

# Jarchar: Reading Makina/Makina Reading in Yuri Herrera's *Señales que precederán el fin del mundo*

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Mexican writer Yuri Herrera's 2009 novel, *Señales que precederán el fin del mundo* begins with death, destruction, and failure. "Estoy muerta" are the novel's first words, a matter-of-fact declaration coming from its enigmatic protagonist, Makina, as a sinkhole opens up beneath her feet. One of several cave-ins regularly and randomly swallowing up her hometown as of late, this particular collapse claims an automobile and an anonymous pedestrian. Makina escapes by the skin of her teeth. Within a matter of pages she faces and embraces a different kind of obliteration, accepting her mother's charge to seek out her lost brother on a journey that will take her from the local village to la Ciudadcita, through el Gran Chilango, across the US-Mexico border, and into Gringolandia. Hers will be an epic journey commencing in the underworld lairs of local crime bosses, riding across Mexico City subway lines, traversing deadly rivers and deserts, then skirting mountain passes into a land of endless highways, empty sports stadia, monotonous suburbia, and fiercely guarded military bases. The indifference, cruelty, and racism displayed in these locales will push aside warmth and human connection. By novel's end our protagonist will descend into darkness, figuratively, and perhaps literally, erased from the waning world.

And yet her course over the novel, paralleling ours as readers, is not simply one of annihilation. Out of her journey into black, cold erasure, new possibilities, even new ways of speaking, arise—signs that precede the end of the world, to make a play on the title of Herrera's novel, but that do not yet spell that end. These new possibilities abide in space, reside partially in character, and haunt the novel's narrative voice. They

begin, ironically, with the stripping down of all three to bare essences, hollowing out space and flattening character, even as the narrative voice and vision deny readers familiar connections and comforts. What is left for Makina and her readers at the conclusion of the novel are the mere signs—sounds spoken and written, language, glyphs of black on white, mere words. And yet, in these words—indeed because words are all we can grab hold of—a path, unclear though it may be, towards some semblance of light or at least sustenance takes shape, if not yet achieving full substance. *Señales que precederán el fin del mundo*, then, is just what its title says: a sign at the end of a certain world, presenting within itself signs at its end that signal a way forward, even if that way for now may be hardly more than those signs themselves.

The idea of a way out, of a path to break through the darkness of Makina's descent, cuts first across space. And to be sure, Makina's journey in this novel is spatial, as she moves from village to town to city and finally to another country. Even so, the novel makes short work of any traditional sense of geography. The story begins, as noted, with the collapsing earth, followed by a brief episode that finds the adolescent protagonist in her mother's embrace where she receives the charge that will impel her forward: "Luego la abrazó y la tuvo ahí, en su regazo... era siempre como estar en su regazo, entre sus tetas morenas, a la sombra de su cuello ancho y gordo, bastaba que a uno le dirigiera la palabra para sentirse guarecido" (12). This will be the last familiar, comfortable space the novel offers—to protagonist or reader. As if drawing ironic attention to that very lack, the novel's chapter headings are explicitly geographic in nature: The Earth, The Place Where the Hills Meet, The Obsidian Mound, The Place Where Flags Wave, The Place Where People's Hearts are Eaten, to name several. Within the chapters themselves, however, the spaces described by the titles resist the human impulse to place-making. The headings mock the reader's search for a traditional sense of geography, enticing readers to engage in the place-making work of what Robert Sack has called *homo geographicus*, only to deny all access in the content that follows (12). As Martin Lombardo has shown, many of the places named in the chapter headings are frontier zones, suggesting the impossibility of abode (205). If the chapter headings offer little sense of place beyond the naming, the geography that follows those headings is in fact nameless. We only know Makina's hometown as the place where she resides before moving on to la Ciudadcita, and then from there to el Gran Chilango and so on, following the course laid out in the chapter headings. The river she crosses to enter Gringolandia is never anything but the river. The hills that follow are only ever the hills, and so on over the course of the novel. Suburbia, where she first seeks her brother, has no name. Nor does the army base where she at last finds him, nor the restaurant, nor the desert, and so on. While readers may be able to identify certain places—El Gran Chilango is Mexico City, the river is the Rio Grande, and of course the land of the Gringos is the United States—that identity remains only, finally, in the mind. The narrator offers nothing, indifferent to what we readers may or may not know—even when (perhaps precisely because?) those locations are so clearly known. If, on the one hand, such refusal to name simply keeps the novel free of what Marcelo Riosco has called the exhausted lexicon of Mexican "border literature," it also converts these places, thanks to their familiarity to the reader beyond the text, into places that both are and are not. Readers may know them, but at the same time, they are, per the logic of the novel, arguably not places at all. Makina's journey is a quest across a landscape of nonplaces, sites devoid of meaningful human interaction, drained of history or social possibility, as philosopher Marc Augé first noted (77-79). If human existence is to be found first and foremost in its places as thinkers from Gaston Bachelard, to Henri Lefebvre, to the aforementioned Sack have argued ("we don't so much know ourselves in time as in a sequence of spaces" [Bachelard 8]), then Herrera's novel appears to care little for humankind.

