# From Canary Birds to Suffrage: Lavinia's Feminist Role in *Who Would Have Thought It?*

Kristie Soares
*University of California, Santa Barbara*

*"What a miserable, powerless thing woman is, even in this our country of glorious equality! Here I have been sitting up at night, toiling, and tending disgusting sickness, and dressing loathsome wounds, all for the love of our dear country, and now, the first time I come to ask a favor—a favor, do I say? No. I come to demand a right—see how I am received!"*

—Lavinia upon being denied a meeting with the Secretary of War (María Amparo Ruiz de Burton, *Who Would Have Thought It?*, (106)

As evidenced by the preceding epigraph María Amparo Ruiz de Burton's 1872 novel, *Who Would Have Thought It?*, conducts a measured critique of both gender and race relations in Civil War-era America. In this, the first Mexican-American novel published in the United States, María Amparo Ruiz de Burton chronicles the story of a young girl brought from Mexico to the United States in the years before the Civil War.[1] For Lola, the principal protagonist, it is her Mexican ethnicity

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Kristie Soares is a PhD student in Comparative Literature at the University of California, Santa Barbara. Soares was guest editor for the Latin American issue of academic review journal, *Counterpoise Magazine* (Vol 9.1, 2005). Her research interests include U.S. Latina/o Literature, Contemporary Cuban-American literature, 20th Century Brazilian Poetry, Gender Politics, and Performance Art.

that delays her full incorporation into American society. She is subject to the racial prejudices of the story's Anglo-American characters, until she ultimately gains acceptance because of her white skin—running off with an American soldier and returning to Mexico.

A cursory reading of the text might suggest that Ruiz de Burton does not delve deeply into the issue of womanhood in Civil War-era America. Indeed, the novel has often been criticized for dealing primarily with race and ethnicity and only secondarily with women's issues. For example, in the introduction to a recent edition of the book, Rosaura Sánchez and Beatrice Pita posit that María Amparo Ruiz de Burton is "only satirically concerned with 'self-realization' and 'self-improvement' of women" (xvi). By positioning the novel's treatment of women as "*only*" satirical, as well as calling it a "backdrop" (xxvii) to the principal narrative, Sánchez and Pita imply that Ruiz de Burton's feminist agenda is secondary to her other political concerns, especially her denunciation of racism.

Although I agree that Ruiz de Burton confronts racism and ethnic discrimination more openly—primarily through her treatment of Lola—she also presents an important critique of women's issues. This critique is developed not through the novel's main female character, but through a supporting character, Lavinia. It is Lavinia, rather than Lola, who voices the feminist concerns that Ruiz de Burton echoes in her personal letters, some of which we will analyze.[2] Lavinia—who undergoes a transformation from a satirical to serious character over the course of the novel—is intentionally contrasted with other female characters to display the growing rift between the feminist dialogue of the time and the domestic conventions required by Victorian society.

I posit that through Lavinia's character, Ruiz de Burton is able to chronicle the evolution of notions of republican motherhood in the United States, reproduce the feminist/suffragist dialogue of the time, and communicate her own brand of feminism. *Who Would Have Thought It?* is, as John-Michael Rivera suggests, a "protofeminist" novel written by an important author in "a long line of protofeminist thinkers" (99). As Rivera argues, Lavinia is able to "leave the bonds of 'republican motherhood'" (99) and enter into the political sphere. He does not, however, conduct an in-depth analysis of how Ruiz de Burton attempts to reconcile the issues of race and gender in the text. In this essay, I argue that an analysis of Lavinia's development—her feminine traits, her relation to the other characters, and her maturation—allows us insight both into Ruiz de Burton's "protofeminist" views and into the ways in which she approaches what we would now call the "intersectionality" of race and gender.

A close reading of the Lavinia character therefore allows us to see the connections that Ruiz de Burton, as a Mexican woman living in post-Civil War America, might have drawn between gender and race. These connections are obvious from personal letters in which Ruiz de Burton consistently reflects on both her Mexican-ness and her womanhood. However, just as her political interests often come into contradiction in her personal letters, so do they in the novel.[3] By choosing Lola to represent the struggle of being Mexican and Lavinia to represent the struggle of being female, Ruiz de Burton seems to be dividing her own political interest between two very different characters. The fact that Lola never fully reflects on her womanhood and Lavinia never develops a complex understanding of race suggests that as a writer Ruiz de Burton is unable to fully reconcile the two. An in-depth analysis of Lavinia thus allows us to see the ways in which gender and race were at odds in *Who Would Have Thought It?*, in Ruiz de Burtons's personal life, and perhaps in the United States in general during the Civil War era.

