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Special Issue: Reinventing Don Quixote in Cultural Production

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Women's Mental Health Advocacy in *Lars and the Real Girl* and the *Don Quixote* Connection

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California State University, Long Beach

Given the depth and breadth of a now four-hundred-year-old *Don Quixote*, it is no surprise that Cervantes's acclaimed seventeenth-century Spanish masterpiece continues to shape the world's literary landscape to such an extent that few narrative expressions subsequent to it escape its influence. Harold Bloom's hyperbolic, nautical metaphor in *The Guardian*, for example, describes *Don Quixote*'s anticipatory impact: "this great book contains within itself all the novels that have followed in its sublime wake." Furthermore, the novel has shown no signs of propagation fatigue, as it continues, in the words of Dale Shuger, to reflect, refract and refashion (3), especially in the 20th century and beyond. From prose works (Acker, Flaubert, Unamuno) to Broadway musicals (*Man of La Mancha*) to cartoons series ("The Adventures of Don Coyote and Sancho Panda"), *Don Quixote* transcends temporal, cultural, linguistic and artistic boundaries, and its progeny attests to the grandeur of what is arguably the first and most celebrated modern novel within the Hispanic tradition. Carlos Fuentes, for instance, praises *Don Quixote* in his review of Edith Grossman's translation in the *New York Times* for its accomplishment of a literary first in 1605, which stems from a spatial-temporal confluence as "a reflection of our presence in the world as problematic beings in an unending history, whose continuity depends on subjecting reality to the imagination." Don Quixote, both the text and the character, stands a metaphor for the human condition as well as figures as a byproduct of the boundless nature of the fertile mind, which as a result puts into perspective this special number of *Laberinto* devoted to "Reinventing Don Quixote in Cultural Production."

The ubiquity of *Don Quijote* substantiates its scholarly and mass appeal, which explains its effortless ability to inspire other, original works of art (Shuger 172), such as plays, musical performances, paintings, illustrations and other novels across time, cultures and languages. Within the global cinematographic tradition, scores of movies have been made about the novel—*The Man Who Killed Don Quijote* (2018); *The Ingenious Gentleman of La Mancha* (2015); *Lost in La Mancha* (2002); *Don Quijote calbaga de nuevo* (1973)—

and its topics therein (e.g. sanity, madness, friendship, love, comedy, tragedy).¹ In addition to these adaptations, countless other films, perhaps due to these universal themes inherent to the arts, either have or could be argued to have parallels with *Don Quixote*. As Barbara Simerka and Christopher Weimer affirm, such similarities serve to demonstrate how “certain tactics employed by Cervantes in his early modern bestselling novel nowadays characterize some of the most overtly postmodern aspects of popular contemporary films” (“Defying” 281). Numerous scholars, including Simerka and Weimer, as well as Bruce Burningham, have fleshed out these affinities.² Burningham, for example, cites the “intertextual dialogue” (“Walt Disney’s” 158) that seemingly transpires between Cervantes and Andrew Stanton, the screenwriter of *Toy Story* (1995), while Simerka and Weimer, by way of *Adaptation* (2002) and *Stranger Than Fiction* (2006), identify some common “epistemological instabilities” (“Duplicitous” 99) and a shared “reflexivity” (“Defying” 295). Indeed, postmodernity, in the broadest of senses, is the thread that weaves through and ultimately creates a seam between page and *pantalla*. In his article “The Literary Classics in Today’s Classroom: Don Quixote and Road Movies,” David Castillo makes a case for regarding road trip movies like *Easy Rider* (1969), *Thelma and Louise* (1991) and *The Motorcycle Diaries* (2004) as Don Quixote-friendly: “I would claim that these are all potentially “productive” explorations of the Cervantine classic insofar as they direct our attention to different, but equally significant, dimensions of the novel” (37). His rationale for integrating film into (and beyond) the literature classroom could apply, in fact, to any cinematic endeavor that, either directly or indirectly, engages with the *Quixote*.³

¹ See Abril Sánchez, Albrecht, and Burningham (“Crouching”) for additional film versions.

