Elvira Lindo: A Different Kind of Female Voice

William Sherzer is a Professor of Spanish literature at Brooklyn College and the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. His field of specialization is prose fiction of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and he has published on such authors as Galdós, Gómez de la Serna, Andújar, Cela, Marsé and Múñoz Molina.

In the space of just a few years, Elvira Lindo has come to the fore as a Spanish cultural phenom enon. She has been the subject of numerous interviews, proving herself to be a constant source of interest for Spanish journalists. The reason for this is not just her success, but the fact that her success covers so many fields of artistic expression. To date she has dedicated five volumes to her juvenile protagonist, Manolito Gafotas, a streetwise Dennis the Menace type from Carabanchel, a Madrilenian working-class neighborhood, and she recently won the Premio Nacional de Literatura Infantil y Juvenil for the fourth of the series, *Trapos sucios*. Manolito also appears weekly in *El País*, and Lindo portrays him orally in a weekly radio program. She is the author of a play, *La ley de la selva*, which had a successful run in Madrid (and is currently being produced in Italy). She co-wrote the script to a film, *La primera noche de mi vida*, which received three prizes: the Ondas prize for 1998, the Critics prize of the Mar del Plata Film Festival, and the Círculo de Escritores Cinematográficos prize for the best original script of 1998.[1] Most recently, and without abandoning the Manolito series, she has published an "adult" novel, *El otro barrio*. While her work is obviously multifarious, there is a definite constant in almost everything she produces: the city of Madrid, especially the outlying working-class quarters, as a function of the meaning of her texts.

With regard to style and structure, her novel emphasizes a third person narrative that is somewhat unusual in contemporary Spanish female literature. One aspect of recent prose written by women, almost a constant, is its first-person orientation. Biruté Ciplijauskaité emphasizes this fact in the very title of her study: *La novela femenina contemporánea (1970-1985): hacia una tipología de la narración en primera persona*. For Ciplijauskaité, subjectivity overcomes objectivity in the feminine novel:

> Una de las características más destacadas de la nueva escritura femenina es la renuncia al enfoque extradiegético u 'objetivo' (Didier y Rochefort lo consideran un rasgo decididamente masculino) y el esfuerzo de expresar lo interior lo más inmediatamente posible. Reflejar la realidad ya no es lo primordial. El reportaje objetivo desaparece en favor de la vivencia subjetiva. (17-18)

In the same introductory chapter, citing Cixous and Irigaray, two of the most important contemporary feminist authorities, Ciplijauskaité describes the heights to which the new feminine novel has risen:

> Cixous se ha pronunciado en varias ocasiones acerca de lo que ella entiende por escritura femenina: 'La escritura es una puerta en mi interior, la entrada, la salida, la morada de la otra que soy y no soy, que no sé cómo ser, pero que siento atravesarme, que me da vida, me desgaja, me inquieta, me modifica.' No en vano ha hablado Luce Irigaray de la 'incomplétude de la forme' en la mujer misma, sugiriendo que hasta ahora se ha quedado 'dans la puissance non actualisée.' Las creadoras de la nueva novela tratan de probar que esta energía en potencia está hallando expresión adecuada. La sugerencia de Sófocles, que la mayor gracia de la mujer estriba en su silencio, ha pasado a la historia. Entre grito y canto, la voz femenina va afirmándose con una fuerza original aun mientras sigue buscando derroteros nuevos. (29-30)

While Elvira Lindo also discovers her "puissance non actualisée," it is precisely not in an affirmation of herself, but in the Madrilenian society that produced and surrounds her, and in a systematic fashion that has, at this moment, culminated in *El otro barrio*, a novel whose title even points to the reverse of what has been, according to Ciplijauskaité and her sources, the direction of the contemporary female novel. While the words "el otro barrio" refer to alterity, the reference is not to one's own personal alterity within a hostile society but, on the contrary, the search for otherness, the search for one's self as defined in the reality of others.

In fact, in this novel, Lindo's approach to characterization is similar to that which existed earlier, in the social novels of the nineteen sixties, and was described by Pablo Gil Casado as the "personaje-clase":

> En el segundo caso tenemos un personaje principal (o personajes) que aparece formando parte de un sector de la sociedad, y aunque tenga personalidad propia, es reflejo de las idiosincrasias del grupo en cuyo ambiente se mueve, convirtiéndose en un símbolo representativo o 'personaje-clase'. (XV)

As we shall see, Lindo's original protagonist in *El otro barrio* soon shares that role with others, until the real protagonist of the work becomes Vallecas, and the vari-

ous attitudes assumed toward it by all those who are trying in some way to deny its control over them.

