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Convertirse en Inmortal, 成仙 Chéngxiān,  
Becoming Xian: Memory and Subjectivity in  
Cristina Rivera Garza's Verde Shanghai

Katherine Paulette Elizabeth Crouch

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CONVERTIRSE EN INMORTAL, 成仙 CHÉNGXIĀN, BECOMING XIAN: MEMORY  
AND SUBJECTIVITY IN CRISTINA RIVERA GARZA'S *VERDE SHANGHAI*

by

Katherine Paulette Elizabeth Crouch

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Accepted by:

Mercedes López-Rodríguez, Director of Thesis

Jie Guo, Reader

Cheryl L. Addy, Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

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## DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to Will, Mary, Anne, and Matthew.

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## ABSTRACT

*Verde Shanghai*, published in 2011 by Cristina Rivera Garza, is often used in discussions of Orientalism in Latina America and Mexico. The text employs tropes and stereotypes common in Orientalist thinking, but to label the work Orientalist and analyze it through that lens seems too simplistic. I argue that *Verde Shanghai* ultimately proves a refutation of Orientalism's existence within Mexico, and, more broadly, an overall deconstruction of the East-West dichotomy. Rivera Garza appears more interested in using racial and cultural identities to dismantle the polar dichotomies in which her characters live, ultimately critiquing these frameworks in the outside world.

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## INTRODUCTION

Marina Espinosa, the protagonist from Cristina Rivera Garza's *Verde Shanghai*, appears to transition from death to life in an endless cycle. She develops a second self as a teenager after running away from home. Her alter ego, Xian, largely remains forgotten by Marina until she suffers a car accident as an adult. Suddenly, Xian reappears in her life, leading Marina in a downward spiral through the fragile boundaries between memory and forgetting, reality and unreality, and the self and the other. The three main female characters of Rivera Garza's work: Marina Espinosa, Xian, and later, Julia O Bradaigh, each represent different points on the spectrum of East and West. These women ultimately present the implausibility of the East-West dichotomy of Orientalist thought. *Verde Shanghai* demonstrates the frailty of the world's frameworks, and how identities, as products of these frameworks, too easily crumble under the trauma of living.

## READING VERDE SHANGHAI

*Verde Shanghai* proves a non-traditional text to read. Written as a continuation of Rivera Garza's *La guerra no importa*, this text expands on characters and themes, offering a metatextual discussion on authorship and reality. Marina's state of mind phases in and out of flashbacks, presently occurring events, and existential ponderings, often simultaneously or shifting without warning. Through a first reading, this text may prove difficult to interpret. To facilitate the reader, I have decided to order this essay according to themes, rather than interpreting it through its own chronological order.

Marina proves a largely passive character. She spends much of her time daydreaming while looking out a window. Her glances outside windows reflect her division between an internal self and an external self.

Additionally, in order to avoid confusion, I refer to the main character by the name she has been given in each passage. In some cases, her name and identity are not confirmed in the scene, especially as the narrative continues and Marina and Xian merge together until they are rarely distinguishable. If this is the case, I may simply refer to her as “the protagonist” or a similar variation, since her identity seems fluid in later parts of the novel. Identity is fragile; based on memories and the interpretation of bodies.

#### ORIENTALISM IN MEXICO

Edward Said indicates the fiction of the “West” and the “East.” Said writes that, “The Orient was almost a European invention, and had been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences” (Said 1), a statement which almost perfectly encapsulates Marina’s imagining of Xian, but, as I argue, Marina’s standpoint differs from European Orientalism in several important ways. According to Said, the “West” makes itself an expert studying the “East,” a position soon exacerbated by European imperialism (Said 3). As hemispheric concepts, Said emphasizes that the conception of East and West embody not just ideas, but entire systems of power. As Europeans envisioned the “East,” their discourse justified invasion and colonialism. Said writes that, “The relationship between Occident and Orient is a relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of a complex hegemony . . . it [the Orient] could be - that is, submitted to being - made Oriental” (Said

5-6). For Said, his concern deals not only with stereotypes themselves, but, more importantly, with the power that the discourse entails.

Said emphasizes the power structure in this way, “Orientalism therefore is not an airy European fantasy about the Orient, but a created body of theory and practice . . . an accepted grid for filtering through the Orient into Western consciousness” (Said 6). As an object of research, the “Orient” remains passive, observed without resistance. As the researching subject, the “Occident” transforms into an active agent, making declarations about the Other without consent (Said 54). The East exists *on behalf* of the West (Said 158), to define the West when the West can find no definition of its own. In other words, the East does not speak for itself, but gives voice to the West, the West’s desires and dreams.

In *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays*, Said makes clear that though theories travel from one part of the world to another, these ideologies do not remain unchanged, but evolve due to circumstances (Said 436). Even so, while tropes about the East were created by and transmitted by the West into Latin America, a difficulty lies within assessing Orientalism in a Latin American framework. Latin America has received forms of Orientalism from two main places: firstly, Spain, the colonizers of Latin America, whose Orientalism stemmed from their long-running relationship with the Muslim and Middle-Eastern world (Tinajero 27 and Kushigian 5); and secondly, another Orientalist discourse came from its northern neighbor, the United States (Mendieta 76).

Additionally, Eduardo Mendieta points out that Latin America was used as a tool in the rise of the Occident(76). As a “failed Occidentalism,” Latin America does not quite form

part of the Occident, itself, as the region cannot “adequately” imitate the Occident (Mendieta 77). In this thesis, the East primarily refers to East Asia and China.

Mendieta uses a term, “latinoamericanismo” to describe views of the East in Latin America. Mendieta writes that the most recent form of latinoamericanismo possesses “a double critique: of orientalism in the ways in which Latin America, itself, has been Orientalized, and of occidentalism, in the ways in which it has been the scapegoat for the homogenization of America as Western”.<sup>1</sup> We see here a sense of frustration in this sort of dichotomizing discourse. Latin America, as a less-developed region (due in large part, no doubt, to the drain of resources from European colonization) fails to fit within the Western discourse of superiority and advancement. Nonetheless, as the United States seeks to homogenize the rest of the continent as properly “Western,” the northern neighbor is met with resistance. As a region of former colonies of canonically Western powers, Latin America fits neither within “Eastern” or “Western” categories, according to Mendieta.

That being said, while Mexico may use tropes and imagery taken from Western orientalism, these stereotypical signifiers are just that, signifiers. Although Mendieta’s framework aides in understanding the origin of stereotypical tropes, his term “latinoamericanismo” does not appear distinct enough to discuss the role, if any, or orientalism in Latin America. Laura Torres-Rodriguez has put forth a more apt term. She uses the term *extimidad* (ex-timacy) to describe the relationships between the East and Latin America (22). Torres-Rodriguez writes that, “an intimate exteriority. Thus, what

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<sup>1</sup> “una crítica doble: del orientalismo, en la medida en que lo latinoamericano mismo se ha orientalizado, y del occidentalismo, en la medida ha sido el chivo expiatorio para la homogeneización de América como Occidente” Mendieta, Eduardo. pp. 81

Please note: When official English translations were unavailable, translations from Spanish to English were made by the author of this thesis, who shall take responsibility for any inaccuracies or misinterpretations.

has been imagined as a maritime border, a limit in the thought of the inside and the outside . . . soon achieves in materializing itself as an invaginated margin, a doubleness towards the inside, a surprising continuity, a link”<sup>2</sup>. This sentiment is also echoed by Kushigian, who claims the “East” as a point of reference and identity for Latin America.

Published in 2011, *Verde Shanghai* is often used in discussions of Orientalism in Latin America, particularly Mexico. The text employs tropes and stereotypes common to Orientalist thinking, but to label the work Orientalist and analyze it through that lens seems overly simplistic. I argue that *Verde Shanghai* ultimately proves a refutation of Orientalism and a denial of the East-West dichotomy. River Garza seems more interested in the overarching impossibility of existence within the narrow frameworks of culture, race, and ethnicity. This text deals with the impossibility of truth and existence itself. The concepts of racial and cultural identities are used as tools to examine a sense of reality based on a socially-produced paradigm. In lieu of orientalist discourse, I briefly outline the following instances of racial and cultural stereotypes which are used as a backdrop for reality and unreality.

In describing Marina and Xian’s first husband, Chiang Wei, Marina reflects that he possessed “an unusual beauty, and at the same time, his effort to erase the orientalism of his features tainted him . . . It couldn’t be avoided; neither one of them had the luxury of forgetting themselves. They needed each other . . . Chiang, it was becoming obvious, was not a product of her imagination. The touch of his fingers on her back was real, soft,

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<sup>2</sup> “una *exterioridad íntima*. Así, lo que se ha imaginado como una frontera marítima, un límite en el pensamiento entre el adentro y el afuera . . . consigue materializarse de pronto como un margen *invaginado*, un doblez hacia adentro, una abismante continuidad, un ligazón” Torres-Rodríguez, 23

perhaps healing”.<sup>3</sup> According to doña Aída, the café owner’s wife, Chiang Wei is a Chinese-Mexican to whom Marina and Xian were betrothed in an arranged marriage. Noted here is this narrative trope of modern-day arranged marriages. Chiang Wei helps Marina on her journey, but he also seeks his own past. His path mirrors Marina’s in many ways: they both have spouses whom they abandon in a search to understand their displacement. His otherness is used not to contrast Marina’s Mexicanness, but as a link to their sameness, which echoes Kushigian’s and Torres-Rodriguez’s sense of transpacific discourse in Mexico. Chiang is somewhat stereotyped as exotic, yet his knowledge of anti-Asian history in Mexico gives him his own sense of agency. He is not only observed but, he, too, observes Marina and her neurotic tendencies.

In the Gran Ciudad, Marina feels Xian’s presence leading her forward. El callejón de Dolores, the passageway of pains, is the Chinese neighborhood, or *barrio chino*, of the Gran Ciudad. Internally, she senses, “Her name, that other face of absence, guided her like a seeing-eye dog over slippery sidewalks and the streets of her city . . . trying to seduce destiny with haste”.<sup>4</sup> Xian haunts Marina, like a ghost from her past and a potential key to her future. The fantasy of Xian propels Marina to attempt to escape her past, but this fantasy is as falsely-constructed as Marina’s own identity.

