

TO WANT AND WANT NOT:
MANIFESTATIONS OF DESIRE IN “BARBIE-Q” BY
SANDRA CISNEROS AND الأريكة (“THE COUCH”) BY
فاطمة حمد المزروعي (FATIMA HAMAD AL MAZROUEI)

218 Doris Hambuch
United Arab Emirates University

Although “Barbie-Q” (1991) by Chicana Sandra Cisneros and “The Couch” (2010) by Emirati Fatima H. Al Mazrouei originate in very different cultural contexts, these two texts have more in common than their brevity and poetic style, and it is their similarities that make them ideal candidates for a comparative analysis. Both short stories are told by female narrators who desire the object identified in the title of each story, and the items of their desire carry significant symbolic value to each respective story. Both stories offer an implicit critique of (post)modern consumerism, and both also weave this critique into a context of female body image and the beauty myth manifested in Naomi Wolf’s 1991 book of the same title. Departing from a philosophical understanding of “desire,” and attempting to encourage a constructive dialogue between so-called “Western” and non-Western feminist discourse, this paper accounts for the implications of diverse representations of female desire for their contrasting cultural contexts. It aims to highlight ways in which increasingly urgent transcultural or cosmopolitan feminist discourse could function more fruitfully.

Cisneros grew up in Chicago, Illinois, and also spent time in Mexico City during her early childhood (Curiel 52). The Puerto Rican neighborhood on the North Side of Chicago, to which her family moved when she was eleven, provides the setting for her debut novel, *The House on Mango Street* (1984). “Barbie-Q,” first published in the collection *Woman Hollering Creek* (1991) about a decade later, includes a few

distinct coordinates that identify the setting of the story as Chicago's South Side. Al Mazrouei belongs to the third category of modern writers from the United Arab Emirates, according to Olatunbosun Ishaq Tijani's categorization in "Contemporary Emirati Literature: Its Historical Development and Forms." This extensive survey, unfortunately without reference to Al Mazrouei's work, distinguishes between an early-twentieth-century generation without formal education, the mid-twentieth-century generation, witnesses to increasing industrialization as result of oil resources, and the contemporary "post-oil (post-unification) generation, who are largely university educated" (Tijani 123). In fact, not only did Al Mazrouei complete post-secondary education, she also taught in a university herself, as Cisneros did, before shifting her focus to her work in the Federal National Council and to the creation of children's books. Both authors thus belong to what Eurocentric paradigms define as "West" and "East," respectively. These two stories are set in contrasting cultural contexts, but both lend themselves to feminist readings that gain from comparative considerations.

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Nima Naghibi's *Rethinking Global Sisterhood: Western Feminism and Iran* provides numerous illustrations of misguided transcultural feminist discourses. Naghibi's comprehensive study concludes with several warnings, the most relevant of which for this study concerns the risk of superiority thinking and patronizing condescension: "A productive and egalitarian transnational feminist network remains a challenge for feminists today, as historically and now, the language of feminism has been successfully co-opted by an antifeminist state rhetoric that promotes and supports what Mino Moallem has called 'civilizational thinking'" (Naghibi 141). Such "civilizational thinking" typically assumes a superiority of Western over non-Western, Third World, or developing regions. Here I follow Naghibi's use of the terms "West," "East," or "Third World," "with all their inadequacies, to hang on to the critical colonial/imperial investments that the terms evoke" (Naghibi xvi). In "Rachna Mara's Cosmopolitan (Yet Partial) Feminisms," Shazia Rahman, likewise, cautions against the ignorant kind of "global sister" who "assumes not only that third-world women are worse off but also that they cannot rescue themselves from the patriarchal conditions of their lives" (Rahman 9). Highly politicized topics such as female genital mutilation or child marriage, for example, often serve to encourage these attitudes. Here, I deliberately concern myself with a universal, psychological theme to draw attention to uniting rather than dividing avenues for exchange. Given that the personal is also always political, manifestations of female desire still function closer to the former than the latter category.

