

In the rush toward digital space, what often gets forgotten is the “meat,” the living, breathing, paying-bills bodies who write.



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As author Erika López says, “There’s already enough meat covering the world many times over and it’s time to clear some space” (<http://www.erikalopez.com>). The following is part one of a two-part conversation.

an interview with Erika López

by Ellen M. Gil-Gómez

I initiated this email conversation with Erika López in the Fall of 2004, since I’ve always been intrigued by her combination of porn, cartoon art and traditional American narrative forms, as well as by her representations of Latina lesbian lives. She reminds us of the discursive spaces that exist in “the arts.” López is an artist, writer, performer, and wanna-be movie producer, with a number of books to her credit: *Flaming Iguanas: An All Girl Road Novel Thing*; *Lap Dancing for Mommy: Tender Stories of Disgust, Blame and Inspiration*; *They Call Me Mad Dog: A Story for Bitter, Lonely People*; and *Hoochie Mama: The Other White Meat*, all published by Simon and Schuster.





Photo Credit: Debra McClinton

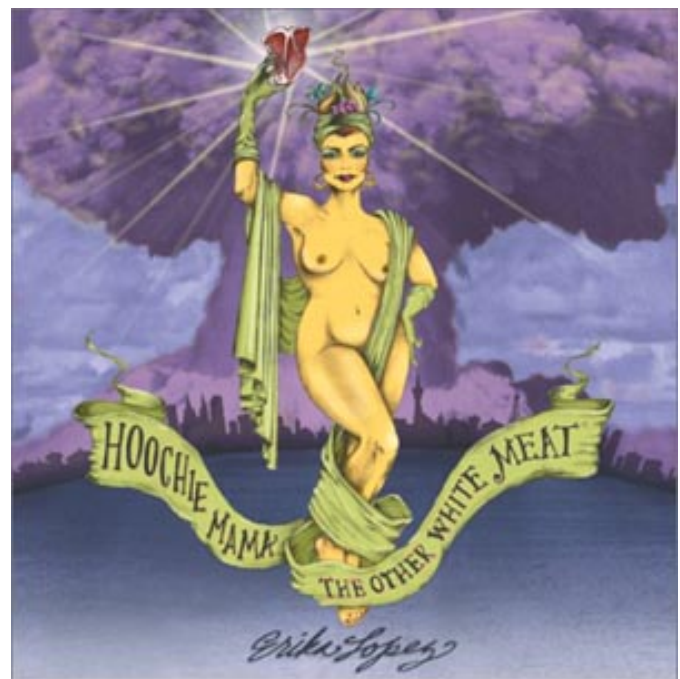
It all started after art school when López found herself out on the streets, unable to keep a job, and “losing the dream of being a rich and famous artist strung out on heroin supplied by gallery dealers” (www.erikalopez.com). During a stint as a cartoonist for porn magazines in San Francisco, she figured she could write better than many people and put her hand to writing a novel. She took the obligatory cross-country motorcycle trip (so that at least she could “write about doing something”) and finished her first book, *Flaming Iguanas*. The novel featured Justine “Tomato” Rodriguez’s motorcycle odyssey from New Jersey to San Francisco. Since her first book, López has dabbled with and evolved into and out of various characters: Tomato, Mad Dog, Hoochie Mama, the Welfare Queen, and, most recently, Grandma López.

Most recently Grandma López has written and performed the first-ever Food Stamp Variety Show entitled *Nothing Left but the Smell: A Republican on Welfare*, which was born as notes on the edges of salmon-colored welfare application forms. Since its successful run, López has turned her sights to movie production; she has created Monster Girl Movies, where she and the “little Puerto Rican child writers” are working on the script for *Flaming Iguanas*. They are currently seeking production funding but, if all else fails, will get money by “mugging businessmen with tennis elbows.” “MGM”’s tag line is “Unafraid, Cheap, Naturally Tan, and on the run.” López is currently holed up and working in secret on her next project and (we hope) not missing too many episodes of *Matlock* and *Columbo*.

GIL-GÓMEZ: Tell me the basic story of the birth of Tomato, Mad Dog, and/or Grandma López and how they are different from Erika López.

LÓPEZ: I have the imaginary fantasy life of a kid. I haven’t changed much. I even still piss my family off. Most of us don’t really change THAT much. But I have a fantasy life because in real life, I don’t think I can accomplish anything. I feel like a sofa girl or a lazy no-homework-doing girl. My fantasy life, coupled with my chameleon ways, makes for a lot of fun. It all starts out as lonely because you’re never a gang person, so you’re on your own. But then you grow up and think thank god!

I don’t want to find myself at age fifty and leave my wife for a man and have two kids who’re freaking out



and doing drugs, and the cycle of being polite so you don't shake things up continues.

My *Flaming Iguana* book begins as I told it to myself. I'd write and do the artwork and call myself a publisher. Now I want to be a movie producer. I want spray-on tans. But instead of girls draped around a swimming pool, I want kitty cats draped around swimming pools. But girl cats, or else it'll smell like spray on cat urine.