Practically all of Lindo's work revolves around working-class neighborhoods, and one might suggest that the author, who was raised in a working-class *barrio* herself—Moratalaz—, creates in her texts a representation and affirmation of those neighborhoods that have traditionally been marginalized: Carabanchel, Vallecas, and the northeastern outskirts where *La primera noche de mi vida* takes place.[2] In the film, marginalization is underscored even further by a contrast created by an affluent father who has traveled to the area in his fancy car to pick up his daughter on New Year's Eve, and also by a second contrast between the daughter and her social worker husband's modest apartment and the neighboring slums, or *chabolas*. In a sense, the gamut of contemporary Spanish society is represented, but with the purpose of underscoring the immense contrasts that exist between rich and poor.

Turning to a chronological analysis of Lindo's texts, let us examine two of the Manolito novels, *Pobre Manolito* (the second) and *Manolito on de road again* (the fifth and last for now), as representative of this series and its development. While the entire first novel takes place in Carabanchel, the first part of the second describes a trip Manolito takes with his father, a transporter, on a delivery job to Cuenca, Teruel and Zaragoza, in lieu of a ten-day vacation that must be postponed. This immediately introduces a social cliché: *el veraneo*. The mother complains that she'll once again be the only person left in Carabanchel, watering the neighbors' plants while they're away on vacation.[3] What is ultimately portrayed is a degraded picture of the traditional month-long vacation; were it to take place, it would only be ten days long, and furthermore, according to Manolito's mother, it will not take place, since it never has in previous years, always sacrificed to the necessities of her husband's occupation.

What is of interest in this section, more than the trip, are Manolito's comments about Carabanchel, and specifically his ironic, humoristic commentary, such as his statement, in *Manolito on de road again*, that he has heard that in other neighborhoods mothers pay people to take care of their children while in Carabanchel Alto one asks neighbors to do the favor for free, and that after one experience the neighbors always refuse to repeat that favor. This is a statement on juvenile behavior, on one level, but also a tragicomic commentary on the neighborhood's economic limitations. The challenge for Lindo is how to create these commentaries without seeming to mock aspects of a typical working-class neighborhood.

Connected to this scene in which Manolito's mother fails in an attempt to leave him with neighbors, is the chaotic passage in the shopping center where she has been forced to take him.[4] Once more there is heavy-handed ridicule, for the center is celebrating "La semana de Japón" with a special on kimonos, at a reduced price for a purchase of seven or more. Manolito's mother therefore buys seven, outfitting the entire family, including the grandfather and two neighbors. Once again, we must ask where does humor stop and derision begin, and how close is this text to the reality of its cultural referent? These are important questions in a Madrilenian society that is rife with socioeconomic and geographical divisions, but they are necessarily subjective questions, for no individual writer serves as an ob-

jective portrayer of a given cultural reality. Furthermore, humor often serves to reduce potential derision; there is humor in Lindo's portrayal of Carabanchel, but there is no sarcasm, no sense that Manolito's creator is speaking from a higher plane. In fact, perhaps because Lindo has virtually *been* Manolito for several years, in novels and on the radio, her voice comes very much from within the character. Where there is mockery, therefore, it is self-mockery, which has always been accepted as legitimate and innocent humor.

In a similar vein, when Manolito, now on the road, catches his father in a compromising situation with the owner of a roadside inn, the discourse is still the same ironic one that we hear when he is in Carabanchel Alto. He is still the humorous while innocent little boy who doesn't understand what his father and Alicia are involved in. Adulterous conduct is turned into humor through the comical perspective of Manolito's involuntary roguish innocence. But this scene has the potential for tragedy; it undermines the family structure, which is the structure that the novel depends upon. What saves the family is the voice—Manolito's—of Carabanchel Alto, which at one and the same time is picaresque and understanding. Lindo's ability to create this acceptance of a character's peccadillo (which might very well have been on its way to being more than a peccadillo) through humorous discourse removes the entire scene from a more serious and ethically oriented approach.