Ottmar Ette and Gutrud Lehnert include a chapter on "desire" in their collection *Große Gefühle (Moving Emotions, 2007)*, though the author of this chapter, Doris Kolesch, explains in her introduction that many scholars of emotions and affect do not recognize the autonomy of desire as emotion in its own right. Kolesch's chapter, in part, challenges subordinations of "desire" in the categories of "will" or "motivation." A comparison of Cisneros's "Barbie-Q" and Al Mazrouei's "The Couch"

identifies desire as the most prominent driving force behind both plots and thus supports Kolesch's defense against its subcategorization. I further argue that both stories present desire in the positive, empowering sense that originates in Spinoza's philosophy according to Kolesch's historical sketch. Both stories end with explicitly positive acknowledgements of the creative powers untapped by the two protagonists through their embrace of desire. Where the girl in "Barbie-Q" allows herself to alter a repetitive story, the older, single woman in "The Couch" welcomes the potential of her imagination once she recognizes the nature of her involvement with the new piece of furniture.

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220 "Barbie-Q" narrates a girl's reflections about her and her friend's creative entertainment in a lively, colloquial style. In "Reading the Puns in 'Barbie-Q,'" Mary S. Comfort outlines three possible readings of the title in relation to the corresponding parts of the story. In the beginning, the narrator reminds her friend of how they used to take the cues—the 'Q' standing for cue—for their role-playing from Mattel's commercial language, though not with very much enthusiasm (Comfort 83). It was "every time the same story" (Cisneros 14), until a factory accident unexpectedly provides the girls, whose parents' budgets are extremely limited, with a new variety of dolls to incorporate as added characters in their play. The accident involves a fire, which prompts the reading of "Barbie-Q" as "barbecue," the second pun (Comfort 84). At the end of Cisneros's text, Comfort correctly discovers a Barbie "queue," because the stories are no longer the same, and the narrator has developed her authorial identity (85).

"The Couch," likewise, presents a female narrator who develops self-confidence, creative expression, and control over difficult decisions in the course of the plot. Al Mazrouei's protagonist is presumably older than Cisneros's, and tells her story from a third-person point of view in contrast to the latter's first-person. The woman obsessed with the purchase of a couch is employed and is herself responsible for her limited budget. She drives a car whose monthly payments are among the regular expenses she must take into account for the calculation of the couch purchase. The woman is single, and in some passages of the text, her desire takes on explicitly sexual dimensions, a connotation only implied in the girl's play with dolls in "Barbie-Q." Once Al Mazrouei's narrator has selected a specific two-seater couch, she slowly begins to imagine this piece of furniture as a potential lover. This imaginary transformation is what drives her to defend her selection against a couple also interested in the same couch. The story ends with a very brief scene in which the woman enjoys the new purchase at her home. The fact that she refuses feelings of guilt caused by her desire affirms her individual agency as much as it encourages the power of her imagination. Neither of the protagonists appears distressed by the imperfections in their

scenarios at the end of each story. In “Barbie-Q,” fire and water damage to the girl’s new dolls do not disrupt her imaginative power, but seem to enhance it. Although the woman in “The Couch” might prefer the living lover to his fantastical counterpart, the joy resulting from her new sense of courage and determination triumph over this shortcoming.

The collections in which these two stories are included are strongly influenced by each respective author’s cultural backgrounds. Born to Mexican-American parents in Chicago, Cisneros uses Spanish or Spanglish vocabulary in *The House on Mango Street* and most of the stories in *Woman Hollering Creek* in order to mark her settings and characters as distinctly Hispanic. “Barbie-Q,” however, lacks this kind of cultural specification. The only clues a reader receives as to the setting of the story are casual references to street names such as Maxwell Street, Halsted Street, and the Dan Ryan Expressway, which identify the location to those familiar with the area as Chicago’s South Side. Comparing this story to the others in the anthology, however, will lead the reader to assume that the nameless first-person narrator comes from the same Hispanic background that is featured prominently within the other stories as well as that of the author herself.

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Al Mazrouei’s story “The Couch” occupies a similar position in her first collection of stories, *نهار الظباء* (*Day of the Antelope*, 2010). Most of the other stories in this collection refer to locations on the Arabian Peninsula, particularly in the United Arab Emirates, as well as to typical items in Khaleeji (Gulf) culture. “The Couch,” in contrast, includes no such references, and the female third-person narrator, like that of “Barbie-Q,” is never named. Readers of “The Couch” receive very little background information about the woman who is obsessed with her planned purchase, other than that she is single and supporting her mother, who is presumably widowed or divorced. Her extensive budget considerations place her within the lower middle class. She has planned to purchase the couch for some time, but is still unable to afford a larger one that would seat more than two people.