Lavinia seems to be the only character in the novel that is truly aware of her status and rights as a woman. Although some of the other female characters share or supersede her social position—in particular Mrs. Norval, her sister—no other female character reflects on her status as a woman quite as much as Lavinia does. Her understanding of women's place in America comes to a head while she is waiting for a meeting with the Secretary of War. After being treated in what she considers to be an ungentlemanly manner by a military captain, Lavinia begins to realize what an "insignificant creature" woman is in the realm of government (106). She exclaims, "[w]hat a miserable, powerless thing woman is, even in this our country of glorious equality!" (106). Lavinia's phrase is reminiscent of the author's own comments. In a letter written on February 15, 1869 Ruiz de Burton similarly states, "[o]h if I were a man!...What a miserable thing woman is…Providence should definitely reward me in some way for having made me a woman!" (*Conflicts* 280).[4] In this letter, written in response to her friend Mariano Vallejo's excitement about the political progress of the Californios (Mexican-American residents of California), Ruiz de Burton acknowledges a helplessness akin to Lavinia's after being denied audience with the Secretary of War. Both women attribute their political impotence to their womanhood.

Of course, Ruiz de Burton's own feeling of helplessness must be attributed as much to her Mexican status as to her womanhood. In another letter to Vallejo written on August 12, 1869 she states, "[r]emember that

I am a woman…and Mexican…with my soul enclosed in an iron cage. In this manner *Society* confines us as soon as we are born, like the Chinese and the feet of their women."[5] In this letter Ruiz de Burton's reference to "society" seems to go beyond American society. It's likely that she is voicing a criticism of how societies in general treat women—American, Chinese, Mexican, etc. She is also critiquing how both American and Mexican societies treat Mexicans. We cannot forget that during this time period she voices a strong opposition to American society for its republican government, as well as to Mexican society for its connections to the U.S.[6] This is evidenced in her letter on September 14, 1869 in which she critiques both the Mexican and American governments and calls herself a woman "without a country" (*Conflicts* 302). Ruiz de Burton's reflection on both her ethnicity and her gender show that, like Lola and Lavinia, she is made "powerless" or "enclosed" by social constraints. Despite these similarities, I certainly do not mean to insinuate that either of these characters represents Ruiz de Burton's authentic authorial voice. Significant scholarship has been devoted to the pointless task of finding a character in the novel, usually Lola, through whom Ruiz de Burton speaks. That said, I only wish to highlight the striking similarities between the political and social lives of Lavinia and her creator. Noting such similarities may help us to better understand the novel's take on Lavinia.

For one, Lavinia's journey to seek government help in securing her brother's release from prison mirrors Ruiz de Burton's meetings with President Lincoln to ask for her husband's promotion to Colonel (Arranda 560). Further, both Lavinia and Ruiz de Burton eventually become dissatisfied with the American government (and perhaps republicanism in general). Lavinia's dissatisfaction is mirrored in the quote: "how little woman was appreciated, how unjustly underrated. *She* could obtain *nothing* from the government—the Cackles, *all!*" Ruiz de Burton responds in much the same way. In the letter written on February 15, 1869 she writes of the American political situation: "It is necessary that I do not become enthusiastic over the progress of the Continent. Why? Neither my race not my sex will benefit."[7] Once again, Ruiz de Burton refers to social constraints grounded in both her gender and race/ethnicity. Lavinia's concerns about womanhood suggest that she represents Ruiz de Burton's views on gender, in much the same way that Lola represents her understanding of ethnicity.

The similarities between Lavinia's and Ruiz de Burton's views go further than just their concern with women's place in government and

society. Both Ruiz de Burton and Lavinia display certain classist and racist attitudes. Anne Elizabeth Goldman argues that this allegedly racist and classist writing may be present because Ruiz de Burton is herself "writing from a racially defensive position"—meaning that as a Mexican she has to appeal to racism in order to maintain her own whiteness and social standing (88). At certain points in the novel, it does seem that Ruiz de Burton's own prejudices are expressed through Lavinia. For instance, in the scene where some nurses kill a young boy by feeding him sausage, Lavinia responds to the situation by becoming "from that day more and more firmly convinced than ever that *ladies* with hearts and brains were absolutely necessary to her country's cause. Not merely *paid menials* should attend the sick and wounded, but thoughtful women [...]" (129). Lavinia's careful distinction between "ladies" and "paid menials" seems to imply that though she is concerned with women's place in the society, she is more concerned with some women than with others. Lavinia is careful to distinguish exactly which type of woman is capable of playing a positive role in society—"thoughtful women" who are most likely of a cultured middle-class background. Despite its classist implications, however, this scene could also represent Lavinia's concern with the proper education of women. If these "paid menials" received the proper education, could they too become "*ladies* with hearts and brains?" Read in this way, the scene provides a critique of the education of women.

