NEW LATINX FEELINGS: RACE, AFFECT, AND FORM IN QUEER LATINX LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT

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Thomas Conners

Román de la Campa and David L. Eng

This project looks to US Latinx cultural production to trace how colorblind social discourse has rendered racial difference mute, as opposed to moot, as conversations of gender and sexuality appear to take its place. While Latinx Studies coalesced during the Cultural Movements of the 1960s and 1970s around an explicitly ethnoracial, heterosexual identity, from the late 1990s on it has contended with deracialized language and homonormativity resulting from colorblindness and the mainstreaming of LGBTQ rights. Through analyses of queer(ed) literary production of a post-1990s Latinx MFA generation, I argue that literary form registers feelings of racialization in narratives about sexuality, positioning both form and feeling as new metrics of Latinx historiography, interpretation, and subjectivity. By reading legal cases alongside novels and short stories, I sustain that Latinx literature does what colorblind law refuses to do by apprehending race and indicting racism in the literary structures of texts that otherwise appear predominantly, if not exclusively, queer. After all, if colorblindness discursively removes race from language despite its continuing structural presence, and if queerness has long existed as unspeakable sentiments, then these sociohistorical shifts demand an engagement with form and feeling.

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INTRODUCTION

abandoned by his coyote, my
father, sand seething beneath
his sneakers, trekked
through southern Arizona:
maze of acacia and cholla
cold sweat cut his face like
a razor in his pocket: a fine-
tooth comb, dice, & a photo
of a girl playing a violin on
the third day, he picked up
a rock, killed a blue lizard
with a single strike he tore it
apart, shoved guts & bones
into his mouth the first
time I knelt for a man, my
lips pressed to his zipper,
I suffered such hunger

—Eduardo C. Corral, "Want" from Slow Lightening (2012)

This poem narrates the crossing of two men: one, a father moving across borders, facing nature, neurosis, and the North; and the other, his son, moving across lines of normativity, facing fellatio and his emergent queerness. While one leaves behind mother tongues and fatherlands in a way that is familiar to contemporary readers, the other breaks with convention to revel in the intensities of sex and desire. What separates them literally, however, is precisely what keeps them together: gaps on the page, filled with the shared wordlessness of hunger and the deep feelings of wanting. Penned by poet Eduardo Corral, son of Mexican immigrants and winner of the Whiting Writers' Award, "Want" becomes emblematic of the generational shifts, tensions between race, gender, and

sexuality, and formal intrigue that animates this project and the queer Latinx texts that sustain it.

New Latinx Feelings provides an account for a generation of Latinx literary production that deviates from the preceding tradition's conventions by centering queerness, encoding racial difference beyond words, and experimenting with form. Just as Corral's poetic protagonist occupies a different positioning in literary imaginaries than the migrant father (kneeling, as it were), faces a set of subject relations more explicitly characterized by sexuality than race, and is beyond the reach of an inherited set of lost objects (compared to the contents of his dad's pockets), the acclaimed Latinx writers I read deploy new representational tactics to show how narratives of sexual loss index in form the feelings of racialization. While, at first glance, the avant-guard queer(ed) texts I analyze seem to diverge from the racialized, heterosexual Latinx writing of the 1960s and 1970s Cultural Movements, I argue that the presentation of explicitly sexual feelings is indicative of implicitly racialized structures and experiences and that gender and sexual become novel signifiers of race. Through analyses of queer narratives of a post-1990s Latinx MFA generation, I show how literary form registers the feelings of racialization that mainstream accounts marked by racial colorblindness, or the disavowal of racial difference, systematically deny. In this way, my work positions both form and feeling as new metrics of Latinx historiography, subjectivity, and literary interpretation.

To best substantiate these claims, my project draws from affect and critical race theories, aesthetics, and queer studies to analyze the relationship between Latinx subjectivity and racial and sexual politics, the linkages of feeling and form, and the dimensions of the literary and the identitarian. Consisting of four chapters and a brief

conclusion, *New Latinx Feelings* reads the critically acclaimed writers Justin Torres, Salvador Plascencia, Carmen María Machado, and Manuel Muñoz alongside legislation like California Supreme Court Case *Pérez v. Sharp* (1948) and Arizona's *House Bill 2281* (2010), also known as the Anti-Ethnic Studies Bill. By studying the literary and the legal in tandem, I show how contemporary Latinx novels and short stories take up the subversive act of rendering colorblindness aesthetic—or enacting what I call aesthetics of colorblindness—by removing race from language and content and installing it in form and feeling. Instead of suggesting the writers of my corpus pander to problematic racial politics, however, I argue that these texts challenge the racism of colorblind legislation by making visible the vast disjunction between official discourses on ethnoracialized subjects and the material conditions and experiences they face.

That an aesthetics of colorblindness manifests in queer narratives recounting experiences of gender and sexual non-conformity is not coincidental. Instead, I join other scholars in affirming that race relations under colorblindness are mediated through a language of sexuality and that my corpus' presentation of explicitly sexualized feelings is indicative of implicitly racialized structures and experiences. That is, that a social lexicon addressing sexual and gendered (non)normativity is also the new social lexicon of race. Close readings of literary texts allow me to show how racial difference and racism are negotiated and articulated in the content and language of non-normative gender and sexuality by the policing of gendered dispositions—notions like "ladylike" and "manly"—that not only tries to straighten queer subjects but also seeks to control *how* they are since colorblindness forbids the very recognition of *who* they are: ethnoracial subjects. Confronted with the disappearance of ethnoracial subjectivity and the

weaponization of ways of being and feeling, I attend to the forces, conditions, and processes that work on and work through racialized, sexual, and gendered relations by determining the contours and dimensions of what is normative, pathological, and permissible. Borrowing this critical orientation from subjectless queer critique and bringing it to bear on Latinx Studies not only responds to the problematic mainstream conditions confronting ethnoracial subjects, but to the literary intrigue of the texts I read—ones that, much like Corral's "Want," are marked by narrative holes and gaps and spliced and split subjects.

By linking explicit gender and sexuality to implicit race, I aim to highlight and counteract the work of neoliberalism that divides and dilutes social problematics along identitarian lines and away from systemic social reform. Cultural theorist Lisa Duggan describes this phenomenon in her *The Twilight of Equality?: Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy* (2004) when she writes that "Opposition to material inequality is maligned as "class warfare," while race, gender, or sexual inequalities are dismissed as merely cultural, private, or trivial. This rhetorical separation of the economic from the political and cultural arenas disguises the upwardly redistributing goals of neoliberalism—its concerted efforts to concentrate power and resources in the hands of tiny elites" (xiv). While this project is less immediately invested in debates on Latinx class warfare or economic modalities, that division and disguise become central operations within neoliberal social fabrics is of paramount importance for my argument reading race *as* gender and sexuality. Disguise is, after all, a question of form, the signaling of a new aesthetic manifestation that repackages familiar systems and structures across and among new subjectivities, colors, and orientations. In this sense, an

aesthetics of colorblindness is working to apprehend not only the new disguises race, racism, and racialization take, but the logics that inform and facilitate the propagation of disguise.

Duggan's work proves instrumental for grounding this process in the concrete example of homosexuality. Coining the term homonormativity to refer to the normalizing interpellation of once dissident queer sexual politics, the critic insists that the proliferation of queerness is more cause for concern than celebration. With the emergence of homonormativity, which in the US finds its historical trajectory in the decriminalization of homosexuality (2003) and the legalization of gay marriage (2015), the critic affirms that "Equality becomes narrow, formal access to a few conservatizing institutions [and] freedom becomes impunity for bigotry and vast inequalities in commercial life and civil society" (66). The formal shift queers undergo from social taboo to permissible partnership is accompanied by a formal shift in the radical reach of their politics, too. While Duggan focuses on sexuality, this process of incorporation runs parallel to Latinx identity within literary marketplaces. While the canonical writers of Latinx literary traditions once yielded both the pen and the sword as artists and activists, they are now recognized and validated through the social institutions that once denied their very existence. Latinx Studies scholar Elena Machado Sáez (2018) has periodized this contemporary phenomenon as the Latinx Masters of Fine Arts (MFA) Generation, or what we might think of as homonormativity's racialized equivalent. While MFA degrees are indeed shared by all the writers of my corpus, the MFA Generation is less a biographical organizer for my project and more a call to interpret Latinx literature beyond commodified identity through the generative work of queer studies. This is done not only

to signal the shared distancing between both queer and Latinx genealogies' antinormative origins and their contemporary positionings, but also to trace how the queer scholarship critiquing the disguising, shifting forms of neoliberalism might influence the major modes of critique and interpretation in Latinx literary studies.

As a result, *New Latinx Feelings* extends analyses of imbricated race and sex to a Latinx present, tracks the shifting forms of anti-racist literature and politics, and situates feelings of racial difference and the literary forms they take as key to critiquing hierarchies of white, heteromasculine supremacy under neoliberalism. The remainder of this introduction expands on these claims while situating them in dialogue with the scholarship that has animated much of my work, as well as with some of the major debates in the fields my work intends to intervene on. I first elaborate on the generational shifts my project is marking to better situate my case for reading an aesthetics of colorblindness, or feelings in a moment of contemporary colorblind homonormativity. I then trace Latinx Studies' turn to form, while arguing for the relationship between aesthetics and affect. Continuing, I track the critical through lines and queer new lines that undergird and pave the way for my project's claims, namely the work of Latina Third World Feminists and queer Latinx critique. I end with a brief overview of my four chapters.

Civil Rights to Colorblindness, Racial Melancholia to Racial Dissociation

On October 23, 1969, the Western Regional Director of the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights declared to the Los Angeles Superior Court that Mexican Americans constituted a "separate and distinct" class of people (Salazar 234-235). This marked a

turning point for famed lawyer and author Oscar Zeta Acosta and the *East L.A. Thirteen* and the *Baltimore Six* cases he was arguing, ones hinging on such a declaration in order to affirm a separate and distinct class of discrimination foisted on the broad, varied collective that would come to be known as Latinx. The declaration, however, also signaled a marked shift away from the centuries-long ambiguous social positionings that left proto-Latinx subjects, to borrow legal scholar Lupe Salinas (2007), "legally white, socially brown" (15). Situating Corral's poetic figures within this history, we see how the father's miserable border crossing interpellated him into the set of material depravations Acosta was arguing against, ones marked by racialized and exploited labor and directly catalyzing the emergence of brown power. This instance of the legal recognition of ethnoracial difference and the existence of discrimination, itself the culmination of decades of activism and protest, added considerable momentum to the Chicano and Nuyorican Cultural Movements that, like the concurrent Civil Rights movements and those of years prior, sought equitable access to rights and resources.

As cultural imaginaries and political arenas evolved to embrace emerging Latino consciousnesses and collectives, so too did social and critical vocabularies evolve to apprehend the increasingly legible histories, social experiences, and material conditions shaping and facing ethnoracial subjects in the US. One such model, emerging from the critical analysis of the many racialized psyches inhabiting the US social fabric redrawn by Civil Rights, reorients Freudian melancholia away from pathology and towards the capture of systemic inequality. As scholars David L. Eng and Shinhee Han outline in *Racial Melancholia, Racial Dissociation: On the Social and Psychic Lives of Asian Americans* (2019), racial melancholia, which characterizes Generation X (1960s-1980s),

directly relates to "losses associated with immigration, assimilation, and racialization that cannot be easily mourned" (171). Using a generative metaphor, they affirm that "you lift the rock of repression and you discover something underneath—a lost object, one demanding to be analyzed and interpreted. Indeed, it is the naming of this object of loss that creates identity from difference; it is the naming and narrating of the social exclusions compelling its foreclosure that creates a racial identity and racial politics in its wake." In this sense, the calls for racial emancipation and redistribution that coalesced during the Civil Rights era, as well as the recognition of histories of displacement and disenfranchisement, not only facilitated the emergence of the generative analytic that is racial melancholia, but are in turn characterized and continued through it.

The impact of this conversion of a once pathological psychic structure into a mode of social critique can neither be overstated nor circumscribed. However, the racial politics of the Civil Rights and Cultural Movements eras upon which racial melancholia is based—the ones grounded in the recognition of separate and district ethnoracial existence and, by extension, distinctly racist channels of violence and discrimination—have proved less perdurable. In short, the melancholic conditions wrought by racism, migration, and failed assimilation, instead of disappearing, were reformulated. As Eduardo Bonilla-Silva asserts in his "The Structure of Racism in Color-Blind, 'Post-Racial' America" (2015), a "new style of discrimination" emerged in the 1970s and 1980s in response to the movement and expansion of black communities across the country (rendering, he affirms, earlier "principal tactics of social control" [1362] less effective), Soviet discourses citing the mistreatment of minorities to underscore the hypocrisy of US democracy, and widespread calls for equitable treatment that is blind to

color. Since then, however, these revolutionary demands for equality have been undermined by US liberal law that refuses to see race or acknowledge any systematic racial inequalities. As critical race scholar Ian Haney López (2011) contends, under colorblindness racism is nothing more than an individual, private choice. Neoliberalism ultimately colludes with this shift by shrinking the public sphere, diminishing the space in which the state might legislate against racism and racial disparity. The practice of disappearing race consequently flourishes, seemingly disappearing ethnoracial subjectivities (as they were) and the anti-racist political projects they champion.

The advent of colorblindness brings with it a shift in the psychic structures characterizing generations of US subjectivity. While the conditions of loss and inequality that racial melancholia emerged from and diagnosed have certainly not disappeared, the dissipation of a lexicon of race complicates a similar apprehension and necessitates new paradigms of intervention. Eng and Han trace this shift to Generation Y (1980-2000), where, they argue, racial melancholia has been upended by racial dissociation. As they write, "in racial dissociation, we are faced not with condensation but rather with a paranoid structure of decomposition, of dispersion" explained in direct relation to the "changing structures of racial exclusion and violence under the directives of neoliberalism and globalization." Continuing, they explain that, "in racial dissociation, when you lift the rock of repression, there is nothing underneath to discover." Returning again to the protagonists of Corral's poem, we see these generational differences enacted. For the father, the very process of crossing the border drives him to lift the rock in the most literal sense, an action that elides displacement with the racial alterity and fraught assimilation spread out before him—melancholic losses with no teleological end in sight.

For the poem's speaker, as Corral pens it, there is no rock to lift, no lived experiences of migration, and, under colorblindness, no vocabulary for narrating racialization or (failed) assimilation. There is only a zipper to unzip, or an explicitly queer want above an implicitly racial yearning.

The change from Civil Rights era racial recognition to contemporary colorblindness, in tandem with not only the shift from racial melancholia to racial dissociation but the shift from a blue lizard of border crossings to a penis of a queer contemporary, poses a central set of analytical, representational, and political problematics *New Latinx Feelings* sets out to explore. On the one hand, if race has been disappeared through legal interdictions on acknowledging and acting on racial difference, how do contemporary ethnoracial subjects narrate and give form to themselves? In other words, and most pressing for the present project, what does Latinx literature look like when Latinx is rendered mute? On the other, if identities of difference have been hewn from the lost objects of racial melancholia (as Eng and Han affirm), and these lost objects are now dispersed to the point of being doubly lost themselves, what basis for identitarian discourse and its political impacts remains? On the last hand, and insisting on discerning Corral's perspicacity beyond poetic intrigue, how does an orientation towards queerness relate to a shifting racial landscape and the apparent exhaustion of identity-driven creation?

With the dispersion of the lost subjects and objects of racialization comes the need to develop a similarly dispersed analytic, or one capable of looking under and beyond the empty rocks of a contemporary generation's dissociation for the unbroken histories and material conditions of race and racism. It is for this reason that I turn to

literary form and the feelings it inscribes, to modes that capture the defining experiences of Latinx that exist between and beyond signification. After all, if colorblindness has removed race from language and content while refusing to address its structural presence, then it is precisely to structure and its contents that we must turn. In this sense, the innovative narrative tactics and qualities characterizing the texts I read render perceptible and aesthetic the otherwise invisible phenomenon of invisibilizing race—the one enacted and exemplified in the legal cases I study in contradistinction—and the experiences and conditions of minoritized subjects that would otherwise remain formless. Calling this practice an aesthetics of colorblindness after the very phenomenon it apprehends, and through its apprehension lays prone to interrogation and critique, ultimately provides an analytical framework, aesthetic in its origin, poised to remain sensible to the anti-racist ethos of Latinx cultural production in an age when race and racism are deemed passé. It also emerges as capable of providing an account for the subjects and objects dissociated and disappeared through displacement, disenfranchisement, and disavowal.

Unearthing the feelings of race in form is only part of the operations of the aesthetics of colorblindness I am arguing for; its complement involves engaging the much more explicit narrative attention attributed to queerness, or a spectrum of non-normative gender and sexuality. Read in conjunction with the colorblind closeting of race, the recent mainstreaming of LGBTQ rights in the US signals increased visibility of queer subjects and an evolving social lexicon attuned to deviations from sexual and gendered norms. In the absence of the articulation of racial difference, a vocabulary of sexual difference emerges. Importantly, however, this does not mark a replacement—believing racial inequality was "solved" and that sexual and gendered inequality are "being solved"

would subscribe to a deeply flawed, if not totally fictitious, narrative of US progressive liberalism. Instead, the emergence of this social lexicon attuned to deviations from sexual and gendered norms ought to be read as novel signifiers of race. That is, the unspeakable tensions and dimensions of racial difference and racism are negotiated and articulated in the content and language of queerness.

While the following section situates this project more specifically in relation to the turn to form in Latinx Studies, I now turn to the work of queer theorist and performance studies scholar José E. Muñoz for his contributions linking the vast world of the sensory to the particularities of Latinx. In his posthumously published *The Sense of Brown* (2020), we learn of the theorist's affective, performative framing of brown and its collective commons of "people [] rendered brown by their personal and familial participations in South-to-North migration patterns" (3). In the performances he reads, like Chicano playwright Ricardo Bracho's *The Sweetest Hangover (and Other STDS)*, these collective experiences become organizing collective feelings, cohered not "by identity but instead by a politics of affect, an affective belonging. All of these subjects are unable to map themselves onto a white and heterosexually normative narrative of the world" (17). Reading playwright María Irene Fornés, Muñoz savors this feelingful unmappability in the even more nuanced artistic subtleties of style, absence, and "a kind of illegitimate speech," or a sense of "being without" instead of a "being with" (126-127). To know brownness and latinidad, then, as the critic aligns the terms, is to know their "affective contours, which is to say the set of collective and often contagious responses to one's historical and emotional situation" (101).

New Latinx Feelings is closely aligned with Muñoz's exceptional project by tracking in cultural production the shared feelings of unmappability in order to attend to the historical, material, and experiential conditions of that unmappability. There is an important distinction, however, between *The Sense of Brown* and my project that directly relates to the generational paradigm shift away from melancholia and to dissociation. Not only is Muñoz's critical oeuvre fundamentally engaged with the experiences of racial melancholia, but it can be credited with the development and establishment of that very analytical framework, specifically his *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (1999). The defining factors of brownness follow suit, emerging from transnational and hemispheric migration to include "uneven distribution of resources; systematic race-, nation-, and language-based bias; unjust and phobic immigration policies; and a general tendency to be scapegoated during a nation-state's moments of economic or cultural instability" (2020, 101). To be quite clear, I am not arguing that these obstacles have disappeared. However, to insist on any formal constancy would be to disregard the polyvalent shapes that uneven distribution, bias, phobia, and scapegoating have assumed and continue to assume in the decades following the gestation of Muñoz's ideas. Setting out to find the same manifestations of brown subjectivity, the same narrative techniques of recounting brownness, and the same contours of a brown commons in a contemporary dissociative, colorblind moment is melancholic indeed.

To illuminate my own disidentificatory relationship to Muñoz's work, I turn to literary scholar Melanie Abeygunawardana. In her project (2021) back-tracing colorblind social formations to better wrest them from a neoliberal multicultural present,

Abeygunawardana affirms that, “In its refusal to acknowledge the connection between color, race, and ongoing histories of racism, colorblindness is therefore not, as the name might suggest, the inability to see color; rather, it is the inability to see *anything but color*. In this way, colorblindness doesn’t just sever the individual from the social—it also severs the individual from itself” (8, emphasis added). In this way, both Latinx and Muñoz’s alternative formation brown are rendered synonymous in their cleaving from broader historical and social frames, becoming the very language through which the severing of dissociation occurs. Instead of diagnosing and indicting these trenchant social ills, colorblindness coopts brown to parse color from systemic conventions, splicing melanin from material conditions. This maneuver does not just happen discursively in the blind/seeing paradox Abeygunawardana so brilliantly flags—one could counter by insisting on engaging brown as Muñoz intended, far beyond the cooptation of colorblind racial politics. Such an insistence, however, would no longer find the subjects and collectives of study that Muñoz found; they have been undone by brown itself, by the very phenomenon that was meant to venture far in the opposite direction. It is for this reason that we, remaining beholden and indebted to Muñoz and his legacy, must contend with the contours of a colorblind, dissociative generation by shifting away from the subject’s accounts of racialization towards the forms and feelings of explicitly queer, implicitly racialized narratives.

A Turn to Form (Or the Realization We’re Already There)

Despite the new, queer want of Corral’s poem ultimately emerging ahead of race with novelty and surprise, lasting tensions remain, ones that are quite clearly inscribed on

the level of form. Without entirely reducing the poem to a concrete poetics, the very layout of the text encapsulates the generational-historical shifts discussed in the previous section: verses are not neatly packaged by periods or line arrangement. Instead, strong points of gravitation make it so the enjambed words either align themselves dialectically with the left or the right—contrasting polarities that articulate themselves with and against each other along the lines of melancholic father and dissociated son, a history of Latin American racial mixture and U.S. hypodescent, racialized heterosexuality and colorblind queerness. The empty spaces this strain leaves are empty on page alone, instead filling up with the affects this project aims to read, reminding us of the representational limits ethnoracial narratives must confront, ones that ultimately call for new ways of reading the structures and contours of Latinx literary production.

Other scholars have heard this call for renegotiating the analytical frameworks and interpretative expectations put to Latinx texts, subjects, and their attendant histories. In some cases, it has provoked anxieties around the uneven relationship between literary form and racial identity. Ralph Rodriguez's *Latinx Literature Unbound: Undoing Ethnic Expectation* (2018) is a recent example of this, where Rodriguez indicts and aims to move beyond, for example, linguistic code-switching, Latinx themes, and other classic "hallmarks of Latinx literature" (1), since such limited requirements for legibility influence "what many critics are willing to examine in their studies of Latinx literature and it unnecessarily encourages, rewards, and possibly constrains Latinx authors to write about what agents, editors, and publishers believe the market desires from Latinx writers" (129). Feeling for the limits of an identity-based critique at the same time one might reconsider the very contours of this identity, Rodriguez instead settles on genre as an

organizing matrix that sidesteps the "limits of employing the political fiction of Latinx to organize and analyze a corpus of literary texts" (3). Almost as an afterthought in his conclusion, the critic blurs the exact relationship between genre and Latinx identity by conceding that "If identity figures in, that is of course, fine, maybe even necessary, but let us not always use it as the first principle of selection" (132).

Rodriguez's hesitation appears to imply that an engagement with form jeopardizes the place of identity within Latinx literary critique. While this hesitation has logical roots, undoubtedly linked to the previously discussed histories of activism, protest, and violence sustaining Latinx, I affirm that a focus on form is not a replacement for racial identity, but instead precisely the way in which it gets delivered. In this project, that delivery is through a set of feelings and affects most explicitly linked to queerness. Continuing in this line of thought, a focus on queerness is also not a move to supplant racial identity, but instead yet another aesthetic quality through which the very substance of racial difference, racism, and racialization is made more legible. As such, and in response to the shifting literary manifestations and critical reliability of the frame and figure of the ethnoracial subject, this project turns to form to explicate the colorblind disappearance of race, the homonormative centrality of queerness, and the impact these changes signal for (what has historically been) the explicitly racialized, implicitly straight speaking subjects of a Latinx literary tradition. I do so by joining Rodriguez in pondering what unbinding might look like, though with a different commitment to form and to nudging the centrality of subject-based critique towards subjectlessness.

The notion of bringing subjectless critique to Latinx Studies begins with a consideration of what is arguably Latinx Studies' most impactful text in recent years:

Antonio Viego's *Dead Subjects: Towards a Politics of Loss in Latino* (2007). Drawing heavily from psychoanalytical discourse, Viego makes a case for placing what he calls "the anti-racist charge of Lacan" (5) above overdetermining US ego psychology as key in rethinking racist discourses that flatten and kill (in discourse and by extension, in practice) ethnoracialized subjects. He shares Lacan's critique of ego psychology as a framework easily coopted by a master-slave dialectic and labels it complicit in the reduction of subjects to a psychic how-they-should-be. He elaborates: "Critical race and ethnicity studies scholars have developed no language to talk about ethnic-racialized subjectivity […] that does not imagine a strong, whole, complete, and transparent ethnic-racialized subject and ego." Viego continues: "We fail to see how the repeated themes of wholeness, completeness, and transparency with respect to ethnic-racialized subjectivity are what provide racist discourse with precisely the notion of subjectivity that it needs in order to function effectively" (4).

With transparency allowing reductions of identity and subjecthood, Lacanian conceptualizations of language (distortion, lack, castration) highlight an important place of slippage, escape, and remainderedness—gesturing to what might lie beyond the frame of subjectivity in US sociocultural imaginaries. While Lacanian language is Viego's site of potential, it is also a site of an anticipatory and retroactive logic that seeks to fix meaning. Reading Latino as the signifying chain, Viego brings temporality into his discussions of legibility. He says that "The temporality of Latino unfolds according to first an anticipation of knowledge about the ethnic-racialized subject and then a retroactive determination, post-hailing, which insists on already having known that knowledge" (21), a procedural killing of the subject's dynamism and desire and a direct

echo of identity politics' dead-end solutions. Viego's work lays bare the exaggerated stability of subjectivity by emphasizing our inability to rest on any one signifier alone, importantly implicating temporal circularity in processes of reading—psychically, historically, and culturally—ethnoracialized subjects as transparent and fixed, and advocates for the recognition of the detriment and falsity in this. Viego's deconstruction of ethnoracial subjectivity unbinds, to borrow from Rodriguez, the substance and contours of Latinx from the yoke of identity-driven subjectivity, and the representational strategies historically deployed for it.

We might parse these critical debates into two camps: one, protagonized (as I have presented it) by Rodriguez looking to form beyond, but not too far beyond, the frame of identitarian ethnoracial subjectivity. The other, protagonized by Viego, gravitating more towards the deconstruction of subjectivity with less stakes in the formal. *New Latinx Feeling* stands to bring these lines together at a critical juncture that takes as a starting point the deconstruction, disappearance, and disenfranchisement of ethnoracial subjectivity. Form enters not as a replacement for this subjectivity, instead emerging as the locus of inscription for the factors—like immigration, racialization, gendering, and sexualization—that constitute the dispersed, pluralistic histories, conditions, and experiences that have been previously articulated through the figure of the subject. Locating these is beyond the frame of a whole, transparent, and speaking subject is, in fact, less an innovative theoretical move on my part and more a necessary response to the cultural products constituting this project's corpus. Where, for example, previous accounts of racist and gendered violence appeared as testimony and memoir, the Latinx short stories and novels I engage have decapitated, dissipated, or objectified (that is,

made of literal objects) bodies—ones for whom speaking, testifying, and re-membering are impossibilities. Where bildungsroman and vignettes once traced the arcs of characters and collectives, they now begin in death and end in total animality. It is precisely with this misfit cast of headless and deceased characters, prowling animals, and bodies of folded paper, however, that I strive to imagine a mode of Latinx critique that neither relies entirely on the speaking subject personalities of canonical Latinidad nor bends aesthetics to any given political aim.

Having been denied the privilege of reading subjects, subjectlessness becomes the privileged frame of critique for this project. Less than flagging the liberatory potential of Lacanian language, as Viego gestures to, I align my uptake of subjectless critique more with the work of queer scholars intent on interrogating "those hegemonic social structures by which certain subjects are rendered normal and natural through the production of perverse and pathological others" (3). As articulated by scholars David Eng, Jack Halberstam, and José Muñoz (2005), "the subjectless queer critique of queer studies disallows any positioning of a proper subject of or object for the field by insisting that queer has no fixed political referent" (3). This analytical shift from subjects inhabiting locations of normalcy or pathology to the processes and structures that create these locations, without reducing queer critique to a study of sexuality only, is not advocating for any type of queer ontological denial, a theoretical genealogy that flirts dangerously with the contradictory defaulting to white gay masculinity. Instead, it is a quasi-meta-reflexive move that begs the question of why subjectlessness is required for an interrogation of queer Latinx Studies. It is by embracing the dialogic relation between the subject and the subjectless—by confronting that it is precisely the subjective qualities of

race, sexuality, gender, and contested citizenship of my project's protagonists that have rendered them subjectless—that situates subjectlessness not as an anti-identitarian maneuver but the critical extension of an identitarian complication beyond the apprehension of identity as it has been historically deployed.

To borrow from scholar Carlos Ulises Decena (2011), who may very well be read as assuaging Rodriguez's earlier identitarian discomfort, it is not that we "need to abandon identities but rather need to better grasp the mediations and intersubjective conditions of their emergence" (8) and, I would add, disappearance. Put differently, this project engages queerness in an adverbial register as the accumulation of violent and targeted actions in their local and immediate instantiations as well as their long-durée, systemic manifestations. While the articulation of this project in the vein of subjectlessness critique allows me to flag the great intrigue, if not concerning novelty, of Latinx literature devoid of the speaking, transparent subjects of previous decades, it need not obfuscate the rich traditions of queer Latinx performance studies that make this work possible by training critical attention to aesthetic practices that render, reorient, and reimagine existences between and among transnational violences. It also bears noting that, within queer studies, the emergence of subjectlessness created invaluable space to incorporate the critical study of race into the folds of gender- and sexuality-based analysis. At our present juncture, a return to subjectlessness not only permits race to emerge in step with content that appears explicitly queer, but it also facilitates the apprehension of race itself in an age of colorblind disavowal and in an emerging corpus radiating queerness.

While scholarship flexibilizing Latinx periodicity is well under way (work on Latinx modernisms in particular), a significant portion of this attention to aesthetics has hovered over primarily queer cultural production of recent decades. This notably includes the work of scholars Christina León and Joshua Javier Guzmán who, in their co-edited special issue of *Women in Performance* (2015), advocate for an engagement with the cuts and impressions of Latinidad. Naming such critical terms metaphorically signals how "history cuts and can be used as a weapon of power [while] language too demarcates and forms bodies in different ways" (263) at the same time it literally names new frames of study: the cuts and impressions of the "aesthetic realm." What is particularly exciting about this aesthetic provocation is its analytical and ontological implications. Analytically, León and Guzmán affirm that such an engagement requires a new temporal dimension vested in a praxis of lingering, where "lingering pushes back against the urgent imperative to read and hail a subject into an immediate frame of knowing" (270). Ontologically, this affirms that "[a]ny theoretical disposition inclined to "know" Latina/os without first engaging how the emergence of latinidad opens, questions, and transgresses the epistemological certitude belonging to the seemingly arbitrary act of categorization, might be considered amnestic at best, if not sincerely dominating" (263). Simply put, this makes a commitment to aesthetics a commitment to apprehending the sociocultural, politico-historical forms that shape, situate, cut, and impress upon Latinx.

In this way, the very manner of analytical engagement resketches the manner of Latinidad, delinking from the prescriptive, anticipatory, or interpellative and embracing the languor of lingering, approximating, and being with. Scholar Leticia Alvarado advances this initiative in her *Abject Performances: Aesthetic Strategies in Latino*

Cultural Production (2018) by attuning Kantian aesthetics, where "the aesthetic [i]s a collision with the sensate," to "the political world within which it is bound, honing in on the subjectivities that might emerge from this collision" (6). This situates "aesthetics as a site for the doing of a Latinidad predicated on a shared sense of being and a way of performing the self often in negative relation to majoritarian publics, a dynamic we might call intrinsically abject" (6). Alvarado's case for "the doing of a Latinidad" becomes a fascinating example of the scholarship that Muñoz's work facilitated, an extension of a genealogy of scholarship that reshuffles the analytical priorities of and eases the sociopolitical demands for a coherent, concrete Latinx agenda. It also locates within this attention to queer Latinx aesthetics the potential to provide an account for and relief from the competing racial epistemologies and psychic paradigms pressing on and beyond Latinx subjects, ones like melancholia and dissociation and racial mixture and hypodescent that Corral's poetry inscribes in his own collision with the sensate, or the unspeakable gaps of wanting left on the page at this introduction's onset. Although the performative nature of the cultural products Alvarado reads differ from the literary nature of my primary texts, they limn the generative relationship that appears innate to form and feeling, as well as the channels of interpretation and investigation that relationship opens and maintains traversable.

Although I address my engagement with affect in more detail in each of my project's chapters, it bears articulating that my study of "feelings" derives its currency in large part from its vagueness. While many affect theorists have labored tirelessly to distinguish between concepts like affect, emotion, sensation, intensity, and more, where these distinctions animate many rich and varied projects (see, for example, *The Affect*

Theory Reader [2011] by Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth), the capaciousness of feeling provides an overall organizational potential to this study. After all, if racism has been ushered beyond the realm of cognizant and appropriate articulation, we can make no comprehensive claims as to which feelingful distinction it ultimately gravitates towards. In this way, I situate a broad conception of feelings at this project's onset so as to not forsake coherence when I, for example, weigh in on the affect/emotion debate in one chapter while theorizing mood in the next. These terms emerge in response to the specific representational limitations, urgencies, and tactics characterizing different literary texts from different literary sources. What's more, a particular insistence on universalizing one affective construction over another might jeopardize the legibility I aim to maintain between my project and other scholarship in the field, including Muñoz's, León and Guzmán's, and Alvarado's, but also works like Edward A. Chamberlain's *Imagining LatinX Intimacies: Connecting Queer Stories, Spaces and Sexualities* (2020), Stephanie Fetta's *Shaming into Brown: Somatic Transactions of Race in Latina/o Literature* (2018), and Joseph Miranda's "On Brown Skin" (2019), all of which share similar critical investments but engage metrics of soma, intimacy, and skin.

My attention to feelings in this project, then, sets out to provide an account for major shifts in the styles of Latinx literature in a move to reorganize the literary tradition through a set of affective and aesthetic conditions and practices. Reading authors writing on heartbreak, abandonment, broken families, and bodily harm, I underscore a set of unchanging intense, visceral conditions for subjects whose very existences place them at odds with whiteness, straightness, and class privilege. In response to the striking formal innovations that manifest in the works of Justin Torres, Salvador Plascencia, Carmen

María Machado, and Manuel Muñoz, ones that include holes in pages, repeated words, twisted text, starts and stops, and more, I sustain that unconventional literary forms index the feelings of racial difference that have so long sustained Latinx literary and political traditions, even if the ever-shifting landscape of racial and sexual politics and the expansion of neoliberal capitalism has rendered such differences not moot but rather mute. The "feelings" of *New Latinx Feelings*, then, marks a look into how the demand for minoritized subjects to represent is negotiated, altered, and short-circuited with an aesthetics of colorblindness that refuses to present a transparent, ethnoracialized subject but proliferates affective inscription. Reading writers who may or may not lay claim to specific ethnic enclaves within Latinx literary production (namely Chicanx, Nuyorican, and Hispanic Caribbean traditions), I aim to engage the specific nuances of un/burdening representations each text presents while signaling larger structural, discursive, and theoretical shifts at play. In doing so, this project situates Latinx literature as an important site for theorizing identity, collectivity, and cultural production in its evanescent, emerging forms.

Feminist Through Lines and Queer New Lines

If the previous sections mark historical and political shifts from eras of racial recognition to racial disavowal, and if they trace increasing critical investments in the forms, structures, and aesthetic practices of Latinx and literary studies, then this section marks constants that predate the Civil Rights and Cultural Movement logics, even if not recognized in those moments, and persist until the contemporary moment I study, where their contemporary manifestations both facilitate the recognition of the changes I analyze

and mark new social formations that exceed (for example) the political constraints of racial dissociation, colorblindness, and homonormativity. For *New Latinx Feelings*, these constants are the work(s) of Latina feminists and gay (as they identify) Latinos. While these gendered and sexual distinctions are blurred and complicated by these collectives themselves, to such an extent that they might indeed pertain to and populate the very same collective, distinguishing between the two allows me to access the critical and cultural genealogies that have been set apart and, in some cases, still are, for better or worse, for their gendered and sexual differences.

Key to underlining the continuity of racism at the intersection of gender and sexuality in my project, and against what colorblindness affirms, is the figure of the Latina mother and domestic laborer. While I will soon elaborate on this conviction, it is worth recognizing how the very acknowledgment of such a figure was an impossibility just a few decades prior. In their revolutionary *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (1981), queer Latina feminists Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherríe Moraga affirmed the commonality of "Third World women writers, so similar yet so different, similar in the issues we confront, different in approach and style," as a predominantly affective one: "What we have in common is our love of writing [because] in our writing we reclaim our tongues" (161). This act of reclamation is at once creationary and critical, one that not only constructs metaphorical bridges but forms real coalition across trenchant lines of division still plaguing feminist projects today. In this way, Latina Third World feminism models an early intersectional articulation of the relationship between racial, sexual, and gendered difference and how reactions to them engender intellectual, political, and artistic projects. If Anzaldúa and Moraga explore

these dynamics in a moment more profoundly characterized by Civil Rights Movements, racial recognition, and racial melancholia, then this project does so in a colorblind, racially dissociative moment. To return yet again to Corral's "Want," we might situate the very possibility of the poetic voice's queer emergence in the direct wake of the queer Latina feminist of a generation before him.

The historical move from race (epitomized by the hetero-masculine Cultural Movements of the 1960s and 1970s) to gender and, more recently, sexuality that my project studies is not just a question of interpretative focus. Rather, I argue that it is a central discursive shift resulting from the achievements of the Civil Rights era being coopted by colorblindness. To better trace how the substance of race is transmuted into that of gender and sexuality, I turn to queer theorist Eve K. Sedgwick's article "How to Raise your Children Gay" (1991), prompted by the American Psychiatric Association's third edition Diagnostic and Statistical Manual depathologizing gayness. Never taking at face value this seemingly progressive move, Sedgwick quickly substantiates just what type of gayness is no longer pathological: "[A]nalysts seem prepared to like some male homosexuals, but the healthy homosexual is the one who is already grown up, and acts masculine," an association that leaves "adult gay male effeminacy" equated with "global character pathology" (19). Distributed unevenly between queer subjects based on their subscription to gender binaries, normalization (the precursor to decriminalization) is not nearly as far reaching or widespread as the DSM might have it. In short, Sedgwick signals how the socio-scientific "depathologization of an atypical sexual object-choice can be yoked to the new pathologization of an atypical gender identification" (21).

Linking the acceptance of once-deviant sexuality to the rigidification of gender norms, Sedgwick lays bare the discursive enactment of movement for stasis.

In the case of this project, this operation has two corollaries. On the one hand, it is the depathologization of implicit, structural racism signaled by Civil Rights legislation (the very kind that failed to bring about any systemic equity) that inaugurates new attention to the gendered and sexual debates that Latina feminists flagged decades prior and that the writers of my contemporary corpus are still grappling with. While explicit racism was legally pathologized, so to speak, with Civil Rights legislation, its implicit bedfellow was not. I identify racism here, as opposed to racial difference itself, as the phenomenon in question given the way colorblindness, at its core, restructures the forms of racial violence and its distribution more than redrawing societal conceptions of race. The discursive removal of race is essential to this rebranding of racist violence, however, opening up a space in which novel sociocultural, legal, and psychic lexicons for gender and sexuality emerge. On the other hand, however, and more literally aligned with Sedgwick's provocation, is the heightened scrutiny surrounding gender identity, gender presentation, and gendered disposition in the wake of depathologized, decriminalized, and now legalized gayness, gay sex, and gay marriage. Connecting these shifts, then, ultimately finds queerness emerging from race where the substance of gender, which still participates in regulating some dimensions of sexual orientation, is what is explicitly negotiated to mediate the other two. On a textual level, this explains how my chapters' protagonists confronting experiences of emasculation and questioned manliness, ideal womanhood and proper girliness are concurrently negotiating racial positions and race relations. On a theoretical level, this confirms that an analytical attention to race

sustaining Latinx literary and critical traditions pales without a concurrent interrogation of gender and sexuality.

The efficacy of this discursive mutation over structural fixity can be read as a hallmark of neoliberalism, intent on atomizing social problematics so as to leave uninterrupted the upward distributive bent of late capitalism. Recalling Duggan from this introduction's opening section, we are reminded how some "identity-driven camps" are pushed to "sacrifice the broad goals that might connect a new social movement strong and ambitious enough to take on inequalities that single-issue politics only ever ameliorate, but never reverse" (xx). While the misdirectionedness of tidy organizations and groups the theorist names might not track directly on to a Latinx context (especially since the work of queer Chicana feminists is certainly invested in indicting global capitalism and bringing about systematic change), the group-based logic wrought from historical and material needs for more nuanced legibility—acknowledging the existence of Latina feminism, affirming the presence of Latino gays—is soon made divisive, separatist, and exclusionary. Instead of widespread systemic restructuring, the result is a shifting target of improvement that moves from collective to collective within the social fabric of neoliberal multiculturalism, pitting feminists against gays, queer Chicanas against queer Chicanos, and so on, promising change that is shortsighted and short lived.

In this sense, underscoring the connections between race, gender, and sexuality, or refusing the neoliberal logic that splices the Cultural Movements of the Civil Rights era from Latina feminism from queer Latinx, assumes a political importance that stands to widen our perspective to better apprehend the divisive and immobilizing work of neoliberalism. In other words, to lay bare the stasis that Sedgwick shows is cloaked in

superficial movement. The contentions specifically separating lesbian and gay Latinx camps come to the fore in Michael Hames-García and Ernesto Javier Martínez co-edited *Gay Latino Studies: A Critical Reader* (2011), where, speaking on gay Chicano cultural production, scholar Richard T. Rodriguez writes that "most of these literary texts do not match the work of Chicana lesbians because they fail to adopt an explicit Chicano agenda that grapples with" (116) family, nationalist, and communitarian life defining Chicano cultural politics. Refusing this notion of an uncoalesced, never fully concretized political platform or position for gay male Latinos and its articulation through comparative parallelisms with queer Chicana lesbians, Antonio Viego responds by naming them "incompatible systems of signification" (95), bucking the logics that only recognize gay Latino subjectivity when his self-expression (cultural production) evinces a dominant, shared cultural understanding of his race, ethnicity, and placedness, requirements that unnecessarily extend demands for reduction, alignment, and coherence. Elaborating, Viego affirms that this "insistence on the readability of the gay male Chicano subject in an effort to locate him seem[s] to mimic the dominant culture's homophobic insistence on taxonomizing deviant sexual identities. […] The demand that this cultural and literary work be made intelligible through dominant cultural reading practices participates in the belief that creating visibility and intelligibility where there was none promotes life-sustaining, community-building, and politically crucial acts in the realm of concrete social struggles" (101).

The tensions surrounding the rubrics of gay Chicano subjectivity and cultural production appear to be twofold: first, as Viego signals, they revolve around a pejorative practice of gifting cohesive intelligibility where none is required, a critique echoed in

queer scholarship warning of the ills that accompany the outness and visibility of homonormativity. Second, they depart from an understanding that Chicana lesbians and the feminist projects they spearheaded, as Rodriguez demonstrates, are explicit in their address of "cultural-symbolic pressures" and remain rooted in the "interlocking discourses of family, nationalism, and community" (116) while those of gay Latinos are and do not. While I am not interested in refuting the explicitness of the agendas as outlined by the vast corpuses of Anzaldúa and Moraga, what's clear is how discourses that seek to normalize and control gender are indeed directly linked to the shifting place of deviant sexuality within US social landscapes. What's more, the very emergence of a social vocabulary of this deviant sexuality is also linked to the defanging of movements for racial equality, equal rights, and equitable access to resources affecting both camps, as they distinguish themselves. On one hand, this flags the divisive work of neoliberalism Duggan warns of and critiques by indicting the onset of a reductive identity politics as the primary source of contention in the field, the very source that violently necessitates the visibility and coherence Viego loathes while hyperbolizing the real, if only more diffused, political work Rodriguez discusses. On the other, it also reiterates the question of neoliberal division as one of form. After all, if we are able to read gender and sexuality as race, and race as sexuality and gender, then we can trace a political, cultural, and literary through-line from brown power to queer Latina feminism to what Viego envisions for gay Latinx subjects and cultural production, a form of queer politics beyond transparency and tidy cohesion that characterizes the primary texts of this project's corpus.

