Dancing Pegadito: Queer Spanglish and the Narrative Possibilities of Julian Delgado Lopera's *Fiebre Tropical*

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In the opening lines of *Fiebre Tropical*, the captivatingly bilingual novel by Julian Delgado Lopera,[1] 15-year-old Francisca delivers a commanding and captivating voice that is familiar to Spanish speakers both in its intimacy and performativity. She announces: "Buenos Días, mi reina. Immigrant criolla here reporting desde los Miayamis from our ant-infested townhouse. The broken air conditioner about the TV, the flowery couch, La Tata half-drunk directing me in this holy radionovela brought to you by Female Sadness Incorporated" (1). Told from the point of view and voice of Francisca, *Fiebre Tropical* traces her loneliness upon what she terms her mother's "Migration Project" from Bogotá to a suburb of Miami she describes as brutally hot and swampy. Francisca styles her new home with what will become a characteristic biting wit throughout the novel, complete with a personification of the climate: "The heat is a stubborn bitch breathing its humid mouth on your every pore, reminding you this hell is inescapable, and in another language" (2). As Francisca attempts to find a way to adapt to life in a country she did not want to migrate to, she struggles with her family, composed of her younger sister, Lucia; grandmother, "La Tata"; and her overbearing Mami, Myriam; and their new social life, which revolves entirely around an Evangelical church. She also grapples with her attraction to women, in particular the Pastor's adopted daughter, Carmen. Of course, the irony of calling her new setting "hell" is that her social life now revolves around gaining entrance into heaven.

At the intersections of Colombian migration, Queer migration, Queer Latinx literature, and Latinx evangelicalism, with *Fiebre Tropical,* Delgado Lopera creates a new Latinx novel that shatters linguistic and narrative categories. In particular, Francisca's non-italicized Spanglish direct address and angsty teenage tone propel the narrative forward, creating a new queer migrant coming-of-age story with profound interventions in narrative bilingualism that incorporates everyday speech and queer performance.

As Delgado Lopera describes in their 2019 TED Talk "The Poetry of Everyday Speech," their writing was inspired by listening to the conversations at their Abuela's dining room on Saturday evenings, "at a table full of loud, unstoppable, women. My five aunts plus my mom's five aunts all smoking, some in their bras, some in their rulos, all complaining about the ineptitude of their husbands, or the rising prices at the grocery store."[2] This sonic quality of writing is perfected in Francisca's narration, using a mixture of sharp bilingual humor and sarcasm as a way to cope with a new daily life, her only stimulation from church functions. Moreover, Francisca's description of the church, in which she is forced to participate, demonstrates this linguistic dexterity as well as the emotional distress of her upheaval:

> This was the real church of Jesús, hermana. Straight from Miami, Florida: Iglesia Cristiana Jesucristo Redentor. A stinky room in the Hyatt Hotel nobody cared to vacuum. Because who needs Gothic churches; who needs divine architecture, angels dropping from the sky, a crucified Chuchito bleeding over His decayed muscular six-pack? Who needs a statue of the crying Madonna and Child when God is everywhere, including the windowless back room with the stained mustard carpet that a herd of

> pious colombianos got weekly – and for a discount – because Fulanito's son worked as a hotel assistant manager there?
>
> THIS IS A REAL CHURCH! GOD IS EVERYWHERE, SISTER! (30)

Within this brief passage, Francisca expresses her difficulty adapting to a life so different socially, religiously, and in climate than her previous life in Bogotá. It is humorous, of course, in its satire of the evangelical church and Colombian evangelical community in Miami, but this humor also masks her loneliness, discomfort within these religious spaces, as well as her form of grieving for the life she left behind. The use of terms like "Chuchito" and "Fulanito" suggest an imagined bilingual readership who would understand Chucho as a diminutive of the name "Jesus" and thus "Chuchito" as an irreverent nickname for the son of God. Francisca's linguistic performance of teen aloofness both serves to authenticate her as a new migrant from Bogotá, and thus "too Colombian" (7) in the eyes of their new church community, and it is a way to mask the full range of her emotions. In her quick wit, there is an emerging queer yearning that is not just sexual but also desirous of a place of belonging outside of heteronormative strictures.

In an interview with Brad Listi of Literary Hub, Delgado Lopera recalls their own youth growing up in Bogotá in an extremely religious Catholic family, and a post-parents' divorce teen migration to the USA with their younger sister and mother. Upon their own arrival to Miami, Delgado Lopera struggled with public school and learning English at 15, as well as the dissonance between the canonical white texts of the school and the vibrant language – Spanglish - of their life in Miami (Delgado Lopera "Spanglish"). However, added to this long appreciation for the sound of everyday language, Delgado Lopera adds a queer Latinx performative aspect. For example, Delgado Lopera has said of their unique voice, "My Writing Starts in Drag" (Listi). According to Delgado Lopera, this style of writing developed not only as a function of their bilingualism and migrant experience, but also their experiences within LGBTQ nightlife spaces where they were introduced to a Queer Spanglish and Queer Latinx slang along with a rhythmic aspect to their prose (Listi).

