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Mobilizing Genre, Revising Politics: The Intersection of Audience, Author, and Allusion in Contemporary Latinx Fiction

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Mobilizing Genre, Revising Politics:
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in Contemporary Latinx Fiction

by

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A Note on the Text

Throughout this thesis, I use the term "Latinx" to describe individuals of Latin American and Caribbean descent that live and write in the United States and their writing. I choose this designation rather than the binary "Latina/o" because of its recent traction in academic and popular discourses and because it encourages a more diverse, inclusive conversation. In the first and third chapters, I similarly use "Chicanx" to describe Mexican-Americans. The "x" provides a space for queer, non-binary, gender nonconforming, and trans individuals to share their experiences, but also forces us to consider the intersections of race, gender, sexuality, and geographic space as forces that affect our understanding of *latinidad*.

Abbreviations

HBAOP	*Her Body and Other Parties* (2017 short story collection by Carmen Maria Machado)
EMF	El Monte Flores (group of characters in Salvador Plascencia's *The People of Paper*)
POP	*The People of Paper* (2005 novel by Salvador Plascencia)

Abstract

This thesis examines contemporary Latinx authors' use of popular cultural and generic allusions to challenge limiting labels that audiences place on their fiction. Confronting readings that privilege Latinx literature as either imbued with the political rigor of the 1960s' Civil Rights Movement or an assimilationist attitude, I argue that these writers deliberately appropriate images and tropes familiar to Anglo-American readers to assure success in the literary marketplace while challenging their readers' expected conclusions. My first chapter analyzes Sandra Cisneros's reimagining of popular U.S. figures in light of ethnic storytelling practices in her 2002 novel *Caramelo*. The second chapter examines the absent *latinidad* and Horror tropes of Carmen Maria Machado's 2017 short story collection *Her Body and Other Parties.* My third chapter assesses the use of postmodernist literary conventions and the presence of Rita Hayworth in Salvador Plascencia's 2005 debut *The People of Paper*. These Latinxs introduce an alternative politics through their fiction; their *latinidad* is neither a reminder of their integration into the white mainstream nor an inescapable marker of their ethnicity. Instead, these texts call for a reconsideration of what comprises the Latinx literary tradition by rehistoricizing the popular consciousness of the United States.

Introduction

My thesis project originates from a viewing of Guillermo del Toro's 2017 film *The Shape of Water* during its theatrical release. The film's blend of fantasy, romance, and history reads oddly: Elisa, a mute woman, discovers and falls in love with an amphibian-humanoid creature that the secret government laboratory she works in has acquired and hopes to use to gain an advantage in the 1960's space race. My interest was not in dissecting the story but instead in looking at del Toro's Amphibian Man, an apparently obvious reference to the 1954 film *Creature from the Black Lagoon*. There is no mistake that this reference is intentional and, in fact, an element that del Toro wished to highlight in marketing his film. The theatrical release poster shows Elisa, played by Sally Hawkins, embracing the Amphibian Man in a way that revisits and corrects the 50's film's depiction of the creature stealing away a woman as his lover. *The Shape of Water* appropriates iconic imagery from *Creature of the Black Lagoon* and uses it as a familiar preview of what the contemporary film will contain; del Toro mimics imagery as an assurance that his film is accessible and instantly familiar to any audience. In his case, this strategy is especially important. Predating the *Shape of Water*, del Toro received accolades and acclaim mostly for Spanish-language fantasy films produced in his native Mexico like 1993's *Cronos* and 2006's *El laberinto del Fauno* (*Pan's Labyrinth*). This film, however, did amass critical attention and garnered four Academy Awards in 2018, including Best Picture.

I am more inclined to believe that *The Shape of Water*'s critical success comes as a consequence of its instantly recognizable iconography rather than its romantic bridge

between two marginalized figures. The film centers itself as an extension and revisiting of *Creature from the Black Lagoon* by conjuring a popular figure from U.S cinema, overriding the plot details to make the iconic image of the Amphibian Man the focus. In evoking the creature, del Toro appeals to a wide audience that will come to the film with a preexisting notion of what it contains. His Mexican identity further distances him from Anglo-American viewers and, by extension, the Oscar's audience, yet his imagery quelled any kind of tension surrounding this difference and instead made the film an extension of the existing United States mainstream. My question, then, is how to address the way that artists—whether filmmakers or authors, as in this project—understand their relationship with an audience and attempt to craft their works to secure not only readership but the possibilities of acclaim. In my work, this question is further inflected by contemporary issues about the way we read and understand *latinidad* in ethnic literatures: how do contemporary Latinx authors evoke familiar images and tropes to reassure Anglo-American readers of their works' relevance while still challenging the very forces that label them as Latinxs?

With the Latinx categorization comes a set of expectations which, in the present literary moment, require a further consideration. Traditional readings of Latinx literature focus either on its subversive potential to evoke social change or on its promotion of multiculturalist values, allowing these ethnically marked individuals to cross borders and enter the Anglo-American mainstream. While these outcomes are meaningful and promote a more inclusive American literature, they also suggest that Latinxs are marked with what Ilan Stavans calls "a history full of traumas and undemocratic interruptions"

that must be recuperated (10). Stavans's 1995 discussion of *latinidad* in the United States, *The Hispanic Condition*, evokes this idea of cultural trauma and exclusion in order to identify a resistant, confrontational politics that attempts to undo the damage caused by colonial forces and the persistence of racism in the United States. He asserts that Latinx people "can no longer afford to live quietly on the margins" and must "infiltrate the system" (17, 16). This perspective suggests that, if integrated into the U.S. mainstream, Latinxs will somehow transcend their ethnic status. Stavans's writing in the 1990s is optimistic and provides a baseline for understanding *latinidad* in the United States, but is this call for assimilation and upheaval still relevant in the twenty-first century?

Keeping the expectations placed on Latinxs cultural production in mind, my thesis argues that contemporary authors are not just aware of these outcomes but also actively working to appropriate them and challenge their utility. In a post-Obama United States, race and ethnicity in literature is read differently than in previous generations. The multiculturalist view that Stavans represents is no longer a dominant reading strategy because the trope of "arrival," as Ylce Irizarry defines it in *Chicana/o and Latina/o Fiction: The New Memory of Latinidad*, "[fails] to accurately reflect the experiences" of Latinxs in the United States and has lost "its centrality as a narrative trope" (14-5). Irizarry posits that contemporary writers are no longer responding directly to the idea of acculturation to Anglo-American culture. These authors are not working from the loss and trauma that Stavans describes because of their generational remove from colonial forces in the Caribbean and Latin America. They need not arrive because they know no other place. Contemporary Latinxs do not respond to inequity in the same ways that

commonly anthologized figures of the post-World War II area-studies boom do; they do not lament the loss of their cultural identity as they are integrated into the Anglo-American world, instead challenging the legacy and persistence of these readings. This changing trend in reading Latinx fiction is further corroborated by Elda Maria Román, who argues in her 2017 study *Race and Upward Mobility* that the presence of liminal, ethnic characters and images "cannot always be reduced to assessments of resistance or selling out" (22). If readers come to Latinx literature with assumptions about upward mobility and assimilation, they will find them, no matter how limiting these conclusions are. Latinx texts may still appear confrontational and subversive, but, if anything, this attitude needs to be considered as an awareness of the limitations placed on the authors and their writings.

The traditions of *latinidad* in United States literature may lead to expected analyses, but this does not mean that Latinxs do not know how to—borrowing from Stavans—infiltrate the Anglo-American canon to adopt narrative strategies and techniques. The three texts I analyze in my thesis all borrow accepted and familiar literary forms, I argue, intentionally to reengage with political activism without a multiculturalist focus. Irizarry and Román both indicate a renewed interest in politics, as do Raphael Dalleo and Elena Machado Sáez, who argue that readers need to develop new strategies and especially consider the literary marketplace's importance if we are to understand how Latinx writers revisit "political tradition by engaging with the triumphs and defeats of the past" (7). I see the market as a tool that the authors I will examine use to establish security and familiarity in their work. Though the need to promote social

justice and integration is not necessarily valid in these texts, securing a readership is still important for these authors. They borrow what they need to assure that Anglo-Americans can engage with their writing in an almost ironic way: Latinx literature lures its audience with familiar literary tropes, but in doing so "mobilize[s] […] formal devices such as footnotes, focalization, analepsis, and metafiction" for their own means, as Jennifer Harford Vargas puts it in her study *Forms of Dictatorship: Power, Narrative, and Authoritarianism in the Latina/o Novel* (15). Switching from recuperation to appropriation, accessible forms of fiction become a tool that promotes not integration, but instead the very reconsideration of analyses that privilege tropes of arrival and political action. This is a covert technique that works because it allows Latinx writers to challenge Anglo-Americans while still meeting their demands for what ethnic fiction is supposed to do.