Thinking back on her memories, Marina encounters Xian at the Verde Shanghai, a café which has been open for decades, situated as a primary location of cultural exchange between East Asian immigrants and Mexican citizens. Marina’s first memories of the

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<sup>3</sup> “belleza inusual y, a la vez, su evidente afán por borrar el orientalismo de sus rasgos lo enturbiaba . . . No podía olvidarlo; ninguno de los dos podía darse el lujo de olvidarse. Se necesitaban . . . Chiang, resultaba obvio, no era un producto de su imaginación. El tacto de sus dedos sobre el dorso de su mano era real, suave, acaso curativo”. Ibid.. 154

<sup>4</sup> “Su nombre, esa otra cara de su ausencia, la guiaba como un lazarillo sobre las banquetas resbalosas y las calles de su ciudad . . . tratando de seducir al destino con velocidad” Ibid.. pp. 89

café, Verde Shanghai, occurred with one of her friends. The owner greets them with funny-sounding words that they cannot understand. “Usually arrived there after searching for, without success, edible opium that a foreign writer had described in some novel. So they read that. Foreign novels. Everything around was sickness. Epidemics. Pain. They couldn’t see the country . . . any other way”.<sup>5</sup> The barrio chino is the space of Marina’s origin. Here we see several descriptions of the Chinese community that fall into certain stereotypes: the comical language spoken by the Chinese restaurant owner, the search for opium in the Callejón de Dolores, the China town, and the fear of disease from the East Asian immigrants. The girls enter the Eastern world through literature, echoed later by Marina’s discoveries through encyclopedias.

In describing the neighborhood, Rivera Garza writes, “The Passageway of Pains. The Passageway of Life . . . A century before, few would have imagined that men and women with slanting eyes would come to dominate a couple of blocks of the historical center with their scent of jasmine and boiled rice. The woman passed under the arch at the entrance of the neighborhood and, turning to all sides, started her secret search. Her own harassment of the past”.<sup>6</sup> Marina looks for herself in the histories of others. As she learns about East Asian immigration in Mexico and Mexican xenophobia, she begins to understand Xian more concretely as another possible self.

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<sup>5</sup> “Usualmente llegaban ahí después de buscar, siempre sin éxito, los comederos de opio que un escritor extranjero describiera en alguna novela. Eso leían entonces. Novelas extranjeras. Todo era enfermedad a su alrededor. Epidemias. Daño. No podían ver al país . . . de otra manera”. Ibid. 69-70.

<sup>6</sup> “El Callejón de Dolores. El Callejón de la Vida. Un siglo atrás, mucho antes de que llegaran los chinos a asentarse en este punto de la ciudad . . . Un siglo atrás, pocos se habrían imaginado que hombres y mujeres de ojos rasgados llegarían a dominar un par de cuadras del centro histórico con su olor a jazmín y arroz hervido. La mujer paso bajo la arcada que daba acceso al barrio y, volteando hacia todos lados, inicio su cacería secreta. Su propio acoso del pasado” Ibid. 88-89.

When Aída informs Marina of her arranged marriage to Chiang, she hands her “a silk fan in whose center was pictured a peach tree surrounded by white birds”,<sup>7</sup> a token of Xian’s immortal state. Ford Company asserts the xian powers of transformation, particularly their ability to become birds (46-49). Marina can grasp only small details of the past as she tries to reassert her own voice in her narrative. Marina writes her stories down in an attempt to right the wrongs of *La guerra no importa*.

At Verde Shanghai, Marina asks to speak with Joel, the immigrant owner of the café. The waitress takes her to the back, “a labyrinth of narrow corridors, half-lit by incandescent lamps and candles”.<sup>8</sup> When she first meets doña Aída, Joel’s wife and Chiang Wei’s godmother, “The old woman was stretched out on a red and gold quilted bed. Silk drapes fell over one of the walls with voluptuousness that tended toward theatric. On the dresser near the walls there were pearl-backed brushes, small crystal boxes, cosmetics, and bottles of perfume with intricate names”.<sup>9</sup> When Marina takes the old woman’s hand, she sees “a sapphire ring where a wedding ring should have been. Red on all sides. Imperial red. It was the red of living blood, pulsing through veins . . . The garnet red of an owl’s eyes, who beats its wings, unable to fly . . . When Marina raised her gaze and found the angled eyes of the woman she realized that she was entering a far-off story, a mistaken story. The mistake seduced her”.<sup>10</sup> Being mistaken

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<sup>7</sup> “La contaminación me mata – explicó la mujer. Luego le ofreció un abanico de seda en cuyo centro se dibujaba un árbol de duraznos rodeado de aves blancas” Ibid. 94-95.

<sup>8</sup> “un laberinto de pasillos estrechos, a medias iluminados por lámparas incandescentes y velas”. Ibid. 91.

<sup>9</sup> “La anciana estaba tendida sobre un lecho cubierto de colchas color rojo y dorado. Los cortinajes de seda caían sobre una de las paredes con una voluptuosidad que se antojaba teatral. Sobre la cómoda que cercaba una de las paredes había cepillos con tapas de nácar, pequeñas cajitas de cristal, cosméticos, y botellas de perfume de nombres intrincados” Ibid. 91-92.

<sup>10</sup> “un anillo de zafiros donde debió haber estado la argolla matrimonial. Rojo en todos lados. Rojo imperial. No era el rojo de la sangre viva, latiendo dentro de las venas, sino otro mas profundo, quemado acaso. Estático. El rojo de una cicatriz que no se cuidó bien. El rojo de la sangre seca. El rojo granate de los ojos de la lechuza que batía las alas sin poder volar . . . Las uñas de perfecto manicura francés le pertenecían a

and unknown allow Marina to escape her life and her past. Being mistaken as Other permit her to explore a world of memories that do not, on the surface, belong to her. By exploring another heritage, Marina seeks another kind of identity which comes into being through a different kind of pain than her own. Marina's pain stems from her bizarre and tense relationship with Cristobal, whose obsession with death lead to her own fixation on the abyss.

Marina's episode with Aída presents a trope of an elderly Asian woman presenting the non-Asian protagonist with their fate and fortune. The lavish and exotic background presents a space of unreality. I would argue that though Aída's back room dows fall into several stereotypes, its presentation deals more with the ethereal realm between reality and unreality than merely an orientalist space.

The racial and cultural stereotypes within *Verde Shanghai* do not imply Marina's power over Xian as a "West" over an "East," not only because Mexico does not correspond to a supposed canonical West, but also because Marina's ideas of China deal purely with the escapism of fantasy, not an exertion of the power of domination. The stereotyped depictions of East Asians in Mexico ultimately allow a subversive reading of Orientalism. Orientalism, at least as described by Said, does not exist within Mexico.

As Said writes, "the Orientalist [ie, the Westerner] can imitate the Orient without the opposite being true" (160). As the Orient is composed of mere signifiers and images, *of course* the Westerner can take these traits onto themselves; a Westerner can "become" Eastern, but an "Easterner" can never truly erase their Otherness and enter the West as an equal subject. According to Said, one of the ways in which the Westerner exerts his

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una aristócrata venida a menos. Cuando Marina alzó la vista y encontró los ojos oblicuos de la mujer se dio cuenta de que estaba entrando a una historia ajena, a una historia equivocada. El error la sedujo" Ibid. 93-94.

power over the East is by appropriating the East onto his own person. The Westerner can “become” an “Oriental”, not only becoming an acceptable substitute for an Easterner, but as many Hollywood films demonstrate, due to a supposedly inherent superiority, the Westerner can become the best “Oriental possible (see *The Last Samurai* (2003), *The Great Wall* (2017), etc). The Westerner can “improve” the Eastern culture, take it on, and master its arts and culture better than any Easterner before him.

Marina’s difference from these Eurocentric narrative tropes lies in her clandestine *failure* to achieve this transformation. Marina imagines this idealized Chinese persona, an immortal Xian, but she fails in her quest to xianhood. This unachievable goal proves not only the failure of Marina’s quest, but also of Orientalism itself.

Although Marina dreams of becoming Xian, an eternally young and idealized vision of Eastern and exotic beauty, this kind of immortality proves impossible and fruitless. Additionally, the introduction of Julia, an Irish woman from Marina’s past, brings the three women together and calls to question the poles of East and West. Each woman’s narrative ends in tragedy, as the conceptions of their identity prove frail. Xian cannot truly exist within Marina’s world, but neither can Julia, or even Marina, herself.

Since Marina is the one researching and appropriating Chinese culture and history, at first glance it may appear as though she acts as a “Western” actor. Upon a closer reading, however, a reader can see that Xian is also very interested in Marina’s life. Xian, too, has some agency, and while her observation of Marina does not rely on interpreting Marina’s Mexicanness as when Marina interprets Xian’s Chineseness, the two appear on largely equal footing in terms of power. Additionally, Marina does not use

her ideas to hold power over Xian. Xian's Chineseness and "Easternness" act as a foil of fantasy and escape for Marina.

Kushigian writes that, "Hispanic Orientalism seeks to approach the Orient, the Other, not in a spirit of confrontation, but rather in what may appear to be a need to preserve one's own identity . . . through a process of leaving the familiar and secure, in which the Other advances an emotional and intellectual detachment that leads to an awareness of the self" (2). Araceli Tinajero also concedes since a periphery of the West, Latin America, can analyze a separate periphery the "East," the dichotomy becomes increasingly complex (20-21). In other words, with its own status uncertain in a binary world, perhaps Latin America "needs" to explore the "East" in order to understand its own position in opposition to the canonical "West."

Said's sense of orientalism greatly relies on constructs of power. As such, orientalism does not exist in Mexico, per say. Mexico is not a colonial power. Mexico does not seek to colonize others, either externally or internally. Mexico is a formerly colonized power. As Torres-Rodriguez writes, "Mexican orientalism does not operate like a simple imitation of the European geohistorical configuration" (29). She also contends that this imaginary does not easily transcribe to images of the "East" within Mexico, citing that Mexico's need to understand the "Orient" arises out of a need to comprehend the complexities of globalization (38-39).

While this text has traditionally been considered a seminal work on orientalism in Mexico, I argue that although *Verde Shanghai* employs and stereotypes of the "East," the text should not be considered Orientalist as such. While stereotypes about Asia abound within Mexico, they do not carry the same connotations of power and superiority that

they might in the canonical West. One might say these caricatures are stereotypical, even prejudiced, but the term “orientalist” seems too far-reaching a phrase. Mexican ideas of the “East” do not speak on a Mexican sense of superiority or right to conquest, as orientalist portrayals often do in the canonical West.

Conceptions of the “East” within Mexico appear as mere fantasy. While the language and stereotypes are derived from traditional orientalism, they do not carry the weight of power therein. Marina, Xian, and Julia can do little to prevent their fates. Julia tries to kill Cristóbal Saldivar, an elderly political radical from Marina’s past, and she fails. Marina tries to escape her memories of Cristóbal and she fails. Xian tries to escape Marina and she fails.

To a learner or speaker of the Mandarin Chinese language, the romanization of character, place, and conceptual names may appear confusing at first. The narration uses several different kinds of Romanized transliteration of Chinese words. *Pinyin*, the standard present-day romanization of Mandarin Chinese appears with names like “Xian.” *Wade-Giles* romanization, which was used in much of the Mandarin-speaking world until the rise of pinyin, can be seen in “Chiang” (pinyin: Jiang) of Chiang Wei, the Chinese husband of Marina/Xian.