Ruiz de Burton participated in her own "racial bargaining," making careful distinctions between which people should be included in her political vision and which people should not.[8] In reference to this "racial bargaining," Pascha A. Stevenson states of Ruiz de Burton: "In short, sometimes ethnic voices are elitist, powerful, mean, racist, sexist, as well as loving, noble, disenfranchised, hurt, victimized, and so forth" (64).

This statement could be equally applied to the complex character of Lavinia. Lavinia is described positively throughout the novel, which highlights such qualities as her "natural ebullition of tenderness" (86). She is also consistently taken advantage of by the novel's other characters. This state of affairs is finally noted toward the end of the novel when the family calls upon Lavinia to take care of her ailing sister. The narrator observes that: "When the family was happy, no one missed the kind Lavvy. But as soon as misfortune came, Lavvy was indispensable" (267). However, as Stevenson states, Lavinia's sympathetic characteristics do not preclude her from being elitist or domineering. She displays both her elitism and her power in her interaction with the nurses who

kill the young boy. For Lavinia, both a "heart" and a "brain" are "absolutely necessary to her country's cause" (167). Since these nurses do not display these qualities, they are not Lavinia's concern. The questions remain whether it is Lavinia's elitism—or Ruiz de Burton's elitism, for that matter—that causes her to distinguish between women of different classes, whether she is expressing her disgust at deficiencies in women's education, or whether these ambiguities reflect an unresolved tension in Civil War-era feminist concerns.

Lavinia's development throughout the novel engages more than just Ruiz de Burton's opinions on women's rights. In many ways, it mirrors the evolution of the women's rights movement in the years before the novel was published. To understand this we must first understand the history of the feminist and the women's rights movements. Whereas the latter refers to issue-driven campaigns for specific rights, such as suffrage, the former refer to a more general freedom from oppression.[9] Although they are not always easy to distinguish, we can argue that the women's rights movement predated a more organized and ideologically-based feminist movement. I refer to Lavinia as a "protofeminist" because she lacks the conscious awareness of oppression that characterized feminist movements, but does challenge male dominance through her role in the war effort—a common role for women who wished to enter the public sphere during the Civil War. Those who entered this sphere were able to combat images of the "pious and pure, fragile and weak, submissive and domestic, passive and unintellectual" woman that characterized mid-nineteenth century America (Berg 85).

Starting in the Jacksonian era, women's participation in the public became an important part of political campaigns (Marilley 30). President Jackson encouraged women to join the anti-slavery movement by pushing them to adopt versions of "republican motherhood"—the nineteenth century belief that mothers were responsible for educating their children in the principles of republicanism in order to make them into model citizens.[10] One way in which women could demonstrate this republican motherhood was to participate in charity, as Lavinia does in the novel. Although many politicians initially encouraged women to have this limited access to the public sphere, as the Civil War neared it became obvious that women were beginning to use this opportunity as a platform on which to argue for equal rights. For this reason, reactions toward publicly active women wavered between support and fear, ambivalence and mockery. This is certainly the case with Lavinia's character, who

from the beginning is positioned as both the book's most pathetic female character and its most admirable. She, like the women's movement at the time, is simultaneously mocked and revered.

It is nearly impossible, in fact, to distinguish how the anonymous, yet opinionated narrator feels about her. On one hand, Lavinia is diminished from the beginning of the novel. Our first introduction to her character, for example, comes by way of her poodle, Jack Sprig. "Jack Sprig—Ms. Lavinia Sprig's poodle—sat bolt upright upon Mrs. Norval's front door-steps, watching the shadows of coming events whilst supper was cooking" (12). At this point in the novel Lavinia has not yet been introduced. It is only several paragraphs later when Mrs. Cackle comments on Jack's blue ribbon that Lavinia appears: "That old maid Lavvy Sprig, I suppose, has decked her thousand cats and her million canary birds all with ribbons, like her odious poodle" (12).

Lavinia's introduction by way of an animal and a blue ribbon foreshadows her treatment throughout the novel. She is frequently associated with animals or other people (as evidenced by a pivotal scene with her canary birds examined later in this essay), and is likewise objectified by many of the novel's characters. It should be noted that not only is Lavinia's character given value through her association with other characters, but these characters are exclusively male. She is introduced through her male poodle, experiences her transforming moment through her male canary bird, and finds her purpose in the search for her brother. The reader is thus lead to pity Lavinia as a dependent character without someone to depend on, as she is an "old maid."