After Chávez and Luibhéid's work on queer and trans migration, I define "Queer" here as more than an elastic identity category. It is an "analytic rubric" that highlights nonnormative ways of writing, expression, and performance within Latinx literature. In *Fiebre Tropical,* queerness is much more than a sexual attraction; it is also a way to question heteronormative structures, gender roles, develop new forms of linguistic play and expression, and a way to provide differing perspectives and interpretations to a situation. As Juana Maria Rodriguez elaborates in her groundbreaking 2008 book, *Queer Latinidad:*

> "Queer" is not simply an umbrella term that encompasses lesbians, bisexuals, gay men, two-spirited people, and transsexuals; it is a challenge to constructions of heteronormativity. It need not subsume the particularities of these other definitions of identity; instead it creates an opportunity to call into question the systems of categorization that have served to define sexuality. There is already something 'queer' about categories such as lesbian or gay, 'inclusive disjunctures' that simultaneously employ speech and silences on sexual practice, desire, identification, anatomy, gender, community, and dare I say love. (24)

Likewise, in *Fiebre Tropical, "*Queer" is much more than a sexual orientation that the main character, Francisca, is grappling with. Rather, it is an orientation, a form of critique and analysis, a place of both queer speech and queer silence, and in the case of Delgado Lopera's writing, a linguistic intervention and method of narrative innovation. In fact, Francisca's queer

desire for Carmen, the daughter of the Pastor, is perhaps the least interesting and queer aspect of the novel. While Francisca's gender presentation and sexual desires remain fluid and undefined, her linguistic play and observations about her surroundings are firmly queer. In this way, Delgado Lopera's *Fiebre Tropical* is a profound and *loud* demand for visibility in both Queer and Latinx spaces, one that is not afraid to dress its narrative up in drag, center queer Spanglish, and invite readers to "dance pegadito with language" (Delgado Lopera "The Poetry").

This paper follows the linguistic interventions of Julian Delgado Lopera through the main character and narrator, Francisca, in order to uncover, activate, and celebrate the narrative possibilities and opportunities of a performative queer Spanglish presented in *Fiebre Tropical.* Centering the novel at the intersections of Queer Latinx literary studies, Queer migration studies, and the exponential growth of Latinx evangelicalism, I invoke a new space of Queer Latinx migrant futurity through Francisca's narrative voice and linguistic innovations. While Delgado Lopera does not shy away from addressing the often-embodied pain and oppression of strict heteronormative structures, they also suggest a future beyond these spaces. In Francisca's frequent direct address to the reader as "mi reina" and suggestions of "poses" that will be used later in life (12), Delgado Lopera suggests that future queer spaces of performance and creativity are on the horizon for Francisca, the author, and the field.

"Buenos Dias, Mi Reina": Re-thinking Queer Latinx Literature

In the now classic *Tropics of Desire* (2000), José Quiroga examined the invisibility of Queer Latinx in a variety of media, using the mask as a metaphor for exploring non-heteronormative sexuality in societies often hostile to homosexuality. Quiroga powerfully flips the idea of invisibility, exploring how Latinx authors, poets, filmmakers, and other producers of culture employ blurring, ambiguity, and indiscernibility as a conscious Queer praxis not based on the necessity of "coming out." Likewise, fellow Queer Latinx studies trailblazer José Estebán Muñoz describes "disidentifications" as acts that not only resist dominant ideology, but also represent, "a disempowered politics or positionality that has been rendered unthinkable by the dominant culture" (*Disidentification*s 31). Although *Fiebre Tropical's* narrative is indubitably queer via the linguistic interventions of Delgado Lopera, Francisca struggles with her queer desire and attraction to Carmen throughout the novel, especially within her context of undocumented Colombian migration and Latinx evangelicalism. Francisca's sharp wit and critical sarcasm recall the "disidentificatory" practice and form of critique that Muñoz highlights as *choteo* (to poke fun at). Thus, Julian Delgado Lopera's novel feels both familiar and innovative, building on histories of queer migrant of color experiences while creating a new language to narrate these contemporary and future stories.

Significantly, in recent years, Latinx Young Adult (YA) Literature has played a pivotal role in creating more nuanced queer characters, such as the novels of Aiden Thomas, including *Cemetery Boys*, Gabby Rivera's *Juliet Takes a Breath,* and Benjamin Alire Sáenz's *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe.* Likewise, Justin Torres' *We the Animals* (2012) demonstrated the possibilities of a Latinx Queer coming-of-age novel both in its storytelling and its linguistic innovations. Although *Fiebre Tropical* is not a YA book, the explosion of books published for young audiences, as well as the focus on young protagonists, has created a swath of new teen characters raised in a generation in which "Queer" has connotations that go beyond sexuality and gender, categories also thought of more fluidly. As

another teen character in conversation with this group, Francisca, represents not just a younger generation's questioning of categories but a creation of new language to describe their experiences that also include contemporary migration and religious beliefs. While Francisca was perhaps "cool" in Bogotá, her status in Miami as an undocumented, newly arrived non-English speaker migrant and nonbeliever in an Evangelical Colombian church marks her as an outsider in her new life in the US, sexuality aside. Nevertheless, it is also her queerness, her alternative perspective, and social and linguistic differences that help ground her amongst assimilative peer pressure.