In this sense, if I am able to situate the critical ethos of *New Latinx Feelings* within and emerging from the desire to apprehend the disjunction between the presence of queer Latinx subjects, their manipulated gender as a means of control, and their absented racial positionings, it is because the long work of Latina feminist projects, politics, and activism are precursors and continual guides to mine as well given the constancy of their critiques of normativity. Recalling Anzaldúa's naming of an affective disposition—love—in animating her radical acts, and noting how León and Guzmán turn to the "cuts" and "impressions" left from these double binds, further affirms this project's move to link form and feeling as a generative mode of tracking the slippery shifts Sedgwick helps illuminate. This cannot happen, however, without continuing to attend to the figure of the Latina migrant, engaged in domestic and reproductive labor and by extension, embodying the sexual, gendered, and racialized violence transnational capitalism would have us splice apart. While *New Latinx Feelings* deploys "queer Latinx literature" as a description of its corpus, this ought not to signal a calculated divergence or distraction from the Latina feminist genealogies to which it is indebted. By insisting on this continuity, my work underscores how, unlike previous decades where the Latina migrant' reproductive and domestic work were directed towards and consumed by an inhospitable nation, the work of Latina motherhood in the texts I read emerges as a labor of representation whose praxis of care and domestic work ultimately give form to the queer, racialized subjects colorblindness seeks to disavow and erase. In this sense, I flag what Alvarado has called "the nonassimilative irreverence with which this pathologized mother might call forth new strategies, and indeed new politics, through abject performances" (4). The representational dimensions of the Latina migrant, then, remain

key to underlining the continuity of racism at the intersection of gender and sexuality in my project and in the field, indeed, key to finding statis amidst dizzying discursive movement.

These debates are relevant for *New Latinx Feelings* because they underscore the need for a political praxis unmoored from explicit signs and agendas, visible and transparent subjects, and stably positioned social collectives. This need, by extension, necessitates a generational shift away from the logic that celebrated "separate and distinct," to harken back to the first section of this introduction, and away from that period's writing that, as Richard T. Rodríguez affirms in another text (2016), exemplifies an aesthetics of politics. By aesthetics of politics, the critic underscores "how political action decisively contours the terms of expressive content—seeking to represent and mobilize their respective communities" (58). It is no coincidence that the decades marked by radical Civil Rights protests across the US correspond to literary production driven by textual "focalization by which an anti-assimilative and communally empowering literary chronicle surfaces" (60). This political mode (and the literary and interpretative modes it engenders), in its dual function of archiving and underscoring societal ills, might more precisely be characterized as one rooted in exposure. Borrowing this term from literary critic Jonathan Flatley (2012), exposure is defined as "writing about the mistreatment of persons by the government, by the police, by factory owners, or by other persons in power" in order to "provoke a dramatic, nearly instantaneous effect" ("How A Revolutionary Counter-Mood Is Made" 509). Though Flatley is reading Black Leninist writings and other newspaper documents cataloguing car worker unions in 1960s Detroit, he is also questioning the relationship between texts, feelings, and social change within

the Civil Rights era. Flatley's work signals an emotional dimension to the 1960s and 1970s Latinx aesthetic of politics and exposure, one that channels feelings towards collective organization and action. While this facilitates the linking of literary forms, political projects, and emotion through a praxis of exposure, it also grounds Latinx subjectivity within a mode of expression defined by transparency. After all, the withholding of secrets or the acknowledgement of unknowability would appear to interrupt political-literary movements intent on laying bare and organizing against systematic and experienced racism.

The appearance of this conviction waivers and fades in a colorblind contemporary, where an aesthetics of colorblindness—characterized by displacement and replacement, by rifts between content and form, by explicit sex and implicit race—champions the problematic racial paradigm's tendency to obfuscate and disavow, and in doing so, lays it bare to interpretative capture. To reiterate, while I find colorblindness as a racial discourse highly problematic, I find an aesthetics of colorblindness generative. The shared name emphasizes the shared maneuvers of moving race from the content and language of legal discourse, social interactions, and Latinx narratives to forms and feelings. The transmutation of a language of race into one of gender and sexuality should also not be read as an unquestioned embodiment of homonormativity, but instead marks a shift in the interpretative and critical projects engaging contemporary Latinx cultural production. If legal critique of colorblindness makes clear how racism goes well beyond the racial epithets that legal and social discourses name as racist, and if queer theory has signaled the superficiality of queer liberalism, then the literary critique of colorblindness—reading an aesthetics of colorblindness—is more a requirement for us to

look beyond the explicit naming of racial and sexual identities to pinpoint, underscore, and explicate the ways in which difference is constructed, sustained, and policed in direct relation to discourses and embodiments of gender relations and queer(ed) sexualities the contemporary Latinx writings I read. In other words, these concepts provide a diagnostic vocabulary for identifying and intervening in shifting social fabrics and their formal, subjective manifestations that the primary texts I read register on their own terms.

Placing the Corpus

In light of this corpus and its positioning within historical shifts and continuities, critical genealogies and debates, and literary traditions, the novelty signaled by *New Latinx Feelings* stands for many things. For one, "new" capitalizes on the recent momentum characterizing interpretative engagements with form. On the other, it marks a "new" attempt to draw attention to the affective, sensorial, and feelingful dimensions of both Latinx and literature. It also signals a new aesthetic paradigm—an aesthetics of colorblindness—characterizing an emerging generation of Latinx cultural production, as well as reformulated relations between race, gender, and sex. But most poignantly, perhaps, and by extension, most tentatively, it gestures to a new orientation towards and of Latinx. While I am hesitant to provide a definition of who and what this term encompasses, given the breadth of existing scholarship that tackles this question, I am less hesitant to provide a framework of how Latinx is. By offering Latinx as a constellation of feelings, each tied to specific historical processes, social systems, and material conditions, I do not intend to name any characteristic or disposition that might be coopted by or added to the already lengthy list of reductive qualities and essentialisms

certain representative and critical projects subscribe to. It is just the opposite. It is the recognition of fluency within affective registers that take no prescribed, anticipated, or even signifiable form, signaling only the multitude of sociopolitical and historical phenomena, some still emerging, that wrought such conditions.

Chapter One reads Justin Torres' novella *We the Animals* (2011) to provide a historical account of how the sociolegal operations of colorblindness complicate and are complicated by subjects situated outside the US black-white racial binary. As Torres' debut novel, *We the Animals* has garnered the author, who holds an MFA from the Iowa Writer's Workshop and currently teaches English at UCLA, accolades from the National Endowment of the Arts, a VCU Cabell First Novelist Award, and the National Book Foundation. It narrates the story of three young brothers—the title's "we"—coming of age and coming to terms with kinship ties strained by the parents' interracial marriage that leaves the children neither as white as their mother nor as Puerto Rican as their Afro-Puerto Rican father. Structured as a bildungsroman, the narrative arc follows the unnamed narrator as he negotiates his effeminacy and emerging queerness, a revelation that divides the family and requires his institutionalization by the story's close. Focusing on Torres' aesthetic strategy that presents explicit gender and sexuality, I read encoded racial collectivity in shifting pronouns (the collective "we" soon becomes an individual "I") and animal metaphors, and fraught racial identification in body textures (Paps is hard, Ma is soft). That sexuality is the mode through which the protagonist relates to himself, however, stems directly from colorblindness' inability to place racial mixture.

Referring to the work of critical race scholar Neil Gotanda (1991), I demonstrate how the tripartite operations of colorblindness, which first requires the cognizance of

race, its subsequent recognition, and lastly its disavowal, can neither surpass the illegibility of mestizaje nor make cognizable its characteristics, qualities, and values. Textually, this situates Torres' protagonist before a set of demands to racially identify that he is incapable of parsing, demands that were navigated with more explicitness in earlier Nuyorican writing like Piri Thomas' canonical *Down These Mean Streets* (1967). Theoretically, this offers an explanation for the absence of historical and social accounts of Latinx subjects prior to Civil Rights era race-explicit identification, since brownness was rendered white (as I demonstrate by reading the 1948 California Supreme Court Case *Pérez v. Sharp*) and is currently rendered mute.

Chapter Two builds on the sociolegal operations of colorblindness and brings them to bear on literary form by reading Salvador Plascencia's novel *The People of Paper* (2005). Born in Guadalajara, Mexico and holding an MFA from Syracuse University, Plascencia, who teaches at Harvey Mudd College in Clairmont, California, has been lauded by the Bard Fiction Prize, Moseley Fellowships, and "best book of the year" honors from *The Los Angeles Times*. The text follows two protagonists—one, a forlorn author dumped by his ex-girlfriend for a white guy who mediates his depression by writing a novel (an exemplary literary manifestation of the Latinx MFA Generation), and the other, the protagonist of that novel, a Mexican flower-picking migrant, seeking solace from invasive omniscient narration to mend his own broken heart. Narrating such heartbreak with striking formal and meta play, the text departs from the realism of Chicano protest fiction, leaving behind earlier literary strategies of documentation for holes cut from pages, passages blackened out, and paragraphs fading into blank space, reappropriating colorblindness by exaggerating how race becomes ink. Arguing that these

avant-guard features highlight the removal race from language and install it in form and feeling of a break-up story, with all its meditations on feeling emasculated, jilted, and un-macho, I make a case for reading that which lies beyond the scope of literary documentation and, by doing so, push back against mainstream political discourses that strive to measure Latinx existence along similar rubrics of (un)documentation.

By showing how an aesthetics of colorblindness moves us towards undocumentation, both in its literary and political dimensions, I also address the ethical problem of representing those who cannot or do not want representation, heightened by the advent of the MFA Generation when the social positionings of the creators of these representational projects diverge from of that of their represented, lower class, undocumented subject. Plascencia's text, however, demonstrates how unexpected literary structures—like black circles at the bottom of a page—can indeed signal the conditions and experiences facing differently documented, differently classed subjects without commodifying their experiences for literary consumption. Following this model of finding the citizenship status, race, gender, and sexuality of Latinx in form instead of content, I ultimately show how unmooring dominant critical paradigms from speaking human subjects and engaging subjects-objects (like people of paper) and innovative forms delinks Latinx criticism from the historical need to capture any specific Latinx collective, while orienting us to the disparities between articulation and silence, speech and affect, and the discursive and the structural.

If the previous two chapters analyze how colorblindness works on Latinx subjects historically and within Latinx texts formally, Chapter Three tracks how the disappearance of race engenders new forms of majoritarian control set on prescribing and limiting

Latinx existence. To do so, I read Carmen María Machado's short stories "Real Women Have Bodies," "The Husband Stitch," and "The Resident" from her collection *Her Body and Other Parties* (2017). Machado, holding an MFA from the Iowa Writers' Workshop, is writer in residence at the University of Pennsylvania and has been widely recognized by accolades like the Bard Fiction Prize, the Lambda Literary Award for Lesbian Fiction, and the National Book Critics Circle's John Leonard Prize. Her critical acclaim undoubtedly stems from the literary intrigue of her writing, which, in this project, includes tales of women who dissolve into thin air, of a wife with her head kept on by a ribbon, and an author driven mad by her writing. In losing visible, cohesive bodies, Machado's literary subjects show how colorblindness deadens the very nature of subjectivity for feminine subjects of color, ultimately piecing them apart into objects like the clothes, fabric, and writing they leave behind.

More specifically, the absence of coherent, living subjects here affords me the opportunity to question the very nature of life and death. The emergence of critical practices of deadening as evidenced by the headless, disappeared obliquely raced subject marks an important shift in queer of color critique that, with José Muñoz, first articulated these expectant demands through a vocabulary of liveness. Reading moments of ephemeral queerness within Machado, I situate the burden of liveness and rendering dead as a part of the same critical arc theorizing queer of color cultural production in relation to power dynamics made uneven by racial, gendered, and sexual difference. This extends earlier scholarship in queer of color critique to contemporary literature and reads the queer Latina lesbian as an invaluable site of inquiry articulating from and actively refuting intersecting forces of racialization, gendering, and sexualization. Similarly, read

within larger traditions of Latin American and Latinx writing feminism, Machado's work evinces how the domestic, manual labor historically assigned to immigrant women of color is recast as the new work of representation. Queer Latina literature, then, works to counteract the invisibilizing, silencing forces of colorblindness whose politics of incorporeality stands to disappear subjects who are not only working on behalf of an inhospitable nation, but directly receiving its violence and aggression. In this way, Machado's writing reveals the shifting forms and relations that place Latinx subjects at odds with normative race, gender, and sexuality, and the subversive representational strategies they develop in response.

Chapter Four continues demonstrating how an aesthetics of colorblindness apprehends in form and feeling the experiences of race and racism that colorblind law, like the Arizona Anti-Ethnic Studies Bill, disavows, while gesturing to the ways in which a Latinx collectivity might emerge from the conditions of disappeared race, explicit queerness, and contested gender. It reads the story "Lindo y Querido" from Manuel Muñoz's *The Faith Healer of Olive Avenue* (2007) to do so. Muñoz, whose writing has been celebrated with a Whiting Writer's Award and three O. Henry Awards, holds an MFA from Cornell University and teaches at the University of Arizona, Tucson. Most of his writing is similarly situated in the Southwest, and *Faith Healer* is no exception. "Lindo y Querido," the first in the collection, follows a protagonist triply muted by colorblindness, the closet, and eventually, death. In the absence of a queer Latinx subject to read, I turn to the affective construction of mood to locate race and sexuality in the larger assemblage of pervasive feelings, objects left behind (like a forged social security card and secret love letters) and recurring spaces (like roads as the site of deadly

accidents). Unlike a Heideggerian concept of mood based on the attunement of subjects and their surrounding world, however, Latinx mood is grounded in disattunement, or a series of disjunctions caused by racial and sexual difference. In this way, as affect theory illuminates new formulations of Latinx experience and its capaciousness, Latinx literature provincializes affect theory through its histories of racial alterity.

Importantly, Muñoz's move from subject to affective assemblage is predicated on the mother of protagonist. Similar to how Machado's work potentializes Latina labor as one of representation, so too does Muñoz's story demonstrate how Latina motherhood's praxis of care and survival works to orient both the reader and the text's remains towards the critical and revelatory capabilities of mood, and the racialized experiences it apprehends. In this way, the possibility of elaborating an analytical framework capable of registering subjective experiences like racialization, migration, gender, and sexuality, despite having no queer Latinx subject to read, is indebted, both theoretically and narratively in Muñoz, to the labor of undocumented Latina motherhood as the figure of the Latina mother connects previous generations of feminist representation to contemporary queer ones. This chapter closes with a comparative reading of Latinx aesthetic practices of the 1960s and 1970s and of a colorblind contemporary, evaluating the forms and functions of the affective politics each inscribes.

It is neither a coincidence nor an involuntary tic that many of my chapters gesture back to earlier moments in Latinx literary production and critique. After all, providing an account for the contemporary corpus, its central problematics, and novel representational strategies requires dialogue with its predecessors to situate them, but also to recast them. In this way, and harkening back to Corral's "Want" that opened this introduction, the

son's kneeling before a man is indeed startling and exciting. But who ultimately gets reframed in that queer deviation is the father, a racialized, migratory, melancholic figure whose place within Latinx cultural imaginaries seems distant from sexual non-normativity and unthinkable without race. It is want, however, that both unites father and son and mutually reconfigures them, situating that affective experience as vital to parsing a Latinx literary and historical trajectory. At the same time, it also flags the interpretative task that will unfold in the following pages: tracing the twisting genealogy of the unspeakable feelings that queer kinship and sociality, legacy and futurity, and borderless affects. That this project sets this task as the coordinates of its operations is not an attempt to think the unthinkable or articulate the unsayable, but to approximate that which exceeds our existing frames of knowledge, parameters of recognition and representation, and our rubrics of meaningful existence.

CHAPTER 1: Feeling, Being Wild
Colorblind Race & Sex in Justin Torres' *We the Animals* (2011)

Introduction

In his foundational Nuyorican memoir *Down These Mean Streets* (1967), Piri Thomas describes the difficulty of establishing a racial identity while navigating the black-white binary of the mid-20th century US. Despite his family ties to Puerto Rico, or perhaps because of them, Thomas is frequently (mis)read as black outside of his native Spanish Harlem. At one point in the text, Thomas, on day-leave from the merchant marines in Texas, pretends he does not speak English in order to enter a brothel, effectively playing with his interstitial racial position to subvert the anti-black racism of the establishment. Given the owner's policy of "keep[ing] these damn niggers down" (188) and away from the white prostitutes who work there, speaking Spanish allows Thomas access and intimacy just as the other "Spanish people who come from Argentina and Colombia and Peru and Cuba." Language, then, becomes a performative tool that facilitates and engenders a certain social positioning that staves off racist exclusion. Importantly, however, a Spanish-speaking Thomas does not mimic the owner's whiteness in this scene of passing, nor does he try to, but rather deploys ethnic, cultural difference to underscore his racial mixture. It is with the embrace of mestizaje that blackness passes through the safeguards of a North American logic of hypodescent, and the enactment of violent racism against Thomas is suspended, albeit temporarily.

After having sex with the white prostitute, Thomas deliberately drops his act and reverts back to speaking English: "When I walked to the door, she smiled and said in

broken Texas Spanish, did I like it and did I want more?" Thomas continues: "I opened the door and said, "Baby, I just want you to know"—and I watched her smile fall off and a look of horror fill the empty space it left—"I just want you to know that […] you got fucked by a nigger, by a *black man*!" And I didn't wait to hear her gasp or to watch her jump up out of that bed. I ran, I disappeared…" (189, original italics). While this scene is but one of many notable narrative moments in Thomas' text, it opens the present chapter for the way it evinces an encounter between competing hemispheric logics of race over the backdrop of a fraught sexual exchange. After all, what makes Thomas' interaction with the prostitute possible is also what makes it problematic: the dynamic position mestizaje occupies within a North American context, the instability of racial identification outside the black/white binary. While Thomas' clear, confrontational articulation of blackness disrupts misrecognition in a seemingly counterintuitive way (for narratives of passing, at least), it ultimately locates the encounter within a historical moment where a language of race and racial difference operates with currency, where interracial sexual intimacy transmutes racial violence into gendered aggression, and where the lived and literary subjects of Latinx literature refuse to let racism pass unseen.

As is characteristic of such Latinx writing from the sixties and seventies Cultural Movements period, a language of race is present throughout and underscores the historical importance of Thomas' narrative. After all, it is his recounting of being "hung up between [the] two sticks" (119) of whiteness and blackness that underscores the societal refusal to recognize a more dynamic racial positioning inherited from, in this case, the Hispanic Caribbean, at the same time it begins to deconstruct such a refusal, triangulating US racial dichotomies with what would later be named Latinx. As such,

Thomas' writing demonstrates an investment in rendering racial difference conscious and elaborating the historical and subjective narratives that accompany this process. This chapter, then, departs from these givens to analyze the ways those critical components return some five decades later to the foreground of analysis in a moment marked by colorblindness, or the problematic racial politics that removes race from language and content, cleaves discourses of racial difference, sexuality, and gender apart, and passes into an implicit (rather than explicit) realm of operation and representation.

To better explore these questions in their contemporary manifestations, I turn to another acclaimed Nuyorican text in the wake of Thomas' narrative: Justin Torres' *We the Animals* (2011). Also structured as a coming-of-age narrative whose unnamed protagonist-narrator navigates the intensities of family heritage, sexuality, and complex and polyvalent race, Torres' text recounts the dissolution of the fraternal bond between three young brothers—the title's "we"—as the narrator is outed. Subtending this explicitly sexual, divisive arc, however, are kinship ties strained by the parents' interracial marriage that leave the children neither white nor Puerto Rican, made even more fraught by the trenchant poverty the family experiences. Over this background of economic instability, which registers obliquely in the protagonist's narration of ketchup and crackers for dinner, nights spent on the floor of his dad's nighttime security guard job, ill-fitting hand-me-down clothes, and more, are shifting proximities and evolving relationships that begin with collective kinship and disperse into broken individuality. Notably, there is no language of race involved in subtending this collectivity, due to, as I argue, the brief novel's stylistic subscription to what I elaborate as an aesthetics of colorblindness, a paradigm that removes race from language and content and installs it in

form and feeling in order to render visible, and therefore subject to critique, the machinations of its problematical political namesake. Instead of a coalescing language of race, what emerges at the onset of the novel is an aesthetic strategy engaging metaphor, texture, and pronouns to recount the protagonist's apprehension of racial difference, its characteristics and meaning, and their assigned value. In terms of literary history, Torres' text is a direct descendent from Thomas'. In terms of literary imagination, Torres' protagonist is the direct result from Thomas' fraught sexual encounter with the white prostitute as a mixed Afro-Nuyorican man.

In the chapter that follows, I begin by staging a more elaborate conversation between critical race scholarship on colorblindness and Torres' novel to track the persistent ambiguity of Latinx racialization. Situating Torres within an emerging corpus of Latinx writers engaging an aesthetics of colorblindness, I show how the aesthetic strategy of *We the Animals* is one that turns to the repeated, dynamic use of pronouns and extended images of animality to articulate the family's collective otherness, one that encompasses different degrees and experiences of racialization without naming them as such. I argue that a non-racialized language is not a consequence of colorblindness, but a newfound representational strategy illuminated by colorblindness' muting of race precisely because the parents' interracial relationship and the dad's mixed black and brownness far exceed conventional racial identities that typically encourage stable recognition and problematic non-recognition. Continuing, I trace the protagonist's arc moving through the bildungsroman as he not only comes of age but comes out. Exploring the relationship between more conscious sexuality and unconscious racial difference reveals the imbricated operations of racial and sexual difference and the narrative modes

of representing the unrepresentable, that is, racial difference and queerness. Lastly, I end this chapter by exploring the limits of subject-based critique if the only available frames for conceiving and articulating subjecthood require normative racial and sexual positions that, as a result of their dynamism, exceed processes of rendering cognizable. It is my ultimate claim that the substance, experience, and complexity of racialized and sexualized queer Latinx subjects lie not in content and language, but in form and feeling.

(Non)Recognition: Colorblind to Brown

In his "A Critique of 'Our Constitution is Color-Blind'" (1991), critical race scholar Neil Gotanda defines the social phenomenon of colorblindness as "a technique of noticing but not considering race" (16). Joining other critics in linking this technique to the problematic creation and maintenance of white supremacy, Gotanda lingers on this technical dimension, ultimately offering a procedural analysis of colorblind law. "Non-recognition as technique," Gotanda writes, has three components: "First, there must be something which is cognizable as a racial characteristic or classification. Second, the characteristic must be recognized. Third, the characteristic must not be considered in a decision" (16-17). The succinctness of this observation, which should not be misconstrued as incomplexity, begins to position colorblindness as a bit of a misnomer. That is, colorblind systems, structures, and subjects are neither literally nor metaphorically blind to color, but rather participants in a US social contract that share collective understandings of race and its manifestations, but refuse to remedy its disparities.

Gotanda's identification of the tripartite operations of colorblindness affords me the opportunity to engage the specific processes structuring race within a contemporary US social fabric, ones that might otherwise be blurred together when operating solely in critique of colorblindness—the outcome—as opposed to its constitutive techniques. While the following chapters of my project explore most explicitly the latter two steps Gotanda mentions—that is, how characteristics of race are inscribed in the form and feeling of Latinx literature precisely for recognition and consideration, in conjunction and dialogue with sex and gender, and, in that way, work through and beyond the oppressive functions of colorblindness, this first chapter lingers on the first component to interrogate more closely the social, psychic, and aesthetic dimensions to electing that "something" that comes to assume racial characteristics and classifications, and then becomes cognizable as such. In short, I set out to study how ethnoracial subjects form as such and narrate these formations not only in an age when racial difference is rendered mute while paradoxically recognized and non-recognized, but when the very substance of racial difference and the meaning assigned to it—especially when this racial difference lies outside the black/white binary—challenges cognizable characterization and classification. In this way, Torres' novel is a potent meditation on the values, forms, and negotiations of difference before they become racial difference.

For *We the Animals*' young protagonist, these challenges emerge in direct relation to his parent's interracial marriage. While the intense, often violent interactions constituting their relationship is equally consequential for the young narrator and his brothers, I focus on its racial dimension, the one that situates Ma, an "uprooted Brooklyn creature" (8) alongside Paps, of Puerto Rican descent from the "tenement buildings in

Spanish Harlem" (10). It is the central contention of this section that both the parents' occupation of different racial positions (their interraciality) and the narrator's resulting racial position (a mixture of racial mixture) disturb the onset, adoption, and recognition of what Gotanda names above as the first step in the techniques of colorblindness—the solidification of racial difference into a cognizable characteristic or classification. As I will show, this does not mean the novel and its narrator are ignorant to what the reader codifies as racial; instead, I argue that the narrator feels difference without being able to articulate it in racial terms given the instability of his own and his inherited racial position beyond the black-white binary. In this way, I elaborate a larger problematic that hinges on the incompatibility (perhaps even illegibility) of Latinx—in the case of Paps, Afro-Puerto Rican—histories and practices of racial mixture in conjunction with North American dichotomies structured by notions of hypodescent.

We can see the narrator's registering of difference without apprehending it as racial in a scene of "ain'ts" where Paps, dancing to salsa in the kitchen, tries to teach his children to follow in his steps, both literally and, as the chapter is titled, in terms of "heritage." They fall short every time: "Paps turned the stereo even louder, so loud that if we screamed, no one would have heard, so loud that Paps felt far away and hard to get to, even though he was right there in front of us. 'Now shake it like you're rich,' Paps shouted, his powerful voice booming out over the music. We danced on tiptoes, sticking up our noses and poking the air above us with our pinkies. 'You ain't rich,' Paps said. 'Now shake it like you're poor'" (9). The dancing continues, with each instruction Paps gives ending in its invalidation, with each attempt to imitate ending in failure. Before long, this assumes an explicitly racial quality: "Now shake it like you're white" is

interrupted by a shout of "You ain't white […] Now shake it like you're Puerto Rican" (10). Unable to escape a similar fate, Puerto Rican affiliation both rhythmically and racially is pulled from the dancing kids: "Mutts, he said. You ain't white and you ain't Puerto Rican. Watch how a purebred dances, watch how we dance in the ghetto.' Every word was shouted over the music, so it was hard to tell if he was mad or just making fun" (10).

At first glance, the language of the scene appears as equally, explicitly racialized as Piri Thomas' abovementioned interaction with the prostitute, though without the immediacy of danger Thomas' disruption of passing engenders. The locus of articulation of this racialized language, however, is of paramount importance: even though Paps names the racial differences between his children and normatively identified subjects (not rich, not poor, not white) and then between himself and his children (they are not Puerto Rican, but rather mutts), the young protagonist and his brothers are not able to comprehend the significance of his words. The narration demonstrates this as the narrator recounts engaging more corporeally than linguistically, striving to step in time and feel sameness with his father, though falling out of synch, as yet inexplicably. As the protagonist recalls, Paps "danced, and we tried to see what separated him from us. He pursed his lips and kept one hand on his stomach. His elbow was bent, his back was straight, but somehow there was looseness and freedom and confidence in every move" (10). The narrator cannot recreate these movements and instead fixates on an unnamed something that "kept pulling our eyes up to his face, to his broad nose and dark, half-shut eyes and his pursed lips, which snarled and smiled both." It was, we read, "as if Puerto Rico was a man in a bathrobe" (11).

Although conventional understandings of colorblindness might cite Paps' language and the narrator's literal seeing of his father's differences as deviations from a colorblind praxis, reading this scene in light of Gotanda's technical analysis of colorblind politics suggests otherwise. Recalling how the first step the theorist outlines is the cognizance of racial characteristics and qualities—the linking of "something" to the complex system of meanings and values understood as race—that must later be recognized effectively situates the protagonist as operating prior to cognizance. That is, he does not yet make the direct, sustained connection between the racial descriptors that he and his brothers are and are not and the futility of following (in) Paps' footsteps. Although Paps' embodied difference is observed—his broad nose, dark eyes, and pursed lips, each inscriptions of an Afrolatinidad whose intensity is heightened through direct comparison to Ma's delicate whiteness, as I will soon discuss, these observations are not comprehended. They remain corporeal, interpersonal, and immediate, not only divorced from the larger social structures, histories, and systems that result in the amounting differences—ones that far exceed salsa dancing—separating father and sons, but condensed into that very relationship, as if the complexities of Puerto Ricanness in diaspora were a man in a bathrobe.

At the same time, however, the protagonist's inability to narrate the meaning and value of being labelled a "mutt," that is, his incapacity to link his father's racialized language to seeing difference and feeling separation (as opposed to seeing self-recognition and feelings sameness), is a direct result of growing up in an age where racial difference has been tutored into implicit unconsciousness. While Torres' text lacks any concrete historicizing details, I argue that it is precisely the inter-generational confusion

epitomized in Paps' dancing and his children's fruitless mimicking of it that situate the narrative snuggly in the folds of a colorblind contemporary. Put differently, and with an eye to a broader Nuyorican-Latinx literary history, the resonance between Paps' and Piri Thomas' verbal apprehension of racial difference in direct contrast with the narrator and his brothers' inability to do so ultimately functions to mark the passage of time. By implementing a novel aesthetic paradigm grounded in the apparent absence of race, the text differentiates itself from a previous period of Latinx literary production grounded in its explicit presence: an aesthetics of colorblindness enters as a meaningful lens between and across generational transitions, even when colorblindness has yet to take root (according to Gotanda's rubric, that is). What's more, by situating the narrative in Upstate New York, Torres also preserves a tangential link to the Nuyorican literary tradition he is proximate to without assuming the representational responsibilities that accompany a more canonical location in, for example, New York City.

In this sense, the protagonist engages a type of pre-colorblind mode of relationality where race remains beyond assuming a condensed form, let alone recognition and disavowal. At risk of creating confusing contradictions, however, I also argue that this pre-colorblind mode is in fact the direct result of colorblindness itself. Without falling into a discussion of exact causality, we can see that the protagonist's inability to parse race emerges from a social landscape devoid of racialized language and subtended by what Gotanda calls non-recognition. Although the protagonist inherits certain racial difference from Ma and Paps, he also lacks both the tools to cognize and recognize it and the same class of racial demands placed on him—ones that Piri Thomas deliberately navigated through passing and unpassing. In this way, the protagonist

demonstrates the self-sustaining system of presence and absence, recognition and non-recognition that colorblindness establishes and upholds by maintaining implicit, unconscious, and unquestioned the existence of racial difference and the operations of racial oppression that rely on it. While the following chapter demonstrates how exaggerated literary forms can turn absent and implicit race into explicit racial presence, for now we might instead see how Gotanda's three techniques acquire a fourth that directs our attention back to step one, securing the longevity of a colorblind politics. Although I recognize the exceptionality of Torres' narrative in underscoring this particular phenomenon, given that it is a bildungsroman following the formation of a developing ethnoracial, queer subject, this exceptionality also affords me the opportunity to interrogate how racial difference comes to be linked to, elided with, and recognized as sexual difference, and then apprehended and articulated in its own terms.

It is more than generational difference and geographical abstraction over the backdrop of racial colorblindness, however, that culminate in insurmountable, still incognizant difference here. It is also the substance of race, the matter of mixture. By mixture, I am referring to the racial ambiguity Paps embodies, ambiguous only by the reductive black/white logics confronting him on the mainland US. While his children inherit this (hence their being called "mutts"), what they fail to inherit by mixing Paps' mixture with Ma's whiteness is the same relationship to blackness that Paps' wide nose, pursed lips, and dark eyes signal, a relationship similar to Piri Thomas' and hence the reason he was able to self-identify (not only as black, but as black and Puerto Rican) with the boldness we read above. The narrator, then, is much more than not rich or poor. He is not white enough to be white, not black enough to be black, not Puerto Rican enough to

be Puerto Rican, and in these ways, not enough like Ma or Paps to establish a stable identificatory relationship with either, all the while expected to non-recognize the very existence of these differences. It is, however, precisely from these ain't—from identitarian instability, from a certain yet pervasive lack—that his and his brothers' brownness emerges.

As Latinx scholar Joshua Guzmán affirms, "brown tells a story of the ongoing mixing of all races, driven by a postracial ideology that then ignores the incommensurable differences of those singular beings organized and managed by oppressive regimes" (25). That Guzmán defines brownness in direct relation to post-racialism—what might be considered an augmented manifestation of Gotanda's colorblindness that non-recognizes race while affirming it is passé—resonates with the contradictions I outline above. In the same way that the protagonist is unable to enact colorblindness (non-recognize race) because of colorblindness itself (his inability to parse race from the onset), brown as a postracial utopian social formation undermines itself by evacuating the very substance of race through blindness and postraciality. Brown (as the story of ongoing mixture) exists precisely in the contradiction of a double bind of recognition (existence) and non-recognition (disavowal), resulting in what Guzmán says is brownness staging "the smoldering indention of its own vulnerability by exposing itself to erasure in the very act of longing" (26). Brownness hangs, then, in the delicate balance of the protagonist's longing search for connection, community, and self, and finding difference, distance, and loss.

The detection of the contradictions facing and, indeed, constituting both brownness in and of itself and our brown protagonist stand to recast the very essence of

Torres' novel. Recalling Guzmán's affirmation that "brown tells a story," we can also see how *We the Animals* tells the story of brown. What follows, then, are not just close readings of Justin Torres' innovative stylistic and formal paradigms. They are sustained analyses and explorations of a decidedly brown aesthetic, one situated firmly at the intersection of colorblind, post-racial fantasies that would render racial difference both mute and moot, and the subjective experiences of confronting generational, familial, and internal illegibilities in their racial dimensions. The text's meditations on the interlocking gears of gender, sexuality, race, and narrative do not merely represent the lack structuring both Guzmán's analysis of brown and Torres' protagonist's existence, but rather enact radical acts of space making, form bending, and being where mainstream conventions of normativity would otherwise see nothing. "In other words," Guzmán reminds us, "just like a bridge, brownness works as an avenue of feelings aiding in the seemingly impossible project of belonging in difference" (27). That these feelings in Torres' text manifest in direct relation to gender and sexuality, that they appear to build bridges away from the substance and matter of race, is the focus of the following section.

Mediating Racial Difference through the Textures of Gender and Sex

While the availability of cognizing race develops for the protagonist throughout the course of the novel, what is less dynamic is how imbricated questions of gender and sexuality are and remain his primary mode of self-understanding. In this sense, the generational gaps, feelings of unremedied difference, and identificatory challenges the narrator faces because of his brownness' illegibility in a colorblind landscape and in his family are soon negotiated through notions of conventional masculinity as understood

and represented as gendered texture. Race remains an object of observation, but it is the protagonist's measuring of his gender presentation and sexual desires what comes to be the subject of explanation. While the previous section provides an account for the main character's inability to apprehend race, this section theorizes how gender and sexuality come to stand in its place as the dominant terms of self- and familial exploration. To be clear, I am not arguing that notions of gender and sexuality—that the metrics of manliness and heterosexuality—replace racial difference; instead, I join other scholars in linking the removal of race from content and language to the proliferation of queer representation, both in Latinx literature and a US cultural sphere writ large. In the section that follows, I turn to narrative moments where corporeal texture and the substance of flesh operate as conscious sites of possible similitude and difference, while the underlying, unconsciousness of racial difference operates as unspoken, omnipresent feeling.

My suturing of race to questions of gender and sex responds to the intimacy of the domestic life Torres' novel recounts with frequent, potent intensity, quite notably in a moment of kinship connection on the protagonist's seventh birthday that soon turns sour. With his father at work and his mother resting in bed, black-eyed and swollen after being beaten by Paps, the importance of the day appears to slip by until Ma wakes and bemoans her son's turning seven: "When you boys turned seven, you left me. Shut yourselves off from me. That's what big boys do, what seven-year-olds do. […] Wriggled away when I tried to cuddle them, wouldn't sit still on my lap. I had to let them go—had to harden my heart—they wanted to smash things, to wrestle." (14). Ma narrates aging, or the transformation from "beautiful baby boys" (13) to big boys, with a shift in actions

(hugging to smashing and fighting), proximity (from her lap to the adventures beyond), and texture, citing the hardening of her heart to protect against the emotional distance that her sons' waning boyhood provokes. Noting the stark contrast between her hardened heart and her tender, puffy face captures the gravity behind turning seven: the smashing and wrestling of becoming man is mediated through feminized bodies made soft through violence to dialogically strengthen—texturally and socioculturally—normative masculinity. "She called for me to sit on her lap, and I came, and we breathed together. [She] leaned in and whispered more in my ear, told me more, about why she needed me six. She whispered it all to me, her need so big, no softness anywhere, only Paps and boys turning into Paps" (16-17). In pleading for her son to remain six for the rest of his live ("You're not seven; you're six plus one. And next year you'll be six plus two. Like that, forever"), Ma is asking to remain soft with the protagonist, to stave off hardening her heart alongside plush boyhood, to remain texturally akin to her son and in doing so, overcome implicit racial differences through a gendered affiliation.

The linking of corporeal texture with gendered difference appears elsewhere in the text, spelling out a set of attributes, behaviors, and positions the protagonist must assume if he wants to maintain proximity with his brothers and father. Paps is frequently at the center of these linkages, affirming the connection between hard bodies and hardened masculinity. Paps, after all, "generally made it his business to learn everything that had to do with survival. He had all the muscles and the will. He was on his way to becoming indestructible" (20). When the family goes to a nearby lake to swim, we see the protagonist yet again aware of the tension between reenacting his mother's softness and the distance it puts between his father and siblings. As the narrative voice recounts

his hesitance to swim freely, he fixates on his "bony weakness," a direct contrast to his father's indestructability. He begins to cry: it was "as if it had only just now occurred to Ma how odd it was that I was here, clinging to her and Paps, and not with my brothers, who had run into the water, dunked each other's heads down, tried to drown each other, then ran back out and disappeared into the trees" (20). The text, then, makes clear that a literal and social texturality is required of normative masculine subjects, and normative masculinity is a requisite for identifying with brothers and dad. In other words, the protagonist's successful identification with his father mandates the corporeal and dispositional enactment of hardness. Notably, this obsession with the corporeal haptic (that is, his hardness or softness, his muscles and his bones), does not necessarily obfuscate the racial difference between father and son so much as it indicates his inability to make it conscious, to understand the core nature of the identificatory requirements being put to him, to recognize the consequence of color even before normative demands for non-recognition set in. Instead, the protagonist vacillates between approximated womanhood—his structural presentation as a sister to his brothers—and paternal masculinity, ultimately passing for the latter while leading the reader to engage with the explicit sexuality to his character's development and the novel's arc. If Thomas was "hung up between two sticks" of white and black, Torres' protagonist is equally caught between masculinity and femininity.

The textual supplanting of race from processes of identification and its apparent sidelining to notions of gender and sex is not merely the stuff of fiction, but rather, as theorist Jared Sexton affirms, the direct result of the multicultural manipulation of interracial relationships. In his *Amalgamation Schemes: Antiblackness and the Critique of*

Multiracialism (2008), Sexton analyzes the specific discursive arguments of multiculturalism that undermine radical black and feminist politics while constructing platforms of antiblackness and normative sexuality. Centering on the phenomenon of the interracial relationship, which, as he outlines, is often lauded as the pinnacle of racial conviviality and, by extension, colorblind post-racialism, Sexton effectively argues the opposite, calling them "ideological lure[s]" (153) that necessitate desexualiziation as a form of distancing from blackness, where desexualization means disavowing intimacy, desire, and the interplay of race and sexuality (154). He elaborates:

> In this representational strategy, there is a resistance to discuss the means and relations of sexual reproduction, to disarticulate sexuality from biological procreation so as to engage a discussion of the politics of interracial sexuality. In place of this critical discourse, we find a desexualization of interracial encounter and […] a deracialization of sexual encounter. This scission operates within the nominally liberal right against a receding white supremacist taboo and the ascendant restrictions of "Afrocentric nationalism." (159)

Sexton's work demonstrates the breaking apart of subjects and their relations—the color of their skin cannot coexist with the proximity of their genitals—while laying bare this logic's subscription to ideas of racial purity (the very idea of interraciality requires static racial categories to intertwine). Recalling Piri Thomas' sexual encounter with the white prostitute as an exercise against anti-miscegenation, we can link the contemporaneity of Sexton's affirmations to longstanding, entrenched social and psychic practices of inclusion and exclusion at the intersection of race and sex. The more recent emphasis on triumphant togetherness Sexton pushes back against, however, ultimately demonstrates how the new language of superficial multicultural liberalism enacts the same cleaving of race from sex, despite the psychic realities and social histories that evince race and sex working in tandem—indeed, as inconceivable apart. Bringing this to bear on Torres'

novel, we see how the deracialization of colorblindness feeds into and off of a concomitant desexualization, presenting the growing protagonist with two seemingly distinct paths of development and self-understanding: one that is racialized and the other sexed, broadly speaking.

Confronted with this inability to parse racial difference from the fraught gender dichotomy his parents foist upon him, the protagonist narrates his difference through feelings and textures that register gender positions and, later, evolve into queer orientations. With this in mind, it is no surprise that the above-mentioned birthday chapter ends with the protagonist reenacting Paps' abuse to reject Ma's softness for the masculine hardness his brothers and father embody. "I turned into her, saw the swollen mounds on either side of her face, the muddied purple skin ringed in yellow. Those bruises looked so sensitive, so soft, so capable of hurt" (17). In linking softness to a gendered position that is literally shaped by received violence, the protagonist becomes aware of a starkly imbalanced power dynamic where he is apparently capable of choosing his affiliation, and he does: "I grabbed hold of both of her cheeks and puller toward me for a kiss […] She ripped her face from mine and shoved me away from her, to the floor. She cussed me and Jesus, and the tears dropped, and I was seven." The young protagonist's body, then, becomes a substance subjected to manipulation, imitation, and identification: he passes for hardness at the expense of his mother to close the identificatory gap between himself and his father, and to join his brothers in age, in texture, and in gendered quality. In rendering softer her already tender face, he succeeds in hardening her heart and foreclosing possibilities of lasting likeness between them.

That race elides with masculinity in the figure of Paps obscures for our narrator the starkly different set of problems put to both himself and his father: it is less that the narrator cannot identify with his father's non-whiteness and more that the imperative to identify racially is not put to him, though a gendered imperative is. We see the complexity of these tensions, and indeed the slippage of the artificial dichotomic distinction between race and sex, following one of Paps' days-long disappearances and the depressive episode it generates for Ma, the parents reconnect with amorous intimacy that springs out of the boys' bath time. While actions drive the narration, memories and metaphors appear and combine through the seemingly choreographed touching and moving of their bodies as the three boys look on: "Ma was in her flesh-colored bra and heavy cotton work pants, and Paps had taken off his shirt to wash us. We saw everything—how our skin was darker than Ma's but lighter than Paps's, how Ma was slight and nimble, with ribs softly stepping down from her breasts, how Paps was muscled, the muscles and tendons of his forearms, the veins in his hands, the kinky hairs spreading across his chest" (45). In describing the corporeal, the difference in skin tone emerges and is immediately fused to bodily substance—wending ribs and slight statures are linked to lightness, full muscles and protruding veins are dark, with each assignation of color measured by the protagonist himself. In focalizing on Paps's kinky hair spreading across his broad chest, we see perhaps the most succinct elision of Afro-Puerto Rican, black brownness—race—and the desired standard of manly masculinity—gender—that the protagonist moves to and from. In this way, Paps's skin color is described in contradistinction to Ma's, her chest and bone structure in light of his, his shoulders and strength through her fragility and weakness. More than mixing difference

through sexual proximity, the passage hinges on distinguishing black and white, brown and pale, strong and soft, masculine and feminine. The trauma of this emerging sexual primal scene, for the protagonist and his brothers, does not necessarily result from the violence or misconstruing of the sex they might witness. Instead, it is a racial primal scene that demands the confrontation of incommensurate, unutterable racial difference.