Lavinia's character is also presented as the only female character, aside from Lola, with admirable ladylike qualities. She is the character who is consistently described as having "true feminine instinct" (104). This instinct, of course, refers to Lavinia's mothering capabilities and her selflessness when caring for others—as demonstrated by devotion to the male subjects around her. Lavinia is thus positioned as the model Victorian woman. Though not a mother, she upholds the ideal of republican motherhood in the sense that she mothers several of the story's characters. Moreover, unlike Mrs. Norval and Mrs. Cackle, the novel's other main maternal characters, Lavinia mothers in a caring way.

Take for example the reaction of all three characters when the Civil War breaks out. Although both of their sons will be fighting in the war, Mrs. Norval and Mrs. Cackle, "like two Roman matrons [...] waited to hear the announcement of the coming battle. They waited and made lint

for the wounded. Lavinia did more" (69). Here we see the juxtaposition of two types of republican motherhood. Mrs. Norval and Mrs. Cackle represent a conservative republican motherhood—adhering to their patriotic duties by expanding their domestic space into the political realm, i.e. making lint for soldiers. Lavinia, on the other hand, represents a more active republican motherhood—expanding the domestic space into the political by physically leaving the home to advocate for her brother's return. This is further evidenced months later when Lavinia has begun caring for wounded soldiers as a nurse, while Mrs. Norval remains at home. It is Lavinia who concerns herself with Isaac's disappearance, contacting Mrs. Norval about what actions to take. Once again, Mrs. Norval—as a representative of a conservative republican motherhood—does not physically leave her home to enter into the political arena. Rather, she states "the best thing that could be done would be for Lavvy to go in person to see the delegation from their state" (103). She then excuses herself from going with Lavinia on the basis of not upsetting her husband. In contrasting Mrs. Norval's passive approach to republican motherhood to Lavinia's active approach, it seems that of the two strategies Ruiz de Burton prefers the more active approach, as she concludes one chapter by saying, "[w]e will give a whole chapter to her [Lavinia's] patriotism in due time" (69).

Moreover, Lavinia's character changes as the story develops. Her job as a nurse becomes politicized when she goes from being a domestic caregiver to caring for wounded soldiers, therefore stepping outside of the traditional domestic realm of giving. The war effort offered many women this opportunity to leave the private realm, while still maintaining the traditional feminine virtues of care and mothering, a phenomenon Nina Baym refers to as "domestic feminism."[11] This often meant that "women involved in the war effort would also figure prominently in the struggle for gender-specific interests, especially suffrage" (Sánchez and Pita xxxvii). Lavinia's character may be Ruiz de Burton's way of acknowledging the movement from the private to the public spheres in many women's lives.

Lavinia's entrance into the public sphere is complicated, of course, by the fact that she has many traditionally female characteristics that might be seen as negative. At the beginning of *Who Would Have Thought It?* Lavinia is linked to what might be called the madwoman trope: a women driven mad by the constraints (misfortunes) laid upon her by society. The fact that Lavinia has been used sexually by both Reverend Hackwell

and Reverend Hammerhead, and the fact that she is unmarried, make Lavinia appear to be a damaged women. At one point in the novel, for example, Lavinia is portrayed staring at a dying fire and thinking of how both reverends "had made love to her, then run off and married them [their wives]" (38). In a moment of rage Lavinia thrusts the poker into the fire, yelling "Villain!" aloud, and launching into a mental soliloquy about her hardships. Upon witnessing this spectacle her niece, Ruth, asks "[w]hat is the matter, Aunt Lavvy? Are you sick?" (39). The reader is thus led to believe that Lavinia has been driven mad. On the one hand her feminine qualities redeem her as the perfect woman that every woman should admire, but on the other hand her misfortunes make her an example of the type of woman that no woman wants to become. In this instance, Lavinia comes across as good-hearted but insane.

This portrayal of Lavinia as mentally unstable is highlighted in the scene in which she kills her canaries. The scene begins with the observation that the birds "were the recipients of Miss Lavinia's pent-up caresses, and thus were useful as well as ornamental, for no doubt they had saved Miss Lavvy from many a fit of hysterics" (85). The use of phrases like "pent-up caresses" leads the reader to view Lavinia as the sexually frustrated women so often associated with Victorianism, women who were prone to many a "fit of hysterics." Lavinia reinforces this view when she kills her canary birds. The birds are said to have "innocently flown to her to be killed" (86), reinforcing the fact that Lavinia, despite her good intentions, is still capable of murder (and one might add, seems to be a crazy woman). As the scene continues, Lavinia becomes more and more distracted, so much so that she forgets to kill the final bird. It seems that Lavinia has become so caught up in her traditionally feminine sentimentality that, "lost in the sad labyrinth of reminiscences" (87), even the canary outsmarts her. Jule, who is notably a male canary, waits until Lavinia looks away to escape.