Fiebre Tropical immediately announces itself as queer from its first words, and its continual direct address of the reader as "mi reina" draws attention to the performative nature of social interactions. In *Fiebre Tropical*, unlike many coming-of-age queer stories, while there is plenty of desire, there is no coming out or statement of gender questioning by our witty, sarcastic, aggrieved teen protagonist. I would argue, this is a specific narrative choice by Delgado Lopera. In *The Avowal of Difference: Queer Latino American Narratives,* Ben Sifuentes-Jáuregui discusses limitations of queer theory in the context of Latinx identities, interrogating the centrality of the "coming out" story as the main and thus flattening metaphor for queer identities. According to Sifuentes-Jáuregui, "the very refusal to claim and assume a 'gay' or 'lesbian' identity should not be simply read as a marker of indifference toward an identity that could be said has been 'imported' from the other side, but rather this refusal might be phrased more strongly as a postcolonial affront to the imposition of identities and categories that do not (cor)respond to the experiences and needs of a particular cultural context" (2). In *Fiebre Tropical,* the never mentioned categories of "gay" or "lesbian" do not fit the cultural context of Francisca's world, demonstrating a decision to write from within a localized space of a specifically Latinx queer desire and expression. In particular, Sifuentes-Jáuregui's focus on the body as a site of becoming offers a perspective on Francisca's and the novel's non-normativity and how silence can also be narrative and affective. As Sifuentes-Jáuregui argues, "open articulation of one's sexual identity is not necessarily the predominant practice to claim or express one's homosexuality. Rather, we find over and again that silence, insinuation, ellipsis, and other strategies result in more effective narratives and tropes to capture and represent Latino American queer identities" (199). Thus, the expression of Francisca's queerness is not solely based on a crush on a girl, but rather within her language, the way she narrates and understands familial stories, and in the corporeality of the characters (their hairiness, their sweatiness under Miami's oppressive humidity). In the pages that follow, I explore these queer literary interventions through the themes of migration, religion, and Colombian identity, themes that are not new to Latinx literature but which Delgado Lopera approaches in a unique way.

"The Migration Cause": Language, Performance and the Purgatory of Inauthenticity

In *Fiebre Tropical*, Delgado Lopera delivers a nuanced portrayal of the migration story of a family of three generations of Colombian women, providing an intimate look at the main character's struggle to find a sense of belonging amid the displacement of immigration, and the rigidly drawn roles and hierarchies of a born-again Christian household. For Francisca, adjusting to a new home, country, language, and religious community emphasizes her outsider status and, in many ways, heightens her queerness. From the first lines, Delgado Lopera immediately announces Francisca's irreverent, teenage, bilingual voice as well as the queer

state of her new immigrant condition. Returning to the opening scene and language of the novel:

> Buenos Días, mi reina. Immigrant criolla here reporting desde los Miayamis from our ant-infested townhouse…That morning as we unpacked the last of our bags, we'd found Tata's old radio. So the two of us practice our latest melodrama in the living room while on the TV Don Francisco saluted *el pueblo de Miami ¡damas y caballeros!* and Tata – at her age! – to Mami's exasperation and my delight, went girl crazy over his manly voice. Y como quien no quiere la cosa, Mami angrily turned off the stove, where La Tata had left the bacalao frying unattended, then Lysol-sprayed the countertops, smashing the dark trail of ants hustling some pancito for their colony behind the fridge. Girlfriend was pissed. She hadn't come to the U S of A to kill ants and smell like puto pescado, and how lovely would it have been if the housekeeper could have joined us on the plane? Then Mami could leave her to household duties and concentrate on the execution of this Migration Project. Pero, ¿aló? Is she the only person awake en esta berraca casa? (1)

Immediately, our intrepid narrator announces the queerness of her situation. She is an "immigrant criolla," indicating a more upper-class privileged background in Colombia, one confirmed by a reference to a housekeeper later in the passage. Their "Migration Project" has upended their social and economic situation in various ways, reducing them to an impoverished bug-infested apartment, full of varied female energy. Moreover, this "Migration project" is described as smelling of fish, fry oil, and Lysol with a range of female energies fit for the telenovelas Colombian television is famous for.

Much of this queer energy and tone to the opening of *Fiebre Tropical* relate to the circumstances of their migration. Francisca has gone from a private school life in Bogotá, where Mami was the manager of a multinational insurance company, to a struggling, new-born-again Christian migrant in Miami. The queer tragedy of this all is laid out piece by piece in the novel by Francisca, as well as through the herstories of Mami and grandmother Tata. In the past, these familial stories are full of unfulfilled desire, also known as "Female Sadness Incorporated." In the present, Myriam's struggles with depression and obsession with the evangelical church and the "Migration Project" are an attempt to get over a divorce. The grandmother's alcoholism is also a representation of her life's disappointments, including her own failed relationships and stifling of queer expressions. Nevertheless, as these opening lines also demonstrate, none of this is narrated as tragedy, but rather as tragicomedy. Francisca hates the "stubborn bitch" of a Miami heat because it reminds her not only that she is no longer in her hometown of cloudy, cool, and rainy Bogotá, but also that "this hell is inescapable, and in another language" (2). Both hilarious and quietly sad, *Fiebre Tropical* refuses to exoticize Latin America, translate for monolingual English speakers or those Spanish speakers unfamiliar with Colombian terms, and in doing so, it also avoids the biggest clichés in fiction about migrants.

That hell is "in another language" is particularly important both to Francisca's story and Delgado Lopera's linguistic innovation. It is more than a bilingual text or Francisca's outsider status in the church due to her limited English abilities. For Delgado Lopera, a bilingual text

is part of bringing authenticity to the migrant experience in her novel. According to Delgado Lopera:

> It's interesting because there is a big disconnect between the literary institution and what's happening on the ground. If you go to LA or New Mexico or New York or Miami, people are living in Spanglish. There's no theory about it. Everything is in Spanglish. People have molded the language and are living the language. It's very much a language that is discarded as less than because it's a mixture of both and so it lacks purity. And also because it's a language that's being spoken by immigrants so there are, again, xenophobic undertones…But the crazy thing is that the literary institution is not catching up to the way that people are actually speaking and existing. (Haas)

The living language that Delgado Lopera describes is "molded" to particular situations. Perhaps most striking about *Fiebre Tropical* is how the Spanglish frequently assumes a Colombian reader, perhaps even a "cachaco," a resident of Bogotá. As a bilingual Mexican American, I found myself consulting my Colombian husband on terms like "cachaco" that frequent the text, a term he immediately pinpointed as a Bogotá-ism (his family is from Medellín). While Francisca explores the spaces in between genders and sexual orientations, Delgado Lopera explores the spaces in between languages, not just English and Spanish, but the many different Spanglishes that exist in contemporary Latinx life. In other words, Francisca's particular brand of Spanglish is also part of her queer experience.