Little wonder that rather than human, Makina and other characters feel more like parts of a machine. She is, in fact, by name, a machine—a *máquina*—with a mission that must be completed: “Una es la puerta, no la que cruza la puerta” (19). Buses, trucks, and rafts are likewise mere vehicles for realizing a mission. Those who would attempt to create meaning via contact—even when violent, as in the case of a boy on a bus who attempts to sexually assault Makina—are ruthlessly dismissed: quickly, coldly, even violently. The only home in the novel, a suburban single-family dwelling where Makina’s brother once found refuge and rescue from the disappointments of life amongst the gringos, turns out to be a mere holding station for a series of ciphers who share in common only their desire to evade commitment. It’s all cold, indifferent, and impermeable, a world hermetically sealed to the possibilities of meaningful, sustained, and open human exchange, the dynamic that converts space-time into place, if not home.

The occupants of this hollowed-out landscape are equally emptied characters. With the exception of Makina, her mother Cora, and Makina’s occasional guide/mentor, Chucho, no character in the novel receives a proper name. In fact, the already minimal nomenclature devolves as the novel progresses. After first chapter visits to the headquarters of el Señor Dobleú and el Señor Hache, Makina heads off to see the merely lettered Señor Q and, still later, Señor P. Boys of Makina’s age, arguably of more interest to the protagonist, may receive the briefest of backstories in the novel, but are still only referred to by simple descriptors: the boyfriend, the boys on the bus, and even the brother, who, despite being the presumed reason for so much of the novel’s action, is only ever known as just that—the brother. Nomenclature dissolves even further once Makina crosses the border into Gringolandia. There, besides brief encounters with the aforementioned Chucho, she engages with a kind of police line of types: the Driver, the Redheaded Anglo, or the Racist Cop, to name but a few. As in Herrera’s first novel, *Trabajos del reino* (2004), all are nameless. Most receive no description, to say nothing of narrated past or future. Instead, the non-characters walk and talk through the novel’s nonplaces like a rabble of walking dead, playing their singular role then disappearing, emotionally unaffected and unaffecting. Of all the walkers, Makina, as Britta Anderson has noted, is the most restless, an outsider constantly on the go, each chapter concluding with an image of Makina’s body in movement (175, 177). So, while she may enjoy a name and be the focal point of narration, she proves just as difficult to pin down.

Such difficulty, of course, does not originate in her narrated qualities, but in the nature of narration. As with the places and people of the novel, the telling offers the reader little warmth or engagement. While traditional, in the sense of standing apart from and beyond Makina and her world, the narrator offers the reader little in the way of privileged information, to say nothing of insight into the inner workings of the protagonist or her social milieu. This initially strikes us as odd since we intuit and then observe how closely the narrative voice follows the mind and vision of its protagonist. Indeed, Makina’s is really the only viewpoint the novel offers. The narrator, as if impossibly tethered to Makina’s every move, never ascends to narrative heights to share with the reader any bird’s-eye-view or global understanding of the dynamics hurtling the protagonist from la Ciudadcita to el Gran Chilango and into Gringolandia. Nor does he shift to share with us the fears of mother Cora, of Makina’s jilted boyfriend, of the ever-vigilant if rarely present Chucho, or of Makina’s brother with his harrowing, bizarre, and arguably absurd adventure. The view is only ever Makina’s. Yet even then, it is limited. The novel’s third paragraph exemplifies this distant yet terribly close but impossibly limiting narration:

Era la primera vez que le tocaba locura telúrica. La Ciudadcita estaba cosida a tiros y túneles horadados por cinco siglos de voracidad platera y a veces algún infeliz descubría por las malas lo

a lo pendejo que habían sido cubiertos. Algunas casas ya se habían mandado a mudar al inframundo, y una cancha de fut, y media escuela vacía. Esas cosas siempre les suceden a lo demás, hasta que le suceden a uno, se dijo. Echó una ojeada al precipicio, empatizó con el infeliz camino de la chingada, Bueno camino, dijo sin ironía, y luego musitó: Mejor me apuro a cumplir este encargo. (11-12)

It's a narration constantly shifting between narrator and Makina. "Locura telúrica," "a lo pendejo," and "el infeliz camino de la chingada" are Makina's words, if wrapped in the narrator's clarifications: "Era la primera vez" "se dijo" "Echó una ojeada." The fact that this mixing occurs in nearly every sentence prevents the narrator from gaining any distance from his subject. Makina has, as it were, grabbed hold of the narrative voice while steering clear of wholesale occupation. The last sentence of the paragraph, an utterly traditional third-person narrative description of Makina's act and speech, if not for the lack of punctuation—what narratologists would call direct tagged speech—shows the extent of the Makina/narrator conflation. The narrator still speaks like a narrator; it is still the narrative voice, a separate entity to Makina. But it can't find separation either from Makina's viewpoint or her voice. The effect is that the narrator simply can't offer the reader much perspective.

And yet, the proximity, as previously noted, doesn't appear to get us any closer to Makina either. Makina remains an enigma. She is, while interesting, rather impenetrable: *máquina*-, or machine-like. In her narrative representation, she would never be mistaken for what EM Forster famously described as a "round" character (67-78). She isn't richly described or redolent of contradiction, and while we hear her words, even sometimes double-voiced onto those of her narrator, at no point do we enter her thoughts to become privy to her "inner life," all qualities traditionally identified with rich, complex characters (Rimmon-Kenan 41).

As for backstory, the whole of the novel features only three brief glimpses into Makina's past: a one paragraph description on the second page of the novel of Makina receiving her mother's charge; a slightly more sustained flashback of interactions with an erstwhile boyfriend; and a shorter look at the moment her brother decided to go north in search of an inheritance. Moreover, one of these three, the scene with her mother, doesn't actually read as backstory. Narrated in the present tense as a distinct, stand-alone subsection of the first chapter, readers only understand towards the end of the novel that it predates the rest of the action through clues they pick up in later episodes. Finally, the longest of the two other analepses, Makina's memory of the boyfriend, only underscores the protagonist's impenetrability. While she makes herself physically available to him, she refuses any emotional engagement, responding to any attempted professions or confessions of love with an increase of cold, calculated physicality. The boyfriend, tired of emotionally distant sexual favors, ultimately gives up and heads out on his own journey north.

Not surprisingly, when Makina does the same, this already rather simple and psychologically inscrutable character manifests little if any character development. Once again, machine-like, Makina quickly processes each experience and moves on: she is, as noted earlier, merely "the door" (18). Near-death experiences at the sinkhole, while crossing the river, and then while escaping through the desert leave her unmoved. Sexual harassment, physical violence, and racist behaviors by others solicit, at most, rapid-fire, quick-witted rebukes. It might be argued that Makina's single-minded focus on her mission necessitates if not dictates such behavior. But when at last she meets her brother face-to-face, there are no embraces, no kisses, no tears, no obvious expression of affection, and certainly no psychological penetration:

Caminaron en silencio un rato. Giraban la cabeza para mirarse, ora él, ora ella, y luego volvían a mirar al frente, incrédulos. Rumiaron un poco más lo que cada cual debía decirse. Al fin, siempre mirando al frente, él inició el diálogo:

¿Le costó mucho trabajo encontrarme? (96)

When the siblings part, Makina, understanding that her brother is permanently lost to her—literally someone else—continues impenetrable:

Su hermano la miró por última vez, como desde lejos, dio media vuelta y volvió al cuartel. Makina se quedó mirando la entrada mucho rato. Luego extrajo el sobre que le había dado la Cora, sacó la hoja que contenía y la leyó.

Ya devuélvase, decía, en la letra irregular de la Cora. Ya devuélvase, no esperamos nada de usted. (104)

While these passages confirm Makina as fundamentally unchanged even by the unexpected conclusion of her single and singular mission, they also make clear that despite such lack of change—establishing her, it would appear, as an utterly “flat” character—Makina is as a character both engaging and powerful.

