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Desert Blood - Critical Essay
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Before I start the essay, as a disclaimer, I want to be clear that as a member of the queer community, I will be using the term queer as an identifier and not a pejorative. Queer politics are an important part of my life, and I will be using the term freely to speak about our community in a non-derogatory manner. I'm never sure who is and isn't in the loop about the usage of the word queer in modern times, so I just wanted to make sure to cover my bases.

In *Desert Blood* Ivon Villa faces the reality of femicide in her hometown, and is wrapped up in the effort to determine its source when her sister is abducted. Throughout the novel, feminism, queerness, gender norms, corruption, and other themes are explored. Because they are all fairly interconnected, I will touch on most of the themes mentioned.

Queerness is the first theme that interested me. While I usually enjoy queer literature, this aspect of the novel actually bothered me. This is most likely because of my own queer identity. I know others in the queer community who are tired of "realistic" portrayals of queerness and queer identities because it is too close to our own lives and experiences. That is not to say we dislike how realistic the portrayals of the characters themselves are, just the realities they face vis a vis discrimination and prejudice. That said, I appreciate the humanizing and grounded representation of Ivon and Brigit, as well as Ximena and Raquel. None of them fit some pigeonhole definition of queerness, and all represent their queerness in different ways. This is an important aspect of how queerness is explored in the novel, because Ivon is so often stereotyped for being a "butch" lesbian. She is still treated, however, as any other woman, objectified, sexualized, and leered at by men. But I will get back to that.

The "butch" subculture and how traditional gender roles and/or traditionalism in general (represented by Ivon's mother) clash with this subculture are important facets of the novel as well. Ivon is, at various times throughout the story, confronted by people who see the way she dresses and acts as an affront to their morals. Not only that, her mother sees it as a choice Ivon has made that is designed simply to shame her by being as audaciously nontraditional as possible. Her mother does not see it as "who she is," but as something shameful that Ivon has made herself out to be in order to vex her family.

On the same note, Ivon is often mistaken for a man and then apologized to as people realize she is a woman, something which can be analyzed from multiple angles.

It is clearly a facet of the story that is important, because it occurs multiple times. There are also other butch characters, which implies that some focus is meant to be drawn to that aspect. The author, perhaps, wanted to make it clear that butchness is not normalized, and that traditional gender roles grate against Ivon. They're a part of what perpetuates homophobia directed at lesbians in particular, and Ivon's confrontations with that are an irksome part of everyday life for her. This is what it is to live as an openly gay woman. The way this is presented seems almost deliberately banal, which implies to me that queerness is a secondary theme, and that the main point is that Ivon is a woman, and dares to be a non-traditional woman.

Butchness is also widely debated in the queer community in general. There are "lipstick lesbians" (Raquel might be called something like this) who hold distaste for butch lesbians, and there are also some who exclusively seek butch women out. There are various points of discourse involved here. Women who love other women are made to feel like freaks for it, and are made to believe through tacit social conditioning that this is a "masculine" trait. Butchness, therefore, is often seen as a result of discriminatory social conditioning and is even looked down upon by the queer community. It is perceived as internalized homophobia and gender conformity/hetero-conformity (making oneself more "male" to conform to the stereotype that heterosexuality is the norm). This can be a tricky needle to thread because, while it is true for some women that they present as butch due to these pressures, many other women simply feel more comfortable presenting this way. In either case, this is an issue of discrimination and the victim should not be blamed.

Ivon seems to be in the latter category, and does not succumb to the discrimination leveled at her. Thus, her portrayal can be seen as a positive affirmation of butchness in wider society, and in the lesbian community as well. She is clearly, openly, and freely butch, and it is an important part of her character and her life, but she has not been shaped by discrimination to be this way. Rather, she has let her true self out in defiance of the social pressure (because social pressure also exists in opposition to butchness), instead of as a result. This is the presentation I believe the author wanted to convey (or perhaps it's simply subtext I've read into), and it has a message in it for queer people and non-queer people alike.

Feminism is the more crucial theme that ties together this and many other parts of the book, it seems. Not only is feminism centrally important when considering the issue of femicide, but also poverty, lesbianism, and gender norms. First of all, femicide is pretty much the ultimate anti-feminist act. Women are being exterminated based on gender, which shows exactly how women are viewed in our societies (both Mexican and American). Disposable. That is what women are in our world. This is explored further as a feminist issue as the victims are blamed for their murders based on what they were wearing and what they were doing. The author often brings this to light, as when Ivon

creates a poster of her sister and Father Francis remarks that the picture from the fair makes her look a “certain way” that would not be pitiable. There are also other media sources and people throughout the novel that remark that the women were “asking for it.”

This is a modern issue in all countries. There are women being raped in this country on a daily basis whose attackers are never blamed for their actions, or held culpable. There are young men who are not given substantial jail time for rape because it would “ruin their lives.” This clearly demonstrates one of many ways in which men’s lives are valued over women’s. Because what that man has done to the woman he’s raped, in this example, has scarred her, probably for life. Instances of women having lifelong PTSD from rape are drastically higher than those of soldiers coming back from war, for example. That has not sunken into our collective consciousness yet, and women are blamed for what has been done to them, rather than men. Again, based on what women wear on their faces and bodies, they are blamed for attracting rapists to them.