Returning to Francisca's perspective of Miami as "Hell," it becomes clear that for Francisca, purgatory is more than just a climate. It is the landscape of her mother Myriam's post-divorce vision of the American Dream, one that centers on a posthumous baptism for the son Myriam lost before Francisca was born. It is an American Dream/ Francisca's hell that requires complete allegiance and assimilation to La Iglesia Cristiana Jesucristo Redentor, a born-again evangelical Christian congregation that comes to define the family's new social life in Florida. Myriam's dream of Baptism--and through it a renewal and rebirth for her own life--is a nightmare for Francisca, who just wants "my girlfriends back home, cigarettes, and a good black eyeliner" (8). Their new life at Iglesia Cristiana Jesucristo Redentor is not just a poor fit for The Cure listening, gothic styled, cynical, gender and sexuality questioning Francisca, is felt as much in the mind as in the body. For Francisca, the inability to be herself is, "an infierno that crawled deep into your bones and burned its own fogata. A surreal heat that veiled everything, like looking through gas, all of it a mirage that never dissipated. A stove burning from within. I didn't want to admit it to myself or anyone, but I was pure Soledad Realness, pure loneliness eating at my core" (8). In other words, as the people all around her, including her mother and sister Lucia, all compete to be the most devout and best Christian, everyone is struggling with something hidden and shameful. Thus, watching this veil brings Francisca extreme isolation. Watching Myriam pop Zoloft pills to make it through church alongside Tata's rum habit leads her to conclude that the true hell of her new life is this disingenuity, a lack of authentic living. As her mother prepares for her dead brother's baptism, she dutifully accepts the yellow discount dress she is required to wear despite the dissociation this causes internally. Again, this is described as an embodied experience: "In my heart I knew the dissonance my body felt every time I wore a dress, a kind of stickiness. But my Mami's face is Mami's face, so I nonetheless removed my black shirt, my shorts, and right there in the living room, surrounded by all the porcelain bailarinas and their broken pinkies, I became once more a sad yellowing sunshine" (11). For Francisca, this is another instance of "Female Sadness Incorporated." The stickiness she highlights about Miami's unbearable climate is also the stickiness she feels when putting on the dress.

For Sifuentes-Jáuregui, the body is key to the construction of Latino American gender and sexual identities. He explains, "As we read gay, lesbian, queer, male-male relations in Latino American cultural contexts, we begin to see a complex and its unfolding. How does queer Latino subject formation happen as a differential of desires, practices, identities, and also contexts? These many facets contribute to queer Latino subject-formation intersectionally, yet asymmetrically. Furthermore, how we begin to unpack those sexual identities, and how we write a 'thick' description of them, signifies a new political story of queer Latinidad" (212). Here, Sifuentes-Jáuregui's observations provide a framework to understand how Francisca's queerness is put under strain in a migration context centered largely around evangelical confines of sexual identity and gender presentation. In this new life, her place in the family feels secure only as much as it lines up with a spirituality and an ambition for social climbing within the church that she does not share. However, as her connections to her former life in Bogotá slide farther and farther away, Francisca must resign and adapt to her new life in Miami, because as she puts it "this wasn't a Choose Your Own Migration multiple-choice adventure with (a), (b), and (c) laid out at the end of each page and you simply choose (b) stay in Bogotá you idiot. Cachaco, please" (8). Delgado Lopera's queer migration project, after all, is just getting started.

"The migration cause. The baptism cause": Latinx Evangelicalism and Queer Desire

As Francisca explains early in the novel, the key to "the migration project" is La Iglesia Cristiana Jesucristo Redentor. Her mother, who packed two jars of holy water on the flight, has abandoned Catholicism for an evangelical church in Miami that is to be the center of their new exciting (queue Francisca's "revered Colombian Female Sighing") lives (22). As Francisca explains, "I quickly figured out that there's a lot to being an aleluya daughter of Jesucristo and that attending church on Sundays was just the tiniest tip of the faith iceberg" (5). For Francisca, the introduction to the full scope of the iceberg is her dead brother's baptism, the son Myriam miscarried seventeen years ago and whose planned baptism is complete with color-coded to-do lists, professional black-clad "lloronas" (mourning at a cost of $15 an hour), and a party that would drain the family savings. In *Fiebre Tropical,* evangelicalism is deeply intertwined with migration as well as the grandmother's, mother's, and daughters' desires.