² Other noteworthy studies include those by Domínguez, Rodríguez-Romaguera, and Wade.

³ I teach at a “research-driven, teaching-intensive” institution and am keenly aware of the challenges inherent to teaching the novel in a few months, let alone incorporating outside material such as film. One way to approach this is to assign students a comparative research assignment, which forces them to read carefully and look for parallels beyond but also including the text, as Patricia Manning proposes: “In incorporating multimedia, not only does my class have plenty of time to dedicate to the Quijote, but students also interact more fruitfully with the text as a result of these comparisons to contemporary life” (65).

Lars and the Real Girl (2007), starring Ryan Gosling as the socially inhibited Lars Lindstrom, is a relevant cinematic feat that fits Castillo's bill. Despite the film's positive critical reception—including an 81% “Fresh” rating on Rotten Tomatoes—scholarly response has been limited to Tony Hughes-D'Aeth's psychoanalytic interpretation, Eunjung Kim's as well as Nicole Markotic's disability studies approaches and Claire Sisco King and Isaac West's queering of the film. Additionally, comparative studies between the movie and Cervantes's masterpiece remain unconsidered, despite several parallels, including settings in remote geographical locations (La Mancha and northern Wisconsin, respectively); townspeople who judge Lars's and Don Quixote's questionable state of mind (a case of “el qué dirán” versus *schadenfreude*); and objects of the protagonists' affection (Dulcinea and Bianca, respectively) that do not exist in the flesh. Lars himself is a sort of social misfit, like his Manchegan counterpart, whose motives, actions and *raison d'être* drive the plot yet often perplex those around him.

The Internet Movie Data Base (IMDb) describes the Hollywood production as one about “A delusional young man (who) strikes up an unconventional relationship with a doll he finds on the Internet” (“*Lars*”). The life-sized, bombshell human replica in question, Bianca, whose plump lips and doe eyes signal a willingness to please, are directly proportional to her anatomical correctness. While our societal expectations may lead us to obvious conclusions regarding Lars's decision to mail-order a prefabricated companion, we soon understand that Bianca is a sex doll in name only, as her physical contact with Lars is limited to subtle displays of affection and innocent handholding, which recall the notion of chastity her name implies.⁴ For Lars, Bianca is more of a security blanket and less an allusion to satin sheets: rather than fulfill a corporal need, she satisfies an emotional void that gradually, albeit comically and at times painfully, allows Lars to learn about relationships, including the one he has with his brother Gus and his wife, Karin, in order to eventually develop one of his own. Although never labeled with a disorder, Lars apparently suffers from some unnamed affliction—a condition located somewhere between autism, Asperger's and PTSD—and

⁴ Bianca, meaning “white” or “pure,” was raised by nuns in a convent, according to Lars. Due to their shared moral compass, Lars asks his sister-in-law, Karin, to allow Bianca to stay in his mother's old bedroom in the main house rather than with him in the guest quarters.

his past includes traumatic milestones such as losing his mother at birth, growing up with a despondent father who perhaps felt resentment toward his infant son, and being abandoned by the rebellious, egotist-turned-family-man-just-a-few-years-too-late Gus. Indeed, *Lars and the Real Girl* is about life, love, and community and pushes the boundaries of reality in ways that explore the heart and mind rather than the pleasures of the body.

