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Reading for Opacity in Queer *Latinidad*

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Reading for Opacity in Queer *Latinidad*

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B.A., University of Florida, 2003
M.A., University of Florida, 2005

Advisor: José A. Quiroga, Ph.D.

An abstract of
A dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the
James T. Laney School of Graduate Studies of Emory University
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Abstract

Reading for Opacity in Queer *Latinidad*
By Christina A. León

My dissertation, *Reading Opacity in Queer Latinidad*, conceptualizes a queer, Latina/o ethics of reading in literature, art, and theory. Many Latina/o scholars have thoroughly analyzed the increasing media focus on Latina/os at the level of politics, but less so at the level of ethics. I contend that ethics is a necessary addition to political urgencies of cultural difference, because a critical focus on ethics allows Latina/o aesthetic productions to be carefully considered in all of their complexity. To that effect, I first articulate opacity as an ethical approach—traced through feminist, queer and Latina/o theories of difference—that thwarts the representative logic of visibility and identity. Second, I show how Latina/o writers and artists work through what I call an opaque aesthetic that resists restrictive notions of *latinidad*. María Irene Fornés, as a figure, shows how sociopolitical context and aesthetics can be held in productive tension in order to nuance the politics of identity. Manuel Ramos Otero employs queer camp to blur the boundaries between autobiography and fiction by a process of translation. Ana Mendieta and Tania Bruguera figure the decimated indigenous peoples of Cuba through performance, in order to forge a relation between colonial violence and the political present. Finally, I look to the artwork of Andre Keichian in order to see how my readings of opacity relate to a contemporary figure of queer *latinidad.* Ultimately, I argue that the literary and aesthetic are modes of ethical relation for queer and Latina/o studies because they offer a way to approach figures of difference without anticipating what that difference might make.

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INTRODUCTION

Invoking a Fornesian Accent

> *I usually gather a number of those things that have some relation—again, I do not even know why I consider that they are related—and I put them together*.
> –María Irene Fornés ("I Write These Messages That Come")

The epigraph that hovers over this introduction operates as a *bendición* for my project, by one of its most elusive and illustrative muses, María Irene Fornés. Some might find her an unlikely queer Latina to beckon what will follow, given that she has not often been categorized—nor does she explicitly identify herself— as queer and Latina in any conventional sense of these words. María Irene Fornés is a Cuban-American experimental playwright and director known for her participation in the 1960s Off-Off-Broadway movement and her lasting commitment to non-mainstream U.S. theatre. Fornés, born in Havana, Cuba in 1930, moved to the United States in 1945. Importantly, her immigration preceded the major waves of Cuban immigration in the 1960s and 1980s that identified strongly as exilic. Not often mentioned in Latina/o literary canons, Fornés is also featured in few studies of latinidad and in no known studies on queer latinidad. Fornés' absence may not be a simple matter of overlooking, but may instead be due to the signature of complexity in regard to her plays and their relation to politics. While Fornés' plays often deal with feminism and poverty, she explores these as ambivalences, ambiguities and difficulties. Her plays are a tight rope walk between playfulness and violence, between camp and despair, and between ludic farce and harsh reality.

One thing that this project has taught me is that origins, and moreover the stories of origins, are primarily relational. So, allow me to begin this text with another beginning—one that, through its unlikely liaisons, reverberates through a forceful obliqueness with the motifs and scope of *Reading for Opacity in Queer Latinidad*. María Irene Fornés's life story is anything but typical. In fact, she never meant to become a playwright. Fornés trained to become a painter, pursuing this training in Paris in 1954 and coming back to the states in 1957. Shortly after her return, she felt an insatiable urge to write a play based on an idea she could not shake. This play was first produced as *There! You Died!*, which she later renamed *Tango Palace*—her first of what would become an impressive and prolific career that included playwriting, directing, and teaching theatre. In Fornes's own narrative of origins, she explains that American theatre, at the time, did not interest her much[1]. Then, she explains: "in 1960, or maybe it was 1959, I had an idea for a play. I was obsessed with it. And I started writing it…And writing it was the most incredible experience. A door was opened which was a door to paradise (Fornés qtd Savran)." Any person familiar with the history of Cuba and the tropes surrounding it cannot help but read an opaque relation to the island in this timeline. 1959, of course, marks the beginning of the Cuban Revolution (at its advent known as the 26th of July Movement). And as an island in the Caribbean, one that has had a literary legacy of diasporic production, paradise and writing resonate with la isla in ways that seem unavoidable. But then, Fornés has rather opaque relations to politics and *latinidad* as a guiding undercurrent in her work.

[1] (54 Savran)

My recitation of this other origin narrative is neither meant to create a false analogy nor a simplistic allegorical reading between Fornés's first play and the beginning years of the Cuban Revoloution. *Tango Palace* did not turn into a political critique of Cuba, the Revolution, or exile. Instead, it became a staging of two characters in a very claustrophobic space, playing out the roles of teacher and student, master and slave, sadistic beloved and masochistic lover. Perhaps the lack of resemblance to the events in Cuba at the time, which forcefully grabbed global attention, could be attributable to the fact that Fornés's status as a Cuban immigrant does not follow the typical story of Cuban immigration. Fornés came to the United States at the age of fifteen in 1945, which she says you can hear in her accent. Her writing life has been mostly in English, though some of her plays have been translated into Spanish. Fornés has had open relationships with notable women, for example the painter Harriet Sohmers and writer Susan Sontag (who also wrote the preface to a collection of Fornés's plays). And, yet again, Fornés is not often someone who adheres to a predictable queer, lesbian, or homosexual script. In this introduction, I consider the stakes of the dissertation through the filter of Fornés's accent. Though I aim to claim her as a galvanizing figure for thinking through queer *latinidad* and opacity, my aim in making her a harbinger of this project is neither to reduce to her life story nor to simply understand her as someone who is queer and Latina. Rather, her complex relationships to identity and her ability to hold life and aesthetics in productive tension allow me to find in her a fitting interlocutor for what will follow in this dissertation. And though she precedes much of the current hyper-visibility of Latina/os and queers on the national stage of the United States, I find in her an aesthetic and ethical practice that anticipates and resists the current reading tropes that demand a simplistic

representative logic. I am interested in the relations that her story, her teaching, and her life's work provoke—relations that exist in dissonance as much as they do in resonance.

Vacillations between tension and harmony guide this dissertation, *Reading for Opacity in Queer Latinidad.* The dissertation builds upon queer and Latina/o studies by thinking about how we can nuance the increasing visibility of *latinidad*, which is often mobilized purely (and problematically) by means of predictable identity markers. Throughout the pages that follow, I pay special heed to what literature and art offer us that differs from mainstream media or electoral politics. In these discursive resources, I find a kind of resistance to simplistic notions of both queerness and *latinidad*—a resistance that I call opacity. My formulation of opacity is indebted to the Afro-Caribbean thinker Édouard Glissant who articulated opacity as a form of resistance to demands of transparency. Opacity keeps the scene of reading open, without foreclosing relations. As such, this concept has forceful ethical and political resonance for queer and Latina/o cultural production as a method of reading and an aesthetic practice. In the chapters that follow, I show how authors and artists resist being reduced to a homogenous, transparent notion of culture through readings of a diverse set of texts, plays, short stories, and performance art that travel between Cuba, Puerto Rico, and New York. Queer and Latina/o aesthetic and literary works can change the way we read latinidad, by refusing to represent conventional stereotypes of latinidad and complicating what we expect to see from names with accent marks and rolling rs.

Much in the spirit of Fornés, *Reading for Opacity in Queer Latinidad* looks to the relations between writers, artists, theories, and lives in order to read the questions of both queerness and latinidad anew. Importantly, for the increasing visibility of both queers

and Latina/os in the United States, my notion of opacity is a visual concept, visual as much as it connotes texture—it is the material stuff that disallows a transparent gaze. The text of texture comes to the fore in much of what will follow in this work on opacity as a form of resistance. But one might ask, resistance to what? I argue that opacity resists the kind of gaze that desires mastery, that desires simplicity, that desires to know before reading, relating, or dwelling in the particular object, concept, or work of art. This dissertation proposes that opacity should be regarded as both an ethical reading practice *and* as a component integral to any aesthetic production. In other words I offer opacity as a crucial concept for queer *latinidad* that both a) lays out the ethical stakes of opacity and b) offers reading practices that honor such an ethics. While the chapters that follow will explore these questions through theory, literature, and performance art, my earliest, and perhaps most earnest, thinking of opacity in regard to minoritarian aesthetic production emerges as a pedagogical commitment.

Stage Directions/Pedagogies of Reading

> *If characters were real people, I would have opened the door for them at the top of it—there would be no play. The play is there as a lesson, because I feel that art ultimately is a teacher.* (Fornés qtd Savran 55-56)

A large impetus for my work has been motivated by the rewards and challenges of teaching minoritarian literature and cultural production in my classes. Teaching minority literature presents opportunities to ask for a kind of reading practice that is perhaps different from the one many U.S. high schoolers learn in regard to multiculturalism.

What I have found is that students are willing and even happy to engage with narratives from marked subjects: queer literature, Latina/o literature, and Caribbean literature. But often they tend to read such texts through well-intentioned, but heavily scripted, frameworks. So, for instance, they look to a short story by queer, Cuban-American author Achy Obejas and write an analysis that relies too heavily on either her background or biography with little attention to narrative structure and technique. Or, perhaps, students read Haitian writer Edwidge Danticat and then make claims about "all Haitian women." This work is driven by my strong pedagogical commitment to teaching a more ethical engagement with difference, one that takes seriously the fact that we are reading literature and art, that we are in the realm of the aesthetic, and that we don't read with fully prescripted notions of difference. The theory, texts, and art that follow respond to and emerge from very real sociopolitical circumstances. As a teacher and a thinker, I emphasize what can be learned from the nuance and capaciousness that aesthetic representation can hold open—keeping social, political, and historical questons *as* questions. As such, I use the methodological work of literary and close reading that takes its critical pleasures in allowing texts to surprise us, for our notions of difference to be challenged and nuanced.

Yet, the works of literature and art that I teach need historical and biographical context. To that effect, I often tell my students that in my classes we will hold two lines of thought in productive tension throughout the semester: we will be investigating the socio-historical contexts of literature and art, but we will also take seriously that these writers and artists have chosen to give form to their cultural productions through literature and art. Likewise, the chapters that follow holds these two lines in tension:

thinking through historical/biographical context and thinking through the aesthetic and poetic dimensions of thought, literature, and art. My title, *Reading for Opacity in Queer Latinidad*, holds open the multiple commitments that guide this process of reading. While I am decidedly reading a specific set of texts that emerge from a specific demographic, I do so with opacity—with a firm belief that what these texts and pieces hold will not and cannot be reducible to the terms of queerness or *latinidad*.

The teaching of literature, and aesthetics more generally, can show how scripted the stage of encounter with difference can be in the classroom. Many students come with a fairly sedimented notion of difference and much of what I do is to show how literary and aesthetic productions, especially ones written by Latina/os, queers, and other minoritarian writers, shake up what we thought we might find in the reading. These texts perform and show how the drama does not always unfold in expected ways. Pedagogical scenes like these, though, also highlight how this problem is not at all confined to the undergraduate classroom.

Teaching someone like María Irene Fornés provides rich challenges in the university classroom. Particularly, her play *Fefu and her Friends* (1977) forces the question of how a Latina and feminist could write this play—one that shows women being violent to one another and one that is set in a very white, New England home. Yet, a trace of something with an accent remains. In the opening pages of the play, there is a directive that precedes the play itself and reads "Author's Note: Fefu is pronounced Feh-fooh" (Fornés 112). This would be how a Spanish speaker would pronounce the name Fefu. That accented name has no explanation, no context, in the play itself. This opaque note from the author, which reads not even as a stage direction, delights me with its

accented heuristic. It is a directive, a note, to read the play opaquely—to consider relations that may never become clear. Fornés's plays are pedagogical forces in their own right, creating worlds on the stage that demand to be read on their own terms.

Fornés is perhaps most well known as an inspirational teacher. Perhaps because she was not formally trained in theatre, but instead in painting, she came to the process differently and more dynamically. Indeed, she came to be known as *the* pedagogue for a generation of Latina/o playwrights. Playwrights such as Nilo Cruz, Eduardo Machado and Caridad Svich emerged and have all praised Fornés for her instruction. She carved out a space for these playwrights at INTAR, through the Hispanic Playwrights in Residence Laboratory, which she founded in 1981 and where she taught for many years. A typical Fornesian day at the workshop would start with yoga and then move into writing exercises that she crafted, ones that inspired writers to move beyond their routines and paint portraits of particular characters. About these exercises, Fornés claimed that they "take you to a place where creativity is, where personal experience and personal knowledge are used. But it's not *about* your personal experience" (qtd Savran 58). Though the workshops served Latina/o playwrights, Fornés did not ask them to create based on their identities:

> And never did Fornés ask dramatists to write 'as' a Hispanic, female, homosexual or whomever because in her opinion to do so would forever cripple the playwright and make him dependent on the expectations or acceptances of others. Likewise, Fornés resists the use of identity categories because in her words, "just as you go to McDonald's and expect a certain kind of meal, you come to expect a certain kind of writing from a chosen category of writers" (López 152).

At INTAR, Fornés crafted a space, wherein the tension that organizes this dissertation could be explored—a space of writing and craft where certain members of a demographic, a demographic often stereotyped and confined to anticipated modes of cultural production, could convene and create works that need not be about their lives in a straightforward, predictable manner. For her, this was a pedagogical venture. For me, it is the crucial intersection of ethics and pedagogy—pedagogy that refuses to be pedantic. Fornés's pedagogy extends beyond her workshops, to her plays, and back to the reader to create ethical engagements with difference that not only inflect the scene of writing with freedom, but also demand that we read difference differently. Pedagogy is always, supremely, about relational ways of learning, reading, and encountering alterity.

Pedagogical interests are closely aligned with critical projects, even though we often create a false separation between our teaching and research. And reading, if nothing else, is a constant lesson—a way in which we learn precisely through breaking our frames of reference. We learn by way of reading, by paying attention to moments where meaning does not come to us in an unfettered manner. We learn when we rub up against opacity. Reading for opacity in minoritarian texts takes us deeper into relation, into the scene of reading, and into encounters with alterity. Doris Sommer urges such an ethical reading practice, because we "can learn to expect more dissonance than our current practices allow. We can learn—if, that is, we admit unwieldy and even unrewarding data" (Sommer 6). The unwieldy and the unrewarding, in other words the resistant, are figures for what I would call opacity—which operates as something that is both integral to texts themselves and also as a heuristic that ethically approaches alterity without domesticating it into a logic of sameness or predictable difference.

"I don't know enough": Ethics and Politics

Fornés herself is no stranger to bearing the weight of representative expectations. Critics have, in turn, criticized her for being neither feminist, nor Latina, "enough." Yet, others have celebrated her for precisely the difference she makes when thinking about categories of identity. For instance, José Esteban Muñoz identified her work as Latina/o in his sense of "feeling brown"[2]—a way of thinking through *latinidad* as a performance of affect in the place of identity. Muñoz identifies her resistance to simplistic identity labels as a "critical and theoretical act."[3] For him, Fornés presents an opportuntity to read *latinidad* as something other than an identity with predictable aesthetic outcomes, while at the same time reading alongside certain structures of feeling that labels as Latina/o, as brown. Alexandra Vasquez, another who finds in Fornés a gestural muse, summarizes this quandary eloquently in her recent book, *Listening in Detail*:

> Consider first that Fornés has forever been assaulted for a supposed lack of Cubanness in her work. In her plays, you will be hard pressed to find much along the lines of predictably tropical or otherwise minoritarian signifiers, be they accents, easily comprehensible characters, or uncomplicated plot lines…Fornés forms part of a solid tradition of challenging readers' desired right of entry to her work and interior life. Like Cuba and like performance, Fornés has long refused those burdens of representation that would have her explain in exacting terms

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[2] Muñoz, José Esteban. "Feeling Brown: Ethnicity and Affect in Ricardo Bracho's The Sweetest Hangover (and Other STDs)." *Theatre Journal* 52.1 (2000): 67-79. Web. See also: Muñoz, José Esteban. "Feeling Brown, Feeling Down: Latina Affect, the Performativity of Race, and the Depressive Position." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 31.3 (2006): 675-88. Web.

[3] ibid

> what Cuba, performance, or Cubanness is. Her work does not provide access into facile questions around identity as they are bound up with culture, geography, gender, race, and belonging. But as much as she refuses to offer direct signals that might or might not indicate her Cubanness, she does not keep it under erasure. (Vasquez 22)

While Vasquez centers on Fornés's Cubanness, the above citation quickly broadens to larger questions concerning what we call identity. The place of identity in Fornés's oeuvre is one that is neither fully traceable nor fully absent. Rather, the inflections and tonalities of what might be called Fornés's experience are registered opaquely, obliquely, and queerly. Opacity, for the purposes of this project, is not the opposite of visibility—it is not necessarily the fully absent nor is it equated with negativity. It is more in line with what Vasquez sees in Fornés's work—something that resists transparency, clarity, and unfettered access.

Such resistance to easy readings, for Fornés, is precisely what she considers to be pedagogical about art. In response to the many critics who have found defeat in the deaths of women and the poor in her plays, she has responded that her characters are not to be liberated, are not to be given solutions. The play becomes a place to learn. The characters, she reminds us, are precisely not real people:

> Some people complain that my work doesn't offer a solution. But the reason for that is that I feel that the characters don't have to get out, it's *you* that has to get out. Characters are not real people. If characters were real people, I would have opened the door for them at the top of it—there would be no play. The play is

> there as a lesson, because I feel that art ultimately is a teacher. (Fornés qtd Savran 55-56)

Fornés's plays have constantly been answered to a politics that demands solutions by holding open the space of aesthetics as a place where questions are asked, where violence is explored, and where easy solutions have no place. By carving out a place for relation and a place for reading—one where solutions are not the goal—Fornés urges a necessary aesthetic and ethical consideration that intersects vitally with politics, but refuses to be subsumed into a logic of liberation or expediency. If art is to be a teacher, it cannot be asked to teach a political programme.

Asking aesthetic representation to offer solutions often comes from a place where readers expect a certain kind of politics of respectability from texts. They crave "good" representations and liberating plot lines. To be sure, this urge comes from a lack of positive representations in the media, literary canons, and museums—a very warranted desire. But such a desire can often foreclose dialogue, by asking texts and art to be unambivalent. Such unambivalence can often take the form of political allegiance, which wants to know that there are answers and to move forward with them in a temporal register that can often flatten out other possibilities, other readings.

Instead of moving too quickly to the level of concrete knowledge and stable solutions, opaque texts and art urge us to stay in a dwelling place that explores the textures of relations and the feelings of doubt. This space, to me, carves open a place for ethics in addition to political realities, fears, and expediencies. Consider the following anecdote from Fornés herself:

> I remember shortly after the Castro takeover [in 1959] there was a group of Cuban exile artists. They wanted me to go to meetings, to have readings, and they said, 'It's not political.' So I went. Then one day they passed an anti-Castro manifesto around that we were supposed to sign. It talked about the Red monster and the language was extreme. I said, 'No, I don't want to sign.' They were indignant and asked, 'Are you in favor of Castro?" I said, "Not really. I'm not in favor of Castro but I'm not against him either. I don't know enough." And they said, "If you're not against him, you're for him. (Fornés qtd Savran 68)

The harsh binary that Fornés receives—if you aren't against Castro, you're for him—is a familiar dictate following the Cuban Revolution. Such a binary has been hardened into policy through the U.S. trade embargo on Cuba, adding to the difficulties of life on the island. Fornés, in an act of humility and in a different temporal logic, refuses this binary saying "I don't know enough." I read this response as one that slows down the need-to-know that often aligns itself with the legibly political. What would have happened if, following the events of 1959, more people had said "I don't know enough"? Rather than a blind response or one that doesn't want to know, Fornés's phrase places an accent on enough—enough to come down on either side of a rather impossible binary, enough to add fuel to an already raging imperialist fire, enough to say with certainty and conviction what was happening in the late 50s and early 60s in Cuba. Instead, her response was one that kept open the space for knowing precisely more, for looking at the nuances of the political situation, and for encountering Cuba beyond this violent binary. Those of us working in queer theory may resonate relationally with Fornés's anecdote. Perhaps in a bit of a different register, many of us who look in earnest to queer politics in the United

States have been frustrated and felt stymied by the gay marriage agenda—either you are for it or against it. Such dualistic thinking often moves forward as a political steamroller, flattening out a rich, varied, and differential terrain. In both of these registers, I argue that opacity, as an oblique relation to politics, adds a necessary ethical tempering to political pretense.

As a figure, Fornés teaches me quite a lot about this project, its commitments and its strange relations. She practices high aestheticism, while also dramatizing violence, not in order to aestheticize it, but in order to teach us about our own relations to violence. And like Fornés, none of the figures or theories in this book offer solutions, not because they are altogether uninterested in the very real need for political solutions. Instead, they know the rush to resolve can obfuscate many of the ways in which aesthetics can hold open a space for thinking through polticial difficulties and ethical dilemmas. As a Fornesian constellation, this dissertation works between the visual, the literary, the theoretical, and the performative, in order to consider questions of queer *latinidad* as they translate across different media, languages, and places.

My dissertation finds aesthetic and literary resources for queer and feminist *latinidad* that resist transparent readings and formulates an ethics of difference that emphasizes opacity and relationality as necessary for granting complexity to marked texts, subjects, and aesthetic pieces. I proceed very interdisciplinarily, considering the overlaps and resonances between performance, literature, theory (feminist, queer, and Caribbean) and Latina/o studies. The entry point for my conceptualization of opacity takes on a problem crystallized at the intersections of queer and Latino/a theories: the problem of transparency in relation to difference. As several Latino theorists like Sandra

Soto and Antonio Viego have articulated the problem of reading or encountering *latinidad* as a dead, transparent signifier or as pure evidence of culture and experience, I look to various theories, literary texts and performative pieces to find aesthetic resources that resist transparent readings of *latinidad*.

Instead of an injunction to transparency, evidence or full disclosure, my project aims to consider the opacity at stake in difference that refuses to reduce lives, texts and art. This practice of reading for and with opacity in regard to *latinidad* might be particularly critical at this moment which has been marked by the media, scholars and demographers as the ever impending precipice of the Latinoization of the United States—an increasing sense of visibility that seldom creates desirable political change. In my first chapter, "Opaque Resistance: Ethics and Relationality at the Interstices of Queer, Feminist, and Latina/o Studies" I lay out the theoretical scope and intervention of my work. To address the question, which I do treat as a question, of visibility, I trace the problem of transparency and evidence through a genealogy of queer Latina/o scholars. Acknowledging the Chicana feminist roots of queer Latina/o thinking, I revisit the nuanced formulation of the borderlands from Gloria Anzaldúa. I then move to a thinking of *latinidad* gleans critical wisdom from Hispanophone Caribbeanists by considering the deft interventions of Juana María Rodriguez, José Esteban Muñoz, and José Quiroga who all galvanize a discourse surrounding queer *latinidad* that emphasizes contingency and relationality over identity politics that continues to be crucial. Moving to more recent work by Antonio Viego and Sandra Soto, I look at their insistence that a politics that demands transparency, evidence, and coming out all reduce Latina/o lives and art. As resources that contend with this problem of transparency, my work explores the thinking

opacity and relationality in Édouard Glissant's *Poetics of Relation* and Judith Butler's *Giving an Account of Oneself*. I reframe the problem of transparency and evidence as an ethical one—an element of difference perhaps underexamined in the fields of queer and Latina/o theories. I contend that Glissant's Caribbean and historically grounded approach helps to give material texture to the more abstracted work of Butler, who, in turn highlights the implicit ethical stances of Glissant. Weaving Glissant and Butler's insistence upon opacity and relationality throughout feminist, queer, and Latino/a theories, I trace a way of reading and encountering that does not demand full knowledge and transparent evidence from objects. Following from these explicitly theoretical considerations, the subsequent chapters of the dissertation consider writers and artists whose works elude transparent readings and urge us to read and encounter otherwise.

As literary and aesthetic resources, I seek Hispanophone Caribbean writers and artists both in the Caribbean and its diaspora that pose difficulties to overly simplistic readings. This project, then, takes on both the imperative to read differently, and those thinkers, artists, and writers that refuse to be read simplistically. In my second chapter, "Dispersed Desire: The Autobiographical Translation of Manuel Ramos Otero," I closely read the short stories of Puerto Rican and New York City writer Manuel Ramos Otero. Taking my cue from La Fountain-Stokes, I consider how the very writing of the self in Ramos Otero's work may confound any predictable or transparent notion of queer Latino diasporic subjectivity. His stories often evoke a telling of the self as both made and undone by desire—many of his stories end in time and bodies dispersed by desire. The resistance to any easy reading is marked by Ramos Otero's linguistic and semiotic choices that precisely do not line up. Much of his writing refers to a very U.S. centered

gay life replete with signifiers of camp and Christopher Street—yet he only writes in Spanish. This chapter addresses a few salient motifs in Ramos Otero's oeuvre that position him as a rich interlocutor to ongoing tensions and debates within queer theory and Latina/o studies. Noting that Ramos Otero often claimed his writing as a translation of autobiography, I consider how Ramos Otero translates a life into fiction in a story like "Hollywood Memorabilia" which furthers itself through a series of identifications with Hollywood starlets at the moment of their on-screen death. What Ramos Otero gives us, rather than a pure negativity or a queer refusal of futurity, is an opaque relationality that disperses bodies and time with only the promise of a conditional future. Ramos Otero's writing risks the future by making it contingent and conditional—his writings favor a playful, campy articulation of the self and offer a kind of opaque resistance to any easy reading or politics. His writing precariously balances on the margins of politics, the margins of life and death and the margins of sexuality to exploit and take pleasure in the liminal spaces of sexual deviance and immigrant status.

Thinking through the historical stakes of my argument, I consider the question of origins, historical relationality, and opacity in the work of Cuban performance artists Ana Mendieta and Tania Bruguera. In my third and final chapter, "Archiving Absence: Negotiations of the Taíno in Mendieta and Bruguera," I read both artists work with the figure of the Taíno, an indigenous people of Cuba, in order to consider how they relate to this figure, who were, by most accounts, completely decimated by colonization. Both artists, through installation and performance, work with the status of the Taíno as a lost object and yet they figure that loss as one that persists in its ethical call. Summarily, I contend that both artists engage with the Taíno to question the loss, absence, and lack of

knowledge at the root of the Cuban nation. Instead of aggrandizing indigenous loss or trying to fill in the gaps of history, both artists incite the Taíno to recreate a feeling of loss and the ethical relation to history that comes along with that absence. As such, this chapter figures performance as a particularly motivating aesthetic practice for thinking through an ethical and political relation to the past that eschews transparency.