Significantly, while this new evangelical church in the novel becomes a comedic site of outlandish performance of devotion that highlights Francisca's outsider and queer (as in different) status amongst the faithful, it also becomes a place of assimilation and queer suppression. Consequently, it does not escape Delgado Lopera's queer linguistic treatment. As queerness seeps deep into the fibers of the narrative, queer Spanglish is also inseparable from the novel's dealings with religion and faith. This is clear immediately from Francisca's descriptions of the all-important baptism preparations. For example, when Mami returns from the discount store Ross with a used, beat-up Cabbage Patch Kid that will serve as her dead brother Sebastian's baptismal body surrogate, Francisca immediately observes the queerness of the scene:

> She placed the doll on her lap and, with great care, dressed the piece of plastic with the tiny pants, the tiny shirt, and the tiny black tie. The gender of the doll was questionable—equal amounts of blue and pink — and my insides chuckled thinking Mami was dressing a girl doll in boy drag. So much for that beloved son! I questioned his gender out loud, but she didn't care. She could have been dressing a giraffe – it was her lost baby and she loved him. (14)

Beyond the way queerness feeds Francisca's voice and guides her observations, this passage also points to a larger issue in the text: the way queerness exists in heteronormative spaces and the way heteronormative spaces often gaslight those who observe queerness. As Francisca reflects immediately after baby Sebastian is pulled out of the Ross bag, "Why ask her? Why ask her when you already knew the answer? Nevertheless, there was an urgency inside me to have this crazy Jesucristo roller-coaster ride echoed back to me so that I knew I wasn't losing my shit. So that I didn't doubt my own reality" (14). Clearly, Francisca isn't losing her mind, but she is losing her mother and sense of family. As Myriam becomes more and more enveloped in the church, she becomes unrecognizable to her daughter, who "didn't know how to reach that part of Mami, how to get past the faith wall" (78).

The combination of skepticism, longing for Bogotá, pain over the growing distance from her mother, and queer perspective are expertly drawn by Delgado Lopera when Francisca provides a full introduction to the "Fiebre Tropical" that is the church in chapter three. Here, Francisca frames the church as a drag ball in her mind, during which she describes the strangeness of this new space and the sense of disorientation it brings her. She opens, "Category is: My first time at the evangelical Colombian church inside the Hyatt Hotel. Only the holiest, most respectable panela people walk this category" (29) after which she describes with ethnographic detail her new landscape. The "Holy Trinity" is El Pastor, La Pastora, and their adopted daughter Carmen. Coming from a Catholic background, the scene of this new church, housed in "a stinky room in the Hyatt Hotel no one cared to vacuum" (30), is perplexing. But rather than directly comment on this difference, Francisca's sarcastic tone does the work of demonstrating her distance and discomfort:

> The goal here, as I understood that day, is to be the most Christian, the most Chosen, the most Holy. And to be honest, it was a hard call. Everything counts. Everyone has eyes and ears, everyone is watching and hearing. Even the children with their perfectly gelled hair, ironed shirts and crayons, even *they* will judge you. The next youth leader, the next pastor could be you! The competition is always on and any slight gesture can send you speaking in tongues, eating with the Pastores, or cleaning the bathroom. You decide, hermana. (32)

Although Francisca's memories of her Catholic church school weekly masses clearly indicate her mixed feelings about organized religion, the intensity and fervor of this new space is clearly shocking to her. In a space where the goal is to be "the most Christian, the most Chosen, the most Holy" (32) as judged by appearance, fainting, and aleluyas, she wants to make clear she is an observer, not a participant. "Because I'm such a considerate narrator, and we're about to enter the peso pesado butthole of Christianity – the forgotten corner where culty blind devotion to Jesucristo meets merengue, bachata, and arroz con pollo – Imma walk you through the first day" (31). Between the "pesado butthole of Christianity" and invocation of a cult, Francisca's judgment of a place that is all about judgment is clear. Moreover, it is a place that makes her physically sick as her embodied queerness physically rejects this emphasis on heteronormative religious conformity. Somewhere after "The Fainting Team" (36) and the entrance of the "shekinas" - "an army of angelic hippies led by one girl waving a gold flag with an enormous gold fish necklace dangling from her neck" (37), Francisca begins to feel nauseous. As she listens to the judgements of "the invisible shady bitch perched on my shoulder" (38), she ends up in the bathroom, vomiting her entire breakfast into the toilet.

Francisca is judging this new church and her family's enthusiasm for it, just as they are judging her. For Francisca, though, her judgment is a form of self-protection as she knows

acceptance for her in this church and with her family would require change in ways she is unsure are possible. As she reflects about the shekinas, "they were dead serious about their dance, their love for Jesus. They knew this to be true, you could see it in their faces. I had none of this. What were they feeling that I couldn't feel?" (38). Thus, Francisca's ability to hold multiple truths, to question her own aversion, is another aspect of her embodied queerness. It is also apparent in the way in which she grieves the loss of her life, with both the visceral messiness of her vomiting and grace of a granddaughter who covers up Tata's public drunkenness so her family is not judged harshly. Still, to watch her mother be enthralled with this new world and faith, for Francisca, is to be rootless: "I'd known a matriarchy rooted in that cultural Colombian Catholicism that said no to Satanás but yes to sin. *El peca y reza empata* or *La puntica no más.* But here we didn't walk on solid ground" (37). Consequently, the rootlessness Francisca feels as a migrant is further heightened by the changes in her family and religious life. She feels a deep shame while hearing her mother give testimony of her past life as a sinner, fainting into the usher's arms after being filled with the Holy Ghost, but is also drawn to Carmen's hypnotic preaching abilities (45). The sensational drama drawn by Delgado Lopera via the combination of sweat, fainting, vomiting, singing in tongues, Spanish Christian rock, the stinky room, the Miami humidity, all while we as readers sit with Francisca, overwhelmed by this landscape, is the queer brilliance of this novel.