The novel later returns to Jule's story once he is in Lola's possession. Awaiting his journey to Cuba, "Jule's memory flashed back to the dark day when Lavinia, converting herself into a she-Herod, had slain so many innocents" (279). In this unprecedented shift into the canary's thoughts the narrator seeks to show the reader the negative effects of Lavinia's actions. If we are to revere Lavinia for her selfless act, the narrator seems to argue, then we must also condemn her for a committing massacre of biblical proportions—at least from the perspective of her traumatized canary. When it's revealed that Jule "distrusted one woman because

*another* one had given him cause to do so" (279) we're reminded that Lavinia's power (christened by the massacre of her beloved birds) represents a threat to male-dominated republican society—and thus functions here as a metaphor for the women's movement itself.

One might question Ruiz de Burton's decision to portray Lavinia as crazy. Why would the only female character that displays any social and political consciousness also be portrayed as a madwoman? This technique follows the madwoman trope that many Victorian women writers employed—that is, the insertion of a mad female character to demonstrate the author's own confinement by society.[12] In light of our prior reading of Ruiz de Burton's letters, it is not difficult to see how Lavinias frustration with women's place in society might parallel Ruiz de Burton's own dissatisfaction. Like her contemporaries, Ruiz de Burton may simply be voicing these frustrations through the use of a madwoman character. The positioning of Lavinia as unstable, however, seems to be temporary. It is, perhaps, an attempt by Ruiz de Burton to allow Lavinia to transcend her domestic confinement and mature into political consciousness.

Lavinia does, in fact, transcend certain female characteristics. She is, in effect, evolving from naïveté to understanding, and rebelling against women's place in society. As Lavinia's character grows politically and socially, her domestic duties are transformed into political ones—a type of "social reorganization" in which her domestic values are projected onto the public sphere (Baym xxvii). Consequently, those duties that cannot be transformed are ignored. Essentially, Lavinia gives up any part of her domestic life that does not serve her new goal of freeing her brother. This is evidenced at her character's pivotal turning point, the scene in which she kills her canaries. Before killing them, Lavinia realizes that her "patriotic enthusiasm [had] reached its highest pitch, and when making lint, or havelocks, or beef tea, or stockings, was not sufficient for the maiden's sacred fervor, then the little darlings were neglected" (85). It is for this reason that Lavinia feels she must "decide between her country and her birds" (85). Essentially, Lavinia's decision is between the public sphere and the private sphere. It signifies a shift in focus: Lavinia will no longer mother her canaries in the private sphere, but rather her brother (and her country) in the public sphere.

A closer reading of the same passage reveals that Lavinia's actions have heroic overtones. To begin with, Lavinia compares herself to both Antigone and Electra. She is described as "a New England lady trained to do her duty no matter how painful" (86). For Lavinia, the act of kill-

ing her birds is both painful and selfless. As such, Lavinia might still be thought of as a caregiver, as it is her motherly tendencies that lead her to commit this act, regardless the sorrow it causes her. Killing the canaries, although apparently absurd, can also be seen as the ultimate form of personal sacrifice.

This heroic gesture is further redeemed when, later in the story, she claims "I had the strength to kill my—my—my—dar—dar—darling can—can—canary birds, but I can't let my own brother starve" (116). Suddenly, it seems, Lavinia has come to her senses. She is not, in fact, an out-of-control woman, but rather a woman who is taking charge of her brother's recovery. The reader becomes aware that Lavinia did not kill her birds in a fit of hysterics, but rather in an effort to protect them. Having committed this crime she is imbued with the necessary vigor for her long fight to rescue her brother.

Lavinia pushes the boundaries of the traditional female role in other ways as well. Her promiscuity breaks with the idea of the pious Victorian mother and simultaneously reinforces the trope of the promiscuous woman. Nonetheless, Lavinia, who has slept with both reverends, is in some ways punished for her promiscuity. She is not only betrayed by both men, she is condemned to spinsterhood. It may be for this reason that the novel's other characters are so willing to dismiss Lavinia's actions as "a common occurrence with old maids, and Lavvy was past thirty-two!" (106).

At the same time, Lavinia's promiscuity can be read as a subversive detail inserted by Ruiz de Burton. When the novel was published, sexualized characters existed in woman's fiction almost exclusively as "occasional recipients of protagonist sympathy" (Baym xxxviii). Lavinia plays a much larger role in *Who Would Have Thought It?* When the other female characters are pining over their lost lovers, Lavinia is breaking out of the private sphere. It is the fact that she is unmarried that allows her to be so socially and politically effective. Moreover, Lavinia's youthful indiscretions demonstrate her daring, if immature, nature and foreshadow her character's willingness to challenge convention.