On second glance, however, there lies some historical truth in this non-standard spelling of Chinese characters’ names. Through immigration into many non-Chinese speaking countries, public officials did not speak any Chinese language, so many immigrants received different kinds of romanization during different immigration waves. Oftentimes, even members of the same family can receive different surnames upon entry to a new country. Moreover, many Chinese immigrants came from disparate regions,

wherein they speak completely alternate dialects, which also contributes to a great variation of Romanizing practices.

In many European languages, words with similar pronunciation or spelling may share a linguistic family tree. For example, evidence and vision both share a family history that deals with seeing. In a language like Mandarin, however, the connection does not lie in the Romanized spelling of pronunciation in the same way that it may in European languages.

“Xian” as it is spelled in the text may be pronounced a variety of ways in Mandarin. *Pinyin* is the standard Romanized form of pronunciation in Mandarin Chinese in Mainland China, but Xian’s name does not exhibit any tonal marks. Mandarin boasts four main tones, along with a fifth, neutral tone. As the conventional example, the Romanized pronunciation “ma”, can be pronounced five ways: mā 妈 (mother), mà 骂 (to scold), mǎ 马 (horse), má 麻 (hemp) and ma 吗 (question particle). Although some of these share a morphed component of 马 mǎ (horse), they do not share any relation to the *meaning* of the component; after all, it remains unacceptable in most cultures to compare one’s mother to livestock. So, in Mandarin Chinese, *Xian* may be pronounced xiān, xián, xiǎn, xiàn, etc. The narrator posits several different meanings of Xian’s name as Marina researches her alter ego.

*Western peace.* The first cited, Xi’an 西安 (xī ān) (literally, “west peace”) references the city famous for its terra cotta army and connection to the Silk Road. Marina reads from an encyclopedia that, “situated in the fertile valleys between the Wei and Yellow rivers, a place traditionally known as the ‘cradle of Chinese civilization’ . . . Xi’an was the capital of China for various dynasties . . . In 1368 the Ming dynasty’s

leader rebaptized the city with the name *Xi'an, which means western peace*".<sup>11</sup> In this way, the name appears mystical, ancient, and deeply spiritual. As Marina lies to sleep, she thinks, "she had to admit that in that era, in that park under the rain, she had been, in effect, a city full of soldiers. The war and the power all around".<sup>12</sup> Marina's identification with this Chinese city falls into some stereotypes about ancient China. Again, while her adoption of this trope may seem purely oriental, orientalism deals with power structure. This depiction appears stereotypical of the "East," but not necessarily orientalist.

To a reader who does not speak Chinese, the spelling of *Xian* could refer to the city. The pronunciation of the city of Xi'an, however, is two separate syllables, which is made clear by the apostrophe between the two vowels. The pinyin of *Xian* would be pronounced as one syllable, and could be pronounced with any tone since the tone is not specified. This makes any interpretation of Xian's name additionally difficult, since dozens of Chinese words could share those four Roman letters in their pronunciation. Additionally, in Chinese culture, each child is given a name with characters that embody their parents hopes for them. A name like 西安 (*xī ān*) would seem a strange choice of a name for a young girl, and though not an impossible choice, this sort of name would be very unlikely.

Marina invites Mujer Mayor in for a midday drink, wanting a confidant. Marina states, "I don't know how to start.' The triviality of daily tragedies: a stutter, a hesitation, that. She tried to many more times. All without much luck . . . Julia, she had said. Julia O

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<sup>11</sup> "situada entre los valles fértiles de los ríos Wei y Amarillo, un lugar tradicionalmente conocido como la <cuna de la civilización china> . . . Xi'an fue la capital de China durante varias dinastías . . . La dinastía Han que le siguió también estableció su capital cerca de Xi'an, llamándola Chang'an, o paz eterna . . . En 1368 el líder de la dinastía Ming la rebautizó con el nombre *Xi'an, que significa paz occidental*" Rivera Garza 53.

<sup>12</sup> "tuvo que admitir que en aquella época, en aquel parque bajo la lluvia, ella había sido, en efecto, una ciudad llena de soldados. La guerra y el poder alrededor" Ibid. 54.

Bradaigh, in a very low voice. A robin inside of a high-walled room, she said. She mentioned the book of lies [*La guerra no importa*] . . . She mentioned the crazy woman from the park [Ángeles] and the name of Xian”.<sup>13</sup> Mujer Mayor tells her about the 八仙 bā xiān, and 何仙姑 Hé Xiān Gū. Throughout the novel, the appearance of peaches references He Xian Gu’s story. Marina is constantly hungry and rarely eats, as part of her journey to becoming an immortal like Xian.

Marina reads about this Daoist mythology, finding that, “The celestial immortals live in Daoist heaven or in the Peng-lai islands, located in the eastern sea or the Kun-lun mountains, toward the west. The second category is composed of earthly immortals that live in mountains or forests. The last category of immortals consists of those people who have separated from their own deceased body”.<sup>14</sup> Marina appears most interested in the process of 尸解 shījiě (shown in the book as *shijie*(50)), in which mortals leave their lives behind (Ford Company 1). Among the Bāxiān 八仙, the eight immortals, she chooses the only female one, Hé Xiāngū 何仙姑, who remains forever single. Marina romanticizes this type of xianhood as untethered to human connection, a solitude and a silence that she craves. The great importance of the xian lies in their deathlessness (Ford Company 40).

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<sup>13</sup> “No sé cómo comenzar. La nimiedad de las tragedias cotidianas: un tartamudeo, una vacilación, esto. Lo intento varias veces más. Todas sin gran éxito. Todas a una prisa que hacia presentir un caso de demencia prematura o un delirio de persecución sin remedio. Julia, había dicho. Julia O Bradaigh, dijo en voz muy baja. Un petirrojo entro de una habitación de paredes muy altas. Mencionó el libro de mentiras . . . Mencionó a la loca del parque y el nombre de Xian” Ibid. 58-59.

<sup>14</sup> “Los inmortales celestes viven en el cielo taoísta o en las islas Peng-lai, localizadas en el mar de este o en las montañas Kun-lun, hacia el oeste. La segunda categoría está compuesta por los inmortales terrestres que viven en las montañas o en los bosques. La ultima categoría de inmortales la conforman quienes se han separado de su propio cuerpo muerto” Ibid. 59.

Marina wonders about her split self, “For entire days she doubted it . . . Split personality, for example. Hysterical repression. The rupture of the self . . . the woman convinced herself that what she had was mental, maybe a result of boredom, maybe of nostalgia . . . Xian looked younger than her, more modern, more attractive”.<sup>15</sup> As an immortal, Xian remains forever young and beautiful. She may have aged from a teenager to a young woman, but Xian will never reach the lows of Marina’s existence. Xian’s difference from Marina reflects her otherworldliness, and thusly inimitable like the xian described by Ford Campany (19).

仙 (xiān) comes from Daoist mythology and its god-stories (神话 shēnhuà), and the narrator also includes the common thread in these god-stories that a mortal can transform into one of these celestials through good deeds or enlightenment. While not cited in pinyin in the novel, this process is called 成仙(chéngxiān), and this process frames the entire narrative as Marina hopes to shed her dull, modern life and become forever young and free. Robert Ford Campany writes that, “Transcendence was a deathless state, but it was also (normally) a celestial status . . . Practitioners engaged in gradual ascetic disciplines . . . to thwart death in two parallel ways: by purifying and divinizing their biospiritual organisms so that mortal elements were removed, and by extricating their social identities from a celestial system” (xiv). According to Said, the East remains in a closed system, forever unchanging (Said 108). An “Oriental” can never quite be a human being (Said 108), as Said writes, “as human material the Orient is less important than as an element in a Romantic redemptive project” (154).

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<sup>15</sup> “Dudó. Por días enteros lo dudó . . . Desdoblamiento de personalidad, por ejemplo. Represión histérica. Escritura . . . la mujer se convencía que lo suyo era mental, resultado tal vez del aburrimiento, tal vez de la nostalgia . . . Xian se veía más joven que ella, más moderna, más atractiva” Ibid. 87.

I would like to note that the author's research of 西安 (xī ān) and 仙 (xiān) do exhibit some accuracy in a historical sense. Although the two concepts are deeply exoticized, the author obviously did a good amount of research into these two ideas. The stories of xianhood and transcendence primarily deal with the shedding of mortal life. Xian can transcend by following a specific diet or abstaining from food altogether. As beings from another plane of existence, they need not worry over worldly problems or questions of reality. Marina seems to idealize this xianhood as a path to transcend the confines of reality and memory. She wants to erase her humanity, her body, *shijie*, as it were, to escape her mortal prison on earth. Thus, Marina appears like a dead woman living. Her passivity bespeaks an overall unwillingness to continue living as herself. The gradual reconstruction of her traumatic memories leads to a deconstruction of her identity, and a rejection of all the constraints of selfhood and reality.

CHAPTER 1  
TRAUMA AND MEMORY

Marina's emptiness stems from her sense of death and its place in her life. Marina yearns to transcend herself, her body, and her memories. She longs to be made new. Death, nothingness, forgetting, and silence are both Marina's origin and her constant fear. This chapter begins with the description of sky blue, "I come from the end of love, Horacio. I come from a dead woman".<sup>16</sup> *Verde Shanghai* begins its narrative after Marina's car crash that left Marina with a broken arm and an occasion reevaluates her life. Abandoning her husband, Horacio, Marina stays at a hotel in the Gran Ciudad. From the hospital, to the hotel, to the streets of the city, she uncovers clues to the alternate version of herself, even as she struggles to avoid confronting the memories of her past. Marina even fears the echoes of her own voice.

Midway through *Verde Shanghai*, Marina dialogues with a female writer, to whom I will refer as la escritora for simplicity's sake. La escritora asks Marina about her life, to start at the beginning. The text relays Marina's fixation on Julia's death, "*Julia, Julia, Julia, in sleep Julia. Julia, Julia, Julia, in death Julia . . . 'If there were a beginning . . . If it were simple to find the beginnings'".*<sup>17</sup> For Marina, Julia, *La guerra no importa*, Julia, and her baptism into the name Xian are her beginnings. Marina goes quiet and Rivera Garza writes, "But who is speaking inside this coffin?"<sup>18</sup> The question here of the dead's voice within the coffin demonstrate not only the uncertainty of the voice's owner, but also the intrinsic relationship between death and the voice itself. Whoever speaks must speak from the grave. As with the Daoist immortals, their story only begins at death of their mortal self.

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<sup>16</sup> "Vengo del fin del amor, Horacio. Vengo de una muerta" Ibid. 62.

<sup>17</sup> "Ojalá pudiera decirte como era Julia . . . *Julia, Julia, Julia, en el sueño Julia. Julia, Julia, Julia, en la muerte Julia . . . Si hubiera principio . . . Si fuera sencillo encontrar los principios*" Ibid. 133.

<sup>18</sup> "¿Pero quién habla dentro de este ataúd?" Ibid. 134.