Access and familiarity are crucial for contemporary authors because they work to assure success in the literary marketplace. This bridges back to my opening invocation of del Toro's film: his use of iconic, Anglo-American imagery despite his existing, ethnically-labeled work garnered him both attention and success. I see this as a popular model for what the literary texts I examine do not only with literary forms, but with popular culture. It is not enough merely to mimic the strategies of canonical fiction; the writers I examine include popular images and tropes from United States culture to both bolster a sense of familiarity even further and to correct the skewed affect attached to these images. Randy J. Ontiveros hints at a changing notion of history in relation to Latinxs, arguing that Anglo-American attachment to specific cultural moments always

tends towards "a moment of perfection" without fully rendering the way that history constantly ebbs back and forth (31). In this project, the allusions to United States popular culture all work in a way that aims to recontextualize the truth despite the fictional exceptionalism attached to the references. These moments all point back to the mid-twentieth century, an interesting detail considering the way that the Civil Rights Movement of the same period helped encourage political and multiculturalist readings of Latinx literature. Perhaps the authors' choices highlight a renewed interest in the activism exemplified by the period without wishing to return to reductive readings, correcting the attachment to these images as well as the expected conclusions of what their work can accomplish.

My first chapter analyzes Sandra Cisneros's 2002 novel *Caramelo*, paying close attention to Cisneros's authorial interventions—namely academic, explanatory footnotes—as moments where she corrects and realigns images of popular U.S. culture to show the prevalence of *latinidad* in what are thought of as Anglo-American icons. Cisneros's acceptance into the American literary canon informs the existing readings of her novel, and critics and reviewers both cling to textual artifacts that highlight her role as a bridge between the Chicanx and Anglo experience: namely *caramelo* skin and her protagonist's family heirloom, a *rebozo*. While this outcome is a successful reading of the novel, Cisneros adopts an ironic tone and plays with the boundaries of truth and fiction in a way that cannot be ignored, in my opinion. Her footnotes allow her authorial voice to enter the narrative, clarifying details of the Reyes' family's story but also challenging the notions of popular culture. I focus on footnotes about Señor Wences, a Spanish

ventriloquist, the actress and pinup Raquel Welch, and María Sabina, a *curandera* who famous for interacting with the Beatles. These moments provide stability and familiarity for Anglo-American readers among the Chicanx experience of the novel, but they also contextualize these figures as fragile constructions of the mainstream consciousness. If her literary prominence helps critics in assessing *Caramelo*, it also helps Cisneros in covertly undermining and challenging history that typically ignores Latinx people in the United States without being ostracized. She is playful and subversive, but still maintains her readership and meets their expectations.

Jumping ahead fifteen years, the second chapter of this project assesses Carmen Maria Machado's 2017 short story collection *Her Body and Other Parties* and attempts to locate its hidden *latinidad* among recognizable genre tropes. Machado's collection, a nominee for the 2017 National Book Award for fiction and the recipient of numerous literary awards, is read as an extension of her persona as an activist: her involvement in #MeToo on Twitter garnered her attention in new feminist movements that readers reflect onto her fiction. Machado's work is difficult to navigate despite her activism, and while reviewers position the stories as folklore and speculative fiction, Machado herself evades generic categorization. Still, her stories do conjure familiar tropes of horror that allow readers easy access into her world and, as I argue, render her Latinx identity visible. Machado's persona again assists as I unearth an ambivalent *latinidad*; the stories' language makes this uncertainty legible using disembodied forms against the active and resistant feminist experiences that are linked to her writing. Machado's use of genre

tropes uncovers the hidden Latinx presence in her text but also works as an access point into the fiction.

The final chapter looks at Salvador Plascencia's 2005 novel *The People of Paper* and its use of postmodern metafiction to secure an academic readership while also confronting the expectations placed on Latinx fiction. Plascencia's work appears more like a novel by Thomas Pynchon or Kurt Vonnegut but does so in a way that allows it to become an easily understandable text in the literary marketplace. Critics find familiarity in his novel's form, and yet still achieve readings that conform to Latinx categories: they come to conclusions that privilege both social justice and multiculturalist possibilities for *The People of Paper*. I challenge this by connecting Plascencia's writing to Cisneros's, comparing her evocation of Raquel Welch to Plascencia's use of Rita Hayworth in the novel. Hayworth is given a fictional ethnic backstory to bolster the omniscient figure of the author, Saturn. While the narrative shows Hayworth to be a traitor to her *latinidad*, the narrative collapses when it is revealed that the metafictive author-character has invented these details to displace his own anger and sadness. While Plascencia relies on the postmodernism's erudition to assure that his novel will be read and lauded, he also challenges the movement's conventions by allowing his narrative to crumble, suggesting a need for a more fluid understanding of Latinx literature.

My thesis examines the interstices of the author, audience, and allusion—both literary and popular—in contemporary Latinx fiction to further understand how Latinx writers challenge the expectations placed on them by the United States' literary tradition. Without needing to communicate the difficulties of their ethnic identity, these authors all

call for a reconsideration readerly engagement with the Latinx tradition. This reassessment is accomplished by correcting historical allusions, unearthing the truth of popular figures, and using genre tropes to navigate the complexities of ethnic identity in an allegedly postrace setting. There are stakes for these authors as cultural producers who are actively seeking an audience. They provide access for Anglo-Americans but readopt the political undertones of previous Latinx writers as a confrontational act. The reminder is not that Latinxs have crossed a border into the Anglo-American mainstream, their difference having disappeared, but instead that there is still work that needs to be done in understanding the relationship between *latinidad* and the cultural consciousness of the United States.

I.

Misleading Artifacts, Ironic Footnotes: Sandra Cisneros's *Caramelo* as a Corrective Lens for Anglo-American Affect and Assimilation

Sandra Cisneros's 2002 novel *Caramelo* opens with a playful epigraph: "*Cuéntame algo, aunque sea una mentira*" (Tell me a story, even if it's a lie) (ix)[1]. While foregrounding the importance of storytelling in the novel with this opening command, Cisneros also winks at the reader, calling her own intentions into question. She chooses to make conspicuous this blending of fact and fiction rather than affirming the veracity of her narrative in the novel's front matter. Whether Cisneros is addressing the audience of her text, invoking the epigraph as a type of muse, or assuming the narrative voice of her protagonist, Celaya "Lala" Reyes, she trusts that readers will continue with the novel even though it may contain lies. She is self-aware in this moment, perhaps letting us in on the secret of how authors blend reality and fantasy, but as the presumed authorial voice of the front matter ends, *Caramelo*'s narrative content works against her introductory quip. Laurie Kaplan, reviewing the novel for the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, describes Cisneros's text as "crowded with the souvenirs and memories of the dramas of everyday life […] like an oversized family album" (14).[2] More than any other facet of the novel, Kaplan emphasizes the realistic, everyday nature of Cisneros's project, and her assertion that *Caramelo* reads like a family album holds true; Lala becomes the historian of her diverse

[1] Though there is no pagination in the front matter, I begin with the title page as page "i" for the purposes of citing this section of the novel.