Neither don Quixote nor Lars, notwithstanding their disparate cultural milieu and expectations, act in a way that society would deem “normal.” Specifically, their inability to forge and sustain appropriate romantic relationships figures as a shared, defining characteristic. While Lars’s interpersonal issues, particularly those with women, clearly stem from his turbulent childhood, the source of Don Quixote’s remains debatable. Numerous critics have examined the psychological underpinnings of Don Quixote’s motivations and limitations regarding carnal encounters. One could make the courtly love case, that Don Quixote, as an imitator of knight errantry, is destined to aspire to but never consummate a sexual relationship. Dulcinea, a figment of his imagination, therefore allows him to operate within a heterosexual economy without commitments, follow through or judgment. What other reasons might be preventing the eccentric Manchegan from marriage? Consider, for example, the ruminations of Daniel Eisenberg, which suggest a latent homosexuality:

He is near fifty, but is still a virgin, perhaps impotent with women. He has never been married, nor does marriage or reproduction interest him. Don Quijote prefers the all-male world of his beloved chivalric books, in which the adult knight is served by a boy squire [...]. Don Quijote cherishes the female ideal or archetype (Dulcinea), but real women do not interest him. (48)

Carroll Johnson, meanwhile, takes a psychoanalytic approach in his *Madness and Lust: A Psychoanalytical Approach to Don Quijote*, in which he targets don Quixote’s live-in niece, who, he argues, incites his sexual frustration and a series of repressive displacement as the root of his inability to have sexual partners. Both of these theories relate to what James Parr has termed “the flight from the feminine” (17). Whatever the motive for his neurosis, Cervantes’s protagonist’s gynophobia is a critical goldmine for a twenty-first

century reader, in the same way that Lars's inhibitions inform gender and gender roles for a moviegoer counterpart.

Bianca becomes co-protagonist of Lars's story, much in the same way Dulcinea legitimizes Don Quixote's quest and whom Martha García refers to as "la meta, el objetivo, el objeto del deseo" (19). In recent years, scholars have turned their attention to female characters of the novel and felicitously reevaluated their impact within its pages, from their status as problematic presences to glaring absences. Ruth El Saffar, for example, argues that Cervantes parodies the sexual convention of damsels in distress (206), which shifts the focus, and agency, to women. This sort of approach, which challenges the notion of a "male-based reading" (207) and whereby sexual politics are often overlooked, provides insight into gender roles and how certain authors use storylines to subvert them. El Saffar rightly concludes that by reexamining Cervantes's female characters of the *Quixote* in what she might call a "female-based reading," we can reframe women's roles in that "the real power that belongs to the 'defenseless' women over whom the men ostensibly struggle" (217). Most critics would agree, then, that Cervantes views women in a favorable light, despite—and perhaps as a reaction to—the rigid social conventions that often restricted, subjugated and silenced them. Even as far back as 1926, in "*Woman in Don Quijote*,"⁵ Edith Cameron identifies thirty-seven salient female characters in the novel and concludes, after glossing each one, that Cervantes "has a democratic and reverent attitude toward womanhood" (157). Caroline Nadeau succinctly puts the critical verdict into perspective: "While Cervantes cannot fully break from the culturally established norms for women, he does attempt to open spaces for rethinking these social conventions" (20).

Bianca is therefore for Lars what Dulcinea is for Don Quixote: a means that enables and facilitates elusive sociability. Just as Lars gives life to (and depends on) Bianca to help forge a more publicly acceptable existence (which is not without irony), Don Quixote envisions Dulcinea to justify—not to mention validate—his anachronistic proclivity to knight errantry. These "women" have a profound effect on their male counterparts, and as

⁵ Cameron uses the Castilian spelling in her article.

the respective plots develop, we read about and bear witness to others functioning as catalysts in the lives of both.⁶