Both Cisneros and Al Mazrouei may have opted for comparatively abstract settings with nameless characters in order to emphasize the universal nature of the main themes of “Barbie-Q” and “The Couch”: the overarching theme of female desire, and its connections to capitalist consumerism, as well as to the vexing pressures revolving around physical appearance. Anonymity and abstraction, however, also serve as protection in the context of elaborations on less publicly explored topics. As Kolesch points out, desire, particularly sexual desire, has traditionally assumed gender-specific connotations (80); she illustrates her discourse with the works of two male artists, Denis Diderot and Yasumásu Morimura, in order to emphasize the traditional understanding of desire as a male-dominated activity. Her discussion of the contemporary Japanese photographer’s work demonstrates the challenges with which this understanding has met in recent decades. My study of two female authors may serve as a complement to Kolesch’s study of these male artists.

An additional cue taken from Kolesch’s chapter on “Begehren” (desire) relates

to the involvement of capitalist consumerism. In an illuminating historical sketch that traces differing considerations of “desire” as concept, Kolesch identifies two contrasting schools (79). The first, which includes Plato, Hegel, Freud, and Lacan, explains desire as the result of a void that leads to an unfulfillable striving for “the Other,” the unfamiliar, something absent. The second, whose prominent proponents are Spinoza, Nietzsche, Deleuze and Guattari, perceive desire as a playful, experimental positivity that engenders energetic and imaginative productivity. It is my hope that future lists of theoreticians will include female thinkers as well. Kolesch sees the principles of capitalist consumerism, aiming at the necessarily unattainable satisfaction of a continuously growing need, more closely related to the first school. My reading of Cisneros’s and Al Mazrouei’s short stories reveals that, although they involve purchases of dolls and a couch, respectively, the plot development of both stories suggests representations of desire more reminiscent of the second school. Kolesch’s summary of Spinoza’s seventeenth-century understanding of desire aptly

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Er identifiziert Begehren nicht mit einem Objekt, dessen Erreichung Erfüllung verspricht, sondern konzeptualisiert es als eine hervorbringende, generative Energie, die es vermag, Dinge zu erschaffen, Allianzen zu schmieden und Handlungen ebenso wie Interaktionen zu provozieren. (Kolesch 85)¹

Although dolls and couches are obviously objects, the aim of desire is the immaterial value they symbolize and represent. In “Barbie-Q,” this value involves the girl’s self-confidence as an original storyteller; in “The Couch,” it revolves mainly around the claim of sexual pleasure and the rejection of marital dependence.

CHICANA VS. ARAB WOMAN CONSUMERS

It is important, in the context of the empowering potential of desire, to understand the symbolic value of the objects in both stories. If the dolls function as fictional characters in the protagonist’s game, the increase in their number represents her development into a more mature and experienced storyteller. It takes a certain amount of maturity, the self-confidence of someone aware of her creative powers, to disregard or even utilize the imperfections of the damaged dolls. The couch, on the other hand, does not as easily compare to a fictional character as the doll. Through personification, however, Al Mazrouei succeeds in turning the piece of furniture into a person controlled by her protagonist’s imagination. The couch in the story further requires consideration, not merely as additional character and a space for relaxation, lovemaking, or other forms of social interaction, but ultimately as the notorious site for psychoanalysis. Once the single woman realizes the extent to which the piece of furniture relates to her wish for a lover, she is able to overcome the agony this desire must have caused in her subconscious. In light of their symbolic values, the objects

from which each story takes its title relate less to a dependence on capitalist principles than to the means for a liberation of the mind, within its complicated network at the centre of the following discussion of beauty. Although the capitalist system is accordingly less relevant for evaluations of the object themselves, it does feature prominently in each story's reference to budgetary constraints that complicate each protagonist's desire for possession.

