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Gender, Religion, and Indefinability in *La burladora de Toledo*

La novela La burladora de Toledo *(2008) de Angelina Muñiz-Huberman es una recreación ficticia de la vida errante de un individuo que vivió en la España del siglo XVI como, en diversos momentos, mujer y hombre. A primera vista la novela parece tener dos temas: el género irreconocible del/la protagonista y su vida religiosa, sumamente sincrética y extraoficial. Según la tesis que propongo aquí, en* La burladora *el género y la religión, que al principio se manifiestan como dos preocupaciones, son en realidad dos facetas de un concepto más amplio que promueve la novela.* La burladora *reiteradamente les asigna un valor positivo a las identidades fluidas, mutables e indefinibles.*

Palabras clave: *hermafrodita, masculinidad femenina, sincretismo, criptojudaísmo, indefinibilidad*

The 2008 novel La burladora de Toledo *by Angelina Muñiz-Huberman is the fictional recreation of the wandering life of an individual who lived in sixteenth-century Spain as, at various times, a man and as a woman. The novel at first appears to have two themes: the main character's unrecognizable gender and their highly syncretistic and extraofficial religious life. My thesis is that in* La burladora *gender and religion, which initially manifest as two concerns, are facets of a broader concept that the narrative promotes.* Burladora *assigns a positive value to identities that are fluid, mutable, and indefinable.*

Keywords: *hermaphrodite, female masculinity, syncretism, crypto-Judaism, indefinability*

The Mexican novelist and poet Angelina Muñiz-Huberman, born in 1936 in Hyères, France, to Spanish Republican exiles, is best known for fictionalized narratives of the lives of figures from the late medieval and early modern periods. These texts, which Seymour Menton categorizes under the "new historical novel" (*Latin America's New Historical Novel* 158-62) and Gerardo García Muñoz classifies in the same way (15-18), exhibit common features. These include anachronisms, fantastic episodes, mystical visions, figures of

exile, and characters who persevere in reclaiming their ancestral Judaism. Muñiz-Huberman so persistently reworks
existing literary and historical texts that, in Edward H. Friedman's words, she "unites reading and writing by using the rewritten story as her primary conceit" (179).

This study concerns Muñiz-Huberman's 2008 novel *La burladora de Toledo*, which adds, to these familiar elements, new themes: recent concepts of gender, sexualities, and identity as fluid entities. *Burladora* has as yet received little commentary beyond Menton's analysis of its religious/ethnic themes ("Angelina Muñiz-Huberman" 108-11), to be discussed below, a note by Alessandra Luiselli, "*La burladora de Toledo* o los barrocos exilios de Angelina Muñiz," on the protagonist as an exile, and briefer mentions. It may have been eclipsed by another work that the author published the same year, *En el jardín de la Cábala,* whose Kabbalistic tales aroused more interest among critics. *Burladora* fictionalizes the life of Elena or Eleno de Céspedes (Spain; 1543-circa 1588). The original Elena/Eleno was a biracial surgeon accused by the Inquisition of practicing witchcraft and committing sodomy while in female disguise. As Malva E. Filer observes, "To a great extent, Muñiz's texts are rewritings that radically transform the original texts" (269); in this case, the transformation is so radical that the Inquisition records become a mere springboard for fictional creation.

This examination of *Burladora* focuses upon the relation between what at first appear to be two themes, gender and religion. In approximately the first two thirds of *Burladora* the most prominent concern is gender. Though characters and occasionally the narrator strive to fit the protagonist into such categories as female, male, hermaphrodite, or transgender, Elena/Eleno's gender remains unrecognizable. In later episodes, religion becomes a more salient topic as the protagonist and two companions devote themselves to mysticism and esotericism, including a new variant of Kabbalah. The novel then focuses so closely on religion that Menton includes it among the author's Kabbalistic texts ("Angelina Muñiz-Huberman").

My thesis is that in *Burladora* gender and religion, which initially manifest as two concerns, are facets of a broader concept that the narrative promotes. Their treatment is part of the positive value that *Burladora* assigns to hybridity and fluidity and, to borrow the words of Daniel Boyarin, Daniel Itzkovitz, and Ann Pellegrini in their introduction to *Queer Theory and the Jewish Question* (2003), "the necessary trouble and incitement of identities that refuse to come clean or become simple" (6).

To see how the themes of gender and religion interact in *Burladora*, one may draw some clues from the articles compiled by Boyarin, Itzkovitz, and Pellegrini. However, a significant difference should be noted: nearly all the

subjects of these essays are more clearly marked as Jewish than the central characters of *Burladora.* As Muñiz-Huberman likens unstable genders to extraofficial ways of being Jewish, the novel enters the complication-filled territory summarized in the title of Janet R. Jakobsen's programmatic "Queers Are Like Jews, Aren't They?" Jakobsen warns that drawing analogies between subsets of human beings can bring undesirable consequences. Her prime example is the practice of likening the oppression of gay men and lesbians to that of African-Americans. Despite good intentions, according to this critic "what was produced was a 'gay community' … predominantly white with a contained African American minority" (Jakobsen 68). Yet after critiquing faulty analogies Jakobsen states that activists and scholars may use this rhetorical device productively, provided that they refrain from sorting human beings into discrete identity groups. Consideration of the links between Jewishness and queerness may become a liberating strategy when the two terms are not made to refer to fixed identities. Something of this move may be seen in *Burladora*, which unmoors characters' sexual, religious, and ethnic identities from knowable categories.