In *Lars and the Real Girl*, women—and their actions—drive the plot. They are life enriching if not sustaining agents, beginning with Bianca and extending to three other key female figures in the film: Lars's sister-in-law, Karin (Emily Mortimer); Lars's psychologist Dagmar (Patricia Clarkson); and Lars's co-worker and secret admirer, Margo (Kelli Garner). Several secondary, female characters offer countenance to Lars as the film progresses. These women's collective efforts, manifest as empowering words and enabling actions, stand in stark contrast to the intolerance of their incredulous male counterparts, who can only be critical of what they perceive as Lar's mental imbalance. The men's eventual cooperation comes not as a realization of their own misinterpretation and insensitivity but rather a reluctant indulgence to these same women who gradually help Lars overcome his emotionally stunted state by working with his delusion rather than against it. This article, as such, suggests a gender commentary continuum between *Don Quixote* and *Lars and the Real Girl*. While Cervantes hints that society (erroneously) understood women in the early modern Spanish period as problematic presences (Marcela), glaring absences (Dulcinea), or monstrosities (The Dutchess),⁷ *Lars and the Real Girl* underscores and promotes women's influence and authority as compulsory for a functioning, productive and healthy society. In their book *When Women Work Together*, Carolyn Duff and Barbara Cohen confirm that women recognize the value of cooperation (117) since success is only proportional to group harmony, which can only be attained by forging connections (36). In other words, while Cervantes's *Don Quixote* brings women's roles to light as an exercise in critical contemplation, Nancy Oliver and Craig Gillespie, the screenwriter and director, respectively, of *Lars and the Real Girl*, demonstrate that a community's welfare is a product of and many times ensured by women's compassion, empathy, connections and collaborations. Although Oliver and Cervantes present their female characters differently, both hint that a well-

⁶ While Bianca has a curative effect, Dulcinea's influence is more ambivalent. While the latter gives Don Quixote a purpose, her elusiveness also causes him great anguish.

⁷ Ruth El Saffar points out the shift from Part I to II, the latter of which shows that "women take on monstrously, overwhelming powerful roles" (219).

functioning society depends on the integrative and restorative powers of women.

Despite their portrayal in this film, Lars Lindstrom is terrified of women, and his gynophobia manifests in the opening scene. Lars stands before and stares out a window from the comfort of his quarters, and we, as spectators, assume he is bracing himself for a cold, winter day.⁸ Instead, however, we come to understand that Lars's fear is the outside world in general and his sister-in-law, Karin, in particular, who lives in the main house of the property she shares with Lars's brother. Just as Lars musters the courage to venture out, she intercepts him in his driveway. This represents her first of two attempts—the second of which results in a full-body tackle—to invite him to a meal as a way to nurture a relationship with her eye-contact-avoiding, incessantly fidgeting, and flight-prone relative. Karin initially represents a double threat to Lars as both a woman and a mother-to-be; she is a reminder of his own mother, her tragic death and his mother-less childhood. Soon, however, Karin—whose name evokes the adjective “caring”—proves to be Lars's greatest ally by accepting his choices and limitations, and educating the men around her as Lars recovers.⁹

The men of the movie, in contrast, brood over Lars's behavior. When Gus, Karin's husband and Lars's brother, exclaims, “He's out of his mind [...]. My little brother is totally insane,” referring to Lars's decision to order a blow-up doll and treat her as a real-life girlfriend, Karin first pacifies her disturbed husband, quickly disregards his hyperbolic comments and instead tolerates Lars's fantasy (“*Lars*”). Upon seeing Bianca's positive effect on Lars, she sees his happiness, as inexplicable as it may seem, as more important than adhering to arbitrary social codes. The fact that when Lars first brings Bianca to the main house one evening and asks to see Karin, although Gus has answered the door, demonstrates that Lars, too, realizes that in order to forge a romantic relationship with a woman, he must first cultivate platonic relationships with women.

⁸ Lars lives in the garage guesthouse on the property while Karin and Gus share the larger, adjacent main house the siblings inherited from their parents.

⁹ Alongside Karin, two other one-scene women in the film, a church parishioner and his office receptionist, attempt to bring Lars out of his shell early on by hinting at Margo's romantic availability.