A Note On Terminology

In this project, I refer to groups of people as Latina/os and the phenomenon of that concept, abstracted from individual subjectivities, as *latinidad*[4]. *Latinidad* would best be translated into English as latino-ness. First introduced to academia by sociologist Felix Padilla in 1985 to explain the coalitional energies of Latina/os from different national backgrounds in Chicago, the term *latinidad* refers to "pan-ethnic Latino/a identifications, imaginaries, or community afflilations that encompass, but do not supersede, diminish, or destroy national origin or historical minority identifications" (Allaston 138). The term itself is meant to connote both a pan-Latino/a sense of filiation and the specifics of local neighborhoods and cities. The term conjures the pan-American ethos of both Simón Bolivar and José Martí. While the term holds within it many contradictions, locales and disparate histories, I find promise in a term that tarries with its own complex underpinnings and want to stay with such productive and relational tensions. I conceptualize *latinidad* as not only an identitarian category, stemming from geographical origins in Latin America and the Caribbean, but also as a way of being read, of being

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[4] Allaston, Paul. *Key Terms in Latino/a Cultural and Literary Studies*. Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2007.

marked, and an affective position that is overdetermined by history and location—what José Esteban Muñoz calls "feeling brown."

I also find continued promise in the term queer, with its etymological roots in the German *quer* that conjure up meanings like athwart, across and oblique,[5] as it has been mobilized to shore up supposedly transparent signifiers of sexual identity that hinge upon the hetero/homo binary. Often aligned with feminist and deconstructive repertoires of thinking difference and *différance,* queer theory has consistently sought out the ground of alterity as its own. Despite these resources, theorists of color and, more locally to the considerations of this project, theorists of *latinidad*, have noted the marginality of racialized and ethnicized theories, literatures and citational politics to queer theory's own canon. This project attempts to further the conversation of what it might mean to encounter or relate to queer *latinidad*; to move beyond evidential claims and to refuse to be satisfied with simplistic visibility. Remembering the roots of the word queer, this project contends that reading difference cannot mean reading for transparency or reading *through* difference. The process must be one of traversal—an oblique traversal of language, location and bodies. As such, this dissertation proffers the concept of opacity for thinking relationally and obliquely in regard to queer *latindad*.

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[5] The etymology from the *Oxford English Dictionary*: **"**Origin uncertain; perhaps (or perhaps even cognate with) German *quer* transverse, oblique, crosswise, at right angles, obstructive, (of things) going wrong (now rare), (of a person) peculiar (now obsolete in this sense), (of a glance) directed sideways, especially in a surreptitious or hostile manner (now rare), (of opinion and behaviour) at odds with others (see thwart adv.), but the semantic correspondence is not exact, and the figurative senses in German are apparently much later developments than the English word."

CHAPTER 1:

Opaque Resistance:
Thinking Ethically at the Interstices of
Feminist, Queer, and Latina/o Studies

We clamor for the right to opacity for everyone.

–Édouard Glissant

Characterizing a subject as either "Hispanic" or "Latino" is an exercise in opacity.

–Cristina Beltrán

I would also like to allow for the possibility of nonmeaning and nonknowledge as 'queer' strategies…This is what I am calling queer opacity.

–Nicolas De Villiers

Introduction

The funny thing about thinking about questions of visuality and the problematics of a politics of representation in regard to queer *latinidad* at this moment: while queers are increasingly visible on the (U.S.) national stage via the redundant, but persistent, framework of marriage and Latina/os appear as the new darling demographic for both the Democrats and the GOP every two to four years when they try to appeal to a relevant populism, queer Latina/os do not yet appear to be a crystallized demographic in the

media or in mainstream politics. To be sure, there are exceptions: Ricky Martin, rumors about Sonia Sotomayor, and the reliably consistent casting of Boricuas on Ru Paul's Drag race. But, more often than not, the metaphors are mixed. Gloria appears as the Latina excess who brings drag and camp to the otherwise tidy, sterile, and white-washed (except, of course, for the transnational adoption of Lily) queering of family in NBC's *Modern Family*. And, perhaps in a more savvy fashion, the Dreamers campaign has re-signified the closet metaphors in regard to citizenship—urging strategic stagings of coming out. The mixing of the metaphors, through the convenient politics of analogy, seem to have more cultural purchase than addressing the two categories occurring simultaneously, as one subject's or demographic's supposed multi-faceted identification. It should be noted that often the mixing of metaphors happens assymetrically: *latinidad* has long been the spice that enlivens queer performance—the perfect accessory—and the usage of *latinidad* in the case of the Dreamers presents a more complicated metaphor, especially when the figure of the closet has often been an optic best represented in white queer culture.

While I argue for queer Latina/o strategies of opacity, there isn't yet exactly a sedimented public discourse of queer *latinidad* visibility. And this may be a felicitous event—one that gives us a temporal space within which to see why and how the two categories are figured in parallel: queer and Latina/o. Together they are often rendered opaque. Could it be, perhaps, that the categories themselves describe the loose ends of identity? After all, Latina/o is a relatively new and unstable category that describes less a particular ethnicity or race and more a set of structures of feeling, the affective sedimentation of being deemed brown in a world that at once conjures and fears the

category[6]. And queer too signifies the frayed ends that border the fabric of gender and sexuality:

> That's one of the things that 'queer can refer to: the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or *can't be* made) to signify monolithically. (Sedgwick, *Tendencies*, 8)

The discursive aims of both queer and contemporary Latina/o studies often point to these spaces of dissonance (or resonating dissonances) in order to put pressure on the logics that require wholeness, transparency, and univocal logic. Much work has been done in both fields to consider how univocal politics create more violence than political sway. And, to be sure, the field of queer Latina/o studies has investigated the productive ways in which thinking at the interstices of queer and Latina/o produces readings of silences, gaps, agonistic politics, and discursive processes. What my work here aims to do, being in relation to these fields of queer and Latina/o (and queer Latina/o studies) alongside feminist, Caribbean, literary, and performance studies, is to consider how opacity, most forcefully articulated by Martinican writer and thinker Édouard Glissant, offers a productive framework, theory, and ethics from which to consider present and prescient issues of queer *latinidad*.

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[6] Here, I am specifically gesturing toward José Esteban Muñoz's notion of *latinidad* as "feeling brown": "While I have stated that the term "Latino" has been politically incoherent, it has nonetheless, as Román has argued, done some important political work. The performance praxis of US Latina/os assists the minoritarian citizen- subject in the process of denaturalizing the United States' universalizing "national affect" fiction as it asserts ontological validity and affective difference" (72 "Feeling Brown" Muñoz).

My notion of opacity at once conjures and resists visual registers. In other words, opacity is itself a visual figure—but it conjures visuality through reference to a resistance that disallows light to completely pass through. Importantly, opacity is often textured and resistant. I argue that opacity resists the kind of gaze that desires mastery, that desires simplicity, that desires to know before reading, relating, or dwelling in the particular object, concept, or work of art. These gazes that desire mastery over an object are often aligned with sexist and colonial desires. Opacity invokes a visual register, at the same time that it highlights a resistance to a transparent gaze. It has neither the sheen of the hardened, smooth surface that reflects all light directly back to its source, nor does it freely allow all light to pass through unfettered. Opacity, as a visual metaphor, gestures toward an ambivalent relation to visual culture—with a keen eye to resisting simplistic representations that seek to tell the whole story, or reading practices that demand completeness. Crucially, opacity creates textured relations[7] of feeling wherein both touch and sight are invoked. I theorize opacity as not an altogether neutral term, reading practice, or notion of relations. Instead it accounts for and resists the inflections of light, the violence(s) of sight, and the difficulty of representative rights.

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[7] I am interested in texture as a phenomenological register that blurs the boundaries between visuality and touch. Thinking through this notion of texture, Renu Bora's "Outing Texture" from the anthology *Novel Gazing* has proven to be most instructive. There he aligns texture with sexuality, calling attention to how both are bound up with the liminal. He also differentiates between different kinds of texture, to show how there are gradient ways of encountering this strange phenomenological register. He writes: "In Heisenberg's model of vision, the observer's gaze transforms the object one would like to know, because this look implies the deflections of light off of the object. Analagously, for TEXXTURE, the Heisenberg principle ,almost identical to the problem of feedback in observation, becomes even more literally and epistemologically violent. For touch and physical pressure transform the materials one would like to know, assess, love." (Bora 99)

In an ironic and critical invocation of rights, Édouard Glissant writes the provocative line: "We clamor for the right to opacity for everyone" (*PR* 194). Such a paradoxical clamoring for a right to opacity, something that seems so far from rights-based discourse, can help us think through many discursive sites: feminist theory, queer theory, Latina/o studies, and Caribbean diasporic literature. Post-structuralist feminist and queer theoretical training makes us question the foundational principles of things like identity and rights-based discourses. And, yet, like many people who feel the very real political and ethical demands of affiliation and accountability, some yearn for those articulate moments where there exists a productive tension between naming a demographic cause (women, queers of color, immigrant's rights, worker's rights) and the dignity that comes along with being granted a complexity that doesn't reduce communities with a tightly focused lens. Focusing on a historicist account of opacity and relationality, the work of Édouard Glissant figures as a rich source for thinking through the ongoing questions of difference in feminist, queer, and Latina/o studies. In this chapter, I want to explicitly consider the charge of the concept of opacity for Glissant alongside discussions in feminist, queer, and Latina/o studies. I theorize opacity as, at once, a generalizable category intrinsic to all aesthetic production and one that is highly necessary for minoritarian subjects and art precisely because those aesthetic productions have not been considered for their formal and artistic innovations. As such, opacity becomes a necessary ethical dimension to minoritarian artwork insofar as it encourages a more complex and sustained reading of the work, without contriving to reduce it to social or political circumstance. I work through Glissant's thought in order to see how it would

add an ethics of historicity to our thinking of sociality and a way of thinking difference without recourse to a romance with negativity.[8]

The Problem of Transparency

> *Perhaps the possibility of the queer-latino exchange, of its actual capacity to become a truly productive engagement of differences would have to stem from the shared respect of each other's veil, from the empowering, transformational energy of their respective shame.* –Rubén Ríos Ávila

This dissertation falls into a field of queer *latinidad* that has been growing steadily since the 1990s. Initially spearheaded by the work of Chicana feminists like Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherrie Moraga, the field has since expanded its range to account for Latina/os that fall outside of the category of Chicana/os. In 1987, before queer theory was a sedimented discourse, Anzaldúa included queers at the heart of her notion of borderlands:

> A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition. The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants. *Los atravesados* live here: the squint-eyed, the

[8] By invoking an ethics of historicity and a romance with negativity I am signaling how my project differs from the anti-social debates in queer theory. Rather than rely on negativity for its sheer disruptive force, I shift the focus onto opacity as a way of thinking through relationality and the resistance to transparent identity markers. Furthermore, historicity enters into the equation forcefully in both my and Glissant's articulation of opacity. It is both a component of all relations, indeed that which makes relation possible, but it is also historically contingent.

> perverse, the *queer*, the troublesome, the mongrel, the mulato, the half-breed, the half-dead; in short, those who cross over, pass over, or go through the confines of 'normal.' (9 emphasis on queer added)

I read, in this exemplary passage from Anzaldúa, an implicit opacity that envelops the borderland: it is vague, it is undetermined. At precisely the site where divisions are supposed to be drawn and difference is supposed to be parceled out, a space that should sever instead of accommodate, Anzaldúa emphasizes figures of permeability, affect, and undecidability. Not only is the queer explicitly named in this space, but it is one of many who populate a place of traversal, of relational locale, and of those who transgress. Such a definitive call for relationality echoes in other theoretical interventions of queer *latinidad* that follow Anzaldúa. Following these considerations, José Esteban Muñoz calls attention to the performative and political nuance of queers of color in his 1997 book, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*. In this book, Muñoz sets the stage for thinking together queer theory, race, ethnicity and performance with a particular emphasis on Latina/os. He highlights the relationality of the term queer: "The word queer … can only be understood as connoting a mode of identifications that is as relational as it is oblique" (127). Instead of affirming any strong identitarian claims, Muñoz calls attention to the way that identities are toyed with and the ways in which certain performances resist strong interpellative calls, answering instead with what he calls a process of disidentification. Moving the scope across the whole of the Americas, *Tropics of Desire: Interventions from Queer Latino America* (2000) by José Quiroga shows how various writers, artists and celebrities from across Latino America have eschewed the politics of identitarian claims for more savvy interventions and

positionalities that work outside of the 'coming out' imperative and turn invisibility and silence into deft tactics of resistance. Recognizing the increasing visibility of Latina/o numbers in the United States, Juana María Rodríguez considers the importance of thinking through such identity formations in the areas of law, culture and activism in her 2003 study, *Queer Latinidad: Identity Practices, Discursive Spaces.* Using a Foucauldian archealogical analysis and a Deleuzian rhizomatic reading practice, Rodríguez moves through legal histories and AIDS activism to find the moments of rupture and dissension that point to the contradictory and multivalent spaces of queer *latinidad*. These interventions galvanized a discourse surrounding queer *latinidad* that emphasized a kind of insistence upon contingency and relationality that I continue to find crucial in critical projects engaging queer *latinidad*.

Keeping this legacy of queer *latinidad* in mind, I now turn attention to the galvanizing force of the current problematics laid out by two scholars in the field of Latina/o studies: Antonio Viego and Sandra Soto. Both of them, in their own ways, show the problem of transparency for Latina/os that permeates across the bounds of the media, politics, psychology, and critical theory.

In his 2007 book, *Dead Subjects: Toward a Politics of Loss in Latino Studies*, Antonio Viego considers the anti-racist charge that a strong Lacanian analysis could lend to Latino Studies. Over the course of the twentieth century, Viego charts a concomitant movement in the United States of both ego psychology and a framing of Latinos that refuses them the complexities of being linguistic subjects. He contends that:

> There has been a thorough psychologization of the ethnic-racialized subject, a want-to-be-exhaustive explanation that ignores the indeterminacy of the subject

> that follows on the subject's vacillation in language and that these psychologization practices are political in nature, reflecting as they do on broader issues of power and knowledge in the context of systemic racism and discrimination. (Viego 28)

Here, Viego links such psychologization to an assimilative project that promises Latina/os the wholeness and agency that he contends has dominated activism and academic writing on *latinidad*. The danger he notes is that some subjects are afforded nuance, while others (specifically ones that are marked *as* Others) are objectified in this lie of wholeness—made to be what he calls dead signifiers which are explained in the following terms:

> An under theorized explanation of loss and trauma at the psychic, political, juridical, and economic levels, as well as an overly simplistic and commonsensical conceptualization of human subjectivity in which we bracket the effects of language on the speaking organism in order to win back some empty promise of fullness and completeness. In this latter compensatory, falsely reparative critical move, we, against our best intentions, provide precisely the image of ethnic-racialized subjectivity as a whole, complete, and transparent, an image upon which racist discourse thrives and against which we imagine we are doing battle. (Viego 16)

Viego finds deep trouble in this terrain of exhaustive explanations and false hopes of completeness. By being called upon to present as whole and transparent, ethnic-racialized subjecitivity does not gain more agency—though that seems to be the promise of such interpellative gestures. Such demands for transparency can only reduce and

deaden. Viego cautions against psychological, political and theoretical interventions that promise a complete and fully agential subject. I want to highlight Viego's insistence that the desire for too much wholeness and too much knowledge becomes a kind of burden for very specific subjects, bodies and objects and that such a burden is bound up with a demand for transparency.

This insistence upon transparency moves too quickly to read subjects and refuse to stay with their ambivalences, their indeterminacy, and their opacity. Viego quite sharply notes a temporal paradox that surrounds the Latino subject which refuses to stay with any nuance or indeterminacy: "The temporality of *Latino* unfolds according to first an anticipation of knowledge about the ethnic-racialized subject and then a retroactive determination, posthailing, which insists on already having known that knowledge about the subject" (21). He further explains that this temporality rests upon a need-to-know Latino and to use it as evidence for categories of ethnicity and race. This need-to-know incurs a sort of temporality that "drains the future into the past and burrows the past into the future" (Viego 22). The temporal paradox collapses the demand for knowledge with an anticipation that forecloses any serious encounter with the object. This is the temporal structure that surrounds the supposed threat of Latina/os who form the center and gravitas of the anticipated browning of the United States. The ethical ramifications of this dilemma are that relationality and encounters are foreclosed at the precise moment that they could be opened. Such an opening would consider the object's opacity and not demand a transparent reading.

Though the work here points to literature, performance and theories of opacity as a way of thinking outside of transparency, Viego finds the nuance that he seeks through

Lacanian psychoanalysis in order to formulate what he calls a politics of loss. While generally rooted in Latina/o Studies, Viego finds a similar hermeneutics between the categories of queer and Latino because both disturb binaries like homosexuality/heterosexuality on the one hand and race/ethnicity on the other—going so far as to assert that "Latino queers ethnicity and race" (21). He considers the queerness of Richard T. Ford's line: "It may be that the price of providing our descendants with a world free of social stigma and oppression of identities such as race, a world that we could be proud to call more just, is that they would not share our identities, that they would be our heirs but *not* our descendants" (qtd Viego 107). Viego emphasizes Ford's queerly framed future as one occupied not by biological descendants but by cultural heirs. Yet, he questions a viable ability for queers to answer this call because of the "mad, earnest dash to courthouses and legal offices to marry and fill out queer adoption papers has altered [his] assessment" (112). Following Viego's own framework, this queer mad dash to legal recognition would be a way of deadening queerness, making it legible within a simplistic, legal code that turns multivalent collisions of desire and bodies into a predictable, stable dyad for the state to recognize. And while Viego's critique is well placed, it may be worth noting that the most trenchant critiques of marriage and its centrality in politics come from queer theory itself.

Like myself, Sandra Soto places herself more squarely in the discursive space of queer theory. Motivated by similar political desires as Viego, Soto writes a compelling case for re-reading major Chican@[9] texts "like a queer" in her 2010 book, *Reading*

[9] Taking her cue from the University of Wisconsin's Chican@ and Latin@ Studies Program, Sandra Soto justifies the work of the ampersat in her usage of Chican@:

Chican@ Like a Queer: The De-Mastery of Desire. Through these readings, she highlights the multivalent ways that racialization and sexualization are mutually constituted. While a strong proponent of queer reading practices, Sandra Soto notes that "Queer theorists' engagement with queers of color, or with racial formation more broadly, is still too often contained in the tiny-font endnotes at the back of books" (4). Soto, here, lays out a productive, critical tension that the present work finds particularly motivating: that queer theory both offers continually exciting critical terrain and that queer canonical terrain has often pushed questions of race and ethnicity to the margins, to footnotes, and to gestures which never get fully fleshed out. To circumvent reading practices that relegate queers of color to the realm of evidence, she calls for a reading practice that values de-mastery over transparent reading. She explains the importance of the 'de' of de-mastery:

> As tiny as my mere two-letter [de] prefix may seem, I cannot begin to do justice to what its expansiveness has meant for me as a reader, a thinker, a writer, and a teacher. And I actually do not want to do justice to it, when to 'do justice' to de-mastery—to *master* de-mastery—would be to discipline, to tame, to reduce, to render intelligible a structure of feeling whose force is precisely in its

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> I like the way the nonalphabetic symbol for 'at' disrupts our desire for intelligibility, our desire for a quick and certain visual register of a gendered body the split second we see or hear the term. Chican@ flies under or over the radar of what Monique Wittig calls 'the mark of gender' (*The Straight Mind*). Or better yet, it does something less sneaky but more impactful; it stays within purview but refuses the norms of legibility and the burdens of visibility. (3)

Though I have chosen to use Latina/o throughout my work, I welcome the use of the ampersat. The symbol holds the indeterminate a signifier that, by another instantiation, often carries the myth of a transparent signification of gender. Not only does the ampersat queer the traditional gendering of Spanish, but it also positions the referential subject as located *at* a particular identitarian site.

> unintelligibility, what Raymond Williams eloquently describes as 'something not yet come' something still 'at the very edge of semantic availability' (2).

Her work in the book uses the "de-mastery of desire" as a method of engaging and reading Chican@ work "like a queer." I take her emphasis on "like a queer" to be one that looks for nuance, surprises, events and productive disjunctures. And, importantly, such a reading practice centers on what I would call reading for opacity, which keeps the scene of relation and the scene of reading open, precisely because there is no pretense to masterful reading—only a reading that desires more reading, more relations, more wordiness.

Although Soto pays close attention to the myriad interstices of race and desire, she does not use experience as the place from which raw truth emanates. She instead re-reads Chicana feminist literature anew, eschewing experience as evidence: "*Reading Chican@ Like a Queer* dislodges Chicana feminist literature from its register of transparent experience in order to perform a queer discursive analysis of racialized sexuality " (Soto10). This "register of transparent experience" can often mobilize people politically, but can also perform insidious violences through recourse to a transparency that, as Viego would remind us, deadens. Her insistence on reading as de-mastery shows that any reading worthy of the name cannot insist upon transparency. Soto re-reads Chicana feminist literature, much of which she rightfully claims has been used as exemplary of intersections of race, class and gender, however, she does not endorse a theory of intersectionality:

> I want to think at once harder and more flexibly about Chican@ subjectivity than is possible when we use the shorthand 'intersectionality' approach…It seems to

> me that race, sexuality, and gender are much too complex, unsettled, porous (and I do mean to be wordy here), mutually constitutive, unpredictable, incommensurable, and dynamic, certainly too spatially and temporally contingent, *ever* (even if only for an instant) to travel independently of one another…What I want to suggest is that we be *wordy* and contingent, that we not look for a shorthand for naming our understanding or footnoting the confounding manifold ways that our bodies, our work, our desires are relentlessly interpellated by unequivalent social processes. (6)

Soto's insistence upon contingency and wordiness exceeds categorical analysis and demands a reading practice, and praxis, that attends to nuance and the myriad ways that our bodies are bound up in asymmetrical power—never fully forseeable and never fully categorizable. Like Soto, I do not want my frame or lens to be merely additive—adding Latina/o to the mix of queer/feminist analysis as a supplement or an exemplarity that showcases the intersectionality of race, gender, and sexuality. While the legacy of intersectional thinking has been instrumental for much of the work that considers race alongside gender, I wonder if such axes of difference may sometimes be a bit too broad in their analytical scope[10]. Moreover, I wonder if intersectional analyses sometimes lend

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[10] Juana María Rodríguez offers a subtle critique, or perhaps questioning and expansion, of the categories of intersectionality when she writes:
"Identity is more than a list of categories that name our sexuality, gender, HIV status, nation, age, ethnicity, ability, class, language, citizenship status, and religion. Even if we expand the list to include all other significant features of ourselves, what do these attributes actually explain about our lives? What aspects of identity exceed the categories we have created to define our places in the world? How do memories of desire and violence mark us in ways that are similar and different from the ways we have been marked by color and gender? How do street corners and kitchen tables, friends and lovers, lullabies and taunts, private violations and public betrayals leave traces on our

themselves toward privileging markers of visible difference—as if the categories of gender, race, sexuality, and so on can remain the same ontological category across bodies, spaces, and times. Hence, my insistence upon thinking with opacity places a humility on our ability to fully name and categorize the many fractal pieces of identity that amalgamate as lives, texts, and subjectivities.

Sandra Soto and Antonio Viego echo one another when they claim that Latina/os are disproportionately relegated to the categories of either evidence or transparent signifiers. Following the problematics that they so carefully lay out, I consider how a theory of opacity may offer a particularly resistant framework to these kinds of interpellative gestures that call for transparent signification. While I take Viego and Soto as figures that crystallize a certain tension surrounding the figure of the Latina/o in regard to visibility and knowability, I do depart from their projects in regard to content, focus and methodology. Though I find Viego's insistence that we read less for transparency and more for complexity quite compelling, I do not remain altogether convinced that a Lacanian analytics alone would afford the nuance so clearly craved by his project. With an insistence on loss, the analytics of Lacan often forgo the delicious pleasures of queer readings and non-transparencies[11]. What's more, an insistence upon Lacan as the answer tends to bring along with it a conceptual machine that paradoxically insists on the limits of knowledge while, at the same time, having all of the answers. Reading with Lacan as the main interlocutor can often bring alarmingly few conceptual surprises. I find Soto's insistence on de-mastery, instead of an allegiance to any one thinker, to provide more

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lives? How do the many moments of our daily existence determine how we view ourselves and the world around us?" (22).

[11] For further consideration on the need to re-inflect queer readings with pleasure, see Elizabeth Freeman's work in *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories*.

conceptual room to revisit texts and stage new encounters of thought and reading. My reading practices are more aligned with hers in her insistence upon de-mastery and her position at the interstices of queer, Chicana/o and feminist thought. Yet, I differ from her project in content and area focus. While she centers her work on Chicana/os, this project hopes to consider different constellations in regard to queer *latinidad*, focusing on how a rhizomatic and errant reading practice through the Caribbean can help us think through some of the urgent issues facing Latina/os as articulated through Viego and Soto. This very different set of historical constraints from the Caribbean leaves me to consider geographical comparisons different from those of Soto—looking more toward Puerto Rico, Cuba and Latina/o New York. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, I depart from their projects by finding the problematics that they so forcefully articulate to be not only psychological or political, but also explicitly ethical. The problems that they articulate have profound impacts on how we read, encounter, and relate to others—a question endemic to an ethics of response. I find opacity to hold strong ethical resources for contending with the problematics laid out in the previous pages. As such, what follows seeks to respond to the critical projects of Viego and Soto as a point of departure to think through a theory of the opacity in regard queer, feminist *latinidad*.

Opacity, Relationality, Reading

> *The thrust of the world and its desire no longer embolden you onward in a fever of discovery: they multiply you all around.* –Édouard Glissant

If, as Viego and Soto claim, transparency is a particular burden of representation or violence for Latina/os (and, no doubt, many other marked demographics), then reading with and for opacity may represent another valence through which to consider the question of differences in relation to one another. I cite Glissant in the above epigraph to gesture toward the ways in which desire, reading, and relation are all tied together. And such processes carry weighty histories, especially when we read in the vein of what may be called the postcolonial, or how we read, relate, and desire after colonization (noting that after, here, is more of a relational preposition rather than an epistemic or historical break). The thrust that Glissant signals is an urgency, a provocation, from the world that ought not drive us to more reading practices that read in the register of discovery, conquest, or for mastery—all of which produce colonizing effects—but instead relationally, rhizomatically, and obliquely. These different reading practices that I allude to would privilege opacity.

