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Village of Chamounix.” She begins it by expressing the “deep affinity” she finds between her experience as a transsexual woman, “often perceived as less than fully human due to the means of my embodiment,” and Frankenstein’s monster, who is similarly cast out from humanity because of the “means of [his] embodiment.” This experience of marginalization, for both the trans person and the monster, “fuels a deep and abiding rage ... against the conditions in which [they] must struggle to exist.” Stryker suggests that, like Victor Frankenstein, anti-trans feminists seem to view trans women as “their own particular golem,” whom they feel driven to destroy.

While reclaiming a connection between transsexuality and monstrosity may be a source of strength for some, for others, such a construction may be deadly. In 1993, a Seattle-based trans woman in her early twenties named Filisa Vistima wrote in her journal, “I wish I was anatomically ‘normal’ so that I could go swimming ... But no,

I am a mutant, Frankenstein’s monster.” She ended her life two months later.

As a reader, also living in England, I had to wonder whether Winterson has been influenced by the increasing vitriol directed at trans people by anti-trans feminists in the UK media. In a May 30, 2019 interview with Reuters about her book, Winterson

advocated against healthcare access for trans teens because, “If someone comes and offers you a solution and says, ‘Oh yes, if you had a different body you’d feel fine’ and you’re a bit uncertain, you might take that.” Winterson, who is not a medical expert, acknowledged that hers is a “controversial view.”

In Britain today, the loudest anti-trans voices are advocating daily for a return to “sex-based rights.” By this, they mean that the rights of women are contingent solely on their biology, thus excluding trans women. They say that there can be no gender identity of woman beyond biology. Is this what Winterson is getting at when she asks us in the novel through her trans doctor Ry Shelley, “What happens to labels when there is no biology?”

Beyond its politics—if one can look beyond them in such an intentionally political book—*Frankissstein* is an entertaining feminist sci-fi novel. Winterson (who came to fame in the mid-eighties with her first book, *Orange Is Not the Only Fruit*) is a

skilled writer with a keen eye on the most anxious parts of our zeitgeist. She presents a timely, *Black Mirror*-adjacent look at the darkly absurd near-future we’re being ushered into—whether we want it or not—by the likes of Elon Musk, Donald Trump, and, now, Boris Johnson.

There are large and pressing questions to be asked right now about technology, gender, and the near-future. For instance, will technology created by men simply recreate a techno-patriarchy? Can realigning our culture to what artist ANOHNI calls “feminine systems of governance” save us from climate cataclysm? Will patriarchy, which depends upon the gender binary in order to exist, collapse in on itself once trans people achieve full rights and social recognition? Winterson offers us no newer insights than what was already written by feminists in the mid-1970s.

Though Winterson largely misses the mark on her depiction of trans characters—referring at one point to trans women’s genitals as “open wounds”—she leaves us with perhaps one of the most beautiful encapsulations of non-binary identity ever written by a cis person: “I am what I am, but what I am is not one thing, not one gender. I live with doubleness.”

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The Stars, O Poet

Cantoras

By Carolina De Robertis

New York, NY; Alfred A. Knopf, 2019, 336 pp., \$26.95, hardcover

Reviewed by Noelle McManus

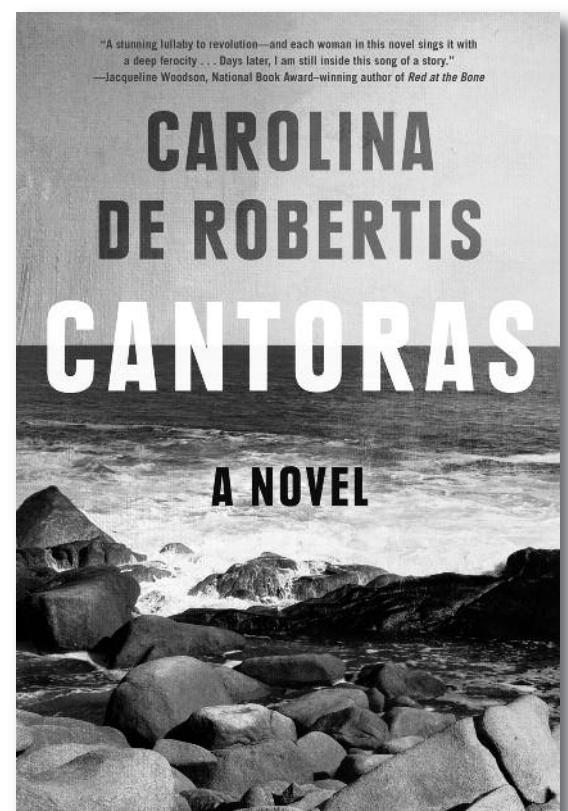
In Montevideo, Uruguay, there is a shopping mall that used to be a prison.