Judaism, especially Jewish mysticism, has always been one pervasive theme in Muñiz-Huberman's work, the other being exile. Daniela Schuvaks notes the close connection between the two topics: "the author dedicates most of her work to showing the relationship between exile and Jewish themes" (83). Luiselli, in a volume on the Spanish Republican exile as seen by the second generation, views Elena/Eleno as the quintessential exile:

> resultado del cruce de las razas blanca y negra, siendo morisca y profesando el judaísmo mientras aparentaba ser cristiana, y habiendo asumido también la fusión de los dos géneros biológicos que afirmaba poseer, la descentrada identidad de este personaje forzosamente hubo de ser construida siempre desde los márgenes … Elena de Céspedes posee la fragmentación de una exiliada. ("*La burladora de Toledo*" 709)

The present essay, however, will not treat the theme of exile, since it has been exhaustively studied by such critics as Judith Payne, Luzma Becerra, Eduardo Mateo Gambarte, and Luiselli.

There is an autobiographical source for the above-noted concerns. Muñiz-Huberman discovered that her mother's apparently Catholic family had "secretly preserved, for centuries, some features of the Jewish tradition" (Filer 263) while remaining in Spain until 1936. Lois Baer Barr describes the effect of this revelation by saying that the author "decided to reclaim her spiritual past by undergoing a formal conversion" (365). I would expand Barr's statement to note that Muñiz-Huberman also recovered her heritage

through her writing. She produced an introduction to Iberian Kabbalah (*Raíces*) and an anthology of Sephardic texts (*Lengua florida*). Students of her fiction often point out its Kabbalistic influences (Menton, "Angelina Muñiz-Huberman"; Vadillo 170-77; Luiselli, "Angelina Muñiz-Huberman" 12-14). Stephen A. Sadow observes, "in most of the author's writing, concepts from Jewish mysticism linger below the surface of the text" (62). One might add to Sadow's assertion that Jewish mysticism may also be an overt theme, as it is in *Burladora.*

Muñiz-Huberman seldom portrays Judaism in isolation. She has created many characters who are syncretistic in that they combine features of more than one religion. The protagonists of some of her earlier novels exemplify the crypto-Jews or *marranos* of post-1492 Spain, who commingle features of their ostensible Christianity with secret Jewish elements. For example, the fictional Santa Teresa of the 1972 *Morada interior* displays Catholic fervor while inwardly reconstructing her ancestral Judaism. In recent years, marranos have drawn the attention of cultural critics whose focus is less on historical crypto-Jews than on "the marrano as metonym" (Graff Zivin 20). Erin Graff Zivin in her 2014 *Figurative Inquisitions: Conversion, Torture, and Truth in the Luso-Hispanic Atlantic* explores the unease that the marrano provokes among those who rely on stable categories of identity. Her study expands upon the Argentine philosopher Ricardo Forster's concept: "Ricardo Forster argues that the marrano represents the alter ego of the modern subject, both because the fractured, incomplete marrano exposes the impossibility of the modern Cartesian subject's claim to wholeness, rationality, and autonomy, and because the marrano inhabits a crack in the decidedly modern project of colonial expansion" (23).[1] Graff Zivin applies these concepts in analyses of fictional versions of the lives of Luis de Carvajal in Mexico and Antônio José da Silva in Brazil and Portugal, both tried by the Inquisition for Judaizing and executed.

This line of thought provides a point of reference for the exploration of *Burladora*. Yet ultimately one finds more differences than similarities between Graff Zivin's examples and the novel under consideration here. Marranos appear in *Burladora*, but only as minor characters. Like the marrano discussed by Forster and Graff Zivin, the protagonist of *Burladora* upsets minds with their "fractured, incomplete" quality. Yet "marrano" is inadequate to characterize the protagonist of *Burladora*; in fact, the inquisitors do not regard them as such. The sparse information that the reader gleans about their background and genealogy frustrates the attempt to identify them even using a hybrid term; they fit no recognizable category. The protagonist of *Burladora* and their companions create never before seen forms of syncretism by fusing Judaism, Christianity, sorcery, alchemy, paganism, and Asian spiritualities.

Though loosely based on an Inquisition case, *Burladora* is a comic and often quite exuberant work. After Elena/Eleno is tried and punished, the novel has a sunny ending, affording its main character a magical escape. As Menton observes, such a dénouement is typical of the author's fiction: "Hay que admirarse del fin optimista de las novelas y los cuentos de Angelina Muñiz pese a la historia trágica no sólo de los judíos sino de todo el universo" ("Angelina Muñiz-Huberman" 108). The principal source of the novel's humor is the gender, ethnic, and religious indefinability of the protagonist and the confusion that it provokes. In an article to be discussed in the latter part of this essay, Menton states that "la víctima más burlada [de *Burladora*] es el lector" who is tantalized by hints that Elena/Eleno's identity will be defined and then deprived of the expected clarification (109). (Here I will use they/their/them pronouns for the main character of the novel and reserve feminine pronouns for the narrator and the avatar of the author who speaks in the text.)