The key is, again, in the narration, specifically the physically intense yet emotionally tensioned co-existence of the narrative voice with the protagonist. The narrator, so tightly tethered to Makina, has nothing else to describe and can indeed go nowhere else. As a result, readers are equally bound to the enigmatic protagonist. Consequently, while we can't step back far enough to even observe facial expressions, we have nowhere else to turn, nothing else to distract our gaze as she stares off into the distance while time slowly passes. As a result, we note small details that take large form: that she and her brother turn their heads to look at one another just before staring ahead. Then, because the narrator can go nowhere else, we too register the silence and the labored conversation. In those details, given the circumstances, we feel their pain. Or confusion. How do you make sense of a world that breaks up homes human piece by human piece? That allows a young man from rural Mexico to become with a bit of slick paperwork a son of US suburbia, that then flies him half-way around the world to fight in places and against people he had likely never heard of when he began his journey, and to return literally a different person? Indeed, Tatiana Calderón Le Joliff reads Makina's encounter with her brother as a moment that rather than resolving questions, only intensifies her fear and confusion (92). Whatever the case, their encounter certainly inspires more silence than words.

The narrator reports barely more than what he sees and then what Makina will share via spoken words or clearly articulated thoughts. He and we cannot go where Makina will not consciously go. Yet in his obsession to know her, he cannot leave her either and thus neither can we. In this way, without any narrative commentary, backstory, or psychological probing, readers have learned earlier in the novel—when Makina traverses el Gran Chilango—that fear courses through the veins under Makina's rough exterior. “No podía perderse,” we read. “Y se repetía que no podía perderse,” we continue (27). Again and again the narrator informs us that she couldn't, just couldn't lose herself in this big cement-hilled city. Of course, in all of this it is the narrator doing the talking. The narrator can't pry far enough inside Makina's soul to know for a certain that those are her fears. Nor can he remove himself far enough away to describe any look of panic or fear or anxiety on her face. He has access only to her movements and her words. But he carries them so closely that they become his. And the reader's. In short, Makina is availed to the reader not via Makina but via the narrator. Or in other words, Makina feels real,

becomes interesting, even captivating, by way of language.

And if there is anything that sets Makina apart from other characters in the novel, it is her way with words. Certainly, as noted earlier, Makina's most apparent attribute is her toughness. But it's hardly differentiating. From the various crime bosses to her brother and even her mother, in Makina's world only the strong survive. Resilience abounds. Makina, alone, however, controls language. As the novel begins, Makina is the linguistic center of her community. A master of three tongues—the local indigenous tongue, the Latin (Spanish), and that of the North (English)—Makina, though still in her youth, works as the local switchboard operator, coolly handling the regular calls across political and linguistic borders. In that task she is not only a master of speech but also an expert at knowing when to speak and when to guard her silence (19). It's a skill she employs deftly over the course of the novel. She speaks and silences her way through the lairs of the four local bosses. She says only enough to her would-be assailants to win an enduring respect that transcends mere awareness of personal desire and demands. Toward the novel's end, she rescues a group of undocumented immigrants through her ability to write—and in English, at that. Even her skill at silencing her boyfriend, though not literally linguistic, is realized by deft use of her tongue. Makina is, then, at once a consequence of language, a weapon of language, and a language weapon herself.

If this is the case, then it appears Makina is more character effect than character. That is, while all character in literature is ultimately an effect of language, in Herrera's novel Makina is explicitly so. Readers may approach her story in search of a "realistic" protagonist, one who imitates people they see in real life. But once inside the novel they find themselves tethered with and ultimately drawn to a construct that calls attention to its own making (once more, she is Makina, a machine). Indeed, as both Ivonne Sánchez Becerril and Rioseco have shown, Herrera emplaces his character's adventure within the structure of a nine-stage descent into the Aztec underworld of Mictlán, each of the novel's nine chapters corresponding to a stage of the journey (Sánchez Becerril 110-11; Rioseco). Makina is, per Sánchez Becerril's reading, an archetype; again, more a symbolic—and ultimately linguistic—construct than an imitation of "real people." That being said, the Mictlán reading draws attention to the final challenge of the novel, the question of Makina's ultimate failure or success. If the journey to the north is a journey into the underworld—that is, towards death—then Makina's and her brother's transformations are ultimately annihilations.