This question of after colonization permeates the Caribbean much in the same way that it does Latino America. And, to be sure, there are many overlaps in the imaginary venn diagram between the two: Spanish colonization, indigenous decimation, the transatlantic slave trade, multilingualism, syncretic religion, and the grouping of many nation-states and derivations under one moniker. To a certain extent, as well, the combination of *latinidad* and the Caribbean brings us back to the beginnings of what

would come to be known as the Americas. As an interdisciplinary gesture, then, what follows considers Glissant, though conventionally confined to the francophone world, in relation to discussions of *latinidad* (as it intersects with feminist and queer theory) with opacity as a lens, an optics, and a desirous reading practice.

By invoking opacity, I do not want to over-emphasize or romanticize some form of a mysterious and elusive negativity. I do not even feign to say, ahead of time, what the opacity of any one text, person, or object may be. Likewise, I do not understand all transparency as necessarily non-resistant. Indeed, transparency and visibility can often lead to more democratic and accountable forms of politics. And certainly opacity can take dangerous forms and unknowing can be a privilege. In her 1986 essay, "The Privilege of Unknowing," Sedgwick argues that many injustices are often exonerated when they take recourse to feigning ignorance. Writing during the height of the AIDS crisis, she contends that we must fight "against the killing pretense that a culture does not know what it knows" (Sedgwick *Tendencies* 51). I take both the context of Sedgwick's essay, the AIDS crisis, and her analysis to be a very apt caution against reifying and romanticizing opacity. Sedgwick qualifies her fight against ignorance by saying "The only move I can see worth making in this context is the actively antihomophobic one, valuing and exploring and sharing a plurality of sexual habitation, love, and even crucially knowledge. *Yet it can be done only with every possible sophistication about the exclusionary and inflictive involvements of that knowledge*" (emphases added 51). The "killing pretense" that Sedgwick wants to challenge can often align with the "deadening" knowledge that Viego wants to fight against. Opacity, in my thinking, is not the

diametric opposite of knowledge—in fact, it might be the thing that moves knowledges forward, making them relational and active, instead of foreclosed and transparent.

My insistence upon opacity is not an excuse to feign ignorance in the face of injustice, but instead a call to sustained reading, relationality and encounters. Certain kinds of visibilities can carry their own violences and a lack of transparency can be an effective and necessary mode of resistance to reduction. Opacity is not a stable characteristic of any one text—it seems to occur as a kind of recognition of the limits of our gaze, knowledge or interpretation. Even texts that are read as transparent may not necessarily be so. As such, this project hopes to suggest a kind of reading practice, a kind of encountering, and a kind of desire that refuses to demand full disclosure from its objects. In what follows, I first trace the concept of opacity in relation to Édouard Glissant's work and then I offer a set reading practices that honor the ethical imperatives of such a notion of opacity.

The intellectual and literary legacy of Édouard Glissant (1928-2011) has been mostly relegated to the French speaking world. And though his work remains very tied to questions central to his native island Martinique, to the Caribbean more broadly, and to French thought, I would contend that the thinking of difference in his work is precisely valuable for its attention to both philosophical questions and, at the same time, historical contingencies. Celia Britton characterizes this strategic tension in Glissant's work:

> His critique of the Western tradition of humanist philosophy, which has much in common with similar critiques mounted by European Marxists, phenomenologists, and poststructuralists, often operates on a general

> philosophical level: but it is always combined with a deep sense of the specificity of the anticolonial struggle in the Caribbean. (11)

On the philosophical end of this tension that carries throughout Glissant's work, he argues against tidy notions of the Other which he characterizes, in "Sameness and Diversity" in *Caribbean Discourse*, as a way to use the concept of the Other to reduce everything to sameness[12]. Such a linear, patrilineal, and colonial logic, Glissant would characterize as a root logic—one that cannot account for what he calls the "womb-abyss" of the Middle Passage. Instead of a root logic, a patrilineal notion of genealogy, or a Eurocentric historical account of civilization, Glissant, echoing Deleuze, offers the concept of errantry and rhizomes.

These errant and rhizomatic paths spread, open-endedly, into Relation—a system for him that is not a closed notion of totalitarianism, but instead a dynamic mode of existence that underlies the constantly shifting grounds for encounters, events, and peoples. Relation, for Glissant, has no ideal, no unity, but instead a multiplicity of diversities. Here, Glissant echoes contemporary concerns in Latina/o studies, best crystallized by Cristina Beltrán's work in *The Trouble with Unity*. Beltrán poses the unity and demographic creation of a Latina/o sector as a convenient and oversimplified homogenization of an otherwise diverse, fragmented, and contestatory set of subjects. She shows how the amalgamation that is *latinidad* poses itself as a sleeping giant, a Leviathan, that cuts both ways: on the one hand, Latina/o elites have used the overarching term to guarantee some semblance of rights and political purchase, on the other hand

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[12] In this way, Glissant resonates forcefully with critiques of Western idealism and philosophy made by Luce Irigaray—one that leads her to consider the Other's Other—a third term that resists being subsumed into a logic of hommosexuality or phallogocentrism.

conservative fear mongering has used the term to amalgamate a threat and wash over inherent differences. In short, both attempts at using the term politically invoke a giant, a giant that never seems to have gigantic agential access. But, instead, this sleeping Leviathan functions as a threat to either conservatism that wants to withhold national recognition and the 'proper' place of Latina/os in the U.S. democracy or as a threat to the very stability of the U.S. as a nation that serves, primarily, a 'proper' hegemonic center of European-descended whites. The trouble that such a term incites is not only the homogenization that tries to take many disparate groups (Cubans, Puerto Ricans, Dominicans, Mexicans, Chicanos, Tejanos, Nicaraguans, Peruvians, Argentines, and the list goes on) under one identificatory aegis, but also the supposed transparency of the term—the ability for it to reference one specific demographic clearly, with force, and to communicate their desires, aspirations, political leanings, and material needs.

This problem of identity categories, of course, is not new troubled waters, politically or theoretically speaking. But a recognition of these limitations often spurs discourses to expand and meet the demands of thinking the "not yet" or the critical impetus to think of categories critically. As such, Beltrán takes a critical cue from a foundational text of queer theory[13], which functioned as a text that sought to expand

[13] Again, I would note here the mixing of metaphors. *Latinidad* functions much like queerness does, as an open category that is politically necessary, though, perhaps, easily co-opted into the neoliberal identity machine that likes things tidy and transparent. Though there are few open references to queerness, or indeed to queer theory, in Beltrán's essay, she does cite recognizable names in queer theory to articulate her position at key moments: she uses Juana Maria Rodriguez to talk about *latinidad* as an open category, she cites Butler to talk about *latinidad* similarly, and she cites Michael Warner to consider how Latina/os may work as a counterpublic. The trouble in the water here also reflects the parallel structure of the *The Trouble with Unity* as echoing Warner's own queer, public intellectual pursuit *The Trouble with Normal*. As a figure regularly

feminism, by citing Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* as thinking through the problematic category of women for feminism in much the way that Beltrán considers the category of *latinidad*:

> Arguing that feminists could no longer seek recourse to an unproblematized women's "experience," Judith Butler has proposed reconceiving the category of women as "permanently open, permanently contested, permanently contingent, in order not to foreclose in advance future claims for inclusion. In a similar vein, it is my contention that "Latino," like the category "women," should be reconceived as a site of permament political contestation….*Latinidad* is approached as a site of ongoing resignficability—as a *political* rather than merely *descriptive* category. (Beltrán 9)

Indeed, both texts use trouble in their title—a trouble that they do not altogether want to avoid, but that they do want to think seriously about. Such trouble exposes the contradictory, fragmented, unstable, and potential reductiveness of any identity category. Such trouble, though, also seeks to keep after the political and ethical questions and pursuits that seek to make certain lives that live under those categories, whether imposed or identified. This tension is familiar, of course, but also one that remains central to the work of minoritarian writers and artists that can't help but feel something of the responsibility of representation. Adding to Beltrán's notion of *latinidad* as political rather than merely descriptive, I would also say that one of the tensions of her work that goes unnamed is that of ethics. Political urgencies often produce a temporal structure

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appearing on MSNBC, Beltrán's text certainly functions and circulates beyond an academic enclave.

that urges shorthand categories. The time of ethics[14], of ongoing relations of reading, desire, and encounters, can sometimes lag behind the demands of politics, especially those that seek to represent and read without much attention to nuance, ambivalence, or singularity. So, perhaps, Beltrán's notion that calling someone Hispanic or Latino "is an exercise in opacity" resonates as more than just a political practice, it ought also to be considered ethically. How we see, how we read, how we encounter difference must also be considered as ethical questions. And, as Levinas reminds us, "ethics is an optics" (*TI* 29). I take optics here for the literal and figurative dimensions—how we see others, but also how we perceive others. Readings, as perceptions, have an ethical dimension. And these readings are not only of text, but extend to people, cultural phenomena, and art objects. According to Diane Perpich, Levinas articulates "ethical life, as Levinas depicts and imagines it, as a life constituted by its tensions" (xv). Reading Beltrán alongside Glissant, we can see how opacity functions as a category that ethically keeps open a space of relation, reading, and tension without giving way to the political pressure to operate under transparent notions of difference.

In addition to these philosophical critiques of Western notions of unity, Glissant's work also hinges, necessarily, upon the material conditions that make up the material, textured realities of the Caribbean: a place, I might add, that proves instructive and elemental for any thinking of coloniality, translation, revolution, and relation. To echo Jamaica Kincaid, in this small place on the global map, we learn of the earliest forces of

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[14] My notion of ethics is not a normative ethics, but instead an ethics that responds to alterity. That way ethics cannot be known ahead of an encounter with another, but is instead contingent upon another or many others. I derive this notion of ethics from Butler's *Giving an Account of Oneself* which theorizes ethics via Emmanuel Levinas.

American colonial conquest, indigenous decimation, the transatlantic slave trade, indentured servitude from India (making the West Indies more forceful as a delayed name apropos of a misnaming), early independence, black rebellion, maroonage, and the coexisting of many new and old forces. Thinking with the challenges and histories that collide in this archipelago, Glissant produces a set of provocations that urge us to resist transparent thinking.

With PhDs in both philosophy and ethnography in France, Glissant critiqued ethnographic approaches that sought to grasp and reduce difference. In *Caribbean Discourse* (1981), he writes:

> One of the most terrible implications of the ethnographic approach is the insistence on fixing the object of scrutiny in static time, thereby removing the tangled nature of lived experience and promoting the idea of uncontaminated survival. (Glissant *CD* 14)

He maintained that the Caribbean, which he called the Other America, could not be reduced to a linear root either historically or linguistically. Responding to *Négritude's* claim to difference via African roots, the abyss of the Middle Passage figures in his work as one of the impasses to such root logic. In so doing, he questions uncomplicated notions of the origin and shows how they collude with Western logics of sameness and non-relation. Furthering his rhizomatic thought, which reverberates between particularity and generality, he claims that, "Caribbean discourse cannot be readily seized. But does not the world, in its exploded oneness, demand that each person be drawn to the recognized inscrutability of the other? " (Glissant *CD* 4). This recognized inscrutability, for Glissant, would later be theorized as opacity and would be a necessary component for sustained

relation. The recognition of inscrutability in the other, for Glissant, is an ethical relation—that which allows the other's difference to be non-transparent, to be ungraspable.

In *Poetics of Relation* (1990), Glissant puts forward this "right to opacity" to precisely undermine a *discourse of rights* that needs to fully *know* those that it seeks protect. Such a right to opacity, for Glissant, means going beyond the categorizable notions of difference that come along with weak multi-culturalism or identity politics. He notes "The theory of difference is invaluable…But difference itself can still contrive to reduce things to the Transparent" (189). Opacity, for Glissant, is that which allows relationality to take place. He writes, "Opacities can coexist and converge, weaving fabrics. To understand these one must focus on the texture of the weave and not on the nature of its components" (190). Such a weave of opacity emphasizes the textures of relation, rather than the classification of the thread. Opacity, then, is a textured matter—one that moves rhizomatically and in unexpected ways. Relation, rather than ontology, comes to the fore as the more important analytic.

This relational model, for Glissant, is almost always tied to the concept of reading. He considers the place of literature, and more specifically poetics, to be a realm within which sustained reading and encounters take place if we can hold onto relational difference without reducing it to transparency. "We have already articulated the poetic force. We see it as radiant—replacing the absorbing concept of unity; it is the opacity of the diverse" (Glissant *PR* 192). The particular politico-ethical imperative to critique the concept of unity haunts the minds of many queer and Latina/o activists and scholars these days. How can we not be absorbed into the demographic machine that confuses diverse

populations with homogenized market sectors (which, all too easily, become the voting blocks sought after by politicians)? How deadening are the anticipatory figures for a Latina/o politics that seeks to effect change beyond the pandering of representation? For Glissant, opacity staves off these flat representations because "it is that which cannot be reduced, which is the most perennial guarantee of participation and confluence" (191). Opacity, for Glissant, is that which allows relationality to take place and that which holds it open. Opacity, then, functions as a desirous drive to reading, encountering, and relation.

Glissant is not alone in thinking of the coupling of opacity and relation. Judith Butler's *Giving an Account of Oneself* considers the question of opacity and relationality in regard to narrative ethics. Taking as a premise that one can never fully know oneself, she shows that one will always tell a story about oneself that comes up short of the full story. This story, then, would need others to tell vital parts of the story, namely the beginning and the end. This story, too, would be addressed to another—as an account. Butler postulates that the very incompleteness of one's own account of oneself and the relational structure of that account by means of address conjures up an ethics within which the subject's primal opacity and relationality figure necessarily. She writes:

> The postulation of a primary opacity to the self that follows from formative relations has a specific implication for an ethical bearing toward the other. Indeed, if it is precisely by virtue of one's relations to others that one is opaque to oneself, and if those relations to others are the venue for one's ethical responsibility, then it may well follow that it is precisely by virtue of the subject's

> opacity to itself that it incurs and sustains some of its most important ethical bonds. (20)

Rather than a firm epistemological ground, it is a limit of knowing which places one in the realm of ethics. Perhaps acknowledging and granting this lack of knowledge is precisely the implicit ethical ramification of the work of Viego and Soto. Such an ethics hinges upon the unknowingness that subtends relationality, encounter and reading:

> Perhaps, most importantly, we must recognize that ethics requires us to risk ourselves precisely at the moments of unknowingness, when what forms us diverges from what lies before us, when our willingness to become undone in relation to others constitutes our chance of becoming human. To be undone by another is a primary necessity, an anguish, to be sure, but also a chance—to be addressed, claimed, bound to what is not me, but also to be moved, to be prompted to act, to address myself elsewhere, and so to facilitate the self-sufficient 'I' as a kind of possession. (Butler 136)

I take as ethical the ability to risk such unknowingness and to stage encounters with *latinidad*--not to promote ignorance but in order to sustain considerations of these objects. Risk, here, is inherent in the reading process, in relations, and in encounters. It also very aptly reminds us that autobiography, as a narrative, is not only a story of the self, but also an aesthetic. Aesthetics often carry risks—risks that the story will fail to communicate, risks that meaning will not be conveyed. I want to consider Butler's notion of opacity and relationality as they pertain to autobiography and narrative. Latina/o subjects are often called upon to "give an account" of themselves transparently, whether through proving citizenship or through the call to represent a certain expected cultural

stereotype. This notion of opacity and relationality, as they pertain to autobiography and narrative specifically, helps us to consider how Latina/o subjects are often called upon to "give an account" of themselves transparently through the demand for culturally tourable novels that explain the intense sabor of island food or, perhaps more materially and urgently, through increasing laws which demand identifying papers to account for the very existence of Latina/os in the United States. With their overlapping ethical imperatives, Butler and Glissant offer us a model that insists upon the interdependency of opacity and relationality that round out and nuance our well-trodden political paths. Butler draws out the ethical implications of Glissant. And reading Glissant alongside Butler shows how important historical contingency is in addition to these more abstract philosophical musings on ethics. Both forcefully overlap in their imperatives and offer us a model that insists upon the interdependency of opacity and relationality.

In response to the ethical stakes of opacity and relationality, I aim to cultivate reading practices that can hold onto ambivalence and ambiguity—that can hold open tensions. Perhaps one strategy against transparency may actually look like the ability to hold onto multiple stories, meanings and questions. Reading for minoritarian writing or aesthetics can often all too easily fall into a pernicious terrain that asks whether or not the representations are good or bad representations, whether or not they show minoritarian subjects as agential. Such proscriptions limit the aesthetic, and indeed political and ethical, nuance of minoritarian cultural production. In *The Feminist Difference: Literature, Psychoanalysis, Race and Gender*, Barbara Johnson opens with some considerations of ambivalence and the value of it:

> Most discussions of ambivalence treat ambivalence as a temporary, unfortunate, and remediable state of feeling. But perhaps *that* is the problem. Perhaps there is something healthy about claiming the right to ambivalence. Or at the very least, there may be something deadening about having to renounce one's ambivalence too soon, on someone else's terms. If resistance is always the sign of a counter-story, ambivalence is perhaps the state of holding on to more than one story at a time. (2)

I read the last sentence of this citation as a cue to look for the resistances built into texts themselves—that they can resist a foreclosed reading or a quick reading by holding onto more than one story at a time. The deadening Johnson refers to resonates with Viego's concern over dead signifiers and is precisely the issue with a reading that forecloses its own question too quickly—demanding one simple, transparent story. Johnson's particular talent lies in showing the crucial necessity of holding onto ambivalence, indeterminacy, and non-referentiality in her own critical works. Such necessities are not merely aesthetic for Johnson, but also vital for feminism, and I might add for all minoritarian discourses:

> Literature is important for feminism because literature can best be understood as the place where impasses can be kept and opened for examination, where questions can be guarded and not forced into a premature validation of available paradigms. Literature, that is, is not to be understood as a predetermined set of works but as a mode of cultural work, the work of giving-to-read those impossible contradictions that cannot yet be spoken. (Johnson 13)

While the present work concerns the disciplines of critical theory, philosophy and performance studies, it remains staunchly in relation to literature and the kind of cultural work that can take place in holding onto questions in narrative and poetic form. Ambivalence, as an attitude or reading practice that can hold onto more than one story at a time, factors as a mode of resistance wherein objects are not reduced to a single story[15]. Moreover, ambivalence is a futural gesture, a "giving-to-read impossible contradictions that cannot yet be spoken." This kind of reading praxis marks literature as a mode of relation—one that resists reading with pre-determined models that are limited to our present language and discourse.

This notion of literature as a mode of cultural work mimics strongly Glissant's insistence upon poetics, even in the face of dire political urgency. He writes:

> And this is why we stay with poetry. And despite our consenting to all the indisputable technologies; despite seeing the political leap that must be managed, the horror of hunger and ignorance, torture and massacre to be conquered, the full load of knowledge to be tamed, the weight of every piece of machinery that we shall finally control, and the exhausting flashes as we pass from one era to another—from forest to city, from story to computer—at the bow there is still something we now share: this murmur, cloud or rain or peaceful smoke. We know ourselves as part and as crowd, in an unknown that does not terrify. We cry

[15] Another exemplary writer and thinker who articulates this point concerning the danger of reading for one story is Chimamanda Ngozi Adiche. See her TED talk "The Danger of the Single Story" for more on this subject. Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi. "The Danger of a Single Story." *TED*. July 2009. Web. 03 Jan. 2014. <http://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story>.

> our cry of poetry. Our boats are open, and we sail them for everyone. (Glissant *PR* 9)

The unknown, for Glissant, is linked with the notion of opacity that he develops in *Poetics of Relation*. In the first section of the book, entitled "The Open Boat," Glissant theorizes the unknown in relation to what he calls the womb-abyss of the boat from the Middle Passage. His poetics of relation hopes that this terrifying unknown, the empirical experience of Africans being ripped from their homes and transported via the Atlantic ocean into slavery, can evolve into an unknown that is not terrifying. The terrifying non-foundation of the Middle Passage makes a Western root logic impossible for those in the Caribbean.[16] This abyssal origin, or foundation of an unknown, evolves into an opacity that inspires relationality. Moreover, this unknown that evolves into an opacity mutates from this fearful unknown to one that can be managed as a singularity that will not be reduced to a univocal logic. This opacity, significantly, can be gleaned in poetics—a figure for Glissant that marks the literary, the imaginative, and the aesthetic.

Following the need to read for multiple meanings, ambivalences, and opacity, I want to consider methodologies that push us to think and feel about relations, bodies, and objects without coming back to a paramount question of a paranoid epistemology—such paranoia always wants to know, always anticipates knowledge. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, in *Touching Feeling*, cautions against such a strong, paranoid reading—noting "Paranoia places its faith in exposure" (138). Instead, she urges us to think differently than,

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[16] Glissant writes: "Just as the first uprooting was not marked by any defiance, in the same way the prescience and actual experience of Relation have nothing to do with vanity. Peoples who have been to the abyss do not brag of being chosen. They do not believe they are giving birth to any modern force. The live Relation and clear the way for it, to the extent that the oblivion of the abyss comes to them and that, consequently, their memory intensifies" (*PR* 8).

perhaps, the 1990s critical trajectory has trained us. The kinds of reading practices that she provides as a promising terrain to gain critical traction consider texture, besideness (a preposition that seems particularly ripe for comparative and transnational analyses), and affect. Thinking with a Kleinian model of psychoanalysis, where the relations of objects seem the most promising, Sedgwick writes that "to read from a reparative position is to surrender the knowing, anxious paranoid determination that no horror, however apparently unthinkable, shall ever come to the reader *as new*; to a reparatively positioned reader, it can seem realistic and necessary to experience surprise" (*TF* 146). Paranoid thinking has a particular temporality that curiously resonates with the temporal constraints that Viego articulates in the gestures that always know Latina/os: "To recognize in paranoia a distinctively rigid relation to temporality, at once anticipatory and retroactive, averse above all to surprise, is also to glimpse the lineaments of other possibilities" (Sedgwick *TF* 146). Both Barbara Johnson and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick offer ways of reading that do not demand transparency or paranoid cognitive gains. Instead, they offer modes of reading that allow us to dwell in the opaque and the relational—allowing a way to stay with nuance and surprise, rather than quickly reducing the object of our gaze to a transparent, knowable, and dead signifier.

A respect for opacity would refuse to reduce experience or use it as raw data. In the opening pages of *Caribbean Discourse*, Glissant writes: "For the attempt to approach a reality so often hidden from view cannot be organized in terms of a series of clarifications. We demand the right to obscurity" (Glissant *CD* 2). In this way, Glissant contends that marginalized people who have been made invisible by hegemonic versions of history cannot simply correct the existing discourse. In other words, an uncomplicated

visibility will not solve the problem of having been erased or under erasure. As such, he demands the right to obscurity that refuses to play to the ideal of transparent universality so endemic to Western humanism. The question of how to articulate difference and subjectivity, without being reduced to a liberal humanist and masculinist version of the subject, has most certainly been an ongoing thinking and challenge within feminist and queer theory.

Linking this problem to evidence and history has been explicitly articulated, most forceflly by Joan Scott. In her 1991 essay, "The Evidence of Experience," Scott investigates the historiographical work coming from anti-foundationalist thinking that critiques history's exclusion of certain races, classes, genders, and sexualities and shows how experience has become an unquestioned, unconsidered foundation for anti-foundationalists. While Scott does not want to discard the phenomenological realm nor supplant it with mere linguistic theories, she does want to complicate the transparent referentiality assigned to experience as a historical phenomenon. To consider this problem, she turns to Samuel Delaney's *The Motion of Light in Water*, an autobiography "that dramatically raises the problem of writing the history of difference, the history, that is, of the designation of 'other,' of the attribution of characteristics that distinguish categories of people from some presumed (and usually unstated) norm" (773). Feminists, anti-colonialists, queer historians and literary scholars have sought out the accounts that point to alternative historical registers and stories, ones that rarely get highlighted in the canon of Western historical knowledge. And while I, like Scott, see the import of these projects, the assumptions that come along with such hermeneutics ought to be complicated not in order to cloud their political issues and aims, but to consider lingering

assumptions that relegate certain subjects to fully knowable signifiers in the place of completely absent ones. She problematizes such histories of experience by saying:

> When the evidence offered is the evidence of 'experience,' the claim for referentiality is further buttressed—what could be truer, after all, than a subject's own account of what he or she has lived through? It is precisely this kind of appeal to experience as uncontestable evidence and as an originary point of explanation—as a foundation on which analysis is based—that weakens the critical thrust of histories of difference. (777)

Here Scott articulates conventional notions of experience, that of an unfettered and transparent referentiality to evidence of difference. Her warnings lead me to understand better Glissant's insistence upon opacity which works to eschew transparency.[17] Glissant reminds us that transparency is linked to mastery, colonizing readings, and an overall refusal to take seriously the material resistance of language and the literary quality of experience.

And this insistence upon an ethics that attends to opacity and relationality would necessarily signal a departure from the queer anti-social stance that emphasizes a nearly reified and constantly anticipated queer negativity. As provocative, galvanizing and sophisticated as the work of Leo Bersani and Lee Edelman has been, the anti-relational or anti-social thesis in queer theory has been unable to attend to the challenges of

[17] Here, we see Scott's insistence on the non-mastery of an account of oneself and necessarily bound up with Butler's complication and ethical reading of giving an account of oneself. Likewise, the above citations from Scott harken back to Glissant's critique or complication of a theory of difference: "The theory of difference is invaluable…But difference itself can still contrive to reduce things to the Transparent" (*PR* 189).

intergenerational, international, and multilinguistic queers of color.[18] In *Cruising Utopia*, José Esteban Muñoz critically encapsulates the difficulties of the anti-relational stance in regard to the critical and political demands of thinking difference in variant and nuanced ways:

> Yet I nonetheless contend that most of the work with which I disagree under the provisional title of the 'antirelational thesis' moves to imagine an escape or denouncement of relationality as first and foremost a distancing of queerness from what some theorists seem to think of as the contamination of race, gender, or other particularities that taint the purity of sexuality as a singular trope of difference. In other words, antirelational approaches to queer theory are romances of the negative, wishful thinking, and investments in deferring various dreams of difference. (Muñoz *CU* 11)

Situating his critique alongside queer feminists and queers of color, Muñoz signals the lack of viability of the anti-relational thesis for feminist and critical race projects and urges us to consider relationality as an imperative—as an *ethical* imperative—that lays

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[18] Lee Edelman's more recent collaboration with Lauren Berlant, *Sex or the Unbearable*, signals a bit of a departure from the rigidity of the former anti-social thesis. Or, perhaps, the collaboration offered an opportunity to respond to critiques and showcase the capaciousness of Edelman's vision of negativity. Berlant and Edelman, themselves a relational, social, authorship, write: "To encounter ourselves as nonsovereign, we suggest, is to encounter relationality itself, in the psychic, social, and political senses of the term. For that reason, this book attends to those moments when negativity disturbs the presumption of sovereignty by way of "an encounter," specifically, an encounter with the estrangement and intimacy of being in relation. Sex is exemplary in the way it power-fully induces such encounters, but such encounters exceed those experiences we recognize as sex." (Berlant & Edelman *SU* 8)

the necessary groundwork for a supple ethics that can do justice to encounters with fractal and nuanced difference.