The very limited budget is an important problem both protagonists share. The narrative perspective in "Barbie-Q" alternates between first-person singular and plural, at times including an equally nameless friend who participates in the narrator's game with Barbie dolls. Each of the friends can afford only one doll, "besides one extra outfit apiece" (Cisneros 14), at the beginning of the story. The sudden additions to this shortage of characters in the game comes as the result of a warehouse accident and subsequent fire sale at the end of the story. Cisneros's protagonist vehemently defends her pleasure with her new toys in the closing lines of the story:

So what if our Barbies smell like smoke when you hold them up to your nose even after you wash and wash and wash them. And if the prettiest doll, Barbie's MOD'ern cousin Francie with real eyelashes, eyelash brush included, has a left foot that's melted a little—so? If you dress her in her new "Prom Pinks" outfit, satin splendor with matching coat, gold belt, clutch, and hair bow included, so long as you don't lift her dress, right?—who's to know. (Cisneros 16)

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The capitalist principles of any industry, the toy industry included, dictate fashions and aesthetic standards in a way that requires consumers to buy more, buy more frequently, and ideally also buy the more expensive versions of the industry's goods. When Cisneros's narrator employs damaged and therefore much less expensive toys creatively, she deliberately subverts these principles.

Being thus triumphs over having in the ending of "Barbie-Q." The inspiration the narrator gains from the new characters outweighs the deficiencies a toy manufacturer would highlight in them. The narrator of "The Couch," likewise, appears content with the purchase she decides on only during a second visit to the same shop. At the beginning of the story, Al Mazrouei's protagonist calculates extensively between her regular expenses and the necessary amount for the desired couch. Over the course of the story, the woman imagines the couch as a potential lover. Once in her home, it has a distinctly empowering effect, and material value becomes irrelevant:

كانت تنخيل نفسها في غرفتها مستلقية على الأريكة، حين نبيها أنفها إلى بقايا عطر الرجل. رائحة عطر مفعم بالقوة والرجولة ملأت روحها، لتأخذها إلى مكان بعيد، فأغمضت عينها وراحت تنحس المكان الفارغ بجوارها، حين أمعن في الخيال رأته. عيني زوجة غاضبة فأبعدتها قليلا قليلا، ثم أخرجتها من الغرفة

(Al Mazrouei 56)²

In each story, the material object of desire not only symbolizes emotional values that will be further discussed, but also relates to the beholder's imagination and intellectual growth. The dolls from the fire sale are far from perfect by official industrial standards, but they allow the protagonist and her friend to create new, more elaborate

stories. The woman who might prefer to share her new couch with a living partner at least becomes aware of and learns to embrace the various forms of her desire. She eliminates uncalled-for feelings of guilt, symbolized by the imagined “furious eyes of the wife.” Alternatively, one may read the imaginary elimination of the wife as the woman’s acceptance of her unmarried status. This reading, relating to the woman’s indulgence in sexual fantasies, is supported by the story’s description of her bonding with the couch, a passage that is at the centre of its exploration of the connections between desire and beauty.

It is worth pointing out that both passages quoted above, taken from the conclusions of each respective story, include elements of colloquial, spoken language marked by the repetitions of “wash” in “Barbie-Q” or “slowly” (تليلاً) in “The Couch.” Although the Arabic of “The Couch” is generally less informal than the English of “Barbie-Q,” the former includes folkloric intertext that further evokes orality. This element, potentially reminiscent of pre-capitalist times, is important for the following section of this essay, which sheds light on the connections between beauty and desire. In *The Genesis of Arabic Narrative Discourse*, Sabry Hafez justifies the popularity of the short story in the Arab world in part with its affinities to poetry as well as the “theatricality and collectivity of the oral tradition” (12). As discussed earlier in this essay, both “Barbie-Q” and “The Couch” rely on a poetic style. One may argue that evocations of orality and folklore enhance this quality in both stories, and even think of the tale as precursor to the short story as genre (March-Russell 2).

BEAUTY OF BODY, SOUL, MIND, AND HEART

The reminiscences of oral tradition in these stories are not limited to their respective repetitions of “wash” or “slowly.” Other examples of repetition, expletives, and informal constructions give “Barbie-Q” a speech-like quality virtually throughout the story; for example, the second paragraph begins, “Every time the same story” (Cisneros 14), and the subsequent lines include expressions such as “Kiss kiss kiss” (Cisneros 14) and “You dumbbell!” (Cisneros 14). The speaker mostly addresses her friend, “you,” but also readers or listeners, especially when she includes her friend as part of “we;” for example, in the closing sentence of the paragraph in question: “We have to make do with your mean-eyed Barbie and my bubblehead Barbie and our one outfit apiece not including the sock dress” (15). The description “mean-eyed” illustrates the ways in which a person’s character traits may be correlated to his/her outward appearance. If the mean expression on this particular doll’s face is the result of a temporary emotion, then the same doll could seem “soft-eyed” or “starry-eyed” at any other time. Needless to say, all of these impressions are projections of the narrator, in whose eyes the proverbial beauty rests in tales.