If before skin moved across skin with the physical expression of intimacy that binds the characters together in the bathroom, it soon moves in a different way after. What begins as a jocund albeit frenzied moment of interruptus as the children insert themselves into the parents' affection ultimately explodes into the physical expression of difference, as if the children found their attempted insertion rejected on unknown grounds. Written on Ma's back and Paps's sides and legs instead of spoken with words and meaning, the silenced impact of racial difference manifests in fingers jabbing at flesh, palms smacking shoulders, and kicks in between ribs. "Then we were all three kicking and slapping at once, and they didn't say a word, they didn't even move; the only noise was the noise of skin and impact and breath, and then our protests […] We hit and kept on hitting; we were allowed to be what we were, frightened and vengeful—little animals, clawing at what we needed" (51). In this way, the cohesive family unit is destroyed by the wordless, visible yet incomprehensible racial difference that differently situates Ma, Paps, and their children: difference can be seen but it cannot yet take language, both the precursor to and pinnacle of colorblind subjectivity. Notably, the scene underscores this transformation over certain stasis, since the parents' bodies do not change, their skin retains its colored difference, and their muscular densities remain the same. It is precisely this stasis—the perseverance of insurmountable, excluding

difference—that provokes the change in the way skin meets skin. The progression from a caress to a squeeze, from a tickle to a poke, from slapping to kicking, from hitting to clawing, signals the expiring longevity of the protagonist's family as it prefigures the protagonist's impending, brutal rupture: passing for masculine will not circumvent racial difference, a reality that begins to near the protagonist's grasp and is soon compounded by his burgeoning queerness.

Dissociative Cognizance: Animals Under the Rock

The notion of family within Torres' novel is in constant flux as the different dimensions of the parents' races, the brothers' performance of gender, and the protagonist's queerness rise to the surface of the narrative and slowly coalesce together. Given the impact of concomitant deracialization and desexualization, compounded by the removal of a language of race for an already fraught neither-white-nor-black brownness, challenges, however, this process of coalescing. In what follows, I argue that Torres' commitment to shifting pronouns and extended metaphors of animality (namely birds) is not just a series of literary tactics but rather potent encodings of the complex imbrications of race, gender, and sex. When the young narrating subject cannot express why he feels akin to his brothers in some moments and profoundly dissimilar to them in other, pronoun shifts from "we" to "I." When the protagonist senses a collective component to his family's alterity, stemming from ethnoracial non-normativity and economic precarity, the feeling and language of a flock emerges. When the movement between and among now-broken, now-whole collectives of siblinghood, parenthood, and family persist without coherent explanation, images of escape, flight, and leaping into a more dramatic

unknown abound. In short, I argue that Torres' text enacts an aesthetics of colorblindness that locates race in the forms and feelings that result from his more conscious sexual deviation. Recalling Guzmán, we might say this is the manner in which brown tells its story.

The principal aesthetic modalities I signal in this section are captured in the novel's title: "we" pronouns and allusions to animalia. While they work together in the title, they appear to operate with more independence in the text itself. Separating the two, if only briefly and for the sake of analytical organization, might indicate how the former most closely relates to the protagonist's relationship to his brothers (and therefore, functions as a rubric of sexual normativity) while the latter links to his parents' (and by extension, the entire family's) interraciality. Beginning with a study of shifting pronouns, it should come as no surprise that throughout the course of the narrator's coming up and coming out the title's "we" is eventually spliced apart into a breaking and broken "I." Given the way in which the protagonist's deviant sexuality remains unspoken until the novel's climactic scene of outing, it is through this grammar of sexuality that we appreciate the effects his queerness has in the family and for the unity of boyhood. As the novel's opening lines recount, "We wanted more. We knocked butt ends of our forks against the table, tapped our spoons against our empty bowls; we were hungry. We wanted more volume, more riots. […] We wanted more flesh, more blood, more warmth" (1). While this literal hunger, for example, further encodes the conditions of poverty the protagonist's family inhabits, it also reflects the unified collective of the three brothers in siblinghood: the shared appetites, desires, and actions erase the corporeal delineations of the brothers and render them "six snatching hands, six stomping feet" (1). This fusion

holds true even by the chapter's end, when the demands for more have devolved into whispers of "we wanted less: less weight, less work, less noise, less father, less muscles and skin and hair. We wanted nothing, just this, just this" (3).

As the contrast of wanting more and wanting less makes evident, the dominant feelings of the text, the ones that contribute to its electrifying prose, do not assume any inherent qualities. Instead, they are measured against the assumed proximity of normative kinship structures and the sociocultural value assigned to them: as long as the brothers want the same thing, collective kinship can survive. This evinces how shared orientations between subjects towards similar objects function as requisites for collectivity, at the same time we see how the pronouns measure the terms of belonging, of wanting and feeling the same, and ultimately, being the same. The novel's first-person plural narrative voice—the fused, indistinguishable brothers of the story's siblinghood—makes this clear, even as the plural subject moves across a spectrum of desire anchored at one end in insatiable need and, on the other, a rejection of excess. It is less important that these feelings change in nature and narration and more important that they change in the same way, given that shared feelings signal shared orientations, which in turn signal the shared intimacy of collectivity.

To reiterate, the inaccessibility to apprehend in language, and by extent, consciousness, the racial and sexual complexities shaping him are in part due to the protagonist's age, but also the psychic and social locations of race and sex in contemporary US social sphere. While the processes of disarticulation, desexualiziation, and deracialization Sexton outlines above lay the sociocultural groundwork identifying the impossibility of racial and sexual relationality, they also characterize a widescale

dissociated psychic paradigm where the very nature of subjective unity is challenged. In their *Racial Melancholia, Racial Dissociation: On the Social and Psychic Lives of Asian Americans* (2019) scholars David L. Eng and Shinhee Han name this dissociation a specifically racial one while linking it to the contemporary prevalence of discourses of sexuality. With striking succinctness, they affirm that "gay is the new black"—or that, with the advent of homornormativity, "sexuality may be the conscious form in which unconscious structures of race and racism appear today" (163). The scholars continue: "Put otherwise, processes of double inscription under queer liberalism posit progressive politics and good feelings about samesex relations as disconnected from unconscious, unacknowledged, and persistent structures of institutional racism and legacies of whiteness as property. In this scenario, progressive attitudes toward homosexuality exhibited by gay millennials might be the conscious transformation and translation of a political unconscious of race that a colorblind US society refuses to acknowledge or to recognize as connected to one another." If Sexton intervenes on the problematic repackaging of interracial sexual relationships, Eng and Han demonstrate the larger, generational dissociative phenomenon that renders a racialized and sexed relationship an impossibility.

In the context of Torres' novel, this means that instead of actively confronting these limitations at this early point in the novel and the potentially irrevocable schisms they might provoke in his family, the protagonist navigates grammatical bits, parsing them down into seemingly automatic pronouns instead of fully formed thoughts and actions. This literary tactic, then, becomes a survival technique, a mechanism for charting shifting allegiances, kinship, and togetherness without doing so knowingly. As Eng and

Han also discuss, the unknowingness within the dissociative model they construct problematizes its remedying. Comparing the later generation of dissociation to its melancholic precursor, the scholars describe how racial melancholia, which directly relates to "losses associated with immigration, assimilation, and racialization that cannot be easily mourned" (171), facilitates the subject lifting "the rock of repression and [to] discover something underneath—a lost object, one demanding to be analyzed and interpreted. Indeed, it is the naming of this object of loss that creates identity from difference; it is the naming and narrating of the social exclusions compelling its foreclosure that creates a racial identity and racial politics in its wake." This changes with later generations as a model of colorblindness and racial dissociation takes hold: "in racial dissociation, we are faced not with condensation but rather with a paranoid structure of decomposition, of dispersion" explained in direct relation to the "changing structures of racial exclusion and violence under the directives of neoliberalism and globalization." As Eng and Han put it, "in racial dissociation, when you lift the rock of repression, there is nothing underneath to discover."

Confronted by a rock devoid of any lost object beneath it, and with that absence, the absence of an identity of difference, Torres' protagonist faces a crisis of representation. How to put into words his racial ambiguity, his non-normative conception of gender, and his queer sexuality if all and each are rendered unspeakable by intersecting, powerful social and psychic forces? What can only exist as dynamic feelings, I argue, remains dynamic feelings, though these feelings take forms in word play, allusion, and imagery. In this sense, race, sex, and gender do not operate in pure forms that are incorporated into the narrative through literary device. Instead, these

literary devices are the very substance of race, sex, and gender, at least until the protagonist begins to relate them and to them differently. This marks a significant shift in the aesthetic paradigms of Latinx letters, where the earlier, foundational Latinx works are written by and read as, in the apt words of Machado Sáez and Dalleo (2007), "poet-warriors and guerilla artists of an anticolonial Civil Rights movement" (7). It is my central claim that the aesthetics of politics of previous generations now manifest in formal subtleties that seem disconnected from the radical projects of representation and liberation in appearance alone. In order to appreciate the continuity of acts that are anticolonial and subversive—indeed, to locate the continuity of those factors constituting a Latinx literary tradition beyond identity, we must join Torres' protagonist in looking beyond the rock for the estrangement, approximation, and apprehension of racial difference in direct correlation to gendered and sexual difference in form and feeling.

If the pronouns above work to measure the shifting metrics of self-sameness between the brothers (soon to be broken by the protagonist's outing), then recurring references to animals function to register shifting collectives of racial otherness as the observing narration continues to search for the language to describe his parents' differences. Extending the textural dimension explored above, Ma and Paps take on animal-human personae, always in stark contrast. For example, the protagonist recalls Paps as "like an animal, our father, ruddy and physical and instinctive; his shoulders hulked and curved, and we had, each of us, even Ma, sat on them, gone for rides. Ma's shoulders were clipped, slipping away from her tiny bird neck." Animality appears here as the continuation of elaborated gendered difference, with metaphoricity painting Paps as a beast of burden, a workhorse of sorts burdened with the yoke of supporting the

family, while Ma becomes a dainty bird, capable of taking flight: “She was just over five feet and light enough for Manny to lift, and when Paps called her fragile, he sometimes meant for us to take extra-special care with her, and he sometimes meant that she was easily broken.” The linking of Paps’ racial difference to animality immediately conjures the human/subject-animal/object dichotomy undergirding centuries of colonization, slavery, and racial oppression, one that extends to the brothers in other points in the text (for example: “we [were] like a three-torsoed beast” [75]). While this scene’s image of Ma and the children riding his shoulders recreates a literal hierarchy, it also places them in direct, constant contact with savage alterity and dogged labor.

Unsurprisingly, Ma and the children enter the animal kingdom, as we see in one instance where Ma, faced with the seemingly impossible task of providing a stable future for her children, loads them into Paps’ truck and drives to a nearby park. While she disappears from the scene to ponder whether or not to leave Paps for good, the narrator and his brothers bounce each other off the seesaw, throw rocks at passing cars, and threaten a passerby when she stops to inquire of their wellbeing. Later, when Ma returns with pretzels and beer, the four sit down to feed the ducks: “Ducks paddled over and silently picked the pretzel bits out of the water. Ma, on a bench, smiled at us and laughed. ‘I thought you were kidnapped!’ she yelled, digging in her purse and tossing more pretzels our way. We flapped our elbows and quacked, and she tried to land the pretzels in our mouths, but she was no good at feeding us” (70). The idyllic moment dissipates into fear and uncertainty as Ma eventually asks, “Honestly[,] what should we do? […] We can go home, but we don’t have to. We don’t ever have to go home again. We can leave him. We can do that. But I need you to tell me what to do” (71-72). While the

cultural legacies and racial implications of "beast" and "bird" are not immediately comparable, that the protagonist conceives of his family in animalistic terms affirms stable subjectivity is still out of reach.

That the narrator enriches this scene of fraught belonging with a parallel sub-narrative about ducks is not mere coincidence, but rather a recurring technique to situate the family unit's alterity as animal within and against the backdrop of the normative personed society they inhabit. While the performance of ducklinghood by the protagonist and his brothers makes this connection quite clear (where Ma's inability to feed as the mother duck parallels her inability to provide her children), it is not until the end of the scene, after Ma drives the boys and the truck home, that we see the larger implications of the characters becoming fowl. As one brother complains about the wasted potential of the day—"I thought we were *going* somewhere"—the other joins in his frustration: "We should have killed that fucking woman[,] taken her keys and driven off" (73). The narrator's petition for clarification "Which woman?" goes unanswered as his brothers continue and the feminine subject in question—Ma or the woman who stopped to inquire in the park—remains unspecified: "Hell yeah[,] we should have smashed her fucking skull open. We should have scooped out her brains and fed pieces to the ducks." The narrator asks "Which woman?" again, but the conversation soon deteriorates into a debate about whether or not the ducklings would have eaten the woman's brains. While one brother insists they would not, the other retorts back: "'Did you look at them nasty things? Looked like some hungry-ass ducks to me.' [The brother] stopped at the lamppost, turned to square off. He had his arms crossed and his head cocked to one

side—so [the other brother] crossed his own arms and cocked his head right back. 'I'm telling you,' [he] said, 'them ducks are too smart to eat them bitches' brains" (73-74).

At first glance, the polyvalence of "woman" here (equal parts a reference to Ma as to the intruding woman who stopped the brothers in the park), augmented by the narrator's insistent and unresolved questioning, appears to generate certain anxiety around Ma's wellbeing: do the brothers mean to have smashed their own mother's skull open? The insistence that ducklings do not eat brains implies both the possibility and futility of this, since the brothers themselves—the ducklings—would have still gone to bed hungry whether Ma was alive or not. At the same time, though, we might read the urgency surrounding "Which woman?" less as an investment in Ma or the passerby's safety and more as an expression of incredulity in regards to feminine personhood altogether. That is, what is hardest for our protagonist to comprehend in the conversation is his shared proximity to a person—a human subject that is recognized as such, with access to reciprocated identity (the ability to see and be seen as), language, and agency. In asking about womanhood, not only does the narrator reignite a focus on gender, but also underscores the permanency of racial alterity via animalia. While the scene ends with the brother's squaring off to fight with heads cocked like birds, the protagonist appears to remain with his confounding interaction with subjecthood, as if willing himself to be the smart duckling that takes flight towards personhood.

This flight becomes more possible, if not more difficult, when the protagonist encounters the closest thing to a reflection of himself in gay porn. Huddled around the TV in the basement of a distant neighborhood friend, the brothers watch an unfolding scene in a porno where an older man spanks a naked teen boy. Eliding eroticism and

violence, the witnessing of this homoerotic novelty recasts the narrator's relationship to bodies, flesh, and his siblings: "We had seen flesh, but still pictures, women. And, too, we had seen each other's bodies—all of us, me and Manny and Joes, Ma and Paps—we had seen one another beaten, animal bleating in pain, hysterical, and now drugged, and now drunk and glazed, and naked, joyous" (96). The gambit of physical and emotional states the narrator knows and has experiences leaves him unprepared and unguarded for what he begins to see and feel: "Wasn't none of it nothing like this." As the scene goes on, the narration falters, interrupting itself, running out of words for the familiar display of animalistic punishment made new with increasingly charged, intersubjective desire. As if finding gays through gaze, the protagonist begins to see a model of existence—importantly queer—that reflects his feelings of disbelonging in a human form that parallels his. A reorientation emerges and the narrative voice feels it before he can articulate why. The chapter ends with subtle devastation as the cracks in the brotherhood grow: "Why won't you look at me, my brothers, why won't you take my eyes?" (97). Almost literally, then, the new queer directionality of his gaze pulls runs parallels to instead of intersects with that of his brothers, and their unity falters.

As the 'we' pronoun is eventually traded for 'I' and 'they,' the affective resonance signaling the self-sameness of siblinghood begins to falter, weaken, and eventually becomes dissonance. Soon the protagonist stands on his own two feet, no longer waddling at the back of the flock or riding or being ridden as a beast. With this emerging autonomy comes marked breaks with his brothers, who become objects of observation as opposed to subjects of unified collectivity. Speaking in a singular voice, the protagonist urges: "Look at my brothers—their saggy clothes, their eyes circled dark

like permanent bruises, their hangdog hungry faces. I felt trapped and hateful and shamed" (108). Trapped in a pack that he doesn't identify with, the mixture of "I" pronouns with a recurrence of animal images for "them" charts a novel development of the protagonist's sense of self in both racialized and sexual terms. He both explores and hones this emergence in writing: "Secretly, outside of the family, I cultivated a facility with language and a bitter spite. I kept a journal—in it, I sharpened insults against all of them. I turned new eyes to them, a newly caustic gaze. I sensed a keen power of observation in myself, an intelligence, but sour" (108). This self-recognition is soon recognized, and a budding identity is met with a similar identification: "Both Ma and Paps had held private conversations with me about my potential, about this bookishness that set me apart from my brothers; both encouraged me to apply myself—they hinted that I would have an easier time in this world than they had, than my brothers would ever have, and I hated them for that" (108-109).

Recalling the novel's opening scene of affective intensities shared between the "we" siblings, this moment of articulated hate affirms the narrator's new position. He invests, both affectively and libidinally, in subjects and objects that are different than those his brothers choose. Feeling alike has devolved into seeing difference where this difference unevenly distributes potential for a future. The importance of this future not only stems from the value his parents assign it, which appears to be laden with hope for a different set of material circumstances and a higher socioeconomic standing. It also presents a future for a subject cut off from the racial language of earlier generations. In inserting himself into a forward-moving temporal trajectory, the narrator also assures he will make his own past, perhaps quelling some of the genealogical anxieties he faced

earlier in their unconscious manifestations. It is significant that the possibility of a future, at the expense of his siblinghood, hinges on the solidification of language. As psychoanalysis tells us, language and the ability to narrate oneself stands to alleviate psychic stresses, like the gender-articulated anxieties he experienced during fraught scenes of affective resonance. Language is what secures the narrator's presence as a subject with history, and in doing so, situates him as a subject of history, in all his racial and sexual deviations that would otherwise remain muted by mainstream and legal interdictions. His awareness of this—his growing proprioceptivity—functions to wrench his family apart even further.

The narrator's voice—as the epitome of his newfound, expansive language—reaches its expressive, descriptive pinnacle in the height of the novel's climax after successfully cruising at the nearby bus station: "I wanted to stand before a mirror and look and look at myself. I opened my mouth and stretched my voice over the buzz of passing cars. "He made me!" I screamed. "I'm made!" (115). In standing in front of a mirror and by shouting (note, here, the centrality of the first person singular pronoun), the protagonist comes out to himself and affirms his new orientation at the same time he comes into being as a speaking subject of and with history, capable of articulating and explaining the differences between himself, his brothers, and his parents. His liberation, however, comes with dire consequences. Upon returning home, he finds his family waiting, with the pages of his journal strewn across the floor in front of them: "In bold and explicit language I had written down fantasies about the men I met at the bus station, about what I wanted done to me. I had written a catalog of imagined perversions, a violent pornography with myself at the center, with myself obliterated. And now there it

was on my mother's lap" (116). His coming out and into being is immediately met with the familial force of a differently oriented collective before him. Any glimmer of resolution or understanding, of resonance or of dialogue, especially considering the impossibility for speech acknowledged elsewhere, is immediately extinguished. The narrator erupts: "I behaved like an animal. I tried to rip the skin from their faces, and when I couldn't, I tried to rip the skin from my own. They held me down on the ground; I bucked and spat and screamed my throat raw. I cursed them: we were, all of us, sons of whores, mongrels, our mother fucked a beast. […] I said and did animal, unforgivable things. What else, but to take me to the zoo?" His newfound, delicate subjecthood faces the immediate impossibility of linking his queerness to familial racial alterity; he is cast out by his pack.

On the Edge of the Wild: Institutional Failures to Capture Race and Sex

Following the earlier scene of destruction, both of the self and the family, the narration shifts from first person to third. This parallels the evolution and then undoing of the narrator, who began as part of a collective subject, found his own voice and his own subjectivity, and now came undone. What's more, however, is how this narrative shift also repositions the reader away from intimacy with the protagonist towards a place of distance. This distance requires a new mode of relationality as well, given distance's disruption to collectivity, to likeness. In this sense, and suddenly unable to feel with and through the protagonist, we are left to see him from afar. This is more than an implicit remediation but instead a repeated imperative, as phrases that begin with "look" punctuate the section: "Look, a father gently lowers his son," "Look. The snow is stacked

two feet high," "Look. The father lays down the rag," "Look, they're opening doors. They're stepping out. Here they go" (119-124). In ceasing to see and only being seen, the once radiant subject of queerness becomes an object of observation and literary substance. His personhood is rendered animal, his language caged and changed.

It is the focus of this final section to link the failed coalescing of subjecthood for Torres' young protagonist at the crossroads of race, gender, and sexuality, to a set of identitarian requirements put to minoritarian subjects by dominant legal paradigms, ones that beget a similar failure of apprehension and comprehension. Not only do I intend to explore further the critical implications of a Latinx bildungsroman that ends in dissolution instead of cohesion, in wilderness instead of fully formed subjecthood, but I aim to substantiate, if only briefly, the relationship of Latinx subjects to colorblind law. To reiterate, I argue that the polyvalence of brownness within a black-white US racial landscape, in conjunction with majoritarian inclinations to remove race from social discourse altogether, only antagonizes (instead of facilitates) the solidification of Latinx subjectivity. Confronted with limited frames of existence, then, requires a shift in the ontological rubrics of Latinidad, ones that might engage form and feeling instead of the language and content of legible identities.

Even when the first-person voice reappears in a fleeting final chapter of just a few lines, it is not without an alteration so profound that it seems irrevocable. The weight of dissonance and anxiety are such that even texture ceases to be a viable literary analytic: he has become too different for even that. The voice recounts in almost taunting perversity how "These days, I sleep with peacocks, lions, on a bed of leaves. I've lost my pack. I dream of standing upright, of uncurled knuckles, of a simpler life—no hot

muzzles, no fangs, no claws, no obscene plumage—strolling gaily, with an upright air" (125). While the shift from an entire pack (his pack, no less) to singular beasts tracks onto the dissolution of family within the coordinates of social alterity we have read before, and the muzzle, fangs, and plumage align with the institutionalization of his embodied difference, the new desires for uprightness, walking, and uncurled knuckles imply the protagonist has reverted to a previous state of existence, one that precedes dissociated subjecthood and invokes the feral kingdom of animalia. Even his capacity to narrate as such, which might signal the survival of a subjective quality akin to the shouting, outing subject of just a few chapters prior but on a much smaller scale, quickly dissipates. In a haunting way, the novel closes with the dissolution of words themselves: "Upright, upright," I say, I slur, I vow" (125). As if signaling one final reorientation—this time, away from men as radical subjects of desire and towards humans in vague overtures of approximation, not even identity—Torres' narrative ends at the exact moment the very presence of protagonizing subjecthood ends as well.

A shift beyond the realm of individual, speaking subjecthood hardly signals an end to the critical interpretation Torres' novel makes possible. If anything, it opens the door to a vast, generative wilderness that, in turn, enacts a form of subjectless queer critique against majoritarian structures. While the language of wildness and wilderness is not only explicit and ubiquitous throughout *We the Animals*, as the title clearly signals, it is also the means through which the final scene underscores the rigid limitations to suturing sexual difference with racial difference in an era of colorblind dissociation. Drawing similar inspiration from a children's book that also mediates on monstrous animality, theorist Jack Halberstam develops a critical framework of wildness in his *Wild*

Things: The Disorder of Desire (2020). Acknowledging (as I have) the racist elision of animal and ethnoracial subjectivity alongside the more anti-normative wildness of queerness, Halberstam affirms that, "While the arc of modern queer histories has bent toward legibility, recognition, maturity, and mutuality, wild bodies plot a different course through history and appear only at the very edge of definition, flickering in and out of meaning and sense and tending toward bewilderment" (14). Inhabiting the edge through flickers and a sense of towardness, for Halberstam, are component of uncharted potentiality: "Bewilderment, furthermore, as a form of lostness and unknowing, is not a politically charged statement about being and knowing; it is simply the space rendered by the absence of meaning and direction."

Halberstam's embrace of the wild can be read as a provocative move beyond the very ontological frames typically structuring the histories of queer and ethnoracial subjects. After all, if wildness lies precisely on the edge of definition, then the frames of legibility, recognition, and development (which culminate in maturity and mutuality, as he names them) will forever be reductive paradigms incapable of appreciating, approximating, and perhaps apprehending the intensities of experiences that flicker between and beyond significance and signification. He makes a case for a sustained engagement with the absence of meaning and direction, where meaning and direction are epistemological dimensions prescribed by the aforementioned impositions of interpellation. While this model of being and knowing leans into the abstract unknowability of the wild as if it were a line of flight, it also lends itself to be linked to a colorblind, homonormative US contemporary where legibility, recognition, and development have always already failed at registering both the domestication of race and

sex through interdictions of race, sex, gender, and interraciality, but also, by contrast, its wild iterations in queerness and brownness. As such, the wildness of Torres' novel expands far beyond recurring metaphors to animals, beasts, and birds. It operates as the fleeting encounters with normative models of being that fail to reflect, recognize, and sustain the narrator. Seen this way, the wildness of being is queer and Latinx and the wilderness is its literatures.

There is a wildness of having one's racial positionality (and by extension, relationship to the world) begin in illegibility and remain there by the non-recognition of its very illegibility. There is also a wildness in navigating these racial impossibilities through the substance of gender and sexuality. The frame of wildness, then, lays bare not only the oppressive conditions that disrupt, antagonize, and undo the creation of certain ethnoracial, sexed subjects, but also the interpretative need to engage flickers, directions, and absences. Although wildness has long existed, its engagement in critical, interpretative paradigms has not, such that the scene of contested racialization and sexual intimacy opening this chapter—Piri Thomas' encounter with the white prostitute, which directly inverted recognition, readability, and mutuality—was immediately reterritorialized into the originary frameworks of a US black-white racial dichotomy. To be clear, I am not suggesting Thomas' embrace of the identitarian position of "nigger" and "black man" is a failure of any kind, especially given the way blackness, as Claudia Milian writes, gets quickly written out of Latinidad as a "panethnic space," despite the very substance of Latinx subjectivity being "constituted in relation to blackness, brownness, and dark brownness" (15). However, I am suggesting that encouraging the white prostitute to recognize how blackness coexists with, in, and alongside brownness,

though a more difficult task that surely exceeded Thomas' capabilities in the moment, would have enacted a different type of psycho-sexual revenge by upending more significantly the racial binary subtending the prostitute's and most everyone else's very conceptions of self.

We might historicize Thomas' eschewing of Halberstam's wildness by turning to the legal accounts of similarly inter-raced sexual encounters, namely the 1948 California Supreme Court Case *Pérez v. Sharp*. Predating *Virginia v. Loving* (1967) by nineteen years, the case struck an important blow to the anti-miscegenation statues found in most places of the country. In this way, it hinges on the imbrication of race and sex at the heart of Thomas' charged scene with the prostitute. An unforeseen consequence of its final ruling, however, aligns less with Thomas and more with Torres: just as the institutionalization of the (self-)destructive protagonist fails to render legible his racial and sexual positionalities, so does *Pérez v. Sharp* mark a failure of legal institutions in reading race. The case centered on the marriage of Andrea Pérez, a woman seen as white in the eyes of the law, to Sylvester Davis, a black man. According to legal scholar Robin A. Lenhardt (2006), California was one of thirty states with anti-miscegenation laws when Pérez and Davis were denied their marriage license. Unlike many states in the South, however, where these laws upheld black-white binaries, lawmakers in California "used legislation to assuage the white public's fears about the influx of Chinese, Japanese, and Filipino workers" (350). This focus on anti-Asian racism evidently obscured the legal standing of proto-Latinx Mexican-American subjects like Pérez, though: "From a legal perspective, therefore, it was irrelevant that Andrea strongly identified as Mexican, and, as a mestiza, could not easily be mistaken for white. Still, she

was surprised when the county clerk concluded that she was legally white and therefore barred from marrying Sylvester" (348).

When the case was decided on October 1, 1948 in favor of Pérez and Davis, it was on the grounds that "the essence of the right to marry is freedom to join in marriage with the person of one's choice, [and the] segregation statute for marriage necessarily impairs the right to marry" (360). Lenhardt is quick to point out how this liberal language of choice returns some decades later as gay activists looked for legal precedents to legalizing gay marriage, since both demonstrate how, "by restricting intimate choice, identity-based restrictions on civil marriage improperly limit self-definition efforts, cabin expressions of human identity and intimacy, and have a negative impact on the ability of those affected to 'belong' as full members of the citizenry or broader community in which they reside" (2008: 846). While the resurfacing of critical attention to *Pérez v. Sharp* is linked to this more recent activism and further braids the sociolegal engagements with miscegenation and incest and race and sex, it overlooks the defense's reliance on Catholic matrimony in winning their case: if the church doesn't bar interracial marriage, why should the court? Deploying one conservative institution to overturn another and notably lacking "the tremendous legal and moral momentum created by the civil rights strategy" (368), *Pérez v. Sharp* continues to be outshined by cases like *Loving v. Virginia* for neither enacting change on a federal level nor explicitly dismantling systematic racism.

The case's obscurity (as well as its intrigue) likely also stems from the fact that, for a contemporary critic, its legalization of interracial marriage was predicated on the misreading of a Latina subject whose Latinidad, in the moment, was illegible. (I apply the

term Latina to Pérez anachronistically to call attention to a racial position of non-whiteness now widely recognized within US contexts.) While critical race scholarship has clarified the long history of sociolegal practices that left Mexican-American, as Lupe Salinas writes, "legally white and socially brown" subjects (15), the court's inability to recognize Pérez's racial position as anything other than white further recasts the supposedly liberating consequence of the case's final decision. By this I mean that the court's refusal to determine the race of love objects a subject might take ultimately enacted the determination of the race of the loving subject herself. Desire, then, laying bare processes of identification, is complicated in this moment (prior to the Chicano and Nuyorican Cultural Movements of the sixties and seventies) by a lack of Latinx for Pérez to identify with. Whiteness fills this identificatory gap and requires Pérez to be white, which confirms the initial illegality of her marriage to Davis. In this sense, the very first legal moment of marriage deregulation actually worked to inscribe colorblind violence towards brown subjects. While the constitutional right to choose the race of one's lover is affirmed by *Pérez v. Sharp*'s outcome, it also establishes the legal precedent for the loving subject to be interpellated into normative structures of identification prior to allowing or disallowing their right to choose their love object.

Conclusion: The Latinx Slurring Subject and Beyond

We might appreciate anew the complexities facing Torres' protagonist (as a contemporary subject of colorblindness) given the identificatory precedent established by the legal practices in *Pérez v. Sharp*. While the case epitomizes the seeing of racial difference to overturn racist interdictions on interracial marriage, it does so by refusing to

elaborate US racial vocabularies beyond blackness and whiteness—recall Thomas' self-proclamation of blackness. Although the Cultural Movements of the 1960s and 1970s refused that refusal and meaningfully secured a place for brownness within our cultural and political imaginaries, colorblindness soon sought to remove it yet again, truncating the legibility of any racial position beyond the binary. After all, the text narrates the trajectory of a subject who emerges in self-same collectivity, confronts the psychic and social divisions of race and sex, struggles for singularity and the speech and futurity it promises, and then comes undone before the weight of social institutions in their literal and familial senses.

While the parallels to Latinx subjectivity historically are visible, I do not intend to backread the sociopolitical development of Latinx within Torres' novel. Instead, I intend to anxiously anticipate the future developments of Latinx Torres' novel occasions us to confront: namely, how to structure Latinx Studies without a whole, speaking Latinx subject, given the perpetual failure of brownness and queerness in reterritorializing from the wild. This is less a thought experiment and more a recognition of the urgent fallouts of racial colorblindness, mainstreaming queerness, a generation of psychically dissociated subjects, and the increasing commodification of Latinx subjects, writers, and texts. If these processes work in tandem and compound each other at every turn, then we are facing a future where the collectives of explicitly racialized Latinxs and the narratives they produce are not legible as Latinx given the invisibility of race, racism, and racialization. What's more, if queerness and sexual deviancy are occupying ground in mainstream conversations surrounding social difference, and if the consequences of this are less liberatory than normalizing, then queer Latinx subjects and their literatures also

do not present with assuring longevity a critical potential able to name and indict capitalist modes of incorporation and normalization.

In brief, I am arguing for critical Latinx Studies to ease its grip on the frame of subjecthood itself, following Torres' protagonist as he slurs on all fours, unmooring paradigms from speaking subjects on two legs. In gesturing towards a subjectless Latinx Studies, I am not advocating for the disavowal of subjectivity, or the components such as racialization, gender, and sexuality that work on the subject. Instead, I am transposing a model from queer studies that looks to the forces of normalization and pathologization, of incorporation and exclusion, of creation and destruction to affirm that, while the impacts of racial colorblindness, homonormativity, and neoliberalism appear on the subject, they work in ways that precede and circumvent the subject so as to make the very frame of subjectivity corrupted beforehand. It is the focus of the following three chapters to extend, explore, and problematize this argument, seeking to hold on to the significance of slurs and the novel orientations that emerge from peacocks and lions, illegibly racialized subjects, and nonnormative social positions.

In other words, by insisting on the centrality of Latinx subjectivity, contemporary critique might very well be subscribing to a metric of existence based in explicit race that, for example, obscures the ways in which the racial colorblindness of recent years is ushering in changes on, edits to, and reformulations of the very nature of race. Similarly, if in response to the recent proliferation of queer characters, themes, and narratives in Latinx literature is the adherence to queer subjectivity, critical paradigms run the same risk of reinstating and propagating normative rubrics of who and what is queer. Neither these nor other subjective components and qualities promise to remain beyond the reach

of commodification and cooptation. What remains are the flickers, directions, and bewilderment of feeling.

CHAPTER 2: When Race Becomes Ink
Beyond an Aesthetics of Documentation in Salvador Plascencia's *The People of Paper* (2005)

Introduction

In his essay titled "Is the Post- in Post-racial the Blind in Colorblind?" (2011), critical race scholar Ian Haney López traces a genealogy of US racial politics from the pre-Civil Rights era to the Obama administration. As the law critic reminds us, colorblindness, which solidified during the Nixon and Ford administrations, "involves opposing every express use of race [and] entails upholding as 'not-racism' gross racial disparities corresponding directly to longstanding racial hierarchies" (816), effectively muting race and explaining disparity through cultural difference. Engaging most specifically the impact of these policies and practices on black subjects in the US, Haney López identifies the prison industrial complex as the contemporary institution par excellence that enacts racist violence in the name of lawfulness, claiming to be blind to, even beyond the consideration of, racial difference all the while. Looking within Latinx Studies for a correlation to this formulation, we might affirm that border detentions and deportations are the 'unraced' means of controlling Latinx subjects. A series of practices intensified in recent decades, detention and deportation enact a similarly targeted racialized violence in a similarly deracialized way. If mass incarceration works to uphold the law, then the control of Latinx subjects at the border and beyond operates under a framework of citizenship. While conversations in Latinx Studies regarding citizenship are extensive such that providing an exhaustive account would exceed the scope of this present chapter's aims, the mutation of racial difference and racist violence to a question

of citizenry and documentation are major discursive shifts that hold consequences for Latinx political projects and ones of literary representation.

As such, it is the central focus of this chapter to trace how race becomes documentation, or how melanin becomes ink. To do so, I study contemporary iterations of documentation in Latinx literature that, through avant-guard literary forms, render visible both muted race and mooted racism reborn as the debate on undocumented immigration. Salvador Plascencia's *The People of Paper* (2005), the novel at this chapter's core, hyperbolizes the political dimension of documentation to demonstrate both the correlation between documents and subjectivity and its problematic inverse, but also the aesthetic dimension to show how Latinx projects of literary representation have evolved alongside the advent of colorblindness and post-racialism. I show how unmooring from the realist tendencies of earlier Latinx literature inaugurates an aesthetics of colorblindness, or a generative formal paradigm that exceeds colorblind interdictions on race and racism to apprehend and inscribe them in form and feeling. If the previous chapter explored the subtleties of pronouns, animal metaphors, and texture as Justin Torres' aesthetic strategy, this chapter demonstrates how exaggerated formal play—what I will call thickening the aesthetic frame—like holes cut from pages, fadeaways, cross-outs, and more, affirms the existence of race and racism through and beyond mainstream discourses of having papers, thereby destabilizing colorblindness' insistence on documents and a Latinx literary tradition's reliance on documentation as he marks, through metafictional play, a new period of Latinx literature that has been called the MFA (Master of Fine Arts) Generation. At the same time, however, by establishing a spectrum of subjectivity rooted in paperhood on one end and personhood on the other (as

the title implies), the novel underscores how proximity to paper (and in that way, documentation) problematically animates beings from objects to subjects, eliding and exaggerating the relation between skin pigment and ink. Marked by formal innovation, literary irreverence, meta-awareness, and pervasive feeling, *The People of Paper* shows how projects of Latinx representation must renegotiate their relationships to forms of race, literary language, and the political work of anti-racism.

Celebrated for these stylistic and formal innovations, Plascencia's debut novel draws from postmodernist, speculative, and magical realist aesthetics to present a captivating retelling of tropes not unfamiliar to contemporary readers: a migrant crossing from Mexico into California in search of work, a writer struggling with the fictitious worlds he is creating, a broken heart mourning lost love. The ways in which these narratives are woven together are at once inventive and new; Plascencia stretches literary form to its limits to explore how literary production captures, sustains, and erases profoundly human experiences. At one particular moment in the text, the novel's fictitious financial backers issue a disclaimer that effectively encapsulates the driving narrative forces at play:

> The Foundation and its endowments are not liable for any loss or damage, whether it be incidental, direct, punitive, exemplary, or special, resulting from *The People of Paper*, the war on omniscient narration (a.k.a. the war against the commodification of sadness), or any involvement with this book. This is inclusive of all paper cuts, whether incurred on fingers or tongues. (218)

In what could also read as a moment of self-branding, here *The People of Paper*'s main axes are articulated: the characters are most actively engaged in literally and figuratively fighting these battles. Though the war on omniscient narration and the war against the commodification of sadness diverge, overlap, and meld together at different times in

different ways, one emphasizes struggles inherent to literary production, representation, and form—who tells the story, whose story is told and how—while the other centralizes affective states and their problematics—what is felt, how is it expressed. A central conceit in the novel, too, is the quote's allusion to text meeting flesh and ink mixing with blood, affirming the book's constant tension surrounding the limits of subjectivity, objects, and personhood: where do people end and where do people of paper begin?

While Plascencia engages other minor themes, structuring the text is experimentation on the contours of subjectivity, enacted through the wars revolving around narration and sadness. Narrated by the personified and hyper-vigilant planet Saturn, we follow Federico de la Fe and his daughter Little Merced from Las Tortugas, Mexico, to one of two dominant narrative spaces—El Monte, California. Saturn goes beyond mere narrator, though, ultimately having caused Federico's loneliness: "Saturn drove [Federico's wife] away, just so that there would be this story" (95). After joining a gang of migrant flower pickers called the El Monte Flores gang (EMF), Federico rallies El Monte to wage war against Saturn—"one of the greatest wars against tyranny…a war against the future of this story" (46). In a turn of metafiction collapsing author and protagonist, we come to realize Saturn and Sal Plascencia are one and the same. Donning the planetary pseudonym when narrating Federico's story in a messy Upstate New York apartment (the other dominant narrative place), Sal is mourning his own loss after being left by his girlfriend Liz. Notably, the characters' names already cue a sort of affective reading: Saturn is as gloomy as his saturnine name implies, Federico de la Fe hopelessly clings to a self-afflicting faith. The two protagonists and their narratives intersect in time

and space as each brawls to gain control of the storytelling and searches for the solitude to mend their broken hearts.

Moving a step beyond these conflicts and the particularities of each side's motivations for fighting is ultimately a question that hinges on how subjects represent and are represented. While this might appear like a conventional narrative component, I argue that the text occasions an engagement with a representative crisis brought about by colorblindness. Afterall, the conditions of silencing race and instantiating documentation disappear already dangerously illegible ethnoracial subjects, recalling here the larger literary and legal histories traced in the previous chapter. Thus removed, what is put in their place is a series of documents and papers, leaving documented subjects raceless and racialized subjects undocumented and undocumentable as such. Confronted by dynamics that his Latinx literary predecessors were not, Plascencia, I argue, responds by appropriating the conundrum, leaning into it with a finessed exaggeration, to underscore the absurdity of both racelessness and documentation. To that end, in the pages that follow, I expand upon and depart from existing scholarship to read Plascencia's novel as an example of an aesthetics of colorblindness. Given *The People of Papers*'s extreme formal novelty in comparison to the other texts of my corpus, I dedicate more attention in this chapter to the devices, logics, and outcomes offered by irreverent literary structure narrating during an age of colorblind dissociation.

I begin by demonstrating how the novel itself orients readers to rendering colorblindness analyzable through references to an invented avant-guard intertext, one marked by the presence of absence, the work of conversion, and an eye to the procedural, phenomena that come to illuminate race where there appears to be none. I then bring

these phenomena to bear on a specific character—Merced de Papel—whose existence is sustained by her extreme documentation as she is made of paper, ultimately reading race where there appears to be only ink. Following that section, I show how race appears elsewhere in the text, namely in the structures of sexist and misogynistic interactions between the tyrannical and depressed narrator and his ex-girlfriend. I do not take the emergence of a gendered language with a racialized structure to be coincidental; rather, I suggest that the narrator mediates his racially dissociated psyche through injured masculinity in a way not dissimilar to Torres' protagonist mediating racial difference through sexual identity and gendered texture. This chapter then turns to consider what a Latinx literary project might look like beyond practices of documenting and, by extension, documentation, before concluding with a brief discussion of how literary critique might better respond to the novelties both Plascencia's text and a colorblind contemporary occasion.

An Aesthetics of Colorblindness; Or, Thickening the Aesthetic Frame

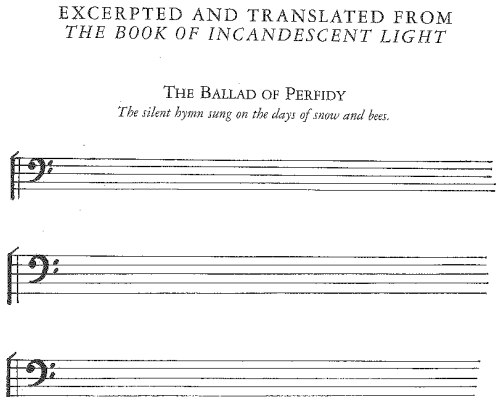
Latinx literature and scholarship has long interrogated the perverse politics of documentation that targets racially and economically precarious communities and individuals in the US. Curiously, this work is often articulated through a praxis of documentation. As critic Richard T. Rodríguez has noted, many canonical Chicano novels of the 1960s and 1970s enact an aesthetics of politics that draws forth through realism "an anti-assimilative and communally empowering literary chronicle" (60), where both the reasons against assimilation and the factors constituting the collective are racism and shared ethnoracial difference, respectively. As scholars Elena Machado Sáez

and Raphael Dalleo affirm, the founding figures of Latinx literature wielded both pen and sword, so to speak, committed to political activism in a way that left their successors appearing as "sell outs" (7). While the results of these projects are irrefutably invaluable and still emerging, their critical, generative practices rooted in forming racial coalition against racist violence are challenged by contemporary racial politics of colorblindness. After all, if race has been removed from legal and social discourse, and if racial violence and oppression are supposedly individual instead of systemic if not resolved altogether, what remains of the ethnoracialized subject? How must representation evolve or shift to capture the persistent presence of supposedly absent race? What does an innovative aesthetics of (un)documenting do to a broken politics of documentation?