At the same time, this double standard exists where Ivon is reviled for choosing not to be “feminine.” The fine line you are meant to walk between “whore” and “man” is an impossible contradiction, and whatever end of the spectrum you fall on, you’re still not safe. As I mentioned earlier, Ivon is still targeted as a sexual object in spite of her butch appearance. And even with this, she is given grief for wearing shorts multiple times, as though displaying any portion of her body means she’s asking for the sexual attention, or something worse.

Aside from the obvious connections with femicide, feminism is also important in how the murdered women are treated before, during, and after their murders. I hate to overuse this word, but they are certainly nothing more than disposable objects to the men who murder them. Men have literally dehumanized women in their minds. Things like the site Ivon finds advertising Juarez as a tourist attraction for its prostitution are just one contributor to a massive societal illness. Women are sexualized and broken down into parts in media all the time, and this is very literally done by the murderers in the novel (and real life). The way this is all illustrated in the novel creates no question in the reader’s mind that this is a feminist issue, and we must combat the values that create a society where things like this happen.

The value of women is inherently tied to sexuality and our bodies. That is what the author pretty openly states by having the pornographers refer to women as “pennies” and “nickels.” They are directly using the women for sexual purposes, and referring to their sexual and physical worth with coins of small denomination.

Another important aspect of feminism explored in the novel is how it is basically not present in powerful circles. Those who run the show, as it were, clearly thrive on the use and abuse of women, and must, on some level, believe that women are

unimportant. And though Rubi Reyna is a feminist force in the media that does pose a threat to those involved in/culpable for the murders, she is still ultimately unable to do anything, as is Ivon. Ivon expresses this clearly at the end of the novel when she thinks that someone much more powerful than her with nothing to lose would have to solve the problem.

The corruption of power in general is an important theme in the novel. JW is the personification of corrupted power. He uses his power over the group of pornographers, other border patrol officers, and people crossing the border as he pleases. He, the United State government, and those involved in running the maquiladoras all benefit from the use of women's bodies in this scenario. This extends to Mexican authorities as well, who benefit from the use of women for prostitution.

Another important theme is poverty in Juarez. NAFTA is often mentioned in the book as a source of woes, and in fact an indirect cause for the murders as women have flocked from more southern areas of Mexico to work in maquiladoras, much to the benefit of the United States. This is also beneficial to those perpetrating the murders directly -- whether they be involved in pornography or otherwise -- because these women are essentially nameless and faceless after moving from their southern towns. No one in Juarez is going to know who they are, and if they do, it's such a populous area that it's impossible to pin down exactly who they socialize with or who they are, really.

This all relates to the issue of poverty because even as the United States and Mexican governments make money from the cheap labor of the women in Juarez, the women themselves see little benefit. Yet it's still a higher wage than they would receive elsewhere, which is made obvious by the migration of women to the area for work. It also ties into the feminist issue of forced sterilization and women's reproductive rights in general. The women are so poor, they're willing to pretend they aren't pregnant in order to continue working. They have no other recourse. This is another facet of the corruption involved in this novel as well, tying many issues together. A lack of reproductive rights, anti-feminist ideals, corruption, and poverty all form a net that traps women in these jobs they can't escape. They need the money for their desperately poor families and themselves. Simply to survive. They can't be pregnant, and it is suggested that they can't even be fertile or they're likely to be fired, meaning they will be even more desperately poor. Corrupt people running maquiladoras will use whatever means possible to keep their cheap labor from escaping this trap, and it is all directed at women.

This novel was deeply upsetting for me, and I went back and forth about how I felt about it for quite some time. On the one hand, I dislike portrayals of the suffering of women as they are often regarded as a treat for spectators of this kind of violence. "Torture porn" comes to mind, which is quite literally a part of the novel. Interestingly,

this novel may very well attract people of that ilk because of its explicit descriptions of torture enacted on women. I don't mean to suggest that the author has irresponsibly described the suffering of these women. In fact, this novel was probably written so graphically to make a point that is vitally important. However, we do not exist in a vacuum, and well-intentioned or not, there is some level of consideration that needs to be made for how these scenes might be misperceived. That, in itself, is a feminist issue that I think was not addressed. I would like to see what the author has to say about this specifically, because it troubled me to think that a feminist author would use these descriptions so liberally. At some point, it begins to lean towards the realm of shock value, in my opinion. Yes, some of it was necessary to keep it in the readers' minds that this is a horrific thing being done, and to impress on us exactly how awful these killings are. But that does not extend as far as the author took it. There were some scenes that I was unable to read in one sitting because I have been treated for PTSD related to sexual violence. I threw up because of this book. I cried and had nightmares and felt sick all day because of this book. So while I appreciate what the author had in mind, I simply feel that she took it too far, and I needed to address that here.