Fiction and Film

Alonso, Nancy. *Disconnect/Desencuentro.* Trans. Anne Fountain. Chico, CA: Cubanabooks, 2012. Pp. 169. ISBN 978-0-9827860-1-7.

Disconnect/Desencuentro is a bilingual collection of twelve short narratives well suited for the undergraduate Spanish program. This anthology presents a variety of contemporary topics specific to the Cuban national milieu including: experiencing other cultures, themes of death and dying, human despair, and the emotional toll of losing family through migration.

The anthology can also serve as an introduction to the theme of female homoerotic relationship from a Cuban perspective, for there are six Lesbian stories, and the last story about male homoerotic desire bears the same name as the title of the collection. Lesbianism operates at two literary levels in this collection. It is suggested emotionally, a spontaneous connection to an interesting other, or it is revealed by a circumstance of trial and difficulty, as those in the relationship struggle to ensure its survival. The literary intention here is non-confrontational; indeed there is no posture of defiance in relation to society as a whole. Neither does there seem to be a desire to express affront or condemnation of the discrimination that individuals might suffer because of their sexual orientation. Vindication and self-affirmation are also not the principal intention. The objective is the establishment of a sense of authenticity or to provide an intimate gaze at thoughts and emotions in relationships destined to suffer the same tensions and challenges faced by any other couple.

Ample use is made of the urban landscape of Cuba's capital city, Havana. The stories zero in on the lives of everyday people, even as they stylistically incline towards tones of tragedy and suffering. The notion of "happy ending" is debunked by way of situations that are the cultural and interpersonal challenges of everyday living even as each story, in its own way, is unique and revelatory. Alonso's art is simple, easy to access culturally even as it is emotionally very heavy and designed to leave a lasting impression. Her writing style is designed to produce certain effects: dissatisfaction, incompletion, endurance, and survival against the odds.

One particular theme that weaves through several stories is the way in which the Cuban subject experiences and processes other cultures. Two main cultural phenomena that inspire the stories are government arranged mission trips abroad and the trauma associated with permanent migration. "Address Unknown/Domicilio desconocido" and "May Allah Protect You/Que Alá te proteja" focus on Ethiopia and are reflections about Africa, displaying a fascination with that continent's difference as well as coping with profound nostalgia for the homeland. "Dialogue/Diálogo" speaks of Brazil, and "Traces/Huellas" focuses on the trauma facing older family members because of long term separation from their loved ones who have chosen to depart. Overall, the inclusion of these particular themes proves strategic, moving against the notion of the island's political isolation because of the embargo by confirming the construction of other types of alliances and travel experiences.

Disconnect/Desencuentro is a representation of Cuba's postmodern experiences, an intimately more personal approach that prioritizes the individual's perspective and emotional response to adversity.

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Del Campo, Eduardo. *Capital sur*. Sevilla, Spain: Paréntesis, 2011. Pp. 424. ISBN 978-84-9919-199-7.

In the face of global recessions, high inflation, political unrest, and new perspectives on the Other in our modern society, *Capital sur* hits home as an engaging and globally relevant piece of fiction. For anyone interested in modern or twenty-first-century Spanish culture, society,

identity, literature, art, and so forth, del Campo writes a novel that depicts the problems and impacts of the deep recession in Seville, Spain in the 1990s. *Capital sur* is at once a critique of high society, a discussion of clashing perspectives during globalization, and an engaging story with both robust characters worthy of discussion and more stylized characters that typify the various social classes.

As a piece of fiction, the value of *Capital sur* lies in the plot and compilation of characters that lend themselves to a variety of readers who will discover a text that is both provocative and entertaining. Taking place in the mid 1990s, the novel follows the actions, perspectives and frustrations of several people representing diverse socioeconomic and educational backgrounds in Seville, Spain. Each of them exhibits unique methods of coping with the devastating recession in which they live, allowing the depth of each character to emerge as they confront related pressures while working through their own personal problems. Shifts in focalization give detailed insights into each of the characters, but the subtle, abrupt, or untagged nature of these shifts also forces the reader to decipher the context clues. For example, Diego, a journalist, investigates and reports on various situations, thus depicting many of the problems in Seville during the recession. While struggling with his own potential unemployment and desires for a house and a stable future, Diego documents Salvador, a drug addict, who is released from prison in order to die with his family. Diego chronicles Salvador's rapid physical decline because of both AIDS and the effects of his lingering addiction. Del Campo also uses Diego's perspective to construct, through friends, examples of victims of the social crisis: from the unemployed and uneducated to the idealistic yet hopeless university student, all who face the effects of a dead economy.