Beyond the narrator, it is the author at whose discretion characters appear beautiful, ugly, attractive, appalling, appealing, dreadful, gorgeous, or horrendous. Fairy

tales are notorious for such visible oppositions, usually in order to emphasize the invisible qualities of certain personalities. Witches or evil stepsisters typically receive unattractive physical appearances, for example. The folktale passage referred to in “The Couch” does not pertain to these sorts of character descriptions; however, and perhaps in a similar vein, it highlights relations between material and immaterial value. Once the woman has selected the piece she likes best, this couch “seduces” her with an imagined whisper. This whisper reminds her of an unidentified folktale, in which a fish tells a girl, “Take me, and I will make you rich.” The couch’s version of this promise raises the question of the extent to which material relates to immaterial value, because the wealth in the couch’s promise is comfort: “Take me, and I will comfort you.” It is worth mentioning that the Arabic word for *comfort* (سأريحك; Al Mazrouei 53; derived from راحة) also implies ‘rest’ or ‘peace of mind.’

The fact that the mind continuously interacts with not just the body, but also other elements variously referred to as heart, soul, or spirit, has long been the center of feminist discourse that challenged the Cartesian subject (see, for example, Grosz). Perceptions of beauty as well as experience and construction of desire are always the results of such complicated and, frequently, unidentifiable interactions. “The Couch” reflects on the complications underlying human behavior by foregrounding juxtapositions of body parts, human senses, and emotional expressions. The opening paragraph sets the scene for these juxtapositions with a reference to the protagonist’s mental impression of weightlessness (بالحلما) as opposed to her actual overweight body (جسدها). The woman’s joy over her impending purchase allows her to temporarily forget the “unnecessary kilos that covered her waist and stomach like lifebuoys.” The appearance of a couple detracts from this joy because it reminds the woman not only of her weight problem, but presumably also of her occasional sense of loneliness.

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A sense of loneliness does clearly inform the woman’s extensive search for the perfect purchase. She singles out a couch that can seat two. She also looks at armchairs, but finds them unimpressive; she cannot afford anything bigger due to her small salary, her regular payments on her car, and her mother’s living expenses. It is not clear whether she shares accommodations with her mother, but they are obviously both single. Despite the strong bond she develops with the chosen couch during the first visit, she does not buy it then. When she leaves work early to return to the shop a second time, her relationship with the couch becomes explicitly sensual, including “shivers,” a “language of the eyes,” and “waves of love” (Al Mazrouei 54). The woman attempts to capture these emotional sensations with her hands, placing her left onto her right. When what appear to be a newlywed couple show interest in the same couch, the woman becomes passionately possessive:

تتقدم إليهما والزوجة مازالت واقفة في مكانها، والزوج على الأيكة كما هو، يسأل عن إمكانية توصيل هذه القطعة مع باقي الأثاث الذي اختاراه. كانت تنجبه إليهما ومشاعر الكره تتفاعل تجاه هذه المرأة، وتقف بين البائع والزوجة مثل لينة تدافع عن عرينها، وبصوت مخنوق: عفوا أنا اخترت هذه القطعة أولاً، وأجري الآن معاملة الشراء وأتيت لأخذ باقي المعلومات، وبدت بصوتها ونظراتها جافة فاسية كجذع الهبه هجير الصحر

(Al Mazrouei 55)³

The fact that she feels hatred towards the woman, but not the man, may signal her desire for a partner. More likely, however, it underscores her stigma as an unmarried woman. She defeats both of these challenges at the end of the story, by dismissing the memory of the married woman from her personal indulgence in all that the new couch symbolizes.