A comparison of Ruiz de Burton's treatment of Lavinia's promiscuity to that of Mina, the novel's other sexually liberated character, reveals important differences. For one, it is presumed that while Lavinia *was* sexually promiscuous in the past, she no longer is at the time the story takes place. For Lavinia, sexual indiscretion does not coexist with her political and social interests. The one exception to this fact might be

her meeting with the Secretary of War. The novel states: "What passed between the Secretary and Lavvy no one shall ever know, for neither of them ever told it. All that is known of that episode is what the driver was able to tell" (106). The phrasing certainly insinuates that something illicit occurred behind closed doors, particularly since Lavinia came out "crying convulsively" (106). If this was the case, it seems that Lavinia has had yet another negative experience behind closed doors with men. Again we see that for Lavinia, sexuality is not a viable tool for rebellion, although this possible use of her sexuality on behalf of her brother's cause represents yet another personal sacrifice.

In contrast, Mina, the French maid, uses her sexuality as a form of power. After being caught in a bedroom with Sophy Head, Mina refuses to be called a "servant" by Mrs. Norval and shouts, "A *real* lady never calls a waiting maid a '*servant*'" (234). Here again we see the emergence of the category of "lady," which Mina believes herself a part of. This may insinuate that because she is French, Mina can be excused from the repercussions that promiscuity has had for Lavinia.

It should be noted that Mina's sexuality, unlike Lavinia's, signifies both a personal liberation and a public act. Whereas Lavinia gives up sexual desire to look after others, Mina pursues her sexual desire in order to care for others. This is evidenced when we learn that "Mina had left Miss Ruth's service, and was now heart and soul engaged in Lola's" (277). Mina uses her sexuality to help Lola, turning Sophy Head into her "abject slave" (277) and convincing him to spy on Major Hackwell. Her private actions—maintaining a relationship with Sophy Head—facilitate her public actions—helping Lola escape.

Ruiz de Burton's decision to include Mina allows the reader to distinguish between a sexually free woman and a socially powerful woman. In the case of this novel, it seems only Mina can be both—although it should be noted that Mina's influence affects only Lola, rather than society in general. The question remains open as to whether Ruiz de Burton inserted Mina's character to highlight the restriction of female sexuality in American society as compared to French society. Regardless, within the confines of the American society, it seems that female sexual liberation in the private sphere and political effectiveness in the public sphere cannot coexist.

It has been argued that in *Who Would Have Thought It?* Ruiz de Burton highlights the different roles performed by women of distinct classes. Beth Fisher states that "women perform roles defined by frugality

or extravagance, sexual restraint or passion, depending on the class to which they wish to claim membership" (194). This needs to be taken into account if we are to understand the importance of Lavinia's break from the domestic sphere. Lavinia, though she remains a member of an upper class, is able to break with the restrictions that social class imposes on her. She is able to be both sexually impassioned and sexually restrained, both frugal with her sexual desires and extravagant with her practical demands. Ultimately, however, Lavinia must discipline herself (by leaving behind these youthful indiscretions) to enter into the public sphere.

To truly understand the function of Lavinia's character, it is important to make a final comparison between her and the novel's only other female character with true power—Mrs. Norval. Mrs. Norval's power, unlike Lavinia's, is entirely contained within her household. Mrs. Norval's story, interestingly enough, can be viewed as the inverse complement to Lavinia's—an indication that Ruiz de Burton intended both women to be significant and complementary characters. Mrs. Norval begins as a woman with complete control of her household and ends as a woman who completely looses control of her own emotions, money, and family. She goes from being a strong, independent woman who is feared by her husband, to being a woman that is completely powerless against her new husband, Reverend Hackwell. As Beth Fisher puts it, "Ruiz de Burton portrays Jemima Norval as a woman engaged in a series of performances, first as a frugal middle-class housewife and then as a wealthy consumer who appropriates Mexican property" (189). Fisher argues that this tactic makes the connection between Manifest Destiny and domestic womanhood.

In the case of Mrs. Norval's fall from power, I would agree. Essentially, Mrs. Norval's power resides in her ability to be evil and heartless. Like Manifest Destiny, it resides in her desire to conquer. Once she falls in love with Reverend Hackwell, her loving emotions prevent her from being heartless, which in turn usurps her power. Upon falling in love with Reverend Hackwell, Mrs. Norval cedes all power to him. She is blind to the fact that her money is disappearing, saying things such as: "Only tell me what I must do, and you know I shall obey you. You told me to send Lola back after they came from Fortress Monroe, and I did" (172). The fact that Mrs. Norval's character experiences such a reversal suggests that her power is contingent on lack of passion and thus temporary.