More recently, Nicolas De Villiers writes *Opacity and the Closet: Queer Tactics in Foucault, Barthes, and Warhol* in order to introduce opacity as a concept to queer theory that considers tactics that work outside of the framework of the closet as a central figure for thinking about sexuality. Though he does not glean his notion of opacity from either Glissant or Butler, he does provide some insightful ways to think about opacity as a particularly queer subject. Thinking through the ramifications of Foucault's linking sex with power/knowledge[19], De Villiers asks: "What if we were to look at speech as nonrevelatory, outside the parameters of confession and truth, the humanist desire for *reflection*, and the ideal of *transparency*? What if we were to attend to its *opacity*?" (5). In this register, our approaches to opacity overlap in resonant ways.

Being in relation, means reading and being read. [20] Though, the ways in which subjects and aesthetic objects are read does not happen symmetrically. Unlike Nicholas De Villiers, I am claiming opacity as a particularly useful concept for thinking through the ways in which subjects of multiple marked identities navigate the world and are read

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[19] He writes: "Following Foucault's remarks in 'The Subject and Power,' I see this as a struggle against subjection (*assujettissement*) and against a form of power that "categorizes the individual, marks him by his own individuality, attaches him to his own identity, imposes a law of truth on him that he must recognize and others have to recognize him.' This form of power makes individuals into recognizable subjects by imposing a categorizing and interpretive regime of truth" (De Villiers 3).

[20] Juana María Rodríguez signals how, as subjects, we are read—though something exceeds what can be read, categorized, or interpreted: "We are continually being read; subjectivity becomes an object of interpretation. There is always an excess that destabilizes, transmutes, or coalesces what we think we know about ourselves or those around us. Manifestations of identity can be mapped within specific fields of knowledge, but cannot be contained by them" (Rodríguez 8).

by the world. While I appreciate the sophistication he has given to the biographies of Foucault, Barthes, and Warhol, my focus is on figures one would not see highlighted in the same canonical light. Other forms of light and other kinds of gazes pre-determine the ways in which my figures are read: queer Latina/os, feminist performance artists, and their corresponding art often get considered through a framework that has a different set of expectations than those of the most celebrated queer thinkers of the twentieth century. How does opacity resonate differently, when one is attuned to the particular historical contingencies of queer *latinidad*? How might we, like Glissant, think beyond the local, while holding onto particular political and ethical affiliations? How can our desires, our relations, and our readings produce more capaciousness when encountering alterity while still understanding the very real need to keep affiliations in mind?

Opacity: Desire/Reading/Relation

In my theorization, opacity directly relates to desire, reading, and relation. These three categories slide into and out of one another—they often overlap or lead to one another. At times, they are indistinguishable. At others, they provide an impetus or a liason. Desire, in many registers, describes the affective attachment and motivation to reach out to that which is not self-same, that which also undoes the self as an intact entity: "Desire visits you as an impact from the outside, and yet, inducing an encounter with your affects, makes you feel as though it comes from within you" (Berlant *DL* 6). If there seem to be conceptual slippages here between desire, reading, and relation, they are, to a certain extent, intentional. A relation is often a reading, and reading always requires a relation, and desire is often takes its pleasure in reading, or be unable to read, a relation.

Which may harken to something like an ethics of eros that Lynne Huffer calls for—a queer feminist ethics. She writes: "If eros is a term we can't quite pin down, I want to harness that strangeness for the relational ethics it might offer" (Huffer 5). Opacity, with its attendant textures of relation, reading, and desire, offer us one way of thinking through such a queer feminist ethics—one that is a particularly apt response to the problem of transparency that currently faces *latinidad*.

Thinking with Glissant alongside various queer, feminist, and Latina/o thinkers, I have shown how his theory of difference resonates with questions that continue to motivate feminist, queer, and Latina/o theories. His thinking of difference, with opacity, guards us from a totalizing comprehension of alterity—noting here that the French *comprendre* (to understand) has the root *prendre* (which means to take, grab, or seize). The key concepts of opacity and relation ask us to persist in the face of unknowing. While promoting an ethics that refuses simplification, his thinking also highlights the desirous and collective ways in which we exist in a matrix of constantly shifting discursive articulations of singularity and plurality. By reading the work of Glissant alongside these thinkers, we can learn to better approach the persistent question of alterity without reducing it to sameness or making it so exotic that it cannot be in relation to our own stories. Such work has the potential to produce an ethics that thinks the historical particularities of race, gender, and sexuality, without reducing any of those particularities to a transparent notion of identity. Instead, we learn to savor the pleasure that focuses upon "the texture of the weave and not on the nature of its components" (Glissant *PR* 190).

An insistence upon opacity also humbles us in the face of strong epistemological impulses. The political climate surrounding the browning or latinization of the United States in particular has given us enough numbers, fear tactics, violent policies and faulty notions of transparency. We always seem to be at the precipice of a brown takeover, though such an occurrence never takes place and the increasing numbers of Latina/os in the United States do little to shift the political landscape for the better. Visibility, transparency, and static knowledge remain insufficient in such a paranoid discursive, geographic and temporal space. Queer theory's Foucauldian legacy knows that any pretension to knowledge lodged in identity is a modern truth game that at best signals a constant play of repression and liberation. Such truth of the modern subject most certainly pertains to sex and, as such, the sex of queers of color will find limited resources if turned into transparent signifiers of evidence and experience. Instead, a more ethical approach would feel the weight of the erotic charge of encounters, travel, migrancies and translation to consider what we do not know about others and how we become undone in the face of any other—and, moreover, how this lack of transparent knowledge and this undoing might perhaps be the very things that keep us in relation.

It has been nearly twenty years after Sedgwick's provocation that considerations of language, skin, migration, and state deepen what we mean by the word queer:

> Intellectuals and artists of color whose sexual self-definition includes 'queer'…are using the leverage of 'queer' to do a new kind of justice to the fractal intricacies of language, skin, migration, state. Thereby, the gravity (I mean gravitas, the meaning, but also the center of gravity) of the term 'queer' itself deepens and shift. (Sedgwick *Tendencies* 9)

I want to consider how this deepening occurs through not only a political attention to nuances of difference, but also and concomitantly through an ethical attention to difference that does not claim to know it a priori. Such an expansive approach, I think, will offer us a mode of thinking difference that gives us at once a closer, more textured reading of difference, as well as a more capacious approach to encountering opacity through sustained relationality in order to move beyond evidential claims, making undead the signifier of *latinidad*. Thinking through opacity and relationality recalls the etymological roots of the word queer, from the German *quer*, which historically resonates with words like oblique and athwart. As such, a queer reading of difference cannot mean reading *through* difference—the path must be across, with an attention both to translation and the transnational. Perhaps opacity, with its resistance to transparency and its insistence upon relationality, might enliven considerations of queer *latinidad*—necessitating an encounter with different texts, thought and aesthetics without knowing ahead of time what that difference might make.

CHAPTER 2

Dispersed Desire:

The Autobiographical Translation of Manuel Ramos Otero

Introduction

> *Worry should be part of the work, if we learn to read the distance written into some ethnically marked literature. A variety of rhetorical moves can hold a reader at arm's length or joke at their pretense of master, in order to propose something different than knowledge.*
>
> –Doris Sommer from *Proceed with Caution*

Doris Sommer's quote acts as a liason between the explicit theoretical concerns outlined in the previous chapter and the more explicit relation to literary analysis in this chapter. Opacity can work as these forms of "rhetorical moves" that resist reading as mastery. In the case of this chapter, I want to consider how reading with opacity can complicate how we think of autobiographical writing. As Manuel Ramos Otero's prose and poetry often coincided with the facts of his life, his critics have pointed to the autobiographical tendencies, moments, and elements of his writing. Born in Manatí Puerto Rico in 1948, Manuel Ramos Otero moved to the capital of San Juan at the age of seven as the island was undergoing massive modernization. After completing a bachelor's degree in Social Sciences from the University of Puerto Rico, he moved to New York in 1968 to continue studying cinema and escape the feeling of persecution for

his open sexuality in Puerto Rico.[21] Many critics have cited sexual persecution as the primary reason for Ramos Otero's move to New York. Yet, he lists this as one of several reasons for moving:

> Primero, era la alternativa para salir de mi casa. Segundo, no aguantaba la atmósfera de Puerto Rico. Me había dado cuenta que Nueva York era una ciudad donde podia vivir sin sentirme perseguido todo el tiempo. En Puerto Rico sentía muchísima persecución debido a la apertura de mi sexualidad. *Pero no fue sólo eso*. Quedé fascinado con la ciudad y con la posibilidad de independencia total que me ofrecía… Además, quería seguir estudiando y hacer cine.
>
> First, it was the alternative in order to leave my home. Second, I couldn't stand the atmosphere in Puerto Rico. I had learned that New York was a city where I could live without feeling persecuted all of the time. In Puerto Rico, I felt a lot of persecution due to my open sexuality. *But it wasn't just that*... In addition, I wanted to continue studying and to make movies. (my italics, Ramos Otero qtd Costa 69).

In New York, Ramos Otero began to study cinema and quickly learned that the equipment would be too costly, and left the School for Visual Arts to study theater with Lee Strasburg. In 1971, he published his first collection of short stories, *Concierto de metal para un recuerdo y otras orgias de soledad*, which launched his writing career.

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[21] In particular, Larry La Fountain Stokes opens his chapter on Manuel Ramos Otero in *Queer Ricans* with a portion of the excerpted quote—excising the other reasons for Ramos Otero's departure from the island. While I very much appreciate La Fountain-Stokes groundbreaking work on Ramos Otero, I take issue with critical appraisals of the autobiographical nature of his work that flatten out his own words through an edit that makes him all too easily the figure of the sexile: a person who leaves their homeland because of sexually repressive state regimes.

With the exception of a brief move back to the island and the short amount of time leading up to his early death from AIDS-related complications, Ramos Otero spent the majority his writing life in New York while most of his life of writing remained linguistically in Spanish. His stories, poems, and one novel moved between the island and the city, between themes of death and sexuality, between his life and his fantasy. This constant reverberation between worlds would mark the specificity and difficulty of reading the oeuvre of Manuel Ramos Otero. Such constantly shifting work makes his work tricky to place—to place in literary history, in a national literature, and in an identity politics. One might argue that these difficulties led to a fairly small critical reception of Ramos Otero's work, both in the States and in Puerto Rico. Recently, though, with increasing attention paid to the aesthetic contributions of minoritarian writers and specifically queer minoritarian writers, Manuel Ramos Otero's legacy has started to become just that—a legacy.

And yet, I would argue, his work resists any simplistic rendering of him as a poster boy for queer of color writing or recursive notions of diasporic sexuality. More specifically, while Ramos Otero himself conceived of his writing in relation to autobiography, critics must proceed carefully with such assignations. I make this claim not because his work does not solicit such a reading, but because his work shuttles so frenetically between life and writing that the distinctions between the two begin to disintegrate, leaving us with a notion that neither one nor the other can be rendered through simplistic referentiality. What we mean by autobiography has important political and ethical dimensions, especially when assigning it to a marked, minoritarian writer. An unquestioned autobiographical reading practice focuses on individuals and has the danger

of turning the assumed referential experience of the individual into either a token success story or an exemplar of oppression. As most critics would agree, the writing of Manuel Ramos Otero fits into neither of these categories. Rather than a straightforward telling of his life, Ramos Otero's autobiographical moments tend to be erotic, campy, and highly relational.

Autobiography, it seems, often gives us knowledge of the author's life—yet I want to argue that the autobiographical moments in Ramos Otero's oeuvre does provide us with little concrete knowledge of his life. And, indeed, we know very little about the biography of Manuel Ramos Otero outside of the two or three author interviews that he gave. More generally, I want to ask how we might read ethnically and sexually marked literature for something different—something other—than knowledge. As such, Doris Sommer's critical invocation hovers over this chapter as a necessarily ethical imperative that considers not only the need to read for difference, but also to read difference differently. That is, in order to resist problematic tropes of revealing, unearthing, and other archeological and ethnographic impulses of a colonial order, Sommer incites worry and the need to read the "rhetorical moves [that] can hold a reader at arm's length" (xi). Following this ethical invocation, this chapter hopes to consider the work of Manuel Ramos Otero and the repeated critical tendency to read his literary work as autobiographical. In doing so, it worries more generally over the practice of reading autobiography transparently, as a clear glimpse into the experience of another. Looking for various modes of aesthetic resistance, I look at the visual, essayistic, and literary performances of autobiography by Manuel Ramos Otero in order to show how he at once beckons and distances readers with what might be called autobiographical moments.

Visual Postures

Before delving into the textual ramifications of this warning issued as much by Sommer as by Ramos Otero himself, I want to dwell on the visual and the use of book covers in Ramos Otero's work. In his published works, Manuel Ramos Otero often put theatrically staged photographs of himself on the covers of his book. And, on his collection *El cuento de la mujer del mar* [*The Story of the Woman of the Sea*], he featured a photograph of his mother. While it remains a sort of mortal, bibliographic sin to judge a book by its cover, Ramos Otero—sacrilegious as he is—invites us to do just that with his ornate covers. This move has all the more intentional flair when we consider that it is not completely audacious for authors to be featured on fictional books, they just usually appear *as* authors on the back, inside, or dust jacket. Moving his image from the author position to the cover, Manuel Ramos Otero playfully invites us to read his image as the aesthetic and fictional subject of his works. And, yet, these images are highly stylized, theatrical performances of visuality—rendering the possible biographical implications of his image in the terrain of aesthetic uncertainty.

Take, for instance, Ramos Otero's penchant for staging himself through the mode of visuality on the book cover for *Invitación al Polvo*, his last, posthumously published collection of poetry.

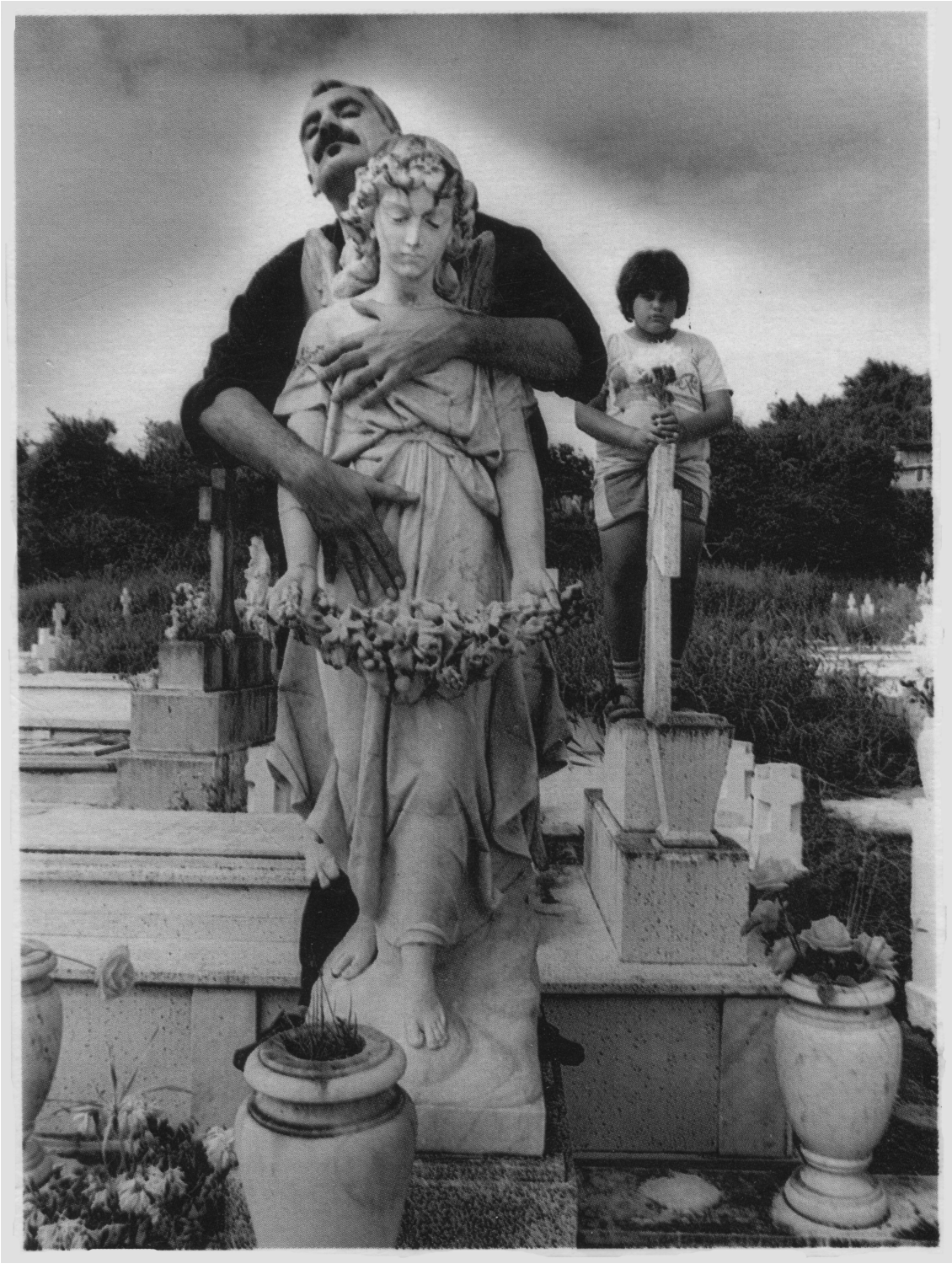

Figure 1: Cover of *Invitación al polvo*

In a cemetery, Manuel Ramos Otero stands behind what appears to be a statue of a woman and wraps his arms around her with one hand suggestively close to her groin while another gently rests upon her chest. His head is slightly cocked back, with his eyes peering down to meet the gaze of whoever might happen upon this macabre scene of theatricality that entices one to open the book. It is imperative here to note a few salient ambivalences integral to this picture. First, Ramos Otero is not alone in this picture. Just behind him a young adolescent straddles a cross that serves as a headstone. Either a tomboy or a slightly effete young boy, this androgynous child at once bears the innocent face of a cherub and simultaneously strikes a pose of sacrilegious masturbation. Secondly, one could perhaps read the embrace of Ramos Otero as a sexual embrace with his object being the statue. Or, perhaps more in line with the cross-gendered identifications of his fiction, one could read this as a moment of possession, wherein he assumes the role of a woman at the tragic moment of her death, beckoning desire through this cross-identification. Finally, the visual uncertainty of this scene echoes the double entendre of the title of the poetic collection itself. *Invitación al polvo* translates literally as "Invitation to dust"— dust that perhaps most obviously also means death and resonates with a religious undertone. Crucially, *polvo*[22] carries a sexual connotation and can mean semen, while "echar un polvo" also means "to fuck." This theatrical image, beautifully and ambivalently orchestrated, conjures up the salient motifs of Ramos Otero's work and should caution us against any simplistic reading of autobiography in his prose and poetry.

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[22] For an excellent discussion of the use of polvo in Manuel Ramos Otero's work as it relates to Lorca and Whitman, see Mark Staebler's "Inter-(Homo)-Textuality: Manuel Ramos Otero and the Nuyorican Intersection of Traditions." Staebler writes that "Ramos Otero appropriates Whitman's image of the individual within the cosmos, the single blade of life in the timelessness of eternity. But his dominant metaphor is dust, 'polvo'" (333).

I begin with this visual reading because Ramos Otero's visual self-representation has led many critics to consider his work autobiographically. I want to dwell in an investigation of how, precisely, autobiography works for Ramos Otero because such a notion of autobiography can hardly be rendered simplistically. As we can see from this photographic scene alone, Ramos Otero's penchant for camp and theatricality nuance what we mean when we assign autobiography to his work. Paying attention to the ludic theatricality of his aesthetic production, we can begin to, as Doris Sommer asks us to, proceed with caution in his marked literature. Instead of assuming that visual representation has a more literal referent than linguistic representation, such a dwelling on the visual register of Ramos Otero may in fact get us to a place of understanding how his use of the autobiographical is elaborately aesthetic. Furthermore, the visual offers a different register of representation through which to consider how Manuel Ramos Otero's work functions as a reverberating set of translations between different linguistic *and* semiotic registers.

In her essay, "A Community in Transit," Mónica Lladó-Ortega explains the impulse to read Manuel Ramos Otero's work as autobiographical: "The tendency to read his writing as too autobiographical is partially due to the fact that Ramos Otero inserts himself in his texts, literally, through pictures of himself and of his mother on the covers of the books…" (Lladó-Ortega 123). While Lladó-Ortega's overall essay nuances much criticism of Ramos Otero's use of the autobiographical by showing it as performative and complicated, this mistaken use of the visual as literal seems to oppose visuality and

literariness diametrically.[23] By conflating the visual with simplistic referentiality, such readings of Manuel Ramos Otero have reduced the complex and highly aestheticized relationship between his life and his work.[24] Using Ramos Otero's own writing about autobiography in order to highlight that the use of the first person as a gesture of performativity and multiplicity, Lladó-Ortega's work mostly nuances the notion of autobiography in Manuel Ramos Otero to show it as transitory and relational. So, to be fair, she shows that this phenomenon of reading Ramos Otero simplistically as autobiography is a misreading. Yet, her diagnosis in the above citation replicates the very symptom she hopes to critique by over-simplifying the complex aesthetic moves of Ramos Otero.

Monica Lladó-Ortega is certainly not the only critic to have written on the complicated role of autobiography in Manuel Ramos Otero. Writers like Arnaldo Cruz-Malave, Efraín Barradas, and Jossiana Arroyo have all countered readings that seek to oversimplify the autobiographical in Manuel Ramos Otero's oeuvre. What this chapter in particular hopes to add to this conversation is a thinking together of autobiography and translation in Ramos Otero's oeuvre through a theoretical exploration of these two phenomena and a close reading of the short story "Hollywood Memorabilia." Though the designation of the autobiographical must be complicated in Ramos Otero's work, one cannot avoid the question. Instead, I aim to show how Ramos Otero translates his own

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[23] Aside from the outright misuse of the term literal, this citation assigns a more pernicious simplicity and transparency to the order of the visual and the photographic. Such an assignation would be a mistake to describe the work of an author who studies both cinema and theatre before formally studying literature.

[24] Further along in this chapter, I will return to the question of visuality as it pertains to translation via the critical work of Rey Chow.

life through aesthetic form—rendering his autobiography opaquely resistant to a straightforward reading of his life.

Autobiography and Translation

> *A simile may help here. Just as a tangent touches a circle lightly and at but one point, with this touch rather than with the point setting the law according to which it is to continue on its straight path to infinity, a translation touches the original lightly and only at the infinitely small point of the sense, thereupon pursuing its own course according to the laws of fidelity in the freedom of linguistic flux.* –Walter Benjamin

While the biography of Manuel Ramos Otero is filled with gaps, one of his first posthumously published pieces laid out his consideration of autobiography as a mode of writing bound up in the place between fiction and history. "Ficción e historia: Texto y pretexto de autobiografía," ["Fiction and History: Autobiographical Text and Pretext"] appeared posthumously in an homage to Manuel Ramos Otero in the San Juan newspaper *El Mundo* on October 14th, 1990, precisely one week after his death on October 7th. In the article, Ramos Otero articulates his ludic and insistent assertion that he has always been the protagonist of his writing. Feeling the need to further refine this statement, he adds "Yo creo que al fin y al cabo, lo unico que siempre he hecho, desde que asumí la escritura, ha sido la traducción de la autobiografía" ["After all, I believe that the only thing I have done, since I started writing, has been the translation of autobiography"]

(Ramos Otero, *El Mundo*, 23).[25] Given such a complicated assertion of his writing as a *translation* of autobiography, this section of my chapter considers the role of both translation and autobiography theoretically in order to better understand his statement.

Autobiography and translation bring up similar theoretical and literary questions. Both make us think and complicate any notion of the origin, while simultaneously invoking it. Both challenge us to reconsider the referent—how the referent does not emerge unmarked from the process of either translation or autobiography. For Ramos Otero to claim that he has only ever written a translation of autobiography highlights the intricate relations between a life and the writing of it. What does it mean to be the translator of one's own life? Moreover, what does it mean to translate not from one language to another, but from a life to the written word? Ramos Otero's comment alerts us to the necessity to think translation beyond mere linguistic difference and to consider the different registers within which translation occurs.

Conventional wisdom assumes that the ultimate referent and origin of autobiography is the writer's life. Speaking of translations of autobiography puts a very different kind of pressure on the status of the origin. A landmark essay on translation, Walter Benjamin's "The Task of the Translator" reminds us that a good translation, like a good story, does not simply convey mere information. Benjamin remarks on the relationship between the original piece of literature and its translation, noting that the former is transformed through the very process of having been translated: "For in its afterlife—which could not be called that if it were not a transformation and a renewal of something living—the original undergoes a change" (73). And this notion of life gives a

[25] All translations are mine unless otherwise noted.

materialism, perhaps even a vitalism, to works of art.[26] The articulation of the life and afterlife gives us a beginning from which to think the work of autobiography in Manuel Ramos Otero. If it is that the translation gives afterlife to a life, then we can see how immediately imbricated the two modalities are. And, indeed, Ramos Otero's autobiographical mode has, to a certain extent, given him more readers and appreciation in the afterlife of his texts than he had during his own lifetime. Now that the academy and literary culture more generally have begun to provide a niche space for minoritarian writers, and specifically queer writers, Manuel Ramos Otero's work has gained something like a resurgence in the culture of letters in Puerto Rico and the academy of the United States.[27]

While Benjamin writes of the importance that the afterlife of a translation brings, he does not see it in a mimetic relationship with the source or the original. Instead, he uses the word echo to denote how the translation has something of a resonant relationship to the original. He writes: "The task of the translator consists in finding that intended effect [*Intention*] upon the language into which he is translating which produces in it the echo of the original" (76). In order to elaborate, Benjamin invokes the image of a "language forest":

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[26] "The idea of life and afterlife in works of art should be treated should be regarded with an entirely unmetaphorical objectivity. Even in times of narrowly prejudiced thought there was an inkling that life was not limited to organic corporeality" (Benjamin 71).