Formerly known as la Penitenciaría de Punta Carretas, now simply called Punta Carretas Shopping, it stands just two blocks from the gentle, gray coast of el Río de la Plata. It’s huge, upscale, has a Zara and an H&M and two separate movie theaters. “I lived there during the dictatorship,” my Uruguayan host mother explained, pointing up to a nearby building as we approached the mall’s exit. “We could see them bring the prisoners in through these gates. My parents never wanted me coming too close.”

She shook her head, laughed. “And now it’s a mall. A mall!” I watched her. Watched the luxurious lights of Punta Carretas Shopping disappear behind us. All the glimmering ads and neon signs rendered the building itself invisible. Only knowing its story could I see it for what it was: the heavy bricks; the looming watchfulness of its

highest point; the tightness of its small, black windows, all in a row like soldiers. *A mall! A skeleton in the middle of the city. A gloomy reminder of the once-was.*

Native Uruguayan Carolina De Robertis delves straight into her country’s tortured past with *Cantoras*, a novel revolving around the experiences of five starkly different women during the twelve-year military dictatorship. Only one thing binds the women together: queerness. They live in a time where little language exists for what, exactly, they are, and even speaking it aloud at all could be cause for arrest. Among themselves, they are simply *cantoras*, singers—a name that arose, one coyly explains, from their ability to make women “sing.” The friends—Flaca, Romina, Anita, Malena, and Paz—first come together for a trip to secluded beach town Cabo Polonio, an attempt to feel freedom. Out there, there are no curfews, no soldiers, no one but them. They capitalize on the



opportunity for a week, having sex between the rocks, romping like children through the sand, and pouring out their fears and traumas to each other around nighttime campfires. But their period of refuge comes to an end, and the five must then return to Montevidean society.

The vast remainder of the book follows them trying—and failing—to be the people they used to be before the trip. Flaca, a suave “*Don Juana*,” goes back to working at her father’s butcher shop.

Romina, an ex-political prisoner, rushes right back into the hidden revolution. Anita, nicknamed “La Venus” for her beauty, must continue living with her thankless husband, doling out sex as consolation for his unmotivated exhaustion. Malena quietly skirts back to wherever she came from, never keen on letting the others in on her past. And Paz, only fifteen years old, is sent home after learning of a new reality that no one in her life can comprehend. With a mother who doesn’t understand her and a world wanting something from her that she cannot give, she is lost. Just as she played by herself on the beach in Polonio: “*Sola*, she thought, alone, *so - la*, a syllable for each step, left foot *so*, right foot *la*, step *so*, step *la*, *so, la*, on and forward.”

Life continues on. The women reconnect, disconnect, reconnect again, always weighed down by the backdrop of the dictatorship. Paz attempts to make their Polonio getaway more permanent, arranging for them to buy a seaside hut they later name *la Proa*, the Prow, but in-group complications make coexistence difficult. They relentlessly cheat on each other, being lovers and stealing lovers, forming an almost comical web of relationships that seems a stereotype (and perhaps a fair portrayal) of lesbian circles. But, as flings come and go, the bond the five of them share remains. Their first experience in Polonio has fastened them together, made them inseparable, the only people, it seems, in all of Uruguay with knowledge of how freedom tastes. Flaca unwittingly speaks of that bond on their first trip when trying to convince Malena to share her own story:

“But anyway,” Flaca said, turning back to Malena, “we *can* talk about you. This circle we’re sitting in, the fire we’re gathered around, it’s not for any one of us. It’s for everyone here.”