The Inquisition-era records concerning the body of Elena/Eleno de Céspedes, discussed below, today produce bewilderment. In fictionalizing Elena/Eleno, Muñiz-Huberman benefits from this confusion to thwart any attempt to assign the protagonist a gender identity. The author treats her character not as a historical anomaly but as a figure of the inherent instability and indefinability of gender and of other features used to categorize human subjects.

The details that Muñiz-Huberman invents for her Elena/Eleno, especially the heterogeneous religion of the protagonist and their companions, further frustrate attempts to categorize them. The impossibility of classifying the protagonist's body and religion may be seen as a productive maneuver to "allow us to remain in the space of difference itself, without being trapped in identity" (81), to cite Jakobsen's description of the rationale for using the term "queer" with a positive valence.[2]

Muñiz-Huberman models *Burladora* on the picaresque novel, but with significant modifications. Friedman's article on the author's early neopicaresque novel *Tierra adentro* (1977) is helpful in understanding *Burladora*. Friedman observes that while Golden Age picaresque novels condemn their rule-breaking main characters as delinquents, Muñiz-Huberman honors the hero of *Tierra adentro* for maintaining a forbidden Judaism. Filer endorses Friedman's assertions, adding that the protagonist preserves his integrity amid sordid environments (266-67). Friedman's analysis applies to *Burladora*, which also celebrates its protagonist's transgressions. Like the hero of *Tierra*, Elena/Eleno is admired for deviations from Catholicism. They practice livelihoods without proper

training; yet unlike the pícaro they are never condemned as an imposter but rather portrayed as adaptable. *Burladora* possesses the outlook that, for Friedman, distinguishes Muñiz-Huberman's neopicaresque from the moralizing originals: "an attitude of tolerance and an historical distance from the events recounted" (186-87). However, *Burladora* exhibits a major difference from *Tierra*: while by pursuing Judaism the hero of the 1977 novel "affirms his identity" (187), through the same activity Elena/Eleno blurs theirs.

The author creates for Elena/Eleno a voice, not just as a defendant on trial, but as an individual who wrestles with the ambiguities of both their body and their religion. Elena/Eleno tells substantial portions of their own story. In the first-person sections, the protagonist goes beyond narrating to offer reflections on the unclassifiable quality of their body and religion and the issues that it raises.

Burladora provides numerous assertions and hints about its protagonist's gender, but the shreds of information can never be reconciled with one another. The historical Elena/Eleno claimed to have been at various times anatomically female and male, thus justifying successive marriages to a man and a woman (Maganto Pavón 92-98). Muñiz-Huberman's fictional Elena/Eleno at times gives this account; in the third-person narrator's summary, the character was female until they bore a child, then underwent "un descenso de la matriz" and developed "un pene rudimentario" (89). Jack Halberstam, drawing on the research of the historian and sexologist Thomas W. Laqueur, notes that this explanation for hermaphroditism was widely accepted until the late eighteenth century (*Female Masculinity* 60).[3] To twenty-first century readers, the account of a uterus transforming itself into a penis sounds no more scientific than the protagonist's attempt to understand themself by consulting alchemical treatises concerning the divine hermaphrodite.

Though Elena/Eleno at times speaks as an individual from the early modern period, in other moments they use twenty-first century concepts and language to refer to the uncategorizable character of their body. Filer has written that "Muñiz has not followed the trend, popular among postmodernists, to rewrite the past according to feminist or other contemporary views by creating an alternative history to fit them" (269-70). Filer's statement was accurate when it appeared in 2003; in *Burladora*, however, the speech of Elena/Eleno at times replicates the twenty-first century discussion of gender; they proudly note that their progressive family let them decide between male and female dress (Muñiz-Huberman 140). In *Burladora*, Muñiz-Huberman's trademark anachronisms remind readers how concepts of gender change over time.

The novel sporadically provides small amounts of information about Elena/Eleno's body, but they make it more difficult to assign it to recognized categories. The principal character performs as a half-man, half-woman in a circus; however, their act is never described. Later the narrator relays the reflections of Elena/Eleno's future wife concerning her partner's body. The young woman is attracted by Elena/Eleno's oscillations between male and female, providing "La sorpresa de cada día: ¿cuál predominará?"; she provides no information that might ruin the ambiguity, which she considers "un bálsamo" (Muñiz-Huberman, *Burladora* 160). Later the third-person narrator discloses that, planning a journey of military and sexual conquests in Italy, the protagonist equips themself with both a condom and a contraceptive pessary (225). This plotline is abruptly abandoned, leaving unsatisfied the curiosity that the unusual preparations arouse.

Toward the end of *Burladora*, Elena/Eleno's body is examined by Inquisitors resolved to disambiguate it. These events are given a light-hearted treatment by the perennially sanguine third-person narrator; she finds absurd humor in the inquisitors' confusion over a body that "escapaba a su afán clasificatorio" (Muñiz-Huberman 277). The episodes involving the Inquisition show how different *Burladora* is from the tragic Inquisition-themed works that Graff Zivin examines, in which marrano protagonists are tortured into confessing and to professing Catholicism and later executed. Elena/Eleno does resemble Forster's and Graff Zivin's conception of the marrano in exhibiting a "fractured, incomplete" quality (Graff Zivin 23) that perturbs the inquisitorial mind. The protagonist receives a torturous whipping (Muñiz-Huberman, *Burladora* 274), though in this case torture is not employed to extract truths or force conversion, as occurs in *Figurative Inquisitions*. Instead, Elena/Eleno receives as punishment a set number of lashes. The narrator, ever disinclined to dwell on the negative, describes this event briefly. The inquisitors show no interest in killing Elena/Eleno, preferring to examine their live body.