Although I would not argue that Mrs. Norval's initial power is in any way "protofeminist," I am interested in the ways in which Mrs. Norval's

power resides in her selfishness, whereas Lavinia's power resides in her selflessness. In essence, Ruiz de Burton seems to be making a statement about the effectiveness of power based on conquest. This version of power, based on the "mixing of the domestic and the foreign through Mrs. Norval's imperialistic designs" (Ruiz 119), would probably not have been viewed by Ruiz de Burton as politically effective. Ruiz de Burton seems to prefer power that breaks out of the domestic sphere and aims to benefit more than just the individual. In other words, Mrs. Norval's initial manipulative power, followed by her complete domination by Reverend Hackwell, makes her laughable—whereas Lavinia's power is not only lasting but also laudable.

Inasmuch as Lavinia's character represents an emerging women's rights movement, her interactions with Lola represent the points of convergence between this movement and the campaign for Mexican rights. Just as these two initiatives were rarely seen in conjunction in nineteenth century political thought, Lola and Lavinia rarely relate throughout the novel. In fact, out of the handful of times that both characters appear in the same room, they engage in direct conversation only twice. I suggest that their lack of interaction and, more importantly, the lack of consciousness that each one displays about the other's oppression, demonstrate either an unwillingness or inability by Ruiz de Burton to understand the intersectionality of Mexican and women's struggles.

The first contact between these characters occurs shortly after Lola's arrival at the Norval house. Thinking that Lola is a mixture of "Indian" and "negro," Lavinia states "Indians are as proud and surly as they are treacherous" (20). Upon learning that Lola is of neither race, Lavinia apologetically states, "I thought she might be Aztec." This scene marks the extent of Lavinia's reflections on race. Throughout the rest of the novel she makes no indication that she empathizes with the discrimination that Lola experiences, despite the discrimination that she herself feels because of her gender.

Lavinia does, however, state that she feels badly for Lola. Listening to a conversation about whether the spots on Lola's skin are contagious, Lavinia exclaims: "Poor child! I pity her!" (78). This pity, however, draws no connection between Lavinia's own situation and that of Lola. In both women's cases, the members of the Norval family ignore them, except to treat them as second-class citizens. Lavinia only seems to make this connection when reflecting upon her sister's tyranny. For example, when Reverend Hackwell falls ill and Lola is forced to come care for him,

Lavinia is outraged. Knowing that she herself will have to leave her beloved Reverend Hackwell's side upon Lola's arrival, Lavinia says to Lola: "You are right, Lola. Jenny is tyrant, and we are all her slaves" (138). In this quote—which marks the first time that Lavinia speaks to Lola—Lavinia acknowledges for the first time that both women are victims of the same oppression—Mrs. Norval. She is unable to draw a link, however, between the larger oppression that they both face. Lavinia cannot see that just as she is kept from fully exercising her power because of her femininity, Lola is repressed because of her Mexicanness. Mrs. Norval is, in this situation, a representation of the control exerted upon these women by the society at large.

In Lola's case, she too is unable to make the connection between her oppression and Lavinia's. For example, after killing the canaries Lavinia rushes out of the room, faints, and is caught by Reverend Hackwell. The Reverend takes advantage of the situation and begins to kiss Lavinia while she is unconscious. Witnessing this, "Lola, amused, looked from one to the other" (88). She makes no effort to stop Reverend Hackwell from taking advantage of Lavinia. Instead she laughs at his actions before concerning herself with saving the life of the remaining canary. In this scene Lola shows that, like everyone else, she views Lavinia as both a comical and a pitiful character. Despite the Norval family's own treatment of her, Lola does not draw links between Lavinia's exploitation and her own.

Perhaps the most truthful statement concerning the relationship between these two characters comes from Lola when she states to Julian: "Miss Lavvy and Mattie, though they didn't dislike me, never took any interest in me" (100). Indeed, Lavinia never concerns herself with Lola's situation, and vice versa. It is Ruiz de Burton's decision to separate her political interest into these two characters—neither of whom ever fully understands the plight of the other—that suggests her inability reconcile their stories.

As we've seen from her personal letters, Ruiz de Burton often reflects on how both her womanhood and her Mexicanness keep her from being fully incorporated into American society and government. Her personal letters do not suggest, however, that she acknowledges how both identities intersect and work together. It seems from these letters that Ruiz de Burton views herself as either a woman or Mexican, but rarely as a Mexican woman. This is echoed in Lola, who also shares both of these identities, but never acknowledges her own womanhood. As such, we can argue that Ruiz de Burton's decision to separate the "woman question"

and the "Mexican question" into two separate characters represents her difficulty in understanding the intersectionality of both oppressions in her personal life and in the time period in which she lived.