As la escritora falls asleep, the image of Julia suddenly enters the room. It seems unclear whether this is a hallucination. Rivera Garza writes that, “It was in that moment that the image of Julia burst in the room. As always, as was her custom, she had come late. The redhead smiled at her from the balcony and, with trivial gestures, approached the bed. Before she sat by her side, she covered her body up to her chin. ‘You should take better care of yourself,’ she advised her . . . ‘Julia,’ murmured Marina . . . ‘Julia, I need to see your tomb’”.<sup>19</sup> Julia possibly covers up her body in order to mask its brokenness from her fall to death. Marina repeats her need to see Julia’s tomb throughout the narrative. This need for finality and closure speaks to Marina’s desire to close away the past and prevent it from seeping into the present.

Marina thinks of what she must have told la escritora about Julia. “Julia was an immigrant. Julia didn’t have a home. Julia went this way, and later, that way. Julia came from far away, like the light on cloudy days. Julia did not come from love”.<sup>20</sup> Similarly to Marina’s origin of death, Julia comes from a lack of love. Like He Xiang, Julia never marries. Her death evokes her freedom Frustrated with her reflection in the mirror, Marina thinks, “In that moment she had to accept that she didn’t really know why she had come there and not to the other side . . . Everything had already happened once before, that is true. During the first days that she was there, she tried to know why . . . to speak

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<sup>19</sup> “Fue en ese momento que la imagen de Julia irrumpió en la habitación. Como siempre, como era su costumbre, había llegado tarde. La pelirroja le sonrió desde el balcón y, con gestos intrascendentes, se aproximó a su cama. Antes de sentarse a su lado, cubrió su cuerpo hasta la barbilla. ‘Deberías cuidarte mejor’ le aconsejó. Julia – murmuró Marina, sonriéndole sin ganas. Tenía tantas cosas que decirle, tantas preguntas por hacerle . . . – Julia, necesito ver tu tumba –” Ibid. 134-135

<sup>20</sup> “Julia era inmigrante. Julia no tenía casa. Julia pasaba por aquí y, luego, por allá. Julia me encontró. Julia venía de lejos, como la luz en los días nublados. Julia no venía del amor. Julia, ¿te dije que Mulia murió? No sabía que habían hecho después o antes. Lo único que sobrevivió de aquella noche, lo que se quedó con ella a pesar del tiempo, fue de hecho ese súbito regocijo provocado por las certezas de su intuición. La escritora nunca los supo. De hecho, Marina se acababa de enterar en ese momento” Ibid. 135.

with doña Aída to know if reality continued to exist”.<sup>21</sup> As Marina unravels, so does her sense of reality. Memory roots reality and the self; and in evading her memories, Marina avoids herself. Julia remains tied to Marina’s trauma.

While visiting Rodrigo Salas, a liaison of Cristóbal, she hands him a copy of *La guerra no importa*, and Rodrigo says that he only read it because it had to do with her, Cristóbal, and Julia. Marina says it’s only true “In the way that a story based on dark conversations and told by some distant person could be about me or about anyone else”.<sup>22</sup> For the first time since the accident, Rodrigo calls her by her original name instead of Xian. Marina explains her need to re-write the story written by tla escritora, saying, “There is no truth. There is no origin. It’s just that I would like to know my version of the facts”<sup>23</sup>. Marina’s propensity for writing speaks of her desire for power over her own story. Marina’s external author impedes Marina’s agency and Marina feels frustrated by her inability to create a past for herself different from what she has experienced.

Rodrigo remembers when he first saw Julia and Marina. Rivera Garza writes, “The scarlet covered laughter almost didn’t let him distinguish their facial features. They pursued each other. They were two teenagers playing at feeling momentum. Feeling. Over their heads, the owl that was trying to fly. Beneath their feet, the axe that cuts everything”.<sup>24</sup> Here we see Julia and Marina’s close relationship, and they appear almost

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<sup>21</sup> “En ese momento tuvo que aceptar que no sabía en realidad por qué había llegado ahí y no a otro lado . . . Tal vez todo eso no era más que un invento de su vanidad . . . Todo ha ocurrido ya una vez antes, eso es cierto. Durante los primeros días que estuvo ahí trató de saber por qué . . . para hablar con doña Aída para saber si seguía existiendo la realidad” Ibid. 136.

<sup>22</sup> “De la manera en que una historia basada en conversaciones oscuras y contada por alguien ajeno puede ser sobre mi o sobre cualquier otra persona” Ibid. 139.

<sup>23</sup> “No hay verdad. No hay origen. Es solo que quisiera saber mi versión de los hechos” Ibid. 140.

<sup>24</sup> “Por un momento las vio a las dos, corriendo sobre una banqueta cobijadas por la luz húmeda de una mañana de verano. Las risas color escarlata casi no lo dejaban distinguir los rasgos de los rostros. Se perseguían. Eran dos adolescentes jugando a sentir la velocidad. A sentir Sobre sus cabezas, la lechuza que intentaba volar. Bajo sus pies, el hacha que todo lo corta” Ibid. 141.

indistinguishable. Again, the owl reappears, an allusion to the birds associated with Chinese immortals. Importantly, the owl only attempts to fly, but the impending doom of the axe will surely cut its flight short. Like Xian, Julia entered into the narrative when Marina was a teenager.

In considering the role of Antigone in the realm of the dead, Rivera Garza writes that, “That task belonged to others, to people with time and want to lose time and want. Men of melancholies like willows and laconic temperaments. Women with emptiness inside their words. Their world could be squalid, but it was, after all, real, foreseeable . . . *Antigone*. If someone deserved that name it was Julia, the woman that, with all certainty, was descending to the earth in those moments to love them, to pity them, to them both [Rodrigo and Marina]. Her dead”.<sup>25</sup> Julia’s death led to her immortality. Marina seeks this transcendence through Xian. As Rodrigo and Marina both look outside the window, “The light of midday seemed to come from another time and alight two people that, at one time, had been themselves”.<sup>26</sup> This disconnect occurs multiple times throughout the text, most frequently juxtaposed with windows. Like an imperfect mirror, windows can reflect only a gaze outward, but not a gaze inward. Staring out windows, Marina cannot hope to discover herself. Unless, of course, she externalizes herself into another entity, or two, watching their lives unfold from the outside.

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<sup>25</sup> “Esa tarea le correspondía a otros, a gente con tiempo y ganas para perder el tiempo y las ganas. Hombres de melancolías como sauces y lacónicos temperamentos. Mujeres con vacíos dentro de las palabras. Su mundo podía ser escuálido pero era, después de todo, real, previsible aun en su desorden, hermético. No quería cambiarlo. No quería, estaba seguro, pero la tentación lo miró con sus ojos bizcos y le sacó la lengua. *Antígona*. Si alguien merecía ese nombre era Julia, la mujer que con toda seguridad estaba descendiendo a la tierra en esos momentos para amarlos, o para compadecerlos, a ellos dos. Sus muertos” Ibid. 143.

<sup>26</sup> “La luz del mediodía parecía venir de otro tiempo y alumbrar a dos personas que, alguna vez, habían sido ellos mismos” Ibid. 143.

Chiang takes Marina to Xian's childhood San Francisco house, somehow transporting her to the American city while seeming to stay within the Gran Ciudad in Mexico. Chiang tells her about when he met her as an infant, saying "Your face was beneath the blankets, you without laughter or any expression. I suppose that's how it is for all the recently-born".<sup>27</sup> Again, even Chiang seems to recognize the cycle of rebirth in Marina. Once she learns of her parallel life as Xian, a possibility emerges of transcending her past and her pain.

In Marina's writings, the narrator, assumedly Marina, speaks with an old blond and fat man, Cristóbal. "I've already gotten rid of everything," the narrator informs him.<sup>28</sup> This action refers to the destruction of some letters from Cristóbal's children. The erasure of the past proves essential not only for Cristóbal but also for Marina. She has learned this behavior from her teen years during her relationship with the old man.

As he finishes reading, Chiang asks Marina if she is the narrator. She tells him, "No . . . Maybe, Chiang. Maybe only in the way that some like that could be anyone. This fiction.' She pointed to her body".<sup>29</sup> Memory gives birth to the fiction of the body. Unlike other constructs, which point to the body as the basis for identity, *Verde Shanghai* asserts the revers. Marina can only become Xian by learning about the past of Chinese Mexicans. Marina is only Marina because her shell of a body contains Marina's memories, or better said, because the memories themselves *created* Marina. Without them, Marina does not exist.

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<sup>27</sup> "Abajo de las mantas estaba tu rostro, tu, sin risa ni expresión. Supongo que así son todos los recién nacidos" Ibid. 148.

<sup>28</sup> "Ya me deshice de todo" Ibid. 152.

<sup>29</sup> "No . . . Tal vez sí, Chiang. Tal vez sólo en la medida en que algo así puede ser cualquiera. Esta ficción. Se señaló el cuerpo" Ibid. 153.

The Marina in her writings tells Cristóbal, “It’s so easy, after all, to invent stories for someone that is lost or abandoned, and you come to find one casual or premeditated with time”<sup>30</sup>. Interestingly, the phrases “se pierde” and “se abandona” could be translated either to the passive “lost and abandoned”, as above, or to “loses themselves and abandons themselves.” Marina’s loss of self proves wholly intentional. Her past is too painful to carry with her, so she attempts to rid herself of the unwieldy trappings forced on her by destiny.

She sees Cristóbal’s image in the brim of the floor, “A look from the abyss. Cristóbal stays facing the open window. He seems like another statue, beautiful and lost, forgotten in another old room of the city. The people that stop by the open window stop, in reality, time. Now Cristóbal just became a figure in my collection of my statues squandered for art, only valued by my silence and my vision”.<sup>31</sup> Marina’s fixation with statues parallels her obsession with Daoist immortality. The statues, terrestrial, physical, tangible, only decay and lose their essence over time. Like the human shells they represent, statues are mortal in a sense. An ethereal immortal, like Xian or the haunting Julia, can never die, not truly, at least not in Marina’s eyes.

Marina has several statues in her life. In the second chapter, she sees several doves roosting on statues (32). She imagines her husband as a statue after he picks her up from the airport (66), her mother as a statue made of white stone (78), Cristóbal as a statue peering out from the abyss (156), Chiang Wei (177), and even her

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<sup>30</sup> “Es tan fácil después de todo inventarle historias a alguien o inventarle historias a alguien que se pierde, o se abandona, y se vuelve a encontrar uno casual o premeditadamente con el tiempo” Ibid. 155.

<sup>31</sup> “Mirada desde el abismo. Cristóbal sigue frente a la ventana abierta. Parece otra estatua, bella y perdida, olvidada en otro viejo cuarto de la ciudad. Las personas que se detienen frente a una ventana abierta detienen en realidad el tiempo. Cristóbal se acaba de convertir ahora en otra figura de mi colección de estatuas desperdiciadas por el arte, solo valoradas por mi silencio y mi visión” Ibid. 156.

own statue (156). She sees golden statues line streets (189). She sees a statue of a young woman with her name, waiting at the cathedral for Cristóbal (192).