In this section, and through a series of close readings of Plascencia's novel, I show how unmooring from realist tendencies of earlier Latinx literature inaugurates an aesthetics paradigm less invested in documentation and more invested in making sense of what is beyond documentable. While this theorization will eventually link to finding race in what is seemingly a colorblind aesthetics, it first engages Plascencia's melodramatically named, frequently cited intertext *The Book of Incandescent Light*. Both experimental and innovative, *The Book* excerpts that appear throughout the novel epitomize absence, conversion, and process, phenomena that are underemphasized if not left out entirely of canonical Latinx texts set on affirming presence, bearing direct witness, and substantiating outcome. I will come to call Plascencia's tactic one that thickens the aesthetic frame, and in doing so, enacts a generative estrangement that guides the critic towards making sense of the potent inscriptions of the feelings the novel contains. Soon, these feelings will be directly tied to the experiences of race, racism, and

racial difference the novel contains, ones a superficial reading and colorblind demand would deny and disavow. In its essence, this section rehearses the major structural moves that an aesthetics of colorblindness enacts without directly weighing in on these racial dimensions, the ones that are discussed in subsequent sections of this chapter.

A notable exercise in imbuing form with feeling appears with an excerpt from the novel's fictitious, overly pious intertext *The Book of Incandescent Light.* Constituting the entirety of a chapter, the excerpt signals a complete deviation from anticipated narrative form: the chapter presents three musical staves in Bass clef, devoid of notation, meter, and stylistic instruction. Appearing under the title "The Ballad of Perfidy: The silent hymn sung on the days of snow and bees" (179), the excerpt and translation of *The Book of Incandescent Light* fills the page with wordless reverberations. It appears as follows:



(179)

Paradoxical at first glance for invoking sound that operates through silence, the music-less music presents the reader with an opening up into both visual and aural realms of experientiality instead of capturing in signification. Though "The Ballad of Perfidy" carries heavy insinuations as to the impetuses fueling the confounding song, the allusions to betrayal, deceit, and untrustworthiness the title invokes color the sadness associated with this excerpt of *The Book of Incandescent Light* beyond mere sadness, shifting it into

a realm of inexpressible un-representability. Not only does this association add an unarticulated but palpably gendered component to the song's title within the larger scope of whom the novel presents as heartbroken (making the perfidy female), that the staff is voiced for a bass or tenor primes a male agent to be the implied subject most directly engaged with the music.

In a plot-specific way, the structures of the hymn recast the agents and actions of the novel's war against sadness in an aesthetic register drastically removed from referentiality, realism, or even linear modes of fictitious narration. Subtle references paint the omniscient narrator Saturn as the singer bursting with noise and feeling, yet unable to make it legible or audible, while the girlfriend that left him is the painful muse. In fact, the subtitle's mentioning of snow and bees confirms that Saturn's Upstate New York heartbrokenness (instead of Federico de la Fe's California sadness) benefits from the Ballad's wordless complexity. What's more, that the Ballad is classified as a hymn invokes a genre of music stemming from adoration and religiosity, alluding to an agent that will come to occupy a position both revered and vilified—the source of paradoxically praiseworthy perfidy. All in all, when charting intensities along these trajectories of complicated, multimodal expression, that they originate from an implied heartbroken male towards a loved-hated (presumably) female ultimately breathes complexity, drama, and beyond-the-page movement into the presentation of Saturn.

While these textual details are essential in ultimately linking The Ballad to the larger narrative, it also encapsulates a major contradiction stretched across what exists in feeling and what can be expressed in language or sound. Not only does the genre of this example shift modes of expression from signification to musical notation, but it frustrates

even a musical analysis and any readerly expectations for readily accessible and legible meaning. Although the title and subtitle facilitate the synchronic establishment of a context—Sal is conjuring through intertextual reference to an invented intertext a scene of lost love—the example ultimately signals a representative limit of the novel (as a literary form) itself: one might be capable of gesturing to the feelings of heartbreak, but the referents of heartbreak—the spectrum of sensations experienced with and through lost love—will always exceed their signifiers even as they are signified. This profoundly sentimental and aesthetic affirmation, however, is not without its political dimensions. After all, the very nature of race as a lived, experienced phenomenon that is denied articulation and utterance is not only structurally embedded in The Ballad. It also prefigures the racialized interpersonal dynamics of the novel's central relationships, dimensions I explore in more detail in later sections. Bringing the racial politics of heartbreak to bear on the forms deracialized heartbreak assumes within Plascencia's novel reterritorializes this reading in the contemporary political paradigms Haney López discusses at this chapter's onset. In this way, the complexity of expressing lost love is augmented and compounded when its racial components have been deemed similarly inexpressible.

Indeed, I am not the first to signal the politics of race associated with narratives of loss within Latinx Studies. Scholar Joshua Guzmán engages these intersections directly in his "Beside oneself: Queer psychoanalysis and the aesthetics of Latinidad" (2019), writing on what he calls a "poetics of loss, which seems timely since the field of Latino Studies has recently yielded two monographs that either explicitly or implicitly address the politics of loss" (173). Synthesizing works by Antonio Viego (2007) and Cristina

Beltrán (2010), Guzmán affirms that "loss and dissensus articulate what Latinidad does to the political landscape and, in effect, embodies in the psychic life of the Latino subject" (172). A Latinx psychic life of loss, for Guzmán, is an impossible desire for whiteness and the wholeness and mastery it might promise, a drive to "plug the lack that sustains the inter-subjective relations of race" (183). A fraught relationship with whiteness, which, for US Latinx subjects, results from lived or inherited displacement or hemispheric migration, is not only a principal force in shaping Latinx subjectivity through lack and want. It is the phenomenon that, through uneven yet persistent racialization, adds sociohistorical specificity to the experiences and conditions of losing constitutive of Latinx as indicated by the previous section's discussion of the extensive history of legal ambivalence in regard to Latinx subjects' racial positioning.

In this sense, the urgency behind finding viable modes of expression or narration for profound experiences and feelings of loss is not just about gaining sympathy or penning a breakup story and its rebounds. It becomes a representational challenge to find the means and manners by which to recount the emerging terms of relationality as the substance of race—that which configures loss within Latinidad—is prohibited for subjects seeking to remain subjects, with the animacy, history, and agency it entails. If Chapter One provided the historical account for this difficulty, the present chapter engages its representational, indeed formal, complexities. The fictionality of the recurrent, avant-guard intertext *The Book of Incandescent Light*, then, gains historical explanation: the representational strategies of previous Latinx generations and periods, noted for their reliance on and deployment of specifically racialized language to organize collectives and indict racist oppression, are no longer viable references for Plascencia's

writer. He must forge out of fantasy a new text with which to sustain dialogue, one that continues to look beyond established modes of narration, creating his own didactic interlocutor for charting and informing the navigation of a colorblind contemporary.

Plascencia invents the backstory to *The Book*, too, as other secondary characters make reference to it, as if it were a longstanding cultural reference. By doing so, its inclusions inscribe other structural shifts that encode the machinations of colorblindness, in addition to finding presence in apparent absence, as The Ballad shows above. In one moment, the affectively named Smiley, a member of the EMF flower picker gang who has always had an affinity for Saturn, cites *The Book of Incandescent Light* into his field journal of observations and conversions. While this journal briefly appears to enrich Smiley's characterization, the table he has drawn up in it, which constitutes the entirety of the chapter, introduces a layer of objectivity to acts of literary transformation. By suturing historical and fictional material through mathematical equations seemingly gleaned from his fieldwork, we gain insight into the processes of transmutation. The chapter appears as such:

METRIC CONVERSIONS
(*from the Good Book, New Testament*)

2.482 liters of water	=	1 gallon of wine
68 oz. of baked dough	=	30 baskets of bread
1 can of salted anchovies	=	3 nets full of fish
the death of Lazarus	=	a short nap
1 lost unhinged halo	=	300 acres of scorched forest

(*from* The Book of Incandescent Light)

a smile (gap between teeth)	=	how he remembers her
mornings waking in her bed	=	happiness
grandmother's knitted blanket, crackling turntable, two prophylactics	=	first love
½ bruised butt	=	Sana, sana, colita de rana

two bags of Susan B. Anthony dollars and a wad of two-dollar bills	=	her savings account
16 inches of snow	=	sadness
round-trip ticket (NY to LA)	=	failed mission
a girl with stings on her arms	=	redemption
a novel	=	the apology
a phone call in which she says: I don't want this book to ruin my life	=	It won't, he says

(193-194)

The proximity of the New Testament with *The Book of Incandescent Light* not only juxtaposes different moments in time and defines both intertexts through comparison: if one catalogues events that defy natural laws of science and death, then the other chronicles similarly law-defying love and loss as it recasts the other with overly specific numbers and irreverent science. The chart, however, also plays with the notion of conversion as it moves across literal and symbolic planes: water does not turn to wine, a blanket, records, and condoms do not result in love, and sixteen inches of snow do not equate to sadness. Smiley's conversions, however, affirm the equality of these disparate, uneven items, renegotiating the symbolic value between objects, proximities, and actions and their correlating affects and experiences where death is a nap, mornings together are happiness, and snow is indeed sadness. In this sense, the novel is telling us that its inscription of experiences and conditions far exceeds the content deemed permissible by and chronicled through the language made available to contemporary ethnoracialized subjects. In other words, by emphasizing conversion and transmutation, we come to see the novel theorizing its own engagement with racial difference, converted beyond language and content and transmuted into feelingful structure. Just as The Ballad had a textual anchoring, so does the chart: at the same time Sal's lost love assumes biblical

proportions—his relationship with Liz was akin to bringing Lazarus back from the dead, her smile like the marvel of the loaves and fishes, her departure like crucifixion—we see how exaggerated narrative forms are primed to inscribe inarticulable content.

My reading of contradictorily silent music and a conversion table that renders snow sadness and a novel with an apologetic act calls to mind the work of Latin American scholar Eugenio Claudio Di Stefano. In *The Vanishing Frame: Latin American Culture and Theory in the Postdictatorial Era* (2018), he questions how post-dictatorship human rights discourses of the Southern Cone minimize formal extravagance to more effectively create an affective (traumatic, and therefore impactful) resonance with readership. He writes that "[Certain] texts demand that the aesthetic frame vanish in order to better mobilize a politics of experience" (12). By minimizing the literariness of an object recounting the horrors of 1960s and 1970s dictatorships, audiences are exposed to re-enacted violence and implicated in human rights movements, if only affectively, but ideally politically, socially, and financially. With the act of vanishing comes an increasingly mimetic construction, but also a blindness to the factors that shaped the dictatorial regimes—economic inequality, as Di Stefano sees it.

Transposing this outlook to a contemporary context of Latinx Letters calls into question the affective potentials of an augmented Latinx aesthetic such as Plascencia's. When Di Stefano signals how dominant conceptions of politically motivating works have assumed a specific form through the concretization of genre, he also opens up space to ponder what capabilities literary works assume when they respond to changes in racial paradigms that require the rejection of formal expectations subtending genre and tradition. As my reading of *The Book of Incandescent Light* demonstrates, and as I will

continue to argue throughout this chapter, resisting the vanishing of an aesthetic frame by enacting the opposite—by thickening it—widens the range of literary recourses capable of indexing experiences that are fundamentally felt and sensed but unable to be articulated. Although Di Stefano's project leads towards a Marxist reorientation of Human Rights discourses in post-dictatorial Latin America, and despite his emphasis on the affects a text engenders as opposed to encodes, I invoke the model of thick aesthetics to explain and subtend my interpretation of literary forms and literary affectivity. In short, it makes plain Latinx literature's inability to index feelings of loss within traditional narrative forms, where loss is directly linked to race given its contemporary muting. What's more, it further underscores the importance of reading the innovative texts of my larger project's corpus.

We see similarities in moments that do not come from *The Book of Incandescent Light*, although they appear with less frequency. Visually striking at first glance, the following example shows Saturn trying to write the perfect sentence for his lost muse, Liz:

> Without you there is nothing, not even drizzle.
> ~~Without you there is nothing, not even drizzle~~.
> I will build you bookshelves like you always wanted.
> ~~I will build you bookshelves like you always wanted~~.
> Missing you is worse than Pittsburgh.
> ~~Missing you is worse than Pittsburgh~~.
> I will wash my foreskin every day. (110)

On a textual plane, one easily reads Saturn's dramatic melancholia: he misses Liz, without her there is nothing. While this is clearly the case, the organization of text on the page begs a closer reading beyond the emotions the words themselves transmit. For instance, the appearance of the sentences in list form already identifies writing as a

certain procedural activity in which Saturn engages to express himself to himself (there is no exchange of dialogue here.) The repetition very evidently caught up in this process implies his writing is not immediately fruitful, but instead serves as an outlet, a discharge of thoughts, because he lacks other desired outlets. In other words, he must write for himself no matter how unproductive and imperfect his creation, because Liz, the intended audience, is no longer accessible. Though she's not explicitly mentioned in this fragment, these structures hint to her presence beneath the surface of Saturn's words—a painfully absent presence often unspeakably complex. Also involved in this process is the repeatedly failing drive for perfection. The slashed sentences evidence this, moving Saturn's affective state in the direction of self-destruction—he himself sets the unattainable goal of perfection and ensures its unattainability (the reader would certainly not be able to determine what a perfect sentence is in Saturn's eyes). What compounds the severity of this self-defeatism, though, is the temporality encoded in the excerpt: the manner in which he writes a sentence, destroys it, writes another, destroys it, and so on indexes a significant passage of time (significant enough, that is, to allow four divergent thoughts to be hand-written and undone.) While also offering a glance into the editing process inherent to the creation of literary texts, the drawn-out insistence directed towards a lost past colors Saturn's emotional experiences beyond what he declared them to be—that is, beyond mere missing.

Only the reader, however, is granted the viewpoint that can take this into account; Saturn's page must look like a series of three crossed-out failures. The importance of keeping this in mind is twofold: on the one hand, it makes clear the reader's participation in a wider-framed perspective, one that nudges us into recognizing our own role in

consuming a cultural product that has been constructed. On the other hand, it foregrounds Saturn's end-product view—a page of scribbles that ends with the promise to wash his foreskin. It is the combination of these two vantage points—ours and Saturn's—that insists on reckoning with the procedural dimensions to thickening aesthetics. By visualizing, in the most literal ways, the act of deviating from conventional narrative form, we not only comprehend the relationship between feelings that exceed signified expression and the structures that appear on the page. We also expand and attune our critical-analytical frameworks towards the literary and political impact of absence, conversion, and procedure. This quote in particular also leaves the reader pondering the correlation between "the perfect sentence" and the vow to clean genitals: is that perfection, or a tacit confession of feeling emasculated? With the introduction of this ambiguous affective component unresolved in this fragment, we begin to see the complex relationship that connects unspeakably racialized loss to speakable notions of manhood, femininity, and gendered betrayal and heartbreak.

In this way, these formal novelties function both as a sympathetic summation of Saturn's experiences in the novel, condensed and converted across time, space, and sentiment at the same time they reflect formal decisions to narrate without sentences or paragraphs, and as exercises in thick aesthetics and careful interpretation. As such, building a fictitious world through fictional intertexts could be read as a larger formal decision that responds to colorblind prohibitions to inscribe feelings of race, gender, and sexuality elsewhere. This, in many ways, marks a shift in Latinx aesthetics in that it leaves behind more testimonial registers for less mimetic, less realist ones. If testimony, as explained by Beverly in his now famous *Against Literature* (1993), makes it so "[w]e

are meant to experience as real both the speaker and the situations and events recounted" (73), then Plascencia has decidedly moved beyond the frame of testimony, beyond an aesthetics of politics rooted in documentation, instead forging a new aesthetic paradigm to correspond to the new contours of a colorblind US social fabric. Not grounded in any typical borderland, devoid of collectivity and its political potential, even eschewing words themselves, Sal's narratives within Plascencia's novel depart from standard narrative content and configuration precisely due to a thickened aesthetic frame in order to inaugurate new contours of being that (re)engage race, gender, affect, and form.

From Person to Paper, Melanin to Ink: Finding Race in Form

If the previous section takes what appears to be the least Latinx of Plascencia's novel—its exaggerated and irreverent narrative structures unmoored from an ethos of documentation—and argues for their centrality in encoding new representational logics, then this section transfers those logics to a more legibly racialized context while continuing to explore the relationship between form and feeling. As such, I lift from *The Book of Incandescent Light* the importance of absence, conversion, and procedure and apply them to the novel's most fantastical character Merced de Papel—a literal woman of paper, as her name implies. Folded into being by a runaway monk, Merced de Papel traverses space and time, accompanying other characters in bus rides across the border, in bedding and abandoning male lovers, and living a life of independence and self-sufficiency. In fact, it is the degree of this independence, compounded by her notable mobility, that distinguishes her from her flesh and blood counterparts, ones whose liveness in and of itself proved insufficient enough to grant them access to similar

agency, movement, and autonomy. As I will argue in this section, this disjunction between people and people of paper encapsulates the tenuous relationship between racial difference and documentation, seemingly distinct discursive phenomena linked through the work of absence, conversion, and procedure.

The reader will recall the genesis of Merced de Papel at the novel's onset in a myth of creation. In tones of religiosity and irreverence, we meet the origami surgeon Antonio who folds creatures into existence, despite the Vatican dictum that "there were to be no more people born of the ground or from the marrow of bones. All would be created from the propulsions and mounts performed underneath bedsheets" (11). Papal decrees aside and situating Antonio in a position of divine creator, the text's opening scene converges paper and flesh to present the reader with the law-defying (both natural and religious) capabilities of paper and ink: "Antonio split the spines of books, spilling leaves of Austen and Cervantes, sheets from Leviticus and Judges, all mixing with the paper of *The Book of Incandescent Light*. Then Antonio unrolled the wrapping paper and construction paper and began to cut at cardboard and then fold. She was the first to be created: cardboard legs, cellophane appendix, and paper breasts. Created not from the rib of man but from paper scraps" (15). Queering dominant scenes of both religious and literary creationism (Adam and Frankenstein's monster, respectively), the scene ends as the paper woman steps over Antonio's collapsed figure, walking into a raging thunderstorm while her toes turn to pulp.

When discussing this scene in his *Latinx Literature Unbound: Undoing Ethnic Expectation* (2018), Latinx scholar Ralph E. Rodriguez urges the critic to take stock of what is, in light of canonical Latinx literary practices, absent. He writes that "It should be

noted that in this allegory of the world-making there is nothing especially Latinx undertaken—not in theme, not in characterization, not in identity construction. Aside from a series of names that are Latinx, the prologue is characterized best as one about the nature of fiction" (62). While Rodriguez's project importantly signals for the need for a critical lens unbound from identity politics and more engaged with literary forms, the fantastical elision of flesh and paper documents determining the liveness of the paper woman appears to be a profoundly Latinx experience recast beyond the frames of realism. The very way in which Merced de Papel's existence defies nature and contradicts legal paradigms controlling the creation of subjects already cues what will remain central tensions in Plascencia's novel surrounding the potentiality of paper, the limits of personhood, and the literary representation of each. In short, the absence of any legible Latinx thematic signals its inscription beyond theme in a framework named by the titular conceit where personhood—existence—is determined by documentation. By applying the novel's own logic of refusing absence's nothingness, we see how Merced de Papel is primed to function as an engagement with a politics of migration, (un)documentation, and personhood.

Though one could argue all literary projects generate figures, peoples, and worlds from the pages of books, rarely do these figures traipse over the bodies of their creators to lead lives of their own; already we see in this woman of paper heightened capabilities despite and because of her refusal of objecthood. Exhibiting the autonomy and agency of a subject without losing her paper constitution, Merced de Papel appears and reappears throughout Plascencia's text, speaking in first-person, spoken about by other characters, and becoming the focus of narration for omniscient voices. Insisting on her personness is

important here insofar as it situates the notion of personhood beyond the biological, instead measured along social rubrics of interaction, movement, and feeling. On one such occasion, the reader sees how she intersects with Little Merced, Federico de la Fe's daughter. Musing about her papered namesake, Little Merced (the person) says of Merced de Papel (the person of paper, her documented doppelganger) that "She seemed sad. I looked at her newsprint arms [] and asked if I could touch her. I put my hand on her arm and gave it a slight squeeze, expecting it to crumple and collapse. It was warm and I could feel the blood climbing up the veins, into her fingers, and then racing back into her heart" (25). As if the paper woman's mobility and physical capacity, heightened in comparison to Antonio, did not grant her sentience enough, that Little Merced confirms warmth, the flowing of blood, and the presence of a heart undeniably positions Merced de Papel in a sphere of three-dimensional liveness. The metaphoricity of documentation here becomes more evident.

Merced de Papel's movement between paper object and living subject is frequently in flux, oftentimes pulled and pushed almost simultaneously by her very relationship to paper. In one moment, she comes to occupy a palimpsestic position after being used as a notepad by some of her many male lovers: "She peeled away every mark and scribble her lovers left, rarely saving any notes, grocery lists, and small reminders that men had written on her: pick up shirts from cleaners; dentist appointment 9:00 a.m.; milk, bread, cereal" (165). Used, here, instead of interacted with, the objectness of Merced's being is called to the foreground at the same time it is contested by her ability and devotion to peeling away the very marks that objectify her. At another point in the text, we learn that Merced herself wrote a book, an archive of her loves and losses: "As

with all people made of paper, there was no official record of Merced de Papel[.] Her history was on the lips of her lovers, the scars that parted their mouths. Merced de Papel was cautious of a legacy left in scar tissue, and for this reason she kept her own account, written on the scraps that she shed […] which she titled in her native Spanish: *Los Dolores y Amores de la Gente de Papel*" (198). Underlining the importance on past histories to uphold present existence, we encounter a similar paradox: that Merced leaves a host of paper-cut tongues in her wake affirms her subjecthood (enough, at least, to enter into carnal and emotional relationships with men), while the fact that her personal history is written on folios she has shed reminds us of her object-origin and condition.

The tension behind aligning Merced de Papel with paper or personhood remains unresolved as long as the obligation to do so persists. In other words, and referring back to *The Book of Incandescent Light*, there is no one-to-one conversion here that unequivocally renders folded paper human. The glide between these two poles that Merced de Papel exemplifies calls forth the work of queer theory scholar Mel Y. Chen. Drawing from their recent *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect* (2012), I center the concept of animacy as a framework particularly primed for conceptualizing existence that is both object and subject, both person and paper, and in that sense, situated on a spectrum of being. Rounding out the term that otherwise has no single standardized definition, Chen describes animacy and its utility as such: "Using animacy as a central construct, rather than, say 'life' or 'liveliness'—though these remain a critical part of the conversation in this book—helps us theorize current anxieties around the production of humanness in contemporary times[.] Animacy activates new theoretical formations that trouble and undo stubborn binary systems of difference, including

dynamism/stasis, life/death, subject/object, speech/nonspeech, human/animal, natural body/cyborg" (3). Evoking a continuum of animacy upon which different entities can be placed, Chen's work resonates with New Materialism's affirmation that life and matter are different in degree, not kind. While animacy "as a quality of agency, awareness, mobility, and liveness" (2) is what moves entities along this continuum, Chen also importantly signals affect's role in triangulating subject/object, live/dead, dynamic/static binaries; with animacy, these dichotomies must shift to include that which elides, collapses, and explodes categorical distinctions. Reading Aristotle and discussing the affect of a vegetable, Chen names as "viable considerations" (4) said vegetable's capacity to animate itself, to affect outside itself, and to receive other affects. Affects then, as intensities that move between and among various entities, become unmoored from their connections to sentimental and emotional anchorings to determine, decide, and define the very contours of being—queering, if you will, the terms of relationality and the delineations of the agents involved. In this way, the language of animacy replaces the language of subjectivity, given how colorblindness and racial dissociation transmute, splice, and split the subject beyond the realm of subjectivity as such.

The conversion pressuring Merced de Papel, then, is not in relation to her essence: the lens of animacy delinks us from the need to cleanly interpellate her within realms of flesh and reality or paperdom and fiction (especially since the metafictional poetics of Plascencia's text undermines these distinctions.) What has been converted is instead a dimension of Merced de Papel, namely, her racial difference into documentation, or melanin into ink. In this sense, we find ourselves before a literary character whose law defying (both natural and juridical) creation and existence is sustained by incorporation

into normative social life precisely because of her extreme documented nature. This is, as the text presents it, due to her insertion into and maintenance of a mainstream political paradigm that similarly converts racial different into a question of papers, one that deracializes profoundly racialized systems, phenomena, and subjects. Neither upholding nor eschewing altogether the metaphorical relation between race and ink, Merced de Papel embodies colorblindness by turning race into ink, by transmuting a socially constructed difference into a politics of documentation that refuses to engage race in any explicit way. In this way, the novel's central conceit surrounding paperhood and subjecthood is recast as the aestheticization of problematic racial interdictions that grant animacy—the capacity to affect and be affected, the sustenance of intersubjective relationality—to any entity capable of belonging within a system that determines existence based on documentation instead of race.

Towards the novel's close, we learn of the car accident that immobilized her and left her vulnerable to a dissolving rainfall. Her life-arc is presented as follows: "Antonio's creation, which had endured a thunderous rainstorm, the saliva from hundreds of lips, and the ensuing spite of old lovers, was undone by an unfastened seat belt and a shattered windshield. And as the sirens approached the collision, a light but steady rain soaked the shreds, flushing her into the anonymity of gutters. And those shreds that were not washed away clung to the hood of Merced de Papel's car, hardening days later as the clouds cleared and the heart of the sun beat down on the wrecking yard" (203). Here, the narrative emphasis on the procedural, corporeal unmaking of Merced's body—the descriptions steeped in physicality—cue us to the importance of form when reading the character and recognizing her (in)existence. This compounds Merced de Papel's move

down the scale of animacy past Aristotle's vegetable, which also results from her sudden inability to interact affectively with those around her. The warmth that young Little Merced felt on the bus when she touched her namesake's arm will disappear along with her newsprint skin, making impossible any interpersonal contact because her person no longer exists. The scarred tongues and paper-cut penises of her lovers will eventually heal, burying a past marked by carnality, unrequited love, and abandonment. She, in a way, ceases to possess a self-authored book and instead becomes its equivalent—a series of shreds that are hardening on the hood of the mangled car in the junkyard, a direct consequence of her reconfiguration.

Merced de Papel's explicit decoupling of essence and form signals two phenomena central to apprehending the machinations of contemporary colorblindness and its impacts on contemporary Latinx literature. On the one hand, it underscores the prevalence of dissociated subjects, ones marked by the cleaving of their race from their accessible, acknowledgeable, and utterable experiences. In other words, it was Merced de Papel's ink instead of her racial difference that granted her mobility, independence, and subjectivity. When the form this ink has assumed—a body of printed paper—is changed, no possibility for existence remains. It is equally impossible for Merced de Papel to be a pile of faded paper on the side of the road as it is for her to be a person who has shed the documents that were her skin. What's more, that Merced's existence was marked by fleeting relationships and solitude further underscores how the dissociative capacity of deracialization (of converting race to documentation) violates the inherent relationality to race itself. Similar to my discussions of animality in Chapter One, this indicates that the generative analytical outcomes that once issued from studies of the ethnoracial subject

must now engage a series of objects and their forms, as well as the forms of social relationality that mark them.

On the other hand, this scene resituates the importance of affect for my interrogations of representation, race, and gender that follow. After all, Merced de Papel enjoyed a liveness other characters cannot precisely because her race is (trans)muted into ink and, therefore, representative of the fullest expression of incorporation into normative social parameters. That she will live on *on* paper instead of *as* paper speaks to an important relationship between language and history. If access to and narration within language renders a subject legible in and of history, then Merced's commitment to paper—her construction from ink and words and documents—secures her a place in the annals of history through her book and beyond the scarred tongues of her lovers. This history, or that which allows her body to dissolve down rain gutters while her legacy remains, however, is one that is predicated on the continued silencing and disavowal of race, meaning that not just any language grants subjectivity, but deracialized language. Participation in a colorblind social contract, then, or the active removal and silencing of race, correlates to animacy and the capacity to sustain affirming relations between subjects, objects, and lasting discourses of history. The manner in which Plascencia's narration of this accident scene cues us to the substance of corporeality, however, is anything but accidental. Not only does Merced's dramatic change in form flag the narrow discursive parameters a subject must occupy to secure lasting subjectivity, but the body and its extra-discursive feelings emerge as potential sites for inscribing the feelings of difference that must remain undocumented. Merced de Papel's dying lesson urges us to

look beyond words, between pages, and beneath the folds of paper to find the unspoken and unspeakable histories of race, or those pigments that refuse to be converted to ink.

An Aesthetics of Colorblindness: Race (through Gender) in Form and Feeling

The previous two sections have explored the relationship between literary form and animating affects to affirm a correlation between dynamic subjectivity and paper, where paper is a metaphor for transmuting embodied difference into the distorted lexicons of hegemonic normativity deemed appropriate by colorblindness. As soon as this dynamic is established, however, it is subverted by experimental forms that demonstrate the limitations to what paper can contain, signify, and express. In this section, I develop how this subversion introduces a shift toward a new aesthetic paradigm that I term an aesthetics of colorblindness, inscribing in form the feelings of verboten yet pervasive hierarchies of power affected by race. To be clear, an aesthetics of colorblindness as I conceive it and have elaborated elsewhere in this project neither panders to nor endorses the problematic racial politics that would disappear race to endorse the maintenance of white supremacy. Instead, an aesthetics of colorblindness hijacks its central logic—removing race from language and content while leaving it in feeling and structure—to render this process apprehendable. Importantly, this shift towards deracialized content is accompanied by the emergence of a gendered and sexualized language. Similarly to Justin Torres' novel, the racial subtleties of Plascencia's novel emerge precisely through explicitly gendered and sexual narrative moments. In this way, it is through the violent manipulation and misinterpretation of female characters, notably Sal's ex-girlfriend Liz,

that racial violence takes shape and problematizes the representational capabilities of narratives of loss within Latinx literature.

Liz comes into literary being amid a series of associations that directly indict female promiscuity to advance a subtext of racial betrayal—or the pattern of brown women leaving brown men for white men. In that sense, one cannot fully engage the particularities of Liz and her now terminated relationship to Sal without taking into account the cast of largely historical women she is associated with, ones the novel renders literary examples of sluttish disloyalty. While figures like Pocahontas and La Malinche appear in tangential references, the text presents as its ground-zero of betrayal one Margarita Casino, who first loses her virginity to a teenage farmhand and then gains, along with a new name, the reputation that "Rita Hayworth had sex with lettuce pickers, that the Love Goddess of Hollywood was democratic in her love, giving it not only to Howard Hughes over a neat bed of Kleenex but also to migrant workers on the spread of leafage of icebergs" (44). When Rita's calls for "discretions" are interpreted as shame in her lower-class lovers, the lettuce pickers spread tales of sexual conquest with increased vengeance. As one declares, "I fucked Rita Hayworth. I bent her over" (50), promoting exaggerated virility over their loss, circulating fictions at the expense of facts, and downgrading Rita herself to maintain the fragility of masculinity afloat. That Rita's calls for prudence are not just disavowed but actively counteracted establishes a pervasive narrative of masculinity that initially extends to Liz as well. Resonating with the forms and figures that appear central to Carmen María Machado's short stories I read in the following chapter, the hierarchy of subjectivity Plascencia's novel presents, one in which certain characters are giving voice, space, and agency at the expense of others, appears to

be explicitly gendered: the literary function of women is defined by the men who manipulate it most, where the events and affects of their feminine sub-narrative serve only to compound, heighten, and justify the violent, defamatory actions taken by the novel's male figures as they grapple with the re-instantiation of their masculine subjectivities.

As is evident with associations to Pocahontas and La Malince, encoded in these narratives of feminine betrayal is a racial maneuver from brown to white. Liz is, once again, characterized through association to Rita Hayworth who, as the novel presents it, ascended to fame by bleaching her hair and shaping her hairline, pinching her nose to make it pointier, and learning to "unroll her *r*'s and pronounce words like *salamander* and *salad* without sounding like a wetback" (47). Though couched in a Hollywood environment of costume and pageantry, that "the linguist and makeup artist had transformed" Rita in a more permanent way demonstrates the text's logic of charting race through the new love objects a woman can take. Rita, in leaving behind migrant workers for Howard Hughes, affirms the relationality of race by becoming white(r), thereby establishing through her recurrent narrative of heartbreak a central component of racial betrayal; we are lead to believe Sal has also been abandoned by Liz for a white boy, augmenting the already present racial dimension to his loss. Notable, here, is the way in which race is encoded in language: metaphors of language and pronunciation, alongside actions like bleaching and tweezing, circuitously encode Rita's alterity that gets most poignantly condensed into the denomination "wetback," a term we might read alongside "thugs, gangsters, [and] drug cartels" as exemplary of what critical race scholar Paula

Ioanide calls “the coded lingua franca used by dominant U.S. publics to talk about race, gender, sexuality, and nationality” (9-10) under colorblindness.

This expression of race through a language of culture, the one Haney López identifies as exemplary of a colorblind racial politics, also appears in the explanation of Liz and Sal’s relationship. We learn, through the recounted prophesy of the patriarch Don Victoriano, that Liz was predestined to abandon Sal. Cautioning against love with “Ticuanenses and Gypsies,” Don Victoriano affirms that they “are people without a homeland and of a bohemian fidelity,” a conviction that is not “a condemnation of the races but as an explanation of their nature” (107). This advice is quite clearly based on race and not heeded by Sal who “fell for a woman who descended not only from a tawny family of Gypsies but from Ticuanense blood as well. Her name, which was cited on the dedication page of this book, was Elizabeth of Helen, but was abridged to simply Liz” (107). Effectively, Sal bemoans his predetermined fate instead the racial othering he experiences in his breakup, precisely because the racial component is both traumatic and taboo. In one exceptional moment, however, the language of culture cracks and Sal names the racialization of his victimhood: he “would write his grocery list on different paper[.] He would not think of [Liz] or the white boy who colonized his memories. [Liz’s new boyfriend] who had spread his imperialism everywhere. All over her, spilling it on her chest and stomach, coating her lips, and throat, lining the esophagus and intestines” (124). Following this allusion to semen, whiteness is explicitly described as a process, a becoming. Though perhaps not enjoying whiteness from the onset, Liz can now internalize the physical and symbolic whiteness her new partner offers, becoming whiter herself in the process (her name is whitewashed through allusion to classical antiquity), a

process in which Sal cannot participate. In this way, he finds himself barred from the access and agency, both sexually and socially, Liz's new partner enjoys and turns to his literary project—his proximity to paper, his manipulation of documentation—to exercise what little control and agency he feel remains. The saddened tone of Plascencia's writing reflects this, stitching together the loss of agency through heartbreak with a systematic denial of complete belonging through brownness.

While the recurrent appearances of *The Book of Incandescent Light* punctuate the novel with paradoxical literary structures that signal the undocumentable, the text's other striking features related to the central narrative of waging wars against sadness occur in the "diatribe against womanhood" (133), or Sal's literary foray into critiquing Liz as he bemoans her absence and tries to get her back. Saturn's diatribe, just twenty-five lines long, begins with what we could call irreverent etymology: he remits to a Napoleonic scene of military defeat at the hands of (the short general's lover) Marie Louise to explain the formation and introduction of "a new word into the French lexicon: cunt" (133). The latter half of the chapter continues as follows:

> Mary Louise researched the etymology of the word and precedents where it had been used. The citations were mostly biblical but she found others:
> in the fall from Eden
> *cunt.*
> in the story of Sampson
> *cunt.*
> in the undoing of Val Kilmer in Heat
> *cunt*.
> in the story of Saturn
> *cunt*.
> in love
> *cunt*.
> in the fall of civilization
> *cunts, cunts, cunts, cunts, cunts, cunts…* (133)

Reminiscent of the pages from Smiley's notebook, that Sal (writing under his planetary pen name) cloaks his critique of Liz in a scene of historical fiction draws parallel lines not only between himself and Napoleon as brave men fighting for love, but between Marie Louise and Liz as cruel and loveless temptresses without directly or permanently disparaging or even naming Liz. Though hardly the only reference to trans-historic femme fatales in the novel, this move situates Saturn alongside Napoleon as simultaneously misunderstood and misjudged by history. The defeats of both men leave them in positions of victimhood, an aspect contradicted but not entirely undone by the subsequent lines of misogynistic attacks. The list of episodes in which Adam, Sampson, Val Kilmer, and Saturn only operate within this position of victimhood effectively offers a lineage of female-induced violence and destruction. Notable in its scope, it begins with the biblical creation of man and ends with the fall of civilization itself; Saturn would have it that the linearity of history itself comes from male sentiments of female betrayal and shows no signs of stopping, as the ending ellipses imply. Even if the events he cites are fictitious in origin (most comically Val Kilmer in this sense), the affective history the heartbroken Sal draws indexes the vastness of the scale of his loss and illuminates his position as history writer—the first and final word, so it seems, in determining the dominant accounts of subjects in history and their relations. If Merced de Papel's living as paper granted her autonomy in determining her own representational terms, then Liz's existence on paper leaves her at the mercy of *author*ity, which is to say repeatedly and metonymically cuntified.

In response to the diatribe, Liz herself joins the conversation. Deviating from the treasonous women she is paralleled with, Liz interrupts Sal's manipulative representation

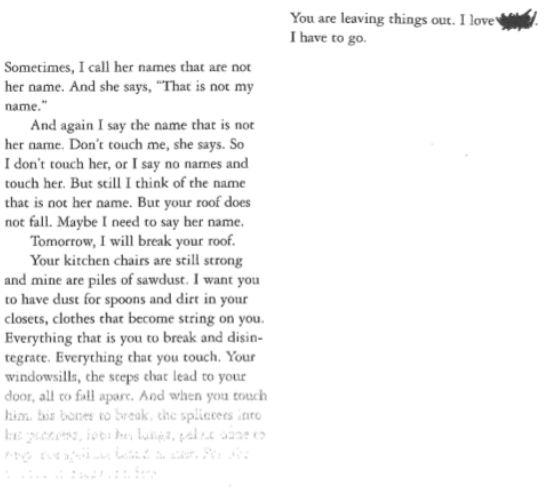
of her: “I was going to stay quiet, let you write your story, let your history as you see it stand. Because I was the unkind one, the reckless one, deserving of whatever you may say. But this is a novel—it is no longer between just you and me” (137). Identifying a public element to the distorting and recasting of her story and perhaps concern at the treatment of her person of paper, Liz takes steps to assume the blame she thinks is hers but not without leveling critique against the writer who has lost himself in his own world. She continues to indict Sal’s narrative abuse: “In a neat pile of paper you have offered up not only your hometown, EMF, and Federico de la Fe, but also me, your grandparents and generations beyond them, your patria, your friends, even Cami. You have sold everything, save yourself[.] You have delivered all this into their hands, and for what? For fourteen dollars and the vanity of your name on the book cover. […] Sal, if you still love me, please leave me out of this story. Start this book over, without me” (137-138). Sal’s love for her evidently persists, since her request literally halts and restarts the entire novel: a new title page appears, followed by an edited dedication where Liz’s name is absent, though not before a final iteration of “cunt” (139).

The forms Liz’s response reacts to and creates are significant. After all, the cunting threnody of loss condenses into a handful of lines the less perceivable tone of toxic machismo that effects Rita, Marie, and others. Plascencia brings this to the foreground with its cutting absurdity yet grounds it in believability with a healthy dose of pettiness—the solitary “cunt” following Liz’s rebuttal. If having the last word in this way is a demonstration of Saturn’s omniscience (in narration) and omnipotence (in a crumbling relationship), both wobble as the novel’s title page and dedication are reprinted with Liz’s name removed. Through the event of having a female character take

a stand against ubiquitous chauvinism, Plascencia enkindles a surprise, a rupture in narrative continuity and commands the reader to consider the ethics of representation when its most potent material—the feelings of heartbreak, the gendered and racialized nature of loss—is beyond capture.

Liz's coming and going, though explicitly misogynistic, is also profoundly structured over this racial difference that harkens back to the novel's central conceit of paper that documents. By this I mean that Liz's new proximity to whiteness animates her in a way that renders a reliance on paper, a place in narrative and history, unnecessary. The ingesting of semen is the metaphor through which her racial becoming takes place, one that resonates with one of Chen's central affirmations that a reading of animating forces and factors permits a recalibrating of categorical delineations, with racial difference being one of them. Instead of reading whiteness as an inherently more animated *racial* category, Plascencia's text presents it as a series of guaranteed conditions of documentation: existence and representation beyond the limits of Sal's narration or the temporal perimeters it draws, authority to intervene in instances of misrepresentation, the literary and social independence to move beyond the limits of the novel's page. That Liz's new relationships aligns her with this set of guarantees activates a series of affective responses from Sal, ones that illuminate affect's inherent gravitation towards the social and subjective qualities associated with whiteness.

Our narrator's refusal to accept a position of victimhood he himself did not define manifests in two other notable characteristics of this chapter: Liz's boyfriend's reappearing blacked-out name and the chapter's final paragraph fading into whiteness.



You are leaving things out. I love [redacted].
I have to go.

Sometimes, I call her names that are not her name. And she says, "That is not my name."

And again I say the name that is not her name. Don't touch me, she says. So I don't touch her, or I say no names and touch her. But still I think of the name that is not her name. But your roof does not fall. Maybe I need to say her name.

Tomorrow, I will break your roof.

Your kitchen chairs are still strong and mine are piles of sawdust. I want you to have dust for spoons and dirt in your closets, clothes that become string on you. Everything that is you to break and disintegrate. Everything that you touch. Your windowsills, the steps that lead to your door, all to fall apart. And when you touch him, his bones to break, the splinters into his pockets, [illegible]

(119)

Focusing on the former, it is evident that the obliteration of Liz's boyfriend's name stems from Sal's desire to establish and maintain, in this narrative context, the power his love life denies him. He goes so far as to directly affirm this: "I don't want him in here. I will scratch him out." (117). While that aggressive, destructive scribbling could be easily situated on an opposite pole of intensity from the gentle disappearance into empty space, the chapter's closing fade can be read alongside the obliterated name as two points in the spectrum that is Sal's struggle for mastery. That each line appears in increasingly lighter print is perhaps the closest literature can come to extra-literary practices of cinematographic scene fade or musical fade-away.[1] I say extra-literary because we are able to access a more procedural side than printed text usually permits: the manners for which we have been reading in other instances of this chapter here are close to the surface, inscribing line-by-line Sal's resignation into awareness of mimetic fictions he has created, ones not immediately capable of alleviating the his traumatic position in

[1] N. Katherine Hayles explains these multimodal formal innovations in Plascencia's text as the effects of writing in the digital age. Hayles explores "the computational nature of 21st century literature" (101) to argue that the acts of digital writing and reading shape the ways in which contemporary literature is conceived of and produced.

relation to Liz. What's more, and because the novel does not shy away from blacking-out entire pages in other moments, that a decrease in control directly correlates to an increase in whiteness could be read as a formal decision that evokes Sal's racial otherness fundamentally structuring this loss, too.