The *Manolito Gafotas* series, with its growing search for a mature reading public, has constituted the entry of children's literature into the realm of popular adult culture. Lindo recognized this when she won the National Prize: "Y, sobre todo, es un premio que dedico a esos adultos que son capaces de llevar bajo el brazo un libro con tapas infantiles sin avergonzarse" (*El País*). She further recognized that it is language and discourse that have been developing throughout the series, more than the character himself:

> Creo que este premio es para el personaje, pero también premia el lenguaje creado en sus libros.... Es un lenguaje que ha ido desarrollándose a lo largo de estos años y a pesar de muchos condicionantes, pero que ha ido liberándose de las ataduras y convencionalismos de la literatura del género. (*El País*)

Lindo has thus managed to create a character who reaches out to many types of readers, who bridges the gap between high and low culture, much as we have seen in certain TV cartoons, such as *The Flintstones* and *The Simpsons*. This, in fact, is the basis for the present article. At the same time, however, one must point out that her trajectory has been from low to high culture, with Manolito Gafotas serving as a point of departure (even as she continues creating more texts based on this character) for her plays, adult novels and filmscripts. The paradox is that she has been rewarded for her work on Manolito and her film (which I would classify more as popular than high culture). Her foray into high culture is yet to be rewarded,[5] and the Spanish reading public must await the results of this facet of her literary production.

In any case, even within the confines of her best known creation, Manolito Gafotas, one finds a trajectory that would perhaps give the lie to what has defined her career—an intellectually acceptable juvenile literature—and to what we are

about in the pages of this particular journal: a justification of the study of popular culture in those journals that have traditionally dedicated themselves solely to a canon defined by the literature of high culture. If Elvira Lindo has, on the one hand, served as an author who leads us in this direction, her work paradoxically and ironically reverses that tendency, in that the later Manolito novels contain a discourse that is much more adult oriented and sophisticated than the earlier ones. *Pobre Manolito* (the second novel), consists of separate episodes where Manolito is very much the protagonist, and the language and thought represent a child's perspective, at times innocent, of the world around him. When he and his brother lose a neighbor's dog, for example, Manolito states:

> Empezamos a gritar: ¡*Boni, Boni*! Llegamos hasta las puertas de la cárcel de mi barrio y le preguntamos a un señor que debía ser un preso que acababa de salir en libertad después de cumplir una condena de cuarenta años y un día. El preso no había visto a la *Boni*. (126)

This is pure humor on one hand. On the other, it places Manolito in his degraded geographical referent: he lives near the well known Carabanchel jail. Thirdly, the dire conditions of the hypothetical ex-convict relegate Manolito to his social insignificance and his ineluctable connection to a neighborhood he is trapped in.[6] In *Manolito on de road again*, however, the discourse has much more to do with the adults. Instead of many discrete episodes, there are three long chapters, the second and third dealing as much with the father and mother as with Manolito. The mother's role as a castigator, whose sincere maternal instincts are generally frustrated because of her anger, is here transformed into that of a woman with definite existential and material problems: the family is generally strapped for money and the father's work as a transporter keeps him away from the house all week long, making her job much more difficult. She is also portrayed much more as a daughter in the last work; her father, while "superabuelo" for Manolito, constitutes for her a major responsibility.

Manolito's mother's existential anguish is not only related to her battle to raise two problem-causing children. It is also played out through her relationship to her geographical referent, as noted earlier, when she complains that they will be seen as the only family in Carabanchel that does not take a summer vacation. A more telling example is when she travels to the neighborhood supermarket to take advantage of the special offers of "la semana de Japón." A similar comical situation had already taken place in *Pobre Manolito*, when Manolito needed a new running suit:

> Mi madre encontró una de sus alucinantes ofertas: con tres chándales de adulto de las Tortugas Ninja regalaban dos chándales de niño de Tortugas Ninja. Uno para mi madre, otro para mi padre, otro para mi abuelo, otro para mí y otro para el Imbécil. (81)