After Aída informs her of her Chinese family's past, Marina runs from the café to the Central Park, "Towards there came, little by little, a distressed face of an iron statue that continued dragging, skimming the ground with enchained wrists".<sup>32</sup> She sees the statues rust (210). Towards the end of their journey, she and Chiang, transition from semi-permanent statues to moving back into reality (212). Marina wonders about Juana Olivares, the crime lord, that without her memories, Juana will become a statue of salt (270), echoing Marina's thought of becoming like Lot's wife in the first chapter (18). Within Marina's writings, when she again meets with Cristóbal, she thinks about the statue on the third floor, representative, possibly of Marina's mother or of Julia right before her death. Marina thinks to herself, "The statue that observes me from the third floor doesn't move anymore. I have already erased her".<sup>33</sup> Since statues appear to represent mortal life, this quote seems to affirm Marina's relinquishing of the past.

Marina has written, "I never came back to stay here, in the place where now I watch the only statue left, my own".<sup>34</sup> Her statue, her mortal body, remains the last vestige of her ties to the mortal world; she appears to feel she must destroy it to transform into a separate immortal self. She remembers how much she tried to convince Cristóbal that she had destroyed everything, when she had failed to do so. Marina continues to fail in destroying anyone's past, including her own. When she sleeps with Cristóbal one last time before his death, he seems like a temporary fulfillment of her emptiness, "He

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<sup>32</sup> "Hasta ahí llegó, poco a poco, el rostro apesadumbrado de una estatua de hierro que seguía arrastrándose al ras del suelo con las muñecas encadenadas. *A pesar de todo*. Marina pensó que nadie puede ir hacia el pasado sin desatar un nuevo desorden, un caos todavía sin revelar" Ibid. 98.

<sup>33</sup> "La estatua que me observa desde el tercer piso ya no se mueve. Yo acabo de borrarla" Ibid. 271.

<sup>34</sup> "Nunca volví a quedarme aquí, en el lugar donde ahora observo a la única estatua, la mía" Ibid. 157

caresses me in the vacillation of memories . . . submerge ourselves in darkness, invite the pleasure to shut out the memory . . . Well, the body exists to detain the memory, the present blurs in the flesh and in the touch . . . But it's temporary . . . the memory destroys the wall of sand that had edified the body".<sup>35</sup> Cristóbal and Marina attempt to escape memory in each other. Even so, Marina confirms that, "that dirty bed where we find ourselves is, on the contrary, a bed of the absence of love. This is the place where Julia's absence is illuminated. Julia the redhead. The atrocious Julia".<sup>36</sup> Julia's origin repeats: the absence of love. A repetition of Julia's birth place, in a sense, an absence of love, is where the Irishwoman is most palpably remembered. Her memory appears to seep into Marina's daily existence nearly as much as Xian's. Pausing from the written narrative, Rivera Garza writes, "Embraced with you, Cristóbal; clinging one to another as though in a shipwreck".<sup>37</sup> Marina, la Marinera de tierra, the sailor of the earth, drowns herself in her forgetting, foreshadowing the death of Xian.

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<sup>35</sup> "Tal vez es porque la ironía crece, va creciendo, y yo no quiero dejarla ir, o quizá es porque al observar el rostro de Cristóbal esta vez solo alcanzo a ver la silueta misma del desamparo, pero me callo. Ahí esta el, sin justificación, sin los velos característicos, del que fabrica una defensa inteligente y lógica para estampársela intempestivamente en turno. Un ser humano. Un cuerpo, el recuerdo fugaz de otro cuerpo. Sobre exposición. Yuxtaposición. Me acerco a el entonces, me siento junto a el sobre la cama ampulosa y le doy mis manos. Él las toma, las beso despacio. No habla. Ma acaricia dentro del titubeo de los recuerdos. Tiemblo. Vamos a hacer la bienvenida, a saludarnos con el cuerpo para no herirnos. Tendremos que cerrar los ojos, sumergirnos en la oscuridad, invitar al placer para que nos cierre la memoria. Debe existir de alguna manera para detenerla, para esconderse ante su avance, para no dejarse arrollar por su torrente. Para detener la memoria, pues, existe el cuerpo, el presente se difumina en la carne y en el tacto: así se logra la proeza. Pero es temporal. Después del último beso, ya en el momento en que se acabaron los sarcasmos y empezamos a sonreírnos sin el tacto, la memoria destruya la muralla de arena que había edificado el cuerpo. Esta segunda vez, sin embargo, en esta segunda oleada, su presencia y no es tan definitiva y podemos tolerarla. Nos observamos en silencio. Mirada desde el peñasco. Mirada desde el abismo" Ibid. 158.

<sup>36</sup> "esa cama sucia donde nos encontramos es, por el contrario, un lecho de la ausencia del amor. Este es el lugar donde se ilumina la ausencia de Julia. Julia la pelirroja. La atroz Julia. Ella. Su nombre es lo primero que podemos decir, la única llave que nos permitirá dialogar hasta a todas las palabras. Y aquí, dentro de ellas, haciendo lo que la gente hace cuando se reúne, Cristóbal y yo empezamos a recordar" Ibid. 156.

<sup>37</sup> "Abrazada a ti, Cristóbal; aferrados el uno al otro como en medio de un naufragio" Ibid. 159.

After Chiang Wei finishes reading Marina's pages, he nearly kisses her and says, "You're not you, Marina . . . I'm sure that you're not you".<sup>38</sup> This quote could be interpreted two ways: that the Marina of her writings is not the Marina he knows, or that Marina is not truly, really, herself. Marina feels disappointed in his assessment, thinking, "She needed someone with more imagination; someone for whom being and not-being were not opposite points on a straight line; someone who could conceive the peculiar reality of the fiction. Its own rules. Chiang had let her down . . . Of course the Marina of the book and the Marina outside were the same person. That was as certain that there was no relation between the two. The truth, of there being only one, was located precisely in the realm of the two prior premises".<sup>39</sup> Truth and reality do not exist in absolutes. Marina's need to exist in two planes affirms a constant dying state. Marina is neither alive nor dead. She exists in-between. She is in between life and death, in between remembering and forgetting, in between the West and the East, and they are all fictions constructed by mortal men.

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<sup>38</sup> "No eres tu, Marina . . . Estoy seguro de que no eres tú" Ibid. 159.

<sup>39</sup> "Necesitaba a alguien con mas imaginación; alguien para quien ser y no ser no fueran puntos opuestos en una línea recta; alguien que pudiera concebir la peculiar realidad de la ficción. Sus propias reglas. Chiang la había defraudo . . . Por supuesto que Marina del libro y Marina la de fuera del libro eran la misma persona . . . La verdad, de haber solo una, se encontraba precisamente en el terreno que separaba a las dos premisas anteriores" Ibid. 160.

## CHAPTER 2

### FORGETTING AND THE ABYSS

The constructions of identity permeate even Marina's childhood. As a child, Marina lived in a world of fantasy. She recalls, "One day they cut your hair, they delicately drew your lips and they gifted you your sex. Afterwards, they told you, Marina, the witches don't exist. The magical mountains and dragons are far away, in a place of closed eyes where wishes live on forever. They never existed here. And you live here".<sup>40</sup> A separate identity appears as a path for understanding her own place, or better said, escaping it. Having suffered a car accident and breaking her arm, on the hospital, the protagonist states that "Forgetting is a boa that eats its tail".<sup>41</sup> Throughout the novel, the text frequently juxtaposes a boa and an owl together. When the protagonist asks herself, "Can an owl devour a boa?",<sup>42</sup> she appears to wonder whether the persona of Xian, or at least, this sense of achieving immortality, could grant the ability to defeat forgetting. Another character, a European woman named Julia O Bradaigh, appears as a robin. Since robins lay blue eggs, the link between Julia, Marina, and Xian is implied throughout the novel. Forgetting and the abyss appear conjointly frequently in the text. For Marina's doctor husband Horacio, your real self is your body (63), but Marina questions this. Rivera Garza writes, "she convinced herself that silence simply came and yoked itself without any problem to the internal geography of her body as though the body belonged to it, as though years before, it [silence] had molded the body itself and now it was only reclaiming its own space".<sup>43</sup> The body is created from nothingness; the self is created from memories. When Marina spots Xian, she states, "I'm sure that she wants to see me

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<sup>40</sup> "Un día te cortaron el cabello, dibujaron delicadamente tus labios y te regalaron el sexo. Después te dijeron, Marina, las brujas no existen. Las montañas mágicas y los dragones quedaron muy lejos, en el lugar de los ojos cerrados donde permanece el deseo. Aquí nunca existieron. Y aquí vives" Ibid. 203.

<sup>41</sup> "El olvido es una boa que se muerde la cola" Ibid. 203.

<sup>42</sup> "¿Puede una lechuza devorar una boa?" Ibid. 19.

<sup>43</sup> "En otras ocasiones se convencía de que el silencio llegó y se acopló sin problema alguno a la geografía interna de su cuerpo como si le hubiera pertenecido, como si años atrás lo hubiera moldeado el mismo y ahora solo reclamara su propio espacio" Ibid. 63.

dead”.<sup>44</sup> In order for Xian to live on, Marina must die, just as Marina has been born from Julia’s death. Rivera Garza writes that, “The truth of Marina was silence”.<sup>45</sup> Marina’s voice lies comfortably in silence. Like the ethnic minorities in Mexico whose voices have been silenced, Marina’s truth is born from the unintelligibility of trauma.

Marina narrates her story through prose. Much of *Verde Shanghai* is told through the writings of Marina or other characters. Her first piece, called “El Desconocimiento” translates to “the ignorance” but perhaps better could translate to “the un-recognition”. The narrator writes that, “We are, ponderously, what we forget. If I could summarize the Marina’s presence, and now her absence . . . Someone that is only forgetting, someone that feeds herself from un-recognition itself. . . Few, certainly, can come to have the pleasure of exploring that ponderous part of our being: the forgetting. Few take the risk”.<sup>46</sup> Marina is embodied in her forgetting. Her existence rests on the death of her selfhood. Rivera Garza seems interested in the unspoken parts of the self, wherein the absence eventually consolidates into being itself. Within this nothingness, this absence of world dichotomies and personal memories, the most elemental parts of the self can push through to the surface. In this way, as Marina learns about the complicated ethnic past of Mexican identity, which had previously been long omitted from the national narrative, she begins to understand a sense of personhood that transcends race and ethnicity.

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<sup>44</sup> “Estoy segura de que tiene ganas de verme muerta” Ibid. 67.

<sup>45</sup> “La verdad de Marina era el silencio” Ibid. 100.