Delgado Lopera's novel not only finds itself on the pulse of queer Spanglish linguistic interventions, but also trends in Latinx religiosity. According to the Pew Research Center, 15% of Evangelicals are Latinxs as Catholicism continues to decline, from 67% in 2010 to 43% in 2022.[3] This makes Latinxs the fastest-growing group of evangelicals in the US (Winter), a growth that is fueled by poor, female migrants.[4] Moreover, Latinx may be gravitating toward Protestant churches because they're more likely than at Catholic churches to find Latinx pastors they identify with, as less than 10 percent of Catholic priests are Latinx, while a 2019 study of Latinx Protestant churches found that 80 percent of Latinx Protestant church founders are first-generation immigrants (Winter). Thus, while Francisca's family may not fit the entirety of new Latinx evangelicals in the US due to their prior socio-economic status in Bogotá, their impoverished migration status and desire to join a Latinx-led, Colombian migrant specific church in their new Miami home reflects a contemporary religious reality.[5] In other words, Francisca's context as queer, formerly middle class, physically, spiritually, and relationally uprooted, are key to her responses to this new religious environment, in addition to their tragi-comedic narrative value.

As Francisca hides in the bathroom during her dead brother's baptism, she starts to accept that this evangelical, humid Miami is the new context of her life. While in the bathroom, she fantasizes about calling her father, who she knows won't answer, or her friends back in Colombia, who she knows have moved on: "I sat on the toilet, phone in my hand for twenty, thirty, sixty minutes until I understood there was no one outside Miami, nobody who would come for me. As Mami said, Esta es our new vida, Francisca. Look around, this is your home now" (58). As a result, despite her initial outlook on the church, when she meets Carmen, La Pastora's adopted daughter, her judgment starts to lessen. Her attraction toward Carmen is immediate:

> When she entered, everyone fell silent. Wilson's face lit up in a shy smile. He stepped back slowly, opening his palms as a way of saying *The Stage is all Yours.* The lead angelic hippie in that sheer gown with the huge golden fish around her neck like an advertisement for a sad aquarium. She looked different up close, smaller, pimply. With

> a terrifying energy and a command of a space like she could pull a string and any of these sheep would bow and move. I felt everyone's reverence including the two shady bitches behind me, who transformed into smiley, kind girls the moment Carmen saluted the eleven-person crowd with a *¡DIOS LOS BENDIGA MUCHACHOS!* (44).

Significantly, Francisca is not drawn to Carmen because of her physical perfection, but rather because of the intensity of her faith, and her charisma as a youth leader. As Francisca concludes their first meeting, "Girl's a preacher. A hypnotic one… *Okay reinita,* I thought, *you have my attention"* (45). Here again, Delgado Lopera's use of a queer lens as a way of connecting and evaluating Carmen's performance is key. Francisca is drawn to Carmen because of her performance – a performance she views through the lens of a drag competition, hence the "reinita" – because Carmen's performance has been rated the strongest.

As Francisca develops feelings for Carmen, her relationship to the church changes. Almost immediately, Carmen makes Francisca her personal salvation project, dragging her to church events and outreach efforts. Soon they are spending a lot of time alone - on their drives to the Walmart where they hand out flyers, poking fun at congregation members during their whispered nighttime prayers – leading to a deeper relationship. Through her developing relationship with Carmen, she begins to feel a sense of belonging and contentment for the first time, as well as have romantic visions of a future with Carmen. Her relationship with evangelical Christianity and her desire for "salvation" grow alongside her desire for Carmen. They are intertwined:

> I'm horny and scared. I try thinking about boys sitting on my lap instead of Carmen. Wilson, Pablito (I went there), my cousins, Camilo, Arturo, every boy at church, every boy hanging by the pool, every boy I know. I'm stroking buzzed heads, flat chests, penetrating them… Five minutes and their dicks disappear and I'm braiding Carmen's hair again, hair spraying it, gold necklaces between her breasts, her deep voice praying over me, and before I know it I'm praying too, before I know it I'm thanking Jesús, then regretting everything and asking for forgiveness over and over until the condom deflates from all the touching and Lucía knocks on the bathroom door. (116)

While Francisca disinterestedly described sexual encounters with "two boyfriends" in her past life in Bogotá (9), as well as expressed her repulsion of gender norms in clothing (11), her attraction to Carmen is unexpected to her, due to gender, the intensity of her sexual desire, and burgeoning religiosity. Again, she eschews gender norms, imagining herself as the penetrator when she tries to replace her object of desire with boys instead of Carmen. Importantly, Francisca's attraction to Carmen is often based on non-traditionally feminine aspects of Carmen: her deep voice, her hairiness. Delgado Lopera highlights this choice: The fact "That Francisca is attracted to someone like Carmen, who has greasy hair and a little mustache, you know, she doesn't seem to be bothered by all these beauty standards that are so ingrained in the culture. Part of the attraction to Carmen is because she represented many things that are undesirable in a woman and are undesirable in a girl, but she doesn't seem to be bothered by it" (Haas). It is through this disruption of heteronormativity on various levels of writing and desire that make this novel so stunning, both linguistically and thematically. Her desire for Carmen and Jesús is intertwined and queer. As Sifuentes-Jáuregui explains, "In other words, the practices of sexuality do not necessarily eventuate into the same sexual identities—in fact, they may be different. Conversely, sexual identity labels do not connote the same series of practices. Uncovering how these sexual and queer practices get narrated and silenced allows us to understand how circuits of desire produce subjects differently" (3). Extrapolating from

Sifuentes-Jáuregui, Francisca's queer desires and queer linguistic play do not necessarily relate to a sexual identity, nor does her sexual identity alone dictate her queerness. If anything, Francisca's queerness comes from these in-between places, from the silence of what cannot be said in her family, from the rigidity of church beliefs, and even from within the few places of privacy in her new life, such as the bathroom.