In short, the arc of Lavinia's storyline gives the reader the sense of a woman breaking cultural restraints, a woman becoming aware of her own feminist impulses. Just as Pascha A. Stevenson has suggested that "Lola's journey from darkness to whiteness commands metaphorical significance as Ruiz de Burton's own journey from darkness to whiteness" (65), so do I suggest that Lavinia's journey has metaphorical significance as Ruiz de Burton's own journey from Colonel's wife to a politically and socially active citizen. Reading Lavinia thus further allows us to speculate on the ways in which gender intersected race and ethnicity both in Ruiz de Burton's personal life and in Civil War-era America.

At the same time, Lavinia is said to be "no advocate of 'women's rights,'" a statement that likely reflects Ruiz de Burton's own opinions on feminism. Her personal letters give no indication that Ruiz de Burton supported a unified feminist or suffragist movement. Rather she reflects on her own personal experience as a woman, and her desire to change woman's position within society and government. The same could be said for Lavinia, who is not interested in joining a public movement, but in making her own movement into the public sphere to accomplish personal goals. For this reason, Ruiz de Burton can be construed as a feminist in terms of her views on womanhood in the Civil War-era, but not in terms of her solidarity with feminist movements. Rather, it is fair to say that she would have been critical of a unified feminist or suffragist movement, in so far as it supported a republican form of government.

By inserting Lavinia in the novel, nevertheless, Ruiz de Burton is acknowledging the importance of improving the place of women in American society. Although she may have been critical of women who identified as advocates of women's rights, her own conflicted stance on womanhood (as displayed in her letters) suggests at least a concern with the woman question. The novel's changing treatment of Lavinia—first as a satirical character, then as an admirable public persona—echoes Ruiz de Burton's own ambivalent attitudes toward her social position.

Ruiz de Burton's inability or unwillingness to make a connection between the intersecting oppressions of race and gender is reflected in her personal letters and in the novel. For example, Lola and Lavinia have almost no interchange in the novel. Thus the character that represents race issues and the character that represents gender issues never interact.

Further, both characters are essentially lost by the novel's end. Although we know that Lola moves back to Mexico, the concluding scenes of the novel portray her with no agency—almost as a piece of luggage—being carried to a steamer in the middle of the night. Aside from her role helping Lola escape, Lavinia's whereabouts are left unexplained. Not only are the issues of gender and race left unresolved, but also a connection is never made between the two.

In this sense, a close reading of Lavinia's character offers us another way to understand Ruiz de Burton's difficulties with intersectionality. The character also allows us to see that Ruiz de Burton, although not a public advocate of women's rights, nevertheless inserted a poignant critique of women's place in society into her novel. Because Ruiz de Burton's portrayal of Lavinia is nuanced and complex, her character cannot be read simply as representative of the nineteenth-century women's movement. However, through Lavinia we can witness many aspects of its emergence. Just as Lavinia is initially dismissed as a promiscuous woman and a madwoman, so too was the women's movement dismissed at the time the novel was written. Likewise, just as Lavinia's acquisition of political and social agency took place at the intersection of the public and private spheres, so did the women's movement deploy this same tactic. Lavinia effectively represents not only the feminist initiative in the novel, but Ruiz de Burton's own subversive insertion of her "protofeminist" politics.

## NOTES

[1] I am referring here to John-Michael Rivera's claim that Ruiz de Burton is "the first Mexican in the United States to write an English-language novel" (82).

[2] I use the word feminist to refer to Ruiz de Burton's concern with women's role in society, not to her support of an organized feminist movement.

[3] I am referring here to Sanchez and Pita's observation that Ruiz de Burton was a woman pulled "in different directions by locations of class, race, gender, and nationality, often at odds with one another" (*Conflicts* x).

[4] All translations, unless otherwise noted, are mine.

[5] Translation provided by Montes and Goldman in *María Amparo Ruiz de Burton: Critical and Pedagogical Perspectives*, 248.

[6] For more information on Ruiz de Burton's opinions of Mexican society see her letter written to M.G. Vallejo on September 14, 1869.

[7] Translation provided by Montes and Goldman in *María Amparo Ruiz de Burton: Critical and Pedagogical Perspectives*, 249.

[8] I borrow the term "racial bargaining" from Pascha A. Stevenson's "Reader Expectation and Ethnic Rhetorics: The Problem of the Passing Subaltern in Who Would Have Thought It?"

[9] For more information on the differences between feminism and women's rights in the 19th century consult Barbara J. Berg's *The Remembered Gate: Origins of American Feminism*.

[10] For more information on republican motherhood in the Jacksonian era see Susan M. Marilley's *Woman Suffrage and the Origins of Liberal Feminism in the United States, 1820-1920*.

[11] Baym argues that domesticity was the 19th century woman's "ticket to the public sphere" (xxxix). For more information on her theory of "domestic feminism" see her introduction to the second edition of *Woman's Fiction*.

[12] For more information on the use of the madwoman trope in literature see Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic*.

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