. I don’t come back from betrayal” (S2Ep8). For Emma, loneliness is better than risking the possibility of being hurt, of which she is afraid. Coming back home forces Emma to confront her fears. She reconnects with Cruz, her first love, but it does not work out. There is a relevant conversation regarding identity and queerness in the third episode of season 2. Emma attends a gay wedding with Cruz and has a major argument with Cruz and her friends at dinner. Emma’s refusal to identify as a lesbian is read by other queer women at the table as an attempt to pass for straight, something that her ambiguous sexual aesthetics facilitates. Different enactments of sexual dissidence emerge in the conversation: from an essentialization of lesbian identity, or the conceptualizing of queer as a more or less precise identity (Hames-García 32-36), to broader conceptions of queerness that imply diverse “resistantly gendered/sexed identifications” including both transgender and transexual, and historically racialized sexualities (Keegan 12). The long shutting down of love in Emma’s life changes when she meets Nico at a gay wedding party she attends with Cruz. Nico gives a warm speech as Best Man-- “It is an honor to witness your love. Gives a cynical mortal like me hope”-- that touches Emma. Staring at Nico she seems to have found the personification of her desire, “an erotic epiphany which is also, implicitly, profoundly political” (Chavez-Silverman 43). Nico is a writer, a creative and independent Latina woman like Emma. Intertextual references, like

the discussion about “the New Mestiza” and the politics of identity (S2Ep4) help the viewer to perceive that these two women share a cultural landscape. Intertextuality is a subtle but very powerful tool to provide side information to audiences. In fact, Molina-Guzmán states that it has become a very significant element of modern TV comedies (Latinas 14). Nico dares to speak to Emma like no one else does, and at the same time, adopts with her a protective role, which helps Emma to open up emotionally.

3.3. “Bad Women”

Lyn, Emma and Eddy embody in various ways the stereotype of the “bad woman”, a woman who does not fit within the ideal models of patriarchal womanhood. As Alicia Gaspar de Alba explains it, “Mexican/Chicano patriarchy assigns three attributes to the feminine gender: la madre, la virgen y la puta”, a trinity represented by La Virgen de Guadalupe (both virgin and mother) and La Malinche, also known as “La Chingada.” Malinche’s indigenous genes in the mestizo son represents “the seed of shame that every Mexican, but especially every Mexican male, carries inside him and that is, to a large degree, responsible for his Mexican fatalism and continued colonization” ([Un]framing 65). *Vida*’s women refuse to comply with the cultural expectations of their sex, and for that reason they are framed as devious by religious, sexual, racist, and capitalist patriarchal imperatives. Gaspar de Alba points out that in the early years of the Chicano Movement, feminist-identified Chicanas were called “agringadas”, “wannabe *gabachas*” or sellouts for seeking equality with men and personal liberation for themselves as women. They are also considered traitors to their race ([Un]framing 70). The Hernández sisters are, in fact, called “wannabe gringas” and “white-tinas” by other Latinx residents of the neighborhood. Emma is accused of being a sell-out with her “vendida’s logic” because of her financial success and her efforts to make the family’s business work. Lynn, on the other hand, is seen as a “puta”, “una hija de la Chingada” due to her free sexuality and the exploitation of her erotic power (S1Ep2). And finally, Eddy, living her sexual identity openly as a butch lesbian, is subverting the religious and cultural doctrine that women cannot enjoy sexuality and that it is only meant for reproduction. She is also reversing “the assumption that lesbians are just wannabe men rather

than women-loving women” ([Un]framing 75). Played by Ser Anzoategui, Eddy is the character that represents the most radical rupture with the patriarchal law. As Gaspar de Alba notes, “a Chicana lesbian was considered the most extreme Malinche of all because she rejected heterosexuality, male domination, and the biological destiny imposed by patriarchy that ensures the perpetuation of the laws of the almighty Apá” ([Un]framing 75). In her personal project to build a life and to love in an alternative social order that still preserves and defends her cultural roots, Eddy is challenging both Anglo dominant and Chicano patriarchal culture. Eddy has managed to inhabit a space that is not determined by phallocentrism and male domination. But her life choices are seen as deviant. And, while the story takes place in the second decade of the 21st century, it shows how for women like Eddy, being true to themselves still means they are risking their lives. The series portrays this permanent threat in a difficult scene in which Eddy is with her friends at a local bar. They are having drinks and enjoying each other’s company, but some of the other customers are “mad dogging” the group of women, and one even starts harassing them: “Come on. You wannabe a real man? I’ll treat you like a man” (S1Ep6). The aggressor cannot accept seeing his toxic masculinity being exposed in public and beats Eddy so badly that she ends up at the hospital. The failure of this homophobic bully to understand that the group of women can have a good time without men parallels the patriarchal denial and repudiation of lesbian women who, like Eddy, defy its rule. “The Chicana lesbian is the most visible manifestation of a woman taking control on her own sexual identity and destiny” (Moraga as quoted in [Un]framing 75).