[2] An expanded version of this quote is printed at the top-center of the back cover of the 2003 Vintage Contemporaries printing of the novel, given before any plot summary or Cisneros's headshot and thus privileging it as an exemplary reading.

and expansive middle class, Mexican-American family, with different voices and stories freely and at times cacophonously flowing in and out of focus. Still, Cisneros's opening suggestion that her novel may or may not be entirely truthful seems ironic, especially considering the abundance of historical and cultural references she relates to the Reyes family. She knowingly introduces a novel that is rich with historical references by suggesting that some facts may be untrue, challenging readers' expectations before the plot begins to unfold. The novel's full title, *Caramelo; or, Puro Cuento* suggests that what unfolds in Lala's journey as family historian may simply be *puro cuento*[3], a historical retelling of a Chicanx family's life, or something else entirely.

Is there, then, a purpose to Cisneros's irony? The novel's spirit and Lala's quick wit add a comical element that is in line with this opening epigraph, and there is even a disclaimer following the initial bilingual command in which the narrative voice—whether Cisneros or Lala—explains: "I have invented what I do not know and exaggerated what I do to continue the family tradition of telling healthy lies" (xiii). I would suggest that this disclaimer does not function to write-off the epigraph but instead to extend it further and to allow another alternative for reading the novel. It seems strange to me that this novel, a work of fiction, intentionally addresses and then apologizes for the possible fabrications within it. Cisneros seems to be somewhat aware of her audience's reluctance to accept historical event in a novel that she suggests may be partially invented. She mocks an apology in the front matter's disclaimer, reinforcing an idea that Kaplan details in her

[3] Ilan Stavans describes the irony of this subtitle in his own discussion of the novel, "Familia Faces," reminding readers not familiar with the phrase that it "means simultaneously 'only stories' and 'untruthful tales' ("Familia").

review: that the Reyes' family narrative is presented as a sort of authentic photo album of Chicanx life. Even before the text of *Caramelo* has begun, Cisneros begins to craft the conversation surrounding her novel; after controversially suggesting that certain details may be invented, she saves face with a disclaimer that, again, acts as a wink that extends throughout the catalog of references and anecdotes that Lala narrates. The disclaimer only works, though, because readers believe it. Cisneros begins the novel immediately following her mock apology and thus leaves breadcrumbs for her audience to follow, disallowing the possibility of looking further into the irony.

It is possible that, in her use of a cheeky epigraph and the corresponding explanation, Cisneros is guiding her readers towards an analysis that privileges verisimilitude rather than humor. I would like to lean on these ironic, humorous undertones to consider what function this mock apology could serve. This tone, playful as it is, creates a rift in the reader's experience with the novel; they come to *Caramelo* with expectations about what they will encounter, but their needs ultimately are not met if they follow Cisneros's lead. And perhaps even without her lead, Cisneros's reputation itself crafts much of the conversation surrounding this novel. Without her literary prevalence, a novel about everyday, authentic *chicanidad* could be entirely inaccessible to Anglo-American readers. Expectations about the novel arise just in examining its title: not easily deciphered by monolingual Anglo-American readers, but racialized with enough *sabor* that they know to know to look for the *latinidad* that will undoubtedly be inside. And, indeed, this linguistic choice marks *Caramelo* as a text that will make connections between Latinx writing and the United States' literary tradition intelligible.

Reassurance and Realism: Popular Responses to *Caramelo*

Writing for the *New York Times* book review, Valerie Sayers describes Lala's narration as a sort of "[digging] through the remnants of the past" to uncover "the stories and even the shameful secrets" of the Reyes family (24). Sayers suggests that the novel is less of a fictional account of Chicanx life and more of an attempt at reconstructing history in her review. This assertion follows Kaplan, who also notes how the novel "reverberates with the history of immigration" that is so important to a Mexican-American family's backstory (14). These reviews focus on how the novel successfully and authentically defines the Reyes family's story for a reader unfamiliar with their cultural difference. An Anglo-American audience especially might need to be reassured that the strange, possibly untrue elements of the novel may just be Cisneros's inventions, conjured up to add interest and ethnic detail to an otherwise realistic novel. Sayers combats this and comforts readers by letting them know that the "ghastly" and "whimsical" details that may or may not be invented are just dramatizations that add to the novel's "time-traveling form" (24). As they address the tensions that are presented before Cisneros's novel even begins, Kaplan and Sayers both outline the importance of historical accuracy to restore comfort to non-Chicanx people coming to the text. There are none of Cisneros's "healthy lies" and exaggerations here, just an authentic portrayal of her panethnic identity.

In her review of Cisneros's text, Barbara Hoffert, too, takes time to reassure readers that know Cisneros's work. Hoffert asserts that those familiar with Cisneros's

"pointillist prose"[4] will be reassured as they progress through *Caramelo* although they may be initially startled by "a head-on cultural clash" between US and Mexican culture (88). Hoffert directly calls upon Cisneros's reputation in the literary world to stabilize the frequent forays into popular U.S. culture; the collision she describes is just a momentary diversion from Cisneros's otherwise exceptionally stylized prose. Access is a crucial part of the way reviewers describe *Caramelo* because Anglo-American readers come to it with high expectations. With a Spanish title, a prominent Chicana author, and a disclaimer that purports the novel will lie, *Caramelo* is tricky to navigate for casual, white readers. Reviewers quell these tensions by insisting that Cisneros's fiction is realistic and accurate, adding another layer to the humor and the wink that the author provides at the beginning of her writing, but still allowing the audience to comfortably explore the Reyes' story.

Still, Cisneros begins the novel with irony, and this, I argue, should not be taken lightly. This is not to say that an expected, realist-focused reading is wrong or not a successful outcome of Cisneros's project, but her introductory tone implies that the novel is more than just another showcase of Chicanx culture. Kaplan's review of *Caramelo* mentions the irony briefly, noting that Cisneros's use of footnotes about popular Mexican and American culture adds a "sly commentary" to the novel (14). Kaplan does not develop this thought any further, though her inclusion of the ironic tone at all is important. Sayers, too, addresses the possibility that Lala's family history may contain

[4] Hoffert cites *The House on Mango Street* as exemplary of Cisneros's style, but it seems like an odd suggestion when *Caramelo*, too, follows the vignette format of that text to some extent.

lies, but she also dismisses this detail as a part of a storytelling tradition that almost romanticizes the plot (24). Sayers, Hoffert, and Kaplan restore comfort to Anglo-American readers so that they can approach *Caramelo* in search of its authentic portrayal of Mexican-American life. Cisneros's front matter similarly asks that we pay attention to her playful tone, but she then apologizes for exposing the possible inventions within her writing. This apology allows the audience to focus on grounded, truthful examples in her prose, whether details of Lala's daily routine or footnoted references that explain historical events, but this tactic distracts from rather than emphasizes other elements of the novel.

***Caramelo*'s Corrective Allusions**

Cisneros's work finds itself at the pinnacle of Chicanx literature, and the reception of *Caramelo* conforms to the way she has resolved racial tensions and elevated the Mexican-American experience in *The House on Mango Street* and *Woman Hollering Creek*. These are important outcomes, but I am less interested in looking at the novel as a continuation of this tradition and instead aim to confront some of the tensions that are present within the narration. Critics celebrate Cisneros but also disallow the possibility of elevating her work by containing it inside a very narrow, expected analysis. There are more complicated concerns at play in *Caramelo*, and Cisneros herself points this out by providing clear framework that guides the audience to easy readings. She provides access for critics, in a sense predicting what they will say about the novel and providing them with all the tools they will need to successfully analyze it. There is irony in this action, too; in providing clear guidelines for analyzing her novel, Cisneros is also drawing

attention to what else is present in the narrative. This is where I am interested in working from. *Caramelo* celebrates the Chicanx experience, elevating it to a subject worthy of scholarly discussion in the American canon, but the novel is more successful in the challenge it presents to readers' expectations, forcing them to reconsider cultural moments and histories through its humor and irony.