The novel's final lines support such a reading. In the novel's ninth and concluding chapter, Makina descends, in an act that appears to be permanent, into the underworld that in the novel's opening lines had first threatened to destroy her. Maquina appears, in short, to die. If this is the case, then her redemptive mission has failed. To be sure, in keeping with the pattern established by earlier seekers of new identity, Maquina finds in that final dark underworld new papers with the assistance of a manicured secretary ("una mujer vieja y guapa, de larguísimas uñas blancas y rostro empolvado" [117]) and a frumpy clerk ("un hombre alto y delgado cubierto de una holgada chamarra de piel" [118]) that are nothing if not American government bureaucrats.

Tenga, le ofreció un legajo, Ya todo está arreglado.

Makina tomó el legajo y miró su contenido. Ahí estaba ella, con otro nombre y otra ciudad de nacimiento. Su foto, nuevos números, nuevo oficio, nuevo hogar. (118)

But with those papers, instead of a stepping into some new light, Makina recedes, almost falls back as it were, into darkness. "Me han desollado," she responds on receipt of the papers. In the English translation of the novel: "I've been skinned." We read then that "le dio un breve ataque de

pánico” (119). Her reaction is hardly what we expect from an immigrant success story. Indeed, Makina’s receipt of papers, and their accompanying new name and numbers, elicits a phrase suggestive of the novel’s opening sequence at the edge of the sinkhole. For the next several lines it is as if her life passes before her eyes, a sequence of the places—the village, la Ciudadcita, el Gran Chilango—where Makina had first become Makina. But those days are apparently now past. In the novel’s closing lines she accepts her fate, and does so “con todo el cuerpo y con toda su memoria, lo comprendió de verdad y finalmente se dijo Estoy lista” (119). The novel has come full circle from one sinkhole to another.

So has Makina been reborn through immigration to the North, or is she to the contrary, ironically, dead? If it is the case that only in this final underworld of the novel does she at last “truly understand” and then accept her fate, we may read Makina’s descent to be as much a death as a rebirth. Yet, this death is merely the conclusion of a death-process that began with the first line of the novel and the opening of the sinkhole. From that point forward she feels the earth under her nails (13), and then glides as if impervious to the dangers around her through a local criminal underworld. When she arrives in el Gran Chilango, she elects to traverse it underground, hoping to tread softly in the city, not wanting it to be the place to “dejar huella” (25). At the river crossing she drowns but then somehow doesn’t (40) and then in the desert is shot through the ribs (54) but continues on the rest of her journey without medical care. We note later that despite so much wandering, so much blood, sweat, and earth, at her journey’s conclusion she has no odor (118).

Read this way, Makina’s quest is not simply a shadow of an earlier archetype, but the journey of a dead soul, already separated from the body, towards its final resting place in the underworld. The name of her guide, Chucho, is both a nickname for Jesús, and a colloquial Spanish term for a dog. To Western readers Chucho is at once Cerberus helping Makina across the river Styx and a Christ figure guiding her towards new life. To readers familiar with the Mictlán journey, he is Xolotl, the canine twin brother of Quetzalcoatl, who, like Cerberus, guides the deceased to their final resting place, while also protecting the sun from underworld dangers on its own daily journey across the sky. Either way Chucho is simultaneously the reaper and the resurrection, the guide of both quick and dead.

If Makina is indeed deceased, the problematic nature of her character at least partially resolves itself. We no longer expect of her what we might of a typical protagonist. It is no wonder that she lacks the complexity, psychological depth, or emotional development we have come to anticipate in traditional characters; Makina is, like the earth beneath her feet, slowly dissolving, inexorably collapsing. She is merely one more of the many signs preceding the end of the world. Her’s is an ending that has long been taking place, an ending that has already taken the life of so many who have gone north like her brother who, similar to Makina at novel’s end, finds himself not merely making a new life for himself but literally transformed into a new person with not merely a new present and future but a new past to boot. If Makina then is incomplete, un-rounded as a protagonist, it is because she is not, in fact, the sole protagonist. Using traditional plotting jargon, Makina is merely the tag—the *Peripetia*, or restoration—in a three part Aristotelian plot where not Makina but her brother enacts the *Hamaratia* (sin) and not Makina but her mother Cora plays the key role in the central moment of *Anagnorisis* (recognition). This is a familial tragedy, not an individualistic bildungsroman. Makina’s brother abandons the family, her mother sees that this mustn’t be, and Makina sallies forth with the aid of helpers and guides to restore unity. The entire novel with the exception of two brief analepsis is *Peripetia*.