<sup>46</sup> “Somos, preponderantemente, lo que olvidamos. Si pudiera resumir la presencia de Marina, y ahora su ausencia, repetiría esa frase hasta cansancio. Supongo que las palabras que enunciaba a solas se la dirigía a sus propios fantasmas. Era, si no me equivoco, una especie de acosamiento cognitivo. Quizás esos fantasmas le respondieron a final de cuentas. Tal vez le susurraron sus secretos . . . Alguien que es sólo olvido, alguien que se alimenta del desconocimiento propio, no tiene manera de saber y mucho menos de prever sus actos . . . Pocos ciertamente llegan a tener el placer de explorar esa parte preponderante de nuestro ser: el olvido. Pocos toman el riesgo” Ibid. 118-119.

Marina's appeal to remember presents a twofold plea: a petition not to forget the oppression of immigrant and immigrant-born citizens, but more deeply, an entreaty not to forget the arbitrariness of fate and, ultimately, of identity. We do not choose the time, place, or ethnic group into which we are born. This absurdity of destiny appears to invoke the question: what right does one have to exist in this body, in this time, in this place? What right does anyone have to exist at all?

Julia, Xian, and Marina all exist within specific racial and gendered expectations. As each woman dies, womanhood, itself, appears impossible. Julia, the European, dies first from falling through a window. The robin had failed to fly. Julia is embodied by red (132), Xian and Marina, by ocean blue (218-219). Perhaps Marina and Xian share a color because as women of color they are subjected to colonialist ideas of race and gender. Julia's red echoes blood on the pavement under her body. Xian's blue anticipates her drowning. The colors of the three women coalesce in a portrait painted by Xian near the end of the text, as a portrait of Julia. Marina appears shocked to see Xian's painting of Julia, in a combination of reds, greens, and blues.

During a readthrough of the text, I questioned which of the women may have been the original. The protagonist is called Marina near the beginning of the novel. When Julia dies first, Marina survives, just as she seems to survive Xian's passing. Xian and Julia both *appear* to have some sort of background that predate Marina's imaginings. Even so, I do not believe that the "original" identity of the protagonist truly matters in the whole of the text. What matters, it seems, is the fact that no matter how much the protagonist may change, and no matter on which ideals she may base her identity, existing proves impossible; what these women share is only their gender and their

impossibility of existence. A woman is meant to disappear, and so each of them does. Early in the text, Marina reflects on her Chinese name, thinking, “The destiny of certain women is to disappear”.<sup>47</sup> Each woman tries to fly, tries to join the blue sky, but they either fall to the earth or drown in the sea. Existence itself is doomed.

Toward the beginning of the novel, Marina witnesses a flood. Named Marina, the protagonist’s identity proves heavily linked to water, the ocean, and journeying. Calling herself, “la Marinera de tierra” (20), the sailor of the earth, Marina can never remain fixed in the present. Her identity and sense of self are in constant flux, as she runs from a past in pursuit. The Chinese name Xian, which refers to a sort of immortal within Daoist classics, also sounds similar to the Spanish “cian” or cyan. Xian, who paints, mirrors Marina, who writes, as she paints her identity onto canvas.

When Horacio he asks her about her place of origin, she thinks to herself, “I come from a dead woman . . . I come from a tomb. I come from a last breath”.<sup>48</sup> In this way, her ability to be born from death correlates with a Daoist immortal, however, it appears she has not achieved the xianhood she so deeply desires since she requires another identity as Xian. Horacio then invites her to marry him and join him in la Gran Ciudad, the Big City. When she declines, he tells her that, “You obviously have nothing to do here . . . You obviously don’t have anyone waiting for you here”.<sup>49</sup> Finally agreeing, she tells him to never ask about her past; and he never does. Marina has no one and nothing. Marina is no one.

When Ángeles takes her to the hotel for broken hearts after she leaves Horacio, Marina thinks of her new name, “*Xian*. At remembering my new name, I smiled, decided

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<sup>47</sup> “El destino de ciertas mujeres es desaparecer” Ibid. 42

<sup>48</sup> “Vengo de una muerta . . . Vengo de una tumba. Vengo de una última exhalación” Ibid. 39.

<sup>49</sup> “Se ve que no tienes nada que hacer aquí. Se ve que nadie te espera en ningún lugar” Ibid. 40.

that I liked being an unknown woman that talks to herself alone in front of a mirror”.<sup>50</sup> Ángeles tells her that, “This is love, Xian, to invent lies and believe them at your core”.<sup>51</sup> The only way for Marina to love herself is to forget herself, to deceive herself, to absolve herself of her past sins, namely Julia’s attempted murder of Cristóbal. The protagonist takes this sentiment to heart, believing that she can reinvent her past and identity separately from her hurtful memories. As Xian watches Ángeles leave, she states, “I was able to see her swift ghostly spirit . . . one moment to the next she would leave flying off, sustained by a pair of enormous white wings: then I knew that we had talked about death [her man]”.<sup>52</sup> Ángeles had baptized Marina with her new name. As an angel in love with death, Ángeles presents a new dawn for Marina’s existence as she leads her from death into a new life.

Marina suddenly draws back from the past, hearing a voice in the present chide, ““But Marina, this is the last straw, now among us you forget that you’re with us’ the voice that would abruptly return to her room would say something like that”.<sup>53</sup> Ángeles interrupts Marina’s inner conversation, asking her, “Have they ever written a book about you all?”.<sup>54</sup> Ángeles indicates the multiplicity of Marina’s being, using the form *ustedes* to refer to her. The author reveals Marina’s inner dialogue in writing, “The questioning took them by surprise and interrupted their conversation. They would turn to see her and would look amongst themselves as though Marina were under the inconsistent effects of

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<sup>50</sup> “*Xian*. Al acordarme de mi nuevo nombre, me sonreí, decidí que me gustaba ser una desconocida que se habla a sola frente a un espejo” Ibid. 30.

<sup>51</sup> “El amor es esto, Xian, inventar mentiras y creértelas a fondo” Ibid. 31.

<sup>52</sup> “alcancé a ver su fantasma veloz . . . de un momento a otro saliera volando sostenida por un par de alas enormes y blancas: entonces supe que habíamos hablado de la muerte” Ibid. 32.

<sup>53</sup> “ – Pero Marina, esto es el colmo, ahora hasta entre nosotras se te olvida que estas con nosotras – la voz que la regresaría abruptamente a su habitación diría algo así” Ibid. 41.

<sup>54</sup> “¿Alguna vez han escrito un libro sobre ustedes?” Ibid. 41.

a drug”.<sup>55</sup> When Ángeles wonders aloud if someone wrote Marina’s story inaccurately (meaning *La Guerra no importa*), Marina assures her, “Honestly, I think there are worse things in this world,’ she would exclaim, with inevitable relief, one of the voices inside the room. An echo. Two”.<sup>56</sup> Marina’s inner voices battle each other for a grasp of reality. The source of these voices remains unclear: whether they are of the Mujer Mayor, Ángeles, and Marina, or Marina, Julia, and Xian. All of this conversation occurs in the conditional, allowing an uncertain reading of the scene.

Despite Marina’s assertion that “Xian” is not her name, Rodrigo tells her, “you know, Xian, that this sort of thing doesn’t change . . . One can never escape their own name”.<sup>57</sup> The name and the body both appear as unchangeable identarian aspects given to an individual by their parents or their social context. The way in which a name is given and a body is interpreted depends greatly on the people and forces which surround an individual. The names given, Xian or Marina, are given by different entities: Marina, presumably gifted by her biological parents, greatly contrasts Xian, which was a baptismal name given by an angel. This contrast in naming origins reflects the social constraints of Marina and the potential for ascension in Xian. Even so, the similarities between “cian” and “marina” ultimately reflect their sameness.

With Marina’s husk still on earth, Xian can never continually exist. She prays to a supernatural power, hoping that she could be Xian forever, “with the fervor characteristic of the recently converted, she continued praying to her divine and informed being to

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<sup>55</sup> “La interrogante las tomaría por sorpresa e interrumpiría su conversación. Se volverían a verla y se mirarían entre ellas como si Marina estuviera bajo los efectos desiguales de una droga. - ¿Por qué lo preguntas? – Ahí estarían las tres, observándose a hurtadillas. Sospechando” Ibid. 41.

<sup>56</sup> “Honestamente creo que hay cosas peores en este mundo – exclamaría, con inevitable alivio, una de las voces dentro de la habitación. Un eco. Dos” Ibid. 41.

<sup>57</sup> “tú sabes, Xian, que este tipo de cosas no cambian . . . Uno nunca escapa del propio nombre” Ibid. 51-52.

concede a miracle while a little swelling wind sculped the noses and lips, the foreheads, the ears, and left her there, with half of her body out the window, praying with her whole soul for an open spiraling world, a calamitous university, eternity”.<sup>58</sup> As Marina prays, she lifts half of her body out of the window, evoking Julia’s death. Memories and imagining can create bodies and identities, perhaps these are as fictional as the constructs created by flawed human beings.

The reasons for Marina’s intense depression are scattered throughout the novel. Rivera Garza writes, “She supposed that something had happened years ago that she tried to remember . . . she imagined it like a crevice where little by little the meaning of things fled. Sometimes, however, her something was just an emptiness, like a colorless sheet that covered all her contexts”.<sup>59</sup> What remains of Marina is nothing; as a woman born from death, she walks the earth empty, yearning for a new body, a new life, a new reality.

While she meets with Cristóbal, she feels like “She has to wait for the sun to make sure that the crack is not there anymore, in the center of her gaze. She has to be sure that she has accurate eyes so that, to go there, outside, there where everything is, she does not succumb”.<sup>60</sup> The crevice in Marina’s memory appears to link to memories of Cristóbal and Julia. As a young teenager under Cristóbal’s care, Marina had to suffer through the commands of an alcoholic old radical. Each interaction with the old man was

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<sup>58</sup> “Y le pidió a su particular ser divino pero informe . . . Los días en que los muertos regresaban de sus aposentos bajo el reflejo peculiar de esas resolanas lubricas. Tenía ganas de internarse una vez más en esos días en los que ella podía ser ella misma. Y así, con el fervor característico en los recién conversos, siguió rogándole a su divino ser informe que le concediera el milagro mientras un vientecillo le esculpía las narices y los labios, la frente, las orejas, y la dejaba ahí, con medio cuerpo salido de la ventana, añorando con toda el alma un mundo abierto en espiral, un universo calamitoso, la eternidad” Ibid. 248.

<sup>59</sup> “Supuso que algo había pasado en los años que trataba de recordar . . . se imaginaba como una grieta por donde poco a poco huía el significado de las cosas. A veces, en cambio, su algo era solamente un vacío que, como una sábana incolora, cubría todos sus contextos” Ibid. 183.