Not only is the protagonist's body inherently ambiguous, but its configuration varies from one examination to the next, depending on the outlook of the observer. Here the novel conveys through comic exaggeration a basic tenet of queer theory: the role that expectations and beliefs play in the perception of gender. Michael Moon gives examples of the irrational way in which bodily features are read as feminine or masculine. He recalls wondering as a child "What was the difference between a hermaphrodite – a figure still presented in freak shows in my childhood – and a male movie star like Victor Mature who was considered hypermasculine despite his overdeveloped and to my and many other childish eyes quite feminine-looking breasts?" (Moon and Sedgwick 216). Moon observes that the same feature, a large derrière, was appreciated as a sign of virility on the actor

John Wayne and proof of effeminacy on a ridiculed local piano teacher. In these instances, the perception of a feature as masculine or feminine depends upon the expectations surrounding the individual whose body is being regarded (216). In both Moon's childhood reminiscences and the narrator's account of the examination of Elena/Eleno, the speaking subject recognizes the absurdity of relying on physical features to ascribe masculinity and femininity to a human being.

The narrator seeks to maintain readers' curiosity concerning the protagonist's gender. She is inconsistent in her gendered references to the character. Generally, she calls them "Elena" and uses feminine grammatical forms, including in the titular epithet "burladora." Yet, in line with the novel's concept of identities as mutable, she sporadically uses "Eleno," "Eleno-Elena," "Elenao," or "Elena Eleno" as a plural subject. The preponderant use of the feminine name and grammatical forms does not disambiguate the protagonist's gender but suggests a feminist narrative in which a persevering woman outwits the restrictions on her gender in sixteenth-century Spain. If Elena/Eleno is perceived as primarily female, this individual would likely have been the first woman physician in Spain, and their participation in military campaigns would have been noteworthy.

Nonetheless, in *Burladora* the masculinity of Elena/Eleno carries as much significance as their femininity. In the final chapter of his 1998 *Female Masculinity*, Halberstam makes the case that women, including heterosexual women, benefit when society allows them to cultivate masculine capabilities. The author characterizes *Female Masculinity* as "a seriously committed attempt to make masculinity safe for women and girls" (268). This scholar cites such advantages of male qualities for women as a greater propensity to exercise and to learn mechanical repair skills. Halberstam calls for the acceptance of "new masculinities," stating that it is "irrational to deny girls access to activity because they are girls" (268).

Burladora coincides with this line of thought in many, but not all, cases. Elena/Eleno's maleness manifests itself in some positive ways. Their admirable traits include bold speech and prowess in self-defense. Like Catalina de Erauso, the sixteenth-century cross dresser, Elena/Eleno especially impresses onlookers with their swordsmanship.[4] For their ceaseless roaming, Sadow includes Elena/Eleno in a list of the author's "traveler" characters (61) while Luiselli views the same behavior as a sign of "las condiciones del exilado" ("*La burladora de Toledo*" 711); it is also a reminder that contemporary travelers were mostly men. The protagonist masters the male fields of science and medicine.

Yet *Burladora* does not always celebrate its protagonist's maleness. Elena/Eleno also exemplifies negative features of masculinity. Uninterested in nurturing children since, as the narrator explains, "no quería más cargas,"

Elena/Eleno abandons their baby (Muñiz-Huberman 86). They are inclined to aggression and relish combat; during gory battles, the character "está en su elemento" (51). But the worst of their masculine conduct involves the duplicitous seduction of women. As Luiselli observes, *Burladora* has links not only to the picaresque but also to *El burlador de Sevilla* (1630), in which Tirso de Molina develops the Don Juan theme ("Angelina Muñiz-Huberman" 11-12). The protagonist adopts Don Juan's practice of seducing women as a heartless game. The third-person narrator disapprovingly summarizes: "No pudo resistir la tentación de tentar a otras mujeres que abandonaba de inmediato cuando ellas o María [the character's wife] estaban a punto de descubrir el engaño" (Muñiz-Huberman*, Burladora* 225).

While in nearly all cases the narrator sides with the protagonist, she makes an exception in the case of Elena/Eleno's womanizing. The speaker withdraws her empathy from Elena/Eleno and transfers it to the many women that they have harmed while overperforming maleness. After describing the conquests and the pain that they cause, she mocks the character's ostentatious display of masculinity: "Esta característica de Elena-Eleno habría constituido gran tema de desarrollo para las teorías de Gregorio Marañón… sobre la poca masculinidad del donjuanismo" (Muñiz-Huberman*, Burladora* 225). In jeering at the protagonist's conquests, the narrator borrows a theory from Gregorio Marañón that would be considered offensive by today's standards; here one must remember that the celebrated Spanish endocrinologist (1887-1960), was ahead of his time in his inquiry into intersexuality.