GIL-GÓMEZ: Can you talk more about how/why you got into training in art and then into writing/performing?

LÓPEZ: I went to art school. Couldn't make a living as a famous artist, so I tried to get dirty cartoons into magazines. No dice. Then I read a really bad book and thought I could do better. Stay away from good things if you're about to start a project.

GIL-GÓMEZ: Are there particular images of which you're particularly proud or which people respond to?

LÓPEZ: Yeah, lots of times. Most recently, I like bowing down before the welfare queen I created!

GIL-GÓMEZ: I've had a number of interesting experiences teaching your books to college students. But what I always find surprising is that the straight white guys in the class think "great, finally a book I can relate to." They seem to embrace your narrators as one of the (white) guys. However what I've found that freaks them out is the meat — the images of penises that Tomato creates.

LÓPEZ: Okay, what's interesting to me is that your boys or you or somebody, picked up on the whole "white guy" thing. I went to Puerto Rico at a conference years ago and said I felt like I didn't fit in with any gay Latino thing. I didn't speak Spanish, I didn't feel like a gay person, or even a woman sometimes. I just felt like a strange person. But a person with a big sense of entitlement and wanted and felt like a "white guy."

Some people clapped.

I was glad they didn't kill me.



I do feel like a white guy in so many ways. Yeah, I've fucked 'em and I've wanted money from 'em or wanted to be taken care of by them. But I felt like an imposter. Like I was playing some girly role I was never quite



Photo credit: Christina Shook

good at, and that's what you have to do in order to fulfill the contract. Just the way it is, like it or not. Whoever stays home has to do most of the dishes and laundry, like it or not, whoever gets paid for has to give a helluva lot more head. Just the contract. Nothing's for free. You live with your folks too long, you think it's free or cheap rent, but you're paying secret bills with interest you can't even fathom yet.

So I wanted to be in charge. I wanted the sense of entitlement. I've played victim. I've watched Janet Jackson on the *Good Times* TV show and wanted to be an abused child hiding under the sink like her. I've been "the abused child" and have had people swoop in to save me and I've played it up. I've gone on and manipulated and worked it.

Sure, it's true, but everyone's abused, and I learned that the savers, the rescuers wanted to save, as taking care of someone makes you feel all good inside like you went to church. There's nothing wrong in that at all. It just "is." I like saving animals because I imagine they wanna be saved. What if they wanna die and be reincarnated into something more ferocious already? Who knows? I've been hit by cars and with all the chemicals flooding your brain in shock, you don't know what's going on. But I digress. So I didn't want to be anyone's project. I didn't want anyone else getting their angel's wings off my hide. It's okay at first, great even, but you can get locked into a game where you're the street urchin, and they're saving you and then you don't even know what the payback is. There's always payback and it's unspoken as to what it is.

That's where I don't feel like a woman, or like a woman who got the brochures on how to tease little sisters with tales of her being adopted from another planet. But I didn't get the ones about what to bring to potlucks—or to even to understand potlucks. I didn't get the baby-making gene, and as for gushing and falling in love? Doesn't really happen except for when I've convinced someone to work with me or go with my idea. Then I feel like a man in a diamond commercial who's swinging his new fiancé around some piazza with a bunch of pigeons flying for cover while she whispers off screen with clenched teeth intensity, "I LOVE this man."

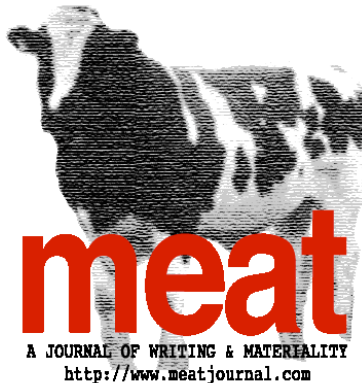
She loves him 'cause she thinks she's gonna get to stay at home when the first baby comes. She thinks feminism is for others. She thinks that staying home's gonna mean that she doesn't have to take it on all fours. And he feels like he's just bagged the best superfreak known to man and sealed it with a diamond. That's what I feel like, the man, but with no diamond yet. The pigeons are already running for cover and I can't figure out why because I want to feed them. I want to TAKE CARE of them and feel good about the girl side of myself.

See what I'm saying? I want to be in power. I don't want to be a woman boss who flings tissue boxes across the room at her subordinates or go to jail with former employees cheering. I want to be invisible like I'm SUPPOSED to have what I've got. Like a white man. I don't want to fight from a position of "Can I please have?" I want to take the place as if it were rightfully mine.

And the irony is that I'm not being unfaithful to "the colored girl cause" ... no I'm being FAITHFUL because we're supposed to have and not remind anyone of anything unless it works for a second. Life your eyebrow if you wanna tip the colored girl card. But make them forget. Don't get offended by jokes. Smack 'em on the ass and tell 'em one of your own, one up them.

part two of the Erika Lopez interview will appear in Volume 1.2 (Summer 2005).

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