With these exaggerated deviations from canonical literary form, we find ourselves before an aesthetics of colorblindness, or the formal tactics that remove race from articulation and install it in form and feeling. (Keep in mind here how the text's first edition has a hole cut out where Liz's white boyfriend's name should appear, or how race is literally removed from the page.) It is in the absence of speakable components and dimensions to profound affective experiences that formal innovation begins to inscribe Latinx feelings of loss and racialization. To be clear, instead of suggesting Plascencia panders to a problematic racial politics, I argue that his text exemplifies an aesthetics of colorblindness by capturing and rendering visible the vast disjunction between official discourse on ethnoracialized subjects and the conditions and experiences facing ethnoracialized subjects themselves. As such, his writing looks beyond the interpretative models inherited from previous generations precisely because the contemporary interdictions on expression and representation—the ones that begin disappearing the very notion of an ethnoracialized subject—demand new approaches to inscribing race and apprehending and critiquing its consequences. Importantly, the means by which the text does this ultimately signals the breaking point in literary form: representation on paper, whether with words or lists or refrains or musical staves, can never adequately encompass the persons beyond. Without diluting referential potentiality, this break manifests as a

formal decision to put in check the dominant discourses surrounding documentation that contour not only the literary components but the lived experiences of Latinidad.

In this way, we could read both the scribble and the fade as political acts away from the forms of accurate representation we are accustomed to, towards abstraction and therefore, towards a major shift in the paradigms of Latinx literature away from an aesthetics of documentation towards one of undocumentation. This reformulation not only signals the need for new interpretative frameworks (as I have been tracing), but also for the need to reassess the value that has been unevenly distributed between testimonial, social-justice oriented texts of the tradition and those that are not. Plascencia's forms demonstrate how undocumentation is not just a newfangled approach to avant-guard form, but the means through which invisibilized, disappeared machinations of racial hierarchies of white supremacy can be manifested and critiqued. By blackening whiteness' referent (the boyfriend's name) and allowing the words of brownness (Sal's) to slip into whiteness, we are reminded of our imaginative capabilities in conjuring the liveness, affectivity, and opacity of the subjects that lay beyond colorblindness' silence. In this way, Plascencia shows how the abstraction of race requires the abstraction of literary form, and leaves us pondering how the ethics of representation shifts alongside it.

The Politics and Ethics of Representation in the Latinx MFA Generation

By exemplifying an aesthetics of colorblindness, Plascencia's novel finds a way both innovative and subversive to register the experiences of race and racialization, unspeakable not only due to mainstream colorblind prohibitions but because such charged affective dynamics will always exhaust and exceed the grasp of signification.

The establishment of this aesthetic paradigm, however, is indebted to feminine Latina subjects like Liz, whose narratives both engender and underscore the metafictional author's gendered violence, which is then demonstrably instilled in deviant narrative form linked to the racial dynamics provoking the explicitly gendered nature of said violence. Recognizing the important relationship between feminine Latinidad and how an aesthetics of colorblindness renders visible the seemingly invisible force of contemporary racism, the following chapter more thoroughly explores this project's theoretical debt to Latina femininity and feminism. Within Plascencia's novel, however, Liz's proximity to whiteness both fosters greater independence from Sal's novel—she lives *off* the page, instead of on or as it—and heightens through contrast the limited social and narrative agency and animacy of Federico de la Fe and his El Monte Flores gang of flower pickers. In this section, I look to Federico's place in the text to elaborate on existing scholarship that reads localized, Chicano neighborhood logics within the strategic fight against and recounting of the war against Sal's omniscient narration. In showing how these tactics are also altered by colorblindness, I expose one of the novel's most central (but not necessarily accidental) misunderstandings, or how Federico's disinterest in representation is interpreted as an inability to represent, engendering a shift in the politics and ethics of representation confronting contemporary Latinx literature.

To recall, Federico de la Fe parallels Sal in experiencing heartbreak, but otherwise occupies a drastically different social position. At the novel's onset, Federico crosses from Mexico into California with his daughter Little Merced to escape the memory of his wife's abandonment. He is soon turned away from a factory for lacking a laminated card with "the stamp of a bald eagle" (33) and eventually finds himself leading the El Monte

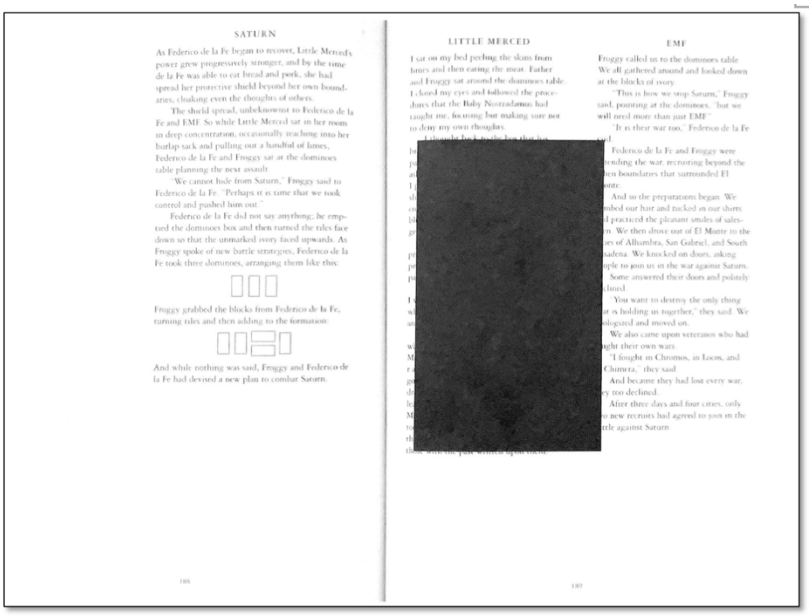
Flores Gang (the EMF), or a gang of flower pickers intent on securing their right to privacy. While this dynamic of migrant organization versus constant surveillance analogizes the political realities facing undocumented communities antagonized by institutions like ICE and Border Patrol, the novel recasts it in profoundly literary terms hinging of the right to representation. In this sense, the notions of whose story is told by whom rise to the surface, again demonstrating an act of conversion that morphs the labor struggles of undocumented workers into the war on omniscient narration. Under Federico's leadership, the EMF launches assaults against the all-seeing planet Saturn in the sky (Sal's pseudonym, so, Sal himself) that disrupt the visual mode of apprehension he uses to surveille and record. Using smoke shields and impenetrable lead barriers built from repurposed materials in some instances, the EMF effectively incapacitates Saturn's ability to see them and render them literary objects. This repurposing of goods and materials, which causes the now limited narrator to repurpose his own narrative and search for the substance of plot in other storylines, embodies what Latinx Studies critic Cristina Rodríguez identifies as rasquachismo, or a decidedly Chicano "sensibility built upon the re-appropriation or "recoding" of objects, taking what one has and changing it into what one needs" (494). As part of her larger analysis of the aesthetic paradigms classifying the neighborhood of El Monte, Rodríguez reads markers of Chicanismo and Latinidad beyond tropes of migrancy and gang wars in the very forms that shape both the setting and the novel itself. As she affirms, "Plascencia's rasquache construction, then, uses the "verbal-visual codes" of the local Chicano community to reflect the "irrepressible spirit" of the neighborhood. This esthetic choice simultaneously implies

that other narrations, with their undisputed omniscient narrator and stock form, are written from the vantage point of the outsider, or colonizer" (497).

It is not coincidental that a crisis of vision for the narrator creates a form of narration that views from within. Yet again, we are presented by the novel's theorization of how to apprehend that which cannot be seen: just as the absence and inaccessibility of Federico and the EMF pivot narrative interest towards other storylines and minor characters, and in that way enact a profoundly classed and racialized rasquache aesthetic, so does the absence and inaccessibility of articulating race pivot representational strategies towards other forms and structures, enacting a colorblind aesthetic. Plascencia's novel affirms that the manifestation of a colorblind aesthetic, then, is not the uptake of a hegemonic logic steeped in white supremacy. After all, if the majoritarian stance on race is that it should not be acknowledged or is no longer a contemporary problem, then aestheticizing race is a view from within, a tactic that only ethnoracialized subjects would have the capabilities of employing and motivation to do. Bridging Cristina Rodríguez's reading with the racial landscape Haney López lays bare and indicts, we might affirm that an aesthetics of colorblindness is a rasquache response to distorted racial politics, a novel paradigm both formal and critical that could have only sprung from the rich Latinx tradition of reappropriation, recoding, and recasting.

While these disruptions to Saturn's omniscience do not last, Federico and other members of the EMF deploy smaller affronts to the policing planet in hopes of protecting Federico's sadness from the reader to consume. Particularly interesting is the technique that Little Merced practices, one she learned from the clairvoyant infant-savant Baby Nostradamus, where she conjures a black, opaque shape between her monologues and

Saturn's reception of them. Differing in size and shape, these blockages appear throughout the text as small circles, skinny ovals, and large rectangles with varying degrees of success: at times they obscure Merced's entire presence, at times only a part as the example below showcases:



SATURN

As Federico de la Fe began to recover, Little Merced's power grew progressively strongest, and by the time de la Fe was able to eat bread and pork, she had spread her protective shield beyond her own boundaries, cloaking even the thoughts of others.

The shield spread, unbeknownst to Federico de la Fe and EMF. So while Little Merced sat in her room in deep concentration, occasionally reaching into her burlap sack and pulling out a handful of limes, Federico de la Fe and Froggy sat at the dominoes table planning the next assault.

"We cannot hide from Saturn," Froggy said to Federico de la Fe. "Perhaps it is time that we took control and pushed him out."

Federico de la Fe did not say anything; he emptied the dominoes box and then turned the tiles face down so that the unmarked ivory faced upwards. As Froggy spoke of new battle strategies, Federico de la Fe took three dominoes, arranging them like this:

Froggy grabbed the blocks from Federico de la Fe, turning tiles and then adding to the formation:

And while nothing was said, Froggy and Federico de la Fe had devised a new plan to combat Saturn.

LITTLE MERCED

I sat on my bed peeling the skins from limes and then eating the meat. Father and Froggy sat around the dominoes table. I closed my eyes and followed the procedures that the Baby Nextadamus had taught me, focusing but making sure not to clear my own thoughts.

EMF

Froggy called us to the dominoes table. We all gathered around and looked down at the blocks of ivory.

"This is how we stop Saturn," Froggy said, pointing at the dominoes, "but we will need more than just EMF."

"It is their war too," Federico de la Fe

Federico de la Fe and Froggy were stretching the war, recruiting beyond the [redacted] boundaries that surrounded El [redacted]onte.

And so the preparations began. We [redacted]mbed our hair and tucked in our shirts [redacted]d practiced the pleasant smiles of sales[redacted]en. We then drove out of El Monte to the [redacted]urs of Alhambra, San Gabriel, and South [redacted]sadena. We knocked on doors, asking [redacted]ople to join us in the war against Saturn. Some answered their doors and politely [redacted]hined.

"You want to destroy the only thing [redacted]at is holding us together," they said. We [redacted]pologized and moved on.

We also came upon veterans who had [redacted]ught their own wars.

"I fought in Chromos, in Locos, and [redacted]Chimera," they said.

And because they had lost every war, [redacted]y too declined.

After three days and four cities, only [redacted]e new recruits had agreed to join in the [redacted]ttle against Saturn.

If rasquachismo, as Rodríguez outlines above, is the process of constructing from lack, this poetics of obscurity—of obscuring vision and access, of rendering narrative subjects obscure—is the creation of lack on behalf of a literary subject who is moved towards objecthood by their position within a dependency on paper. By this I mean that Little Merced, Federico her father, and the other members of the EMF gang working against omniscient narration lack the animacy to affect or be affected and are, instead, manipulated through Sal-Saturn's literary mediation of his sadness. Merced de Paper was paper, Sal controls what appears on it, Liz can move away from it, but the migrant workers of El Monte appear tethered to it—yet another manifestation of the hyper-centrality of documentation within Latinx sociocultural and political imaginaries. Their

rejection of these terms of dependency on Sal's project of representation is ushered into a narrative of inability: they cannot represent themselves, so they must be represented.

This relationship exemplifies the hierarchy of documentation structuring the novel, the one that elides subjectivity and animacy with apparent adherence to conventions of language and race. In being viewed as in need of a narrative intervention to represent on their behalf, Federico and the EMF are interpellated into a power dialectic against an "*author*itarian" (61) figure, as scholar and critic Jennifer Harford Vargas has termed it in her *Forms of Dictatorship: Power, Narrative, and Authoritarianism in the Latina/o Novel* (2017), one measured through but largely unchanged by the "topography of dissent" they create and the "guerrilla resistance tactics" (74-75) they deploy against it. Harford Vargas' reading positions Plascencia's text within the larger transamerican category of dictator novels for its depiction of "the aftermath of Latin American authoritarian regimes on Latina/o communities alongside authoritarian structures and discourses of power that minorities and migrants face in the US" (5). Playing with multivalent language to link dictation to dictator (in a similar way that the critic highlights 'author' with authoritarian), Harford Vargas leads us to see the larger historical genealogies of state violence prefigured in the text, reaffirming and heightening the political and ethical stakes of the war against omniscient narration, or Federico's right to opacity. The EMF does not want to negotiate the terms of their appearance in the narrative—they do not vie for heightened subjectivity akin to Liz or Rita, for example. Instead, they contest the very relationship that positions them as literary objects, or deadedend and deanimated onto paper. Because the novel acknowledges the complexity characters have in their lives beyond the text, Federico is not rejecting representation,

recognition, or existence writ large, but rather the rigid conditions of those phenomena foisted upon him.

The differences between Sal and Federico as equivalent heartbroken protagonists gestures to a direct correlation between social position, agency in subjectivity, and affective capabilities; we begin to see the ways in which certain experiences of loss are granted an affective intricacy that others are not. These differences are augmented through the novel's metafictional play, too, given the way Sal (the character) masquerades as Plascencia (the author). As a result, we are not only permitted but seemingly encouraged to extend the biographical details of Plascencia's life to Sal, explicitly marooned in a blizzardly Upstate New York and, by extension, implicitly enrolled in the MFA program at Syracuse University. While biographical fact is not needed to see the disparity of a migrant worker juxtaposed with a writer, it operates as yet another facet of territorialization in a more concrete realm of sociopolitical urgencies. By this I mean Plascencia uses himself to historicize his literary project within what Latinx Studies scholar Elena Machado Sáez has termed the Latinx MFA Generation. Independently of whether or not contemporary writers hold an MFA degree, the naming of a Latinx MFA Generation, as Machado Sáez outlines in her "Generation MFA: Neoliberalism and the shifting cultural capital of US Latinx Writers" (2018) speaks to the emerging conditions creating and evaluating Latinx cultural production. This "credentialing of creativity" (363) not only highlights the "broader neoliberal privatization of space that consolidates hierarchies of artistic value" but evidences a substantial shift in Latinx literary history: Latinx authorship now articulates with

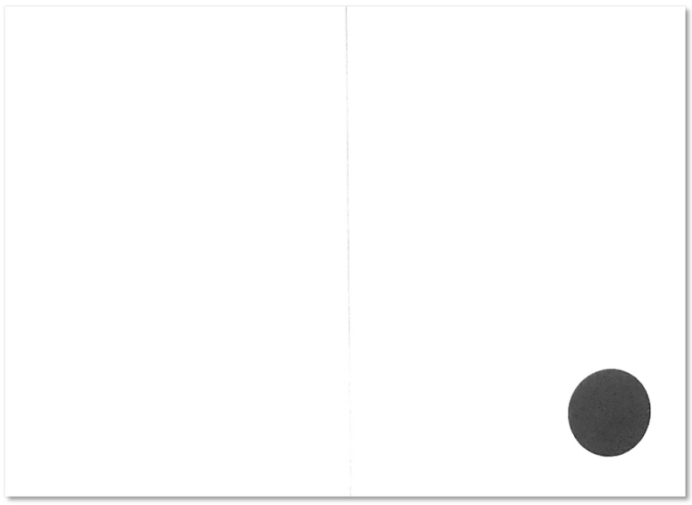
affiliations to and accreditations from established universities, effectively incorporated into the institutions that sought to exclude them mere decades before.

Introducing the notion of a Latinx MFA writer into this war on omniscient narration not only acknowledges an emerging corpus of authors experimenting with form, but it also suggests the ethical quandary facing Sal in Plascencia's text is one that faces other writers of the contemporary moment: how to represent ethnoracialized, marginal subjects when the traditional means of representation conflict with the problematic racial zeitgeist? How to document the experiences of these when documentation reinstates papered hierarchies working on behalf of the state? To begin, transmuting Machado Sáez's historicizing framework through a critical study of an aesthetics of colorblindness to a focus on the different forms, substance, and factors of loss makes an argument for periodization in affective, material terms. This offers a way of not only recognizing how Plascencia's text itself questions the parameters of ethical representation when writing across the country from a markedly different social positionality. Consequently, it also gestures to a possible reconciliation of these tensions, a pathway through and around the shifting social metrics that now index significant disparities between subjects creating literature and their literary subject-objects. I would argue that this possible reconciliation lies with a new praxis of interpretation that, most immediately for Plascencia, demands a way to read seemingly de-animated subjects without confirming their de-animation, a move that would accept their incapacity to human subjectivity both in the pages of literature and critique. For the Latinx MFA Generation, and for critiques of our time, this means finding new ways of signaling, apprehending, and reading racialized subjects beyond the familiar frames of whole, transparent, speaking subjectivities narrating their

accounts of (what has historically been) racialized violence and oppression. Little Merced's illegible blocks are not barriers to reading and representing her, but rather they are her: an animated subject whose total knowability will always reside beyond the page.

Our interpretation of Federico gains importance here, as critical intervention emerges from the tensions of seeing him as a subject that extends far beyond the deanimated, victimized migrant as he is primarily presented. We must read him as an agent engaged in the refusal of dominant and dominating forms of being and losing, recognizing that such an engagement alters the terms on which he can be thrown and pulled around by saturnine authoritarian powers. At the end of the text, Federico de la Fe leaves the reader with such an opportunity. Operating in the preceding chapters in Saturn's shadow as his war enemy, counterpart, and radical other, Federico at the novel's close marks a subtle end to contention and confrontation. While Saturn daydreams of a future with Liz that will never materialize, Federico and Little Merced finally exist on their own terms, walking off the page under a parasol even Saturn's gaze cannot penetrate—a black dot at the corner of the page. This offers no resolution to the tensions of paperhood and personhood characterizing Federico's multivalent position as object and subject; instead, it solidifies a space in novelistic form and literary imagination that liberates existence, experience, and affect. It collapses the demand for documentation, knowability, and transparency, and ushers in a paradigm imbued with approximating absences, contrapuntal conversions, and endless becoming. In easing his dictatorial grip on Federico and his narrative, the metafictional author ends his literary project. With that end, however, comes a beginning, signaled in the open blankness of the page, ready to be

written in such a way that is free of the expectations of total knowability and beyond the blurring of race and ink.



Conclusion: New Latinx Literary Imaginaries

In many ways, Plascencia's text in its entirety marks the inauguration of new literary forms inscribing the racialized and gendered feelings inherent to and constitutive of social relations, even beyond their parameters of articulation. The novel substantiates literary Latinidad as capable of decentering canonical identity positions, instead engaging with brownness, masculinity, and other identitarian referents by challenging their limits, projections, and articulations. It paves the way for a tradition in which generic formulae are disturbed with narratological experimentation happening in the most extreme instances (scribbles, holes, fadeaways), and refreshing, repositioning poetics characterizing the lesser cases (intertextual references, a poetics of loss, Napoleonic neologisms, and so on). The binary of origin-destination migration is transgressed, with movement traced in networks and loops across psychic, cultural, and localized space (between Las Tortugas, Tijuana, El Monte, and Upstate New York) with much more

frequency than the familiar border-crossing tropes of hemispheric corpuses. Centering such narratives of racially- and gender-minoritized subjects like Plascencia's and responding with nuanced and novel readings develops ways of interpreting subjectivities and constructing literary imaginaries that "unbind us from the preconceived, unquestioned notion that there is something called 'Latinx literature' and from the identity and thematic expectations attendant to that formulation" (13), as Ralph Rodriguez poignantly declares.

Similarly, Ramón Saldívar's "Historical Fantasy, Speculative Realism, and Postrace Aesthetics in Contemporary American Fiction" (2011) moves towards new literary imaginaries, though arrives elsewhere. Seeking explanations for the text's formal irreverence, Saldívar identifies in Plascencia a postrace aesthetic that embraces and emphasizes the fictitiousness of the text instead of returning to realism, a move that allows the author to center fantasy as an imaginative act with decolonial potential. While poignant in placing the novel within a larger history of literary production that spans aesthetic and political movements of both the Global North and South, Saldívar's alignment of the text's form with a project grounded in the politicization of fantasy, imagination, and creation seems to draw heavily on the historically activist slant of Latinx fiction. Engaging a critical lens drawn up in reaction to mid-20th century Chicano cultural production rooted in the desire for social, institutional, and cultural recognition, Saldívar slips into a reading that does not respond to the text's presentation of itself. Claiming that "*The People of Paper* insists on the possibility and necessity of an aesthetic idiom sincerely committed to social justice" (584), he writes:

> Rewriting borderlands history outside of the realist tradition, Plascencia asks us to consider the nature of nation- and community-formation, the ethos of justice, and the crossing of symbolic borders and inhabiting the transnational imaginary, but all in the mode of multicultural fantasy and romance at the boundary between fabula (as the stuff of story) and sujet (as narrative emplotment). (578)

Although social formations, the crossing of junctures, and transnational imaginaries constitute notable inroads in the text, this interpretation remains rooted in a conceptualization of the borderlands and its history that requires a justice-oriented agenda. Afterall, for decades, such a space implied such a focus, and with it, formal parameters. While one's critical reading of the novel can and should emphasize the ethical stakes of what's just or unjust, the characters' fights in the wars on narration and sadness assume forms that center (inter)personal dynamics and sentiments operating far from a collective, activist project. What's more, by locating Saturn, Liz, and Federico de la Fe within the modes of multicultural fantasy and romance, the critic safeguards against alternative readings that would name such forms as entirely new.

While Saldívar's clarifies "post" as "not a chronological but a conceptual frame, one that refers to the logic of something having been 'shaped as a consequence of' imperialism and racism," something "deal[ing] with the meaning of race in a time when race supposedly no longer matters" (575), his classification of it as "an aesthetic idiom sincerely committed to social justice" retroactively confirms what ought to be read as the disruption, expansion, and redefinition of who has a stake in the social, for whom justice operates, and the shapes it takes. Such heavy emphasis on what drives the protagonists and, by extension, the novel, eclipses a more nuanced reading of how the various driving components come into being, negotiate convention, reverberate reorientation, and feel. It is precisely the opposite of this prescriptive, inherited dynamic that separates presence

and presentation and drives Plascencia's novel: just as feelings do not assume signified, articulated forms but rather resonate in structure and nuance, so do discourses of power and subordination. As a politics of racial colorblindness moves to delink difference from systematic marginalization, acts of interpretation and literary critique assume heightened importance in order to read the spaces, gaps, and fadeaways for the truths that are still felt, though not spoken.

CHAPTER 3: Reading What's Not There
Dead Subjects, Live Literature, and the Labor of Representation in Carmen María Machado's *Her Body and Other Parties* (2017)

Introduction

The controversy surrounding Jeannine Cummins' novel *American Dirt* (2020) is largely unsurprising to anyone familiar with Latinx literature's extended history of political activism and social justice. The text, which follows a middleclass woman and her son's escape from a Mexican drug lord in love with her, reads (and, indeed, has been described by the author) as a well-intentioned attempt to humanize migration by someone rather significantly removed from that experience and only recently aware of other, more meaningful, literary and political projects that do so. Critique abounds, underscoring the absurdity of literary marketplaces that paid Cummins a seven-figure signing bonus and the uncritical readerships of, for example, Oprah's book club who remain unaware of the novel's uncompelling style and unoriginality. In her scathing review titled "Pendeja, You Ain't Steinbeck: My Bronca with Fake-Ass Social Justice Literature" (2019), which was refused by the original publication that commissioned it, Myriam Gurba roasts Cummins' text. The Latinx writer sustains that, by penning such a novel, Cummins "[a]ppropriate genius works by people of color, slapping a coat of mayonesa on them to make palatable to taste buds estadounidenses, repackaging them for mass racially 'colorblind' consumption." In acknowledging Gurba's indictment of Cummins' colorblind style, I am afforded the opportunity to articulate a central framework of my research—the aesthetics of colorblindness—and relate it to another emergent writer within Latinx Studies: Carmen María Machado.

While Cummins and Machado position themselves differently in relation to the identities, literature, and social justice projects of people of color Gurba highlights, both of their oeuvres align in their diversion from the explicitly ethnoracial language and content historically indicative of Latinx literary production. For some, this has been reason enough to denounce and decry one or both writers; for others, it is a moot point. For me, it is a productive juncture that confronts Latinx literary criticism with the opportunity of not just reading for Latinidad, but for developing from literary production the very contours and potentialities of Latinidad itself. In this sense, each author's refusal to present the reader with explicitly ethnoracial content is not grounds for exclusion or deletion, nor permission or admission, into any literary history or emerging corpus. Instead, it is an interpretative challenge to find where and how race, as imbricated with sex and gender, appears, and the work it allows us to do. While *American Dirt* is certainly worthy of more discussion, it is for this reason that my engagement with Cummins' novel does not extend beyond this point, for its uptake of colorblindness allows the reader to remain unaware of the elaborate histories and ubiquitous manifestations of racist oppression linked to US imperialism and transamerican violence. Machado, on the other hand, is the subject of this chapter precisely for the opposite reasons—for the ways in which her writing indexes racial and sexual difference through aestheticized feelings as responses to conditions and experiences of pervasive loss that colorblindness would rather remain invisible and unheeded.

While it is true that Machado's acclaimed collection of short stories *Her Body and Other Parties* (2017) I read here does not articulate race in name, speech, or geographical location as more legibly Latinx texts have done, I argue that her aesthetics of

colorblindness is critical instead of complicit. Recognizing how her style, which has garnered much critical acclaim, is clearly gendered and frequently sexualized as queer, I do not suggest that race is sidelined, forgotten, or left behind. Instead, the arguments of this chapter affirm my central conviction that, in an age of colorblindness and homonormativity, the social lexicon for apprehending race, racism, and racialization is precisely through a language of gender, sexuality, and queerness. For these reasons, I, like a growing number of scholars, take Machado as an occasion to question not only who and what constitutes Latinx and its literatures, but, as Ralph Rodriguez (2018) encourages, our very own interpretative expectations. In this sense, a considerable part of this chapter is invested in continuing to develop the hermeneutical praxes of my previous chapters that read the fraught relationality of race where there appears to be none, with my findings in Machado's work facilitating the elaboration of new theoretical trajectories articulating the operations of violence as well as the attendant aesthetic, political modes of response, refusal, and repair.

To begin, I first look to two of Machado's stories, "Real Women Have Bodies" and "The Husband Stitch," given the way both problematize the forms explicitly gendered (feminine) and tacitly raced (Latinx) subjects can take and must take in the face of an increasingly deracialized cultural imaginary, as brought about by colorblindness. Reading these stories in tandem allows me to locate in an array of objects (dresses and ribbons, instead of documents and paper) the representable signifiers of ethnoracial subjectivity. My focus then shifts to a closer reading of "The Husband Stitch" and how what is at stake between the protagonist-wife and her husband is more than just marital bliss, but control over whether she is a subject or an object. With an eye to how this

centers deadness over liveness, I argue that queer theory's earlier model of the burden of liveness now operates through a vocabulary of deadness due to the removal of race from contemporary discourse. The subsequent section responds to these new forms of subjective deadening by finding in Machado's writing resistant, generative moments of affective liveness.

Taking into account the ending scene in "The Husband Stitch," where, as the reader well knows, the protagonist's head falls off, recasts engagements with subjective deadness and adds a more urgent, literal dimension that begs the question of what and who gets repaired during an age of colorblind deadening. Drawing from psychoanalytic theory, I sustain that a reparative reading (a la Eve K. Sedgwick) and a melancholic politics of refusal (a la José Muñoz) are reborn as a political-critical praxis of dissociation that demands subjectivity be reconstituted across various social spheres, psychic encounters, and literary forms, or by reading beyond what is visible or articulated, by reading what's not there. Concluding this chapter with a brief reading of Machado's short story "The Resident," I ultimately make a case for finding in literary forms the feelings that register racial difference within gendered and sexualized narratives.

"Am I Not Allowed This One Thing?": Corporeal Form and Latina Labor of Representation

The question of corporeality, of having a literal body to represent, is at the fore of Machado's "Real Women Have Bodies," a short story in her collection *Her Body and Other Parties*. The story, which Latinx Studies scholar Renee Hudson sees as a parallelism to the film *Real Women Have Curves* (2002) about Latina body images,

recounts how the unnamed protagonist's life working in dress retail is upended when an unexplainable phenomenon begins to disappear women: at first, they shimmer and shine, then fade, and eventually dissipate altogether. The invisibilization of certain subjects, in their gendered and racialized dimensions, evokes borderland histories of feminicidios while signaling a crisis of representation that this section will explore, one intent on questioning the social forms and legibilities available in the face of certain loss. As Hudson describes it, "The characters not only remain unmarked racially, but they also lose their bodies – and thus signifiers of race – as the main issue of the story is of women fading, becoming transparent, what the text refers to as 'going incorporeal'" (3). With no scientific or supernatural explanation surfacing, going incorporeal remains a fantastic phenomenon that is further complicated by the protagonist's discovery: the faded women are sewn into the dresses sold at the store where she works, a fate presumed to await both the protagonist's girlfriend and then the protagonist herself as they both forsake corporality by the story's end.

In Hudson's perceptive analysis, which is part of a larger project looking for Latinidad where Machado seemingly presents none, it is the disappearance of the capability to speak that rearranges the faded women's relationship to the world, "leaving their self-identifications presumed rather than known" (5). These acts of presumption, then, enact speech, knowledge, and action against the women over and beyond their agency, participation, or consent, "just like processes of racialization." Hudson continues: "By noting how going incorporeal is like processes of racialization, I turn to simile to emphasize the relationship between the two while also turning to simile as a speculative form that seeks to make connections where ostensibly there are none. As the faded

women make clear, race, like going incorporeal, is not something one chooses – it happens whether one chooses it or not. A Latin American-born immigrant may decide not to identify as Latinx, but they will be perceived as Latinx by others and by the state, just as the protagonist of the story and news commentators assign fadedness to the women who are going incorporeal." In this way, Hudson locates race and racialization within Machado's writing not in any explicit identitarian position, but in a fraught mode of relationality overdetermined by uneven processes of knowing, doing, and being.

In what follows, I join Hudson in looking for Latinidad in the interpersonal dynamics between Machado's characters of husband and wife, father and daughter, and writer and reader. Simile, however, is not the manner in which I link the explicitly gendered nature of the author's writing to the indexing of race I argue her stories perform. Instead, I turn to psychoanalytic theory to substantiate how the connection between womanhood and Latinidad is not just a speculative possibility, but a direct indication of the dominant social phenomena marked by colorblindness and queer liberalism that posits a vocabulary of gender and sex as race. Returning to the generational shift from a melancholic psychic modality to a dissociative one discussed in Chapter One, I recenter the work of scholars David L. Eng and Shinee Han to underscore how it is the cleaving of race from sex that results in one prevailing over the other. Writing with striking succinctness in their *Racial Melancholia, Racial Dissociation: On the Social and Psychic Lives of Asian Americans* (2019), they affirm that "gay is the new black"—or that, with the advent of homonormativity, "sexuality may be the conscious form in which unconscious structures of race and racism appear today" (163). Eng and Han continue: "Put otherwise, processes of double inscription under queer liberalism

posit progressive politics and good feelings about samesex relations as disconnected from unconscious, unacknowledged, and persistent structures of institutional racism and legacies of whiteness as property. In this scenario, progressive attitudes toward homosexuality exhibited by gay millennials might be the conscious transformation and translation of a political unconscious of race that a colorblind US society refuses to acknowledge or to recognize as connected to one another." Through this lens, we are able to see that Machado's conscious plays with the intimate, sexual dimensions of gendered difference are precisely the locus of inscription for unconscious, faded, colorblind race.

We are, then, confronted by a social dynamic where the currency of race is messily instilled in the substance of gender, where the language of womanhood, masculinity, intimacy, and the sexual relations between and among them are indexing race. Machado's work is not just a conveniently exemplary text, but one demanding analysis to better understand the implications of our colorblind, dissociative age. "Real Women Have Bodies" encapsulates this, where going incorporeal not only narrates the invisibilization of bodily and racial difference with gendered subjects whose gender does not fade, but where the very subjects of critique and analysis have disappeared into rays of light and stiches of fabric. In this way, Machado is inaugurating a literary praxis intent on the refusal of representation by moving beyond the canonical representational registers of voice and body, of agency and race, requiring us to look beyond the racialized body—indeed, beyond visibly apprehendable forms of difference—to find not only the privileged subjects of Latinx literature, but Latinx itself.

Though the remainder of this chapter looks to finding race in the forms of relationality and feelings of Machado's other stories, merely using gender as a means to

race glosses over the import of the larger shifts Machado is signaling for queer, brown, Latinx women. This is where, I argue, the importance of sewing the faded women into dresses returns. As the reader will recall, it is mother of the protagonist's girlfriend Petra who performs this work. While on the one hand it appears as a kind of cruel action the protagonist even sets out to undo, ripping seams and destroying dresses and setting the women free, by the story's end we understand the importance of giving incorporeality visible, tactile, and social form. In this sense, the domestic and manual labor historically associated with and assigned to immigrant women of color signaled in Petra's mother's tailoring is transmuted into the new work of representation. Latina labor is no longer just a practice of care that dusts the houses of white America, a type of productive work for the nation that will not have or keep her. It is a representational labor, too, intent on counteracting the invisibilizing, silencing forces of a colorblind racism whose politics of incorporeality stands to disappear the subjects who are not only working on behalf of an inhospitable nation (still), but directly receiving its violence and aggression. Whereas the manipulations of Liz in Plascencia's novel flagged the centrality of Latina femininity in facilitating the emergence of this theoretical framework, here we see a more active, agential role in linking racialized labor to representational labor. In essence, Latina womanhood begins to lay the groundwork for a restructuring of social and literary imaginaries, bringing about new ways of new being one word and stitch at a time.

The prevalence of split (dissociated) subjects, gendered labor working on racial representation, and shifting corporeality encompasses much of Machado's corpus, and her short story "The Husband Stitch," the first in her *Her Bodies* collection, is no exception. The story is a retelling of a children's tale about a young girl whose head is

secured to her neck with a pale green ribbon. A nostalgic reader might recall how, in the 1984 original titled "The Green Ribbon," the ribbon becomes a point of fascination for the girl's boyfriend-turned-husband, how it remains a guarded secret throughout their lifetime together, and how the climactic undoing of the bow signals the undoing of the woman's body at the end of the story in a scene of surprise for reader and husband alike. Machado's adult-rated rewrite leans into this intertextuality and follows the same arc, underpinned with conditions and experiences of loss in the most literal sense—decapitation, a loss of head and of life—and more abstractly and without resolution—dealing with a loss of subjectivity, desire, and liveness. While themes of femininity, secrets, and corporality appear in both stories, Machado introduces formal novelties in narrative voice, narrative modes, and recurring structural breaks to enact an aesthetics of colorblindness that builds from inherent loss and explicit mentions of gendered difference to signify racial difference.

Lifting from "Real Woman Have Bodies" my focus from the connection between racial invisibilization and domestic acts of sewing (gendered feminine) to "The Husband Stitch" brings the ribbon to the foreground. Similar to the original intertext, it operates literally and serves practical purposes: it keeps her head on her shoulders, it remains off limits to her husband, it keeps her alive. In Machado's story, in light of the more nuanced dynamics surrounding individual and enlivened subjectivity and generic aggrupation, the ribbon marks the very limits of existence: it keeps the protagonist an unrenderable subject, it thwarts her husband's attempts to possess her in totality, it protects her from total subsumption into his being. The husband is resistant to accept these restrictions, however, and continues to operate under the belief that his wife is rightfully his, that she

is less a subject and more an object of psychosexual pleasure. In this sense, the husband takes the ribbon to mark a literal and figurative point of inaccessibility that threatens to invalidate the very nature of the intimacy that holds their relationship together. The irony, of course, is that the action he so strongly desires—untying—will not reinforce their intimacy but, rather, will render it impossible through decapitation. His inability to comprehend this appears throughout, notably in the following tense exchange which the husband begins:

> "The *ribbon*."
> "The ribbon is not a secret; it's just mine."
> "Were you born with it? Why your throat? Why is it green?"
> I do not answer. He is silent for a long minute. Then,
> "A wife should have no secrets."
> My nose grows hot. I do not want to cry.
> "I've given you everything you have asked for," I say. "Am I not allowed this one thing?"
> "I want to know."
> "You think you want to know," I say, "but you don't."
> "Why do you want to hide it from me?"
> "I'm not hiding it. It just isn't yours." (20-21)

The movement from the language of secrets to the language of exchanging ("I've given everything you have asked for") and possessing ("It just isn't yours") signals the disconnect between husband and wife. For him, the bodily secret—and indeed the body it modifies—is a thing to be known and possessed, is knowledge his wife will not give him. For her, it is a lived condition that requires mitigating through negotiation, give and take, and reciprocity. His expectation of a unidirectional transfer of thingness against her dynamic navigation of condition underscores larger misalignments in regard to each other's very existence: she functions as an object of and for his desire, she must work to

retain her subjective sovereignty. The ribbon's significance, then, straddles corporeal and subjective realms as it functions as a fetish of race.

While the ribbon's coloring suggests the color of racial difference, it operates as a point of persistent distraction for the husband, one he is unable to solve, resolve, and disavow, while for his wife, it is a constant burden requiring mediation and negotiation, permanent in its presence and impact. Far more than a piece of cloth performing a practical duty of keeping head and neck together, it is the point around which bodily autonomy and subjective agency intersect and conflate, always just eluding the husband's prying questions and wandering fingers. It is also that which marks the protagonist as unwhole, obscure, and unknowable, signaling a disruption to incorporation. These tensions surrounding bodily limits and fleshy manipulation call to mind the work of scholar Michelle Stephens, whose *Skin Acts: Race, Psychoanalysis, and the Black Male Performer* (2014) explores performance of the 20th century to locate racial and sexual difference on the level of the skin. Drawing from psychoanalysis and critical race theories, Stephens emphasizes how skin functions as a "boundary between self and world that serves as both an entryway to the outside world and an enclosure of interior space" (1).

The critic elaborates this idea by exploring both instrapsychic and intersubjective relations. The first refers to a process of conversion and manipulation through which one subject's "objects, fantasies, constitutional drives, and projections" come to turn "the other into an object incorporated into the subject, producing incorporative forms of identification between self and other" (9). Operating on the level of the psychic, incorporation and modification remain unchecked, involved in the very same process of

deadening on account of racial difference that Machado encapsulates through rendering collective. This differs from the intersubjective relation where "one [] cannot be fully reduced to object status." Precisely because of the materiality of the skin—a boundary, a limit, an irreducible border, "the like subject is that other who can neither be fully assimilated nor eradicated and destroyed in the subject's efforts to individuate and distinguish him or herself." As Stephens powerfully declares, "[s]kin is resistance to incorporation" (9). Curiously for Machado, however, skin is not the only surface to achieve this. As the husband's insistence flags, and as the many scenes of sex, penetration, and subservience suggest, the materiality of flesh no longer poses as firm an intersubjective boundary precisely because it is the thing through which the husband manipulates his wife towards a sex object of heightened pleasure. It is a substance that poses little interruption to his conceiving of her as a complete, already known totality.

The ribbon, however, operates differently, signaling incompleteness, obscurity, and impenetrability and in that way, resists the husband's attempts to render his wife whole and known. With this in mind, the structure of the husband and wife's exchange above enacts attempts to render intrapsychic and deflections towards the intersubjective. "A wife should have no secrets" can be read as "A wife should not *be* a secret;" the wife's response of "it just isn't yours" can be read as "I am just not yours." At the same time, it is the ribbon that facilitates the continued relationship between the narrator-protagonist and the reader, a relationship that is kept secret from the husband and, in that way, functions as a source of structural difference that imbues her with more complexity than the other characters. That the significance of the ribbon remains a known secret—known not only to the nostalgic reader who recalls the ribbon's function from the original

intertext, but to the attentive reader in dialogue with the narrator—relegated to the realm of unspeakability further parallels the place of race within a social fabric characterized by colorblindness. It is both present and visible, integral in determining the contours of subjectivity, and the source of feelings like frustration and mistrust, but is and remains removed from speech. In an age of colorblindness, omnipresent race remains tangled in secret and silence.

This dispute gets enacted in a more physical way during the scene where the protagonist gives birth, affording us the opportunity to think the ribbon alongside flesh as a boundary of subjective impenetrability as we prefigure the discussion about Latina motherhood that comes in the following chapter's reading of Manuel Muñoz. After twenty hours of labor, the doctors consider delivering the protagonist's baby through a cesarean section, a procedure the expectant narrator very much wants to avoid. While the doctor winks at the husband after this proposition, gesturing to how bypassing a natural birth bodes well for his sexual pleasure, the woman pleads in her head with the baby and it works: "Little One is born twenty minutes later" (16). A ribbon-less boy is born, but not without a type of incision the protagonist wanted to escape. She reflects: "They do have to make a cut, but not across my stomach as I had feared. The doctor draws his scalpel down instead, and I feel little, just tugging, though perhaps it is what they have given me" (16). It is in the moments after birth that the husband affirms his wife's place as a means to desire and the story gets its title. As the doctor moves to sew the cut, the husband inquires about the husband stitch, a colloquial reference to not just repairing but tightening the vagina for increased male sexual pleasure. The protagonist drifts out of consciousness as the men discuss what they can and might do to her un-consenting body:

> They take the baby so that they may fix me where they cut. They give me something that makes me sleepy, delivered through a mask pressed gently to my mouth and nose. My husband jokes around with the doctor as he holds my hand.
>
> "How much to get that extra stitch?" he asks. "You offer that, right?"
>
> "Please," I say to him. But it comes out slurred and twisted and possibly no more than a small moan. Neither man turns his head toward me.
>
> The doctor chuckles. "You aren't the first—"
>
> I slide down a long tunnel, and then surface again, but covered in something heavy and dark, like oil. I feel like I am going to vomit.
>
> "—the rumor is something like—"
>
> "—like a vir—" (17)

Although the husband's disinterest in his wife's well-being and the allusions to rape are clear and unnerving, this scene ultimately serves to augment the importance of the green ribbon. Try though he might, the husband can neither insert himself (literally) behind the ribbon nor (figuratively) by knowing what it signifies, despite his ability to manipulate, create, and change the contours of his wife's body in its most intimate, interior areas. While the husband stitch is for the husband, it is not the *husband's* stitch—it does not belong to the husband. In this sense, the physical intimacy the husband enjoys with the protagonist's body does not include the subjective interiority that the ribbon—the wife's stitch, if you will—marks and the protagonist maintains, even though his request for the husband stitch brings him to the literal borders of his wife's interior. Linking this to the advent of colorblindness and in line with Machado's other characters going incorporeal, we can affirm that skin is no longer the surface that presents a barrier of refusal to manipulation or incorporation, but rather a series of material objects like green ribbons and elaborate gowns. In effect, the husband here discovers the limits of his penetration: the ribbon keeps the protagonist a protagonist and not a sex object. Though just a narrow, strand of green threads, it is the representable surface of difference that distinguishes the protagonist from an otherwise normative husband-subject, wife-object relationship.

The logic of colorblindness, then, not only prohibits the social currency of racial difference in order to maintain structural racism, but it also renegotiates the relationship between flesh, skin, and the material in direct relation to subjects and objects. With an eye to both "Real Women Have Bodies" and "The Husband Stitch," we see how flesh—what Stephens names as "before the scratchings of discourse" (4), "the body [sitting] on the very edge, on the underside, of the symbolic order, pre-symbolic and pre-linguistic, just before words and meaning have yet to seal it away" (3)—is not just prone to violent processes and encounters like disappearing and genital mutilation, but the means through which violent encounters render certain subjects into objects of majoritarian control. Continuing, we see how the political significance of skin has been downshifted, such that its capacity to insist on intersubjective relations waivers before an increasingly pervasive inclination towards intrapsychic object relations. What emerges, then, is a series of objects—elaborate dresses and colored ribbons—associated with actions like sewing and tying that come to be the means through which subjects of difference, split apart along lines of race, gender, and sexuality, constitute a coherent social form. We must look to the realm of objecthood to find the ethnoracial subjects of our literary critique. Literary accounts like Machado's—the weaving of a tale, so to speak, stand to be the new labor that makes this possible, stitching line by line the aestheticized manifestations of unspeakable, faded difference and the new epistemological skins of unrepresentable subjects we might read.