The pairing of voice and gaze in this passage is another manifestation of inter-relations between the tangible body and beyond. A juxtaposition of chest and head, described as the origin of anger, precedes this passage. The anger arising in her chest engenders “red swirls” (الدوامات الحمراء) inside her head that threaten to burst it. The joyful sensation of the woman’s bonding with the couch, likewise, results in the singling out of “eyes,” “heart,” and “body” (53). When “her eyes took hold of the couch, her heart began to beat excitedly, and her body trembled” (عندما وقعت عينها على الأريكة) (خفق قلبها واضطرب، وحين لامستها انتفض جسدها). The continuous stress on her body parts and implied embodied cognition evokes the related juxtaposition between personality and physical appearance.

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Even before she personifies the couch, the woman’s first impression of the item she seeks and eventually acquires is best described by the German phrase *Schein und Sein*—appearance and reality. The woman first notices the colour and material of the couch cover. She sees that the couch is covered entirely, not allowing anyone to know its “fine inner details made of wood and aluminum” (53). While this distinction between exterior and interior may symbolize the differences between a person’s looks and inner character traits, it also brings to mind the covering of a melted foot discussed in the context of “Barbie-Q.” Much feminist Barbie scholarship has attacked the toy as “the American icon of feminine perfection” (Curiel 54). The dolls in Cisneros’s story, in contrast, become affordable for the characters because of their imperfections. As both Comfort and Curiel recognize, these imperfections allow the girls to “create their own subversive understanding of Barbie and female success” (Curiel 54).

I propose to take the cue of the melted foot, which Comfort wisely relates to the concept of the “melting pot” (85), to return to the necessity of transcultural or cosmopolitan feminist discourse. Debates between “White” mainstream North American feminists and their counterparts from so-called “ethnic minorities” have arguably been beneficial for all parties concerned. Alice Walker’s idea of “Womanism” (Hambuch 45), for example, adds crucial perspectives to the dominant discourses of Second- and Third-Wave feminism in the United States. Hispanic proponents, including Cisneros as well as Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherríe Moraga, have also contributed significantly to the diversification of debates, as have indigenous authors such as Joy Harjo and Leslie Marmon Silko. In the current age of globalization, I argue, the increased inclusion of more diverse points of view from across the hemispheres has become essential to any meaningful progress of the concerns at hand anywhere.

In her insightful recollection of a graduate seminar, “Sex and the Muslim

Feminist,” Rafia Zakaria laments the continuous exclusion of Muslim feminists in global debates led by celebrated Western pioneers. She notes that just as the 2006 seminar did not assign any texts by Muslim authors, Western advocates of women’s rights still overlook their Muslim counterparts. Zakaria’s essay is particularly relevant for this study, because it concerns itself with the consequences of the Sexual Revolution in the United States and challenges the importance subsequent Western feminists have given this movement in recent decades. Zakaria ultimately argues that sexual liberation has become the center of Western feminist discourse, and that this focus trivializes many other, possibly more urgent issues. Studies of women’s underrepresentation in American public policy, or the consequences of a lack of maternity leave, may indeed support this claim. At the same time, it is illuminating to understand Zakaria’s critique of the achievements of the Sexual Revolution:

The emphasis on sexual freedom permitted the taming of radical feminism to fit the capitalist society from which it emerged. If sex was understood as a commodity that women were choosing to consume, then its problematic aspects could be disguised. The objectification of women as sexual objects could hence be replaced by the objectification of sex and even sexualization. [...] The focus shifted away from the state and from oppressive institutions to the women [sic] herself. Instead of taking on the thorny business of how sex itself replicated patriarchy in complex ways, sex was made into a commodity, which would be consumed by both men and women. (Zakaria)

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Zakaria refers to the popularity of plastic surgery to illustrate this problematic shift between different feminist foci. One may add eating disorders, teenage pregnancies, or certain forms of depression to the unwelcome effects of this single feminist concern, whose overemphasis might indeed have distracted from more pressing, if anti-capitalist, demands. Both “The Couch” and “Barbie-Q” take a stance in terms of sexual liberation, without treating it as any more important than other implications of the more general theme of desire. Both, likewise, avoid linking it with the promiscuity and fashion-dependence Zakaria interprets as funnels of the debate in her graduate seminar on the one hand, or with much of the aftermath of the Sexual Revolution in Western societies on the other. Al Mazrouei’s protagonist celebrates her sexuality through the imagined elimination of “the furious eyes of the wife,” symbolic of guilt and of society’s pressure on unmarried women. Cisneros, whose pre-pubescent protagonist’s concern with sex is necessarily different, still mentions that the girls “don’t have money for a stupid-looking boy doll” (Cisneros 14), and Ken is therefore “invisible” in their game. Both stories thus celebrate various manifestations of women’s independence, relating that independence to the development of imagination inspired by the embrace of desire in its most general sense. As explained in the context of Kolesch’s distinction between two schools of philosophers, both “Barbie-Q” and “The Couch” represent desire as the positive kind of energy that Spinoza, Deleuze, and Guattari describe.