In roughly its final third (chapters 28-50), *Burladora* shifts its thematic emphasis and novelistic construction, yet continues to develop its central concerns of indefinability and hybridity. Elena/Eleno is less central as other characters emerge. Most importantly, religion becomes a more prominent theme and Judaism appears in new forms unlinked from Jewish identity. In the writing of Muñiz-Huberman, Jewishness has always been subject to questioning; as Dolores Rangel comments on *El mercader de Tudela*, "M-H provoca que el lector se cuestione sobre lo que pudiera significar la identidad de un individuo y particularmente, la identidad de un judío" ("Búsqueda de identidad" 85). This relativistic outlook is taken to an extreme in *Burladora* as characters disregard the established parameters of Jewish identity in favor of a Judaism created by intellectual and mystical means. Mirroring the protagonist's indefinable gender explored earlier, the characters' religious activity is distinctively queer.

While earlier Elena/Eleno and a third-person narrator took turns telling the story, as the novel moves toward its ending two new voices are heard. One belongs to María/Miriam, the protagonist's wife, whose story

dominates two chapters (28 and 29). María narrates the bulk of Chapter 29 (Muñiz-Huberman, *Burladora* 204-10). The other new voice is that of a literary figure of Muñiz-Huberman who recounts her family history and the genesis of the novel. Menton considers her passages closer to essay than fiction ("Angelina Muñiz-Huberman" 109). Longtime readers of Muñiz-Huberman will not be surprised by her appearance in the novel since, as Luz Elena Zamudio notes, the author has often woven her own story into her work: "Un aspecto que estará reiteradamente en su obra y que formará parte de su poética es el que se refiere a su singular historia personal" (81). Both María and the author represent Muñiz-Huberman's favored topic of the struggle to recover an abandoned Judaism. Schuvaks observes that Muñiz-Huberman associates reclaiming Judaism with maturation (85-86) and indeed the autobiographical segments show the author deepening her understanding.

In the last chapters, readers witness the emergence of a syncretistic new mixture of Judaism with various esoteric beliefs and practices. A character glimpsed briefly earlier in the novel becomes a key figure because of his skill in blending religious and occult currents. This is Yosef Magus, a learned sorcerer who eventually uses his magic to bring about the happy conclusion of the narrative.

The protagonist, their wife, the author, and the wizard all have connections to the Jewish life coursing under the surface of Inquisition-era Spain. However, unlike the Inquisition victims discussed by Graff Zivin, they are not accused of maintaining Jewish observances, to which they appear to give scant importance, preferring to approach Judaism through mysticism. Since none of them has belonged to a Jewish community or received a Jewish education, they construct their own Judaism, practicing a spiritual bricolage with whatever elements they can access. In this way, the three fictional characters extend the concept of indefinability from the domain of gender and sexuality to include as well the beliefs and knowledge gained through religious cultures and esoteric systems of thought and belief.

As the theme of religion grows more prominent, the novel touches upon the parallels between Jewishness and queerness, examined in the earlier-cited *Queer Theory and the Jewish Question*. Daniel Fischlin, in his contribution, succinctly states an aspect of this question of particular relevance to *Burladora*: "Jew and Queer resonate as signifiers of a difference that refuses monolithic notions of identity categories" (383). Daniel Rosenstock's "Messianism, Machismo, and 'Marranism': The Case of Abraham Miguel Cardoso" examines some of these complications in the early modern Spain that fascinates Muñiz-Huberman. This scholar notes that Spanish men with Jewish ancestry were vulnerable to both religious and sexual accusations: "the Jew's blood was imagined to carry not only the

ineradicable and demonic propensity toward the hatred of Christ and his Church but also a tendency toward effeminacy (understood especially as a lack of martial prowess) and sodomy" (206-07).

In *Burladora*, the perceived link between Jewishness and queerness keeps the protagonist in a perennially endangered situation. In sixteenth-century Spain, normative Catholicism is as compulsory as heterosexuality, but Elena/Eleno, their wife, and their sorcerer companion deviate from both. The Inquisition tries the protagonist for sodomy and cross dressing. Yet they could equally well have been detained for straying from Catholicism. In *Burladora*, practicing clandestine religions is akin to being in the closet, and living among multiple religious cultures is analogous to being in a space between genders. The protagonist's wife muses: "Que me da lo mismo y lo mismo me da. Que una religión o la otra. Que hombre o mujer" (Muñiz-Huberman 208), recognizing the parallels between her borderless religiosity and her marriage to an individual of unclassifiable gender.

Burladora here presents a notable contrast with the essays in *Queer Theory and the Jewish Question*, whose subjects are uneasy with, if not tormented over, their Jewishness, their sexuality, and their masculinity or femininity. Boyarin exemplifies this tendency in his essay on Sigmund Freud as a "postcolonial subject" whose writings betray evidence of self-loathing (166). This scholar draws parallels between assertions by Frantz Fanon and by Freud, observing that both had "access to the same kind of painful knowledge" (172) and knew well the internalization of prejudices against one's own group. In contrast, starting with Muñiz-Huberman's first novel *Morada interior* (1972) her characters never doubt that involvement in Judaism and Jewish activities bring delight even when they attract persecution. In *Burladora,* the author extends this enjoyment to characters who are far from normative Judaism and do not meet its criteria for Jewish identity. In the same buoyant vein, far from being troubled by her oscillations between masculinity and femininity, Elena/Eleno takes pleasure in these fluctuations.