Caramelo's often historical footnotes especially interest me because they are an essential part of reading the novel effectively. They act as points of contention where readers are asked to question the authenticity, meaning, and possibility of what the novel is trying to accomplish at that moment, yet their veracity is never questioned. The footnotes in a sense build trust and reassure that the aforementioned lies have not made their way into this historical account of the Reyes family's story; no one will question her description of Crí-Crí the singing cricket, "*the alter ego of that brilliant children's composer Francisco Gabilondo Soler*," because Cisneros describes him as the precursor of Disney's familiar Jiminy Cricket (30). Her suggestion that the text may contain lies should not be brushed off, though, as it is not simply an element of her ethnic storytelling practice. The footnotes are potential sites where truth and fiction interact, forcing readers to once again confront the novel's ironic invocation. *Caramelo* is full of references that may or not be familiar, but the author provides context throughout, seemingly preventing any troubles that may arise for non-Chicanx readers. Cisneros's first footnote appears on the seventh page of the novel, marking the Maxwell Street flea market, which she notes as a "filthy, pungent, wonderful place" that has been around for over 100 years (9). This detail is easy enough to accept as true, but should readers trust Cisneros? She opens the

novel by acknowledging the possibility of deluding her audience, but then restores confidence with familiar historical signposts, letting readers know that they can ground their understanding in real world, factual details. I would like to challenge this reassurance, though, and question if the footnotes, rather than moments of an authoritative, trustworthy voice, become possible moments of challenge. Is Cisneros telling the truth, or are there more facts at play that are only available to Chicanx readers? Though her references fit cleanly into the novel, Cisneros creates conflict in asking readers to reexamine historical and cultural moments through an unfamiliar lens.

It is not unusual then that Cisneros chooses to footnote multiple references to U.S. popular culture of the 1960s in her novel. An expected reading of the novel works to place it within the scope of American literature by linking Cisneros's distinct Chicanx background to the events and images of the Sixties, but especially the Civil Rights Movement and Chicanx activism during the decade. Readers connect references to the time period to the assimilationist, multiculturalist tendencies that the Sixties afforded to Chicanx people, and they take comfort in knowing that Cisneros's historical references are moments that fit inside mainstream narratives, too. In a sense the references bind the disparate cultures together, restoring another layer of comfort to an unfamiliar reader who approaches the text. Anglo-Americans make this connection, but also tend towards nostalgia for the decade, reading these tendencies into the references to satisfy their own emotions. They want to believe that, in some sense, their engagement with the novel is a continuation of the acceptance of Chicanx people into the U.S. mainstream, as difficult to negotiate as that may be. Cisneros is aware of this emotional attachment to the decade

and uses it to restore a sense of security to her audience, but she also realizes that the sentiment is most important to the white American mainstream who will likely be reading and assessing her writing. Instead of Anglo-American nostalgia, irony becomes her chosen affect, and she becomes aloof as a way to challenge readers' expectations as she moves through the footnotes. Her choice of cultural references—from Raquel Welch to Janis Joplin to recent Nobel laureate Bob Dylan—complicate readers' understanding of these figures as exemplary icons the decade. The Reyes' interaction with Sixties' culture disrupts Anglo-American longing for Civil Rights and the promise of the Chicanx movement that Cisneros's writing is usually thought to affirm. *Caramelo* appropriates images and histories of the 1960s to subvert this affect, placing a working-class Chicanx family in the middle of the popular culture of the Sixties as an ironic critique of the social justice thought to be exemplified by the decade.

***caramelo* and *rebozo* as Narrative Signposts**

Caramelo provides framework that inevitably leads readers to ethnic realist readings, making it easy to see the possibility of an emerging *mestiza* in the novel. Lala invokes two images that become symbols of her story and her understanding of her own identity: the *caramelo* skin color of her Awful Grandmother's housekeeper's daughter, Candelaria, and her grandmother's *rebozo*. Lala describes the *caramelo* shade in the novel's opening section, "Recuerdo de Acapulco," perplexed and intrigued by the color that is "so sweet it hurts to even look at" (37). Lala's description pays careful attention to Candelaria's coloring and how it sets her apart from the other members of Lala's Chicanx family:

> The girl Candelaria has skin bright as a copper *veinte centavo* coin after you've sucked it. Not transparent as an ear like Aunty Light-Skin's. Not shark-belly pale like Father and the Grandmother. Not the red river-clay color of Mother and her family. Not the coffee-with-too-much-milk color like me, nor the fried-tortilla color of the washerwoman Amparo, her mother. Not like anybody. Smooth as peanut butter, deep as burnt-milk candy. (34)

There is something poignant in Lala's description of this skin as a unique and almost valuable shade of brown: she is the color of a candy and a coin simultaneously, doubly desirable. Lala contrasts Candelaria's coloring with unusual details about her family members' skin tones to further accentuate the sweetness of the *caramelo* hue. The skin colors seem to transition from her aunt's transparency toward brownness, passing her father and grandmother's "shark-belly pale" skin and Lala's own diluted-coffee coloring before landing on the unique *caramelo* of Candelaria. Lala describes her family's coloring with negative, hard to understand images, perhaps to truly convince her reader of Candelaria's uniqueness. Her own "coffee-with-too-much-milk color" is particularly self-deprecating, painting herself as inadequate because she has been overfilled or contains too much of something unneeded. Lala's image of a sucked-on *veinte centavo* coin raises questions as well. She could have easily imagined the taste of the "burnt-milk candy" that she mentions just a sentence later, but instead opts for the coin. This choice likens the two disparate things by relating them in color, as though the image of Lala with a coin in her mouth is her attempt to distill the brown hue to fix her own faulty coloring. Lala's details are pointed and unusual; she uses them to draw attention to the *caramelo*

shade, forcing readers to take note of its appearances in the novel. Candelaria's *caramelo* complexion gains traction as an important facet of the novel despite Lala's complicated imagery.

I would argue that this symbolic signpost furthers the conflict that Cisneros presents between the fictional and historical facets of her novel. By giving the *caramelo* shade a monetary value and a sugary sweetness, Cisneros presents two possible outcomes for reading the text: it can be pleasing and sweet like the candy or useful and valuable like the *centavo* coin. Given the novel's context, the utility of the coloring seems to be the primary concern. Critics engage with the border-crossing potential to suggest that this ethnic narrative does, in fact, have currency in academic literary conversations. Sayers even suggests that the novel "blithely [leaps] across the border between literary and popular fiction," having use for academics and casual readers alike (24). *Caramelo*, then, can adequately communicate the fusion of Mexican and Untied States cultural references to a wide array of readers, thus making it a useful tool for promoting a multiculturalist vision of the United States. This usefulness echoes Cisneros's choice to authenticate her fiction with familiar historical images. The unfamiliarity and discomfort of the Reyes' *latinidad* needs to be mediated to be made valuable. In identifying the narrative's utility, critics too can find the second half of the *caramelo* binary. The candy-like sweetness arrives when critics contextualize the value of the text with a larger literary tradition. Sayers writes that Cisneros's project is a "fizzy American novel, a deliciously subversive reminder that 'American' applies to plenty of territory beyond the borders" (24). Her language here mimics her own satisfaction. The novel's exuberance comes from its

ability to challenge Anglo-American definitions of American literature and allows Sayers to place her own writing into that disruptive space. The narrative's focus on the *caramelo* shade intentionally leads readers to these analyses, perhaps showing that elements of the novel—Candelaria, perhaps even the title—are colored with a heavy hand, too willing to show the desirable hue.