Karin's underlying concern, however, prompts her to suggest that Bianca, not Lars, see a doctor. By focusing on Bianca in this way, she deflects any negative attention from Lars, who, as a result, serendipitously learns about ensuring the welfare of others as well as his own in a less threatening way. Dagmar, the physician/psychiatrist in question whose Scandinavian name coincidentally translates as "mother," shows no sign of incredulity or alarm upon meeting Lars and Bianca. Instead, she casually diagnoses Lars as having a delusion disorder and rationalizes his mental illness by calling it a "communication facilitator" ("*Lars*"). When Gus asks when Lars's delusions will stop—yet another instance of emerging male anxiety—the doctor replies straightforwardly, "as soon as he doesn't need it anymore" ("*Lars*"). Dagmar suggests they acquiesce to Lars's delusion as part of his recovery, which Gus does not hesitate to lament. Even a professional diagnosis cannot dissuade Gus from worrying that "Everyone is going to laugh at him" ("*Lars*"). His skepticism in conjunction with his reductionist attitude toward Bianca causes him to refer to her disparagingly as "a big, plastic thing" ("*Lars*"). As Gus worries about what people will think, Karin and Dagmar express more concern with what *Lars* is thinking. In Gus's defense, he does attempt to learn about his brother's affliction by reading books on the subject and performing online searches, but he does not engage Lars. While Karin and the other women confront Lars directly and intrepidly because they realize this is a human issue, Gus prefers to arrive at an arm's-length understanding through science. Gus' efforts, therefore, end up being more for his own peace of mind than his brother's benefit.

As the storyline develops, the locals grow accustomed to, yet not fully accepting of, Lars's interactions and outings with Bianca. At a certain holiday party, Bianca becomes the center of attention, both positive and negative. While female community members become more tolerant of her presence, as is the case when they complement her flattering outfit, the men can only huddle together and spew demeaning sexual slurs. The celebratory spirit and spirits incite them to refer to her as a "total babe" and "hot," and then, as if adding insult to injury, they ponder her flexibility as they fantasize from across the room ("*Lars*"). Up to this point, the film's men have figured as the antithesis of their female counterparts in terms of communication, acceptance and assistance. Their disparaging remarks, incredulous states, and cynical attitudes function to not only highlight their lack of sensitivity and empathy but also, by default, to underscore women's lenience and solidarity.

In a peripheral scene about halfway through the film, Lars tenderly reads to Bianca in her bedroom, and the most overt connection between novel and film materializes. Only a handful of words have screen time in a blink-and-you'll-miss-them moment, but the attentive viewer will recognize their deliberate and relevant nature, albeit fragmented and slightly out of order: "And so he solaced with himself with pacing up and down a little meadow [...] in praise of Dulcinea. But what distressed him greatly was not having another hermit there to confess him" ("*Lars*"). Some four hundred years after its publication, Lars Lindstrom chooses Book I, chapter 26, titled "In which the elegant deeds performed by an enamoured Don Quixote in the Sierra Morena Continue" from which to quote (1, 26; 205). This episode represents the fulcrum of Part I (of fifty-two total chapters), just as this scene halves the movie. Don Quixote's self-imposed penance signals a catalytic moment in his trajectory, just as Lars's lecture infers a change by association. In the second half of the movie, Lars's evolution grows increasingly palpable, and Bianca's purpose within his life shifts. While I do not claim this scene as pivotal to appreciating the film, the reference to Don Quixote and the allusion to his atonement does liken Lars's condition to psychological reparations he endures ("playing a lover") in order to become a better-functioning adult, and Bianca, like her literary counterpart, Dulcinea, will play opposite his role.

As the pair's relationship persists, a group of townswomen decides to help Lars in their own way by volunteering Bianca at a school and as a storefront mannequin at a mall. They tone down her hair and clothing and welcome her into their church group, as if she were a living being. By repurposing Bianca in this way—treating her as a functioning member of society who has other social relationships, a job and responsibilities—Lars learns that (romantic) relationships are complex and often fraught with adversity. The time they spent apart also exacerbates fissures in the relationship, including those that previously bonded Lars to his own fear, which he now is forced to confront. In order to reinforce Lars's sense of self, the women ensure that Bianca arrives home late, and Lars, as a result, disengages from her. Lars soon realizes that he, too, can and must function independently of his girlfriend and instead interact more with others. His insight coincides with increased encounters with co-worker Margo, a more suitable, real-life potential match for Lars. Margo, to whom the film likely owes its title, is never aggressive, overt or selfish in her pursuit of Lars. She