While this humorous sentence constitutes the entire reference to the purchase, the later scene at the "semana de Japón" is long and rowdy. The connotations are multiple. First the existence of and trip to the supermarket in themselves are meaningful. They represent the change in mentality of a Spanish population that barely pa-

tronized supermarkets until recently. Now they are constantly threatening the livelihood of the traditional merchants: butchers, greengrocers, etc. There is a certain "out of sync" quality in Manolito's mother's going off to the supermarket, given her very traditional household, which extends to include la Luisa (her neighbor on the second floor) and other traditional institutions such as Ezequiel's nearby bar, El Tropezón, and señora Porfirio's bread and candy store. Upon arriving at the *Hiper*, Manolito's mother discovers that the best bargain is in kimonos, as was the case with running suits in the earlier novel. Here she must buy seven to obtain a bargain; la Luisa and her husband are in luck. But what was in the previous novel a quick laugh, narrated almost as an aside, is here a major element of the plot. The kimonos must be tried on, and Manolito, his mother, and his younger brother, El Imbécil, must all squeeze into the tiny fitting rooms. To avoid boredom while their mother tries on her kimono, the children begin to play with the severed feet and head of a chicken their mother has just bought, and soon the head has rolled under the partition and is lying face up between the legs of the lady in the next fitting room with Manolito and el Imbécil trying their best to recapture it with the chicken feet. The result is a raucous slapstick scene that at the same time connotes the frustration Manolito's mother often feels because of her social and personal situation. What was almost a transparent one-liner in the earlier novel becomes here a humorous but well crafted statement about the trials and tribulations of a typical Carabanchel housewife.

This more recent tendency toward verbal sophistication in Lindo's work is surprising if we bear in mind what Antony Easthope has described in his analysis of *Heart of Darkness* and *Tarzan of the Apes*, where he explains that high cultural texts are verbal while popular texts are iconic. Lindo began as an iconic writer and has steadily moved to the verbal art form, in spite of the fact that the iconic brought her a place in contemporary Spanish literature. One might even conceive that a key precursor to the scene just described may be the drama *La ley de la selva*, in which absurd Ionesco-like scenes such as the confusion between a bag of garbage and a bag of laundry inject verbal humor into the drama. This connection, in fact, may be seen as continuing through to the "murder" that takes place in *El otro barrio*, in which two people are killed totally by accident in a sequence worthy of the quasi surreal antics of a Laurel and Hardy comedy.

La ley de la selva constitutes a postmodernist parodic return to both the theme of matrimonial satisfaction/dissatisfaction and the discourse of the absurd. It is the telling and retelling of a woman's dissatisfaction as both wife and mistress, as well as a criticism of the closed-mindedness and self-centeredness of the contemporary male. Given this second theme, this play is as close as Lindo comes to a full-fledged feminism, a politic that she generally eschews in her writing. All of the male characters are played by the same actor, signifying that the problem for the female character is men in general, or, by extension, the problem for *all* women is men in general. At the same time, however, the female in the play is self-destructive, in that her search for liberation, first from her husband and then from her lover, is constituted by simply another leap into still a third man's arms. Women's inability to do anything but search for another

lover, while attempting to fulfill an unfulfilled sexual desire (an ironic twist in the plot—the men in the play either have no sexual power or exaggerate their abilities) still constitutes a form of dependence, especially since each new relationship is one of subordination of the woman to the man (though, ironically, not sexually, since they are incapable of satisfying her in that respect). She is seen as foolish and ignorant by all three males, and is at the beck and call of her lover, who summons her from the floor above with an African ritual chant. One must question, then, what is the thrust of the play's criticism; it attacks what Lindo sees as the ills of present day Spanish bourgeois marriages: lack of authenticity, incommunication, sexual dissatisfaction. And, to repeat, though the male of the species is originally at fault, the depressing conclusion to be drawn must be that the female is equally unsuccessful in finding a solution to the problem.

Although Lindo has stated, with regard to *La ley de la selva*, "yo la siento ya absolutamente lejana a mi forma de escribir ahora,"[7] it is not difficult to find the influence of Manolito in this play. After all, this narrative voice has been Lindo's continuous *modus operandi* for many years. The constant shift between studied surrealism and more general laughter, in the style of Ionesco or Beckett, is resonant of Manolito's humorous style. The linguistic play of a verbal misunderstanding, for example, is a clear carryover, as are the more slapstick situations, such as the above-mentioned confusion between garbage and laundry, a scene that seems almost lifted from one of the *Manolito Gafotas* series (Manolito's clumsy misplacing of his grandfather's false teeth, for instance). Lindo does not profess a burning desire to return to the theater at this moment, but it is still easy to see how this work fits neatly into the trajectory she has created for herself on the way to *El otro barrio* and her budding film career.