The second symbol that appears in Lala's narrative is her grandmother's heirloom *rebozo*; the image becomes a tool that helps Lala understand her own work as family historian. Though the *rebozo* appears briefly in the text's opening section, Lala clarifies its importance throughout the novel, not realizing its meaning until the final moments of her story. She describes the unfinished, tattered *rebozo* as a memory of her Awful Grandmother's life, identifying it as a *caramelo* style *rebozo* because of its "beautiful blend of toffee, licorice, and vanilla stripes flecked with black and white" (95). As she does earlier with the *caramelo* shade of Candelaria's skin, Lala highlights the *rebozo*'s sweetness by likening it to candy. Her choice to explain the colors of the *rebozo*'s woven textile as different shades of candies, moving from light vanilla to dark licorice, is an interesting echo of her description of Candelaria. Thus, it is understandable that Lala foregrounds the *caramelo* hue of toffee in her description, calling back to the sweet, valuable nature of the color that she establishes earlier. Lala introduces the shawl with these details and shows her admiration for it, though she does not initially recognize its possible use value. Her retelling of the Awful Grandmother's history in the novel's second section, "When I Was Dirt," helps to further contextualize the woven, haphazard shawl's importance to the Reyes family, but its potential as a *caramelo* is not fully

realized until the novel's end. At her parents' thirtieth anniversary party, Lala comes to understand and appreciate the many controversies present in her family's history: her Aunty Light-Skin's secret relationship with a Mexican movie star, her grandfather's affair with Josephine Baker, and the fact that Candelaria is her father's daughter. As Lala works through her role as the Reyes family historian, she learns that the *rebozo* is in some ways a physical manifestation of her family's story, one in which "[plotlines] continue and spiral, lives intertwine, coincidences collide, seemingly random happenings are laced with knots, figure eights, and double loops, designs more intricate than the fringe of a silk *rebozo"* (428-9). The twisting, woven texture of the Reyes' history calls back to Lala's initial description of the heirloom, likening it to the mixture of sweet colors and shades that make the *rebozo* such a desirable object. Lala's narration becomes a *caramelo* itself, "as beautifully blended as the fabric" of the shawl according to Hoffert (88). Her explication of the *rebozo* connects it to her preoccupation with Candelaria's skin, both becoming tools that Lala can use to understand her complicated identity and history.

The *rebozo* has become a fixture of critical discourse surrounding the novel because its woven, tangled image stands in quite easily and adequately as a metaphor for Lala's blending of the past and present of her family's history; Heather Alumbaugh's discussion of the *rebozo* in the novel, "Narrative Coyotes: Migration and Narrative Voice in Sandra Cisneros's *Caramelo*," is perhaps exemplary of this connection. She focuses on *Caramelo* as a migratory novel that tactfully blends Lala's voice with her grandmother Soledad's, ultimately creating a story that moves from "the past to the present, from Mexico to the US, from the dead to the living, and from one person to another" (54).

Alumbaugh uses the Latin etymology of migration—"bearing across"—in order to show how Lala is helping her family's history cross boundaries and move between multiple spaces. The rebozo itself becomes a physical image of this bearing across, carrying a multitude of stories and histories that are woven as intricately as the textile. In her analysis of the novel, she asserts that the *rebozo* "makes explicit the connection between" the multiple voices at play (69). The rebozo becomes a storytelling vehicle according to Alumbaugh, one that "represent[s] ethnic female artistic production and innovation" (70). The *rebozo* gains symbolic agency as a representation of *Caramelo*, a novel that is authentically depicting the layered Mexican American experience to a wide readership.

Mimicking the way that reviewers engage with Cisneros's novel, critics too respond to *Caramelo* following a predictable set of expectations about what it aims to accomplish. As they reassess the accepted structure of the Latinx literary canon, Raphael Dalleo and Elena Machado Sáez suggest that readers tend to somewhat problematically imagine "the Latin[x] writer as the ideal representative for bridging the gap between the marginal Latin[x] culture and the American mainstream" (4). Though Dalleo and Machado Sáez call for a reassessment of this view of Latinx writing, audiences persist. *Caramelo* lends itself to this type of analysis, and critics respond accordingly, having found their point of entry and using it to promote acceptance of Mexican-Americans through Lala's family history. Sayers's review perhaps best fits this expected, guided reading of the text as an authentic account of Chicanx life for white American readers. Her headline defines *Caramelo* as a "joyful" novel "about crossing borders" (24). Because *Caramelo* is written by an eminent Chicana and tells the story of a Chicanx

family travelling between the United States and Mexico, readers expect to be able to read the novel as a meditation on Lala's liminal, panethnic position, somewhere between U.S. whiteness and Mexican otherness. Though Sayers provides a complete and considered analysis of the novel, she sees it as a successful "fusion of Spanish and English, idea and emotion, geography and spirit" (24). Sayers's understanding of Lala's panethnic identity and the way she fuses her cultures together is a valuable outcome and is useful, but reading the novel in this way can be limiting and foregrounds easily understood facets of the text rather than any of its underlying intentions. Reading Lala's position, lodged between two cultures, as a possible site for the emergence of the *mestiza* works because it aligns with concerns about verisimilitude and historical accuracy.

Other critics follow Alumbaugh's example in the way they analyze the *rebozo*, but at the same time they are following the lead Cisneros provides, depending heavily on the framework even in attempting to access and analyze different parts of the novel. Catherine Leen, too, looks at issues of verisimilitude and inclusivity at play in *Caramelo.* Conflating Cisneros's novel with Manuel Puig's *El beso de la mujer araña*, Leen argues that *Caramelo*'s intricately woven string of references pays homage to the "craft tradition" seen in the *rebozo*, pointing out the connections between disparate cultures (190). Leen seems to be led to her conclusions by the clear signals provided throughout the narrative. Still, she can make her point clearly: the weaving of popular history and everyday experience, especially by a Chicana narrator, allows Lala to carve out her own space in the United States' cultural makeup (195). Leen attempts to give history agency in her critique, using the *rebozo* framework to connect *chicanidad* to references to Anglo-

American icons. Without directly addressing it, she pays attention to the way the text interacts with itself, switching from narrative to footnoted explanations in a way that constructs a linear, woven history of the Reyes family. The effect is a reading of *Caramelo* as a reconsideration of Mexican-American culture as an integral part of the Anglo-American culture. Her analysis of the novel ends by affirming Cisneros as a figurehead for Chicanx empowerment and upward mobility, again returning to the possibility that the novel has use value as an assimilationist tool that revises and affirms historical images to promote inclusivity.

Scholars find a point of entry into the novel through the *rebozo* symbolism, reading Lala's liminal *chicanidad* as a celebration of *mestiza* politics and panethnicity. Sylvia M. Peart and Dale C. Lesher address the authenticity and acceptance of Chicanx identity by discussing the novel's bilingualism, switching fluidly and fluently between English and Spanish. In their article "Spanglish and the Negotiation of Latina Identities in Sandra Cisneros's *Caramelo*" they posit that the dueling languages playfully "[bring] to life" the real, day-to-day cultural conflicts that *mestizas* experience (5). Because *Caramelo* oscillates between English and Spanish, they argue that it is a text tailored for Chicanx readers, presumably masters of both languages. Peart and Lesher suggest that the use of both languages "challenges rigid binaries" to redistribute hegemonic forces, possibly allowing Anglo-American audiences to better empathize with Chicanx people (7). Their reading responds to the text as a realistic portrayal of Chicanx life in the United States and concludes with the hope that Cisneros's novel can help to carve out a space for Chicanx writing and culture in the United States. Though Peart and Lesher do not directly

address the *rebozo*, their critique follows Alambaugh's "bearing across;" language is carried across the text, effectively constructing the verisimilitude of Mexican-American life for monolingual readers. Anglo-American audiences can learn to understand the intricacies of Chicanx culture as they navigate through two competing languages. Still, though, as with the novel's reception, realism and authenticity remain in the fore of the discussion of the novel rather than Cisneros's humorous undertones and what they may suggest.

In some ways, critics come to expect the potential for cultural assimilation in Cisneros's novel because her work has been accepted into the United States' literary canon. Scholars follow the breadcrumbs, focusing on Lala's fascination with the *caramelo* color and *rebozo* because they understand the canonical, accepted way to read Cisneros. In his analysis of *Caramelo*, "After Words: Sandra Cisneros's *Caramelo* and the Evolution of Chicano/a Cultural Politics," Randy J. Ontiveros, suggests that Cisneros's literary success predating the novel has been integral in elevating Chicanx literature to a topic that is worthy of critical consideration (174). Her acceptance into the U.S. literary tradition complicates the way that readers respond to her work, however, and because she is a central figure of Chicanx literature, the tendency is to read her work as supporting the emergence of the *mestiza* and responding to issues of racial conflict. Ontiveros reinforces these issues by focusing on the historical context surrounding the novel, particularly the Chicanx movement of the 1960s. Ontiveros privileges the novel as a bildungsroman and suggests that Cisneros's engagement with historical references to the Sixties helps to insert feminism into the Chicanx movement with a female protagonist

(191). In reading *Caramelo* as an ethnic, feminist bildungsroman, he expands upon the expectations that he outlines for Cisneros's fiction and builds upon Alumbaugh's discussion of the *rebozo*'s potential as a feminine, ethnic storytelling symbol. Ontiveros gives Lala agency as a Chicana who overcomes the problems of her family's history, growing into her own identity and connecting the social justice associated with 1960s Chicanx politics to Lala's self-discovery. Ontiveros emphasizes the possibility for the *caramelo* brownness of the novel to transcend racial boundaries and connect many different groups of people, also deploying the weaving metaphor and the textile of the *rebozo* (195). He negotiates the complicated ways that the novel melds history, race, and culture, but not in a way that challenges expectations. Ontiveros focuses on the historical veracity of Cisneros's writing in order to promote a more inclusive vision for the past and present of the United States, maintaining rather than subverting the easy entrances into the novel. His reading succeeds but does not subvert.