Returning to the stereotype of the “Bad Woman,” Gaspar de Alba analyzes its characteristics and formulates it into a theoretical framework that allows her to articulate and examine different female subjectivities in whom she is interested: “the transgressive bodies that queer and alter the male-centered politics and consciousness of Chicano culture”. The personal evolution of the characters parallels the implications that un-framing the unfair and manipulated categorization of these subjects as “bad women” would imply: to acknowledge and understand how female bodies have been entrapped by various intersectionalities, and to “re-write their stories within a revolutionary frame” (Gaspar de Alba Book Talk). This conception of identity as

transformative is a key idea presented by Hill Collins and Bilge in their work *Intersectionality* (130). And it has been developed by subsequent scholars in connection with anticolonial theories: “Transformative understandings of the relationship among race, capitalism, gender, and sexuality are probably stronger precisely when elaborated from outside of Eurocentric frameworks” (Hames-García 42).

Emma assumes the financial well-being of the sisters first, and later of the household. Her relationship with Lyn shifts throughout the series from distrust and a kind of love that she sees as a burden, towards the recuperation of their close family ties. Emma’s initial rejection and on-going tension during the series with Vidalia’s widow is linked to Emma’s trauma. Eddy functions as an extended version of her mother, with whom Emma has her true conflict. She has lived under the assumption that her sexual orientation was the reason for which she was sent away from the family. Her mother’s rejection, mimicking the cultural homophobia of the community, closed Emma off from her own emotions at an early age. But coming back home, coupled with different events that challenge her permanent division between mind and soul, pushes Emma towards major changes in her subjectivity. For the first time in her life, she makes a decision influenced by her feelings: to keep the building and the bar and try to make it work. She also confesses that she admires Eddy and Vidalia’s relationship: “I looked at her broken wife today and thought, God, that must have taken guts walking around this neighborhood together” (S1Ep6). Nevertheless, her true inner conflict will not break open until later in the series with the unexpected appearance of Victor Villanueva, Vidalia’s legal husband and the girls’ father. Victor Villanueva, who has become “Pastor Villanueva”, personifies the union of the church and patriarchy as the strongest threat to the women’s freedom. Such an alliance, which seeks to control the bodies, the sexuality, and eventually, women’s lives, has been greatly discussed by Chicana feminists: “In the journey to the love of the female self and each other we are ultimately forced to confront father, brother and god (and mother as his agent)” (Alarcón, Castillo y Moraga 9). The unexpected appearance of Victor also represents an emotional conflict for Eddy, who is still in mourning and feels betrayed by her late wife. Vidalia could not legally marry Eddy because she never divorced Victor. But only, as

Eddy learns later, because she did not have the chance to do it. Victor had long abused his wife and after a beating that almost killed her, Vidalia reported him to the police. That caused Victor to disappear from the family. Violence, sexism, and male domination embodied in Victor's character reminds the viewer that those threats persist and may appear unexpectedly at any moment.

Interestingly enough, there is a secondary but relevant character that has kept the family's secret and that will bring the viewer to the final revelation of the series: Doña Lupe. Doña Lupe portrays an iconic and traditional figure from Mexican and Chicano culture: She is a "bruja", a "curandera", a bridge between this world and the supranatural one (Anzaldúa 60). She represents a kind of powerful wisdom that is diminished by Western rationality. Gloria Anzaldúa discusses the colonial imposition of the Christian ideology that encourages the split between the body and the spirit and the distrust of other spiritualities, which Catholic and Protestant religions consider pagan superstition:

White anthropologists claim that Indians have "primitive" and therefore deficient minds, that we cannot think in the higher mode of consciousness-rationality. They are fascinated by what they call the "magical" mind, the "savage" mind, the *participation mystique* of the mind that says the world of the imagination-the word of the soul-and the spirit is just as real as physical reality (Anzaldúa 59).