“And the stars, O poet?” Romina sang. “Are they shining for the five of us too?”

Of course, Romina means the question as a joke, but it seems to be true. While Montevideo remains a prison encircling the characters, bits of Polonio—the sea, the sand, and, above all, the sky—call to them. In De Robertis’s Uruguay, the natural world seems an almost mythical dimension, a wardrobe the five women can step through to become who they really are. But even *la Proa* and their own interior palaces are sometimes left powerless against the regime. Soldiers, eventually, make their way to Polonio, and the disastrous results fracture the five’s tight-knit group. By 1985, when the dictatorship finally falls, little remains of the foundations the women built their friendships off of. But still *la Proa* stands. Still—even in the final chapter, which takes place in 2013—bits and pieces of the characters are scattered along that beach, waiting to be rediscovered. Each visit brings a new metamorphosis.

In addition to the wildly complicated strings of events that pass with the decades, De Robertis takes care to address concepts of gender fluidity inherently present in queer individuals. The women already exist outside the bounds of what a woman should be; therefore, it is easier for them to wiggle back and forth between gender roles. Flaca is a prime example of a butch woman—doing nasty, “masculine” labor; flirting incessantly; carrying herself with a strong, confident air that turns heads everywhere she goes. But free gender expression doesn’t need to be on either end of the spectrum for it to matter. Assessing Ariella, her opera singer lover, La Venus observes,

It seemed that she’d found a way to live beyond the masculine-feminine divide, not so much crossing it as flouting it entirely. She peppered men’s clothing into her attire, wearing a necktie over a ruffled blouse, a men’s suit jacket with silver bracelets that clamored brashly as she talked, a fedora with a sequined dress and feather boa.

De Robertis’s careful description of gender roles and queer women is one of my favorite aspects of the book. She puts into words things I’d only felt, that tricky area of non-straight womanhood where the needle on the compass of society’s categories can never quite sit still. When Paz thinks of herself as “a non-girl ... a failed girl, an in-between,” she is matter-of-fact—almost proud. Taking place in a time starkly more binary than our own, even dangerously so, the assessment of these women’s places in the boxes set out for them is both welcome and necessary. Still, *Cantoras* only briefly dips its toes into the concept of bisexuality,



Panella Denise Harris

Carolina De Robertis

making it feel a bit less real and vital to queer history.

And, though masterful in its detail, some instances of De Robertis’s prose go a bit too far in depth. In the first of the book’s three parts, she meticulously introduces us to each of the five women—again, and again, and again. It is beaten into our heads that Flaca is a tease, Romina is a radical, La Venus is gorgeous, Malena is shy, and Paz is young. When the book continued reminding me that Romina is “their once-captured friend,” or that Malena is “the sensible one, the reserved one...” I found myself wanting to tell the book, “I know already!” Descriptions follow characters like near-epithets. Facts of the dictatorship veer to cliché; statements like, “She was so young. But not carefree—no one had that anymore,” are peppered throughout. However, this persistent describing fades as the book progresses and is nearly all gone by the middle of the second part. Otherwise, the story moves on in beautiful clarity, every scene just as important as the last (except for a particularly peculiar one in which Paz regains her hope for safety after staring intently at La Venus’s nipples, which perplexed me straight to the end).

Cantoras remains a fascinating, emotional read—just as important for those who know Uruguay’s history as it is for those who know nothing about Uruguay at all. The stories De Robertis tells in *Cantoras*, though fictional, follow the twists and turns of the real lives of queer women during the military dictatorship. Astounding, to think that the Uruguay in this book is the same Uruguay that today has the reputation of being the most socially liberal country in Latin America. Yet, when one looks at the sky of modern Montevideo—even the light-polluted sky above Punta Carretas Shopping—it is the sky that the *cantoras* would’ve seen. The same stars shone for them. ☾

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