<sup>60</sup> “Tiene que esperar el sol para comprobar que la grieta ya no está más ahí, en el centro de su mirada. Tiene que estar segura de que posee los ojos precisos para que, al ir allá, afuera, allá donde todo es, no sucumba”. Ibid. 195.

rife with sexual tension, echoing her strange relationship with her biological father. Cristobal appears obsessed with “the war,” for which *La guerra no importa* appears to be named. Although Marina had tried to persuade him that the war had ended, he would not believe her. Later, when Cristóbal has died, the narrator states, “The war ended and the cries of the crippled are ridiculous, they do not evoke pity but laughter”.<sup>61</sup> The pain of the war gives way to laughter, just as Marina seems to be healing from her past trauma. In the present, Marina thinks, “It was true: then there would be no cure. It was true: it was dawning”.<sup>62</sup> Marina understands that there may not exist any remedy for her cyclic traversal in and out of her memories and deaths.

Xian tells Joel, the owner of Verde Shanghai that, “The memories claim life for themselves, and without blinking, without worrying about those that generate them, they acquire legs, hands, faces, voices”.<sup>63</sup> Memories appear as the basis for identities and bodies. Without memories, both personal and cultural, consciousness cannot exist. Back at the Estrella de Choi, after the receptionist informed her of a visitor, Marina ponders, “she also wondered if this were what everyone did within their own forgettings: ring down the curtain of what is real and huddle in a small place . . . Without end. She repeated her name over and over. Marina. She was trying to return to her body. Marina Espinosa”.<sup>64</sup> She meets face to face with Xian in her room, their voices colliding together until both are unsure of who is whom. Marina touches Xian’s face, and Xian sarcastically

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<sup>61</sup> “La guerra terminó y los lamentos de los lisiados son ridículos; no dan lastima sino risa”. Ibid. 271.

<sup>62</sup> “Era cierto: entonces ya nada tendría remedio. Era cierto: estaba amaneciendo” Ibid. 271.

<sup>63</sup> “Los recuerdos cobran vida por sí mismos y, sin parpadear, sin preocuparse por aquellos que los generaron, adquieren piernas, manos, caras, voces” Ibid. 219.

<sup>64</sup> “Y se preguntó también si esto era lo que toda la gente hacía dentro de sus propios olvidos: correr el telón de lo real y agazaparse en un lugar pequeño, un ángulo apenas, detrás de los escenarios donde todo ocurría. Sin cesar. Se repitió su nombre una y otra vez. Marina. Trataba de regresar a su cuerpo. Marina Espinosa”. Ibid. 278.

asks her, “Who told you that flesh is real?”.<sup>65</sup> Confronting her other self, Marina faces the impossibility of reality and existence. Bodies are interpreted by constructs over which the corporeal subjects have no control and no authorship.

Thinking on her own death, Marina wonders, “The darkness does not invent names for its beings . . . One day they invented your body, earthly creature, so that you would never separate yourself from the asphalt . . . A name . . . via a body, that immense loneliness is known . . . Marina, one day you stopped existing, and you forgot to invent an end to the tale . . . the mirror is momentary . . . You will be eternal, Marina”.<sup>66</sup> While the allusion to asphalt echoes Julia’s suicide, the darkness of fate appears almost cruel in its random distribution of histories and memories. In stating that “the mirror is momentary,” the text reflects again the randomness of bodies and identities. The reflections mere moments; the transience of selfhood cannot endure past a single moment. As the body ages, changes, as memories fade or made new, one’s selfhood is never constant, but fluctuating. Recontextualized, the self is no longer the self. In this way, as systems interpret bodies and persons as “other,” they transform the selfhood of the observed subjects themselves.

When Xian sees Marina on the street, she reflects that, “She had spent years recreating her, inventing her, yearning for her, with the same meticulousness that others spent attending to a capricious or difficult-to-please lover . . . Someone with the name

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<sup>65</sup> “¿Quién te dijo que la carne es real?”. Ibid. 280.

<sup>66</sup> “La oscuridad todavía no inventa nombres para sus seres . . . Un día te inventaron el cuerpo, criatura terrestre, para que no te separas nunca del asfalto . . . Un nombre, un encuentro, una historia . . . es así, a través del cuerpo, que se conoce la soledad inmensa . . . Marina, un día dejaste de existir, y se te olvidó inventar el final del cuento . . . Marina, cierra los ojos el espejo es efímero . . . Te hará eterna, Marina” Ibid. 204.

Marina was going all over the City of the Inside without the help of lanterns”.<sup>67</sup> Marina is as much of an invention as Xian is; they both exist as inventions in the other’s mind.

They both reflect, “The women defined one another”.<sup>68</sup> Marina tells Xian, “If you were not here, I surely would have invented you”.<sup>69</sup> Here we see a reflection of Said’s reasoning for the “invention of the East,” but recontextualized in that each individual invents a reflected self in the “other.” As the two halves drink together, they each feel confused about whose voice is whose. Jennifer Prince claims that the novel’s phrase “*Yotro*” shows a combination of “yo” and “otro” that reflects their relationship (128). “Yo,” meaning “I” and “otro” meaning other, combine to form a new word and sense of identity within and without of oneself. When they feel confused at the collision of voices, Marina wonders about a third voice, but Xian reminds her, “She is the one that does not speak, Marina . . . You know that the dead don’t speak”.<sup>70</sup> Julia, the dead woman, the birthplace of Marina, the final artwork of Xian. The Irishwoman, long dead but not forgotten still haunts Marina and Xian as they struggle to exist in a world of fleeting and unsure realities. The trauma of attempting to murder her father figure and former lover haunts Marina. Julia haunts Marina’s past while Xian haunts her present.

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<sup>67</sup> “Tenía años recreándola, inventándola, añorándola, con la misma minuciosidad con la que otros atienden las necesidades de un amante caprichoso o difícil de complacer . . . Alguien con el nombre de Marina recorría la Ciudad de Adentro sin ayuda de linternas” Ibid. 218.

<sup>68</sup> “Las mujeres se definían”. Ibid. 280.

<sup>69</sup> “Si no estuvieras aquí, seguramente te habría inventado”. Ibid. 281.

<sup>70</sup> “Ella es la que no habla, Marina . . . Tú sabes que los muertos no hablan” Ibid. 282

## CHAPTER 3

### SUBJECTIVITY AND THE OTHER

As Marina tells la escritora her life story, she begins by saying, “I loved my father in a strange way . . . A sickly way”.<sup>71</sup> When Marina was a teenager, her mother had found letters from her father and throws her out, telling her that her relationship with her father was unnatural. She takes out her laptop and “she decided to give her that, the wound, the real wound”.<sup>72</sup> She mistrusts la escritora, who had previously misrepresented her story. Marina aims to represent her own story, removing any authorship from la escritora. Marina calls her mother, “she without a voice”,<sup>73</sup> which also corresponds to Julia. In this way, Julia’s inability to speak echoes Carolina’s. The nothingness of womanhood reflects deeply in Marina’s depiction of her mother, Carolina, whose father called her “Na,” a shortening of both “Carolina” and colloquially, “nada” (79). Na not only reflects a diminishing of Carolina’s name, but also her existence itself. Her father appears to have been an abusive man, begging his wife to die with him. When Marina refers to the crazy love experienced by Ángeles for death, this seems to be a reference to her mother’s intense love for her father.

If her mother was nothing, then Marina is “no one”.<sup>74</sup> The moment when Marina left home is the moment when Xian was born in her (81). Xian meets with “a young man with almond eyes and tan skin”<sup>75</sup> and as she spends the night with him, she considers, “More than making love, she makes a plea, a prayer: restrain me, that your body would be the wall of water that drowns the desert, that your body would be the veil that lets me open my eyes without crying. Protect me. Shelter me for I am made of dust and I am

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<sup>71</sup> “Amaba a mi padre de una manera extraña . . . Enfermiza” Rivera Garza 71.

<sup>72</sup> “se decidió a regalarle eso, la herida, la verdadera” Ibid. 77.

<sup>73</sup> “Ella sin voz” Ibid. 83.

<sup>74</sup> “Marina, nadie” Ibid. 81.

<sup>75</sup> “un hombre joven con ojos almendrados y la piel morena”. Ibid. 81.

going to scatter with the wind . . . Contain me. And he does it. Or he tries”.<sup>76</sup> Even as Xian, the protagonist struggles against the emptiness intrinsic in a mortal existence. Here the water metaphor becomes more corporeal; Xian and Marina, always tied to water, nonetheless remain in the desert where no respite seems possible. There is no rest within life from its traumas or memories.

Doña Aída asks Marina if she fell, signaling her broken arm from the car crash (92-93). This falling may also call back to Julia’s fall to death. Aída tells her that Marina’s grandfather had always mistrusted the Wei family for their dirty business dealings. So, even though her grandfather had arranged her marriage to Chiang, her grandfather and family left San Francisco, moving to Mexico to outrun the Wei family. Aída affirms, “That’s why he went to the Other Country. To save you from Chiang Wei”.<sup>77</sup> She quickly tells Marina, “You must be one of the Chou women, from Hunan”.<sup>78</sup> Aída claims that Marina had abandoned her grandfather, claiming this trait as typical in her family. Degrading the Chǒu, Aída states, “All of you are the same. You run away, you go through it hiding yourselves and then you present yourselves with different names . . . What else could you hope for from a Chou girl? . . . I suppose that in the Other Country you all forgot everything you had in this one’ *You all*”.<sup>79</sup> Throughout the book, there is reference to the Other Country. It is unclear whether this refers to Mexico (and

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<sup>76</sup> “Más que hacer el amor, hace la súplica, el ruego: detenme, que tu cuerpo sea el muro de agua que ahogue el desierto, que tu cuerpo sea el velo que me permita abrir los ojos sin llorar. Protégeme. Ampárame que estoy hecha de polvo y voy a esparcirme junto al viento . . . Conténme. Y él lo hace. O lo intenta”. Ibid. 81.

<sup>77</sup> “Por eso se fue al Otro país, contigo. Para salvarte de Chiang Wei” Ibid. 94.

<sup>78</sup> “Tú debes ser una de las Chou, de Hunan” Ibid. 92.

<sup>79</sup> ““Todos ustedes son iguales, huyen, se la pasan ocultándose y luego se presentan con nombre distintos . . . Que más podía esperarse de una Chou. Supongo que en el Otro País ustedes se olvidaron de todo lo que dejaron en éste’ *Ustedes*” Ibid. 92-93.

whether this conversation takes place in China), or whether the Other Country is some sort of metaphysical space between worlds.