Both Cisneros’s and Al Mazrouei’s protagonists are female and unnamed; the former speaks in the first person and the latter in the third; Cisneros’s narrator is

young where Al Mazrouei's is older. Their respective objects of desire, which give each story its title, have great symbolic value to the protagonists, the authors, and the readers. Each text adds the challenge of a limited budget, and each text alludes to a struggle with physical appearance. Both stories end with their protagonists experiencing liberating satisfaction. Cisneros's protagonist suddenly has a variety of different dolls that give her the capability to tell different stories. She indulges in the development of her original voice as storyteller, enhanced rather than diminished by the damage the dolls suffered in a fire. Al Mazrouei's protagonist not only enjoys the possession of the couch in her home, but also the imaginary presence of the man who sat on it in the shop. The scent of the man, associated with strength and masculinity, transports her to a faraway place. The imagined appearance of the furious eyes of this man's wife may indicate guilt as well as stigma over being unmarried. When the woman pushes the image of this wife, slowly but determinedly, out of her room, she develops her personal independence as single and entitled to sexual pleasure. Like **228** the girl in "Barbie-Q" who controls the potential of her dolls, Al Mazrouei's character controls the potential of her new piece of furniture, even if that does not necessarily imply control over everything that these items symbolize.

Reading these two stories within their respective Hispanic-American and Arab contexts, and alongside each other at the same time, provides an illustration of what Ien Ang calls a "more modest feminism" (Rahman 14). Rahman further says of this concept that "one way to critique patriarchy within specific contexts, rather than through sweeping generalizations, is to advocate a partial feminism" (14). Such a critique should not concern itself as much with appearance, the realm of *Schein*, through confusion of content with its labels. Transcultural feminism, womanism, and discourses of women's issues or rights, should rather follow Ang's plea to accept "the moments of ultimate failure of communication" as starting points. Women everywhere, disregarding their origin and its relation to their individual whereabouts, stand to gain from patient, unprejudiced, and better informed listening and reciprocal exchange of ideas. My comparison of Cisneros's "Barbie-Q" and Al Mazrouei's "The Couch" has aimed to exemplify this kind of exchange by drawing attention to uniting rather than dividing treatments of a common concern with the universal theme of female desire and its involvement with aesthetics as well as its anti-capitalist undertones.

NOTE

1. "He [Spinoza] does not identify desire with an object, whose possession promises satisfaction. Instead, he understands it as a fertile, generative energy with the potential to create things, forge alliances, and provoke actions as well as interactions." All translations in this essay are my own, though I would like to refer to Marei Grundhöfer's excellent German translation of Al Mazrouei's collection, which has helped me with translations from the Arabic. Many thanks also to Fadwa Baraba for her patience with my many language-related questions. Finally, thanks to my CCLA audience at the 2016

Congress in Calgary, for constructive comments.

2. "She was stretching on the couch in her room, when her nose became aware of the man's remaining cologne scent. A scent filled with strength and masculinity enveloped her soul and brought her to a distant place. She closed her eyes and felt the empty space next to her. As she surrendered to her imagination in this way, she saw the furious eyes of the wife. She rose up and pushed her slowly but determined out of the room."
3. "The wife still stood on the same spot, and the husband still sat on the couch. He asked how this piece of furniture could match with the others they had already selected. She moved towards them and felt hatred against this woman. She manifested herself between the vendor and the woman like a lioness defending her den. She said with a stifled voice, 'Excuse me. I have chosen this piece of furniture first. I am in the process of buying it and only went to gather the remaining information.' Her voice and gaze seemed harsh and dry like a tree trunk set aflame by the midday heat in the desert."

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