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Foreign Bodies: Margarita García Robayo's "Holiday Heart," translated from Spanish by Charlotte Coombe

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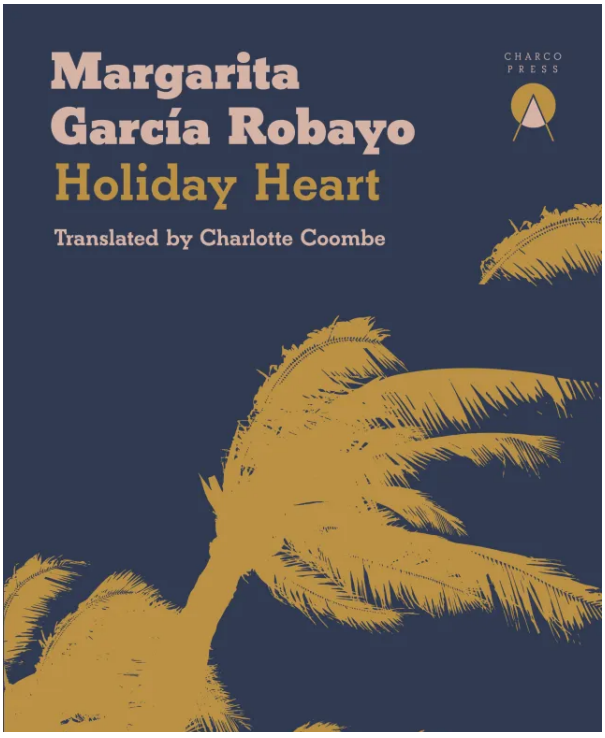
By Dorothy Potter Snyder

"We must take the feeling of being at home into exile. We must be rooted in the absence of place." — Simone Weil [1]



What is a Self made of? How can one be at home if not in a place or among family? Do the contemporary dramas of pandemic and mass migration demand that we accept instability and displacement as facts of life and just get on with it? Must we adhere to the imposed systems of culture and power? Or can the body itself become the place where we discover new paradigms and liberation?

Holiday Heart by Colombian writer Margarita García Robayo poses those Foucauldian questions, and offers the strategies of her characters as an array of possible answers. The uncomfortable, ailing human body is foregrounded in this thematically dense novel, a fable about problematic motherhood and the hard labor of forging epistemological change in the 21st century. Robayo's antagonists Lucía and Pablo, an educated Colombian-born couple living the bourgeois life in New Haven, have hit rock-bottom in their 19-year marriage. They are arrogant, smart, self-pitying, destructive people who are cruel to each other, intolerant toward others, and excruciatingly uncomfortable in their own brown, middle-aged bodies. Having twins, apparently, has broken them.

The novel begins and ends with Lucía on the beach with the children, that no-place at land's end, recalling Alfonso Cuarón's film *Roma*, Elena Ferrante's *The Lost Daughter*, and many other tales of conflicted mothers who are pushed,

quite literally, to the brink. She's left Pablo, whose point of view we follow in alternating chapters, back in New Haven with his alcohol and drug-drenched "holiday heart" condition, sexual dalliances, and his bad novel romanticizing his youth on a remote Colombian island. At the hospital, where his teenage gal-pal has taken him following a collapse, the family doctor drily reports Pablo's risky sexual activity to Lucía, and it's the last straw: "The silence expanded in the seconds that followed, like a plague, building vast totems of humiliation" (9).It is the social wound, not the innumerable intimate ones they've inflicted on each other, that sends Lucía fleeing with the twins to her parents' all-amenities-included condo, Sunny Isles, in Miami. This "time out" (the original Spanish title of the novel was *Tiempo muerto*) combines luxury vacation with emotional and familial collapse. Lucía needs to stop the clock to figure out how all her feminist theory has gotten her…*this.*

A member of the prestigious World Fellows Program at Yale, Lucía's struggling to finish an article they've asked her to write, ponderously entitled "The Role of Motherhood in the Social Construction of the Woman Model." But theories crash and burn not only on motherhood's exhausting praxis, but also on Lucía's attempts to locate her Self in theory and social and demographic data. She is, she meditates, "well-positioned statistically: just a couple of points above American women, who had 1.8 children on average, and a couple of points below Latina women, who had 2.2." (10). She's dismissive of old-school epistemes like her own Mom's reminder that "Mothers are supposed to comfort their

children." Thinks Lucía, "Who really believes that?" (60). Being pregnant felt like having aliens in her body and the children's ongoing demands terrify her, so Lucía blunts her terror by writing. What are fathers good for? Neither Pablo nor Lucía have any idea. The center cannot hold.[2]

Children in this novel are demanding, anti-romantic bodies. They ruin a woman's looks, get lost or hurt, and finally just grow up and leave. Lucía loves them, but does she *want* them? "Lucía and the children are lying on the sand," begins this regressive narrative. "Tomás is slotted into one side of her body and Rosa into the other. Like two soft organs, easily removed" (1). The twins, conceived by IVF, are insecurely anchored. But they cleave to Cindy, the Cuban-American household helper "with curly brown hair, her own car, and wide, shapely hips," a paragon of well-fed maternal solidity. Cindy nannies both the kids and Lucía, good-naturedly putting up with the latter's high-handed treatment while "[t]he children hug her, kiss her" (4). To examine the systems of oppression, women have to hand over the maternal dirty-work to someone else. Lucía's anti-heroic journey begins and ends on the beach on Independence Day: the family unit has become two women and the children, safely quarantined from both the elders' antique values and all those needy, useless men.

