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# Charting the landscapes of the mind

## 'Latitudes' probes three women's lives

By Robert James  
The Register

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**A** prostitute, a murderess and a witch. These are the outward identities of the women of Kate Braverman's second novel, "Palm Latitudes."

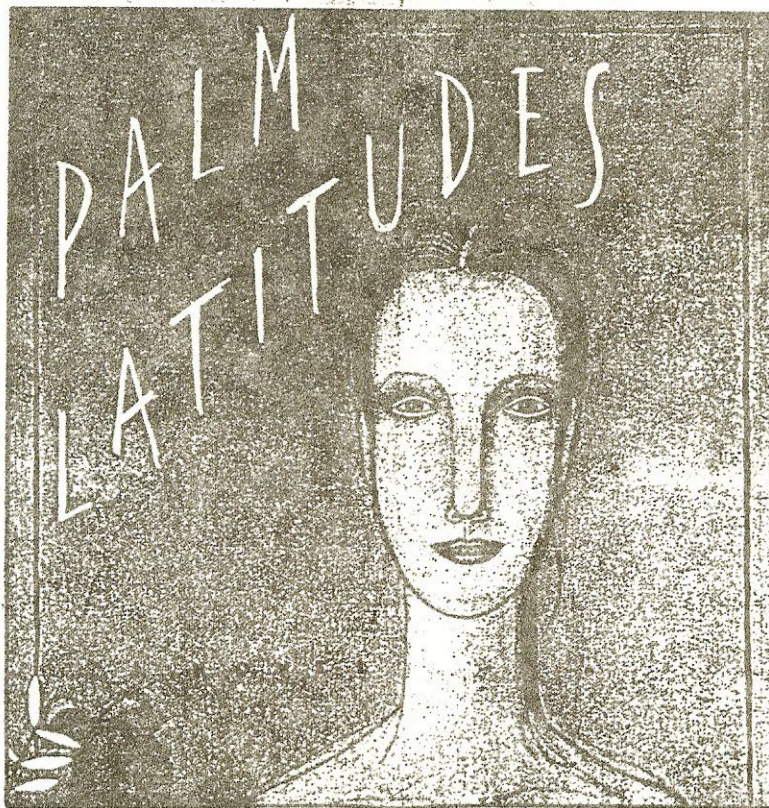
Their inward lives are infinitely richer than those convenient labels, and it is these unseen landscapes that Braverman incessantly explores.

Set in the barrios of Los Angeles, "Palm Latitudes" lives in the hidden corners of the city and the unknown complexities of its silent majorities, of its Hispanic women. Francisca Ramos, better known to the street gangs of LA as La Puta de la Luna (the whore of the moon), sells her body in order to maintain the security of her private history, of her abandonment by her married lover.

Gloria Hernandez, a housewife and mother quietly enraged by her husband and sons' monumental indifference, murders a white woman who has caught her husband's rapt attention.

Marta Ortega, the brilliantly unique matriarch of the barrio, is a woman savaged by her daughters for her non-conformities, for her refusal to allow her daughters to be normal, even as they seek her enormous capacity to love and absolve them.

"Palm Latitudes" is an unusual novel in all respects, and as such, can be difficult to comprehend at



Novelist Kate Braverman uses her background as a poet to transcend the inarticulateness of the characters in her new novel, 'Palm Latitudes.'

times. There is no plot in any traditional sense; the book and the reader are pushed along by the growing sense of the impermanence of meaning, as men and women try in vain to hold life still.

Life's surface shifts and changes constantly; there is regularity nowhere but in the Earth in its cycles, the sun rising and setting, the heat of the summer and the bite of the Santa Ana winds.

Francisca Ramos expected her illicit lover to remain, removing

her forever from the scrubbing of floors and dishes. Gloria Hernandez cannot understand why the traditions of marriage bring her no affection from a husband and sons avidly pursuing all things American. Marta Ortega's miraculous gardens, her beloved friends and her books all dissolve around her into dust and ash. Each woman must deal with the shattering of the illusions of stability, of the sham of convention and the turning of yesterday's joy into today's sorrows.

Title: "Palm Latitudes."  
Author: Kate Braverman.  
Info: The Linden Press, 384 page  
\$18.95.

While all this might have added up to a very depressing novel, Braverman's language transforms these bitter realities into a lush, green, wondrous celebration of the aesthetics of life. Braverman has written several volumes of poetry and she is unafraid to use her poet's vocabulary in this book. Each woman speaks in the same voice, rich and extravagant. While the dense thicket of words at first raises suspicions in the reader, Braverman slowly seduces a reader's rendering of disbelief.

Eventually, even a poorly educated housewife can honestly utter this about her abusive father: "Only his yellow eyes and ears, fists, how he stumbled over chairs and created bruises across my mother's arms and shoulders. She wrapped herself in a shawl, even in the midst of summer. She hid her shame, the purple marks like dead flowers my father engraved in her flesh. That was the extent of his invention, his embroidery and vision, the arbitrary tattoos I punched into her skin."

With such language, Braverman transcends the inarticulateness of the masks worn by these women. Within each woman, there is a landscape of poetry and invention, a human being demanding the respect and dignity of the individual. This is no easy book to be read at bedtime to lull us to sleep. This is a book that demands the light of attention to awaken us to the faces behind the faces that we meet.

# the mind

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