Dead is the New Live: Colorblindness and Shifting Forms of Control

"The Husband Stitch" begins with a set of polite instructions more reminiscent of theatrical scripts than short stories. Setting the scene in terms of voice and tone, the opening lines offer up a series of performance notes about the central literary figures of the story:

> (If you read this story out loud, please use the following voices:
> ME: as a child, high-pitched, forgettable; as a woman, the same.
> THE BOY WHO WILL GROW INTO A MAN, AND BE MY SPOUSE: robust with serendipity.
> MY FATHER: kind, booming; like your father, or the man you wish was your father.
> MY SON: as a small child, gentle, sounding with the faintest of lisps; as a man, like my husband.
> ALL OTHER WOMEN: interchangeable with my own.) (3)

Quite clearly, the passage unevenly distributes the effects of characterization: the men are poignantly nuanced, robust, and intimate, while the women are generic on account of their gender. Shrill and forgettable, and perpetually interchangeable, these feminine figures appear to operate in deference to their masculine counterparts as unnamed literary objects contrasting man, boy, father, and spouse—subjects defined through their relationality to other subjects and, indeed, the world. In laying bare the sexist double standards of masculinist logics, Machado gestures to how processes of knowing influence and prefigure the dialogic distribution of subjectivity and objecthood. To take Machado's terms, feminine characters are deemed collectively interchangeable and forgettable because they are presumed known—all women are the same—while the male characters' existences are enriched with dynamism and transformation, vitality and relationality, and desire. Womanhood, then, is predicated on the belief that not only this subject, but all subjects signifying womanhood, are one and the same, therefore allowing their actions

and motivations, interiority and corporality to be presumed, prescribed, and, as Latinx theorist Antonio Viego calls it, deadened. The interchangeability of Machado's narrator-protagonist is problematically justified, her forgettability forged by the presumption that there are and will be many others like her.

This section looks to the evolving meanings of the terms life and death to offer an account for why this performative interchangeability, once theorized through the burden of liveness, now operates as a form of psychic deadness. While life and death most immediately denote literal, biological states of living and not living, they have also appeared throughout a genealogy of queer of color critique to diagnose and intervene on the perceptions, expectations, and limitations put to ethnoracial subjects. I begin by engaging José Esteban Muñoz's notion of the burden of liveness to contextualize how liveness was a performative display of difference, limited in time and space by majoritarian expectations—indeed, anything but enlivening. Following in this similar tradition is Viego's more recent theory of deadening, which, while perhaps truer to its name, is not entirely dissimilar from Muñoz's liveness, as it signals the prefiguration of ethnoracial subjectivity in perhaps more affective, less performative ways. I indict the advent of the racial politics of colorblindness in explaining this shift from liveness to deadness in their spatial, temporal, and affective dimensions, and close with a brief look to ways in which Machado's writing captures in form psycho-affective deadening. That Machado presents these examples in terms of gendered difference while Muñoz and Viego theorize them primarily in terms of race and ethnicity is neither a distinction to be brushed over nor an insurmountable disjunction, but instead affirms this project's central thesis that the substance and language of race is mediated through gender and sexuality.

Muñoz's now seminal *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (1999) outlines how subjects on the fringes of racial and sexual mainstreams deconstruct and resignify normative culture for their own uses in their own ways. Central to these acts of disidentifying, then, are not only generative acts of shifting a "dominant cultural logic from within" (11), but also the exposure of the very maneuverings of dominant cultural logics—the processes that result in its dominant culturality. Muñoz names one of these maneuvers the burden of liveness, and, learning from and elaborating on the performances of his many subjects of analysis like Carmelita la Tropicana, Marga Gómez, and Vaginal Creme Davis, ultimately theorizes ethnic, racial difference in terms of performativity. In this way, the burden of liveness comes to signal "a particular hegemonic mandate that calls the minoritarian subject to 'be live' for the purposes of entertaining elites" (188). Muñoz continues, describing it as

> a cultural imperative within the majoritarian public sphere that denies subalterns access to larger channels of representation, while calling the minoritarian subject to the stage, performing her or his alterity as a consumable local spectacle. […] Some performances are structured through historically embedded cultural mandates that the body of color, the queer body, the poor body, the women's body perform his or her existence for elite eyes. This performance is positioned within the dominant culture as a substitute for historical and political representation. (188)

Seen through this lens, liveness and the conditions of life are modified away from the instinctual conviction that being alive is good. Blurring biological life with a perversely contrived psychosocial life for subalterns, and undoubtedly drawing terminology from the context of a live show in front of a live audience, Muñoz highlights the cultural imperative that requires the performance of a marked existence—marked by race, sexuality, class, and gender—for a majoritarian, normative audience, and in doing so,

further highlights an unfoundedly imbalanced set of expectations and requirements deployed along channels of difference. This performative process pandering to and short-circuited by cis-heteromasculine classism effectively squeezes certain subjects into confines prescribed by majoritarian expectation. Liveness lives only in that performative moment that condenses collectives into individual bodies, truncates histories into mere minutes, and reduces worlds to the small space of a stage. In this sense, the very terms of living are neither above nor beyond corruptibility and manipulation by straight white male supremacy.

The burden of liveness reminds us of the need to interrogate the conditions of life and how they become corrupted to emerge more akin to death. After all, a subject burdened with liveness not only lacks the spatial, temporal, and affective range of a normative white subject, but, by extension, ceases to be a subject with and of history, a subject with place and space, and a subject capable of negotiating their own desires, dispositions, and sensations. Unsurprisingly, these conditions have persisted since Muñoz's penning of *Disidentifications*, but now are apprehended through a language less organized around life and liveness and more explicitly invested in death. More specifically, Antonio Viego brings about this shift with his *Dead Subjects: Toward a Politics of Loss in Latino Studies* (2007). Before entering into closer discussion with Viego's work, I move to argue that the change from liveness to deadness is not only a shift in conceptual names. Instead, it is the indication of an evolving racial landscape that removes the very language of race from legal and everyday discourse, thereby disappearing the axes of race along which Muñoz's subjects were burdened with a constraining, distorting liveness.

In discussing the disappearance of race from language and discourse, I am referring to the advent of racial colorblindness born from legal studies. While the conviction that US law is blind to color can be traced back to Supreme Court Justice John Marshall Harlan's dissent of the 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* ruling, recent critical race scholarship affirms colorblindness in its contemporary iterations does the opposite, facilitating the maintenance of white supremacy. As scholar Ian Haney López writes, "under colorblindness race is only skin color; it is not a categorical system constructed over a long history of group-based exploitation. Racism is any and every use of race; it has nothing to do with the imposition or defense of racial hierarchy" (2010: 824). Power, Haney López continues, is deployed "to attack racial remediation and simultaneously defend embedded racism. It defends racial injustice directly, for instance by insisting that massive racial disparities are 'not racism.' And it does so indirectly, and perhaps ultimately more powerfully, by providing cover for racial stereotypes expressed in cultural and behavioral terms, for example through imagery of minorities as criminals" (2011: 817). For a politics of racial colorblindness, then, race is problematically removed from content and language, rendered mute through metaphors of culture and behavior, and sidelined as a problem of the past. This removal of race, by extension, removes the very notion of a racialized subject and collapses the racist (in addition to classist, sexist, and misogynistic) terms of burdening liveness. In other words, if ethnoracialized subjects do not exist, they cannot be kept alive; if they cannot be kept alive, the must be kept dead.

For Viego, deadening assumes both affective and temporal dimensions, though the scholar elaborates them in relation to Lacanian psychoanalysis instead of queer of

color performance. Melding desire and time, Viego draws parallels between the structures of Latinx stereotypes and the anticipatory and retroactive logics of the signifying chain—the idea that I think I know what this sentence is about (anticipation), but that it's only confirmed once I arrive at the end (retroactive justification). Viego writes: "The temporality of Latino unfolds according to first an anticipation of knowledge about the ethnic-racialized subject and then a retroactive determination, post-hailing, which insists on already having known that knowledge" (21), where such logics are founded in the idea that such ethnoracialized subjects are capable of being totally and transparently known. In addition to seeing how anticipatory and retroactive knowledge works to solidify the presumed contours of Latinidad, the Latinx subject in question—the one subjected to these violent prescriptions and justifications—finds no room for the articulation of, enactment on, or engagement with inherent desire. This affective predetermination of what a subject might want, need, think, or be like, for Viego, effectively renders them dead. Deadening becomes the erasure of a subject's desire as it is folded into a preestablished script of existence written by a majoritarian elite.

Queer Latinx critique, then, forges a genealogy from the burden of liveness to deadness as the modes it studies are altered. To be clear, I am not suggesting that the queer of color performance Muñoz discusses no longer takes the stage or that it pales as a site of critical inquiry, nor am I arguing that the anticipatory and retroactive determination of subjectivity that Viego explores is a recent invention. However, the rooting of colorblind racial discourse necessitates a shift in the articulation of majoritarian expectation that Muñoz discusses. If all mention of race is disappeared from appropriate legal, social, and interpersonal proceedings and interactions, then it can no

longer remain a central axis through which to generate explicit expectations for minoritized subjects, let alone persist as the core of an exaggerated and staged performance of difference. As a result, the burden of liveness during the age of colorblindness becomes deadening—an extension of Muñoz's critique now nuanced to the advent of colorblindness. The taxing performance of liveness is rearticulated as the systematic predetermination of desire and knowledge when embodied racial difference can no longer occupy the spotlight. The means to control, then, leave behind deviations from dominant cultural practices, turning away from perceived skin color, racial projections, and evidence of minoritized ethnicity. Control turns to that which is beyond the scope of colorblindness and post-racial liberalism: not who and what subjects are, but how. Colorblindness turns the stage into predetermined scripts of desire and morphs performance into the knowledge of self-sustaining essentialisms only. The burden lies not in a fleeting moment of theatrically racialized flaunting, but in components of subjectivity that are predetermined, anticipated, and retroactively confirmed through stunted relationality as emotional contours and coordinates that are staked and vehemently upheld.

While I have already signaled the advent of colorblindness as a possible central cause in theorizing this extension, it also bears investigating what larger intellectual shifts might come of it. After all, if the burden of liveness now enacts deadening, then the prescription of desire and emotional qualities continues to enact, as Muñoz writes, "a substitute for historical and political representation," though perhaps with less theatricality. Continuing, if deadening has signified rendering the individual into a monolithic, static collective, and if the burden of liveness effectively viewed an entire

collective performed through a burdened individual, then rendering can occur as a multidirectional tactic set on refusing the existence of subjects of nuance, dynamism, and self-sameness by subscribing to ideas of interchangeability, dilution, and superficiality. If subjects of difference can be rendered collective and collectives of difference can be rendered individual, then deadening occurs on multiple levels to make minoritized subjects of difference into paradoxes that challenge notions of existence all together—the performing dead, the live deadened. It crams the nuance of infinitely dynamic beings into one as it erases the difference between individual and collective altogether.

Machado apprehends the prescription of being in literary form through repeated references to wives' tales, or brief stories born from urban legend, folklore, and superstition that revolve around expectations of chaste feminine behavior, tragedy at the expense of explorative and curious young women, and horror stories of marriage and maternity gone wrong. These appear on at least ten occasions in the text to enrich whatever experience the protagonist recounts. Because none appear with clear origins and are presented as malleable and fluid (the protagonist even confesses to their multiple, contested, or unresolved conclusions), we can situate these stories as part of a tradition where the very parameters of subjectivity are created, circulated, and kept alive through the act of narration. In other words, there is no apparent relation between the tales and a concrete referent, like an event or a living person. Veracity is not their purpose; they operate through a certain type of desired effect instead of convincing factualness and display a commitment to influence over truth to deaden subjects into normative social relations. In one moment, the protagonist acknowledges this by equating rain drops to women and wives' tales to a pond. It reads:

> There is a story about a woman who goes into labor when the attending physician is tired. There is a story about a woman who herself was born too early. There is a story about a woman whose body clung to her child so hard they cut her to retrieve him. There is a story about a woman who heard a story about a woman who birthed wolf cubs in secret. When you think about it, stories have this way of running together like raindrops in a pond. Each is borne from the clouds separate, but once they have come together, there is no way to tell them apart.

While the image of raindrops meeting in a pond most readily parallel the timeless, de-spatialized stories blending and flowing together, they also literalize the structural movement from subjectivity to objecthood, from dynamism and desire to forgettable interchangeability. Of particular importance, however, is the relationship between this deadening and the narrative, broadly speaking. After all, these tales recount the transference not only from individual to collective (from raindrop to pond), but also from life to legend. Unlike the narrator, who retains an active place of literary agency and subjectivity, these stories make literary objects out of once-live individuals. The women "go incorporeal," albeit in a different way, and remain as zombies and ghosts that are deployed through storytelling in order to narrow the ontological path their peers and descendants seeking life must travel. The only existence worth recording and recounting is one that conforms to dominant frameworks or normative relationality.

This is enacted on a more detailed level in one instance, where we read "about a girl dared by her peers to venture into a local graveyard after dark. This was her folly: when they told her that standing on someone's grave at night would cause the inhabitant to reach up and pull her under, she scoffed. Scoffing is the first mistake a woman can make" (Machado 9). The tale continues: the girl declares her bravery, intent on disproving her friends despite the narrator's warnings that "Pride is the second mistake." She enters the graveyard with a knife to stick into the ground as proof that she completed

her mission, but, blinded in the darkness, accidentally "pin[s] the sturdy wool of her skirt to the earth. Dead of fright or exposure, would it matter when the parents arrived?" The narrative voice goes on to warn: "Afterward, everyone believed she had wished to die, even though she had died proving that she wanted to live. As it turns out, being right was the third, and worst, mistake" (10). The deadening (both the girl's physical death and the death of her will) is evident: scoffing, defying, and blindly stabbing are perilous deviations from a predetermined script of socially acceptable behavior at the same time that, temporally, what was anticipated (her being pulled to the underworld) is retroactively confirmed. Using the imagery above, the girl dissipates into a pond of sameness that exchanges life for legend. What appears in this example with novelty, however, is how pride and bravery (as embodied emotions) and being right (as a disposition, an emotional conviction) contribute to such dubious ends. That these emotions operate in tandem with certain behaviors evidences the existence of emotionally predetermined registers inside whose boundaries certainly marked subjects must operate. Frameworks of knowing constructed a priori radiate into and contour the emotional dimensions that determine, substantiate, and sustain existence in cultural imaginaries. In short, to be a certain way means feeling and not feeling certain things; gendered, sexual, and racialized identities comes with emotional parameters. What was once explicitly racist control is recast as the policing of ladylike behavior, feminine disposition, and a politics of legibility.

Parenthetical Resistance; Or, Living Between and Beyond the Lines

If the previous section highlights shifting theoretical models apprehending the controlling machinations of white, cis-hetero normativity targeting minoritized subjectivities and rendering them dead through prescribed relationality and desire, then this section looks to possible sites of response and resistance that work to forestall and stave off deadening. Like the section above, this interrogation responds to formal innovation in Machado's "The Husband Stitch" at the same time it presupposes that the shift from burdening liveness to paralyzing deadness runs parallel to the expansion and development of enacted resistance and theoretical models equipped to register it. As I will argue, it is by cleaving space out of the main narrative—by parenthetically bracketing herself off from, for example, her husband and facilitating direct address the reader—that the narrative voice reappropriates a performative narrative modality that, instead of fettering her with liveness, creates conditions of dynamism and feeling that escape and exceed prescription and control. I read these as literary affects intent on preserving desire that model a mode of relationality grounded in the present (instead of contested or reductive history and futurity) and corporeality (instead of, to recall Stephens, intrapsychic subjectivity).

Operating in contradistinction to the story's prescriptive wives' tales are recurring parenthetical instructions to the reader that approach an off-the-pageness of performance. To contextualize, these parenthetical interruptions appear throughout the text and are always related to the narrative events unfolding. In that way, they introduce a dimension of orality and corporeality rarely found in short stories (a nod to the narrative tactics of Alvin Schwartz's anthology *Scary Stories to Tell in the Dark*, as Machado has affirmed

in her notes to the online Kindle version of the text.) Here, however, they function as a break in the narrative fourth wall. While, at first glance, it appears as though the story brackets off certain parts of the text from the reader, they in fact function as direct lines of communication with the reader: the brackets allow the narrator to outline what to do (in voice and action, like the scene that begins this chapter) and how to perform (in tone and movement) that which, by nature of its intensity and corporeality, exceeds reading. By signaling the creation of contexts, (dis)positions, and relations that are intense, contingent, and ephemeral, Machado transgresses conventional short story forms.

Memorable examples include the following: "(If you are reading this story out loud, give a paring knife to your listeners and ask them to cut the tender flap of skin between your index finger and thumb. Afterward, thank them.)" (16); "(If you are reading this story out loud, prepare a can full of pennies. When you arrive at this moment, shake it loudly in the face of the people closest to you.)" (21); "(If you are reading this story out loud, force a listener to reveal a devastating secret, then open the nearest window to the street and scream it as loudly as you are able.)" (23). While these augment the narrative at hand, their structuring as direct comments from the narrator to the reader preserves an important space of difference where they do not seek to recreate an experience. Rather, they suggest the creation of one that parallels the narrator's inhabited contexts, but transmuted onto the reader, includes dynamics, places, agents, bodies, and sensations that can never be known or even imagined. What's more, these commands to cut flesh, shake cans, and (among others) shout secrets function as radical demands for the creation of an immediately lived condition that inverts or betrays social and corporeal scripts. In this sense, the unknowability of the conditions in which unfamiliar actions may or may not

take place load the parenthetical commands with a potential that far exceeds the conditions under which the narrator originally issued the command.

On one level, the parenthetical dictations introduce a corporeal, audiovisual, quasi-theatrical narrative manner that deviates from the wives' tale modality by signaling dynamism that exceeds linguistic capture and sociocultural expectation. It is important to note that this is achieved through language, though it uses linguistic structures to exceed social convention instead of buttressing it. On another level, the structuring of the dictation in the imperative mode functions to facilitate the exercising of desire: the reader will shake a can of pennies if they want, the reader will not shake the can if they do not. In breaking the narrative fourth wall in this way, the narrator enacts agency through dictation at the same time her imperatives engender conditions of desire, intensity, and whim off the page and away from her text. For the protagonist, who at most other times in the text is grappling with the controlling machinations of her presumed equal characters (namely husband, father, and son), they are fleeting but powerful moments where she can dictate and instruct the reader to move beyond and away from the textual world that, through language and characterization, seeks to reinstate power dialectics of limitation and control. She shifts her place within the husband's power dialectic to create a parallel one grounded in the enactment of desire over its squashing, or in suggestion over necessity, movement over stasis, and release over capture. She surpasses the position of literary object and flirts with a heightened dimensionality to approximate personhood, if only in a paper realm. In short, the parenthesis enliven.

The new forms of relationality this tactic of bracketing encodes sharply contrasts the forms and impacts of the deadening wives' tales discussed above. If the tales operate

with collectively legible significance, the parentheses signal dalliances with the unknown that, instead of operating as a metric for the types of existences worthy of literary longevity, chart intensities between and among subjects and objects. Even without marking two second time lapses, galvanic skin response, or electrodermal activity, we find ourselves before the literary manifestation of affect precisely because of the contingency, unchartedness, and becomingness of the parentheses. It occurs in such a way so as to precede, circumvent, and collapse pre-established scripts of meaning and continuity, far from the husband's penetrating maneuvers and anticipatory and retroactively knowing logics. In this light, I read Machado's literary affect as the signal of a line of flight from the culturally circulated, anticipated, and expectant modes of being, acting, and feeling. Bringing us to the limits of the literary, Machado's affect resides in breaks, twists, and deviations, in moving to the window, in slicing hands, in shaking cans, because it operates with and by an emergent, virtual vitality.

If the wives' tales and parenthesis are presented as formal counterpoints, and if one deadens through emotion while the other enlivens through affect, then affect immediately appears as a counter-normative, antihegemonic entity in and of itself. I do not think this is case. After all, the emotion-affect dichotomy, as articulated and popularized by theorist Brian Massumi (2002), is a relatively recent distinction that posits emotion as "intensity owned and recognized" (28) and affect as "not ownable or recognizable and is thus resistant to critique." From there emerge different conceptual relations to signification, subjectivity, and the social, where emotion is organized into "semantically and semiotically formed progressions, into narrativizable action-reaction circuits, into function and meaning," while affect remains "autonomous to the degree to

which it escapes confinement in the particular body whose vitality, or potential for interaction, it is" (35). While Massumi's distinctions (one of many within affect theory) offer generative frames for perceiving and discussing seemingly imperceptible, unarticulatable concepts, they are certainly not categorical definitions of things in and of themselves. In this reading, then, emotion and affect operate best as different points on a spectrum of sensorium directly linked to language, subjectivity, perception, sensation, and critique. Affect is not preordained to dismantle any system or hierarchy of power or oppression (indeed, it is often at work maintaining them), but facilitates an approximation to the structures and forms these systems and hierarchies might take.

In this sense, the wives' tales populating Machado's story do not just contain emotions; they are structured as them, too. The lived and felt dynamics they signify are defined by their transmutation into a form that operates with clarity and legibility between and among subjects. The specificity of their causes falls to the wayside as their co-constructed social value moves across and connects bodies and subjects, contexts, and time. They evince how subjectivity requires sociolinguistic fixing in order to foster shared intelligibility across socially formed collectives. Similar to how Justin Torres' protagonist grappled with notions of masculinity and manliness to mediate fraught race relations, so is the notion of a bad girl defined by the co-construction of badness and girlness at the same time the legibility of these notions structure and organize the collective assigning bad girls as such. By contrast, the parenthetical commands towards performance do not contain any uncorrupted, antiracist, or anti-misogynistic content. In its place, they structure radical moments of rupture that eschew these premeditated terms of relationality. Instead of recounting the intensities of dangerously unladylike behavior,

they demand the creation of an immediately lived condition where lady and ladylike are inverted and rejected.

The appearance of a subversive mode of relationality, apprehended through affect-as-structure, does not remain on an exclusively aesthetic, literary level. At one point in Machado's text, we see the protagonist engage a woman she desires through a series of interpersonal interactions that are retain the possibility of liveness for that woman, instead of rendering her dead. Creating a spectator-spectacle dynamic evocative of Muñoz's objects of study, the protagonist attends a figure drawing class for women and soon begins to fixate on one model in particular: "one woman returns over and over. Her ribbon is red, and is knotted around her slender ankle. Her skin is the color of olives, and a trail of dark hair runs from her bellybutton to her mons" (22). While the model does not perform in the same way Muñoz's burdened entertainers do, and while Machado's protagonist does not function as Muñoz's majoritarian audience, the two contexts run parallel by centering a gazing subject, a seen body, and the attendant questions of power and perspective: "I know that I should not want her, not because she is a woman and not because she is a stranger, but because it is her job to disrobe, and I feel shame taking advantage of such a state" (22).

Machado's protagonist, it would seem, begins to grapple with the power dynamics of painting a nude object and wanting the naked subject, ones that structurally mimic the power dynamics Muñoz conjures in his description of othered subjects baring all for an elite, white audience. Interestingly, the narrator's discomfort in creating this situation and wanting more from it corresponds to the anxieties a contemporary subject of colorblindness might have when in a similar situation, where a confrontation with visible

discrepancy is less palatable than its less visible, structural manifestations. The emergent queerness of the scene complicates this by threatening to turn the desired subject into a sex object—into an intrapsychic fantasy: "[A]s my pencil traces her contours, so does my hand in the secret recesses of my mind." The introduction of queer sexual tension is reminiscent of theorist Kaja Silverman's (2003) notion of "girl love," or a kind of retroactive resurgence of the girl infant's libidinal investments in (a figure like) her mother. Silverman warns, however, that this love is neither independent nor altogether different from straight love, since the psychic recovery involved in "girl love enables a new kind of heterosexuality" (19). The figure model woman of intrigue risks becoming just a figure confined to a stool-sized stage.

When the protagonist asks her to coffee, however, we see the emergence of what we might call enlivening relationality, with the narrator checking at every turn her overdetermined position as seer and knower. Casually talking of home life, the protagonist's commitment to refusing to burden appears in questions that are asked and unasked, in some knowledge that is learned and some that is recognized as unlearnable. She recounts it as follows:

> We do not discuss the specific fears of raising a girl-child. Truthfully, I am afraid to even ask. I also do not ask her if she's married, and she does not volunteer the information. […] I desperately want to know what state of need has sent her to disrobe before us, but perhaps I do not ask, because the answer would be [] too frightening to forget. […] I am captivated by her, there is no other way to put it. There is something easy about her, but not easy the way I was—the way I am. She's like dough, how the give of it beneath kneading hands disguises its sturdiness, its potential. When I look away from her and then look back, she seems twice as large as before. (22-23)

Instead of presuming or even asking, the protagonist listens. Instead of prying or guessing, she lets things go unsaid. While this scene might appear markedly different

from a parenthetical imperative to slice your hand or shout secrets, it similarly brackets space for another subject without demanding they fill it. Difference, distance, and dynamism are registered and retained without invasion, lust, or exertion. Perhaps most representative of the narrator's refusal to burden appears with the equation of the woman to dough. Instead of relishing in or acting on the model's apparent malleability—her capacity for being shaped and manipulated, the narrator emphasizes the woman's substance, her sturdy resistance, the endless possibilities she contains that will forever elude a baker's hands, an artist's brush, and an enamored suitor's daydreams.

In short, the protagonist does not burden the model with liveness because of the critical, self-reflective positioning and relationality she assumes and cultivates by asking and not asking. The disruption of burdening, however, is not the penning and posing of smart questions. It is, instead, a critical praxis more deeply invested in knowing one's relationship to a subject instead of knowing (both attempting and presuming to know) said subject. Expectation is upended as liveness operates differently not based on different modes, but on different critical positions engaging those modes. In other words, a performative mode of liveness has no predilection towards burdening or unburdening: Muñoz's performance outlines a weapon of reduction and limitation that pretends the stage is equivalent to a represented place in social and historical discourse, whereas Machado's parenthetical performances signal a radical departure from expectation and rendering. For one, expectation demands something be performed, and that something is liveness; for the other, liveness emerges to confound expectations of deadening on account of identitiarian reductionism. It is the drastically dissimilar approaches undergirding these modes that tips the scales: one is fueled by the majoritarian belief that

an exaggerated staging of non-normativity (in its racial, gendered, and sexed dimensions) transparently and unquestionably captures the depth and breadth of existence. The other is sustained by a commitment to approaching or approximating existence in its dynamic negotiations of structures of power and in ephemeral, emergent intensities.

Paranoia, Melancholy, Dissociation: Who or What Gets Repaired?

As the reader will recall, "The Husband Stitch" ends with the husband untying his wife's green ribbon. The narrator confesses how, after resisting her husband's prying and penetrating fingers for pages and years, "Resolve runs out of me. I touch the ribbon. I look at the face of my husband, the beginning and end of his desires all etched there. […] 'Then,' I say, 'do what you want" (30). The scene continues from the penultimate page of the text until the very end, recounting the long-awaited untying: "With trembling fingers, he takes one of the ends. The bow undoes, slowly, the long-bound ends crimpled with habit. My husband groans, but I do not think he realizes it. He loops his finger through the final twist and pulls. The ribbon falls away. It floats down and curls on the bed, or so I imagine, because I cannot look down to follow its descent." The scene undoes what, for pages, had remained together against all odds and, despite its anticipation, confronts the reader with a series of questions provocatively unresolved at the story's end: how do we read this untying, in light of the political and psychic potential I have assigned to the ribbon? Is the split subject (whose dissociation here has assumed an exaggerated literalness) in need of repair? How do previous reparative modes operate in an age of colorblindness where ethnoracial subjects are deadened into certain objecthood, and what might this do for race as relation?

To begin, remaining alive for the narrator would, of course, have required the maintenance of her head on her shoulders for no other reason than continuing to embody a legible form of existence. For all we know, head and neck were never one; their appearance of unity and the corporeal cohesion the ribbon afforded her, however, never brought this dynamic to the foreground until her undoing. Becoming dead, too, would have necessitated an abrupt end in narration the moment the ribbon was untied. The continuity of narrative material—recounting how the husband's face falls away, how the ceiling and wall come into and pass out of vision, how a feeling of loneliness takes hold—indicates that literal death and subjective deadening have not triumphed. The intimate and enlivening relationship between the reader and the narrator perseveres, if only fleetingly, until a Borgian writing-existence elision takes hold and both end simultaneously. In fact, the loss of the narrator's head ultimately reveals that she has never inhabited a static position of life or death. Upon recognizing this decapitation as condition instead of event, the condition (at once haunting, supernatural, and pitiful) becomes an explicit, unavoidable factor that is neither recent nor short-lived: untying merely lifts the allusion of whole subjectivity, allowing us to better see Machado's protagonist as a subject divided by her difference and refused legibility by mainstream rubrics. This ultimately affirms my previous readings that Machado has moved literary projects of representation beyond the frame of unified, speaking subjecthood, instead imbuing the intersubjective relations of race, gender, and sexuality into an array of objects held together by feminine acts of domestic labor turned representation.

Continuing, it seems as if the notion of repair naturally emerges from the text's closing scene with the narrator's body draped over the bed, her head on the floor

wherever it stopped rolling, and the green ribbon dangling in the husband's hand. To better articulate who and what is need of repair, and how, however, requires a return to the story's ending paragraphs. Just before she allows her husband to pull her neck-bow apart, she addresses him directly to express her affection: "I love you," I assure him, "more than you can possibly know" (30). The threads are pulled and the climax arrives, and with it, a shift not only in body weight but in narrative directionality as the narrator appears to address the reader: "If you are reading this story out loud, you may be wondering if that place my ribbon protected was wet with blood and openings, or smooth and neutered like the nexus between the leg of a doll. I'm afraid I can't tell you, because I don't know. For these questions and others, and their lack of resolution, I am sorry" (31). Following this apology, "gravity seizes me. My husband's face falls away, and then I see the ceiling, and the wall behind me. As my lopped head tips backward off my neck and rolls off the bed, I feel as lonely as I have ever been."

On a reflexive level, no party is satisfied here: the husband does not succeed in rendering his wife an object because the appearance of her subjectivity—the form of it—also falls away, while the reader does not succeed in preventing this action that so clearly evokes, if not enacts, deadening. Recognizing this shared position of disappointment between reader and husband, despite the preceding narrative strategies that kept us separated, quickly underscores the disquieting similarities between his desire to know (and deaden) and our desire to read (and enliven). As the story closes and the protagonist apologizes for the loose ends that are pulled apart instead of tied up, we come to reckon with the ways in which literary interpretation risks recreating for ethnic, racialized

subjects the very power dialectics from which an escape is sought. Or, to use Muñoz's terms, in burdening Machado's character by reading from an expectant position.

The closing scene of the text lays plain this dangerous overlap between critic and husband. Most notably in the above quote is how the refrain "if you are reading this story out loud" is repeated without the parenthesis and is followed by the acknowledgment of and apology for not knowing. This change is significant. Following my logic above, the parenthesis excludes the husband (and all he represents) from an affective, enlivening interaction between reader and narrator. The absence of parenthesis here, then, not only aligns with the events narrated—the grammatical barrier disappears with the literal one, that is, the ribbon—but it also unmoors the pronoun "you" from what had been previously a more clearly delineated referent: parenthetical you addresses the reader, non-parenthetical you addresses the husband. This recasts the previous "you" statements—"do what you want," "I love you, more than you can possibly know"—as possibly directed at us, or more specifically, at me, the reader and literary critic *and* the protagonist's spouse. In other words, the untying of the secret ribbon dissolves the distance between the intent-on-knowing husband and the critic engaged in a knowledge building project. The time of the story is no longer bracketed away from the reader-critic, but instead fuses together as we find ourselves meeting in the time of the now. This does not ameliorate any type of past—like ones overdetermined by racial hierarchies and sociopsychic machinations of control—nor does it suggest any possible future—the decapitated head is looking up from beneath the bed, not to any utopic social contract yet to come. This draws striking parallels to Plascencia's Merced de Papel, losing legible form while dissolving into a pile of pulp on the hood of a wrecked car. Instead, the

intensity of the blending of literary planes reveals that it is not Machado's headless narrator that needs repair, nor Placencia's woman of paper, but our very relationship to the racial present where ethnoracial subjects are cleaved apart and dispersed into a wide field of objects.

To recall, it was from the destruction wrought by the AIDS pandemic that one of queer theory's most influential interpretative praxes emerged: Eve K. Sedgwick's reparative reading. In her now seminal chapter "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think this Essay is about You" (2003), the theorist meaningfully builds a hermeneutical and ontological framework on the glimmers of pleasure gleaned from a generation permanently impacted by HIV. Affirming the importance of protecting the weaker affect pleasure from its subsumption into paranoia (the forestalling of pain), Sedgwick outlines how queers and queers of color might avoid forsaking pleasure to homophobic and racist systems of oppression. In light of Viego's assertion that pre-scripted desire leads to deadening, Sedgwick's insistence on keeping pleasure possible could be recast as a practice intent on keeping live without its burden. Importantly, however, Sedgwick reminds us that the reparative draws its force from a specific type of loss: when subjects disappear, processes and practices of "extracting sustenance" must turn to objects. Speaking to the specifics of queer communities during the crisis of the eighties and nineties, she elaborates: "what we can best learn from such [reparative] practices are, perhaps, the many ways selves and communities succeed in extracting sustenance from the objects of a culture – even of a culture whose avowed desire has often been to not sustain them." Simply put, when

subjects are lost, look to the objects that remain to find new points of contact, meaning, and subsistence.

Largely thanks to the work of José Muñoz, we understand how lost subjects become objects of sustenance and resistance, or how to find political potential in Sedgwick's modes of redress that would otherwise be classified as pathology. Situating melancholic queers of color in a space between militancy and mourning, Muñoz re-appropriates Freud's original argument that paints melancholia as a problematic inability to construe loss. A depathologized iteration of this, however, emerges as "an ambivalent structure of feeling that works to retain the problematic [lost] object and tap into the energies that are produced by contradictions and ambivalences" (71). Whereas mourning allows the ego to release the lost object, the melancholic subject remains attached to it in a way they cannot identify. Illuminating a psychic dimension to disidentification, Muñoz affirms that, in this way, "a subject [can look] at an image that has been constructed to exploit and deny identity and instead finds pleasure, both erotic and self-affirming," (72). Echoing Sedgwick's insistence on keeping the portals to pleasure open, melancholic disidentification arises from the contradictions of attraction and repulsion, interest and disinterest, and ultimately signals a perdurable paradigm where the finality to mourning is deemed impossible for "lives that are either/or/and black and queer" and vulnerable to the systematic constancy of loss.

I indulge in reconstructing both Segwick's and Muñoz's work on repair work, reparative reading, and a queer politics of melancholia to make clear this project's debt to both scholars, but also to underscore how the remediation of our relationship to the colorblind present through and for dissociated subjects might require a new iteration and

politics of repair. After all, as Machado's headless protagonist shows us, the very notion of a subject—the kind that is lost—does not exist now as it did decades earlier before the advent of colorblindness and the inauguration of a dissociated generation. Eng and Han's work returns here to articulate how the *what* and *who* of losing has evolved between a decidedly melancholic Generation X and a dissociated Generation Y. Recalling previous discussions of their work in this project, for their theory of racial melancholia, which directly relates to "losses associated with immigration, assimilation, and racialization that cannot be easily mourned" (171), "you lift the rock of repression and you discover something underneath—a lost object, one demanding to be analyzed and interpreted. Indeed, it is the naming of this object of loss that creates identity from difference; it is the naming and narrating of the social exclusions compelling its foreclosure that creates a racial identity and racial politics in its wake." This changes with later generations as a model of racial dissociation takes hold: "in racial dissociation, we are faced not with condensation but rather with a paranoid structure of decomposition, of dispersion" explained in direct relation to the "changing structures of racial exclusion and violence under the directives of neoliberalism and globalization." As Eng and Han put it, "in racial dissociation, when you lift the rock of repression, there is nothing underneath to discover."

Just as the language of an empty rock signals a crisis of representation for Torres' protagonist in Chapter One, the absence that confronts us underneath the rock of repression in relation to Machado's work affirms the need to reformulate the forms of repair work and its attendant politics of refusal. After all, when objects constitute what used to be subjects in life, and when these dispersed objects teeter towards deadening, it

appears that neither the objects of remains exist to offer the same sustenance Sedgwick pointed to, nor remains as objects facilitate a melancholic attachment that refuses death through depathologized insistence and refusal. Because a dissociated psychoanalytical model articulates the conditions of these changes, it might also hold a psychic framework with potential for restructuring our relationship to the social. For example, as psychoanalyst Philip Bromberg reminds us in his essay on dissociation titled "Standing in the Spaces" (1996), dissociation is a natural psychic process that "allows individual self-states to function optimally (not simply defensively) when full immersion in a single reality, a single strong affect, and a suspension of one's self-reflective capacity is what is called for or wished for" (515). On occasion, it maintains personal continuity, coherence, and a sense of self; constantly, it impossibilizes unity and complicates the nourishing and narration of an authentic past and history. The operations of this, however, are altered by Eng and Han's affirmation that racial dissociation characterizes an entire generation of subjects and results from legal and social interdictions on race. In this sense, subjects find themselves with no recourse but to dissociate in order to repress racial difference in line with the terms of a majoritarian white norm. The trauma that might result certainly manifests within the subject, but does not ultimately protect the subject; instead, it is the fragile psyche of white supremacy incapable of confronting racial difference while relying on its subordination that benefits. In this way, psychoanalytical models of subjectivity and psychic maintenance illuminate the necessity of anti-racist work that parts from dissociation and seeks ways of facilitating standing in the spaces, or one's relative capacity "to make room at any given moment for subjective reality that is not readily containable by the self he experiences as 'me' at that moment" (Bromberg 516).

The political work of dissociation, then, is perhaps just another case for a renewed commitment to thorough, critical interpretation. It parts from the understanding that subjects stand in multiple spaces, not as pathological defense mechanisms, but by nature of being subjects. This is compounded by the fact that no subject is beyond the reach of gender, race, and sexuality—that the arrival of these components to and their subsequent processes on the prototypical infant are the makers and markers of subjectivity. Knowing this would make any literary, historical, or political project fixated on only one of these facets lopsided but not inhibitively so, unless it were subscribed to the majoritarian notion of complete interpellation and deadening knownness. More concretely, then, dissociation as diagnosis is reborn as dissociation as intervention as a critical call to look in the spaces for the evidence of standing. If one rock is empty, look beneath another, if only to find a strand of green thread, a shimmeringly translucent body, or the imprint of a lonely head. Importantly, by committing to look for what is not there, we do not promise to reassemble cleaved, split subjects. After all, and although we have seen the ways objects have meaningfully stitched subjects back together, we must recognize the temporariness of this suturing and how what is really adhered together is not so much a spliced psyche but an invisibilized psychic entity to a more readily apprehendable form. Instead, we might begin tracing lines between the dispersed objects that now signal experiences and processes of ethnoracial difference, minoritarian gender, and abject sexuality, ones that transgress and supersede the psychic defense mechanisms we have developed in deference to the fragile white psyche. In doing so, we might find the pleasure Sedgwick urges us to maintain, not on any utopic horizon, but in the constellations that appear above it.

Even if lifting the rock of Machado's story might reveal a severed head, it would certainly be an entity so enigmatic that it might be nothing at all. There is, after all, no clear series of linkages or social vocabularies capable of giving an account of a bodiless, aracial cranium that is gendered but devoid of a body on account of its gender, that is more a thing than a person on account of none and all of the above. Its illegibility comes from the dispersion that Eng and Han name, one that only begins to waiver if we look to what is not there—what is not under the rock, what occurs in other places, shapes, and forms: the ribbon in the husband's hand, the mess of a torso and appendages on the bed, the scarred perineum, the absent child, the cut fingers and shouted secrets, the parentheses, the husband, the father, patriarchy, racism, and more. This becomes the work of identifying and indicting the forces and structures that seek to deaden subjects like Machado's narrators, since their deadening comes from seemingly nowhere—she gave him the permission to untie the ribbon—and work on seemingly no one—if her head was never secured, who is to say the untying changed anything at all? In doing so, the action becomes more about repairing our relationship to the manifestations and operations of violent, oppressive racism, sexism, and homophobia. It requires parting from beyond the frame of visibly marked and articulated ethnoracial subjects and turning towards the forms and feelings of difference, fraught relationality, and within the structures, sensations, and systems that contour our contemporary social landscapes. Repair work of today might stand to forge new relationships, not only with the objects we study, the subjects they narrate, and the forms they take, but to ourselves as well—our critical questions, our expectations, our interpretative practices, our complicity.

Conclusion: The Presence of a Non-thing

In the same way that a melancholic politics of resistance and the work of repair do not eradicate the pervasive conditions of loss that face minoritized subjects, neither does the dissociative politics I am sketching. While that model might reorient the work of anti-racist, anti-homophobic critique away from the losing and lost subjects-rendered-objects and towards the systematic frameworks structuring the lack of spaces in which they might stand, there comes a time in the process of world making and remaking that must attend to the dispersed array of objects constituting what is and used to be subjects. It is here that I situate the literary works of Machado and others in my project as texts that stitch out of faded bodies and detached heads the forms and figures of subjects and collectives afflicted by psychic, social, and historical violence through innovative narrative forms and novel literary feelings. It is through the bracketing of convention and the re-visualizing of inherited narratives, stories, and existences that oppressive structures of relationality are rendered visible and new ones are created. In this concluding section, I look to another of Machado's stories, titled "The Resident," to affirm the work literary production enacts on our collective imaginaries, for, by, and on behalf of the ethnoracialized, queer subjects that colorblindness deems unrepresentable.

In a mode more reminiscent of memoir than the other stories I read here, "The Resident" recounts the experiences of an author, referred to as "C— M—," at a months-long artist residency in a rural part of the northeastern US. Although she ought to be preoccupied with writing her newest novel, the author spends much of her time grappling with unexplained sicknesses and rashes, feeling at odds with the other residents, and roaming the surrounding woodlands that she, coincidentally, used to frequent as a child at

Girl Scout camp. The familiarity of the space, which is, in fact, more defamiliarized (as the writer herself declares) than not, brings back flashes of her youth and seems to reinvigorate a search for self amidst and through her felt difference and queer alterity, even before and beyond knowing it as such. As a result, the work of memory blurs with literary creation, narrative tropes straddle both character and writer, and the careful delineations between reality and fiction diffuse into the fog that frequently surrounds her writing cabin. In an exceptional moment of sunshine and camaraderie, though, the writer sits for a portrait that her fellow resident and photographer Anele requests. The protagonist sheds her clothes, wraps herself in a white sheet, sits in a chair and, at Anele's command, tips over into the earth that awaits beneath her. The camera clicks away as a thunderstorm arrives and both women run back to the central building. Although she is soaked through, the writer recalls: "I felt light, airy. I laughed. […] Was this friendship? Was this how things were supposed to be? I felt that way, that I had ecstatically stumbled into happiness, and everything seemed right and correct" (195).