Of the four figures who dominate the last part of the novel, the author is unlike the fictional characters, as are the segments that she narrates. She reveals her family's history as forced converts who maintained a vestigial Judaism and recounts her excited discovery that "la familia maternal durante siglos mantuvo la costumbre de acudir a determinados sacerdotes, todos ellos con el mismo apellido de familia, para las ceremonias principales, como el bautizo, el casamiento o el entierro" (Muñiz-Huberman, *Burladora* 216), among other subterfuges. The certainty with which the author speaks of her Jewish roots and identity makes all the more evident the tenuousness of the characters' Jewishness.

The author then uses the topic of Elena/Eleno's uncertain Jewishness to tantalize readers. They are encouraged to suspect that a Jewish trader who at times crosses the protagonist's path is their father. The unconfirmed patrilineal connection, when only Jewish mothers were seen as transmitting their identity, doubly confounds the question of the protagonist's identity. *Burladora* drops hints that the protagonist's parentage will be revealed but ends without resolving the issue. Teasing readers in this way is a technique cultivated by Muñiz-Huberman; Rangel notes that her 1998 novel *El mercader de Tudela* "va creando una serie de expectativas que finalmente no se van a cumplir" ("Búsqueda de la identidad" 84).

Menton, discussing this feature of *Burladora*, observes how disconcerting it is to the reader not to encounter confirmation of the biracial protagonist's Jewishness:

> Otro aspecto inesperado de *La burladora de Toledo* es la falta de un enlace directo entre la ex-esclava Elena-Eleno y los judíos…. al sentirse perseguida por la Inquisición, se identifica con los criptojudíos-conversos-cristianos nuevos como su mentor criptojudío … Como abundan las alusiones a los judíos en general, el lector se siente burlado al no encontrar un parentesco entre Elena-Eleno y los falashim, los judíos negros de Etiopía que sí se mencionan en *El mercader de Tudela.* ("Angelina Muñiz-Huberman" 111)

Menton had been expecting *Burladora* to reveal the Ethiopian-Jewish identity of Elena/Eleno's mother while I had been anticipating the confirmation of a patrilineal link through the crypto-Jewish merchant. In either case, the result is the same: after persistently insinuating that Elena/Eleno has in some way inherited the attribute of Jewishness, *Burladora* withholds information that readers could use to either assign or deny the protagonist a Jewish identity.

Whatever their lineage, Elena/Eleno's connection to Judaism is fervent. Until Elena/Eleno meets Yosef Magnus, they possess little Jewish knowledge but are fascinated by Judaism and once surreptitiously perused their crypto-Jewish employer's secret Judaica library. Even when consumed with Jewish learning, Elena/Eleno makes no effort to officialize their Jewishness. Here the novel seems to implicitly raise the question that Jakobsen formulates as "Must we think, however, of Jews as the stable ground for an identity?" followed by the earlier-quoted suggestion "Is Jewishness something that we are? Or could [Jewishness], like queer, be something that we do?" (82). Elena/Eleno is not seeking to anchor their free-floating Jewishness to any normative definition but rather to participate fully in the mystical currents of Judaism.

Though the protagonist's wife María has a family connection to Judaism, it is another tenuous link. She is the daughter of a crypto-Jewish man who dies during the novel. *Burladora* again uses patrilineal transmission to signal an extraofficial Jewishness. María's feelings toward her father, who had hidden his identity from his offspring, are troubled by numerous secrets. Some of these have to do with his being, in his daughter's words, "dentro: judío: fuera: cristiano" (Muñiz-Huberman 208). Readers recognize the father as a marrano, the figure studied by Graff Zivin as an "anti-identitary concept" (19) that is "uniquely threatening" to those reliant on stable identities (29). Yet, like the other crypto-Jews in the novel, the deceased father is simple to classify in comparison to the central characters: his daughter, Elena/Eleno, and the wizard, all of whom are simultaneously non-Jewish and Jewish. María's discovery of her father's Jewish ritual objects impels her toward Judaism, but her approach is as atypical as that of Elena/Eleno. The absence of a Jewish community, education, or ritual life makes her Judaism a wild, unsanctioned variant; yet in the fictional universe of *Burladora* it possesses validity.

Even while pursuing Jewish learning, María is not seeking to be specifically a Jew. Rangel has noted that while Muñiz-Huberman favors Jewish themes, the mysticism and other forms of spirituality in her narratives are not exclusively Jewish but draw upon multiple traditions ("Muñiz-Huberman" 72). The culture of ambiguity that Elena/Eleno and María maintain in their home allows them to fuse elements from religions and philosophies, but there are notable absences. No one practices the Church-defined Catholicism imposed upon all inhabitants of Spain. Although both members of the couple are enthralled with Judaism, they give scant attention to the rituals and customs that mark a home as Jewish. This lacuna is another clue that what they pursue is not being Jewish but, to adapt Jakobsen's words again, doing Jewishness.