[27] 2010 saw the reprint of his only published novel, *La novelabingo*. And in June of 2012, the progressive newspaper, *Claridad*, featured a center spread on him called "Manuel Ramos Otero, nómada del sueño al reves." Furthermore, his work is prominently featured in a 2010 anthology of queer Puerto Rican literature from the island and its diaspora: *Los otros cuerpos: Antología de temática gay, lésbica y queer*. The literary collective, Colectivo Literario Homoerótica, has become a galvanizing presence in Puerto Rico, assuring that queer Puerto Rican literary production has an ongoing place in the island's literary circles.

> Unlike a work of literature, translation does not find itself in the center of the language forest but on the outside facing the wooded ridge; it calls into it without entering, aiming at the single spot where the echo is able to give, in its own language, the reverberation of the work in the alien one. (76)

The question here, for the purposes of this chapter, would be the following: what if the translation is at once a translation and, to a certain extent, an original piece of literature? What happens to the notion of the original and to the notion of translation?

Using a slightly different figure, that of an accent, Ramos Otero's own conception of autobiography shows how he conceives of it as a process of translation inflected grammatically. His formulation considers the poetics of autobiography as a process within, as Benjamin writes, "the laws of fidelity in the freedom of linguistic flux." Considering the particular grammatical laws dictating pronouns, Ramos Otero elucidates the gendered accents of autobiographical modes of writing with a nuanced, feminist approach to difference. He writes:

> *Sí*, la autobiografía es un "recuento retrospectivo," pero *sí*, todo acto de la escritura lo es. *No*, no es necesariamente en prosa, todo depende de la capacidad poética del que (de la que) quiere autobiografiar. *Sí*, el acento se pone sobre la vida individual, pero el acento siempre ha estado puesto gramaticalmente sobre el *Yo*, que también es *Tú*, que además es *El* y que siempre es *Ella* cuando nos genera con el acento fundamental de la diferencia. Y *Sí*, pero también *No.* El acento se pone particularmente sobre la historia, pero no sobre la historia de la personalidad sino sobre la historia del personaje.

> *Yes*, autobiography is a retrospective story, but *yes*, every act of writing is as such. *No*, it is not necessarily in prose, everything depends on the poetic capacity of he (and she) who wants to write autobiographically. *Yes*, the accent is placed on the individual life, but the accent has always been placed grammatically on the *I*, which is also the *You*, which moreover is the *He* and is always *She* when we are generated from the fundamental accent of difference. And *Yes*, but also *No*. The accent is placed particularly on history, but not on the history of the personality—instead on the history of the character. (Ramos Otero, *El Mundo*, 23)

Here we see how Ramos Otero imagines the process of autobiographical writing as both impersonal and singular, contingent upon the laws of grammar and the particular positionality and poetic capability of the writer. If "translation is a mode," as Benjamin reminds us, then we may find that this mode translates life into literary writing through registers that are not merely interlinguistic (70).

Rey Chow takes up Benjamin's essay on translation in order to move beyond a notion of translation that only considers the phenomenon between different linguistic registers. Instead, she closely reads the essay in order to think about translation between cultures and between media. In "Film as Ethnography: or, Translation between Cultures in the Postcolonial World," Chow explores the resistant work of Chinese documentarians who undo the orientalist frame of looking: " 'viewed object' is now looking at 'viewing subject' looking" (153). In order to consider further the complex moves of auto-ethnography, Chow turns to theories of translation:

> Precisely because translation is an activity that immediately problematizes the ontological hierarchy of languages—"which is primary and which is

> secondary?"—it is also the place where the oldest prejudices about origins and derivations come into play most forcefully (156).

Indeed, Chow sees such a relation between the original and the derivation not only as traditionally hierarchical, but also conventionally over-simplified. As such, she does not seek a reassertion of the primacy of an original that is precolonial, Eastern, and authentic, but instead invokes the coevalness of different linguistic and semiotic registers to get at the inescapably imbricated ways that our post colonial world makes meaning:

> Instead, cultural translation needs to be rethought as the co-temporal exchange and contention between different social groups deploying different sign systems that may not be synthesizable to one particular model of language or representation. Considerations of the translation of or between cultures would thus have to move beyond verbal and literary languages to include events of the media such as radio, film, television, video, pop, music and so forth, without writing such events off as mere examples of mass indoctrination. (Chow 166)

Given Manuel Ramos Otero's penchant for writing film, camp, and popular culture into his own writing, our task may be to trace the moments when his writing uses different semiotic registers that precisely do not line up in order to begin to see what a translation of autobiography might be. Rey Chow's capacious understanding of translation, as well as her insistence upon the inherent hierarchical strictures of thinking translation as merely linguistic, provides a point of departure that allows us to consider the differing semiotic, linguistic, and cultural registers of Ramos Otero's mode of translation.

In *Queer Ricans,* Lawrence La-Fountain Stokes devotes a chapter, "Autobiographical Writing and Shifting Migrant Experience," to Manuel Ramos Otero

and asserts that "By highlighting a self-referential, autobiographical 'mask' or 'persona' in his fiction, nonfiction, and poetry, Ramos Otero constructs a highly stylized, particular, yet striking image of a displaced, exiled gay Puerto Rican man in New York" (La-Fountain Stokes 62). Here, La-Fountain Stokes acknowledges the aesthetic intervention into a pure notion of referentiality by invoking the work of Arnaldo Cruz-Malavé and Jossiana Arroyo who have both considered the characterization of the autobiographical impulses of Ramos Otero by calling them masks and personaes, rather than Ramos Otero as such.[28] These critics show how autobiography functions as a complex aestheticisation for Ramos Otero that exceeds a solitary writing of the self.

Noting the figurative qualities of autobiography, Paul de Man's 1979 essay, "Autobiography as De-Facement", nuances conventional notions of autobiography and its relation to reference. Early in his essay he asks: "But are we so certain that autobiography depends on reference, as a photograph depends on its subject or a (realistic) picture on its model?" (69). While de Man oversimplifies the photographic mode of representation, he goes on to productively blur the hard and fast border between fiction and autobiography. First, he contests the categorization of autobiography as a genre, specifically because he claims that such a designations takes an aesthetic category (genre) and melds it with a historical category of life (biography or autobiography). Considering the complex relation between aesthetics and history, Ramos Otero sets up his essay on autiobiography by figuring translation as the process that frames the difference between fiction and history:

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[28] See Arnaldo Cruz-Malavé's "Para virar al macho: La autobiografía como subversion en la cuentística de Manuel Ramos Otero" and Jossiana Arroyo's "Exilio y tránsitos entre la Norzagaray y Christopher Street: Acercamientos a una poética del deseo homosexual en Manuel Ramos Otero."

> Yo sé que toda traducción es una reescritura. Yo sé que nuestra definición de lo que es ficción y de lo que es historia está matiuzada por ese fenómeno habitual que nadie parece tomar en cuenta, llamado traducción.
>
> I know that all of translation is a rewriting. I know that our definition of what is fiction and what is history is tinged by this quotidian phenomenon that no one seems to take into account, namely translation. (Ramos Otero, *El Mundo*, 22)

For de Man, the aesthetic or figurative dimensions of language puts pressure on the category of autobiography, which is so often deemed self-evident. De Man goes further to show the performative aspects of autobiography that do not come down to a simplistic notion of referentiality :

> We assume that life *produces* the autobiography as an act produces its consequences, but can we not suggest, with equal justice, that the autobiographical project may itself produce and determine the life and that whatever the writer *does* is in fact governed by the technical demands of self-portraiture and thus determined, in all its aspects, by the resources of his medium? (de Man 69)

The answer to de Man's rhetorical question is, of course, yes. Autobiographical writing figures the life that it claims to merely reference and, in so doing, disfigures the life as much as it figures it. And much like J.L. Austin shows that all language is to a certain extent performative, de Man goes to show that the autobiographical is an element of all reading and writing. This point touches upon the process of autobiography as one that is

essentially relational—it takes place as much on the level of reading as it does on the level of writing. [29]

Furthering his theory through a reading of Wordsworth, de Man links the writing of life to death and the giving of face to defacement: "Prosopopoeia is the trope of autobiography, by which one's name, as in the Milton poem, is made as intelligible and memorable as a face. Our topic deals with the giving and taking away of faces, with face and deface, *figure*, figuration and disfiguration" (76). In order to communicate this dual function of autobiography, de Man chooses the trope of prosopopoeia, that figure of speech within which an absent, dead, or fictional person is speaking. Clearly a deconstructive move, de Man uses such a trope as exemplary of autobiography to eschew transparent or literal notions of the mode of writing. Prosopopeia, which de Man describes as both a headstone and as writing from beyond the grave, resonates well with Manuel Ramos Otero's literary and visual penchant for the macabre. While we have already seen the visual representation of Ramos Otero fondling death in a cemetery, he also has a complex relation to death in his first collection of poetry *El libro del muerto* (*The Book of Death*). Though death maintained a spectral constant in his work, the gravitas of his poetic engagement with death shifted in confluence with his diagnosis of HIV. Over the whole of his oeuvre, Ramos Otero told his life by narrating and poetically envisioning his relation to death which straddled, like de Man's notion of autobiography, a consistent tension between figuring and disfiguring his biography.

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[29] "Autobiography, then, is not a genre or a mode, but a figure of reading or of understanding that occurs, to some degree, in all texts. The autobiographical moment happens as an alignment between the two subjects involved in the process of reading in which they determine each other by mutual reflexive substitution" (de Man 70).

Writing more specifically about autobiography in Latin America, Sylvia Molloy chimes in with de Man's notion that: "autobiography is as much a way of reading as it is a way of writing" (Molloy 2). Though Molloy writes more of a historical and political investigation of autobiography than a philosophical one, she contends that:

> Autobiography is always a re-presentation, that is, a retelling, since the life to which it refers is already a kind of narrative construct. Life is always, necessarily, a tale: we tell it to ourselves as subjects, through recollection; we hear it told or we read it when the life is not ours. So to say that autobiography is the most referential of genres—meaning, by reference, a somewhat simplistic referring back to 'reality' and to concrete verifiable facts—is, in a sense, to pose the question falsely. Autobiography does not rely on events but on an articulation of those events stored in memory and reproduced by rememoration and verbalizaton…In a sense I have already been 'told,' told by the very story I am telling. (Molloy 5)

Such an articulation of autobiography figuring not events, but memories that one has already been told, further complicates the process of writing an autobiography by showing how it is mediated through the work of memory. Such a translation bears upon the work of Ramos Otero insofar as his articulation of autobiography relies as much upon the end product as it does upon the supposed source of his life.

The question of telling one's own life that always tends to fall short, disfigure, or be incomplete is the very basis of ethics for Judith Butler. As she explains in *Giving an Account of Oneself*, every person's account of herself is necessarily incomplete—there are certain things that we were not fully conscious of, things we cannot remember from

our beginnings. Far from saying that the autobiography is impossible or illegitimate, Butler writes:

> We can surely tell our stories, and there will be many reasons to do precisely that. But we will not be able to be very authoritative when we try to give a full account with a narrative structure. The "I" can neither tell the story of its own emergence nor the conditions of its own possibility without bearing witness to a state of affairs to which one could not have been present, which are prior to one's own emergence of a subject who can know, and so constitute a set of origins that one can narrate only at the expense of authoritative knowledge. (Butler 37)

These origins, which we cannot know and which we depend on others to tell us, enmesh us in an ethics of opacity and relationality. So giving an account of oneself, being accountable by address, and using the autobiographical mode may very well prove to give us something "different from knowledge." And for Butler, this set of ethics relates not only to narration, but also to reading. As such, this ethical stance in relation to the autobiographical mode gives us a compelling ground from which to ask how one might proceed with adequate caution in regard to autobiographical modes of writing and reading. As I explicate later this in chapter, this constitutive failure of autobiography will be the very point that Ramos Otero pleasurably exploits in his writing.

To be clear, I do not want to say that reading for referentiality is always wrong. Instead, I want to emphasize that reading with an expectation of transparency is quite often an asymmetric demand made on marked, minoritarian writers and texts. Readers often want or claim to know, ahead of time, what will lie between the covers of a book instead of proceeding with caution. This is a persistent problem for minoritarian work

that often exists in the double bind of claiming truths heretofore untold, while simulataneously being read as a synechdoche for a whole people.

In order to step to the side of this double bind, Manuel Ramos Otero used a mixture of poetics and narrative to bear upon the question of biography, indulging in the errant and figurative qualities of writing. In an interview, Ramos Otero claims:

> En mi literatura coexisten poesía y narrativa porque siempre he concebido la escritura como mi biografía. No hay diferencia entre lo que soy y lo que escribo.
>
> In my literature, poetry and narrative coexist because I have always conceived of my writing as my biography. There is no difference between what I am and what I write. (Ramos Otero qtd Costa 66-67).

Refusing a difference between his self and his writing, Ramos Otero highlights the performative qualities of writing and reduces the difference between life and writing to a generic difference. When he claims no difference between his writing and his life, he precisely guarantees a singular notion of difference. By refusing recourse to a stable referent, his writing dodges interpellative reading practices that want to know his marked difference. Writing highly poetic prose, prose poetry, and aestheticized essays, Manuel Ramos Otero's work consistently eschews a transparent reading through its highly theatricalized postures of the self. Tempting readers with the promise of a telling of a life, Ramos Otero's work at once beckons and distances readers. The resistance of his work comes through the ways in which he chooses to figure a life, ways that are not at all transparent. His highly theatricalized postures and aestheticization of autobiography render his life as precisely opaque.

A Campy Translation of the Self: or "Alright Mr. DeMille, I'm ready for my close-up."

> *Pero yo soy un animal de tentación y en la ribera de la vida hay algo, alguna voz que me seduce y me traduce, que me oraculiza con enigmas que buscan ser descifrados.*
>
> *But I am an animal of temptation and in the shore of life there's something, some voice that seduces me and translates me, that oracalizes me with enigmas that yearn to be deciphered.*—(Ramos Otero, *El Mundo*, 22)

In this section, I turn to one of Ramos Otero's most celebrated short stories, "Hollywood Memorabilia,"—written in Spanish except for the title— which certainly bears some resemblance to the facts of Ramos Otero's life. He, like the narrator, was a social researcher and lived in New York. Yet, the story's very structure resists any notion of the narrator as self-same, self-contained or transparent. Rather than a direct mapping of his life as a point of referentiality to his fiction, Ramos Otero's writing shows how the autobiographical tells the tale of its own undoing and own dissolution. Moreover, the dissolution in this short story becomes one of translation through fleeting, metonymic and thickly pleasurable identifications with campy Hollywood stars. The short story, published in 1971 in the collection *Concierto de metal para un recuerdo y otras orgias de soledad* (*Metal concert for a memory and other orgies of solitude*), tells the story of a young man who lives a solitary life in New York—working various jobs and fantasizing about lost lovers and Hollywood starlets. The whole of the story takes

place in the narrator's interior monologue, fluctuating between his own life and the lives he watches on cinematic screens. Through his solitude, the two registers begin to blend and culminate in an indistinguishable, atomized suspension between his body and the screen.

The process of both figuring and disfiguring the first person narration in this story begins to pleasurably and queerly unravel upon the very first enunciation of itself as both authoritative and authorial. With the inaugural lines, "Yo soy Dios" ["I am God,"] the story opens with a promise of authorial sacrilege that will toy with the limits of narration. One could read this story and its disintegrating deity of a narrator as a post-structuralist critique of authorial intent—but this story is much more convoluted and more polemical, both in its relation to politics and its dance with death. Fairly quickly into the narrative, one is struck by the excessive references to English language signifiers of camp (as the title itself remains in English and in homage to one of the most important components of camp—Hollywood's past[30]). The "yo" of "Yo soy Dios" sets up the campy theatricality of writing and language—indeed he plays up the performative aspects of language to bring things into existence.[31] Like the God of Genesis, the narrator creates things with his words. But instead of creating light or the natural order of things, this narrator creates a character who will be named Angel… and John and Paul. The act of narration, of naming, sets the stage for a flood of fantastical relationships to these three men whom the narrator calls "la Divina Trinidad Parasitaria" ["the Divine Parasitic Trinity"] (96).

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[30] It is important to note that the Hollywood that titles the story is in relation to memory and nostalgia. Camp, according to Sontag, always has about it the air of the démodé.
[31] For "Hollywood Memorabilia," I am using the translation by Gregory Kolovakos unless otherwise noted. "Hollywood Memorabilia." *Callaloo* 15.4 (1992): 973-78. *JSTOR*. Web. 05 Apr. 2012.

Aside from being an author, our deity of a narrator also works as a researcher in a governmental program that seeks to create "una sistema perfecto de movilidad" ["a perfect system of mobility"] (93). Defensively and as if in conversation with another, a "politicized" other, Otero quickly responds:

> No. Las deficiencias de capitalismo no me interesan. ¿Por qué? Porque tengo viente años y pienso que a los treinta moriré con un ataque imprevisto de tuberculosis (como Greta Garbo en *Camille*).
>
> No. Capitalism's deficiencies do not interest me. Why not? Because I'm 23 years old and I think that at thirty I'll die of an unforeseen attack of tuberculosis (like Greta Garbo en *Camille*). (Ramos Otero 93)

After this rather flamboyant dismissal of normative politicization, the narrator announces that he also works as a projectionist in a second run movie theatre. He explains that this means that he never has the time for chance encounters with men and then immediately undermines that claim:

> Tan tarde salgo que camino hasta casa y no me queda tiempo para conocer a nadie en el camino, entablar una relación espontánea y rápida e invitarle a que pase a casa a tomar café (también tengo té de jazmín porque conocí un chico que adora el té de jazmín pero todas formas no importa porque dijo que llegaría a las ocho y después de esperarlo hasta la madrugada supe que no vendría; aún no he abierto la caja con sobres individuales de té de jazmín).

> I leave so late that I head home and there's no time for me to meet anyone on the way, commence a spontaneous and quick relationship with him to come over to the house to have a cup of coffee (I also have jasmine tea because I met a guy who adores jasmine tea but anyhow it doesn't matter because he said he would come over at eight and after waiting for him until dawn I figured he wouldn't come; I still haven't opened the box with its individual bags of tea.) (93)

The narrative moves from the performative and animistic work of narration, to a social research job, to a blatant disinterest in politics that is explained by an anticipated death that simulates Hollywood, then on to a failed romantic life. The larger narrative that follows works in such a metonymic, conversational and contradictory way—gliding along and punctuated by references to an early death that luxuriously resembles melodramatic Hollywood movies. Though seemingly chaotic at first, this movement gains significance throughout the narrative and develops into a textual relation to death, politics and camp that refuses to be subsumed under a liberationist project.

What seems particularly provocative is the privileging of a camp aesthetic over and against a more recognizable form of politics. With a defiant and polemical gesture, the narrator announces himself as not at all interested in race or class:

> La investigación social y la movilidad y el problema de los negros (escucho el ruido de varios suspiros de pechos insultados que consideran el racismo el issue universal) no me interesa tanto como el cine y Joan Crawford en *Grand Hotel*… (varios ¡ahhhhhhs! vomitados que al fin y al cabo me tienen sin cuidado porque ya no resisto a las señoras que se levantan temprano en la mañana y acuden a misa vestidas de negro sin nada en el estómago y se golpean el pecho tres veces con

interrupciones, ni a la gente que critica al presidente de la Universidad del Estado por sosperchársele homosexual reprimido debido a sus manerismos desbocados durante los discursos de graduación, ni a la gente que opina que estudiante es sinónimo de sometimiento tradicional y que la revolución en los países coloniales y el comunismo son lo mismo). Todo me parece tremenda porquería burguesocialista, izquierdoderechista. Después de todo la mierda es mierda es mierda (revisando a Gertrude Stein).

Social research and mobility and the problem of blacks do not interest me (I hear the sound of many sighs from the insulted breasts that consider racism the universal issue) as much as cinema and Joan Crawford in *Grand Hotel*…(many vomited ahhhhhs! that when all is said and done don't matter to me because I can't stand any longer the matrons who rise early and go off to mass dressed in black with nothing in their stomachs and beat their breasts three times with pauses, or the people who criticize the president of the State University suspecting him of being a repressed homosexual because of his coarse mannerisms during graduation speeches, or the people who hold the opinion that a student is synonymous with traditional subjugation and that revolution in the colonized countries and Communism are the same thing). It all seems a lot of bourgeoisocialist, leftrightish rubbish to me. After all shit is shit is shit (to revise Gertrude Stein). (94)

Much like the rapid disintegration of the authorial voice's omnipotence, this railing polemic against normative politics camps the whole bit by portraying it as both melodramatic and theatrical—the sighs from insulted breasts and the vomited ahhhhh!s seem a rather fitting characterization of the kinds of reactions that camp provokes. And the flippant dismissal of politics gives way to a more nuanced critique of politics that can no longer abide the liberal humanist projects that equate students with the traditionally subjugated and confuse revolution with Communism.[32] The narrator then gives us a campy revision of Stein's a rose is a rose is a rose to further develop his queer citational practices and further inflect his abject aestheticism that refuses to take the shit of politics.

This diffuse and multivalent camp practice also translates the autobiographical impulses of the first person narration. The narrator parodies the role of any 'I' in a narration:

> Bueno, el personaje se llamará yo. Porque después de varias recapitulaciones de la memoria, aún no se me facilita el comienzo…Ocurre que el comienzo y el final pertenecen al mismo espacio y ya no se distinguen sus formas.
>
> Okay, let's call the character I. Because after several recapitulations of memory, the beginning is still not made easy for me…It so happens that the beginning and the end share the same space and their forms can no longer be distinguished. (94)

[32] This statement is somewhat heretical and intentionally so for Ramos Otero. He had a personal and staunch commitment to Puerto Rican culture and the independence movement that had been galvanizing over the midcentury. Instead of being a denouncement of politics in general, what Ramos Otero critiques here, in quite a subtle and savvy manner, is the slippage between student resistance movements in the United States and other first world countries with struggles happening in the current and former colonies of empire and imperialism.

Drawing our focus to the limits of any narration, the narrator reminds us that no I is witness to its own beginning or end. As Judith Butler reminds us, the beginning and the end are precisely the part of one's own story that one cannot be witness to—they are the radical absence of the self from its own narrative and the necessary limitations on any autobiography. Rather than covering up this limitation, "Hollywood Memorabilia" takes pleasure in fantasizing the many possible, glamorous deaths—letting Hollywood starlets take the lead roles in the protagonist's own cinematic vision of his memory and eventual death. If camp is, as Sontag's notes tell us, a failed seriousness—then Ramos Otero employs such a failed seriousness in regard to death and the autobiographical mode by camping both[33].

Perhaps the campiest and most artificial aspect of "Hollywood Memorabilia" is the demystification of one's own memory by using Hollywood's memory instead. What does it mean to identify with film of an era that is not one's own? What does it mean for a queer, Latin American, diasporic subject to write about Vivien Leigh, Bette Davis and Mae West in Spanish? The cinematic tradition that the narrator brings up is not contemporary to the early 1970s nor is it markedly Latin American. Instead, it is an older Hollywood—the 1930s and 40s Hollywood of great stars and high glam[34]. Noting this I do not intend to erase the presence of Latinos and Latin Americans in the history of

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[33] In note thirty six of Sontag's "Notes on 'Camp'", she writes: "And third among the great creative sensibilities is Camp: the sensibility of failed seriousness, of the theatricalization of experience. Camp refuses both the harmonies of traditional seriousness and the risks of fully identifying with extreme states of feeling" (62). The "theatricalization of experience" is precisely how Manuel Ramos Otero keeps autobiography from being read as either "traditional seriousness" or full identification.

[34] Argentine and queer writer Manuel Puig also had a very similar camp aesthetic in his fiction. I will return to this aesthetic relation later on in this chapter.

Hollywood, but instead I aim to highlight that camp is used here as a mode of translation that is not predicated on resemblance[35].

Our narrator is careful to note that he works in a second run cinema. The second-handedness of these films not only gives them the appeal of the vintage or the old, but also creates a temporal distance that frees them up for a kind of infusion of fantasy and mythologization that departs from the banal and the quotidian. Sontag explains that "Time may enhance what seems simply dogged or lacking in fantasy now because we are too close to it, because it resembles too closely our own everyday fantasies…We are better able to enjoy fantasy when it is not our own" (60). Fantasies of an older time and place are more accessible. "Hollywood Memorabilia" interpellates the reader into this game of illusions and desire—making the play of fantasy an integral component of relationality. To project one's own fantasies onto another renders them, often, more legible as desirous—as with the temporal distance gained from camp. Likewise, to project one's own identity, or death, or lovers onto démodé Hollywood stars may seem delusional—but it also renders that identity, death, or those lovers unavailable to be co-opted into a pathos of sympathy or oppression. The metonymic movement of desire moves forward alongside the many imagined deaths of this narrator and keeps it always out of reach, distant, and desirable. This cross identificatory mode made material through the intricate descriptions of projection in the story shows how camp functions as a kind of translation that eschews any literal resemblance.

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[35] For a history of early Latina Hollywood starlets, see Steve Starr's *Starrlight Glamorous Latin Movie Stars of Early Hollywood*. Chicago First Flight, 2010. Print. This book contains biographical accounts of Maria Montez, Rita Hayworth, Lupe Velez, Carmen Miranda and Dolores Del Rio.