But if *Peripetia*—that is, restoration—then what are we to make of the idea expressed in the novel’s title of the world’s end: “el fin del mundo”? Here we return to the question of success or failure, life or death. If Makina

is *Peripetia*, her restoration culminates at the very moment of her annihilation: her receipt of papers from the American bureaucrats in the novel's final pages. To be sure, if this is a family romance, the receipt of her papers at the end of the novel hardly constitutes a physical family reunion, let alone anything we would readily associate with a traditional unity of spirit. Cora remains alone in the nameless, collapsing homeland to the south, while her erstwhile son moves forward on his US military base committed to a new identity with another's name and papers. And Makina is of course "muerta." The nuclear family dissolves, permanently separated by geography, by nationality, by surname, and even by the logic of existence itself. Where, then, is restoration?

Restoration comes instead in a broader familial moving beyond—that which has caused early readers of the novel to see it as "un salto al otro lado" with respect to narrative about the Mexico-to-USA immigration experience (Lemus 86). At the novel's beginning, Cora offers her daughter a final embrace upon her fertile lap, enveloped in her life-giving breasts. But that seat rests upon a four-hundred year legacy of colonial and postcolonial exploitation, resulting in collapsing mine shafts and bullet-riddled streets. The goddess of fertility belongs to the dying world. She has raised a machine—perhaps machines, if we were ever able to follow the brother's journey as well—for a new world, one that is, in the specific case of her daughter, a language machine.

For it is in language that our narrator—guided, as if her were her latest boyfriend, by the alternately resistant and insistent tongue of Makina—signals a way beyond our impasse. This comes in the words placed over the lintel of the final door signaling the exit from the known toward the underworld of Makina's last descent: "Jarcha." The novel's outstanding neologism, "jarchar" as employed throughout the novel is understood by readers to mean to exit, to head out, or to move along: e.g. "Para luego volverse y jarchar con el cansancio de quien sabe que le están mintiendo" (31); "Pero antes de dejar que afloraran ya se había dado la vuelta y había jarchado para no volver" (32); "devolvió el lápiz labial al morral y jarchó del baño" (38). Herrera, however, never makes its meaning or purpose explicit. There is, to be sure, no verb "jarchar" in Spanish.

"Jarcha" is instead a noun that names a certain very narrow genre of proto-Spanish poetry. Accordingly, to "jarchar" as used here, is to exit or leave, but to do so poetically, that is, in a way that explores and expands mental and emotional realms through the tool—or weapon, if the violence of Herrera's novel is any hint—of language. Moreover, "jarcha" holds much more specific historical associations. A "jarcha" is a short verse of poetry dating from tenth and eleventh century Spain, tacked on to the end of longer lyric poems written in Arabic. The jarcha, however, is composed not in Arabic but Mozarabic. Mozarabic is the name traditionally given to a long-since disappeared Romance language employed by Christians living in Muslim territories of the Iberian Peninsula during its long Islamic occupation. The language was so unofficial, so transitional that it never developed its own script: the jarchas were written in Arabic and required live, oral reading to be understood. They will, consequently, prove wholly indecipherable to one not equally immersed in that hybrid culture. While some Mozarabic texts were transcribed into Latin in medieval times, the jarchas remain to date the earliest and principal evidence of this transitional culture. As such, they represent for scholars the earliest manifestation of what will become Spanish literature, and in so doing point to this now official, organized, and canonized tradition as the explicit product of the convergence of older realms, the Roman-Visigothic and the Muslim, with perhaps a bit of ancient Hebrew added in for good measure. The jarcha, then, epitomizes not only hybrid, evolutionary language, but the iteration of that language in a specific, unrepeatably moment. It must be further noted that Mozarabic, in a sense, came to nothing. Unlike other Iberian dialects of the day, Mozarabic did not directly evolve into any of today's modern peninsular tongues (Castilian, Catalán, Gallego-Portugués, etc). Mozarabic

may arguably be the beginnings of these, but not genealogically speaking. Instead it remains forever hybrid, truncated, and lost, a still not fully understood language, a remnant of a once vibrant, heterogeneous culture at the cusp of a new world. Finally, as Yuri Herrera has himself pointed out, the jarcha was typically written in the voice of a woman saying goodbye (Figueroa; Body), and in that sense, it expresses the voice of the half of humankind traditionally on the wrong end of borders of power. Hence, Mozarabic jarchas were both a sign preceding the end of an old world and the sign of the birth of the new one. And, importantly, they were little more. As Herrera again notes concerning his use of the word jarcha in writing his novel: it was “really just an intuition” (Body). Like the word and the world it suggests.