La primera noche de mi vida is Lindo's first film, soon to be followed by an adaptation of the adventures of Manolito Gafotas and two more films, all with the same director, Miguel Albaladejo. Not only did she write the script, but she took a role in the film, that of a Guardia Civil who confronts a municipal policeman regarding the jurisdiction over the possible arrest of a suspected car thief and then reappears in an all-night gas station looking for sanitary napkins. The masculine nature (a woman armed and dressed in what is still considered male clothing in Spain) followed by the feminine (Calderón's Rosaura revisited) may be seen as symptomatic of the totality Lindo attempts to create in the particular character she represents, a totality that is to be found throughout a film in which male and female characters are in constant interaction, with varying degrees of antagonism or sympathy. Early on one finds a definite celebration of marital bliss, when a young husband begins to make love to his wife. The fact that she is pregnant in a film entitled *La primera noche de mi vida* creates an anticipatory Holy Family scene. The fact that she is sensual and laughingly refers to her husband, a young social worker, as a pervert subverts, modernizes and humanizes that symbolism.

The film takes place on New Year's Eve, 1999, and it brings together many characters from different walks of life, all of them drawn to a marginalized area in the northeastern section of the city—once more "el otro barrio"—, to a *chabola* which will serve as the beginning and the end of

the film. Fittingly, the main character in the *chabola* is a young boy who strikes a contrast to the infant ultimately born in his house. While the future of the *chabolista* must be seen as grim, a future in which only his quick-wittedness will help him survive, the future of the new-born augurs better, if for no other reason than the wealth of his maternal grandparents.

We come finally to *El otro barrio*, Lindo's first full-fledged adult novel. In the opening chapter, the protagonist, Ramón Fortuna, is introduced not so much as his own person as he is as a reflection of his immediate surroundings. He is fatherless, and this lack is substituted by four females: his mother, sister and two spinster sisters who live on the floor below. His person is further seen as an extension of his identification with his neighborhood, Vallecas, or at least he understands that such is his role as a young adolescent in that quarter:

> ... abrazado a Valentín y al gordo de Minnesota, tuvo la sensación de tocar por fin el futuro, la gloria, el centro de la Tierra. Lo sentía mientras avanzaba en aquella procesión humana y desmadrada que subía una Avenida de la Albufera sin tráfico. Todos del mismo barrio, del mismo equipo y cantando a voces aquel himno a la solidaridad local:
>
> *Somos del Puente Vallecas,*
> *no nos metemos con nadie,*
> *quien se meta con nosotros,*
> *¡aupa!*
> *Nos cagamos en su padre.* (15)

Fanatical support for a soccer team quickly turns into an identification with the entire neighborhood, and what was, in the Manolito series, a humorous sociological referent, a geographical context that granted sustained humor and irony to the text, is here an active participant in the creation of the protagonist's character. It is an urban area that most immediately defines him, and one that is set off from other areas that are alien to him, and that belong to other characters who are defined precisely as *not* from Vallecas, notably the young boy's lawyer, Marcelo Román. Furthermore, Marcelo Román typifies this double geographical exclusion, in that he was born and raised in Vallecas and is now actively, in the discourse of the novel, *not from there*. One might go a step further and view the personal evolution of the author in a similar way. Lindo was raised in Moratalaz, a working-class neighborhood (more comfortable than Vallecas, but still clearly identified with the working class and leftist politics), and has lived in various areas since, now residing in an area that is definitely removed, socioeconomically, from Moratalaz, for which she still expresses great nostalgia. This is not precisely the case of Marcelo Román, who sees his distancing himself from Vallecas as a salvation, but as the novel progresses, his need to reconnect himself to it becomes evident.

We have discussed earlier the discourse of Carabanchel. Here it is necessary to focus upon Vallecas, perhaps the urban area most regarded as the origin of the *cheli* behavior and language of the 1980's. In the third chapter, Ramón returns home to spend the afternoon with a friend and a girl the friend has invited to join them. The language this couple employs is vulgar and sexually oriented. We again must ask questions similar to the one we asked about the discourse of Carabanchel. Is it stereotyped? Is it hyperbolic? Does the use of stereotyped discourse detract from reader credibility?

Perhaps what most impresses this author, as in the case of the Manolito series, is Lindo's ability to make authentic use of this stereotyped discourse, and to do so without demeaning the society to which the characters who speak in this manner belong. The language employed is sincerely representative of a *type*, and, independently of that function, it also serves to develop the alienation of the person toward whom that language is directed, Ramón, who, while attempting to conform, reacts adversely to the negative aspects of the Vallecas type represented by his friend Valentín.