recognizes Lars's delicate emotional state and knows to respect it. Even at the moment the spectator realizes they will pair off, Margo remains a background character who observes and patiently waits, which is exactly what Lars needs; so in a sense, she, too, is instrumental in his recovery. Her perseverance ultimately allows Lars to acknowledge and accept, in his own time, the human bonds he yearned for but dreaded all his life due to circumstances beyond his control.

This scene in the film is a turning point and signals Lars's long-awaited catharsis thanks to the female characters' subtle, purposeful ingenuity as he unfastens the self-imposed shackles to Bianca. A group intervention they orchestrate ultimately destabilizes Lars's relationship and precipitates Bianca's departure. In an emotional scene, Lars takes Bianca to a lake—which recalls don Quixote's arrival on the beaches of Barcelona—to say goodbye. Lars's choice of locale is fitting since bodies of water in the Judeo-Christian tradition symbolize renewal, fecundity and growth.¹⁰ Lars's announcement of Bianca's "death" coincides with a friendly bowling outing with his co-worker/admirer, Margo, at which point he summarizes his girlfriend's purpose in the following way: "Bianca was a teacher; she was a lesson in courage" ("*Lars*"). I would alternatively argue that the principal female cast—Karin, Dagmar, and Margo—together imparted the lesson in question by working in tandem to provide life lessons for their on-and-off-screen communities. Without ever saying a word, Bianca served as the foundation for the emotional support system Lars lacked all his life. While some might argue that Bianca figures no more than a symbol of the stereotypical, objectified, passive woman, I would instead underscore the ways she manages to effect change by uniting an entire community, to enable Lars, and to empower Margo, the unassuming "real girl" who has been standing in plain view the entire time.

Lars and the Real Girl and *Don Quixote* share several thematic similarities that could be developed in numerous critical directions, and I believe that the portrayal of the townswomen, both as individuals and a unit, allows the film's female cast, specifically when juxtaposed to the salient female characters in *Don Quixote*, to continue—if not cap—a dialogue about

¹⁰ J. E. Cirlot associates the lake with the "transition between life and death" and likens it to "a mirror, presenting an image of self-contemplation, consciousness and revelation" (175).

women's significant contributions and emerging societal roles as subjects. Although clinical studies have neither confirmed nor denied that men and women have similar empathic dispositions—questioning the belief that women, in fact, are superior to men in this aspect—Oliver and Gillespie's film hints that women, nevertheless, continue to be perceived culturally as better team players, perhaps because historically, that has been our societal default. Even the inanimate, wheelchair-bound Bianca, as Markotić points out, forms part of the small town, Midwest mental health literacy campaign, which ultimately ties into Lars's unconventional therapy: “the film also presents a town in need of overcoming its reactions to mental disability” (3). Contrastively, the men around Lars are depicted as puerile and close-minded, which prompts the women to throw down the gauntlet without hesitation. Furthermore, the aforementioned female ensemble of *Lars and the Real Girl* precipitates the protagonist's metaphorical rebirth, which without the power of a few determined, sympathetic women may have never occurred.¹¹ With these ideas in mind, the connection between *Don Quixote* and *Lars and the Real Girl* figures not only as a gender contemplation but also as an evolution. If Ruth El Saffar is correct in referring to women in *Don Quixote* as “what is left unsaid,” a reference to her eponymous article, then the female characters in *Lars and the Real Girl* have clearly picked up where Cervantes left off and are now speaking volumes.

¹¹ In contrast, *Don Quixote* is surrounded mostly by males (the priest, bachelor and barber) who misunderstand, belittle, tease and trick the (in)famous Manchegan, even when their intentions seem noble.

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