In Diego's travels, as well as in the adventures of other characters, del Campo questions many of society's norms and perspectives as Spain prepares for the twenty first century. For example, in Diego's portrayal of Salvador, rather than criminalizing an inmate and marginalizing an addict, he paints a struggling soul through sympathy and empathy, allowing both the fictional reader and the real reader a connection with the other's desires, emotions, and regrets. This makes Salvador a tragic hero, the Other with whom the readers must connect, as Diego would argue. Another, much like Salvador, is Antonia, a prostitute, who, rather than living alienated because of a moral laxity, turns her practice into a viable profession. Carrying an illegitimate child, she escapes the ridicule of her conservative community twenty years before the events in *Capital sur* begin by abandoning her baby and walking into the streets of Seville. She learns to recognize when and where to advertise her services in order to increase her clientele, which, when combined with an understanding of trends of supply, demand, and competition, has allowed her to maximize profits. In the depths of a devastating recession, Antonia can claim more financial stability than some of the others who must sell themselves to other demoralizing jobs to merely make ends meet (such as an art school model, dispersing useless pamphlets to uninterested people, or other dehumanizing and dangerous lines work). This sort of irony about alternative economies permeates the novel and casts a tragic air, forcing both characters and readers to question acceptable social values and practices, especially as the upper and mid to lower classes clash at various points throughout the novel. Del Campo includes an international critique through a subplot in which a moviemaker from the United States plans to use the city for a scene in an upcoming film. Promising quick and easy money for locals as extras, this director's idealized vision of the city, juxtaposed with Diego's darker reports, pits constructed cinematographic facades of an enchanted Seville against the misery of reality.

The work's greatest obstacle for readers may perhaps be an artistic choice in narrative style: del Campo's unclear and often abrupt shifts between narrators. There are no chapter sections in the novel; section breaks are signaled by an extra space in the body of the text itself, which may or may not also signal a shift in narrators or perspectives. Furthermore, the narration frequently assumes a stream-of-consciousness structure in which there are no punctuation marks or paragraph breaks, making comprehension and identification difficult. This ambiguity

is accentuated by the fact that these sections are mostly first-person narratives without a clear tag identifying which of the characters is the narrator. Ultimately, however, this allows del Campo to portray perspectives from the destitute, low, mid and high classes along with their implications, playing into the effort to give a more global vision of the social situation during the recession. In addition to this variety of perspectives, this physical structure parallels, and powerfully conveys to the reader, the sense of chaos and helplessness that the characters face both internally and while attempting to navigate the sinking economy. The novel is a puzzle in a sense, requiring the reader at each break to connect the new pieces with the old, trying to fit together a picture of each character as well as the problematic society that he or she represents.

With its non-traditional approach to themes and structure, *Capital sur* engages its audience and demands attention, and it lends itself to philosophical and literary studies. With its broad appeal to all sorts of readership, including, but not limited to, professionals, graduate students, and advanced undergraduate students, this novel is a valuable tool to understand and discuss Peninsular issues and situations, particularly because of the prominence of social problems coupled with their relevance to the current global situation.

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Díaz, Junot. *This Is How You Lose Her.* New York: Riverhead, 2012. Pp. 213. ISBN 978-1-59448-736-1.

Love is a common theme in literature; it is timeless and universal, and so is deception and betrayal. *This Is How You Lose Her* presents one side of love: when it goes sour, or when it fails to create a long-lasting and satisfying relationship. All that remains are "memories," as suggested in the novel's epigraph by Sandra Cisneros: "But sometimes there were good times. Love was good." At the center of this short stories collection, which reads like a novel, is Yunior, a young immigrant from the Dominican Republic, a womanizer who asserts from the beginning as if asking for the reader's understanding: "I'm not a bad guy" (3). Yunior, the family nickname of the author and that of his quasi-autobiographical protagonist, has been a central character in all of Díaz's works. We met Yunior in *Drown* (1996), Díaz's first collection of short stories, and in the novel *The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007), for which Díaz was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 2008. In his works, Yunior serves, at times, as narrator and also as the author's literary alter ego.

Eight of the nine stories in this collection revolve around relationships with women. The narration oscillates between the first and second person, thus shedding light into both the perspectives of his female characters and Yunior himself. From an early age, Yunior had been exposed to the promiscuity of his older brother and the philandering of his father. As time goes by, Yunior becomes aware that girls start noticing him, but he cannot escape his destiny. The ghost of his father lures in the background: "You had hoped the gene missed you, skipped a generation, but clearly you were kidding yourself. The blood always shows" (161). In the eyes of the women he has loved, all Dominican men are cheaters, they are overtly flirtatious and cannot be trusted in matters of love. At times, the stories reveal the power of romantic love, but they are also tainted with a dosage of machismo.

"The Cheater's Guide to Love" closes the collection. It reminds the reader of "How to Date a Browngirl, Blackgirl, Whitegirl, or Halfie" from *Drown*. But unlike that story, "The Cheater's Guide" is not a handbook, but rather, a recount, almost in a confessional tone at times, of Yunior's suffering and efforts to regain a woman he has lost. The reader learns that the "you" of this story has been caught cheating and his fiancée threatens to harm him with a machete. She does not physically harm him; she does, however, hurt him emotionally. He finds that he cannot stop loving her. Over a five-year period, Yunior goes through times of suffering, denial, failed relationships, but ultimately and presumably, becomes a wiser person. This is a