This lack of resemblance, through a campy translation, creates an opaque aesthetic that puts pressure on the pathos of the politics that Ramos Otero has so wittingly criticized. Old Hollywood becomes a set of citations within which to negotiate a relation between "realidad e ilusión" which the narrator names as the two most important words for him to understand because the "felicidad externa de saber que se nos aprueba el comportamiento, para mí no existe [external happiness of knowing that our behavior is approved of doesn't exist]" (95). Campy signifiers make available an affective register and a disguise from which to explain a life. Again noting the failure of his own biography, the narrator reveals that he writes his biography with disguises (98). Such an admission gestures toward the love of adornment and costume in camp. Philip Core reiterates Sontag's aphorisms on camp and write:

> CAMP is a form of historicism viewed histrionically.
>
> CAMP is a biography written by the subject as if it were about another person.
>
> CAMP is a disguise that fails.
>
> CAMP is a lie which tells the truth. (80-81)

In this biography of disguises, we do not have direct access to the person who takes on the proper name of Manuel Ramos Otero. And yet, through the failure, the disguises and the histrionics, we do receive an archive of affect within which to relate to the life hinted at: "Escribo mi vida que es un recuerdo de emociones reconstruidas a través de Rita Hayworth en *Gilda,* de Gloria Swanson en *Sunset Boulevard*, etc. etc. [I write my life which is a retelling of emotions reconstructed by means of Rita Hayworth in *Gilda,* of Gloria Swanson in *Sunset Boulevard*, etc. etc.]" (98).

Accepting death and fantasizing about it means confronting the grandest illusion—the thing we cannot know. Ramos Otero and Freud both know this—we may fixate on death, fantasize about it, visualize it—but we cannot know it. Which is perhaps why the final star that appears in this story is the Greta Garbo of *Queen Christina*[36]. The narrator is starting to disintegrate, the end is drawing near and he feels himself changing roles with images on the screen:

> Hace algún tiempo que al quedar hermético en la cabina siento cómo cambio lugares con alguien en el film. Lo vengo haciendo con frecuencia (he tenido resultados estupendos con *Queen Christina* en la escena final).
>
> For some time, now, remaining sealed in the booth I feel how I change positions with someone in the film. It's been happening to me frequently (I've had incredible results with *Queen Christina* in the final scene). (99)

This final scene is not a scene of death, but instead a scene of survival—Greta Garbo's stalwart face at the bow of a ship. Her Spanish lover, whom she met and fell in love with while dressed as a man, has been murdered. It was for him that she had given up her throne. And this is the fleeting cinematic image that Ramos Otero leaves us with—something between a happy and a sad ending—an exiled figure that has loved and lost,

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[36] *Queen Christina* was produced and directed by Rouben Mamoulian in 1933. The film was billed as Greta Garbo's return to the screen after an eighteen month hiatus from Hollywood. Her career had declined as a result of the rising popularity of "talkies." The film is loosely based on the life of seventeenth century Queen Christina of Sweden. The film grossed over $2,500,000, making it one of Garbo's most commercially successful films.

that has reigned and relinquished power, that stands alone but determined[37]. Rather than a figure of death, Garbo becomes a figure of survival. Indeed, one should remember that camp, while it emphasizes the frivolous and artificial, has its roots as a code of recognition and a semiotics of the love which dare not speak its name. It is a vestige of queer culture before the Stonewall Riots. Phillip Core reminds us: "Besides being a signal, camp was and remains the way in which homosexuals and other groups of people with double lives can find a *lingua franca*" (Core 82).

And while this text does have a relation to politics that extends beyond its reactionary proclamations, the text does not have a politically normative telos of liberation or revolution. The queerness of this text lies in its marginal position to politics and cannot be reduced to the allusions to same sex desire. The campy aesthetic here pertains to a desire that exceeds sexual identity and exceeds simplistic notions of liberation—risking not only ridicule but also that the campy subject may stay dispersed and suspended. As the narrator draws near to the end of his own story, he narrates his dissolution:

> Pero ya comienzo por desvanecerme. El autor, el proyeccionista, Dios, parecen quedar desintegrados en átomos constantes de luz y siento un impulso flojo que me proyecta con suavidad en el lienzo. El tiempo del proyector al lienzo nunca fue más largo y siento partículas perdidas que aún no terminan su viaje. No

[37] As a figure of survival, Garbo's character in *Queen Christina* is an ambivalent form of survival. She holds open the space of question and does not foreclose ambivalence in the way that Barbara Johnson finds so necessary about the literary. In the final scene of the film, her face becomes an unwavering ellipsis—she does not blink and she does not show much emotion.

> quiero pensar en la posibilidad siempre presente de que la proyección se interrumpa sin que los átomos logren integrarse en la ilusión esparada.
>
> But I'm already beginning to dissolve. The author, the projectionist, God, seem to be disintegrating into lasting atoms of light and I feel a weak impulse that gently projects me onto the screen. The time from the projector to the screen was never longer and I sense particles that still do not finish their journey. I don't want to think about the always present possibility that the projection may be interrupted without the atoms managing to integrate themselves into the desired illusion. (99)

This dispersal becomes a figure for reading both the failure and the survivability of the text—the always already there possibility that the projection of one's desires and the achievement of them may not in fact "integrate."[38] And yet, the consistent failure of integration—into a cogent autobiography, into a sustained romance, into a political vision—is the very textual machination that propels the text. The perpetual crossings of ideas, genres, and identities offers Ramos Otero, and us, a way of configuring a non-integrationist, perhaps disidentificatory, practice of persistence drenched in aesthetics and pleasure.

What does it mean to write adoringly and identificatorily about Joan Crawford or Bette Davis in Spanish *as* biography, as the translation of autobiography? How does such

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[38] The dispersal rendered in the English translation fails to capture the Spanish original of *desvanecerse*. A reflexive verb, *desvancerse* has no opposite of *vancerse*, even though it is preceded with the undoing prefix of *des*. It is a word that can mean dispersal and would often be used to show how things fade or how fog dissipates. It has a temporal character that shows how matter erodes or separates or thins over time, ever spreading more than disappearing altogether.

an opaque identification thwart more predictable interpellations of Latino subjects? José Esteban Muñoz writes of "an opulent scene of cross-identification that is, in one manner of speaking, *queer*…the word *queer* itself, in its origins in the German *quer*, means 'across'; the concept itself can only be understood as connoting a mode of identifications that is as relational as it is oblique" (*Disidentifications* 127). In "Hollywood Memorabilia," Manuel Ramos Otero translates autobiography through these metynomic and oblique cross-identifications with starlets. Like most campy gestures, he does so not to identify with an unfettered beauty of women, but to create a constellation of complicated adoration mixed with identificatory relations to Hollywood women in the moment of their denouement—feeling somehow like Gloria Swanson's role of the late career actress grotesquely and maddeningly clinging to her legacy. This work of camp, as a pleasure in failure, shows the affective attachments and crossings of desire that comprise the autobiographical mode of Manuel Ramos Otero.

Modalities of camp, identification and autobiography in Ramos Otero's oeuvre emphasize the relational, metonymic and productive failures of such desires. Ramos Otero's work created its own camp—one that resisted both total assimilation through its linguistic register that remained in Spanish and recognizable politicization through its aesthetic choices. The choice to write openly queer and campy stories defied the political center of the Nuyorican scene during Ramos Otero's time in New York. Much of this scene had an overt political bent, one that was often quite machista. The complicated translation and aesthetic issues within Ramos Otero's work, perhaps best exemplified by "Hollywood Memorabilia," offer us dense layers of cultural and linguistic semiotics that precisely do not line up. The campy aesthetic rendered in Spanish keeps on opaque

tension that resists any easy reading of the story as either simplistically queer or simplistically Puerto Rican. Instead, he works between the poles of history and fiction and between entrapment and liberation, in order to carve out a desirous practice of self-writing:

> Yo estoy entre mi ficción y la historia, no estoy fuera de ninguna de las dos sino entre ambas, y todo lo que he escrito , todo lo que escribo es un intento de atrapar, irónicamente, la voz de mi liberación, esa voz que al apprehender las otras voces de los otros cuenteros de la historia definirá mejor los bordes temporales de la lengua, ese órgano tan humano que lo mismo hace el amor con la piel polvorosa de otro cuerpo que con la piel polvorienta de la fábula.
>
> I am between my fiction and history, I am not outside of either of the two but between both, and all that I have written, all that I write is an attempt to trap, ironically, the voice of my liberation, this voice that in apprehending the other voices of other tellers of history will better define the temporal rims of the tongue, this organ, which is so human, that it makes love with the dusty skin of another body just as it does to the dusty skin of a story. (Ramos Otero *El Mundo* 23)

Here, Ramos Otero figures liberation as something to be trapped and caught. An ambivalent conjunciton of liberation and entrapment such that they are flip sides of the same coin that holds them in productive tension. Ramos Otero locates himself between fiction and history in order to reduce himself to neither pure abstraction nor pure referentiality—instead he remains in the opaque place between the two registers. This space is not only a space of the self, but of others—a relational space. One that returns

him to the ambivalent and desirous figure of *polvo*—soemthing that conjures both death and desire. He notes the temporal rims of a dusty tongue with the adjective *polvorosa*—which I have chosen to translate as dusty instead of the more clumsy, but also more specific, translation as dust-ful. Full of dust, this tongue is that which makes love to another body—it is made up of particles that comingle with the other body and thus lessen the distinction between the two. This bordered tongue is then likened to the dusty skin of a story. This embodied page, through skin, is signaled as dusty by the descriptor *polvorienta*—which, again, I have translated as dusty. But this form of dustiness is one that is actively dusting—decaying, perhaps, and crumbling at the edges. The suffix -*ienta* is similar to constructions of gerunds and present participles. As such, this usage of the adjectival form of *polvo* connotes an active dusting that makes up the pages of the story. Here, Ramos Otero not only figures himself between fiction and history, he aslo figures desire between bodies and the page through an erotic invocation of *polvo*. This usage of *polvorosa* and *polvorienta* here shows how desire, for Ramos Otero, is figured as a dispersal, as the particles between bodies making love, between a self and its projected ideal, between life and death. This liminal figure shows desire as ambivalent and radically opaque. But it is a figuration of desire as always relational.

Contrapuntal Echoes

In "Forked Tongues, Marginal Bodies: Writing as Translation in Khatibi," James McGuire makes a series of claims about bilingual writers that may more directly pertain to Manuel Ramos Otero as a writer between not only two languages, but also between dissonant cultural, geographic, and political mappings. He writes:

> The post-colonial bilingual writer is essentially a translator or, more precisely, a self-translator. The inherent failure of language as it is posited by Benjamin, with the help of de Man, undermines any lingering notions that language can be policed and purified by a history as derivative as language itself. The question really is not "what language to write," but rather "how to write two languages simultaneously, how to write a life lived between languages." (McGuire112)

Manuel Ramos Otero wrote a life between different locations, languages, and semiotic registers—using camp as one mode of translation. The use of camp in Ramos Otero's work brings together a lingua franca of homosexuality, while maintaining his aesthetic production in Spanish. Not entirely unique, Argentine writer Manuel Puig[39] also used camp in order to nuance a queer politics. If we think of camp as a kind of translation, a kind of translation that indulges in its own pious infidelity, we may begin to see how popular culture, film, and language all mingle as different registers in Ramos Otero's

[39] Efraín Barradas writes "A Puig lo conoció personalmente y muy bien Ramos Otero. Del argentino el puertorriqueño admiraba el tratamiento abierto del tema de la homosexualidad y, aunque ambos cultivan la sensibiladad *camp*…ese cultivo era muy diferente en uno y en el otro." ("Ramos Otero knew Puig personally and very well. From the Argentine, the Puerto Rican admired his open treatment of the theme of homosexuality and, although they both cultivated a sensibility of camp…this cultivation was very different in on and the other") (my translation Barradas 35-36)

work to produce a translation of autobiography. And it seems hard to conceive of such a practice outside of a place like New York. [40]

In New York City, Manuel Ramos Otero discovered his relationship to Latin America and Puerto Rico through the distance of diaspora:

> Nueva York me dio la posibilidad de conocer el resto del mundo. Aquí aprendí lo que era Latinoamérica. Esta ciudad también me dio la distancia necesaria para entender a Puerto Rico y crecer políticamente. Aquí desarrollé mi identidad como puertorriqueño. Constatamente repito que para mí, en Puerto Rico siempre fue más fácil ser puertorriqueño que homosexual, y en Nueva York es más fácil ser homosexual que puertorriqueño.
>
> New York gave me the possibility of knowing the rest of the world. Here I learned what Latina America is. Also, this city gave me the necessary distance to understand Puerto Rico and grow politically. Here I developed my identity as a Puerto Rican. Constantly, I repeat that, for me, in Puerto Rico it was always easier to be Puerto Rican, and in New York it is much easier to be a homosexual than Puerto Rican. (Ramos Otero qtd Costa 60)

This kind of queer, contrapuntal claim shows how Manuel Ramos Otero's work reverberates in a productive relay between Manhattan and Puerto Rico as two islands undergoing constant negotiation in his work. Rather than locating his identity formation

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[40] In New York City, Manuel Ramos Otero began to articulate a politics of the marginalized by living amongst the civil rights movement: "En esta ciudad yo había vivido los años de la lucha por los derechos civiles de los homosexuales, las lesbianas, los hispanos y los negros, es decir de los marginados" ("In this city, I had lived during the years of fight for the civil rights of homosexuals, lesbians, Hispanics, Blacks, that's to say, the marginalized.") (Ramos Otero qtd Costa 60).

in a place of origin, displacement itself creates a relay within which he can articulate a sense of belonging. He also employs such a relay to queerly translate his life into autobiography.

Ramos Otero exploits the genre of autobiography to make it unviable as proof of a certain expected role of the queer, Latino diasporic subject. Rather than writing through memoir or through easily mappable and referential markers, he renders autobiography opaquely, through camp. The very textual resistance to reading for transparency in relation to identity makes this campy translation of a life all the more motivating for a theoretical terrain, like queer theory, that builds itself upon anti-foundationalism. And yet something does persist in Ramos Otero's writing— not a self, not a solid political project, and not a successful immigration story, but that of queer relations themselves. They are the last things, the last processes, the last distillations that Ramos Otero leaves us with—the persistence of desire, even in the face of its undoing properties. That which persists beyond self, death, and time in Ramos Otero's work is desire and, concomitantly, the precarious relationality of desire.

CHAPTER 3

Cuban Abyssal Origins:

Figures of the Taíno in Mendieta and Bruguera

Introduction

Pienso en los caballos de los conquistadores cubriendo a las yeguas,

pienso en el desconocido son del areíto

desaparecido por toda la eternidad,

ciertamente debo esforzarme a fin de poner en claro

el primer contacto carnal en este país, y el primer muerto.

I think of the conquistadors' stallions mounting their mares,

I think of the forever lost sound of the areíto,

I need to try to make sense

of the first carnal contact in this country, and the first death.

--Virgilio Piñera[41]

The above epigraph, taken from Virgilio Piñera's 1948 poem *La Isla en Peso*,[42] dangles over this chapter as a sort of literary entry into a thinking that will ultimately

[41] Piñera, Virgilio. *La Isla En Peso/The Whole Island*. Trans. Mark Weiss. Exeter: Shearsman Book Ltd., 2010. Print.

[42] Virgilio Piñera wrote prolifically over the course of the Twentieth Century in Cuba and, for a period of time, in Argentina. As a member of two highly influential, seminal journals, *Origenes* and *Ciclón*, Piñera helped shape the world of Cuban letters between the 40s and late 50s. Piñera was arrested in 1961 for "political and moral crimes"—in other words, for his homosexuality. After his release and up until his death, he remained

hover somewhere between reading and performance, between language and bodies, between the past and the present. Piñera's well known poem gorgeously and carnally explores the many impossibilities of thinking Cuba which brings him to think of the primal carnal scene that inaugurates the origin of the Cuba: the contact of conquistadors and the indigenous peoples of the island. Piñera charges himself with an ethical task that is nonetheless impossible—to make sense of the first carnal contact which is also the first death. Instead of directly depicting the initial scene of conquest, Piñera chooses to metonymically figure horses copulating and the thinking of a sound forever lost of the *areíto* (a dance of Cuba's indigenous people).[43] It is an impossible task, all figured under the ethical imperative of *deber*: to have to or to need to. It is precisely to consider the peso, the weight, the cost, the entirety of the island that brings Piñera to this ethical difficulty—one that brings him to think of lost performance—dance and its sound.

These figures of indigineity, as lost embodiment, haunt Cuban history—conjuring up the undeniably violent foundations of colonialism in general and the bloody origins of Cuba in particular. Unlike some other Caribbean and Latin American countries, Cuba does not have a particularly strong identity rooted in a discursive articulation of indigeneity. Indeed, it seems that the figure of the Taíno would be one difficult to reappropriate into a logic of identity, sameness, or a revolutionary narrative. Perhaps this lack of recuperability is the precise reason why both Ana Mendieta and Tania Bruguera

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a marginal figure suffering the censure of the Cuban Revolution. Nonetheless, he won the Casa de Las Americas prize in 1969 for *Dos viejos pánicos*. Piñera died in 1979 and later received more institutional praise in 2012 when a group of scholars in and out of Cuba declared it "El Año Virgiliano."

[43] This gesture to figure markedly Eurpoean animals copulating in a scening of domineering "mounting" inverts colonial rhetoric surrounding the need to tame Taínos and indigenous peoples of the Americas as animals.

have featured Taíno rituals and figurations in their own work. As performance artists born in Cuba, Mendieta and Bruguera incorporate the figure of the Taíno in order to complicate Cuban notions of history, race, and nation. Working to conjure up questions of origin and historical relation, both artists engage with the Taíno whose catastrophic encounter with colonization poses a particular foundational and historical ethical dilemma for any thinking of Cuba.

Scarcely anything beyond linguistic traces and agricultural legacies remain of the Taíno people in Cuba, as conquest and disease decimated the indigenous peoples of the island by the middle of the 16th century. While some claim Taíno blood in Guantanamo and there are glimpses of something like a cultural revival,[44] Cuba as a nation retains little to no trace of its indigenous roots. To clarify, my purposes here are neither to corroborate nor to launch a polemic against aboriginal extinction. Instead, it seems the fact of the debate itself—the debate of indigenous presence in a place like Cuba—points to the dilemma of the violent origins of the nation that disrupt easy genealogies and reliance upon historical veracity. Regardless of the stance one takes, the overwhelming majority of Taínos were nearly wiped out on the island within less than a century. And, yet, something persists: people who claim the culture, the legends of mythology, archaeological traces, food practices, and Taíno words. Discursively speaking, Cuba does not have a strong nationalism rooted in indigeneity—the revolutionary discourse seems to cathect more strongly onto forms of identification and liberation that produce possible progress narratives. The figure of the Taíno would, for such purposes, be

[44] See José Barreiero's "Taíno Survivals: Cacique Panchito, Caridad de los Indios, Cuba" in *Indigenous Resurgence in the Contemporary Caribbean*.

counter-intuitive. The Taíno, then, is not an invisible figure in the Cuban national imaginary—though it is one enshrouded in opacity.

In order to launch a nuanced, critical aesthetic intervention into Cuba, both Ana Mendieta and Tania Bruguera utilize the opacity surrounding the figure of the Taíno. This chapter attempts to consider the kind of political and ethical artistic engagement that Bruguera and Mendieta make by bringing up the impossibility of either forgetting or correcting grievous historical violence. Instead, their pieces alert us to the ways in which history affectively and relationally persists. In this way, I contend that Bruguera and Mendieta's work intervenes into our notions of history, by tempering our pretension to knowledge of the past while simultaneously creating a relational structure that urges us to be accountable in the face of what we can never fully know. First, I turn to the question of translation in regard to a brief history of the Taínos in Cuba and in the history of the Americas. I then turn to Mendieta's work, reading her alongside Luce Irigaray, in order to see how her works return to a source that gives us a very nuanced notion of origin and genealogy. I then turn to Bruguera's work, showing how she carries on Mendieta's legacy and inflects it with a temporal register that moves us into the realm of affect, instead of knowledge. I find that Mendieta and Bruguera figure the Taíno as a queer, textured response to politics—one that holds us accountable to the violent foundations of history. Both artists engage with the figure of the Taíno opaquely, in order to neither resign the lost civilization to pure absence nor to pure presence. Instead, the opacity at work in their aesthetics creates a space of being in relation to the past without recourse to a fully legible identity politics.

The Opaque Haze of Translation

> *…translation does not find itself in the center of the language forest but on the outside facing the wooded ridge; it calls into it without entering it, aiming at the single spot where the echo is able to give, in its own language, the reverberation of the work in the alien one.* –Benjamin "The Task of the Translator"

The question of the Taíno in Cuban history is one fraught with many original losses, differing testimonies, and various trials of translation. The first person to write an account of the Taínos was Fray Ramon Pané and, indeed, much of the scholarship on Taínos has been derived from his account finished somewhere around 1498. Written in Castilian Spanish by a missionary priest whose first language was Catalan, and translated from the indigenous language he was simultaneously learning, Pané's manuscript was from the start fraught with the many challenges of translation—both linguistic and cultural. The plot of translation thickens once we learn that the original manuscript has never been recovered and only exists as a facsimile copied into Christopher Columbus's son's account of the historical defense of his father and this too no longer exists in the original Spanish but only exists in an Italian translation. The first recorded encounter, which also happens to be the first book written in a European language in the Americas, becomes lost many times over and only survives in the opaque haze of translation.

Ramon Pané's successor, Bartolomé de Las Casas, commented upon Pané's translation challenges and even corrected some in his own writings on the indigenous peoples of the Caribbean. As Las Casas came to be known as an ardent defender of the "Indians," he also came to be known as the very person to advise the Spanish crown to

participate in the African slave trade. Antonio Benítez-Rojo characterizes this deeply ambivalent political stance of Las Casas: "Las Casas had been precisely among those who had advised the crown to introduce black slaves into the New World's first plantations, and was, at the same time, one of the first to lament the consequences of the slave traffic" (85). While the Taíno people met a tragic fate in the conquistadors, we can see how a careful genealogy shows that the story of the Taíno is far from over and is in fact necessarily bound up with a larger history of violence that persists in the Cuban nation.

Both Ana Mendieta and Tania Bruguera work with these various opacities of translation and challenges to *knowing* the Taíno through their own aesthetic translations of historical origins and violence. Indeed, the ephemerality of their performative engagements works with, rather than against, these historical uncertainties, while at the same time maintaining a relation to this constantly receding past. In the following, I hope to show how each artist engages aesthetically with the figure of the Taíno in order to create a relation between the present and the past that does not follow a linear, or progressivist, narrative. Ultimately, both artists incite the Taíno to recreate a feeling of loss and the ethical relation to history that comes along with that absence—elucidating the persistent, contrapuntal relations between now and then.

Returning to the Source: *Viaje a la semilla*

A seldom highlighted fact about Cuban American artist Ana Mendieta is that at the time of her early death, she was working on a book. This book was meant to take the photo etchings from her cave carvings, done in Cuba, in the summer of 1981. She intended to take these photographic glimpses of her textured sculptures and place them alongside mythologies of Taínos (indigenous peoples of Cuba) and descriptions of the first colonial contact in the Americas. Because the sculptures were located at a remote site and because the sculptures themselves would necessarily fade with the humid, ever-changing tropical landscape, Mendieta thought that the experience of seeing the sculptures would be best experienced in the form of a book: "It really makes sense to view these very intimate works in the intimacy provided by the book format" (Mendieta qtd Clearwater 41). And, as we will see, Mendieta's cave carvings are bound up with a literary history that has been lost to the various trials of translation. Most of her knowledge of Taínos came from Ramon Pané's book, *Relacion acerca de las antiguedades de los indios* (*An Account of the Antiquities of the Indians*). Looking into Mendieta's caves, this chapter will bear in mind how Mendieta's performative installation is one haunted by a history of lost literature and lost culture.

Bearing this history in mind, I now turn to Ana Mendieta's cave carvings which mark an aesthetic relation to this lost indigenous past. The *Esculturas Rupestres* (*Rupestrian Sculptures*) were 10 life-sized figures that Mendieta carved into limestone cave walls in Jaruco, Cuba in the summer of 1981.[45] Up until this point, Mendieta's

[45] During the early eighties, Mendieta traveled to Cuba several times as part of a group of Cubans born in Cuba and interested in creating a relation with the island: "Mendieta was first able to return to her homeland in January 1980 as a member of the Círculo de

career had been marked by a prolific number of land art and performance art pieces that dealt with questions of feminism and identity through evanescence. These cave works signaled an evolution in Mendieta's work. They also marked her as the first Cuban American artist granted permission by the Cuban Ministry of Culture to officially create and exhibit art on the island in the short history of Cuban Revolution. In making the carvings on the oolitic walls of the caves, Mendieta cited Taíno goddess effigies—most likely taken from José Juan Arrom's research on Pané's manuscript and Arrom's *Mythology and Arts of the Prehispanic Antilles*[46]. Working across these translated sources, her cave works function as an iterative genealogy of myth—invoking the aura of cave paintings, pre-history, and the very origins of art. Mendieta created the effigies in the very limestone of the cave walls, a supple, soft and ever-changing canvas, carving the *esculturas*[47] in proportions and movements that follow the surface of the rock. In so doing, the *Esculturas Rupestres* foreground the medium –the very ground of Mendieta's work— and continue her signature aesthetic of a materialist symbiosis with earth.

While Mendieta's work is compelling in its own right, most scholars working on her art feel equally compelled to explore her life's story. Born in 1948 in Cuba, she came to the United States at the age of twelve through the fraught Operation Peter Pan. From

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Cultura Cubana (Cuban Cultural Circle). Driven by a sense of emotional longing to reconnect with her family and birthplace, she quickly developed ties within the local art community. Between January 1980 and July 1983 she traveled seven times to the island, sometimes as a tour guide for the Cuban Cultural Circle, sometimes to exhibit and create her own work." (Roulet 22).

[46] Viso 89.

[47] I retain the Spanish word *esculturas* instead of the English word sculptures, because the works are not exactly sculptures. Instead, they are carvings and effigies. Sculpture often signals a free standing work that takes raw material and shapes it into an aestheticized form that, more often than not, sits on a pedestal. These carvings are much more contingent upon the form and movement inherent in the cave walls.

December of 1960 through October of 1962, Operation Peter Pan was a CIA initiative that removed roughly 14,000 Cuban youths from the island and brought them to the United States as unaccompanied minors. Parents volunteered their children for this lonely exodus in fear that the Cuban government would eventually take away their parental rights. As a result of this operation, Ana Mendieta, and her sister Raquel, were taken to a refugee camp, foster homes, and various institutions in Iowa where they both endured prejudice and isolation. This forced exile would be one of many motivations that Mendieta claimed for her artisitic practice which she began in earnest at the University of Iowa. She would later go on to produce work internationally, in Mexico, Cuba, and Italy. Mendieta's biography gained intense public scrutiny due to the suspect circumstances of her early, tragic death at 36— a fall from her 34th floor apartment in Greenwich Village. Her husband, minimalist sculptor Carl Andre, was tried and acquitted for her murder. Understandably, Mendieta remains a figure that is read in relation to her many biographical figurations, some self-identified and other imposed. Depending on the lens, the year, and the vantage point from which one views her, she can translate into many figures: the adolescent exile, the bold feminist artist, the provocative performer insisting upon corporeality, the pan Latin Americanist or the tragic figure of an all too early death. Some of these readings reduce Mendieta's work to the toilings of a traumatized exile who desperately wants to find home, while others follow her tracks, tracing the rich and prolific trails that she left behind.