Assessing the Artifacts: Cisneros's "Ethnic Spectacle"

I do not mean to suggest that critics have not successfully read *Caramelo* or that they have altogether dismissed the references to popular images of the Sixties' and the explanatory footnotes that I privileged in my introduction. Ontiveros and other critics, like Ellen McCracken and Amara Graf, in fact, do focus on forms of popular culture as a different possibility for analyzing and understanding *Caramelo*. The novel barrages readers with allusions to popular media from the mid-twentieth century. Typically, references to Latinx figures or culture are highlighted, especially from film and television. Ontiveros suggests that these allusions are Cisneros's tribute these figures,

drawing attention to their impact not just for Latinx people, but for Anglo-Americans too; the references are not outliers but representative of "the everyday experience" of Latinxs (194). Conjuring familiar images like Betty Boop, the Three Stooges, and Lay-Z-Boy furniture in conjunction with *telenovelas* and Crí-Crí the Singing Cricket creates an interesting contrast between appearance and reality. Ontiveros aims to show how Chicanx people are in tune with and involved in the production of the United States' culture during the Sixties, an era he clearly links to the text by suggesting that Lala's history arises as a reimagining of the Chicanx movement. Though these popular images appear intermittently, they are an important part of accessing the novel for him, but, again, the references stress that the narrative is simply telling a truth.

Cisneros's historical footnotes add another layer to the novel, complicating the storytelling and challenging how audiences read the text. While Alumbaugh argues that the *rebozo* is a melding of the numerous narrative voices that inform the novel, *Caramelo*'s footnotes take on a non-fictional, authoritative voice: that of Cisneros herself. While the footnotes are at first vague and follow the plot so that Lala, Soledad, or some omniscient narrator could be providing them, Cisneros does insert herself into the footnotes and reveals herself to be their author in a reference to "A Waltz Without a Name." The composition, said to be written by Lala's grandfather Eleuterio, "[*proves*] *without a doubt [that] the family Reyes is directly descended from Spanish blood*" (122). This note, however, is footnoted itself and is given further clarification: "*This song was actually written by the author's great-grandfather, Enrique Cisneros Vásquez*" (123). Not only complicating the reader's understanding of the author's relationship to her

novel, this footnote serves to further complicate the truth/fiction dichotomy set up in *Caramelo*'s disclaimer. Cisneros's reference to her own grandfather adds another layer of confusion, providing presumably true facts but layering them inside the narrative and edifying her own voice as a clarifying, reliable one in the footnotes. Cisneros is simultaneously author and critic of her own book, inventing details and clarifying others as she moves through her project; the ironic invocation that begins the book must be taken seriously when Cisneros's footnotes are considered. The footnotes become a self-reflexive fact check both for the author and the reader as they progress through references that are both familiar and foreign.

Ellen McCracken reconsiders the way critics should approach *Caramelo* because, as I have alluded to already, it is a novel that is very aware of its agency as a literary text. McCracken calls Cisneros's text "avant-garde" and postmodern, being "almost instantaneously accepted into the American literary canon" (165). McCracken's and Alambaugh's analyses are contemporaneous but suggest different strategies for approaching the novel. McCracken notes the centrality of the *rebozo*, but her argument does not celebrate the "metaphor of narrative, family history, and ethnic identity" (167-8). She instead considers the ways that *Caramelo* and Cisneros herself perform ethnicity for an audience, with Cisneros posing for a publicity photo for the novel wrapped in a *rebozo*, "performing as a Latina" (168). McCracken's analysis is a bit more critical of *Caramelo* because it is a text that celebrates Chicanx life by making it into a spectacle; Cisneros's writing and her own performance indicate how the novel should be received and should operate, turning the *rebozo* and the *caramelo* hue into "the spectacle of

ethnicity that Celaya tries to recapture" (178). The novel, then, does not just lead readers to these images, but makes them grandiose and conspicuous to provide them with an ethnic performance that fulfills their expectations about what Latinx literature and Cisneros are capable of.

Though McCracken is slightly pessimistic about what *Caramelo* can accomplish, her analysis of the novel's footnotes is valuable for understanding the humorous undertones of the text. She notes the importance of Cisneros's "scholarly devices—namely, footnotes and a chronology" in bolstering her novel's status as postmodern fiction, and her commentary on *Caramelo*'s metafiction returns to the front matter's message: "Such techniques situate readers not only in the liminal space between genres but also in that between fiction and truth, invention and documentation" (179). McCracken, unlike other scholars, sees Cisneros's irony as a critical part of her narrative, and interestingly points out that the footnotes reinforce the disclaimer by furthering the truth/fiction binary that follows readers through the novel. The problem for McCracken is that Cisneros wants to present both inventions and truth while remaining credible. She creates an ethnic spectacle successfully, convincing readers like Sayers, Hoffert, and Kaplan that *Caramelo* purports truth about the Mexican-American experience, but Cisneros fails herself, "undermin[ing] her role as an ethnographer" by dismissing the novel as *puro cuento* in the subtitle (180). The critical reader remains in the liminal space she describes, unable to come to terms with how Cisneros's authorial voice constructs truth or fiction.

Following McCracken's discussion, I would like to suggest that the *rebozo* symbolism is not sufficient in reading *Caramelo*'s footnotes efficiently. The footnotes do not follow the guidelines provided by the *rebozo* structure because they do not weave into the novel cleanly, but in fact stick out and draw attention to themselves because of their difference from Lala's narration. The narrative voice changes to Cisneros in these moments, using what Amara Graf[5] calls "a textual element characteristic of academic writing [that] underscores her interest in guiding the critical dialogue surrounding the novel," allowing her to "[enter] the critical discussion surrounding her work" (1). She posits that Cisneros uses the footnotes as self-analytical moments where she can reflect on her own writing and the implications of the Chicanx references she includes in the narrative, assuring that her ethnic performance garners the correct reader response. The footnotes interrupt the reading experience, not just by causing a page turn or by diverting the reader's attention, but by inserting a second or sometimes third voice into the novel. The multiplicitious *rebozo* textile disappears, and instead Cisneros uses the footnotes to draw out specific cultural references and call them into question. Cisneros is undoubtedly aware of her own literary agency by the time *Caramelo* is published, and her use of critical footnotes shows her intention not to conform to an accepted literary tradition, but to oppose it and actively work against it. She uses Lala to establish the *rebozo* as a tool for understanding the novel, but then ironically inserts her own voice into the footnotes, disallowing the novel to read as a woven shawl. If anything, Cisneros recognizes this

[5] Though I use Graf to discuss Cisneros's use of footnotes, her essay, "Mexicanized Melodrama: Sandra Cisneros' Literary Translation of the Telenovela in *Caramelo,*" is concerned with how *Caramelo* aims to elevate the popular *telenovela* form to a literary genre.

critical tendency towards Chicanx assimilation into the United States' literary canon and critiques it by returning to the source, reevaluating the Anglo-American recollection of the 1960s and the decade's Chicanx activism.