Soon afterwards, in a surreal sequence, Ramón accidentally causes two deaths, and then, without any real desire to escape, wanders over to his favorite spot, El Parque de las Tetas, where the author is able to create an intimate portrait of the youngster's general sense of alienation, which further metonymizes into a more specific alienation from the neighborhood and the center of Madrid, even farther removed:

> Subió una de las colinas del Parque de las Tetas. Muchas noches del verano pasado había ido con Valentín y con el gordo de Minnesota a tumbarse en lo alto para sentir lo que el gordo y él habían bautizado como "la soledad cósmica." Eso hizo: se tumbó y miró el cielo. Se acordó de una de las ilustraciones de *El principito* en la que el niño aparece solo, como único habitante de su pequeño planeta... a la vuelta del cine su madre podría imaginar que Ramón no tenía valor de salir corriendo más allá del parque, de los límites que cercaban su mundo de todos los días. Las luces de Madrid, allá abajo, le enviaban destellos, también le llegaba el rumor lejano de los ruidos de la ciudad, pero todo resultaba mucho más hostil sin el abrigo envolvente y mágico de las noches de verano, y el ruido de los vecinos que tomaban copas hasta las tantas en el Mirador. Ahora sólo frío, noche y soledad. (56)

This is a classic figure in modern literature: the outsider, from above, recognizing his/her alienation from the city that represents everything unattainable.[8]

This sense of alienation is further developed when Ramón's lawyer, Marcelo, retraces his steps, but Marcelo has achieved what Ramón could not (or Manolito and his family, for that matter, or Guadalupe in *La ley de la selva*): a break from the limits of place, of *barrio*:

> En realidad era tan raro que él dedicara algún tiempo de su vida a las amistades de sus padres o a saldar cuentas con el pasado, que su mujer no estaba acostumbrada a que tuviera alguna obligación sentimental al margen de ella. La cosa es que él también era de aquel bario, bueno, mejor sería decir que había sido, porque todo aquello le parecía de una vida anterior a la que no le apetecía demasiado acercarse. Nunca sintió ese sello del barrio que dicen tener algunos vallecanos, al contrario, desde muy joven se encontró ajeno y en cuanto pudo se marchó de allí, no sólo físicamente, sino también de la clase social en la que se había criado. (63)

Herein lies the meaning behind the title of the novel. Ramón is being defended by his alter ego; both of them are aware of the mutual "otro barrio." Marcelo has escaped from the confinement of the first, but his temporary return is necessary for his personal fulfillment, so much so that although Ramón's defense continues to be important (as well as his own escape from Vallecas), it becomes subservient to Mar-

celo's need to make amends for having turned his back on his boyhood environment; Marcelo, in effect, becomes the new protagonist, and, logically, the portrayal of Vallecas becomes much more severe.

> Marcelo había huido de su propia historia como para salvarse de una vida semejante a la de sus padres. Todo eso que la gente rememora con una sonrisa en los labios de los sabores y los olores de la infancia. Muy bien, que se queden en la infancia, y que no vuelvan. El olor de la coliflor recocida que inundaba la escalera de su casa; los domingos por la tarde en el barrio, sin un duro, estudiando en un cuarto desde el que oía la televisión de sus padres, la radio del de al lado, los gritos del de arriba, y los polvos del de más allá, y la vergüenza por ser el chaval formal, el que quiere hacer carrera, el que no se droga. Cada cosa que poseía era un anclaje más en su vida presente: una mujer preciosa, del barrio de Chamberí, del centro; una casita adosada en una urbanización de las afueras. No había vuelta atrás. (64)

This is far from the romantic vision held by contemporary progressive residents of Vallecas, and quite distanced from the equally romantic portrayal found in the neorealistic writings of the idealistic "generación de la berza" (here, cauliflower has been substituted for cabbage, but the smell is the same). It is a realistic description of a classic tendency: personal salvation through flight from depressed urban areas towards the center of wealth and culture. Examples of this are to be found in other literatures, perhaps most notably in American, where the borough of Brooklyn holds the ignominious honor of having much literature and film dedicated precisely to leaving it.[9] Lindo's task here, however, is to undo the impression created through Marcelo's memories in order to make credible his need to return to Vallecas and find in Ramón the connection to his boyhood and the identity from which he has fled. This will constitute the thrust of the rest of the novel.