Feeling right and correct, however, does not last long. On the evening when all of the residents share their various artistic projects, Anele presents "C— M—" with the printed photograph. While she confesses that she "did not remember that afternoon very clearly—all the action that passed before our breathless dart across the meadow was hazy, like a watercolor painting," she is nonetheless unprepared for what she sees:

> I looked completely, irrevocably dead. My body was crumpled like [the other resident] Diego's as if I'd been sitting demurely on the chair and then shot through the heart. Several of my bandages were visible. My breast had slid out from underneath the sheet—this I did not remember—and there was nothing in my eyes. Or even worse—there was *nothingness*. Not the absence of a thing but the presence of a non-thing. I felt as if I was seeing a premonition of my own death, or a terrible memory I'd long forgotten. (201-202, original italics)

"C— M—" is, on many levels, mortified. The narrative juxtaposition of the photograph's creation—light and airy—with its reception—dead and devoid—signals a kind of meta-defamiliarization, or a moment where the artist herself ceases to be recognizable as such, where her very being is strange, nothing, unknown to even herself. In seeing yet another example of how the forms of existence available to an explicitly gendered, tacitly racialized subject are shot through with deadness, the photograph comes to represent an artistic form of capture that sets out to do the impossible by rendering object an existence that is intense, expansive, sensational, and rich.

Latinx Studies scholar Ricardo Ortiz centers on this "presence of a non-thing," tying it to the larger field of Latinx studies and the objects and subjects it analyzes and sustains. He writes that "This formulation of an active "presence of a non-thing" operates as apt a description as I, as a specialist of US Latinx literature, might desire of how latinidad courses through the corpus of textual and representational work that makes up Machado's *Body* as a collection of short fiction about which my field should want to, and hear itself called to, produce knowledge" (6). Latinidad is the non-thing with presence here, that phenomenon as present in literary text and critical discourse as that which leaves the eyes of "C— M—" with a haunting one-dimensionality. The thing that is not a thing, a presence that is not a presence, is, then, the social currency of the ontological entity Latinidad that is negotiated along with its epistemological dimensions in emerging cultural praxes that are at once artistic, historical, and political, where Machado's work is a direct conduit. It is approximated through a desire to non-thingness, a will to register the vast and expansive registers, sensations, forms, and feelings of Latinidad, and with a

presence, or the need to cohere just long enough to gesture, where the gesture establishes the means to cogent critique of structural inequalities and persistence violence at the same time it is the ends to these actions as well. We must not forget that it originates in and emanates from "C— M—" herself.

With both writer and analyst, creator and critic positing the ontology of Latinx as nothingness, we return to the need to read and feel what's not there: the feelings and forms of race and racism, the sensations of deadening relationality and the subversion of queer and intimate connection, the shifting stitchwork of Latinidad. In doing so, we not only embrace the impossibility of permanently forestalling loss for bodiless women, headless narrators, and nothinged writers, but we also articulate an investment in speculating (to use Hudson's term) the forms and feelings that such subjects approximate, given the particularly racialized structures and sentiments that exceed their representation's language and articulation. We embrace loss, life, death, and neither life nor death to look towards the potential of the parenthesis, to revel in the breaks and commands, to imagine sensation and its radical possibilities to depart from (and in that departure, rewrite) the scripts of normative existence. Overall, reading the forms and feelings of Latinidad as present nothingness promises to embrace the potential of ephemeral affect and relational identity in the face of deadening expectation. An interpretative praxis attuned to what is not there puts on the horizon the possibility of approaching, if never arriving, at the enlivened, unfolding conditions of being with an attunement to its attendant pleasures, potentials, and possibilities along the way.

Engaging beyond the recognizable frames of life and death reparatively by starting from loss instead of its prevention and moving towards pleasure means a

reorientation of the ontological and epistemological away from the fixed articulations, static forms, and positionings of speaking subjects tutored into normativity and long holding a privileged place in literary studies—we keep Latinidad a meaningful, present nothingness. The markers of life and death fall short for beings that exist in excess, beyond, or between such established poles. Instead of reading along the axes of life and death, which participates in and propagates a specific kind of knowledge-building project reliant upon certain sources of knowledge and understanding, reparative speculation inaugurates modes both new and relational, critical and reflexive sustained by a commitment to untethered liveness, or the capacities to affect and be affected. Making sense of a narrating head, whose connection to her body was no stronger than ours to it, requires an assurance to measuring existence by intensities, passions, desires; being is measured and sustained through emergent relations and the contingency of in/dependence; presence is illuminated by the sparks of desire and shadows of loss, and the codependent relationship sustained between the two.

Reading an aesthetics of colorblindness, as I name and elaborate elsewhere, reminds us of the delicate, tenuous relationship between the literary and the contours of existence deemed legible, indeed, between Latinx and its literature. After all, our ways of reading are what bring about, sustain, and keep Latinidad within the very fabric of existence in its narrative, aesthetic, and political registers. With an adjustment of our critical, interpretative practices, we expand the questions we ask from *who* and *what* is (can or might be) Latinx to *how* is Latinx—how it feels, how it shapes and takes shapes, how it loses and gains, suffers speech and silence, how it ties and unties. We commit to reparation, to bending paranoia to pleasure, to embracing and departing from loss and its

attendant sensations. Reading the forms and feelings of Latinidad, or reading what's not there, stands to embrace the enlivening potential of affect in the face of deadening scripts. We find ourselves in alignment, again, with Ortiz when he writes that "we will only project a *latinidad* as desire, as wish, and as *project*: that is, as a not-yet-realized occasion for the production of resources for survival and cultivation, resources to be shared, and enjoyed" (xv). We might take our cue from "C— M—" here. For, after seeing death and nothingness, her resolve is emboldened: she throws her drafted novel into the lake, leaves the residency (forsaking the permanence of place the space and title imply), and rushes home to live the splendor of her life that will be not-yet-realized, that can never be exhaustively captured on the page.

CHAPTER 4: Decentered Subjects, Affective Orientations, and an Aesthetics of Colorblindness
Moods in Manuel Muñoz's *The Faith Healer of Olive Avenue* (2007)

Introduction

In May of 2010, then governor of Arizona Jan Brewer signed House Bill 2281 into law, prohibiting, amongst other things, the teaching of courses or classes that "promote resentment to a certain race or class" and "advocate ethnic solidarity over" treating students as individuals (State of Arizona 1). Enacting colorblindness with much more clarity than *Pérez v. Sharp* as discussed in Chapter One, the bill, quickly deemed the Anti-Ethnic Studies act, came under immediate fire for specifically affecting Mexican American Studies courses and was eventually struck down, ironically, for its partisan and racially motivated discriminatory intent. During the seven years between becoming and unbecoming law, HB 2281 sparked larger debates surrounding the substance and value of Ethnic Studies in the classroom and beyond.

Engaged in one such debate, comparative race and Ethnic Studies scholar Lisa Marie Cacho wrote in defense of the targeted courses. In her "But Some of Us are Wise: Academic Illegitimacy and the Affective Value of Ethnic Studies" (2010), Cacho sets out to "map[] the centrality of feelings to Ethnic Studies debates and policies" (28), arguably responding to the bill's original affective language aimed at resentment and solidarity. Through her reading and rejection of public support for the bill, Cacho demonstrates how right-wing policy makers and pundits understand the field in relation to history, objectivity, and affects: "Ethnic Studies is often delegitimized as a discipline that to some seems more concerned with evoking 'feelings' than explaining the 'facts'—especially

when non-white empowerment is the "feeling" thought to displace and replace historical and contemporary 'facts'" (28). As logic would have it, then, disappearing specific texts from the curriculum and classroom also means disappearing the supposedly illegitimate feelings and counter-histories to which they are related: "The act presumes that objects and signs contain the feelings they seem to evoke, which suggests that if the object or sign were to be removed, the feelings would also cease to exist" (29). Instead of dwelling on the specificities of the bill, Cacho leaves us with what could be considered conservatism's simplistic theory that views certain art objects as containers for disagreeable affects.

As Cacho notes, the proponents of HB 2281 are unaware of their own affective politics (indifference, under the guise of factualness, is indeed a feeling), their devaluation of the feminine (that is, the gendered weight of the fact-feeling divide), and their contradictory racism exemplary of a colorblind racial politics. With social vocabularies rewritten and deracialized, any literary text organized around a particular racialized identity falls on the chopping block, leaving many (if not all of most foundational) texts of Ethnic Studies doomed by their very nature of writing on ethnic, racialized experiences. Such would be the case in Latinx Studies if the place of identity, affects, and literary objects were to remain unproblematized. In what follows, I read Chicano author Manuel Muñoz's collection of short stories *The Faith Healer of Olive Avenue* to problematize HB 2281's colorblindness by demonstrating that Latinx writing, even if not presenting subjects in explicitly racial terms, captures the depth and complexity of Latinx subjectivity as it relates to objects, spaces, feelings, and histories of migration, racism, and gendered and sexual difference. At the same time, I refute the

legislation's reductive affect-object relationship to argue that disappearing Latinx literary texts does not disappear continued histories of marginalization, disenfranchisement, and subjection because the subjects in question are already oriented towards these historical processes and their contemporary manifestations.

While all of the stories of *Faith Healer* center narratives of queer Latinx loss in central California, "Lindo y Querido," the first in the collection, follows a protagonist triply muted by colorblindness, the closet, and eventually, death. This racial muting in particular is indicative of a new formal paradigm I trace in Latinx literature called an aesthetics of colorblindness, characterized by its removal of race from language and content and its installation in form and feeling. The intersecting work of colorblindness, secret queerness, and tragedy, explored in turn in the previous chapters, converge here and succeed in removing a queer Latinx subject to read. As such, I turn to the affective construction of mood to read race and sexuality in the larger assemblage of pervasive feelings, recurring spaces (like roads as the site of deadly accidents), and objects left behind (like a forged social security card and secret love letters) that "Lindo y Querido" presents. This theoretical move from subject to affective assemblage, however, is predicated on the protagonist's mother, whose praxis of care and survival works to orient both the reader and the text's remains towards the critical and revelatory capabilities of mood. In this way, decentering queer Latino subjectivity is indebted, both theoretically and narratively in Muñoz, to the labor of undocumented Latina motherhood. Leaning into the affective attunements and disattunements created and sustained by a queer Latinx mood, I ultimately gesture to a possible model of racial and sexual collectivity coalesced through certain feeling.

Written on Roads: Mood, Subjectivity, and Space

The short stories in *The Faith Healer of Olive Avenue* (2007) diverge from dominant identity-driven tropes frequently found in Latinx literary traditions. Instead, in an affectively rich, restrained style, Muñoz brings the reader to the "charred emotional topography" (Engle) between Gold Street and Olive Avenue, just outside of Fresno, California. The novel intensity of Muñoz's writing has been recognized with critical acclaim, notably in the form of a Whiting Writer's Award, three O. Henry Awards, and appearances in Best American Short Stories. Holding an MFA from Cornell University where he studied with the celebrated Latina author Helena Viramontes, Muñoz's entire oeuvre presents the reader with a breadth of characters of what Pamela Mann calls in her review "the next generation," or the children of immigrants, now growing and grown, facing their failures at assimilating into dominant frameworks of racial and sexual normativity. An identity of social otherness, however, is never at the foreground; in its place are accidents of some kind (a car accident, a heart attack, a suicide) which form not only the impetuses for the narratives of *Faith Healer*, but also the feelings that pervade them. As another critic noted in her review, these narratives are curiously protagonized by characters who "rarely speak; it's their afterthoughts that do the talking. Muñoz's strong point is silence, describing wordless emotion with an acuity that would put Charlie Chaplin to shame" (Smucker). In this section, I show how these subject-defining feelings come to be inscribed across places and spaces.

We see this wordless affectivity in "Lindo y Querido," the collection's first story and the only one I will closely read, which begins with a motorcycle crash and continues

to recount the death of Isidro and the discoveries his mother makes about him and the other boy on the bike. I quote the opening paragraph in its entirety:

> People know that road, that intersection, how often it happens. They recognized it when the newspaper ran a picture from the scene, the motorcycle on the road and a policeman writing something on a notepad. It had been the kind of accident that happens only in fog. But this had been in broad daylight, summertime, the boys coming back from Fresno or wherever they had gone to, and neither of them wearing helmets. At least Isidro made it, people said when they saw it in the papers. The other boy, one of the triplets from over on Gold Street, died right there on the road. (1)

Heavy with disaster, the opening passage derives its weight from its pervasive groundedness. In just six sentences, the word "road" is used three times, such that it exerts more protagonist-like subjectivity than the humans mentioned: the road is even more well-known than the unnamed "triplet[] from over on Gold Street," who is ultimately defined spatially by his street address. Whether shrouded in deadly fog or illuminated by b*road* daylight (a turn of phrase where the word still lurks), the road's recognizability and prominence in its spoken and unspoken appearances begins unfurrowing both a physical and affective landscape. It is physical in that it connects a dangerous secluded turn to a more populous and familiar Gold Street, in the same way it links and structures the opening paragraph in both its explicit naming and as the pronoun "it" ("the people recognized it"). As "it" is later used to refer to the deadly accident ("It had been the kind of accident") and Isidro's briefly continued life ("At least Isidro made it"), the road assumes an affective component as well, melding subjective loss, absence, and love into space and materiality. By attuning our reading to the ways in which such sentiments manifest themselves, we situate the road as a foundational structure whose aestheticization in the text informs our reading of Isidro, his partner, and his mother, and

in turn, our understandings of the felt-community—the mood—to which they belong, at the same time it decenters human subjects of loss from our analytical framework.

The decentering of subjectivity amidst prominent affectivity, as Muñoz's opening passage enacts and recounts, is characteristic of the affective construction of moods. Mood, like most concepts in theories of affect, enjoys no unanimous definition but is frequently traced back to a Heideggerian subject-environment relation. When Rita Felski (2012) describes this as "a feeling of I-and-world together" (vi), she situates it as a capacious lens through which to read the blurry amalgam of subjects, objects, spaces, and their relations of attunement. Affect theorists Ben Highmore and Jenny Bourne Taylor vaguely yet effectively describe it as "an orchestration of many factors" (6), the ones that situate us within a complex environment at the same time our situating mutually influences that very environment. In this chapter, I use it as a concept that thinks through the pervasive affects generated by loss in their aesthetic dimensions to reconceive subjectivity through relations, proximity, and feeling. The contours and utility of mood will unfold throughout the close readings that follow, but mood ultimately signals a contingent, emergent form of existence (as opposed to the prescriptive identitarian logic HB 2281 presupposes), bound by affects and constructed from similarly inhabited spaces and similarly aligned subjects and objects that result from experiences of migration, racial otherness, and sexual non-normativity.

My engagement with mood does not only stem from the distinguishing factors of Muñoz's writing. It also responds to a new interpretative conundrum brought about by the intersecting forces of colorblindness and homophobia that demand the double closeting of articulated ethnoracial difference and sexual non-normativity. When death

enters into play, the story loses the protagonist it appeared to center on (the one whose race and sexuality were already silenced), requiring literary critique to find inscriptions of racial and sexual difference elsewhere. Mood, then, as a model that sutures people to places to things through affective relationality, stands to register the sociocultural factors and material conditions shaping and shaped by the ethnoracial and sexual difference that cannot be uttered. In this sense, situating mood as a viable framework within an aesthetics of colorblindness, as I elaborate in previous chapters, positions innovative Latinx literature and theories of affect as necessary critical junctures capable of highlighting the persistent though unarticulated presence of racism and cisheteronormativity that might otherwise appear absent. Reading an aesthetics of colorblindness, then, is a requirement to look beyond the explicit naming of racial and sexual identities to pinpoint, underscore, and explicate the ways in which difference is constructed, sustained, and policed and requires the critic to think beyond the limits of a self-contained speaking subject, opening up the possibilities of a hermeneutic of feeling, of contingency, of approximation.

The feasibility of reading race and sex in this way rests, in Muñoz's story, on Connie, Isidro's undocumented mother. Although Isidro's accident and eventual death shape the trajectory of the narrative material, the reader will recall how Connie is the only character whose presence is constant throughout. This constancy, however, does not make Connie an animated protagonist whose thoughts, feelings, or actions shape the text. Instead, she becomes an agent of loneliness whose presence by default organizes the remains left not only by Isidro, as an example of intersecting racialization and sexualization, but by motherhood and undocumented labor as well. Recalling how "what

is lost is known only by what remains of it, by how these remains are produced, read, and sustained" (Eng & Kazanjian, 2002:2), Connie becomes an important gateway into the mood Muñoz's text creates. Her presentation negotiated through sprawling roadways and streets, similar to the text's opening passage, not only outlines a model of engaging Latinx subjectivity grounded in space and place instead of speech or identity, but also underscores the theoretical centrality of undocumented Latina motherhood in reading queer Latinx moods. In the remainder of this section, I chart how Connie's life is inscribed across the landscape upon which the text's mood is built.

Following the opening scene of the crash, the reader accompanies Isidro's mother as she tends to her dying boy. After his death and while cleaning out his now vacant room, she comes to discover love letters written between Isidro and Carlos, the other boy on the motorcycle. Not understanding more than the pencil-drawn hearts, the discovery adds depth and height to the already active barrage of memories, feelings, thoughts, and stories that flit in and out of the grief-stricken woman. Reading Connie through and alongside the dominant spaces and recurring objects that surround her, I argue in this section that "Lindo y Querido" reformulates Latinx subjectivity as a single agent within a network of assembled things, places, surfaces, and textures, not as a fully formed, independent subject. By reading transpersonally—beyond the subjects now decentered, I demonstrate how Muñoz inscribes locality and specificity to the Latinx experiences while imbuing it with the universally legible affectivity of loss and loneliness, disrupting reductive assumptions about the nature of Latinidad by doing so.

Even before her discovery of the secret love letters between Isidro and the other boy on the motorcycle, Connie, shortened from Concepción on her forged citizenship

papers, is presented in relation to existent tropes and stereotype. In one instance, when describing her livelihood, the text reads: "Isidro's mother works for a woman on the good side of town, doing work that doesn't need defining. You know what she does and how she does it and how hard it is" (2). Muñoz acknowledges the widely circulated image of an undocumented woman engaged in domestic labor to position Connie as Latina subjects have been before: performing racialized and gendered labor while occupying a precarious socioeconomic position. The author's writing, however, is too nuanced and rich to leave Connie within this prefabricated script of subjectivity; we are soon encouraged to read for the many ways in which the story's opening tragedy will rewrite the tropes of the working immigrant mother and of how the dangerously curved road pushes Connie down a new life path. In other words, if Plasencia in Chapter Two turns to form to push back on demands for documents and documentation, then Muñoz turns to mood. It is the focus of this section to evidence how the way in which these deviations from existent trope and stereotype respond to a colorblind aesthetic and signal the need to reconfigure the boundaries of Latinx subjectivity.

For example, we learn more of Connie's backstory and better understand her present position only through her movement from "her side of town" to "the good side of town" (3). It is the crossing of dissimilar spaces and landscapes that substantiates where Connie typically resides and where she works, and how she came to be the breadwinner for her family. Beginning where there are "roads so skinny they don't need painted lines [and] vacant lots with overgrown grass" and moving to "wide sidewalks and the streets paved rich and dark, to a house with boulders nonchalant on the lawn a driveway with two cars, and a husband who waves timidly […] as he goes off to his job" (3), the details

and descriptions that locate, contextualize, and situate Connie's experiences, work and otherwise, float to the surface. More specifically, the connection of a husband to a two-car driveway to paved sidewalks creates an image of a normative white suburb as it defines Connie's existence through contradistinction: her sidewalks are unpaved, her driveway has no car, her house has no husband. Encoding a failed marriage here, and in that sense, distinguishing this model of motherhood from the psychosexual control facing Machado's mother in Chapter Three, the recounting of Connie's crossing from one side of town to another is also evocative of her undocumented status, having crossed disparate spaces and faced loneliness before. Once again, Muñoz embeds within place larger experiences and histories undergirding Latina subjecthood that far exceeds the initial affirmation that "we know."

Connie's family did not always consist of only her and Isidro. She was married before "her husband abandoned her when Isidro was seven years old" (4) and more connected to her parents back home before she convinced herself their increasing silence was because "correspondence was often lost in Mexico and never delivered" (5). On a structural level, these cues serve to orient the reader to the lasting effects of migration and marital complications, two components that are frequently undergirding but rarely explicit in the tropes of undocumented female domestic laborers. Muñoz's introduction of them through a comparative presentation of roadways and walking surfaces not only signals the writer's investment in adding layers of complexity to the characters of familiar Latinx narratives, but it also underscores the interpretative imperative to read beyond the subject, literally. After all, it is the gravel and pavement beneath Connie's feet that bring these nuanced histories into play.

Roads and trails literally connect people and places, but also function as surfaces that inscribe temporality. The text's roads reflect a unified history of solitude, disappearance, and eventual loss that harkens from the broad history of transamerican displacement to the initial, highly personal motorcycle accident. Despite their capability of facilitating both departure and return, a come and a go, roads for Connie are only ever inscribing permanent departure, a reality contained in the gravel that paves the way between her house, the mountains, and beyond. This roots the larger structure in a complex web of actors and agents, subjects and spaces. While Isidro's passing runs through the story with almost equal pervasiveness as the road which precipitated it, Connie, as the survivor that reveals remains, carries the narrative and many accumulating burdens. The text reflects the unidirectionality of these roads in breaths, just after Isidro dies:

> Connie sighs. It is true what they say about the last breath. It is so deep and the exhalation is not an exhalation at all, but a release, with nothing back in. Connie knew what it was and turned on the light. She cried at the unanswered letters that had been sent to her parents. She cried at her husband's having left her. She cried for the stroke of bad luck both her son and that other body and his mother had had, and then she cried because she could not go to that woman's house to share the misery. (11)

The counterpoint of the mother's sighing—the indication of life, despite its crushing weight—and the son's exhalation—an outward breath, never again to become an inhalation—signals a powerful moment that paints living as more tragic than death. Her position as an abandoned wife, childless mother, and lonely woman estranged from her family and fatherland inserts Connie into a position of loss that is at once profoundly personal at the same time it is widespread and systematic. No single person or action can account for her resounding solitude as it emerges from intricately linked processes of

migration, feminine domesticity, and fate, and yet we see her position within the mood of loneliness that may take on different contours for similarly marked subjects. The metaphor of intersecting roads reflects who Connie is and where she finds herself and conjures a larger horizon of similarly positioned subjects anchored in space and defined by unidirectional movement through it.

This style of narration and the networked presentation of personal experiences that invoke historical processes (migration) and social realities (feminine abandonment) marks a shift in the relation between literary text and affect. Muñoz narrates with a voice that is both distanced witness and intimate interlocutor by playing with expectation on the surface and specifying and enriching the substance beneath. On a formal level, conventional linearity in time and occurrence wavers here as the profundity of Connie's loss extends hours to days and collapses years into fleeting memories. The relationality of cause and effect that structures sequential, chronological narratives protagonized by speaking subjects has dissipated, shifting the value away from naming causality of or blame for Connie's solitude, instead emphasizing the lived conditions of inhabiting a mood of loneliness. These differences, profoundly aesthetic and formal, make Muñoz's text one that engages affective registers in a way that far exceeds adding an emotionally realist realm to the narrative: loneliness is dissipated and reappears and repeats with each step along unpaved paths to cement sidewalks. The story sighs for and with Connie in the presentation of the vectors that push her as an increasingly multilayered subject of loss defined not by phenotype or identity, but by the ever-expanding roadways outside of her front door.

Although literary theory and cultural critique have provided numerous and meaningful ways of reading through and beyond subjects, it seems as though few have taken into account affects in this decentering, especially in the spatial dimension seen with Muñoz's linking of Connie to roads and vice versa. As such, I turn to critic Charles Altieri's discussion of mood in his *The Particulars of Rapture* (2003). There, Altieri addresses a mood-subject codependency that reveals the dispersed, collective nature of subjectivity. Mood, he says, "offers us a thin but evocative sense of how we might find at the core of subjective states conditions we share completely with other agents, as if the psyche could be said to dwell in its own version of atmospheric landscapes" (55). Subjects, then, are not limited to the confines of an individual body, but are rather floating over and interconnected through physical and affective landscapes. This floating, however, does not result in entropy. As Altieri continues to affirm "Mood produces overall affective coherence, and as such attracts subjects to make identifications with its insistent but ungraspable totality." Reading almost literally, the concept of the psyche dwelling in atmospheric landscape conjures Connie's existence through and because of roads.

The interpellation of Altieri's framework into a Latinx context stands to modify both his theoretical paradigm and the place of identity in literary critique. To begin, our central attention on the contours of undocumented Latina motherhood make plain how the sharing of subjective states with other agents—including objects, the focus of this chapter's next section—cannot be interpreted as a utopic collectivization of subjectivity, or existence of any other kind. The "overall affective coherence" that the theorist names does not extend beyond the axes of race, gender, or documentation status, as Connie's

character shows, but rather reveals their boundaries, overlappings, and innerworkings. In this sense, Connie does not cohere with or share the totality of her "core subjective states" with someone like her married white employer because the feelings of loss, loneliness, and abandonment structuring and structured by her and the mood are not replicated with the same material conditions or resultant from the same sociohistorical occurrences. While Altieri's framework does not preclude this reading, it also holds back in situating mood as critical apparatus capable of revealing disparities simultaneously present within larger frames and intimate localities. We need not forget the materiality of roads in bringing this realization about: just as Connie is formed and sustained through her connection to the gravel road that turns into a paved driveways on the good side of town, so are uneven textual landscapes representative of uneven sociohistorical landscapes. This unevenness—the difference between dirt and asphalt—is the material inscription of differences of race, gender, and citizenship that now exist most palpably in feeling and form.

With this critical potentiality of a transpersonal mood clarified, Altieri's model releases the grip on the form of the individual subject by recasting its boundaries beyond rigidity. As a result, we come to reckon with a conception of subjectivity that is sustained through its relationality to other agents, constructed and articulated in codependent, mutually distinguishing ways. Affect, then, is that which permits the dispersion of subjectivity at the same time it disrupts notions of subjectivity itself, ultimately inaugurating a new locus of interpretation: the subject becomes a site of study incomprehensible without reading the mood, which outlines and fills in the subject at the same time the subject outlines and fills in mood. This complementary, back-and-forth

mode of reading shows how a moody interpretation offers a hermeneutic not dependent on transparent subjecthood, given the muting machinations of colorblindness and heteronormativity, but more engaged in certain approximation. I return to Muñoz's text as an example. Although we know Connie much more deeply than the superficial images with which she was initially presented, the inscription of her being within space and place—her psyche as part of a larger, unknown collective stretched across a vast, undefined landscape—leaves the totality of her being unknowable by any reader.

In many ways, this connection between feeling and approximation corresponds to Altieri's mood, or the way in which identification occurs simultaneously in relation to a larger "overall affective coherence" and an "insistent ungraspable totality." Identification, here, implies both the ways in which the literary subjects we are reading are named, known, and interpellated—their placement into specific positions within socio-culturally legible narratives—and the ways in which readers may relate to the narrative material at hand. In the context of interpreting contemporary Latinx literature, both play with, invert, and expand expectation and accessibility. As I have mentioned, Muñoz's text constructs its characters with increasingly nuanced layers. Connie begins as a cleaning lady that "you know," and is then steadily developed in relation to a mood of pervasive loss created through migration and abandonment, death and un-documentation, and ultimately manifested in roadway and landscape. However, just as the reader begins rounding out the once-mother and widow, the limits of making sense of stones and pathways returns to the foreground and Connie eludes stable situation within pre-established scripts of Latina subjectivity. In a social climate where politicized curricula and state legislation seeks to fix, limit, and control the capacities of ethnic, racialized subjects, as we saw with

Arizona's Anti Ethnic Studies Act in this chapter and in *Pérez v. Sharp* before, this reformulation of subjectivity and identification invalidates the very possibility of presuming knowledge or enacting capture.

That which displaces the character from her anticipated localization—the excess of her loneliness, the intensity of her abandonment, her inhabitance of a mood of loss—is precisely what invites the reader into this interrupted process of identification. Either through resonant experience or empathy, many readers will recognize the scenes of loneliness (nights of solitude in front of the T.V., front doors upon which nobody knocks, phones that don't ring) and, in that way, enter into closer approximation with the elusive totality that makes Connie so complex. Immediately, however, we are reminded of the historical events and material conditions that lay the groundwork for the text's mood of loss and approximation becomes distanced once again by the unevenness of structuring landscapes. Mood, then, demonstrates how interpretative modes can unmoor from individuality and complete knownness without erasing the subject, its psyche, and its capacity to represent and be represented in different aesthetic registers. Its decentering away from the self-contained subject without her eradication maintains opens alternative channels for meaning making in Latinx literature. The following section continues this endeavor, expanding the critical focus from roads—as exemplary of the spaces, places, and landscapes subtending mood and its population—to objects.

Inscribed in Things: Subjects, Objects, and Disattunement

As the previous section demonstrates, it is from the relationship between space and subjectivity that the factors sustaining mood and its inhabitants can come into

aesthetic being. This not only stands to show how Latinx literary subjects must be read as agents in a larger assemblage of space and landscape, but also how reading moods function as aesthetic and interpretative practices that move us beyond the pre-established scripts and tropes that have bound Latinx literary production to limited, reduced imaginative realms, as scholars like Ralph Rodríguez have discussed (and I discuss later). It is the focus of this section to evidence how the histories and material conditions causing and caused by racialization, gendered and sexual difference, and the ramifications of undocumentation are inscribed in objects. While these inscriptions certainly parallel and build from the previous discussion of spaces and places, they ultimately signal disjunction instead of cohesion to more potently mark the social construction and maintenance of difference.

Just as roads brought about familiarity with Connie, so do things determine who and what she is. Notable are her forged citizenship papers, the love letters she finds between Isidro and Carlos, and her secondhand Egyptian cotton sheets. Thinking on the centrality of defining objects, Latinx scholar Mary Pat Brady underscores the importance of written documents altogether in her "The Waiting Arms of Gold Street" (2016). Brady writes: "[A] mesh of paper, from [Connie's] forged citizenship documents purchased for $1500, to returned letters [to her parents], to [her husband's] porn, to love notes from one dead young man to another […] serve as screens for her memories and for her navigation of an increasingly isolated existence" (118). Not unfamiliar in narratives exploring immigrant or diasporic experiences, tropes of documentation and written correspondence home surface as ways of charting identity development. While these are the very materials that acquire hyperbolic centrality in Plascencia's text as seen with Merced de

Papel, their juxtaposition here with Isidro's love letters, however, introduces an intriguing tension since those documents, hidden under the mattress, did the opposite: on the one hand are Connie's fake papers that achieve legal recognition and social visibility, and on the other are Isidro's sincere letters meant to remain unseen. While there are drastically different urgencies behind these acts of writing tied to the subjectivities of each of the document's owners, both represent a larger sort of proof-of-self through writing. That the love letters outlived Isidro, and presuming that Connie's social security number will continue on as hers after her death (or as that of another woman in a similar position), illuminates a trans-generational tactic of validation through articulation. Given that this articulation does not happen in vocalized speech—it remains muted—means things are employed to confirm the existence and legacies of peoples, instead of the people themselves.

This idea requires further elaboration, however, because Connie ultimately destroys the love letters. Reading what Connie does in isolation might lead one to a conclusion in which feeling is the explanation—Connie reacts violently because she is sad. Reading through affect, specifically the way in which such sentiments manifest and lead us beyond Connie to the past and the future, to what's present and absent, reveals nuances altogether different. I cite the letter-ripping scene at length:

> For a good part of an hour, Connie does nothing but sit in Isidro's room […] and she realizes grief is finally coming and she will be washed over by it. She would say, if the mother of that [other] boy came back, that she is stricken with a double loss. Connie takes the letters and begins to rip them into tiny, tiny pieces. […] Through her swollen eyes, she does her best not to look at them as more than sheets of paper, as meaningless as the green ink corrections from Isidro's teacher. But the difficulty, the impossibility, of ignoring the pencil hearts scrawled across the pages. She rips the letters angrily, just as she did her husband's magazines all those years ago. If her husband had stayed, they would have had a better rein on

> their boy, and he would not have been on the back of that motorcycle in the first place. She would not be alone in this house as she is, with a pile of letter scraps on the mattress. (20)

Though Connie's charged emotional state is present, this passage does not leave it explicitly presented. Instead, we see how "pencil hearts scrawled across the pages," at one time so defining of Isidro, turn into shards and shreds as they return to secrecy. Also, and again, we see parallels drawn between Isidro's death and the husband's abandonment, a repeated link that begins positing tragedy and loss not as events for Connie, but rather as ubiquitous conditions. Her wishful thinking towards the end of this passage of a life full of potential and presence she will never know becomes self-defeatist, precisely because her husband did not stay and because Isidro did not live. In this way, the 'if-thens' and 'would have and could haves' index a real and lived quality of life particular not only to Connie, but to other single-mother, immigrant women living along Gold Street, Olive Avenue, and elsewhere. We should recall the partner-less mother of the other dead boy to recognize how these conditions of social precarity move past particularities and intersect along lines of citizenship, race, and gender. Connie's experiences transcend her singularity and flow between and among other subjects similarly defined through written documents, abandonment and absence, and conditions of double loss.

However, if the love letters at one time functioned as a proof-of-self that validated the existence of Isidro and his relationship, is one to interpret Connie's destruction of them as the destruction of Isidro? Our interpretation by way of response leaves us vacillating between both yes and no in a manner that reflects the tensions surrounding visibility and existence, opacity and unknowability. Reading Connie's destruction of the

letters as a destruction of a part of Isidro further solidifies a condition of loss by linking two instances in which the deletion and removal of material things creates emotional distance from an absent male body—a sort of instinctual repetition of the way she coped with her husband's departure: remove all trace of the person to remove the pain of their absence. This also imbues the narration's mentioning of a "double loss" with multiple meanings. It could refer to both absent husband and son, but also perhaps to the discovery and erasure of Isidro's queerness. After all, the accidental discovery of Isidro's relationship compounded by his premature passing results in an incomprehensible loss of a person she never fully knew or had already lost. In this manner, queerness could very well be a deviation she dreams away when thinking quote "If her husband had stayed, they would have had a better rein on their boy."

Reading in the opposite direction, that is, delinking the destruction of the letters from the destruction of a queer component of Isidro's subjectivity, hinges on yet another central object: Connie's prized eight hundred count Egyptian cotton sheets re-gifted from her employer. In a narrative marked by the hardness of roads, the tearing of paper, and the scratching and breaking of skin and bones, the set of luxury sheets introduces a comforting smoothness otherwise absent. Connie, after all, "cherished the bed set, washing it by bucket in the backyard with a little Woolite and then hanging it up on the laundry line, stepping back with pride to watch the cloth sway in the breeze" (7). Her pride is just as soon crushed when the dying Isidro, losing control of bodily functions, soils the sheet. Not so easily erased as the written letters, "The Egyptian bedsheet will never lose that spot in the center, but [Connie] will get it to fade enough so that someone would have to look very closely to see it [and] she will sleep on the cool fabric in her

own room" (21). Recalling Hudson's reading in Chapter Three of Machado's disappearing women, we might say Isidro "goes incorporeal" here, forsaking corporality for stained fabric, though on a sheet instead of a dress. Despite the omnipresent residue of her son's death, that Connie opts for the continued use and treasuring of the sheet instead of its destruction or disposal ultimately frames either her inability or her disinterest in removing Isidro—so engrained in her past and in the text's present—from her future. If the shredded letters signal disavowal, the sheets signal holding close.

Egyptian cotton also marks the text's encoding of a theory of irreducibility in regard to knowing, existing, and remaining. The fraught tension and sustained ambivalence of Connie's double loss ultimately parallels the attempts to preserve Isidro in concrete, tangible things before the feeling that his presence by way of absence will remain for an indeterminate period of time. In life, Isidro was never a subject with impermeable boundaries, limits, or delineations but rather the dynamic sum of actors and agents working across time and space: a boy with a hat, memories stretching over roads, passions connected to Carlos through letters, the most lasting product of Connie's marriage. In death, he is no different. In this way, the text aligns its emotive, textural presentation of a moody aesthetic with something akin to a moody ontology that disrupts interpellation through lingering, circuity, and networktivity.

After all, the loss in "Lindo y Querido" is diffused over and articulated through a web of characters, things, and spaces; I emphasize again that our reading can no longer rest on the individual subject in isolation. As we have seen, Connie doesn't make sense without Isidro, who doesn't make sense without the road, which doesn't make sense without the letters, which make different sense in relation to forged citizenship papers,

and so on. Recalling Altieri, moods stretch the subject through objecthood and collectivity to beyond without erasing it, begging a dialogue between individual, community, environment, and aesthetics to begin grasping how mood embodies subjects and how subjects embody the mood. The locus of ontology shifts from the concrete and singular to the dispersed and multiple, without complete dissipation. Moods, then, position themselves as expertly just enough: just readable enough to be a rich field of study while remaindering just enough illegibility; just subjective and collective enough to engage the individual and the communitarian while retaining just enough blurriness to throw-off racializing and gender-normalizing scripts; just visible and perceivable to undeniably and aesthetically exist while being just elusive enough to upset a limiting, flattening politics of representation.

Objects do not only inscribe components of existence; they also make evident a series of connections and relations. As Sara Ahmed discusses in her "Orientations: Toward a Queer Phenomenology" (2006), "we get a sense of how being directed toward some objects and not others involves a more general orientation toward the world" (546). Ultimately outlining a codependent, fluid relationship between objects and subjects as they each define each other, Ahmed writes that "[n]either the object nor the body have integrity in the sense of being the same thing with and without each other. Bodies as well as objects take shape through being oriented toward each other, as an orientation that may be experienced as the cohabitation or sharing of space" (552). Reminiscent of Altieri's framework of transpersonality, Ahmed acknowledges the assembled nature of actors and agents through a lens of directionality to show how processes of perception—the worlds we see, know, and inhabit—stem from interactions with and proximity to things. Seen in

this way, we understand how, for example, Connie's falsified papers align her with a specific kind (or lack) of mobility, that in turn positions her in the loneliness she inhabits.

Returning to other things previously discussed in this chapter, I center Muñoz's objects to affirm the following: objects call to be interacted with in the way they determine. A letter calls to be read, a road traversed, a sheet to be laid upon and caressed and forgotten as sleep or love arrives. When the interactions for which objects call do not align with their relations with subjects, spaces, times, and affects, they fall out of synch. We see this in the text: the letter that wills itself read cannot be because of the intervention of language barriers and an unwillingness to understand the words beyond the pencil-drawn hearts. The road cannot be a surface of passage and mobility, instead becoming a final, violent resting place. The sheet, while still caressed, cannot fade into the background underneath the grieving mother's body because its stain marks a presence, a memory, a past. The disjunctions between these objects' willed relations and the ones that come to be—their inherently queer orientations—index the loss that pervades Gold Street's mood as it actively shapes, creates, and determines it. Again, loss goes beyond a literary theme—it is a process and condition, both byproduct and cause, of a world unfolding. These fleeting moments of what we could call disattunement—a misfire between object-will and event—draw heightened attention to the scenario, flagging the distance between how objects ought to interact with the world and how they interact with Muñoz's. The unanticipated orientations that result gain presence and prominence within a mood that abandons the Heideggerian notion of "I-and-world together," not even existing as a reformulated "I-and-world apart" precisely because

centuries of racialization, gendering, and sexualization challenge the very relationship of an I (as we have been reading) and a world.

In this way, I find moody affects to be an undeniably important site of inquiry for the aesthetics of Latinx literary traditions and the ways Latinx subjects are read and known. The identity-driven logic behind naming some of the text's tropes only Latinx (the brazenly Hispanic names, domestic labor, undocumentation) suddenly seems limited and incapable of encompassing the sometimes wordless, sometimes person-less relations and existences that subtend the collection. Departing from this prescriptive grammar, however, moods are fundamentally descriptive, building understanding from the bottom up instead of the top down. That affect in moods inhabit the body's most visceral moments and movements, grows to attune other bodies and objects and mark the social failures of disattunement, and pervades social spaces allows us, as you may recall, to identify a trans-generational poetics of love connecting Connie and her husband and Isidro and his boy, otherwise divided by the mutually exclusive groupings heterosexual and queer. It also foregrounds the importance of written documentation in confirming marginalized relations and conditions, a connection often undone by divergent immigrant-rights and queer narratives. What's more, it reformulates a manner of reading history (on a stained bed sheet) in such a way that centers corporeal memory, texture, sensation beyond a named, physical presence. Ultimately, these qualities of moods reject attempts for conservative law to police ethnic, racialized collectives precisely because of the construction's descriptive contingency.

The importance of this is immediately evident for scholars working at the intersection of race and form, for those questioning what shapes Latinidad has taken and

must take in literature. The framework of mood, precisely for its eschewing of prescription for a more descriptive "ungraspable totality," works towards unbinding Latinx literature. I borrow this verb from Ralph Rodriguez to refer to a critical, interpretative approach poised to unmoor us "from the preconceived, unquestioned notion that there is something called 'Latinx literature' and from the identity and thematic expectations attendant to that formulation" (13). In many ways, Rodriguez is responding to the ossification of themes, forms, and ways of being that have resulted from the widespread circulation of established tropes and stereotypes and their attendant racial, gendered, and socioeconomic specificities. Importantly, then, the affectivity of Muñoz's text introduces a type of universality into these troped spaces and stories that develops the sensorial, intense, and profoundly human experiences of lost love, lost life, and loneliness. Moods of loss offer this widespread, liberating potentiality without losing completely or succumbing to the localized specificities inherent to constructing the exact contour of these experiences. We feel with Connie at the same time we feel for Connie, inhabiting the tensions of coming close to her and remaining worlds apart. In many ways, it is the universal affectivity of loss and Connie's specific manner of losing that animate Muñoz's literary project.

Returning to a focus on objects within the text, we confront a presentation of things that far exceed the static positions of thingness. They are animated and animate others, construct and contour subjects and spaces in assemblage, and speak to what remains in spite of and because of loss. In essence, they function as crucial points of contact in narratives and lives where brownness, queerness, and femininity are targeted by economic inequality, patriarchy, homophobia, and violence. In that way, if the things

themselves do not contain the capacity to exceed their assumed limitations—if they do not encode person, place, and feelings—then Connie's double loss becomes the reader's triple loss, losing any trace of Isidro to the dangerous curve in the road. Bluntly, if Isidro had only been presented as a self-contained subject, we would have learned of his death and little else, but his expansive existence beyond his body challenges this. In the section that follows, I shift my focus from the objects that surround and define Connie to the ways in which such objects attune readers, inscribe transgressive queerness, and serve to restructure Latinx collectivity.

Mood as a Means to Something More (a Possible Collectivity)

The tensions produced at the intersection of universal feelings of loss and the specific historical and material conditions structuring Muñoz's mood move beyond the scope of rereading and reconceiving Latinx subjects. In the following section, I expand the capabilities of mood beyond the subjects it has decentered, thinking through the ways in which it registers and accumulates otherwise lonely, divisive experiences. These experiences are what Ahmed calls orientations—positions and perceptions defined and reproduced by the entities that participate in the construction of subjects. Responding to queerness in the text and its relation to orientations (in terms of sexual orientations, for example), I come to show how mood can suture a larger entity from individually felt, pervasive solitude. While this may not constitute a concrete collectivity, this section gestures to how feelings can shape a Latinx group without falling into easily reduced, expectant, or commodifiable scripts.

To demonstrate the slide from a typically subject-oriented collective bound through identity to one sustained through and across subject, object, space, and feeling, I read queerness in Muñoz's work. My focus on queerness, or the manifestations of sexual non-normativity, stem from the doubly affective and identitarian histories and implications of the term. Tracing its evolution, we recall how queer, at one time, described people, actions, perspectives, and aesthetics that deviated from conventions of gender, sex, and sexuality, as well as form, placement, and articulation. In many ways, the widespread, pejorative use of the term responded to and generated positions and feelings of otherness that queer theory scholars like Heather Love (2007) have since re-potentialized through an amalgam of queer writers, texts, social relations, and aesthetic forms. In recent years, however, queer has been increasingly deployed as an identitarian term—one of the latest additions to the string of marketable, brandable identities signified by LGBTQ. Simultaneously a descriptive term and a static identity position, queer encapsulates both fully formed subjects and more diffused feelings. I read it in "Lindo y Querido" to move from the one to the other.