Following these often bloody tracks brought many feminists of the 1980s and 90s unease as they found fetid bodies, fire, dirt, and far too many allusions to nature in Mendieta's artwork. In the 1980s, theorists like Griselda Pollock and Mary Kelly warned

that such a use of the female body in feminist art (i.e. Carolee Schneeman, Lucy Lippard and Judy Chicago) was narcissistic and ran the risk of essentializing femininity through fetishism. Such critiques of Mendieta's work persist through the 1990s. For example, in 1997 Mira Schor writes:

> Mendieta's Woman, particularly in the later works, is only female, she represents a limited view of the form and experience of femininity out of the limitless possibilities of femaleness. Because dialogue and conflict do not flourish within a significant portion of her work, it does not have the depth of an oeuvre. In Mendieta's work there are many deeply moving and rivetingly memorable images, but, ultimately, the constant repetition of an unquestioned, generic (gyneric) Great Mother is deeply, and now, poignantly problematic. (66)

I want to contest Schor's claim that dialogue and form are somehow lacking in Mendieta's work—to show, instead, that her work on origins is precisely relational. First, however, I will demonstrate how such criticism against Mendieta's essentialism pushed many other feminist critics to say exactly the opposite. For instance, Jane Blocker's 1999 book *Where is Ana Mendieta? Identity, Performativity, and Exile* works to undo some of the accusations that Mendieta's work was too "essentialist" (i.e. that she re-presented woman as primitive, earthly and womb-like). Eschewing presumptions about the work as naively essentialist in regard to gender or wholly traumatized from exile, Blocker emphasizes the theoretical opposite so endemic to the late 90s—that the work is performative and uncanny. With similar concerns but different theoretical goals in mind, Suzanne Best's 2007 article "The Serial Spaces of Ana Mendieta" maintains that

Mendieta's work is essentialist and utopian but reads that essentialism as not necessarily simplistic, but instead renders essentialism with complexity.

While Blocker's and Best's work provided a much needed nuance to the reception of Mendieta, specifically with regard to her figure within debates contemporaneous to the 1990s, I aim to shift the terrain of the inquiry away from questions of essentialism versus anti-essentialism to consider figurations perhaps more specific to Mendieta's work. Following the invocation of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in *Touching Feeling*, I would like to move away from the dualistic, conceptual gridlock of debates of essentialism versus anti-essentialism as the necessary starting point or hermeneutics for any discussion of performativity, gender, the body, or sexuality. Such a guiding dualism often produces an allergy to considerations of the body, of femininity, and of origins. Instead, I would actually like to dwell in Mendieta's explorations of origins in her cave sculptures. Reading her speleological installations alongside Luce Irigaray's work on Plato's cave allegory, I hope to begin to reconsider some of the nuances of Mendieta's work that treat origins as necessarily relational. Secondarily, I hope this gesture puts Irigaray and Mendieta's work on caves in conversation--to hear the echoes that traverse the different mediums, languages, and archives within which they work. Mendieta grapples with a complex understanding of materiality that subtended the metaphorics we ascribe to questions of relation and belonging.

The *Esculturas Rupuestres* figure as a culmination of the earth-body work that encompassed the intensely corporeal performance and installation art of Mendieta's *Body Tracks* and *Silueta* series. Mendieta's art dealt with various incarnations and transmutations of the body. Situating the *Esculturas Rupuestres* among the different

phases of Mendieta's artwork, Olga Viso writes, "Mendieta's series of rock carvings in Jaruco, the *Esculturas Rupestres*, would prove to be among her most significant works of the period. She had brought the Siluetas, a series of ongoing earth-body works devoted to the recuperation of origins and a lost homeland, to its very source" (82). Though Mendieta often spoke of origin and her own exilic status as one torn from her homeland, she did not use the language of recuperation. Instead of looking for a single point of origin, the quest for belonging took on a more cosmic search for Mendieta: "My art is grounded on the primordial accumulations, the unconscious urges that animate the world, not in an attempt to redeem the past, but rather in confrontation with the void, the orphanhood, the unbaptized earth of the beginning, the time that from within the earth looks upon us."[48] Rather than redeeming history, Mendieta looked to confront the abyssal voids—the gaps and fissures and silences—that often make up the foundations of what we consider to be history. If these cave sculptures do signal a confrontation between Mendieta's work and its source, we must push what we mean by such loaded terms as source and origin.

Take, for instance, the carving entitled Guanaroca:

[48] Mendieta qtd Viso 32. Mendieta's interest in origin and prehistory is explicitly linked to Octavio Paz's writing in *The Labyrinth of Solitude.* "It is a form of orphanhood, an obscure awareness that we have been torn from the All, and an ardent search: a flight and a return, an effort to re-establish the bonds that unite us with the universe" (20).

Figure 2: *Guanaroca*

Here Mendieta carves a goddess effigy to the purported first woman of humanity, according to Taíno legend. Mendieta shapes the effigy according to the contours of the cave, giving asymmetry to this goddess that conjures the figures of many other goddesses of fertility recognizable across cultures. The effigy is both specific and translatable, legible even beyond the specific locale of Cuba. The texture and shape of the wall dictates the movement of this static sculpture—it seems to both emerge and be a site of emergence. The focal point of the sculpture is a vaginal opening, which is also surrounded by a labial carving that may also connote the legs. The southern hemisphere of this carving, then, creates a space from which movement springs. It is a first woman, who herself seems to be a matrix, inextricably bound within this cave. Looking to the

overlapping histories of these caves, we will see how the locale is one of many origin stories.

To get beyond the founding of Cuba as a nation, Mendieta investigated the histories and mythologies of the Taíno peoples through readings of José Juan Arrom's work on Pané's manuscript. Already, we see that Mendieta's source is riddled from the start with questions of translation, colonization, and lost originals. Working across these translated sources, the *Esculturas Rupuestres* function as an iterative genealogy of myth—invoking the aura of cave paintings, pre history and the very origins of art. Olga Viso describes the pieces: "The goddesses carved in Rupestrian Sculptures include Guanaroca (The First Woman), Iyaré (The Mother Goddess), Atabey (The Mother of Waters), Guabancex (The Goddess of Wind), Itiba Cahubaba (The Old Mother Blood) and Maroya (The Moon); Guanaroca is the most powerful goddess of all, she is the first woman that populated the Earth" (22).

The caves at Jaruco function as historical reservoirs of the locale. The soft, impressionable limestone rock serves as a canvas that registers, layers and blurs the traces of time passing. Olga Viso writes that "Pre-Hispanic civilizations had inhabited the zone and the park's rocky outcroppings had served as refuge for pirates during the colonial era. At the end of the nineteenth century the location was a hideout for Mambíses" (81). In addition to providing an enclave to indigenous civilizations and independence soldiers, the caves also held a place for more modern dissidents. In "Still Searching for Ana Mendieta," José Quiroga writes "I am sure too that Mendieta learned that some of the Jaruco caves held many recent memories of clandestine homosexual weddings, and that they had been used as places where rockers and pot-smoking disaffected youth would

meet" (193). These caves, then, are suffused with the affective traces of those who have never been fully accounted for or within the Cuban state. This history of alterity troubles any simplistic rendering of Mendieta's notion of origin, exile or return—or, indeed, any simplistic reading of Cuba and its contents.

Mendieta's caves beg for a careful reading not only because of the multi-layered temporality of these particular caves or because of the complex task of translating a lost civilization, but also because her work has a tendency to push figuration to its limits—or as she might say, to its source. If she is going to the source, then she's also digging around in the source getting dirty with the very stuff of what grounds her work—its ability to figure. Her cave could also be read as a metaphor for the very origin of metaphoricity within Plato's allegory of the cave, as I will discuss immediately.

Much as Mendieta unearths the messiness of origin stories, Luce Irigaray's speleological close reading of Plato in *The Speculum of the Other Woman* performs a troubling genealogy of metaphor and figuration. Plato's allegory of the cave describes prisoners facing the back of the cave, looking at shadows on the wall. This story is meant to show that a true philosopher unshackles himself and proceeds out into the light of idealism where he comes to know true form and ideality, not just the secondary world of sensory. According to Irigaray, the amnesia that subtends and makes possible the allegorical function of the cave is its status as a womb, a matrix. She ludicly and mimetically performs a close reading of the cave allegory, tracing the steps and exposing the cracks in Plato's metaphysical primal scene of representation. In so doing, she shows that the very figural ground and matrix of relations is precisely what gets forgotten in

Plato's tidy rendition of metaphoricity which gets all too easily launched as a metaphysics of symmetry. Yet, Irigaray reminds us that such symmetry is not seamless:

> There is an odd hitch in the system, of course. For the holes, cracks, tears—in the *diaphragma* for example—or the faults and failings of the *hysterin* must, in their turn, be re-marked, reinscribed. Particularly in the memory. Which is not to say that they will or can be represented, but that by their very elimination, their very reserve, they will set up the economy of representation…The *negative and negating* constituent of *aletheia* must not be left out of consideration. Thus the outlawed element—called the slave and the repressed in other symbolic systems—rules without appeal or recall the very text that outlaws it. This becomes clear if we question its overdetermination, and unmask the figures, forms, signs, that ensure its present coherence. (253)

Irigaray reminds us that there is an abjected, forgotten flesh upon which systems of metaphoricity, substitution and symmetry are built.

This forgotten materiality that subtends tidy logics of symmetry is sexed. Lynne Huffer explains:

> Irigaray brings attention to the metaphysics of presence that both produces origin as the source of truth and masks the violence of that production. Irigaray names that violence by invoking an always already dead maternal body. If Western metaphysics both produces and masks the constitutive absence at its source, Irigaray argues that this constitutive absence is sexed: Western culture is founded on the murder of the mother and the absence of maternal genealogy at the level of the symbolic. (Huffer *Are the Lips* 4)

I cite Irigaray, and Huffer's work on Irigaray, to show that a thinking of the self and the other can often fall back all too tidily into a logic of sameness. Irigaray's notion of the other's other, here, is helpful. It is that forgotten alterity that both lays the ground for, and interrupts, the tidy logic of Western dualism. Irigaray's reading of origins helps us to understand why the Taíno, as an original and erased figure, would be at the heart of Mendieta's return to the source. This figure, as an alterity that cannot be incorporated into the logic of the self or the nation, is opaque.

Harkening to Irigaray's notion of the other's other, the one who subtends neat symmetries of Other and Same, Mendieta sculpts 10 life-sized deities onto the Jaruco caves that have housed the very outlaws, the loose ends, of Cuban history. She creates a constellation of prehistoric myths, social dissidents and her own "return." While still decipherable, these figures must have played with visibility, tempting passers to touch upon Cuba's indigenous roots and pause over whether or not they were 'original' carvings. But like most of Mendieta's work, the carvings were not meant to last—the *Esculturas Rupestres* works have faded with time. The opacity that often envelopes prehistory fades back into opacity in these humid limestone caves.

Rather than figuring these caves as a unilateral source, Mendieta turns to these caves, and moreover turns to prehistory, as a matrix of materiality and relationality. Relating how prehistory cannot be relegated to a stable past, Judith Butler writes:

> …it is this prehistory which has never stopped happening and, as such, is not a prehistory in any chronological sense. It is not done with, over, relegated to a past, which then becomes part of a causal or narrative reconstruction of the self.

> On the contrary, it is that prehistory which interrupts the story I have to give of myself, which makes every account of myself partial and failed. (*GA* 37)

Indeed, the *Esculturas Rupuestres* play in the dirt of origins only to willfully recede back into the place of memory. Succumbing to the elements and the mutable limestone, they gesture toward an ephemeral genealogy.

Mendieta's caves are both figurative caves and actual caves—colliding figuration with referentiality to the point that the caves can be neither solely figurative nor solely referential, but overwhelmingly both. The figuration of these caves *cave in.* They can neither be resigned to having either simple referential relevance nor solely metaphorical meaning. As such, they function as a catachresis which conventionally defined as a figure of strain, misuse, or abuse of words and metaphors. These catachrestic carvings are ones of lost objects. Barbara Johnson writes that "every lost object is always, in a sense, a catachresis, a figurative substitute for nothing that could ever be literal" (Johnson *WD* 53). Calling attention to the work of catachresis in Irigaray's writing of the lips, Lynne Huffer defines catachresis as "The extension of metaphorical meaning beyond the figural… a figure that lacks original or proper meaning" (157). Such a move to push figuration to its limits, through catachresis, is precisely what Irigaray calls for in the *Speculum of the Other Woman* to "unmask[s] the figures, forms and signs, that ensure present coherence."

Both Mendieta and Irigaray call for a work of genealogical translation that refuses to read origin myths as a one to one translation—both unearth caves of origin in philosophy and national discourse. Moreover, both feminist thinkers have been the subject of many translations, have been called essentialist, and have found odd fits in the

various discourses of Anglo-American feminism. Against this charge of essentialism, Naomi Schor writes that "it is on the rock of materialism and not of essentialism that Irigaray seeks to establish the truth of her claim" (55). I gesture toward Irigaray as a felicitous interlocutor to Mendieta's work in order to re-route the feminist reception of her away from debates that reigned over the 90s and early oughts about essentialism, to a more materialist critique of origin and historical truth.

Like Irigaray, Mendieta focuses more on the overdetermination of origin stories, rather than their deterministic characteristics. These caves, as installation art pieces that conjure up myriad artistic, metaphorical, historical, and political scenarios, function as a catachresis that shows how matter at once makes meaning and lets it fade away. The agency ascribed to meaning making in these caves does not, and cannot, be solely given over to Mendieta's hand. The work here is collaborative—given over to the mutable limestone and the histories that have sedimented in this inaccessible locale.

Feminist theorist Vicki Kirby gives us a provocative set of questions to reconsider this question of the sedimented natural alignments of nature with the atemporal, the feminine, and the indigenous. She asks:

> What happens if Nature is neither lacking nor primordial, but rather a plenitude of possibilities, a cacophony of convers(at)ion? Indeed, what if it is the same force field of articulation, reinvention, and frission that we are used to calling—"Culture"? If we embrace the provocations in this suggestion then the conventional landscape of political intervention for those whose identities are denigrated because more primitive (because closer to Nature) shifts considerably. Should feminism and race politics reject the conflation of "woman" or "the other"

> with "Nature," or instead, take it as an opportunity to consider the question of origins and identity once again? (Kirby 88)

Rather than seeking recourse to a prelapsarian notion of nature or indigeneity, Mendieta chooses caves as a site to carefully carve out a past that is not necessarily her own. She moves with the limestone, not against it, to engage in a dialogue with matter that *matters*. The limestone make-up of the caves is significant in that the material canvas acts on Mendieta's carvings, morphing them and erasing them, rather than preserving them. Most of the grains that comprise limestone are skeletal fragments of marine organisms like coral. Limestone holds the traces of the sea as a historical place and as a relational space for the Caribbean, chiming in with Derek Walcott's provocation that the "Sea is History" and Edward Braithwaite's notion that "The unity is sub-marine."

Mendieta gives us a catachresis of her source—these caves and their effigies figure the source and origin of her work as a receding origin, a relational source. For her, the source reveals the universe as springing forth from a matrix, a mater, which we can never fully recover. Rather than a simplistic return, her work suspends a place of searching and relation that is markedly feminine and unrelentingly corporeal:

> I have been carrying on a dialogue between the landscape and the female body (based on my own silhouette). I believe this to be a direct result of my having been torn away from my homeland during my adolescence. I am overwhelmed by the feeling of having been cast from the womb (nature). My art is the way I reestablish the bonds that tie me to the universe. (Mendieta qtd Viso 47)

Belonging, for Mendieta, cannot be a simple return home, but it is an ongoing encounter with relationality. The ingenuity of Mendieta's artistic signature comes forth through her

ability to take a seemingly simple material or minimal gesture and explode it with both referentiality and non-referentiality at once. Her works are celestially orchestrated collisions of reference and metaphoricity such that neither aspect functions outside of a consistent, almost dizzying, relay. Mendieta's cave works invite us to keep searching, to stay in relation, to find traces of the past that have slipped into silence, to listen to echoes, and to run our fingers along the crumbling walls that invite us to perceive texture and not just visibility. We haven't found Mendieta, not in our rehashed debates over essentialism. Perhaps, instead of reducing Mendieta's work to the debate du jour or to a simplistic return story of a lost exile, we might do well to question our frames, and to question whether or not they are as transparently clear as we thought. We might, instead, look to Mendieta's work and how she pushed against the frame, the lens, and the metaphor to distort the very thing we thought we might see.

Instead of seeing the past, we feel it. Mendieta's aesthetic materialism placed its faith not in the evidentiary realm of what remains, but instead placed stock in what may be gleaned from witnessing something fade, die, and disappear. How then are we to make claims of essentialism in the face of an artist whose aesthetics, ethics and politics asked us to watch ephemerality, to feel the fleeting, to grasp at the ineffable. Placing us squarely at the chiasmus of the universe and the moment, her work operates at the hinge of the almost impossible. What we see are small miracles of materiality, momentary monuments to that which never lasts.

Feeling the Past

Ana Mendieta's return to the island not only left behind traces of these Taíno silhouettes, but also sparked a fervent engagement with performance art on the island. Some of Tania Bruguera's earliest work paid homage to the legacy of Mendieta in Cuba by recreating some of her silueta series. While many, like Gerardo Mosquera and Tania Bruguera herself, have noted the important inflection of Mendieta upon Bruguera's work[49], my aim here is to consider the ways in which Bruguera's work echoes some of Mendieta's work on the Taíno. Subtending my investigation is the question of why two feminist Cuban artists, with very different relations to Cuba itself, both choose to use this figure in their artwork. Furthermore, I want to see how such a figure invokes an ethical engagement with the past that exceeds a progressivist ideal of history. In order to do so, I

[49] See Gerardo Mosquera's "Re-animating Ana Mendieta" published on taniabruguera.com. There he writes: "Despite the mythical aura that surrounds her, Mendieta is not well known among younger Cubans. This is due to the silence of the media and the official culture, a disinterest that has allowed the destruction of part of her Cave Sculptures in Las Escaleras at Jaruco and the abandonment of the other works. Today it is difficult to locate this site, when in fact it should be declared a national monument because of its historical, artistic and cultural importance.
But Bruguera has created a more fitting homage. She has managed to publicize her work, her life and the metaphor of union among Cubans that Mendieta represents. Her procedure was to duplicate this metaphor: Bruguera, just like Pierre Menard, has repeated some of Mendieta's works and has carried out others that Mendieta only sketched. As if taking possession of Mendieta, she reenacted her performances, the same thing that, coincidentally, Nancy Spero did. It could be said that Bruguera's work closes the circle of Mendieta's work by solving the obsession that fueled it. Prior to her death Mendieta expressed tragically her inability to solve her desire to return in both a symbolic and physical way. Her death was her last work, as it left the silhouette of her body on a New York City sidewalk. Tragic heroes become gods and the return to Earth to take possession of their followers, as in the Afrocuban religions that were a main inspiration for Mendieta's work. Her conflict was solved through a vicarious return that manifests a presence on this side, both imaginary and living: Tania Bruguera displaced the silhouette of death and became her final silhouette, walking the streets of Old Havana. This transubstantiation is also a utopic image of the possible union of all Cubans on the island and beyond."

turn to Bruguera's piece *El Peso de la Culpa*—which, with Mendieta, insists on thinking relationally about a lost indigenous past.

Working deftly with context instead of transparent representation, Bruguera's work exacerbates emotional traffic with her audience, narrowing the distance between the performance or installation and the witness through the invocation of intense, and often negative, affects. Of her work, she writes "I work with fear, vulnerability, empowerment, self-determination and freedom as well as submission and obedience as *social survival strategies*" ("Tania Bruguera"). *El Peso de la Culpa* is an affectively laden performance haunted by the specter of social survival, urging us to take historical violence into account and showing us that survival is one mode of mitigated agency. Translated as "The Burden of Guilt," *El Peso de la Culpa* first took place in 1997 at the 6th Havana Biennial in the artists own home. Biennial visitors, neighbors, and clients from the bar across the street enter Bruguera's home as she kneels before a very large Cuban flag, woven out of human hair. While kneeling before the flag, Bruguera wears a split lamb carcass that hangs from her neck and covers her torso, she mixes together Cuban soil and water to form mud and then eats it. She repeats this ritual by making pellets with the mud and eating them over the course of forty-five minutes. The overwhelming corporeality of this performance—the flag woven from hair and the physical weight of the butchered lamb that pulls this body to the ground where it literally eats dirt—must have elicited visceral reactions, performatively generating a matrix of relations between bodies that implicate one another through their vulnerability and affective responses. The meaning of the performance becomes heightened when Bruguera explains to the audience

that the ritual is an allusion to a legendary suicide ritual that Taínos performed when faced with the colonizing forces of Spanish conquistadors.

According to documentation of the Havana Biennial performance, Bruguera only explained the referential significance of the ritual after the performance. This scenario conjures the immediacy of a *lost presence* and a *lost present*, forcing the audience into a position of affectively receiving an event as it occurs, making feeling and relation precede knowledge. As Lauren Berlant reminds us, "the present is perceived, first, affectively" (*CO* 4). This affective set of relations places the audience in a paradoxical situation—in a place of witness, but not a place of knowledge.

Important critics like Gerardo Mosquera and José Esteban Muñoz have eloquently and forcefully articulated the importance of this particular performance.[50] Mosquera has situated the piece historically, noting how the body relates to a larger sociality in Cuba. Muñoz has given a compelling reading of the piece in relation to guilt as a particularly Cuban affect. In addition to this vibrant conversation, I want to reconsider Bruguera's performance to emphasize questions of opacity, ethics, and relationality intrinsic to the work itself. As such, I consider the very nuanced kind of political and ethical intervention that Bruguera makes by bringing up the impossibility of either forgetting or correcting grievous historical violence. Instead, her piece challenges us to consider that history weighs heavily on questions of agency and intervention—alerting us to the ways in which history affectively and relationally persists even though it is necessarily enshrouded in opacity. In this way, I contend that Bruguera's performance intervenes

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[50] See Gerardo Mosquera's "Cuba in Tania Bruguera's work: The Body is the Social Body" published in *On the Political* and José Esteban Muñoz's "Performing Greater Cuba: Tania Bruguera and The Burden of Guilt*"* published in *Holy Terrors: Latin American Women in Performance.*

into our notions of agency by tempering our pretension to knowledge of the past while simultaneously creating a relational structure that urges us to be accountable in the face of what we can never fully know.

The very title of the performance—*El Peso de la Culpa*—provides an affective and corporeal lens through which one can read the citations and actions of this provocative piece. I would like to pause over the title and its language, noting that the English translation of the title, "The Burden of Guilt," loses some multivalent meaning. *Peso*, translated as burden, also comes from the verb *pesar*, which means to weigh. This burden, then, has a weight—one that is vividly and corporeally registered by the performance itself. Perhaps more obviously, the word *peso* is also the measurement of currency; hence this weighing burden also carries a meaning of price and economy. *Culpa*, translated correctly as guilt, can also mean fault or blame or culpability—registering both the notion of blame and feeling of guilt within the same word. Articulating the material aspect of affect, Muñoz writes that "Bruguera's performance is a form of materialist critique that asks us to feel the weight of guilt and understand it as something incorporated into the Cuban body and the nation's body" (407).

First, I would like to explore the role of guilt in relation to Melanie Klein's thinking of guilt and Judith Butler's work on the ethical role of Kleinian guilt in relation to not knowing to emphasize that affect occupies a space that precedes and is quite different than the space of knowledge. We feel the weight of things without fully knowing what is happening or has happened. As such, this section concentrates on the weight, burden and ethical charge that the performance urges. Turning from affect to

consider how this performance confronts us with historical opacity, I turn to a discussion of opacity via two thinkers, Édouard Glissant and Judith Butler, who consider the realm of not knowing as precisely the space of relation, and hence, ethics. Ultimately, Bruguera's performance works with affect and historical opacity in order to illuminate the burden of historical violence, while also holding us accountable for inheriting such foundational violence, thus placing us in a mitigated realm of agency—what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick would call the "middle ranges of agency."[51] For Sedgwick, a turn to agency puts us in a different realm of agency—one that can avoid an all or nothing dualism of agency.[52] Affect, with its emphasis on contingency and phenomenology, sustains itself as an experientially grounded mode of agency that bridges the world of politics and aesthetics, theory and the everyday.

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[51] In *Touching Feeling*, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick notes that we must contend with "what is" without reifying the status quo: "Another problem with reifying the status quo is what it does to the middle ranges of agency. One's relation to *what is* risks becoming reactive and bifurcated, that of a consumer: one's choices narrow to accepting or refusing (buying, not buying) this or that manifestation of it, dramatizing only the extremes of compulsion and voluntarity. Yet it is only the middle ranges of agency that offer space for effectual creativity and change" (13).

[52] In "Some Avenues for Feeling," Adam Frank comments "The affects are where Sedgwick would locate "middle ranges of agency" (13), and a chapter on paranoid and reparative reading practices attempts to make space for such middle ranges, especially for queer critical practices that have been exemplarily motivated by what she calls (after Melanie Klein) the paranoid position. Sedgwick's analysis of the nature of such paranoid styles of affective and cognitive critical behavior offers Klein's reparative position as an alternative gestalt, a reparative impulse continuous with an interest in shame.

Affective Relations

Explaining the powerful role of emotions in politics and art, Tania Bruguera articulates her artwork as "feeling pieces" and not just "looking pieces." Such a crucial distinction shows how the role of affect, or emotion, in her work signals a necessarily more fluid, experiential, and relational component of her work:

> Feeling pieces, not only looking pieces. I want people to move through a work emotionally. I work with emotions and memory, and the idea of documenting not in a historical way but through emotions. I want my work to be transformed and remembered by the audience as an experienced emotion. I want the audience to access the piece as an experience, sometimes a physical experience, and to carry the "documentation" of it with them as their own lived memory. I would like my work not to be seen but to be remembered. (Bruguera "Being Cuban")

The force of her aesthetic interventions becomes the emotional residue, the affective trace, that lives on in memory. As such, her performative and installation pieces traffic in emotions as a privileged site for historicity—feelings, emotions and affects that the audience experience become the register for an event to endure. In this section, I want to tease out how such an affective relation to history works in *El Peso de la Culpa* and articulate that this way of thinking affect has a valuable articulation of ethics and historicity.