Around Christmas, Marina feels devastated by the absence of Xian. She “understands the torture of the saints”<sup>80</sup> as she waits for her god and object of worship. In her letter to Xian, Marina writes that, “I didn’t search for you; you appeared. You appeared without any warning and, now, in the same way, you leave, you flee, that’s what you do, flee, flee . . . I knew that already you weren’t around when I saw the dead house”.<sup>81</sup> Referencing Xian’s childhood home in San Francisco, Marina realizes the small likelihood of Xian’s return. Desperate for her new identity to give her life meaning, Marina bemoans that, “That time you spoke to me about your distractions . . . that you were one of them, you said, that you were losing I-don’t-what ability that concerned humans”.<sup>82</sup> Marina fears connection. She values her silent and passionless marriage to Horacio only in the sense that it precludes her from true human connection and ties to the earthly world. She envies Xian’s ability to breeze through life without the need to connect to others. Xian’s inability to create strong ties demonstrates her almost supernatural facets, since she has no need for anything connecting her to the earth. Xian’s lack of connection ties to the sense of Chinese immortals’ propensity to live as hermits with no ties to the world (Ford Company 53). Importantly, Xian’s lack of connection contrasts Julia’s deep need for earthly ties. Julia had valued her friendships and romantic relationships, but her relationship with Cristóbal ultimately led to her suicide after her

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<sup>80</sup> “comprendió la tortura de los santos” Ibid. 110.

<sup>81</sup> “yo no te buscaba, tú apareciste. Apareciste sin derecho alguno y, ahora, de la misma manera, te vas, huyes, eso es lo que haces, huir, huir . . . Supe que ya no estabas cuando vi la casa muerta. Ni los libros ni las ventanas tenían más movimiento” Ibid. 111.

<sup>82</sup> “Esa vez hablaste algo de tus distracciones - ¿me olvidaste? – que tú eras una de ellas, dijiste, que estabas perdiendo no se que capacidad que atañía a los humanos” Ibid. 113.

failed attempt to murder him. In Marina's eyes, relationships appear dangerous. Her relationship with her father led to her loss of a childhood home and her split into Xian. Julia's relationship with Cristóbal led to her death, with her body splashed red on the pavement and forever connected to the earth. Julia, the robin, was never able to fly.

Marina writes to Xian, saying, "Now I understand something about what for you was earth and dust. Now I'm drying beside the desert, waiting only for the visit of vultures".<sup>83</sup> She leaves the windows open for Xian, since Julia had fallen through a closed window. Marina offers, "You should know that I'm going to look for you, that I carry bread in my pockets in case you're hungry",<sup>84</sup> talking about Xian as though she were a bird. The immortals are forever hungry. Marina laments, "'This is love,' she said to someone that did not come to sit with her. 'This way of pushing one toward this abyss. This horror'".<sup>85</sup> For Marina, connection pushes its subjects closer to death, to nothingness. Connections to the world push people to death. Only the untethered can reach immortality and transcend death.

Marina appears obsessed with visiting Julia's tomb. In the past, Julia ran some sort of hospital or safehouse, where she first meets Cristóbal. Julia, always red, carries on a tense relationship with Cristóbal, ultimately attempting to kill him after he begged Marina to destroy him. Cristobal had written Marina, saying, "Protect me from curiosity, don't drag me toward the danger of the world . . . don't forget to destroy me. Dissolve me".<sup>86</sup> Ultimately, Julia, in all her love for him, tries to fulfill the promise Marina made.

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<sup>83</sup> "Ahora comprendo algo de lo que para ti era la tierra y el polvo. Ahora me seco junto con el desierto y únicamente espero la visita de las aves de rapiña" Ibid. 114.

<sup>84</sup> "Debes saber que voy a buscarte, que llevo pan en mis bolsillos por si tienes hambre" Ibid. 115.

<sup>85</sup> "Esto es el amor – le dijo a alguien que no se vino a sentar junto a ella -. Esta manera de empujarlo a uno hacia el abismo. Este horror" Ibid. 243.

<sup>86</sup> "Protégeme de la curiosidad, no me arrastres hasta el peligro del mundo . . . no olvides destruirme. Disuélveme" Ibid. 206

When she fails and realizes the immense power Cristóbal holds over the courts, she commits suicide by jumping from a building to her death below. Like Marina's car accident, she is also run over by a bus. This gruesome death appears to be the death from which Marina is born. Julia's death gives way to Marina's life, and Marina's death gives way to Xian's life. Even so, the deaths of these women do not appear so final, since each continues to reappear in the lives of the others. I want to make clear that though Julia *might* be a third self for Marina; her connection to Marina and Xian is not made as obvious. She is one of the women marked by a color, but hers is red while the other two are blue.

Confronting Horacio and Chiang, Marina thinks of the owl she had seen throughout the city, "Not Horacio, not Chiang Wei, not even Xian would understand that. Nobody would. Not even Julia. The thing remembered: that thing that in the ups-and-downs, in the fractures of the persnickety climatic system of remembering and forgetting, finally consumes the life of the remembered thing. Not even Marina".<sup>87</sup> Marina can never be like the bird she glimpsed in her travels to and from the space in-between, Verde Shanghai. She can never fly to the heavens or gain an immortal state as she remains tethered to the earth.

As la Marinera de tierra, the sailor of land, Marina remains ever-fixed to the earth and the water. She will never, can never, ascend to the skies like an immortal xian. For Marina, she feels frustrated at her failure to ascend and become Xian. She imagines her ascension and her failure, "Nothing exists, the infinite writes itself over the surface with

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<sup>87</sup> "Y extrañó, sobre todo, el ave que ahora estaba segura de que si había visto a través de los ventanales del Verde Shanghai. Ni Horacio, ni Chiang Wei, ni Xian, entenderían eso. Nadie lo haría. Ni siquiera Julia. La cosa recordada: la cosa que, en el vaivén, en las fracturas de los quisquillosos sistema climático del recordar y el olvidar, finalmente consumía la vida de la cosa recordada. Ni siquiera Marina" Ibid. 292

icy characters, but you are not cold . . . This is the world of the perfect. You walk over it and you make it imperfect. You disappear, shout out . . . At last always, always we are mortal and we go past the light”.<sup>88</sup> Marina remains alive and imperfect.

Xian is kidnapped, potentially by someone Julia and Marina had known as teens, and she confesses to stealing jade from his house with her friend. As the man drowns Xian in a bathtub, the protagonist realizes that none of the recently described events have occurred. The kidnappers had left the protagonist in front of Marina’s house, with Horacio and Chiang Wei waiting. Marina thinks of Xian, who disappeared under the water, “Xian and her loneliness covered in hues of aquamarine . . . give me a memorial and bury, Xian, your dead. Mine. I’m sorry for . . . your very existence. I’m sorry for the time that passed by irreparably. I’m sorry for the future”.<sup>89</sup> As Marina, herself, goes up to her room to bathe, she thinks, “I hope that you forgive me . . . For this name. For this burial”<sup>90</sup>. Marina feels regret for bringing Xian into the world, similar to her regret for her own life as Marina Espinosa. As Chiang and Horacio wait for Marina downstairs, Chiang remarks, “I suppose that everything ends here . . . One can never go past what is narrated”,<sup>91</sup> and he disappears into the rain, as Xian had into the bathwater. One cannot surpass their own narration.

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<sup>88</sup> “Son largas las explanadas, blancas, lisas. Caminas sobre ellas. Nada existe, el infinito se inscribe sobre su superficie con caracteres de hielo, pero no tienes frío. La luz se esparce, nace en cada palmo de la explanada y se extiende hacia el cielo. El cielo es blanco, tampoco tiene punto de fisura. Este es el mundo de lo perfecto. Tu caminas sobre él y lo haces imperfecto. Te desesperas, gritas . . . Al final siempre, siempre somos mortales, y vamos más allá de la luz”. Ibid.. 254-255

<sup>89</sup> “Xian y su soledad cubierta en tonos de aguamarina; Xian que tenía otras cosas que hacer, compromisos, fechas. Quería pedirle perdón ahora. Diría: dame un memorial y entierra, Xian, a tus muertos. Míos. Perdón por . . . su existencia misma. Perdón por el tiempo que pasaba, irremediabilmente. Perdón por el futuro”. Ibid.. 294

<sup>90</sup> “Espero que me perdones . . . Por este nombre. Por este entierro”. Ibid.. 294

<sup>91</sup> “Supongo que aquí se acaba todo . . . Uno nunca puede ir mas allá de lo narrado”. Ibid.. 295

Marina sits again in a café, although it is not clear whether this is Verde Shanghai, or whether or not she still lives. A man approaches her, tells her she looks like a pretty “Oriental” (307). He tells her, “Bodies are a nuisance, an infernal demand . . . The spirit always ends, every day at dawn”.<sup>92</sup> Marina envies this stranger’s belief in God; he is not lost. Belief in destiny disgusts Marina, since its authorship lies outside of her control:

She looks at him with disdain saying, “There is only one possibility to continue living, only one: stay far away from love, eliminate the new sprouts of desire every night, assassinate the body with everything it carries inside, entrails and spirit”.<sup>93</sup> Crying aloud, she returns home, seeing in the window, “The face of a dead woman . . . it was left to go beneath the tide. *she becomes naked in the paradise / of her memory / she does not recognize the cruel fate / of her visions / she has a fear that she cannot name / what does not exist*”.<sup>94</sup> The face of the dead woman has appeared as Julia’s for much of the text, but by the end of *Verde Shanghai*, this dead woman’s haunting visage may belong to Xian, Julia, Marina, or even all three.

Importantly, the text does not make clear *how* or *why* these women are connected. As a Mexican, Irish, and Chinese woman, each one comes into the story implicit in their own context, yet they all meet the same fate. Death is inevitable in a system so strictly designed; identity is inescapable and a fate worse than death. The paradigm constructed by Orientalism predetermines the impossibility of truth. As constructed by the world and its prejudices, the East-West dichotomy disallows any identity to truly exist without an

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<sup>92</sup> “Los cuerpos son un estorbo, una exigencia infernal, están llenos de movimientos estúpidos . . . El espíritu se acaba siempre, todos los días, al amanecer”. Ibid.. 308

<sup>93</sup> “Solo hay una posibilidad de seguir vivos, solo una: mantenerse lejos del amor, asesinarle todas las noches los nuevos retoños al deseo, asesinar al cuerpo con todo lo que lleva dentro, tripas y espíritu”. Ibid.. 314

<sup>94</sup> “El rostro de una muerta . . . se dejó ir bajo su marea. *ella se desnuda en el paraíso / de su memoria / ella desconoce el feroz destino / de sus visiones / ella tiene miedo de no saber nombrar / lo que no existe*” 315

Other with which to compare itself. As such, all identities fail to realize themselves as viable vessels for life. Although Marina may fantasize about the potentially transcendent nature of Xian, Xian exists within the same flawed framework constructed by mortal men. Imagined as an idealized Chinese immortal, Xian remains just as constricted by the impossibilities of existence within the confines of identity. Xian and Marina's sameness bespeaks the ludicrousness of orientalist discourse. Xian cannot exist because the East does not exist. Julia cannot exist because the West does not exist; and Marina, as neither "Western" nor "Eastern" cannot exist in a world with broken and unreal definitions.

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