From Reassurance to Recuperation: Señor Wences, Raquel Welch, Viva, and María Sabina

I am interested in looking at these often-footnoted references to examine how, in forcing them out of the *rebozo* narrative structure, Cisneros draws attention to the complexities of Anglo-American historical knowledge and the place of ethnic others inside the mainstream's understanding of these references. If, as I argued earlier, critics find utility and pleasure in assessing the novel as an inclusive, realistic vision of Chicanx life, what is the sweetness that Cisneros herself distills from the *caramelo* hue? For her, the pleasure and the value seem both to come thanks to the irony she is slyly including. While the cultural references are reassuring and comforting for non-Chicanx readers, Cisneros disrupts attachments and assumptions about the historical moments she conjures for her own enjoyment but also as a way to point out the artifice of the emotional appeal of references to the 1960s. Cisneros understands the critical currency of her writing, but also wants to challenge the process and, seemingly, enjoy the results; the dualism of the *caramelo* color again here is relevant, but now as a structure that mimics the scholarly discourse surrounding the text and Cisneros's own intentions to subvert expectations.

Cisneros's historical footnotes succeed as subversive interruptions because, for the most part, they reference details in passing that do not crucially affect the novel's overall plot. Critics and reviewers persist with readings that privilege the historical,

realistic, and assimilationist possibilities of *Caramelo* because the footnotes reference familiar, assuring details. These footnotes covertly challenge their contents in the same way Cisneros ironically begins her novel. Still, the context she provides adds another dimension to Lala's narrative and often provides an alternative viewpoint to the Anglo-American vision of the reference. For example, Lala describes her father befriending a man in a holding cell in Chicago because he also speaks Spanish. With no fanfare or emphasis, the man introduces himself as "Wenceslao Moreno* to serve you" (215). Had Cisneros not made note of the name, this ancillary character could fade into the background after this scene and have no bearing on the plot; readers might even presume that he is invented without the critical insertion of the footnote. Instead, what becomes clear thanks to Cisneros's entrance into the narrative is that Moreno, better known as Señor Wences, famously appeared on *The Ed Sullivan Show* as a ventriloquist (221). Without Cisneros's intervention, Wences's fame would go unnoticed. This technique reassures readers but is particularly startling given the evidence she provides about his appearances on the hugely popular *Ed Sullivan Show*. Wences is relatively unknown to a modern reader, but Cisneros reintroduces him in her novel. Despite numerous appearances on *Ed Sullivan*—a platform that famously highlighted and introduced important popular figures in the 1960s—Wences remains obscure. His appearance and the history attached to the reference is an alarming moment that sparks a question about authenticity.

Wences's appearance in *Caramelo* could easily be glossed over as an interesting detail that adds depth and truth to the Reyes' family history. Reading the novel forces

acknowledgement of Wences, but why should he not already be known as a popular figure from the Sixties? Here the novel begins to challenge Anglo-American attachment to the decade by critiquing the figures who are remembered and romanticized. Cisneros uses the *Ed Sullivan Show* not to refer to a pivotal moment like the Beatles' famous appearance, but instead to challenge her audience to look at a familiar source in a different way. She notes in her footnote that Wences was, indeed, an important figure for Latinx viewers because he "*was one of the first Latinos*" seen on television that was "*actually Latino*" and not a caricature; Wences was a source of pride for Latinx people (221). By locating a sense of identity and pride within Wences, Cisneros pushes against an Anglo-American audience's expectations and revisits history to revise it. Though Wences is not familiar to white readers, his historical relevance is pointed out as important to and valuable for the Latinx community. Why then has he faded into obscurity while other cultural figures of the Sixties remain at the helm of the nostalgia and longing for the decade?

Returning to Wences's performance itself may provide some answers to why he has disappeared from the accepted canon of Sixties' imagery and why Cisneros chooses to include him within her footnoted information. A performance from the March 20, 1966 broadcast of *Ed Sullivan* showcases Wences's virtuosic use of three puppets: Johnny, a young boy performed in a falsetto, Pedro, a crass baritone conjured from a disembodied head in a box, and Cecilia Chicken, a skittish alto-voiced hen. Wences's technique is put on display as he switches between his own voice and that of the puppets, with all four conversing and interacting. Cisneros notes his *latinidad* in her novel, and at first it may

not seem evident. Wences' ethnicity comes to the surface during his performance, though, and even someone unfamiliar with Wences could recognize his *castellano* accent, introducing his surname as Wen-thess rather than Wen-sess. His accent itself challenges the established notion that he is a sense of Latinx pride. Cisneros's details are evident as Wences performs with his "elegant" tuxedo and accent on display, but, as a Spaniard, is he fit to represent Lala's *latinidad* or is he just a white European (221)? Wences carefully adjusts between his puppets, but the true performance seems to be his attempt to convey his own ethnic difference. His formalwear and white complexion conceal the accent that becomes so essential to his stage persona and brings humor to the performance.

In Wences's case, ventriloquism is not just a performance tool, but a possible indicator as to why his legacy and his place in popular culture has been compromised. His vaudeville-influenced performance style points out his difference by revealing his accent, but it is important to keep the imitative quality of ventriloquism in mind. Wences's ordinary European appearance makes his exaggerated characters more entertaining; the contrast between the elegant Wences and the ruffian Pedro is comical and projects Wences's *latinidad* from his accent onto the humor of the dummy. His *castellano* never disappears during the performance, but Wences can pass it off onto his characters, racializing the puppets to divert attention away from his own identity. Cultural critic Esther Romeyn theorizes that vaudeville techniques like ventriloquism, in attempting raise lowbrow culture to an art form, problematically maintain bias against ethnic others, relegating them to "a spectacle existing for the entertainment of the emerging middle classes" (132). Wences's performance becomes McCracken's ethnic

spectacle, performing *latinidad* for a mass-market audience to consume on the *Ed Sullivan Show*. Still, though, he has disappeared from the archive of important Sixties' cultural figures. Wences's ventriloquism does not bolster feelings of American exceptionalism that are maintained and celebrated through remembrance of the period, but instead points out a tendency toward racial stereotypes and biases that were thought to be eliminated during the era; Wences's performances become locations of racial biases and stereotypes that must be hidden to maintain the political narrative of the Civil Rights movement. His ethnicity—whether valid or not—is put up as a commodity for Anglo-Americans to enjoy. Cisneros's ironic invocation returns in her reference to Wences by pointing out the fragility of 1960s popular culture. Latinxs are proud of Wences, imagining their own successes by praising his, but Wences must be subdued and kept on the margins of Sixties culture to maintain the dominant Anglo-American nostalgia. Knowing Wences's faded relevancy and the implications of his work, Cisneros reinvigorates him by including him in *Caramelo*. This inclusion provides a reimagined, corrected view of what Wences means to Latinx people, placing him into Lala's family history and elevating him to cultural relevancy once again rather than just a token susceptible to exploitation.

Cisneros's irony enters the novel in the moment that she interrupts the plot with Wences. She provokes readers with an unfamiliar image from the Sixties, though his status as an important source of ethnic pride is clear, too. The detail about Wences becomes a model for how Cisneros calls white mainstream culture into question. While typical readings of her work follow her mock apology, ignoring the narratives lies,

Cisneros aims to confront details thought to be untrue and rehistoricize them. She ridicules her audience's narrow understanding of history—especially references to the 1960s—in a humorous way that allows her to covertly challenge Anglo-American sentiment and memory. Cisneros takes pleasure in her own humor, but, more importantly, she calls for a reconsideration of the role of history in her writing. She is critical of the fixedness that her references have, and the dual challenge/assurance she presents through history suggest a reevaluation of the way readers engage with history. Cisneros, echoing theorist John Lukacs' writings, asserts that history "is open and never closed," always open for reassessment and "multiple jeopardy" (9). She challenges typical associations with history to reconsider its meaning outside the mainstream; *Caramelo* addresses the gap between popular understanding and the true context of the 60's images it presents. Her humor becomes apparent in her desire to reimagine the period as a more accurate, truly inclusive space, rather than one that reinforces her white readers' experience.