The title, *El Peso de la Culpa*, brings to the fore the multi-dimensional aspects of guilt as the emotional register of the performance. Bruguera's piece allows us to take into account a nuanced perspective on guilt—one that attends to guilt's historical and ethical

function. In order to read through the implications of this sign of guilt that hangs over Bruguera's performance, I will now turn to Melanie Klein's theory of guilt for its articulation of relationality and accountability. I then turn to Judith Butler's work on Melanie Klein to show how such an articulation brings us to a crucial ethical register—one very much at work in Bruguera's performance. Recent thinking through affect has been profoundly motivated and intimately bound up with the later work of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and the current work of Adam Frank. I take their cue to revisit the work of Melanie Klein—a psychoanalytic thinker whose work often comments upon the dynamic role of guilt in quotidian relations.

Working through the constitutive and primal aggression of infants, Klein developed a notion of object relations that relies heavily on the work of guilt. Frank describes this vicissitude of guilt as "a feeling often following on anger and violence that accompanies an intention to atone or repair that which has been damaged" (12). In Klein's articulation of the depressive position, guilt follows paranoid anger or violence and leads the subject to seek reparation. In this position, the infant has finally been able to accept that the loved good breast and the hated bad breast are part of the same, whole object: the mother. This leads the infant to worry over the sadistic phantasies it has had in regard to the bad breast that, it has come to understand, belongs to the loved object. Precisely because these phantasies have taken place within the psyche and may not have been actualized in the empirical realm, the infant begins to feel guilt that then leads it to make reparative gestures, both empirically and phantastically.

Judith Butler dwells upon the uncertainty as to whether or not the subject has committed violence as a particularly intriguing motivation for guilt. Finding promise in

Kleinian notions of relationality and sociality, Butler focuses her reading on Klein's notion of guilt as something beyond a mere symptom of repression or internalized prohibition. Butler emphasizes Klein's contributions to thinking constitutive aggression and the concomitant self-awareness of this aggression: how the subject comes to recognize and have anxiety around this potential destructiveness. In the paranoid position, the subject acts wantonly and sadistically, but through the depressive position it comes to doubt its ability to *know* if it has or has not done damage. This doubt that comes along with the oscillations between love and hate produces a guilt within the subject in regard to the object's well-being: "Doubt then marks the vacillation between love and hate; it is the *epistemic effect of ambivalence* and of the desire to annihilate that which one at once seeks to protect from any annihilation" (183). Butler locates this ambivalence in melancholia and says that it persists as "a structuring modality of all relations"(184). Particular to the depressive position, this ambivalent and melancholic relationality foregrounds epistemic doubt, the possibility of destructiveness, and the dynamism between external and internal objects. And, indeed, much of this relationality in a Kleinian model relies upon the work of guilt. Guilt is produced through an internal working that hopes to save objects from the subject's inherent and always potential destructiveness. Because this work takes place in a psyche that makes little distinction between empirical and phantastical events, these objects may no longer be living. Butler explains "Klein engages the melancholic position to show how precisely what is lost, absent or dead nevertheless becomes an object to conjure and sustain…This fidelity to death must nevertheless be sustained, and sustained by an energy that is itself a threat to

that enterprise's success" (187). Such an account of guilt and relationality articulates a complex matrix that extends beyond the empirical world of the living.

In *El Peso de la Culpa*, *culpa*, or guilt, seems to be operative in a manner most akin to a Kleinian articulation. It facilitates a recognition and a bearing witness to the violence of colonization and genocide. And yet this citation of a suicide ritual remains opaque; context and allusions are deferred during the performance itself, as Bruguera does not explain the reference until the performance is over. Instead, the only lens through which one can read this gesture is through that of a guilt that is also a burden, a weight, and a price. Eschewing a representational ethos, Bruguera's artwork creates experiential events that bear a relation to a lost past and a lost people.[53] Carefully constructing and performatively articulating a specific form of guilt, Bruguera creates a space of witnessing damage that we cannot know.

This unknowing, this doubt, is particular to a Kleinian notion of guilt. As Butler urges us to consider, not knowing may in fact *be* the moment of ethics. When one knows, when history is fully legible, when a field of morality is discernible, guilt is far easier to avoid. But guilt makes its appearance when one does not know the enormity and entirety of the damage that has been done. And indeed, the question of knowing is particular to Taínos as what we "know" about the Taínos mostly comes through accounts from colonial missionary priests: namely Ramon Pané and Bartolomé de Las Casas. On a more phenomenological register, one cannot fully know the affective field within which Taínos felt compelled to perform this ritualistic suicide. Urging us to consider what a

[53] In an interview with Roselee Goldberg, Bruguera explains her resistance to producing art as mere representation: "I want to work with reality. Not the representation of reality. I don't want my work to represent something. I want people not to look at it but to be in it, sometimes even without knowing it is art" (13).

subject can ever know of an object, this relational question of guilt moves from simply a question of subjection to the state to also consider the guilt of subjectivation which, in Bruguera's articulation, may be a very different vicissitude of guilt explicitly tied to survival.

The question of survival is deeply ambivalent in Bruguera's *El Peso de la Culpa*. Eating usually takes the form of sustenance necessary to survive, but Bruguera eats in order to risk her own survival and allude to a historical lack of survival. Taking any object into one's body has much importance in Klein's theory of the psyche. On the symbolic import of eating, Klein writes "The very word 'gnawing conscience' testifies to the relentless 'persecution' by conscience and to the fact that it is originally conceived of as devouring its victim" (Klein 268). We may then think of the eating of mud as a way of libidinally identifying with the Taínos and, at the same time, a performance of the gnawing acknowledgment of an inheritance of colonization. This paradoxical performance both bears witness to historical loss and also admits complicity with the violent legacy of colonization, ingesting the mud as both a mode of introjection and an admission of this gnawing conscience. If suicide is the only recourse when relationality no longer seems possible, then this homage works as one last relation toward that object. Ultimately, the work of reparation in *El Peso de la Culpa* may be less of a total failure and more of a paradoxical gesture—showing that the work of the performance is less to restore or to resolve and more to sustain a relation to the dead. As such, the performance does not make a programmatic political move, but instead challenges us to be accountable in the face of that which should not be forgotten.

Another figure that looms ambivalently in Bruguera's performance is the hair woven into the large Cuban flag. Over the two-year life span of this performance, the flag, which came from an earlier piece called *Statistics*, was often placed as the backdrop—woven with dead, partial objects. The hair, taken from Cubans and woven together to create this flag, was dead even when attached to living Cubans. As such, Bruguera's difficult performance is further implicated as a relation to the dead. The national symbol of Cuba is woven out of this strangely liminal object, situated somewhere between the living and the dead or the dead objects that are attached to the living. Hair, in this register, operates as that which extends out from our bodies, attaching the dead to our corpus. The weight of the dead, of this hair, is hyperbolized in Bruguera's performance, pulling her down to the earth and forcing her to confront the very foundation of the nation. This position, facing down, corporeally expresses the depressive position. Despite its morose name, the depressive position still holds hope, futurity and love. It is a position that can tolerate and metabolize loss through guilt, moving the subject toward reparative acts, from a paranoid hate to an integrated love. Perhaps most importantly, the move to reparation necessitates an acknowledgement and responsibility for one's own potential destructiveness. In Bruguera's performance of the depressive position, the performing subject's potential destructiveness gets woven into a relationality that extends beyond one subject to the audience, the nation and the historical others. The violent foundation of the subject, of the nation-state, comes to the fore, indeed becomes both flagged and incorporated into the individual in this performance. And the biopolitical flag coupled with the citation of the suicide ritual reminds us that a nation is not only comprised of the living.

This articulation of guilt, as a facet of guilt that cannot be explained away through a model of repression or liberation, seems to be a particularly motivating affective relation to history and ethics. What might be the critical work of guilt? What might we learn if we are attuned to a frequency of guilt that isn't as simple as subjection to the state or some sort of internalized prohibition? Bruguera's work dwells within this form of guilt—one that emphasizes relationality and opacity instead of prohibition or repression. Works like Bruguera's urge us to consider a way of relating to history that is at once critical and reparative—pointing toward the state, critiquing nationalism, but also taking responsibility for not knowing what damage has been done and what violence has been inherited. This articulation of guilt is not a simple articulation of subjection to something—but, rather, a complex and dynamic notion of relationality.

Recreating a scene of suicide, Bruguera phantasmatically enmeshes us within a complex field of relations between the living and the dead without fully knowing the conditions of this relational structure or the historical context within which bodies are implicated. Following Klein's work, we can see that this specific form of guilt allows one to decipher objects in their complexity and compels the subject to make reparations. As such, guilt figures as an imperative in Kleinian theory for sustained sociality and mutuality. Bruguera's performance does not make this thinking of relations or guilt any easier—the historical and social dynamics of her performance are quite complex, both temporally and intersubjectively.

Opaque and Relational Historicity

Moving from an explicitly affective consideration of Bruguera's *El Peso de la Culpa,* I now turn to a more thorough examination of the historical context and ethical dimensions of the performance. This section explores the implications of the many contexts of the piece: the historical context of the Taínos, the context contemporaneous to Cuba in 1997, and Bruguera's own anecdotal history of the performance. These differing origins highlight the opacity and relationality of historical violence, weaving together a series of events that urge us to remember and experience the foundations of the Cuban nation. I then consider the ethical stakes of this performance by turning to work on opacity and relationality by Judith Butler and Édouard Glissant.

Historical and geographical context weighs upon this performance and its relation to those who still grapple with the question of survival. Though the piece has been performed internationally, the first performance occurred, as noted above, during a Havana Biennial in Bruguera's own home in 1997. At this moment in Cuban history, Cubans would have already endured the harshest years the Special Period, with its extreme famine and economic crisis. The question of survival is brought to the fore when many Cubans had to endure food rations that, at their lowest, were about one fifth of the UN minimum requirements for daily intake. The performance conjures a hostile environment, early colonization, and makes a relation—albeit a precarious one—to the situation in Cuba by asking how the nation founds and sustains itself. At what cost? At the price of whose bodies? In this context, Bruguera's performance is doubly risky— she risks her body by eating dirt and performs an enormous expenditure by wearing this lamb, this much sought after meat and nourishment.

On a more personal level, Tania Bruguera has commented on the social context of the piece and related the following in an interview:

> Actually, now that you ask, I think fear has been present in my life, but in very subtle ways. It was never extreme fear but rather a fear that comes from realizing that what you do will have consequences in other peoples' lives, consequences you cannot control. That happened when I made a newspaper, "Memory of the Post-War," 1993 / 1994, which was an art piece that looks like an "art newspaper" but edited like an ordinary newspaper. I invited artists to write typical sections on sports or agriculture, as a metaphor of the political and artistic situation in Cuba at the time. I was called to the Arts Council and was told to destroy the newspaper; one friend who helped me, with this piece was detained and the person who printed it was expelled from his job. It was very disturbing, traumatizing. I stopped making work for quite a long time after that. This incident was the origin of the "lamb piece" series ["The Burden of Guilt," 1997 - 1999] when I wore a lamb's carcass around my neck and ate dirt. I felt I had compromised and at the same time I was worried about how one continues to make work under such circumstances. Submission as a way of surviving. (Bruguera "Being Cuban")

Here we can begin to unpack the multi-layered relational historicity of the performance that creates matrices of death and survival, scarcity and expenditure, intervention and submission. The question of what harm has been done bleeds into the ambivalence of what can be done. While this performance does not give us a heroic promise of agency, it does remind us that the very acts of memory, submission, and survival carry out a way

of staying in relation, of remaining accountable to the past, and of finding a way to persist in the face of overwhelming injustice.

Persisting relationally can be one of the middle ranges of agency and one way of describing the intervention of survival. Defending post-structuralist accounts of agency and subjectivity, Judith Butler's work has shown that precisely because we rely upon one another, we are also accountable to one another. In *Giving an Account of Oneself*, Butler finds opacity and relationality to be the very grounds of thinking ethicality. She counters the pervasive claim that a post-structural account of a nonsovereign subject with mitigated agency translates as a lack of accountability and responsibility. Following the inability to fully know oneself, Butler postulates that the very incompleteness of one's own account of oneself and the relational structure of that account through address conjures up an ethics within which the subject's primal opacity and relationality figure necessarily. She writes:

> Indeed, if it is precisely by virtue of one's relations to others that one is opaque to oneself, and if those relations to others are the venue for one's ethical responsibility, then it may well follow that it is precisely by virtue of the subject's opacity to itself that it incurs and sustains some of its most important ethical bonds. (Butler 20)

Rather than a firm epistemological ground, it is a limit of knowing which places one in the realm of ethics. Such an ethics hinges upon the unknowingness that subtends relationality, encounter and reading.

In a slightly different and more historical gesture, Édouard Glissant postulates that the past, particularly the past of the Antilles, is one that must account for a radical abyss.

His thought of such an abyss incessantly reverberates between abstract thought and material events—resulting in a thinking praxis that refuses to reduce the material to the Transparent and the abstract to the non-material. In the opening pages of his book, *Poetics of Relation*, Glissant writes the Middle Passage as an abyss that necessarily informs any thinking of relationality, politics, and ethics in regard to Caribbean history. Such an abyssal history does not incite Glissant to the language of rights, except to say "We clamor for the right to opacity for everyone!" (189). Following such a motive, we may consider the abyssal legacy of the Taíno in the very privileged terms of Glissant and Butler: opacity and relationality.

Coming back to the performance itself, one that leads us down unforeseen paths and toward constantly receding origins, I want to emphasize how the opacity that Bruguera figures in her performance is at once abstract and historical, much like the work of Glissant. She does have a historical allusion, yet she only reveals it after the performance. This insistence upon an affectively laden opacity conjures up a set of relations precisely through the shared unknown that permeates the space of performance. This opaque relationality, or relational opacity, is precisely where her performance extends an ethical responsibility that goes beyond her own precariously poised body.

In this performance, Bruguera eats the ground of the nation and conjures up a thinking of incorporation—bearing all the weight of psychoanalytic thought from Freud to Klein to Laplanche—and brings us (like Glissant) reverberating between the figural and the literal. Bruguera eats dirt, eats land, the very land over which the blood of Taínos hav been spilt. She incorporates that which no longer survives, that which no longer persists by the very same act that she now performs to a dangerous degree. Though one

might be tempted to read performance as an apology for nationalism, it also seems quite significant that this historical genealogy does not rely on veracity and configures historical citation differently from a typical revolutionary genealogy that aligns itself with all of the former oppressed that sought liberation. Instead, this citation is non-recuperable and figures a refusal of engagement and of relations that cannot be read in the context of a struggle for independence.

Beyond these heavily weighted risks, Bruguera risks knowledge in the face of historical brutality. Butler writes "Perhaps, most importantly, we must recognize that ethics requires us to risk ourselves precisely at the moments of unknowingness" (136). Such a risk, we might contend, is much of the historical work that performance and performativity can do. We may do well to consider the dances with failure, failure to last and failure to be read, as very much the domain and legacy of performativity which takes us away from registers of truth to think of felicitous and infelicitous acts instead. Consider the performative charge of an infelicitous act, or perhaps, an act that willingly indulges the possibility of felicity while also engaging the very fertile possibilities of infelicity or failure. My claim is that Bruguera's performance does just that—it wrenches us from the world of historical knowledge and epistemological veracity and encloses us in a web of relations charged with the feeling of an endangered body on display. Not knowing what to do, not knowing what truth lies in the performance, other modes of experience get heightened through this act of endurance: opacity and relationality that we feel through intense affect.

Bruguera risks her body and archives absence to do the impossible task of thinking an originary murder, death, and genocide as something other than simple lack,

but something that persists. Through the opposing forces of the overwhelming corporeality of the performance and the ephemeral quality of any performance, the form of Bruguera's *El Peso de la Culpa* archives absence by conjuring a relation of the living to the dead by bringing up the very moment when the dead felt that being amongst the living was no longer an option worth pursuing. Her performance steeps us in more questions than answers, making us experience opacity and its relational charge. Echoing both Piñera and Bruguera, Éduoard Glissant reminds us "There is opacity now at the bottom of the mirror, a whole alluvium deposited by populations, silt that is fertile but, in actual fact, indistinct and unexplored even today, denied or insulted more often than not, and with an insistent presence that we are incapable of not experiencing" (*CD* 111).

Textural Relations

While Ana Mendieta focuses her citational practices of the Taíno to rework our notions of origins, Tania Bruguera does so to consider our relation to foundational violences and to the ethical imperative of thinking such foundations. Instead of aggrandizing the figure or trying to fill in the gaps of history, both artists incite the Taíno to recreate fetid feelings of loss and corporeal relations to history that come along with that absence. As such they incite the desire for a consideration of origin stories, but also refuse to assign stable truth values to such narratives. For them, the Taíno reminds us that the body of Cuba is imbued with violences we can never fully understand or recuperate—thwarting any attempt for conventional or progressivist politics. This, for me, is the queer relation saturated with affect and texture, in the place of historical veracity. Queer theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick turned to texture in her later work as a

particularly promising alternative to the strong epistemological urges of 1990s critical work. Texture, and its implication between touch and vision, works in a phenomenological register which blurs the boundaries between subject and object, active and passive. Mendieta and Bruguera both work through texture—of dirt, bodies, and location—to enfold the past within the present through a register of feeling, rather than knowledge. We are urged to feel, to touch, to be in relation, to recognize the ways in which bodies are bound to one another across time and space. Both Mendieta and Bruguera create fetid and material explorations of the ways in which the past continues to impress upon us—implicating relations between bodies (both past and present) through a desirous drive to touching and feeling.

CONCLUSION

Queer and Latina/o, Here and Now

Opacity, as I have traced it in this dissertation, has been proffered as many things: queer, Latina/o, translation, camp, performance, and ethical relations. It is, to be sure, an opaque term. For me, though, as for Glissant, it is inextricably tied up with the aesthetic. An aesthetic dimension is often precisely what is withheld from minoritarian writers and artists, especially when we read for transparent signification of culture, experience, and history. Instead of such expectations, I have looked to the moments where a text moves to the side of an interpellative gaze with a wink or with something dirty. Opacity, as a visual term, holds visuality in a complex relation to itself. It is, at once, a visual register, and that which resists visualization. As I move from registers of knowledge to registers of affect and texture, it seems befitting to reconsider Beltrán's statement that "characterizing a subject as either 'Hispanic' or 'Latino' is an exercise in opacity." This phrase, of course, becomes compounded when thinking queerness and latindidad together, because often the matter of feeling comes to the fore.

A feeling, not unfamiliar, for certain Latina/os in the United States, particularly ones who were not raised in a monocultural home or who do not follow a typical migrant narrative. is that one isn't Latina/o enough. They don't, to quote Fornés again, know enough—enough of the language, enough of the histories, enough of what it feels like to belong. Enough, *basta ya*. To feel opaquely Latina/o may not always feel good and may not always yield legibly Latina/o artwork. Instead, feeling Latina/o may feel queer—at once familiar and yet not enough. Let me turn, in closing, to another muse of unlikely *latindidad*.

The work of Andre Keichian has been an increasingly resonant force of thinking through opacity in relation to queer *latinidad* for me as I write this dissertation. During the writing of it, Keichian has produced pieces that illustrate what I mean, beyond what I even knew I meant, by opacity. It might be that sometimes you know it when you see it. Or, perhaps more appropriately, you know it when you see that you don't see it.

Keichian is an Atlanta-based artist who works between installation, photography, video, and performance. In regard to gender and sexuality, they[54] identify as queer, genderqueer, and fluidly on the trans spectrum. Born to an Argentine father and a British mother, Keichian grew up in Houston, Texas. Keichian uses their art practice as a place to play ludically, but also quite seriously, with the relations we have to ourselves, our perceived selves, and the absent others who comprise the matrix of who we feel ourselves to be. Their work is conceptually process-driven, both in the feeling and in the craft. Recently, their pieces have shifted from video to a much more installation-based practice that develops video onto walls, as still image. This process is convoluted, as Keichian explains:

> This investigation takes form through the building of a darkroom; hand-painting surfaces with silver-gelatin emulsion, exposing these coated surfaces with projected video and then developing the projected areas like one would a black and white photograph. (Keichian 1)

This process takes video, which often works as the privileged archival preservation of Keichian's performance, projects the video onto the walls where emulsion has been painted. The effect of this process blends performance, painting, video, and photography

[54] Keichian's preferred pronouns are they, them, their.

into a piece that often registers as abstract minimalism as installation. Keichian takes otherwise legible mediums of art, ones that can and often do render bodies as legible, and produces a relational piece that demands a longer look, engagement, and reading precisely because of its opacity.

Keichian's "¡Que rico!: *I just need you in the reel*" was first installed at the Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA GA) on April 25th of 2013. There, Keichian spent countless hours constructing a fireplace mantle, gathering sentimental objects from friends, priming the objects and space, and building a darkroom in the museum around this place that held objects and architectures saturated with feeling. Below the piece, one can see the multiple sites of testing how the photo emulsion will develop on the wall—small moments of projection and timing.

Figure 3:*¡Que rico!: I just need you in the reel*

All this preparation, construction, and testing led to the final projection, wherein Keichian used an old video that featured the artist and their grandmother eating ice cream together, though this scene never happened in the real. Keichian found a picture of their grandmother eating ice cream in the countryside in Argentina, blew it up, and then situated the cut out it in their backyard in Atlanta—amidst the kudzu and greenery so local to the city. There Keichian staged a relation, one only made possible in the reel, with their grandmother. Both are eating ice cream as Keichian says repeatedly, turning to their grandmother, "Que rico." How delicious, how rich, how lovely. This gustatorial scene of correspondence between here and there, between now and then, works as the source material[55] for the projection above. The emulsion hand painted on the walls shows the trace of the artist's hand, providing textured strokes where photographs usually have sheen or matte flatness. The developing chemicals, applied hurriedly with a sponge, drip down the museum wall—pulling a black and white color scheme into brownness as the exhibit remained on display. Family in diaspora requires such technological forms of care and feeling to remain in relation—technologies that are shifting rapidly. Keichian creates these installation spaces, ones that register abstractly and opaquely the kinds of relations that we try to sustain in the place of absence, difficulty, and vulnerability.

Closely following this piece, Keichian installed another piece at Atlanta's Goat Farm, an art space for local curation and performance. There, with the piece *AutoPecho i & ii*, they dealt more specifically with their own relationship to their body and the technological apparatuses that render bodies as ephemeral, apparitional, and opaque. For this piece, Keichian used video to alternate between shots of themselves standing still,

[55] The video that inspires "Que rico" can be seen here: http://vimeo.com/82143308.

clothed with a plaid shirt, and then bare-chested and moving their torso back and forth. This second segment of the video was sped up, so their chest moved so quickly that it became a blur, invisible, showing the more flat chest that they often achieve through binding. This video[56] repeated on loop, beside developments of the two segments on the video:

Figure 4: *AutoPecho i*

Here, queerness and juxtaposition are more readily explored. *AutoPecho* translates as SelfChest—a sort of autopoiesis of chest here, through layers of artistic craft, intentional blurring, that at once lay something bare and obfuscate it to achieve a precarious balance of exposure and opacity—or, perhaps more appropriately, an overexposure and a speeding up that culminates in the opacity desired.

[56] http://vimeo.com/82154070

Figure 5: *AutoPecho ii*

Note that in *AutoPecho ii*, the image, because of movement, registers on the paper as more phantasmatic. What we see most well formed *as opacity* is the chest itself—appearing as Keichian desires it to be. The chest here is flat and not markedly female. And, yet, this rendering is directly next to the video which shows the process—one that alternates between frenetic and calm, nude and clothed.

Figure 6: still from *AutoPecho i&ii*

For Keichian, the aesthetic becomes a place to reference intensely intimate and vulnerable desires. And yet, it also operates a safe space that grants a kind of distance from static truths by playing with form and media to produce an opacity that emphasizes relation and feeling before concrete knowledge.

I am particularly drawn to the way in which these pieces age—turning more and more brown with time. Looking at these pieces and the ways in which, with age and exposure, they brown the image, I cannot help but think of José Esteban Muñoz's notion of "feeling brown[57]." The brownness that these pieces develop register the affective state of exposure—one particularly acute in Keichian's work. Though the final piece of "work" is abstract, the work can only happen through tapping into vulnerable states of

[57] Here, as in the whole of the dissertation, I write with José Esteban Muñoz's later theorizations of *latinidad* as "feeling brown" in mind. This theorization of brownness crosses critical race theory, performance studies, and Latina/o studies to consider the affective dimensions of being read as brown in the current ethnic and racial climate in the United States. It is, at once, a shared set of structures of feeling and a way of feeling that comes about from being read as brown.

feeling, structural precarity, and the matrices of loss and absence that permeate our social sphere. Hence, the relay between a life and its aestheticization creates a relation that yields an opaque rendering—one that is very much in relation to both queerness and *latinidad*. This relation does not always get registered, it may never coalesce for a viewer, but the persistent browning of the pieces have a slow accrual and urgency that ask us to consider these pieces in their larger political and social contexts, without letting those contexts tell the whole story. The fleeting and phantasmatic movements in these installations are registered in two and three dimensions—deconstructing any strict binaries between pure performance and representation. The opacity registered is neither radical negativity, nor is it full presence. Instead it is something else, something both thick and depleted, with dripping and stroked traces of the artist's hand.

I end with Keichian's work to reflect, once again, how Glissant's rallying for "the right to opacity for everyone" operates in a contemporaneous tone that resonates forcefully with an aesthetic that is as attached to queer *latinidad* as it is to contemporary art. The opacity of Keichian's work, like the artists, writers, and thinkers explored between these pages, invites us to perceive opacity intimately—while also creating necessary distance. It beckons the reader or viewer to stay in relation, to ruminate over the piece, to feel the drips of brown that fall down the museum wall and gather in a puddle that has long been cleaned up. Keichian's work becomes more brown as it interacts with the visible sphere, with light, and with the onlookers' gaze. It materializes in a way that is markedly queer, at once about identity and beyond it. And it is intensely relational. For me, in these pieces, I have found a way in which to articulate opacity as

something that is absolutely vital to affective survival—a form of aesthetic resistance that preserves relations and complexity in a world that often demands transparent identity.

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