Likewise Makina, her world, and Herrera’s novel. Makina is only partial. Readers who search for a whole or rounded character seek in vain. More language than person, she is the mechanized, jerry-rigged, hybrid form tacked onto five hundred years of undoing, of digging out, and of breaking up. Once mined for its mineral resources, Makina’s world is now undermined for its human ones, her brother standing as the absurdist—and yet completely true-to-life—extreme of imperial power outsourcing its most sacred and hellish obligations to the ends of the earth. As the earth caves in around her, the family dissolves, but only because it is ultimately society and culture itself that are collapsing. Cora, like humankind in general—the endangered species she represents in her earth-mother guise—has run out of options. She knows only to send her last remaining child in search of reunion—a true Aristotelian *Peripetatia*.

But Makina, an incipient if not fully-formed citizen of the hybrid, understands her journey not as a restoration but as a “jarchando.” Hers is a poetic, exploratory, paradoxical, always partial journey into the beyond: dead in life, alive in death; impossible to the reader and yet the reader’s only possibility; Cora’s daughter and yet the world’s archetype. She is Mozarabic in her performance: an index of the new without being its full revelation, what one reader of the novel has called a “displaced referent...a trace that readers cannot follow” (Anderson 183).

The answers Makina seeks are certainly not to be found in a simple acquisition of US citizenship. Gringolandia is not the answer, what another critic calls “not an ideal but a form of survival” (Lombardo 204). But neither are the abandoned village, the collapsing town, or the undesired Gran Chilango. There is no place. There are no people. And the language is enigmatic. In fact, on reading the final command—“Jarcha”—as she at last descends into the underworld in the novel’s final pages, Makina realizes that she can no longer recall what the word means—not in English, nor in Spanish, nor in her indigenous mother tongue. Even the hybrid is not enough. The moment of meaning has passed. As Calderón Le Joliff has argued, Makina’s labyrinthine border experience produces a confusion that undermines any clear writing of her story, or of any border story for that matter (93).

Ironically, it is only in this state of growing darkness and the collapse of signification that Makina receives papers from the old, sodden bureaucrat in his dingy office space. The papers give her new meaning and thus new life, but they are, at the same time, a gift inseparable from her recent experience with violence, racism, sexism and a culture of spectacle and military power. The seemingly archetypal earth-mother Cora at the beginning of the novel has not, it turns out, shown her daughter the way to redemption and renewal in some new world paradise, but simply compelled her kin to move on—to “jarchar.” The past is sunk in the abyss of history. There is no evidence that the present will be any different. It is for now at least as dark as the sinkholes of yesteryear. But it is the only option left. The village, la Ciudadcita, El Gran Chilango, Gringolandia are gone. And we feel that we can’t go on. And yet we must go on. Jarchar. Move on. Because doing so will do just that: move us on. To where? Herrera’s title suggest to

world's end. What comes after that? There is no answer here, only bits of a language of transition that, like Mozarabic, likely will itself may leave no trace nor even lead directly toward any future. Nevertheless, in its historical and cultural resonances, the language play suggests that something new will dawn. If only, like Makina, we continue to step once more into the dark.

Is this leap from Makina to reader too much? Speaking of the connections between his literature and politics, a field he once formally studied, Yuri Herrera has stated: "Literature cannot take full responsibility for creating good or bad men and women, but what it can do is give you the tools to make yourself into a conscious citizen. In this sense, I believe literature always entails a political responsibility" (Figueroa). Literature rises to the challenge, for Herrera, by way of its use of language, casting seemingly familiar, even tired, problems in new light, giving readers words beyond those "provided by and for power and mass media" (Figueroa). Ultimately then, Maquina, a character long-dead, jarchando her way into an oblivion which may, by this logic, be a new form of life, is a vehicle—a machine—for the reader to rethink the discursive machines of today. If Herrera's novel fits all the qualities of a traditional Mexican border novel, as some have argued, its ultimate border is much more than the physical *frontera*. Its words and its protagonist—herself words, more character effect than character—do indeed point we readers beyond. But only into the illuminating darkness. We too, if we search for easy answers, on turning the final page, have been skinned.

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