

# Novel offers sultry look at exiled women's rugged life

## PALM LATITUDES

Kate Braverman  
384 pages, \$18.95

Reviewed by  
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The *Palm Latitudes* referred to in the title of Kate Braverman's second novel are, as you might expect, those geographic areas that stretch "from Mexico City and El Salvador through Havana and Miami across the islands of the Caribbean from Caracas to Los Angeles."

They constitute the world of displaced Hispanics, driven from their homes by politics, or more often poverty, looking for something and sometimes finding only sterility and loss.

The characters in this novel have worked their way through various parts of these latitudes and have all ended up on Flores Street in Los Angeles. They live between cultures, the culture they carry with them and the larger American culture of Los Angeles.

The *Palm Latitudes* are also, according to one of the women, the places characterized by "that particular air of slow rotting, that spe-

cial scented steaming poison masquerading as emeralds, spice, clouds."

The three central characters of this novel, Francisca Ramos, a prostitute, Gloria Hernandez, a subservient housewife who is unable or unwilling to learn English, and Marta Ortega, an elderly woman of uncanny wisdom, know each other only slightly.

What they share, however, is the haunted quality that Braverman implies is the inheritance of all women in their position, women betrayed and abandoned by men, women brought and deposited into this hopeless life.

All of them are mad, possessed by their anguish and anger.

Los Angeles, like Miami, which appears briefly in this novel, is a modern city now weighted down with symbolism. For these women, Los Angeles is hell, combining the heat and rot of the tropics with the brutality of contemporary impersonal architecture and unbreathable air. The God who created and presides is "harsh, unfathomable, alien," an "eccentric bandit."

These are women who have no voice, and for the most part their response to their misery and anger is an increasing public silence. They speak very little, answering tersely if at all. But to themselves, each in her own section

of the novel, they speak effusively. Braverman gives these women and the others they represent, a voice, and what a voice.

The language in this book, like the *Palm Latitudes* themselves, is hot and overgrown, steamy and lush, and at times out of control.

All three of the women recognize their connection to each other and to so many other women sharing their emptiness. Gloria, echoing an earlier thought of Francisca's says to herself, "Because I was no one, I was everyone, all women who stood at windows taunted by the terrible and too hot moon, round as an open screaming mouth." Their union, and their awareness of this bond with other women, though, gives them no solace; rather it adds to the weight of their suffering.

Only Marta is able to make use of the lucidity that visits all of them in periodic flashes. Only Marta keeps her ties to the earth without having to eat the dirt.

The men in this novel are for the most part not monsters — just strangers. Often their abandonment and betrayal of the women consists of little more than a quicker and less reluctant assimilation into their new lives. But the women cannot do this, cannot accept a world without beauty or poetry as the "new" world and long for the transcendent beauty

they rightly or wrongly associate with what they left behind.

This is a slow and frustrating book. It is overwritten, certainly, but it also has powerful unforgettable flashes of passion. Braverman's open-throttle, self-indulgent language is at once the strength and weakness of this novel.

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