Doña Lupe's character is a through-line in the narrative of the series that starts with a message to Eddy from Vidalia at the funeral and ends with the disclosure of the Hernández family's secret: Vidalia sent away her eldest daughter to protect her from Victor, who had discovered Emma "playing" with another girl and was threatening her physically. When Emma learns of her mother's love and protection it finally unites her mind and body. She also defies the patriarchal and heteronormativity imposed and represented by her father who is trying to reclaim ownership of the building using the excuse that the perverted spirit of Vidalia is "a curse on the place". Emma tells him that she is legally prepared to fight in court and declares in front of his congregation: "La hija del pastor is a queer. ¡Que soy marimacha!". When she threatens Victor with the evidence that he was a "deadbeat husband and father" he tells Emma enraged:

“You are your mother’s daughter” to which Emma proudly responds “Yes I am” (S3Ep6). This statement and Emma’s embrace of the rebellious spirit of Vidalia within her, echoes Anzaldúa’s own statement and recognition of her proud cultural lineage: “Sí, soy hija de la Chingada. I’ve always been her daughter” (39).

Doña Lupe also helps Lyn understand the meaning of true love in her life. Although initially she is presented as relying on men to make a living, she turns out to be her own woman, with the “superpower” of survival and the ability to adapt to life-changing circumstances, which also includes taking ownership of her erotic power. Lyn has been concerned throughout the series about the status of the un-documented tenants and how they may be affected by gentrification if they cannot afford to live in Vidalia’s building anymore. She ends up working to better the community through her job. In her role as co-owner and cultural programmer of the bar, she only hires Latinx and tries to promote Latinx bands and artists. On a family level, she has always played the role of an emotional mediator between Emma and Eddy. In the end, she understands Doña Lupe’s words: “Your big love is and will always be here, at home” (S1Ep1), which does not mean Johnny or any other man, but the bond created through her mother’s legacy. La “señora” also carries out a cleansing ritual for “Vida”, the bar, to bring for good fortune and welcome people. In a way, the ritual also heralds the characters’ new family life.

As for Eddy, Doña Lupe tells her that Vidalia wants her to be happy (S1Ep1). Eddy represents the love force that brings the sisters together. She has never given up on her and “her Vida”’s dream: to reunite the family, and to keep the bar and the building for la gente. Eddy’s dream resonates with Esteban Muñoz’s articulation of concrete utopia as “the hopes of a collective” (3), and “the understanding of queerness así collectivity” (11). Eddy is the “queer corazón” that inspires the main message of the narrative: the celebration of a strong love and bond among women who are revolutionary because, as Chela Sandoval explains in the introduction of *Methodology of the Oppressed* and develops further throughout the work, they can transform culture and re-invent their lives on their own terms through love.

4. “THE BEST REVENGE IS LIVING WELL”: CONCLUSION

In her show, Tanya Saracho develops a vision of gender and sexuality that proposes queerness as the desire for a better future, as well as a potentiality that implies possibilities of resistance to neocolonial forces, and eventually as a horizon. (Esteban Muñoz 19). Hammonds’ reflections help us to understand how sexualities and sexual subjects are produced by dominant discourses. The *Vida* television series not only interrogates those discourses, it also resists stereotypical conceptions within white gay and lesbian culture. And Chavez-Silverman’s *borderotics* draws the geo-sexual space of characters of the show.

Throughout the series, Emma, Lyn, and Eddy are referred to as “vendidas”, as “hijas de la Chingada” or “traitors to La Raza”. Daring to express and take pleasure in their sexuality, as well as living their love freely has initially brought them the rejection and the self-exile from their own culture. However, the three of them manage to resignify the negative images that Anglo-American and Chicano patriarchy used to ostracize them into positions of resistance. They re-claim their right to use their minds and bodies, the legitimacy of their “broken tongues” and their hybrid roots. They become subjects and agents of their own desire and occupy a *fronterótica* from where they work towards becoming their whole selves. Vidalia’s legacy eventually goes beyond the building and the bar that she has left them at the beginning of the story. She sets an example for her daughters of how to embrace their cultural roots and live on their own terms is possible. And for her beloved wife she creates the family that she had always wanted.

If the best revenge is living well, as Gaspar de Alba reminds us, “meaning not only economic wellness but above all the wellness of spirit that comes from loving oneself and living true to their nature” (*[Un]Framing* 78) then the women in *Vida* are on the right path to achieve a type of justice from which there is no turning back.

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