The problematic body is the star in this novel of bourgeois Hispanic angst and when that homeland of last resort betrays you, there's nowhere left to go. According to Pablo, becoming a mother has made Lucía into a stranger: "Before

giving birth, she'd been the most intelligent and the kindest person he knew. After she gave birth, Lucía expelled all of that false kindness along with the placenta" (18). Meanwhile, Lucía spews her feminist fury in articles for *Elle*'s Latin American edition in which she fulminates against Pablo who bears it by numbing his body with drugs, alcohol, and illicit sex. "She's a bitch and a hypocrite," asserts his sister Sarah Katherine, one of the few likable characters, whose curt yet honest assessment of Lucía comes as a relief to the reader who's been thinking the same thing. "Sarah-K," an activist and teacher, didn't get to study abroad like Pablo because, well, she was a girl. Now, she directs her fury toward fighting unwinnable ecological battles in Colombia and is as comfortable in her body as Lucía is anguished by hers. As Pablo's mother comments, "[i]n case you're wondering how Sarah Katherine's doing…well, all her collagen is still intact" (68). Is Sarah-K's body well-preserved because she's on home soil? Or is it because, as it turns out, she's a lesbian?

Lucía also regards her body as foreign and thinks it looks like "offal" (62). Pablo experiences major organ failure. But they're not the only ones suffering: Lucía's globe-trotting parents have chronic flatulence from an over-rich diet; David, a Dominican-American athlete convalescing at Sunny Isles and potential fling for Lucía, has a broken leg. Lucía responds to his advances by speaking to him in Spanish, aware that he can't understand her. As his desire grows, she becomes terrified that, "he could snap her neck. Beat her to death. All men – she says, she remembers, she repeats it to

herself like a mantra – are united by their infinite capacity to create violence." Lucía's body wants sex but her systems of thought problematize loving the one she's with. Body denied, she vomits.

The twins offer alternative strategies for existential survival. Precocious Tomás, who often bites his nails and furrows his brow, thinks the book Lucía has given him is stupid, so he rewrites it: Alter-ego Benjamin shatters his body into pixels of light to travel the world via the internet. Obliteration of the body is one way to survive a broken home. Meanwhile, little Rosa learns "the dance moves of a 'Latin hot bitch'" (110) from Cindy, uses Mom's credit card, and engages in precocious flirting with men. Mastering a female cliché is another way to design a Self.

Readers will find the pitiless stereotyping of different Hispanic American communities and the racist descriptions of people of color in this novel hard to bear, especially since none of those characters ever get a chance to defend themselves. But Robayo underlines the important truth that racism and classism are not the sole domain of white people: brown Hispanic burghers can be self-hating imbeciles, too. Forced emigration and the continued oppression of women and people of color are the major themes of our times; to address them usefully demands rupture with perceptions we previously held to be self-evident. It is useful to portray ugliness as it is. Divorce, both from spouses and belief systems, requires careful examination of a society that looks, well, like offal.

Charlotte Coombe's translation is sharp, daring, and delightful. The Briticisms that occasionally surface, however, are disorienting in a novel that already foregrounds cultural confusion: why would Colombians living in Connecticut speak of "rubbish bags" (16), "scoff" food (29), or measure things in "tonnes" (85)? But that's a small complaint. In Coombe's words, these characters sound just as jagged, brittle, and lost as Robayo wrote them. By the end of the novel, the patriarchy, embodied by Pablo, has imploded. Intellectual Lucía, newly-grateful to working-class Cindy, has accepted the futility of trying to win her theoretical battles or hold on to anything. She leads her woman-led tribe away from Sunny Isles and to a new unnamed beach where she contemplates the sea, the backdrop that masterfully demonstrates both power and fluidity. Then she simply breathes, that most basic bodily function that is as close as any of us ever get to being home.

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Dorothy Potter Snyder writes short fiction, essays, and translates literature from Spanish, including works by Mónica Lavín (Mexico), Almudena Sánchez (Spain), and Juan Carlos Garvayo (Spain). She is a passionate promoter of contemporary Hispanic women's texts and her translations have appeared in *The Sewanee Review*, *Surreal Poetics*, *Two Lines Press, Review: Literature and Art of the Americas,* and *The Short Story Project*. She is a contributor *Public Seminar*, *Potent Magazine*, *The Durham Herald Sun*, and *La*

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[1] Simone Weil, "Gravity and Grace", New York: Putnam, 1952, p. 86

[2] William Butler Years, from the poem *The Second Coming*.