Yosef Magus unites in his figure religious, sexual, and intellectual queerness. He first appears to Elena/Eleno as a supernatural revelation. This character allows Muñiz-Huberman to include in *Burladora* the descriptions of visions that, as Naomi Lindstrom has shown, are fundamental to the author's work ("Narrativas visionarias"). Yosef is not an adherent of any religion but rather partakes of a broader tradition of esoteric hermeneutics. As Rangel observes, throughout the fiction of Muñiz-Huberman characters who are not Jews follow the same quest for spiritual knowledge as the Jewish characters:

> El Dios de los personajes de M-H no es un concepto cerrado por un sistema religioso, a pesar de que su principal perspectiva de aproximación sea el judaísmo. Estos personajes, en la mayoría de los casos, se distinguen porque son cristianos, judíos o

musulmanes que de una forma u otra buscan a Dios o bien, el conocimiento interior. ("Muñiz-Huberman" 72)

When Yosef first appears to Elena/Eleno, the third-person narrator makes highly diverse claims about him (Muñiz-Huberman, *Burladora* 179-83). Amid this profusion of information, the reader finds hints that Yosef is connected to Judaism: the narrator calls him a figure of the biblical Joseph (179); she uses the Hebrew word "nistar" (hidden) for the concealed truths that Yosef seeks (180); she attributes to him an account of creation derived from the esoteric treatise *Sefer Yetzirah* (180). Yet she avoids rooting the sage in a particular tradition. Yosef cultivates and imparts a system of his own that the narrator summarizes as: "Creencia sincrética, mezcla de magia, influencias babilónica y griega, conceptos del judaísmo, sobre todo del Génesis" (260). His method consists of extracting from any religion its element of mystical knowledge: he isolates Kabbalah from the common practices and beliefs of Judaism and gnosticism from everyday Christianity.

In addition to his intellectual and spiritual teachings, Yosef Magus moves the plot along by means of such wizardry as becoming invisible and flying on a cape. More than any other feature, he epitomizes the magic that runs through the author's works, which in Lindstrom's summary "are frequently designed to communicate the idea that there is enchantment and magic in the world" ("Angelina Muñiz-Huberman" 56). His unusual capabilities suggest that Yosef may not be a human being, a basic prerequisite for Jewish identity.

Mixed together with alchemy, sorcery, and other traditions, Yosef's Kabbalistic teachings are not only Jewish and heretical from the perspective of sixteenth-century Spanish Catholicism but also stand in an outsider relation to normative Judaism. In the latter case, the complication is not primarily the inclusivity of Yosef's system, since such eclecticism often occurs in the history of Judaism. Magic persistently appears in Jewish thought, despite biblical prohibitions such as the one against being "an augur, a soothsayer, a diviner, a sorcerer, one who casts spells…" (JPS 414; *Deut* 18: 10-11) and the attempts of Maimonides and others to purge irrational elements from Judaism. In *The Jewish Alchemists*, Raphael Patai finds that although Maimonides "was a staunch opponent of alchemy" (300) a number of Jews, including rabbis, composed treatises on the topic. Gershom Scholem in his 1977 *Alchemy and Kabbalah* critiques attempts to unite these two systems, dismissing the resulting hybrids as "developments that run their course outside Judaism" (11);[5] *Burladora* dissolves the distinction that Scholem draws between ideas that belong within Jewish thought and those "outside Judaism." Yosef's borrowings from Asian thought (Muñiz-Huberman, *Burladora* 180) suggest a link to his twentieth-

century counterparts who sought commonalities between Judaism and Buddhism, such as Rodger Kamenetz in his *The Jew in the Lotus*: *A Poet's Rediscovery of Jewish Identity in Buddhist India* (1994).

The essential factor that makes the magus such a renegade in his use of "conceptos del judaísmo" (Muñiz-Huberman, *Burladora* 260) is his bypassing of the established routes whereby knowledge is created, authorized, and transmitted in Jewish communities. There is no indication where or with whom Yosef studied Kabbalah. Like the character himself, Yosef's knowledge appears to have materialized magically out of thin air. The sorcerer delves into Kabbalah, traditionally only approached by learned, married male Jews over forty, in collaboration with María, a young woman, and Elena/Eleno, of unknowable gender and age; none can claim a Jewish formation. Though they do not meet normal qualifications in their background and education, the trio proves highly successful in developing innovative interpretations of the *Zohar*.

The sorcerer's lack of credentials and strange teaching practices would in a more realistic narrative identify him as a charlatan, yet the third-person narrator is certain of Yosef's intellectual and spiritual soundness. The wizard anticipates the counterculture of the late 1960s and early 1970s with its rebellion against the cult of expertise. In Yosef's system, anyone may enjoy access to any source of spiritual enlightenment.

Yosef functions in *Burladora* as a link between the novel's themes of gender/sexuality and religion. He has scarcely appeared in the household of Elena/Eleno and María when he adds himself to their already indefinable sexual relationship. He simultaneously satisfies sexual desire and the thirst for spiritual illumination, the encounter culminating in one of the numerous moments of revelation in the fiction of Muñiz-Huberman: "contempla a Elena y a María que han enlazado sus cuerpos. Se enlaza con ellas y su orgasmo es el matrimonio de los metales y las piedras dando a luz el universo total" (257). Esoteric sex and mystical text interpretation become interconnected avenues to hidden knowledge.

During the time that Yosef lives with the couple, Elena/Eleno, María, and he gain the ability to carve out a magical queer space, to borrow from the title of Halberstam's 2005 *In a Queer Time and Space*, within a repressive society. In their household, the non-normative prevails as the lines between gender, ethnic, and religious categories are erased, and the trio samples, reinterprets, and creates a wide diversity of forms of knowledge, all of them forbidden in Inquisition Spain. Even Elena/Eleno's gender-changing cat participates in the ambiguity by "compartiendo con su ama la doble personalidad biológica y síquica" (Muñiz-Huberman, *Burladora* 309). This portion of *Burladora* is reminiscent of Halberstam's assertion that certain films about transgender subjects lend themselves to a viewing in which "the

transgender body represents a utopian vision of a world of subcultural possibilities" (*In a Queer Time* 96). In *Burladora*, the utopian vision relies not only on a transgender body, but also on all parties' willingness to forgo identities based on gender, sexual preference, or religion.