As Francisca becomes more involved in the church, both her physical and emotional closeness to Carmen serve as a lifeline, which is both a source of comfort and fear. As she imagines a physically intimate relationship with Carmen, she struggles to contain her desire: "Yes, reinita, but you're not the motherfucking criolla scared shitless of losing the one relationship that at fifteen brings you enough joy to ignore the hell outside" (174). Significantly, it is through physical touch that Carmen brings Francisca fully into the church. When Carmen takes Francisca on an evangelizing mission during which they get soaked in a tropical downpour, they return to Carmen's home, and Carmen insists on undressing Francisca. While taking off her shirt, Carmen inadvertently catches Francisca's earring, ripping it out and causing the ear to bleed. Then Carmen takes Francisca's bleeding earlobe into her mouth. The scene is a *fiebre tropical* – they are hot, sweaty and smelly from having handed out flyers in Miami's insufferable humidity, and they are also wet from the downpour and bloody from the ripped-out earring. The scene is a mixture of fluids, intimacy and sexual desire. Francisca describes, "…I didn't want Carmen to stop but I had no idea exactly how my earlobe tasted or if I'd washed my earlobe that morning or if Carmen would turn around disgusted. Her teeth barely touch my skin and I couldn't make out the form of her tongue, just its waves of water. Not sure how long this lasted. Maybe real-life thirty seconds, maybe a minute, maybe it was eternal" (123). Moments after Carmen releases the ear to inspect the wound, Francisca announces her acceptance of Jesús. It is interlaced with her desire for Carmen: "And so I give in. I don't want to. But maybe, I do. I do" (156).

This pronouncement draws the two young women even closer: Francisca moves from salvation project to best friend and in their frequent sleepovers, Carmen opens up about her feelings about adoption, her sexual history (she is not a virgin!), and her dreams to be a Pastora and have her own church in the future, which forces Francisca to think about her own "career path as Christian woman" (163). Eventually, Francisca makes a move, caressing Carmen's thigh as she drives her home. When Carmen does not stop her, she thinks, "I know somewhere inside this car there's hope for us" (175). Unfortunately, this hope is short-lived. Soon after, Carmen goes to Bogotá with the Pastora for several months, and when she returns to Miami she is much changed. Francisca barely recognizes her – Carmen has been turned into the vision of ideal Colombian womanhood. Her hair is straightened and has highlights, she's most likely had plastic surgery on her breasts and nose, and her body is hairless. "Carmen wasn't there," Francisca describes. "She wasn't inside that policed body, that smooth brown skin with plucked eyebrows and that perfected flipping of hair that didn't belong to my Carmen. My skin had opened up waiting for her and she didn't show up. Who is this. How do we zip Carmen out of that costume" (278). Again, the choice of language is specific and powerful – Carmen's body has been "policed" and placed into a costume in which all her queerness and rejection of Colombia's standards of hairless feminine beauty are gone.[6]

The irony, of course, is that during Carmen's absence, Francisca had been cosplaying heternormativity by getting together with Wilson, a former admirer of Carmen's. In this way, all three of them are playing an identity that is not authentic – Francisca as the heteronormative girlfriend of Wilson, who actually desires Carmen, and Carmen as unrecognizable beauty

queen. In observing this new costumed Carmen, "*toda una reina. Reinita de Dios"* (279), Francisca yet again invokes the comparison of religion to drag, highlighting its performative aspects, while she evokes the Virgin Mary alongside her lover. In *Sexual Futures, Queer Gestures, and Other Latina Longings,* Juana María Rodríguez investigates the importance of queer gesture as something that insists and persists, emphasizing the political agency of sexual practices: what happens when bodies touch each other in a demonstration of love and care, or alternatively when they refuse to touch because of homophobic fear of the other. Francisca gives this new Carmen a distant hug: "I wish she'd never come back so I could still have her" (279).

"Cachaco, Please": Queer Colombianidad as Family Story and Migrant Future

Fiebre Tropical is much more than a story of teen angst and queer sexuality; it is a matrilineal story of coming of age as a Colombian woman. Adding depth to Francisca's story, Delgado Lopera departs from Francisca's point of view twice, for chapters exploring her mother and grandmother and their adolescences. The placement of these chapters is critical. While her mother's story is inserted between chapters that deal with Carmen's sucking of Francisca's bloody earlobe and her acceptance of Jesús Cristo as her savior, her grandmother's is inserted during Carmen's absence and after Wilson and Francisca become a couple, despite both desiring Carmen. Although there seems to be deep rifts between these three women – the "faith wall" between Francisca and her mother, the alcoholism of her grandmother – these three are deeply connected by their love for each other and their adjustments to life's disappointments. Despite Francisca's wry cynicism and sarcastic tone, she lovingly cares for both Mami and Tata, covering up Tata's alcoholism and tending to her hangovers so as not to agitate her mother's already struggling mental health: "I silently cared for her so Mami's Migration Project could continue" (166). Moreover, these familial stories and the silences they uncover are connected to a queer female Colombianidad felt in the body in *Fiebre Tropical*, made known as the all-powerful "revered Colombian Female Sighing" (22) that was collected as part of "the larger collective Female Sadness jar to which we all contributed" (17). Simultaneously sad and melodramatic, by including Mami and Tata's own personal histories relating to gender and queer desire, Delgado Lopera reflects on the power of "forbidden stories' discussed by Sifuentes-Jáuregui. As he writes, "I am trying to link two secrets or forbidden stories—one speaking about loss of home and the other of queer potentiality—and in both cases propose that what they have in common is a form of protest against certain practices that patriarchy has over the lives of women" (220). For these women, the search for home and queer potentiality are intimately linked.