This process of reidentification begins when Marcelo visits Ramón's mother and sister. Ramón's mother identifies him as "el hijo de Román," a sign that it is through memory of and identification with the dead father that he is beginning to be defined and to define himself. The conclusion to this sequence is a logical scene upon returning home, when he sees his own son, nestled in the arms of his wife and quietly sobs over a photograph of his own father and Ramón's that Ramón's mother has just given him.

The problem of the fatherless son is not to be taken lightly in this novel. It is not only Ramón and Marcelo who have no father (Marcelo's father died shortly prior to the narration, but it was Marcelo's abandonment of Vallecas that kept him separate from the figure he now so misses). In one way or another, the theme is repeated in the case of all the wayward youths of the novel; their fathers are either absent, irresponsible, or hostile.[10] And this of course is a construct which we will find in the literature of suffering youth from the time of *Lazarillo de Tormes* onward. In the particular case of Ramón, the lack is underscored by an abundance of mother figures: his mother, who is really his grandmother; his sister, actually his mother; and the two neighbors, one of whom he inadvertently kills. In this structure, Marcelo fits in perfectly as the potential father he has never known, and in fact the possibility that he actually *is* Ramón's father is strongly suggested.

But we must return to the major concept of this novel, at least as far as this essay is concerned: "el otro barrio," which, while at times referring to death or the other world from which Ramón's father returns to speak to him, maintains a more concrete reference to the Madrid that is foreign to Vallecas, and the possibility or necessity of entering that geographical space. This is what Marcelo has achieved, as we have stated above, and Ramón logically registers the cultural difference between the eastern slum of Madrid, Vallecas, which leads the traveler outward to the flat dry expanse behind it, and the fertile northwestern sierra where Marcelo has set up his family, in a typical chalet, an *adosado*, so common to the upper middle-class suburbs:

> No podría expresar lo que le pareció la casa de Marcelo porque la vio con los ojos del niño que ha vivido siempre en un piso de no más de sesenta metros cuadrados, con el suelo de un linóleo que imita al parquet, y una escalera de una decadencia reciente.... Pero Ramón... estaba abrumado por aquella cocina tan blanca, tan grande y tan alegre, por el pasillo en el que pisaba una tarima de madera clara. El salón también era amplio, con estanterías pintadas en blanco y con los sofás blancos.... Y Sara [Marcelo's wife] era tan guapa, tan distinta a las chicas como Jessi. A Ramón le pareció que aquel hombre que la tomaba por la cintura y la besaba en el pelo no era Marcelo. Daba la impresión de que aquí, en esta casa, el abogado se refinaba con el ambiente. (117-19)

In a sense, throughout the rest of the novel, a longing for this cultural difference, geographically as well as sociologically based, becomes a major theme, alternating with the theme of a person's incorporation of his past into his decisions about his future and the ability of a person to determine that future. Thus, Ramón's sister Gloria's first decision after admitting that she is actually his mother is to remove Ramón from Vallecas: "No quiero que vuelva a un lugar que le es tan ingrato. Buscaré la forma de que viva en otro barrio" (129). Along with a group of delinquents in rehabilitation, Ramón actually sets himself up in a halfway house, a crafts workshop, and here the English term *halfway* house is also geographically appropriate because the shop is in Las Matas, in the northern sierra, halfway to El Molino de la Hoz, where Marcelo, his wife, and child play out Ramón's dream of the perfect family. The term may not exist in Spanish, but the author's message is clear.

The traditional naturalist questioning of upward mobility from one class to another, its possibility or impossibility, takes on, thus, a geographical as well as a philosophical aspect in the novel's conclusion. At first glance, a determinist reading of Ramón's social tragedy is subverted by Marcelo's social and economic success. But this success is in turn subverted by Marcelo's need to return to his roots, his reidentification with himself as a native of Vallecas, the hint of a sentimental connection with Gloria, in the past and in the present. In fact, his wife's insinuation that Marcelo's interest in Ramón is really a shield for his interest in Gloria is a textual suggestion that we are always controlled by the conditions of our birth, one last twist in the novel that reintroduces the theme of determinism. It is finally Marcelo who strikes a compromise between these two lines of thought, so im-

portant in a post-dictatorial urban society caught up in a rapid period of social readjustment:

> ... cuando se mira el pasado parece que todo estaba previsto, los encuentros, las huidas y los regresos, parece que uno tropezó donde debía y acertó donde estaba señalado, pero no hay nada escrito, y no le podemos pedir a nadie que nos ilumine el camino del futuro, es nuestro propio corazón desconcertado el que tiene que guiarse a ciegas y superar el miedo a dar un paso adelante. (184)

But at times the dead, one's past, reappear to make that trip into the future all the more meaningful:

> Los muertos. Nos acompañan, nos ven andar ahora al mismo paso, te ven a ti, cómo te recuperas del que pudo ser tu destino, me ven a mí, adivinando a tientas el mío, ¿es que no los oyes? Son los ecos que nos llegan desde el otro barrio. (185)

One element that has arisen constantly in this essay is the question of urban discourse. On the level of humor, it leads to the comical misunderstandings that take place in the Manolito series, such as el Imbécil's belief that he has killed his grandfather because the latter screamed "me habéis matado" when the children accidentally hit him with the TV remote control, or Manolito's misreading of the metaphorization of sexual activity between his father and a female acquaintance. But, in typical Lindo fashion, the humor develops into social critique and pathos, such as the prolonged conversation between the rich father of *La primera noche de mi vida* and the lower-class young woman he finds himself abandoned with, or the entire plot of *La ley de la selva*, where mutual lack of verbal understanding is the basis for the plot.

In the film, this constant lack of communication is most evident in the conflict that exists between the rich parents and their social worker son-in-law, saved only by the determined yet angelical nature of the daughter. The father is perennially confused because he is alienated from his geographical as well as his social element. Having been abandoned along the highway by a car thief, a potential rescuer stops for him, only to reabandon him when he refers to the neighborhood as "el culo del mundo." The truck driver rejects this unflattering description of his neighborhood and simply drives away. The Germans who periodically appear on screen, lost in a Volkswagen camper en route to the center of the city, not only do not speak Spanish but cannot even agree with each other in their own language. Although everyone is brought together at the birth of the baby, which coincides with the birth of the millennium, and which might be read as a romantic symbol of people's potential to overcome their differences, these differences stand out, expressed verbally, as they have been throughout Lindo's work, and in *La primera noche de mi vida* the iconic links with the verbal, as visual images—the "chabolas", the fancy car that contrasts with more humble vehicles, clothing differences, etc.—join with pathos-laden dialogues, definitely the author's strong point as a scriptwriter, to underscore the gaps that separate the various urban elements that abound in Elvira Lindo's Madrid. In fact, the concept of the divisive existence that is to be found within urban microcosms, the worlds of Madrid that Lindo

recreates in all her work, has to be seen as the major statement she presents in her most recent work. In her play, her novel and her film, apparent coincidence brings characters together, but in all of those unions, whether they be the different types of police or the two brothers in the film, the husband and lover who are unknowing neighbors in the play, or the lawyer who is the possible father of his young client in the novel, divisions, discourse-based, abound, overshadowing the suggested possibilities (primarily in the novel and the film) of a future in which those very divisions may some day be erased.

Notes

[1]As a result of this process, she has been asked to develop scripts for four more films that are currently being produced.

[2]We might add to this list the southern outskirts, the scenario of a film vignette Lindo wrote for a film soon to be produced.

[3]This complaint also introduces a second topic, which we mention below: the solidarity that exists among the inhabitants of the neighborhood.

[4]This scene is narrated by Manolito while travelling with his father.

[5]It must be noted, however, that her play was well received and, as mentioned above, is being produced in Italy.

[6]We will soon see that in the adult novel, *El otro barrio*, escape from the working-class neighborhood of Vallecas forms the basis of the plot line.

[7]Letter to the author, January 13, 1999.

[8]One of the direct utilizations of the scene in Spanish literature is Juan Marsé's rendition of Balzac's Rastignac, when Manolo, *el Pijoaparte*, stands above Barcelona, preparing to make his entry into the city in the manner of Rastignac, at the end of *Le Père Goriot*, defying Paris from on high with his "à nous deux maintenant."

[9]The Bronx probably fares no better. Marshall Berman quotes a fellow former resident of that borough as saying that the ethic of the Bronx is "to get out of the Bronx."

[10]The most obvious case in Aníbal, Ramón's roommate in a youth center, who longs for the social worker to replace his father.

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