This idyll cannot last in Inquisition-era Spain, and a glimpse of a figure lurking around the windows foreshadows the end. The subsequent portion of the narrative follows Elena/Eleno rapidly through their apprehension by the Inquisition, their examination and trial, and their detention as a physician in a public hospital, from which Yosef's magic frees them.

The novel's last chapter is patterned on the epilogues, especially associated with nineteenth-century novels, that allow narrators to summarize the fates of the characters after the principal narrative has come to an end. In *La burladora de Toledo*, the narrator seizes the opportunity to layer yet more uncertainty over the already unreadable gender of the protagonist, giving two alternate paths that their life might have taken after fleeing Spain. In one, "su sexo se inclinó hacia la masculinidad" (Muñiz-Huberman 308); in narrating this possible masculinization, the narrator reflects: "El traje masculino ya no fue travestismo" (308). This remark suggests that Elena/Eleno might previously have been simply a cross-dressed woman rather than, as the novel has so far been suggesting, a person whose body can be either male or female. The narrator expresses boredom with the ending in which Elena/Eleno becomes a cisgender straight man; she prefers the idea that the protagonist lived out their days without allowing themselves to be confined to a gender identity.

La burladora de Toledo first catches readers' attention as the story of an individual who lives as both a woman and a man. Its successive episodes and the reflections of the narrator and protagonist are designed to make the main character's gender as undecipherable as possible. Although the narrator and characters frequently discuss Elena/Eleno's body, readers end up with almost no information that would allow them to categorize the protagonist's genitals or secondary sex characteristics. Indeed the narrator, speaking for both herself and Elena/Eleno, considers the classification of human beings meaningless: "Pero: si la naturaleza trae el desorden y lo a-normal, todo es normal, ¿no? Entonces, ¿para qué diferenciar? ¿Para qué distinguir?" (Muñiz-Huberman 103).

In approximately the third part of the novel the theme of religion becomes more prominent. By means of this shift in emphasis, *Burladora* broadens and further develops its central concern of escaping identity-based categories. Elena/Eleno, María, and the wizard create a previously unknown system that fuses Kabbalah, Jewish hermeneutics, gnosticism, alchemy, mystical sex, sorcery, and other elements. The characters' syncretism is not only taboo in a Spain under compulsory Catholicism, but

also queer in relation to established concepts of Jewishness. Elena/Eleno and their friends are able to enrich Kabbalah substantially without undergoing a basic Jewish education or meeting the known criteria for Jewish identity.

The narrator, Elena/Eleno, and the latter's friends all share a joyous appreciation for the main character's unknowable gender and the anarchic Jewishness that runs through the novel. In *Burladora*, hybridity is viewed as advantageous; female masculinity emboldens women to expand their range of activities, and Yosef Magus's unauthorized teaching leads to highly original interpretations. But beyond these benefits, the escape from identity-based categories, whether of gender or of religion, is shown as an inherently valuable phenomenon.

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NOTES

1 It should be noted that *Figurative Inquisitions* focuses upon such topics as torture, truth, and forced conversions, while the themes of this examination of *Burladora* are gender and religion.

2 The passage reads in full: "Queers are not just those who are different and reviled, queers are those whose difference is potentially resistant, subversive, and perhaps even liberatory. It [the positive use of the word "queer"] was supposed to name a space of difference that didn't just produce a new identity – homosexuals who are different from heterosexuals, gays who are different from straight – but might also allow us to remain in the space of difference itself, without being trapped in identity" (Jakobsen 81).

3 This explanation of Elena/Eleno's oscillations between genders corresponds to what Halberstam calls the "one-sex model" of sexual identity, "in which a woman was understood to be an inverted man … Within a one-sex model, then, a hermaphrodite is a woman who becomes male (sometimes a male who becomes female) when her womb drops down" (*Female Masculinity* 60).

4 Catalina de Erauso, also known by the sobriquet La Monja Alférez, was born in 1585 or 1592 in the Basque Country and later roamed through the Spanish New World colonies, where she died in 1650. This figure, born female, owes their fame to their adoption of multiple male names and men's attire and pursuit of a military career. However, since *Burladora* is based on the life of Elena/Eleno de Céspedes and deals with religious and ethnic categorization as well as gender, a more detailed inquiry into the life of Catalina de Erauso would lead beyond the scope of the present essay. Those interested in the latter's life may see a personal life account attributed to them, *Vida i sucesos de la Monja*

Alférez: autobiografía atribuida a doña Catalina de Erauso, ed. Rima de Vallbona (Tempe: Arizona State U Center for Latin American Studies, 1992). For a scholarly investigation of issues of gender and sexuality surrounding this figure, one may see Sherry M. Velasco, *The Lieutenant Nun: Transgenderism, Lesbian Desires, and Catalina de Erauso* (Austin: U of Texas P, 2000).

5 Scholem notes that many Kabbalistic alchemical treatises were the work of non-Jewish writers lacking a Jewish education. However, he views even Kabbalah-alchemy hybrids by Jewish authors as beyond the limits of Judaism properly speaking.

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