The text connects characters through objects and similar actions. Notably, we recall how Isidro's love letters and Connie's citizenship papers evince a shared process of self-affirmation, definition, and articulation through writing. More than just writing, however, this example brings to the foreground the way in which queerness begins to move from an identitarian marker—referring to Isidro, given his relationship with the other boy on the motorcycle—to an experience of secrets, tragedy, and loss that comes to subsume Connie and engage a larger history of abandonment and separation. Recalling that these conditions enter into Connie's life because of and alongside migration and

failed matrimony, queerness shows itself less as an isolated identitarian position limited to sexually non-normative subjects and more as a nebulous web of things, places, people, presence, and absence that permeates and positions Gold Street and its connected network of roads.

More specifically, we can see how the emergence of the boys' furtive, forever-interrupted queer love recasts the nature of Connie's life, her documents, and the surrounding roadways in such a way that identifies the larger patterns of isolation from loss across space and time. By this I mean that the text uses Isidro's relationship (gone forever) to introduce the story of Connie's husband (also gone, probably forever). Although Isidro's relationship and his sexuality were kept hidden from his mother and distanced from her, it was archived in the trails by Avocado Lake from where he was returning the day of the crash. This detail situates roads, not only as the proverbial memory lane, but as a physical and narrative surface in need of interpretation to understand the experiences of loss and heartbreak so prevalent in Muñoz's writing. At one point in the text, Connie puts herself in Isidro's position, recalling her own trips to Avocado Lake for an amorous tryst: "She had been up there—how long you could walk on those trails […] so divided and hidden you could do anything up there under the blue skies and not be seen. She remembers those days when her husband was not yet her husband, when she rested her head on his shoulder, when she rested her head on his bare chest under the blue skies without being afraid" (19-20). In this way, we see how loss, presented through queer relationality, is not an individual experience but a dispersed one that exists in feeling among and beyond the characters, given its profound presence

between the trees, hills, and open stretches of highway. It is a defining aspect of Muñoz's mood.

Heartbreak's central role in the text is certainly a reason for this, and it remains a theme echoed and manifest through queerness in Muñoz's first publication *Zigzagger* (2003). Without entering into *Zigzagger*-specific details here, I engage Ernesto Javier Martínez's analysis of that text to highlight the ways queerness in Muñoz's work has been read in other diffused, collective ways and can continue to be read, given evident similarities between his 2003 book and *Faith Healer*. In "Shifting the Site of Queer Enunciation: Manuel Muñoz and the Politics of Form" (2015), Martínez identifies a departure from the first-person narration historically employed by queer-of-color writers. In marking this shift to a multifocal, decentered style that I argue can be carried over into *Faith Healer*, Martínez underlines Muñoz's interventions of both literary and socio-political import. He states: "Such a narrative practice reformulates how queerness is traditionally understood—as belonging by foregrounding the manner in which queerness gains consistency or is denied presence in the social" (244). Using narrative techniques and aesthetics as his evidence, Martínez finds in Muñoz the radical expansion of queerness as a shared and socially produced phenomenon, a theoretical move that displaces the subject and casts (what could be) identitarian referents across a collective space.

Though not transferrable without a slight degree of difference, *Faith Healer*'s narratological approach continues that of *Zigzagger*'s to make Martínez's reading informative and applicable here. Because queerness is diffused over and articulated through a cast of actors and agents, our reading can no longer rest on the individual

subject in isolation but instead, by default, engages the collective. Muñoz's work gravitates towards a rhizomatic conception of identity in which the lone (queer Latinx) subject is no longer the favored unit of study precisely because their representative capabilities pale when severed from (not exclusively human) collective assemblages. This decentering operates on both a spatial and temporal level. Spatially, the protagonists' experiences (marked by racial and sexual otherness) are not legible or knowable without reading beyond subjecthood's limits: secondary characters, intimate and public spaces, important and reoccurring objects, the landscape of suburban Fresno itself—all become sites full of significance, a significance accessible only through co-construction. Temporally, since the foregrounded subjects are only fragments of the model of social-being Muñoz is presenting, a reading that lingers is in order. Borrowing this terminology from Christina León and Joshua Guzmán, "lingering pushes back against the urgent imperative to read and hail a subject into an immediate frame of knowing" (270). Enjoying the process of co-constructing meaning from numerous narrative sources, then, *Faith Healer* stretches the spatial-temporal borders of subjectivity beyond the individual and through the collective to an affective alternative hinging upon objects and landscapes, evidencing mood without labelling it as such. The Latinx collective is shaped and sustained through queer feeling.

I reiterate: within mood frameworks, the locus of interpretation must shift to account for the inherent dispersion, diffusion, and interrelationality—we find ourselves reading at the level of the collective. Although Connie appears as and remains a central character in the text, our reading must take into account the things and places that make it and her so, which demand an engagement with the other agents that live alongside and

around her. In the text, this results from the appearance of queerness as a series of actions, spaces, subjects, and objects modified through the feelings of non-normativity. While this co-reading of numerous entities is not altogether unfamiliar in theoretical discourse (think: assemblage theory), the linking of queerness to affects makes the reformulation of Latinidad through feeling instead of racialized identity at once evident, at the same time it underscores the importance of engaging emerging, interdisciplinary modes of literary critique.

In many ways, it is the appearance of queerness that begins and continues to emphasize the affective experiences and conditions of certain loss that work across straightness and queerness, youth and age, man and woman, documented and undocumented. Queerness, then, activates an intratextual process of orientation beyond the positionalities of a politics of difference and works to reformulate a connectivity unmistakably forged through intense feeling while rich with localized specificity. Orientation, as I now argue, also happens intertextually, creating resonance with the reader through universal affect, both to underscore the particularities structuring a Latinx mood of loss and to explode the reductive scripts of expectation conducive to leaving Latinx narratives as always different. While the term has been deployed as a concept attuned to the relations between subjects, objects, and the sociocultural contexts they inhabit, I use it specifically to refer to how objects enter into and leave alignment with each other and other entities, and how those solitary alignments accrue under the umbrella of mood.

Focusing specifically on orientations within a larger mood framework demonstrates that the particularities of the text's objects encode particular dynamics of

Gold Street's mood. The examples that fall out of synch with expectation—recall the unreadable letters, unforgettably stained sheets, intransitable roads—flag the pervasive presence of loss as it intersects with and bifurcates across straightness, womanhood, masculinity and their inversions. More than this, however, these gaps and imperfections ultimately constitute the basis of a larger literary project of attunement that reorients, aligns, and pervades the reader, commanding them to perceive, interact with, and feel alongside the complexities that sustain *Faith Healer* far beyond normative object relations. In this way, the things that sustain "Lindo y Querido" due to historical processes and social conditions that silence and disappear its protagonists are also the things that model orientation for the text itself. Like the letters, road, and sheets, Muñoz's writing wills itself read, moved through, caressed, and forgotten but instead is disrupted by circularity, interconnectedness, density (to use scholar Joseph Miranda's term [2019]), and heavy feeling. The text functions as an affecting object precisely because of its moments of reorientation—the rejections of anticipated Latinx literariness—and in doing so orients, as Ahmed would say, the reader to the formal, affective, and sociohistorical components of the mood world it has created.

I am arguing here that mood is a construction that can be aestheticized and theorized from a distance at the same time it can be intimated, approximated, and perhaps experienced by orientation. Moods in Muñoz do not stay in Muñoz, but instead compound and conflate contemporary theory's beloved affect with object, landscape, space, time, and individual and collective subjects. The literary object represents just as it reorients, bringing together forms, text, signification, and language to recast a world through narratives, disjunctions, dis/attunements, and feelings. Reading Muñoz, we come

closer to our involvement in an imperceptible atmosphere that situates us just off a road that connects to another—and another and another—until we make our own way to Gold Street. We become proximate to attuning ourselves with the entities of the collection as loss is cast as widely universal and inherently specific. While an immediate collectivity is not formed by mood in this process, mood does intervene as a structure particularly capable of highlighting similar orientations, which is to say, similar relationships between objects and subjects, spaces and places. In short, mood registers its orientations as its orientations characterize mood. That this occurs not through labels, tropes, or stereotype, but by, with, and through an affective assemblage interrupts stereotypical identitarian scripts or identity-based collectives, further disrupting the discriminatory logic motivating legislation like HB 2281.

In this way, thinking through the blurry boundaries of mood that may draw in the reader is not an argument for a return to or reformation of theories of reader response. Such positions focus on the reactions of an assumed universal readership, often remaining within the realm of named emotions and subjectiveness such that critical theory has taught us to seek interpretative ground elsewhere. Although I am not eschewing the relationship between feelings and words since I am ultimately situating Munoz's text as an affecting art object, I am positioning the text in a way that emphasizes an alignment of feelings that can become a cognitive process of awareness, a reorientation, a sigh, instead of emotional reaction as its dominant form of engaging. As affect theorist Jonathan Flatley reminds us while invoking Lauren Berlant, it means separating the structure of affect from the way it feels (139). Munoz's text is not alone in doing so, but particularly primed to outline how the orienting capacity of literary moods

does not reside within the pages but instead requires the alignment of peoples, places, things, and sensations to resound. The reader indeed participates in this process, amplifying the reverberations that begin on the page and float outward.

These affirmations, of course, leave mood as a synergistic construction that creates a totality through the accumulation and in excess of similarly situated existences defined by loneliness and abandonment. Seen in any other way, the very qualities that define Muñoz's mood would threaten the possible collective capacity I am sketching here because of their depressive and divisive characteristics. However, the reader will understand how experiences and conditions of isolation, loneliness, abandonment, documentation, and more, forge a larger mood-entity out of the things and persons populating an otherwise sprawling network of roads. When affective modes suture such lives and stories together as Muñoz does with notable synchronic referentiality, and when such lives and stories are in direct relationship to each other as well as nonhuman actors and forces, we must step back to widen the scope of our interpretation. Leaning into its foggy, dispersed nature, mood shows us that Isidro and Connie belong with each other, their papers, and roads, just as much as they belong with their neighbors down the street, just as much as they belong with all experiences of marked difference, torn love letters, and dark and silent bedrooms. Mood ushers in a transition away from a structuring politics of identity to a universality of untethered sensorial intensity that plays with and through stasis, signification, and individuality to register the embodied experiences of Latinidad and beyond.

In the final pages of Muñoz's story, its mode of articulation begins to delink from the text's finitude: the narrative voice trades in the past tense for the future tense. The

reader's knowledge of what has happened tilts forward as a series of "will" statements casts Connie, Isidro, baseball caps, destroyed letters, love, loss, and isolation far into the future: "The house will be empty, only Connie, only her things. She will become the woman that lives alone in that little blue house on Sierra Way with no car out front." The funeral comes and goes, as does the memory of Isidro for his peers: "In next week's paper, photographs of her son and the other boy will appear. […] The day of the first funeral, a line of cars will drive through town [and] mostly kids from the high school will come. [But] the high school girls will forget him. People will not remember" (22). The narrative continues, leaning into the affective dimensions this future holds. I quote at length:

> Connie will dream of the boys on a motorcycle. She will dream of her son hugging Carlos as the motorcycle drives faster. This was love. At each of the intersections, she is there watching as Isidro hugs Carlos, feeling with her son as Carlos takes a deep breath, the boys waiting for clearance, Carlos's back widening. […] Up in her closet's top shelf will sit her son's wallet, its battered leather, handed to her by the police at the hospital, and a Giants baseball cap. Connie will regret having destroyed the letters, such beautiful things, even if she did not know what they said. […] Such beautiful things—they were the only things, really, worth keeping. Connie will wake up in the middle of the night and stare at the dark space at the top shelf. It will nag at her that the cap might have belonged to the other boy, and that there is another mother in town just like her. (22-23)

Devoid of any climactic peak or cathartic denouement, the story's final lines bring neither resolution nor comfort. Though Connie is left to imagine and dream, it is not of aspirations for a better and brighter future. She instead floats in and out of spaces she never inhabited and can never inhabit, since they were buried with Isidro and his boy. Notably, however, these dreams take on a profoundly sensorial characteristic that permits Connie to extend beyond the boundaries of her corporality, unfurling from memories of

the road or, as Ahmed calls it citing Husserl, "the zero point of orientation, the point from which the world unfolds" (Ahmed 545). Connie's understanding of love melds with Isidro's; her memories of hugging on a motorcycle blur with his; the very fabric of Connie herself is stretched and sutured beyond distinguishing to her son, his lover, motorbikes, intersections, breaths and sighs, waiting and feeling. In this way, Connie becomes part of the pervasive fog of loss from the text's opening pages, the one that refuses to be cleared.

The things that will remain (or did not remain) continue in their orienting capacities and are equally constitutive and underscore, again, the importance of mood's conceptualization of interconnected, transpersonal subjectivity. Even the wallet and the cap, objects poised to remain on the shelf as long as they are left there, cannot signal Isidro in a direct, isolated fashion—"the cap might have belonged to the other boy." They tie one lonely mother to another, a link forged through the affective charges of battered leather, empty rooms, and faraway gravesites. That these connections and parallelisms are registered through nagging underscores another textual disjunction, beyond the future appearing at the end: the conditions of isolation, loss, and abandonment that Connie suffers should not be shared or replicated. That they are—that Connie's orientation is mirrored by someone just down the street—encapsulates mood's ability to flag existences that are failed by systems of social support, dependence, and togetherness. If there was ever a way to form a possible collective out of loneliness without invalidating the defining terms of that loneliness, it would be mood.

Closing with a focus on the love letters—the ones that will live on through their absence–re-centers this chapter's focus on literary, textual objects and their affecting

capabilities. Not only did their discovery and destruction significantly alter the weight of the story's events, the love letters also give name to the story itself: "If they had been [Connie's] love letters, she'd have written *lindo y querido* to say it all: beautiful and dear, lovely and loved" (23). Although these adjectives correspond most closely to the letters' recipient, we could also read them as descriptions of what it is to write with feeling, to read with feeling, and to proximate a position that inhabits such feelings. Carlos wrote with love, Isidro read with love, Connie lives with love. What's more, the mother's translating of the letter into her native Spanish is not merely a change of language. It is the transmutation of histories and sociocultural practices of racialization, sexualization, and gendering that are so poignantly indexed and enunciated with and by Latinx. This potentializes even further the affective capabilities of certain types of writing, as long as we remain attuned to the orienting capability of their symbols and shapes, repetitions and connections, residues and resonances.

Historicizing Latinx Lit: From Coalition to Colorblindness

As the centrality of queerness and its capacities for decentering subject-based critique turn us towards the future of a Latinx assemblage and its literary tradition sustained by mood, this section adopts a janic position of looking forward toward this project's close by looking backwards to juxtapose an aesthetics of exposure seen in Latinx texts of the sixties and seventies with the aesthetics of Muñoz's emergent Latinx mood. Exploring in more depth the shifts in Latinx literary traditions that I previously gestured to in my reading of Piri Thomas and Justin Torres in Chapter One, I now argue that both forms—an aesthetics of exposure and one of colorblindness—correspond to the

dominant racial politics of their historical moments and that the advent of racial colorblindness and increased presence of queerness help to explain the aesthetic paradigm that characterizes Muñoz's work.

To begin, I do not pretend to offer an exhaustive, all-encompassing reading of the manifestations of feelings in Latinx literature of the 1960s and 1970s. In fact, I begin this section by doing just the opposite: reading a fragment of one canonical Latinx text as a way of speaking to larger political and aesthetic practices that have defined canonical Latinx writing. I turn to Tomás Rivera's *...y no se lo tragó la tierra/And the Earth Did Not Devour Him* (1971/1995) to do this for numerous reasons. To begin, the text has been notably praised and awarded (not to mention translated and reprinted numerous times) since its original publication half a century ago for its moving depiction of Chicanx migrant worker experiences in Southern Texas. Its success even garnered Rivera recognition as one of the founding fathers of Chicanx letters, a nomination I take as testament to the text's representability of the foundational literary production of that period. Another component that primes Rivera's work for my analysis is what it shares with Muñoz's collection and "Lindo y Querido." Organized into brief vignette-like chapters, *...y no se lo tragó la tierra* offers a glimpse into a 1950s Mexican American reality historically marked by violence and collective othering. Written from within that community without explicitly identifying a named narrative voice, the text is grounded in a time and place not unlike Muñoz's where racial difference is compounded by sickness, death, hunger, and migration. The forms each author uses, however, are markedly different.

These organizational elements resonate strongly with narrative components of Muñoz's *Faith Healer* since that text's overarching structure also consists of shorter chapters that intimately explore interrelated experiences of a othered collective. What's more, the fragment I now present operates with a similar set of themes and events as "Lindo y Querido": the texts centers on an abandoned woman and recounts a gruesome car accident, much like the motorcycle crash that eventually claims Isidro's life. Titled in the original Spanish as "Poquito antes de las seis," Rivera's vignette in its entirety (and in English translation) reads as follows:

> Poquito antes de las seis, cuando ya mero regresaban los acelgueros, se oyó primero el pitido del tanque del agua, después se oyeron las apagadoras y luego al ratito la ambulancia. Para las seis ya habían regresado unos de los trabajadores y traían la razón de que una de las trocas que traía gente había dado choque con un carro y que todavía se estaba quemando. Era de caja cerrada y cuando le pegó al carro los que no saltaron para fuera de la caja quedaron atrapados. Los que vieron el choque dijeron que se había encendido luego luego y que habían visto a unos pobres correr por el monte con el cabello en llamas. Dicen que la americana que iba en el carro era de un condado seco y que había estado tomando en una cantina de puro pesar que la había dejado su esposo. Fueron diez y seis muertos. (47).
>
> A little before six, just before the spinach pickers would be getting home, there was the high-pitched signal of the horn at the water tank, then the sound of fire trucks, and then some moments later the ambulance sirens. By six o'clock some of the workers arrived with the news of how one of the trucks transporting workers had collided with a car and was still burning. When the car hit it, those who were not throw out of the van on impact were trapped. Those who witnessed the crash said that the truck had immediately burst into flames and that they had seen some victims, poor souls, running from the wreckage toward the thicket with their hair aflame. They say the Anglo woman driving the car was from a dry county and that she'd been at the bar drinking, upset because her husband had left her. There were sixteen dead. (121)

Upon first glance, the reader may think this passage comes from a news report or eyewitness account, given its almost journalistic, matter of fact narration. Its presentation as a single paragraph alone on the page facilitates this interpretation, as does its

chronological progression marked by the passage of time, interpolating the reader into a familiar form of storytelling. The numbers that appear throughout, however, indicate more than narrative style and speak to classed and raced inequality. In the span of some ten lines, six (the hour) has become sixteen (the death toll of migrant spinach pickers), recounted as if it were another event that comes and goes in the quotidian Southwest.

The tension between reserved voice and tragic events, though, seems to set on equal ground two profoundly distinct and uneven losses: one recently divorced white woman and sixteen Mexican American workers trapped and burned alive. It appears as though there is a disconnection between what is articulated and how it is articulated, with the sterile retelling of a traumatic occurrence slipping only with the inclusion of "unos pobres/poor souls," which, if anything, reads more superficially than deeply empathetically. The sameness with which the passage recounts both drunken sorrow and torturous death is compounded by the racial identities explicitly named and associated with each. Noting how "americana" is translated to "Anglo," we are presented with a pseudo-biopolitical framework in which one white life is equal to sixteen Chicanx lives. What's more, and although this fragment does not name any emotional state as some of Rivera's contemporaries did in their writing, neither does it provide the space, literary subjects, or literary objects within the narration to absorb, process, or respond to the presentation of such a stark imbalance of value, perversely assigned along racial lines.

As previously mentioned, for Latinx Studies scholar Richard T. Rodríguez, Rivera's work, like that of his contemporaries, exemplifies an aesthetics of politics "or, in other words, how political action decisively contours the terms of expressive content—seeking to represent and mobilize their respective communities" (58). Rodríguez locates

this in Rivera's narrative voice that he takes to be a mirroring of the author's lived experiences as a migrant worker, a mirroring that "provides the text's focalization by which an anti-assimilative and communally empowering literary chronicle surfaces" (60). In this sense, the articulation of a racially-defined collectivity in Rivera's text (as in other foundational and canonical texts of the 1960s and 1970s, as Rodríguez shows) forged in contradistinction to white femininity stands to represent and mobilize a Chicanx coalition at the same time it constructs it. The language of race, exploitation, and certain loss animates these political and literary projects and establishes scripts of Latinx subjectivity and collectivity in markedly racial terms. These identitarian terms, however, remain neither static nor absolute in the shifting landscape of racial politics since the sixties and seventies and their subsequent decades.

Putting both *...y no se lo tragó la tierra* and *Faith Healer* in conversation reveals the ways in which race and literary aesthetics shift, if not in tandem, then in dialogue. If Muñoz's text encodes imbalance, disjunction, and marginality through carefully nuanced networks of (dis)attuned actors and agents, then Rivera's does so with explicitly identified people and in a form structured by cause and effect. Although the narratives resonate with thematic, geographic, and generic similarities, their distinguishing differences occur with the manner in which their texts are constructed, situated, and articulated. I continue in a comparative mode: if Muñoz's subjects are knowable through co-readings of things, surfaces, spaces, and cycles of time, and in that way, only partially knowable, then Rivera's do not extend beyond their job (and its implication of migrant status and precarity) and their death. If Muñoz's text creates a world of overlapping, bisecting, blurrily connected existences through self-referentiality, then the world to

which Rivera refers a nonfictional one beyond the boundaries of literature. If Muñoz structures and sutures parts into a whole through feeling, affect, and mood, then Rivera does so through signified identity.

Rodríguez's aesthetics of politics, in its dual function of archiving and underscoring societal ills, might more precisely be characterized as one rooted in exposure. Borrowing this term from literary critic Jonathan Flatley, exposure is defined as "writing about the mistreatment of persons by the government, by the police, by factory owners, or by other persons in power" in order to "provoke a dramatic, nearly instantaneous effect" ("How A Revolutionary Counter-Mood Is Made" 509). Though Flatley is reading Black Leninist writings and other newspaper documents cataloguing car worker unions in 1960s Detroit, he is also questioning the relationship between texts, feelings, and social change within the Civil Rights and Cultural Movement era. Flatley's work signals an emotional dimension to the 1960s and 1970s Latinx aesthetic of politics and exposure, one that channels feelings towards collective organization and action. While this facilitates the linking of literary forms, political projects, and emotion through a praxis of exposure, it also grounds Latinx subjectivity within a mode of expression defined by transparency, since the withholding of secrets or the acknowledgement of unknowability would appear to interrupt political-literary movements intent on laying bare and organizing against systematic and experienced racism. Muñoz's writing, like that of Torres, Plascencia, and Machado, clearly operates with a different logic.

Returning to "Poquito antes de las seis" through this lens, we can understand Rivera's inclination to a restrained style and his penchant for diachronically-referential realism as moves to expose: to activate communities towards anti-racist charges through

naming explicitly raced identities, using referentiality (drawing from lived experiences, at the very least) to document collective disenfranchisement and inspire action and reaction. By remaining within a form upheld by cause (a white woman driving drunk) and effect (sixteen dead spinach pickers), Rivera's text, I argue, emphasizes racially identified subjects in order to affect other like-identified subjects. Without arguing that Rivera's text is more innately affective that Muñoz's, or more adept at moving the reader in feeling for its spinach pickers and their broken worlds, I venture to say that Rivera's text engages a formal register of exposing so as to spark feeling within its readership, whereas Muñoz's formal registers draw in, attune, and invite. An aesthetics of exposure, after all, is realist and contrapuntal to opacity, and therefore already positioned away from queerness' longer taciturn history. Exposure, however, proved central to securing the increase in widespread legibility and importance Latinx populations and their literatures experience today precisely because racial and classed inequalities during the 1960s and 1970s required calling out, revelation, and denunciation. Racial discourse has since mutated, and with it, the efficacy of affecting objects rooted in an aesthetics of exposure.

The implications of this for Latinx subjects and literatures are manifold. For one, a contemporary and uncritical reader—like the authors of HB 2281—might find the language of racial identity we see in Rivera not only passé but antagonistic and discriminatory. While this shift ultimately protects white supremacy and complicates reconstructive and redistributive practices towards the improvement of racial inequalities by deracializing the conversation, it also signals a wavering in the political viability of an aesthetics of exposure like Rivera's. This is not to say that political and artistic projects invested in exposing histories and realities of racial disparity, subjection, and violence

ought to fall by the wayside—this would signal a triumph of colorblindness and the racism it propagates. Instead, it serves to explain why more recent Latinx literary production has shifted away from narrating Latinx subjects and their collectives in explicitly raced terms and primes intimacies as the next beacon of radical Latinx politics, as I study in the previous two chapters.

By analyzing *Faith Healer* within a paradigm of colorblindness, I show how, in the absence of speaking subjects and without present love objects, feelings and the forms they take are the sites most potently inscribing racialization and, therefore, key to critiquing hierarchies of white, heteromasculine supremacy. To be clear, instead of suggesting Muñoz panders to a problematic racial politics, I argue that his text exemplifies an aesthetics of colorblindness by capturing and rendering visible the vast disjunction between official discourse on ethnoracialized subjects and the conditions and experiences facing ethnoracialized subjects themselves, encouraging Latinx literary critique to look beyond the interpretative models inherited from the previous generation. Returning to the opening excerpt of "Lindo y Querido" makes this clear. Whereas Rivera names his car crash victims by race, profession, and the manner in which they died, Muñoz emphasizes the surface upon which tragedy has struck—"that road, that intersection," so easily "recognized […] when the newspaper ran a picture from the scene"—and the space in which it occurs—"in broad daylight, summertime, the boys coming back from Fresno or wherever they had gone to" (1). While Isidro is named, his lover is similarly described through place and roadway—"[t]he other boy, one of the triplets from over on Gold Street"—instead of name and identity—queerness diffuses that which cannot be named. Finding ourselves before such an aesthetics of racial

colorblindness that encodes an evolving politics of sexuality, we are presented with the interpretative task of finding in surfaces and textures, bodies and papers, objects and subjects, and unnamed yet transformational feelings the components that make Muñoz's writing a heart wrenching tale of Latinx loss.

Colorblind Law, Latinx Lit, and the Future of Ethnic Studies

Recalling Cacho's discussion of affects, objects, and anti-Ethnic Studies legislation in this concluding section affords me a final opportunity to make the case for reading literary moods. Whereas previous chapters engage constructions like emotion and affect, my focus on mood provides a more capacious framework through which to suture the sensorial, historical, collective, and aesthetic-literary. To elaborate, we can substantiate HB 2281's logic of removing certain affects by way of removing certain literary objects through the inherently political aesthetic of Rivera's text. Given the way Rivera's fragment constructs a narrative populated with explicitly named racial identities, each assigned a specific role in a cause-effect trajectory of death and exploitation, we could perhaps see a glimmer of reason behind thinking a disavowal of *...y no se lo tragó la tierra* means ignoring what it exposes, a move that would leave buried the (hi)stories of racial oppression it recounts. However, as I have maintained throughout this chapter, a reading of literary mood demonstrates the ways in which contemporary Latinx literature collapses HB 2281's logic: the absence of an explicit articulation of ethnic, racial identities does not leave histories and conditions of racism and racial disparities unaddressed. Luckily, as Cacho says, some of us are wise to the ways in which literature can index, register, and encapsulate through a feelingful assemblage of places, surfaces,

objects, and subjects, the persistent vilification of difference along lines of race, sexuality, gender, and documentation.

Presented under the guise of a neoliberal logic invested in the development and preparation of students, the legislation tacitly propagates myths of self-sufficiency and independence while casting a group-oriented Ethnic Studies as behind the times. While the preceding pages provide close readings of how Muñoz's subjects cannot be read as self-sufficient or independent, but rather deeply entrenched and interconnected to vast constellations of agents and entities, I want to iterate how the concept of mood requires a transpersonal reading that explodes notions of self-sufficiency and independence, regardless of whether the primary text has papers, letters, sheets, or roads. This assumes greater importance when recognizing that fixity dominates our conceptions and articulations of self (who we are, what we feel), subordinating porosity and dynamism to the detriment of collectivity and critique—we struggle reading subjects outside of the static identity categories into which they have been placed. Ossified in mainstream discourse, this logic moves beyond stereotype to render minoritized subjects transparent and flattened both anticipatorily and retroactively, permanently excluded from coming into being on their own terms. The literary liveness a text like "Lindo y Querido" enjoys stands to revert this, if not dismantle it entirely.

The idea of removing racially defined texts in order to remove feelings of "resentment" and "ethnic solidarity" is also unraveled by my discussion of Muñoz's writing. More specifically, the text creates a moody atmosphere through proximate, interacting, and codependent actors and agents and, in doing so, evidences how feelings neither begin nor end (nor remain, for that matter) squarely within the subject. Instead,

they inhabit things and people, spaces and textures simultaneously and dynamically. While this framework emerges from its literary manifestation with Muñoz, it moves far beyond an exercise in affective imagination; it reflects the ephemeral, contingent, and emergent forms and relations affects take in the wake world and confirms that the removal of one component—like an overtly political text—will not disappear pervasive, infectious feelings like solidarity or criticality in the face of racist, homophobic, and classed disparities.

That this understanding of the complex environments we inhabit comes from a literary text should stand to underscore the innate revelatory, re-orientational potentiality of literature over the validity of removing it from curricula and classroom conversation. Whether or not we come into contact with literary texts does not alter the reality of the interconnected actors, agents, and feelings made clearer through the framework of mood; this is a lesson the authors of HB 2281 could stand to learn. However, when we do, we find ourselves primed for entering into a proximate resonance with the mood of the text at hand at the same time we are reminded of the assembled and affective natures of the worlds in which we dwell. While reading mood requires a text as nuanced as Muñoz's, it also possesses fundamental components independent of narratives that make it a literary framework and interpretative mode worthy of further study and a wider application. Effectively, mood changes the grounds on which subjectivity can be read and conceived, how it structures collectivity in affective terms instead of identitarian ones, and how it heightens the political impact of an aesthetic that is not immediately political. In short, mood underscores how within the act of reading (a text like Muñoz's) lies, perhaps, the

greatest potential in invalidating and resisting the racism of anti-Ethnic Studies legislation without violating its racist, exclusionary terms.

Towards the end of her article, Cacho reminds us that "Ethnic Studies poses a threat not because it teaches students they are oppressed, but because it encourages them to keep it surreal and to hope for a world not yet born" (35). Finding resonance between Cacho and Muñoz in this sense, I also retain an orientation to the future at this chapter's close. Although the text presents a mood of loss rather than gain, and although Connie will live with nagging instead of calmness, reading such conditions through mood can only lead us to look for what Cacho assures is yet to come. While mood does not present itself as utopian, it does hold great potential for, as Altieri does, deconstructing and reconstructing. Its presentation of dependent, interlaced subjectivity is poised to engage identity and its political ramifications without remaining there. Its ability to read and sustain collectivity through feeling promises to expand and extend the contours of community, unity, and coalition. Its fundamentally aesthetic qualities, as well as its capability to aestheticize or render aesthetic, recharges projects of interpretation and literary production. That these components intersect in mood and in *Faith Healer* unequivocally recognizes queer Latinx literature, as well as its attendant traditions of critique and scholarship, as both the means to this future and the future itself. In this way, and though the world not yet born will forever reside on the horizon, queerness, Latinidad, and the literary bring us closer one page, step, and sigh at a time.

CONCLUSION: The Dehumanization of Latinx Literature

> I am on my knees, my mouth over the mouth of the toilet, waiting to heave. It comes up with a bark. All the badly pronounced Spanish words I have forced myself to sound during the day, bits and pieces of Mexico spew from my mouth, warm, half-understood, nostalgic reds and greens dangle from long strands of saliva.
>
> I am crying from my mouth in Mexico City.
>
> — Richard Rodriguez, *Days of Obligation: An Argument With My Mexican Father* (1992)

This project begins and ends with a queer Mexican American man on his knees, mouth agape, defined in contradistinction to his father. But as Corral's poetic voice looks to take in, Rodriguez's here is forcing out. This scene of rejection is emblematic of the polemic memoirist's oeuvre, often characterized by a refusal of the Mexican American, Chicano, and Latinx collectives that might have him, in all their identitarian, political, and historical dimensions. Corporealizing that act of refusal here by vomiting, vomiting Spanish, and vomiting Mexico itself, Rodriguez expulses his father's inheritance in an act of articulation, where father is padre, patria, and pater noster all in one. Purging, then, becomes a confusedly decolonial act where the then-closeted brown Anglophone US writer resists what we are led to believe is a wave of reverse colonialism, protagonized not by conquistadores, but by Latinx identity politics. By imbuing his memoir with metaphors and their slippage and spillage, Rodriguez directs his literary project away from the collective investments historically informing Latinx memoir and autobiographical writing, garnering himself status as persona non grata within the field. At the same time, however, this metaphoricity introduces an aesthetic tension that

ultimately shifts what is articulated and how: language becomes vomit, nation becomes bile, tears become saliva, feelings become words.

I am most immediately drawn to this aesthetic transformation and the way it renders foundational and formational social institutions, systems, and experiences apprehendable in different ways. Without weighing in on the value of those different ways as Rodriguez sees them, this act of rendering shares at its core the central operations of this project's major theoretical framework: an aesthetics of colorblindness. While Rodriguez is writing in a time before the critical frameworks of colorblindness, homonormativity, and the institutionalization of Latinx cultural production enjoyed the cultural currency they currently do, he is still invested in a literary project that engages form and feeling to buck the expectations of what Latinx, literature, and Latinx literature is, does, might be, and can do. It bears stating, though, that the capture of racial difference, racism, and racialization that the primary texts of my corpus enact and that my project facilitates through the analysis of explicitly gendered and sexual narratives operates with a markedly different set of political urgencies, impacts, and consequences than Rodriguez's. However, to allow these differences to obscure the similarities between the aesthetic processes central to both an aesthetics of colorblindness and Rodriguez's scene of vomiting would be a lost opportunity to expand *New Latinx Feelings*' commitment to form and feeling beyond the immediate contemporary.

In order to facilitate this temporal flexibility, one that I ultimately hope allows other scholarly projects to engage my work in different periods, with different corpuses, and with different social structures and systems, I seek now to characterize the core machinations of an aesthetics of colorblindness as dehumanizing ones, drawing that

adjective from the Spanish thinker José Ortega y Gasset's essay *The Dehumanization of Art* (1925). The first few decades of the 20th century, the time during which Ortega y Gasset was writing, saw in Spain the onset of social liberalism, industrial revolution, and intellectual movements intent on critiquing the corruption of conservative political institutions and the bourgeois artistic sensibilities of the previous century. While the Spanish Civil War would soon signal an end to this moment, much of Ortega y Gasset's work emerged in the pre-war timeframe, characterized by the notion of perspectivism grounded in the subjectiveness of perception. Playing with these concepts almost literally, *The Dehumanization of Art* describes the historical reception of visual art, where realist renderings of men, houses, and mountains (for example) inspire identification and connection, and modern (as Ortega y Gasset names it) depictions engender confusion and rejection. Leaning into the generative capabilities of the latter aesthetic experience, one classified as dehumanizing, the philosopher elaborates: "The painter, far from stumbling towards reality, is seen proceeding in the contrary direction. He has set himself resolutely to distort reality, break its human image, dehumanize it. It is possible to envisage living in the company of the things represented in a traditional picture; association with the things shown in the new picture is impossible. In ridding them of their aspect of living actuality, the painter has severed the bridge and burnt the boats which might connect us with our customary world. He leaves us imprisoned in an abstruse world and forces us to confront objects impossible to treat humanly" (71).

Dehumanization, then, is the valiant stumble away from reality, an exploration of the limits and breaking points of the referents, forms, and structures whose familiarity situates them beyond the scope of everyday critique. Simply put, it makes Spanish into

vomit, Mexico into red and green dribble, and competing racial and identitarian epistemologies into a kneeling man before a toilet. While Ortega y Gasset continues to elaborate this framework in relation to the collectives that may "understand" and "enjoy" dehumanized art in an unsavorily classist way, the processes of interfacing with novelty, thought, and reflection that stem from such aesthetic encounters—the very kind that have sustained and inspired the preceding chapters—ultimately hinge on the generative distancing from reality in order to contemplate it. While this original framework of dehumanizing aesthetics emerged long before the coalescence of the problematics *New Latinx Feelings* interrogates, its takeaways are still promisingly relevant. Most immediately, this dehumanizing denomination conjures the subjectlessness I have advocated for in my project and dovetails with my corpus's centering of animalia, paper and fabric bodies, and death. These could be read as literal breaks with the human, ruptures that afford a vantage point from which to see the many ways in which the frame of the human subject is already broken. It also parallels the perverse impacts of colorblindness, homonormativity, and commodified Latinidad, processes that reduce the vast and expansive richness of subjects in their racial, gendered, sexual, and artistic dimensions to mere color, orientation, disposition, stereotype, and trope. The dangerous act of neoliberal disguise, as I have named it in this project's introduction, is distorted here, engendering a confrontation with the already present impossibility of treating and being treated humanly. What's more, that Torres, Plascencia, Machado, and Muñoz sever the bridge of realist representation and burn the interpretative boats beneath facilitates the capture of how race relations between identitarian camps, across differently racialized collectives, and within subjects themselves have already been severed and burned.

The framework of dehumanization, then, becomes one that facilitates the rethinking of Latinx literature without bracketing identity as a secondary or tertiary critical inroad. Latinx Studies scholar Ricardo L. Ortiz writes on this balance in his *Latinx Literature Now: Between Event and Evanescence* (2019) when he states that dominant frameworks in US Latinx Studies remain beholden "to the pull of a cultural politics of social restitution and social justice that favors the call of latinidad as politicized identity over the disciplinary (and philosophical) demands of literature as discursive material practice still-awaiting just accounts of both its ontological unfolding and its viable epistemological capture" (74). What ought to occupy Latinx Studies now, to use Ortiz's timeframe, is not only a model of scholarship that confronts the inherited parameters of Latinx legibility and its relationship to the literary, but one capable of registering distortion and disguise, sensing breaks and burned bridges, and refusing any insistence on humanizing (or centering subjects) where dehumanization (subjectlessness) is at work.

After all, we find ourselves, at a time in Latinx literary history where previous representational strategies have been co-opted by perverse racial and sexual politics. We are therefore encouraged to interact with objects that determine the scope of a subject's liveness and deadness in time and space, with feelings that escape words yet give shape to body and corpus, with subjects whose existences operate along sliding scales of paralyzing dependence (paperdom, headlessness, animality) on the one end and narrative agency and excess on the other (motherhood, authorship, omniscient narration). The tensions undergirding this spectrum of intensity evinces a generative politics of feeling that rewrites the limits of subjectivity, expands affective interpretative frameworks, and

unmoors Latinidad from convention. In this way, each of the texts I have read theorize dehumanization on their own terms. Whether it's through a journal marking a young protagonist's coming of age and coming out, the metafictionalization of a writer editing his novel about militant migrants, a narrative voice that speaks of secrets and sex to the reader in parentheses, or secret love letters hidden under the mattress, the narrative acts that have inspired and shaped this project recognize the subjective, sociocultural, and aesthetic importance of being themselves narrative acts.

With the embrace of such dehumanizing art, which overlaps with Halberstam's frame of the wild from Chapter One, comes the need to develop dehumanizing frames of analysis that can detect manner up to the limits of movement, that register the opacity of thick aesthetic frames, recognize what lies beyond the reach of the subject, and ignite imagination to ponder without pinpointing, to ruminate without reducing. My attention to Latinx feelings—that is, the feelings that are constitutive of Latinx—moves to this end at the same time it signals a breaking with more familiar or canonical forms of knowing and reading Latinx. The preceding chapters demonstrate how these feelings are rooted in multivalent loss as it manifests through the unanticipated departure of an individual or valued entity, the gradual dissipation of a bond or connection that once was, the sudden disappearance of a place or space. Whether imagined or real, tangible or intangible, these psychic and lived experiences give shape to subjectivities by defining, at least in part, the physical, social, and affective contexts they inhabit.

When such loss shapes and is shaped by the subject's minoritized position in relation to normative discourses of race, gender, and sexuality, and with those very social coordinates in constant flux, it assumes a form in dissonance with mainstream

expectations reified through canon and tradition. In short, the experience of losing is what drives a dehumanizing framework, nudging Ortega y Gasset's initial explanation away from the high art of the European avant-guard and towards the constellations that radiate from ethnoracial and sexually- and gender-nonconforming collectives. We see this with Rodriguez, where, in an act of miraculous conversion that might have come from Plascencia's *The Book of Incandescent Light*, vomit becomes tears and fraught race, queerness, and language become memoir. While it is beyond the scope of this project to trace these claims away from the present and towards a pre-Civil Rights era, we might find how a similar engagement with form and feeling—with the work of dehumanization—before an evacuated (or, more literally, non-existent) Latinx subjectivity as such, in relation to the material conditions structuring processes of normalizing certain racial, sexual, and gendered positions—instead of concretely articulated identities, be them assigned or asserted—could extend a distinctly Latinx history, culture, and critical tradition backwards, well before Latinx and its other 20th century parallelisms. In this way, and recognizing that texts of this self-aware nature populate literary production across periods, genres, and traditions, or rather, that dehumanizing work is afoot elsewhere, I situate *New Latinx Feelings* as a project beholden to the specificities of a queer Latinx present while invested in charting larger aesthetic trends and their sociocultural, politico-historical impacts. This is ultimately an undertaking that I hope other scholars will weigh in on, respond to, and develop with me further.

We need not overlook how the dehumanization of Latinx literature dehumanizes Latinx itself, too. This framework ultimately moves to reconfigure Latinx as a shared

affective positioning capable of registering the multitude of positionalities it contains. Imbuing this identitarian term with collective affectivity and a critical engagement with varying histories and material conditions retains sociopolitical legibility and the continued possibility of critique while problematizing the cooption of representation for ontological paralysis. In other words, by reading Latinx as the indication of a shared feeling that assumes no particular form or quality but results from structural experiences of migration, racialization, sexualization, and gendering, and recognizing the formal manifestation of these structures, we are able to chart distance from normative social relations and positions while remaining attuned—indeed, held accountable—to the infinite array of modalities, relations, forms, and existences that populate such distance. This does not contest the takeaways of identity critique: Latinx is and remains a discursively mediated identitarian category open to and worthy of interrogation and resignification. However, it might also provide the frame and scope required to read the expansive and nuanced conditions and experiences of losing that I am tracing here, the ones that directly inculpate continued histories of white supremacy, xenophobic nationalism, and cis-heteromasculine patriarchy.

This formulation precipitates a clarification in regard to my use of Latinx. I am hesitant to provide a definition of who and what this term is, given the breadth of existing scholarship that tackles this question. I am, however, less hesitant to provide a framework of how Latinx is. Just as others have imbued Latinx with the feelings of loss wrought by processes of racialization, sexualization, and gendering, so do I elaborate an affective dimension to Latinidad that, as Ortiz calls it, projects "as desire, as wish, and as project: that is, as a not-yet-realized occasion" (xv). After all, we might read the adoption of the X

into Latinx Studies critical vernacular as a recognition of the tacit pasts, loaded presents, and long futures Latinx and Queer Studies share.

Ortiz (2020) returns with a final observation, affirming that the X "doesn't then just "include" queer and trans more visibly or strategically into some standing and stable construction of latinidad, but instead saturates latinidad with queerness, with transness, insisting instead in an alternative construal of a latinidad that itself now becomes unthinkable, and unsayable, without queerness, without transness" (3). The discursive opening, the reorientation, the variable that escapes calculation that Ortiz names—as opposed to inclusion, incorporation, and capture—is precisely race dehumanizing sexuality dehumanizing gender. It is the twists and turns, the breaks and burns, the slips and spills that bring us to the edge of what is emerging, what is just beyond capture. They bring us to the wild.

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