In the "collective female sadness" of Francisca, her mother Myriam, and her grandmother Tata, Delgado Lopera highlights the way heteronormative patriarchy limits queer potentiality. In the story of Francisca's mother, we learn of her long-standing desire for social status and social climbing, and the effects of that ambition. Tata's contribution to the familial female sadness jar, subtitled "La Muñeca Brings All the Boys to the Bar" was a direct result of refusing multiple rich suitors in 1950s Colombia at age fifteen, experimenting with gender roles and traditional appearance, and the indication that La Tata may also have struggled with same-sex desire, one she repressed for the sake of familial harmony. For both women, their queerness and the sadness that results represent an inability to articulate their yearnings, to live as their authentic selves, as well as a general lack of control over their lives. Although in

Francisca's case, the logic is more circular than linear between her queer desire and faith — she embraces religion because of her desire for Carmen, despite the obvious conflict between those sexual feelings and church doctrine — the narrative throughline remains. Female sadness for the women of this family is the result of sublimated desire across generations, often within the context of religion. As Sifuentes-Jáuregui clarifies, "the avowal of (cultural) difference delivers us a more nuanced understanding of queer Latino subjects—their forbidden desires and pleasures" (230). In other words, understanding Francisca's familial, cultural, and religious history illuminates her messy desire and faith-filled journey in the narrative's present.

As Francisca climbs the church hierarchy, she is forced to decide if she's going to make similar choices as her mother and grandmother by subjugating her queerness or if she will make a different future. In buttressing these stories of her mother and grandmother amidst her highest and lowest points in the church – her acceptance of Jesús Cristo in front of Carmen after the earlobe sucking and Carmen's departure to Bogotá after the leg caressing – Delgado Lopera both adds nuance to the context of Francisca's life but also heightens what is at stake: her future queerness. In the late José Esteban Muñoz's provocative text*, Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity,* Muñoz suggests that our preoccupation with liveness and the presentness of performance also means that we are trapped in the here and now, a "straight time." According to Muñoz, "Straight time tells us that there is no future but the here and now of our everyday life" (*Cruising Utopia* 22). As Muñoz argues, this straight time makes something else, a different queer future, unrealizable, unthinkable at all.

Julian Delgado Lopera is clearly engaged in queer future, linguistically, creatively and even narratively for our young heroine. Although *Fiebre Tropical* begins and ends with Francisca at fifteen and with no pronouncements about her sexuality, gender, or future, Delgado Lopera repeatedly indicates that there is hope for our young heroine and it is decidedly queer. While written in the present tense, the novel frequently gestures in future tense: "A pose I will use over and over again throughout my life" (13); "… many months from now – La Tata will step out into the streets en cuera, como Diosito la trajo al mundo." The novel is littered with "wills" suggesting a queer future is reflecting on this time period. In this way, Delgado Lopera continually contradicts the "straight time" imposed on Francisca, and the traditional coming-of-age novel itself, suggesting the performance of new social possibilities through narrative as a way of laying claim to this queer futurity. After physically rejecting this new, straightened Carmen, Francisca imagines leaving Florida and then finds herself poolside with Andrea, an older girl from the same apartment complex. Sensing Francisca's emotional state, Andrea silently attempts to comfort her. These are the last two lines of the novel: "We stayed like that for what seemed like hours, then she rolled toward me, pulling me to her, letting all her warmth cover me like a blanket. She kissed the back of my neck and I pretended that I wasn't crying" (281). Through *Fiebre Tropical,* Julian Delgado Lopera demonstrates that if we attune ourselves to the "*Avowal of Difference"* of Queer Latinidad we may find that the linguistic play in drag, the performative "cachaco" bilingualism, the queered observations, sticky sensations and messy desires, the silences, the gestures, and the touches are what chart a path to a queer migrant Latinx futurity full of utopian desire.

Notes

[1] *Fiebre Tropical* was originally published under the name Juliana Delgado Lopera, who now uses Julian (he/they), and the authorship has been updated in the book's third edition to Julian. I am citing from the first 2020 version.
[2] https://www.ted.com/talks/juliana_delgado_lopera_the_poetry_of_everyday_speech
[3] https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2023/04/13/among-u-s-latinos-catholicism-continues-to-decline-but-is-still-the-largest-faith/
[4] https://www.pewresearch.org/religious-landscape-study/database/religious-tradition/evangelical-protestant/racial-and-ethnic-composition/latino/
[5] For a deeper dive into Latino Evangelicalism and Latinx religious studies see Felipe Hinojosa's *Latino Mennonites: Civil Rights, Faith, and Evangelical Culture* (2014).
[6] According to Delgado Lopera, "Colombians have a very class-based society and there is so much around hair, with women specifically. In Bogotá there are hair salons everywhere you go, everybody gets everything waxed, you don't see people with curly hair, everybody has their hair straightened. You don't see any hairy women; everybody waxes everything. Everything. It's a huge deal. Huge. Just an example, the first time I went back to my house from San Francisco with armpit hair my mother sat me down on the toilet and was like, 'wait right here,' while she heated up the wax and waxed my armpits, right there. 'Raise your arm,' and I was like, 'No.' But she insisted so I did. I also wanted to get at the invisible ways that women hold their bodies, you know? Hair is something that's always present, it's just that people, usually women, are hiding it in all these different ways. that's the same as the way we desire someone or don't desire someone" (Haas).

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