Cisneros does not only utilize unfamiliar or lost popular culture references to challenge the prevailing narrative of the 1960s, however. In the final section of the novel, the Reyes move from Chicago to Texas, and Lala is disappointed that she must relinquish her bedroom to her Grandmother. She tries to imagine a time in the future when she will be able to reclaim her space, describing "Raquel Welch's† poster for *One Million Years B.C.*" stuck up on the wall, a remnant of the previous tenants (314). As with Wences, Raquel Welch is footnoted, forcing the reader to look more closely at this textual moment. Unlike the ventriloquist, Welch is a much more recognizable cultural figure from the 1960s, and the poster described is particularly noteworthy. Welch's appearance

in *One Million Years B.C.* was her breakout film role and cemented her status as a pin-up and sex symbol of the 1960s thanks to the fur bikini[6] she dons for the promotional poster and during the entirety of the film. It is this poster, hanging in the Reyes' crowded Chicanx home, that propelled Welch's career and made her a cultural icon. Cisneros chooses to highlight the actress's name, leading the reader to consider the reference and draw conclusions about its relevancy. Cisneros's explanation of Welch complicates this possible reading, though.

Welch's appearance at this point in the novel could possibly be read as a challenge to Lala's own emerging identity. Returning to some of the established critical concerns with the text, it is possible to posit that Lala projects herself into the iconic image or strives towards it since it is indicative of Welch's entrance into the mainstream culture; Lala may see Welch's success and hope that she can somehow achieve the same kind of triumph. This possible connection dissolves when Cisneros interrupts, though. She explains the footnoted reference, describing the *Star* gossip magazine's suggestion that Welch's real, Latina name is Raquel Tejada; Cisneros suggests that "*no one knew* [this fact] *except Raquel Tejada. Maybe not even Raquel Welch"* (317). Cisneros briefly investigates Welch's possible *latinidad*, suggesting that it could have been celebrated had it been more evident. The information is factually accurate: Welch was born as Jo Raquel Tejada to a Bolivian father and American mother. She establishes a difference between Welch and Tejada as if the well-known actress, Raquel Welch, and the unknown Raquel

[6] Welch's fur bikini, though not the recipient of much scholarly attention, has obtained status as a cultural artifact of the 1960s, as evidenced by its standalone *Wikipedia* entry.

Tejada are different entities. Cisneros points out the fragility of the Raquel "Welch" persona in this moment. Welch masks her *latinidad*, entering the popular consciousness of the United States and remaining prominent even in the present day. Lala, in her search for the *caramelo* she sees in Calendaria, pauses for a moment, perhaps looking for herself inside the actress's veiled Latinx identity. Welch has transcended race, becoming a popular image despite her racial difference. Cisneros again returns to irony to point out the artifice of Welch's iconic status and to problematize the ways readers ground their understanding of the novel in their attachment to its historical references.

The ironic authorial voice that Cisneros opens the novel with again enters as she further explores Welch's fragility, contrasting her unknowable *latinidad* with familiar images of Chicanx culture. Lala explains that, until the Reyes can figure out how to remove Welch's poster from the wall, "la Virgen de Guadalupe and Raquel both share a space" (314). Lala's description conflates the orthodoxy of *la Virgen* with the pinup in a playful way. Cisneros playfully contrasts Welch, a Sixties, white-passing sex symbol, with a Mexican religious idol. Both stand as possible figures of feminine authority for Lala, one of her Chicanx roots and one of her hope towards American assimilation. Lala's options appear to be binary oppositions, but neither is ultimately a sufficient idol. Cisneros does not affirm Welch's non-racialized status despite her success and cultural import, nor does Lala: it is an impossible choice between abandoning her *latinidad* and Catholic orthodoxy. This moment creates humor but also points out the construction of US ideals and culture and how it is insufficient for Lala and for Cisneros. In contrasting these two women, the fragility surrounding Welch's public persona and legacy becomes

apparent. Cisneros is critical of Welch and calls for a reconsideration by placing her next to another powerful Latina icon. Neither is adequate, though Welch ends up worse off, stripped of her ethnicity in order to obtain popular status. Cisneros is challenging the attachment and admiration of Welch by addressing the truth behind her pinup persona.

Cisneros does not only use footnoted prose to reference Sixties' popular culture, though Lala's in-text details are not nearly as disruptive as the footnotes. There are numerous references made to familiar artists, products, and images both in Lala's narrative voice and Cisneros's explanatory footnotes. Perhaps the most direct references to Sixties' pop culture appear through Lala's friend Viva. Named appropriately, Viva is boisterous and loud in contrast to Lala's reserved personality, and her appearance in the novel helps to contextualize Lala's coming-of-age experience. Viva's character is developed through numerous cultural references that contribute to her vibrant character: she mentions seeing Janis Joplin in concert, she imagines her and Lala "writing together like Lennon-McCartney," and she compliments Lala for looking like Cher (326, 330, 336). Viva's engagement with the real world of the 1960s is clear from the quick barrage of images that appears in her dialogue. Her everyday conversations with Lala reference popular culture in a way that shows her active participation in it. Viva's references do not need footnotes, as they are seemingly ordinary, understood, and a part of her identity; she is engaged and participating in the culture Cisneros challenges. These references comfort readers rather than challenge or discredit Sixties culture. Graf notes that Cisneros is concerned with creating "a text with a high degree of verisimilitude" so that readers can connect the world of the novel and the real world (4). Viva helps Cisneros to achieve this

realism, fluidly incorporating her favorite artists and celebrities into her daily conversations with Lala. There is no oppositional tone when Viva speaks because she is presently participating in the Sixties, and Cisneros wants to reassure readers that her narrative is not deceptive by validating their nostalgia for the time period. To oppose the 1960s with Viva's references would be too much of a challenge because she is a fictional imagining. Cisneros must ground the history in this fictional character to reinforce readers' realist expectations, though she cleverly inserts a critique elsewhere in the novel.

Perhaps the most openly challenging reference Cisneros makes is to María Sabina, a Mexican *curandera*, midway through Lala's retelling of her grandfather's history. She opens with a generalization about women "[having] a bit of the witch in them," marking Sabina's name with an asterisk leading to an explanatory footnote to further explain her "shamaness" status (192). This detail of the family history is not an abrupt challenge; it normalizes Mexican folk *curanderismo* by making it a common, feminine practice. Sabina is not an outsider nor is she unavailable to non-Mexicans. Cisneros further counters the possible difference that readers might associate with Sabina by linking her to popular figures of the 1960s' United States. The first mention of her name in the narrative leads to a footnote written in Cisneros's more scholarly voice, describing her relevance outside of Lala's story as a provider of psychedelic mushrooms:

> *Hippies and vagabond anthropologists, artists, students, foreigners, the spoiled children of the rich, the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, Bob Dylan, the wives of politicians, the devout and the curious, anyone who was somebody and a whole*

string of nobodies came to see María Sabina and gain a shortcut to nirvana. (195)

Cisneros conjures images of the hazy, drug-fueled culture of the Sixties in this footnote, linking Sabina's brand of witchcraft to United States history, again, to help familiarize the Latinx figure for white readers. This conflation, while reassuring the truth of the reference, is complicated. Though Sabina's role in history is documented and Cisneros accurately represents historical accounts, readers may question the authenticity because of how startling this detail is. The Beatles, Rolling Stones, and Dylan are all foundational figures of Sixties U.S. culture. Cisneros's explanation here may be challenged as fiction rather than fact, returning to her opening irony once again. Though Sabina is a Mexican *curandera*, Cisneros posits that she is a foundational figure for the dominant Sixties' culture, complicating readers' notions about what is and is not realistic within the novel.

In blurring the truth and fiction of Sabina's legacy, Cisneros's candy/coin binary comes into focus again. Is this explanatory passage a way to keep readers or herself entertained, or is it usefully unearthing lost history? Her footnote explaining Sabina is uncharacteristically long, occupying a whole page, and begins almost like a folktale: "*In the times of love and peace, an invasion of illegal aliens descended into Oaxaca, land of the* siete moles*, and ascended into the clouds of Hautla de Jiménez*" (195). Cisneros's humor here is clear, mocking Sabina's visitors as "illegal aliens" and even making a joke about Oaxaca. This footnote, then, becomes difficult for Anglo-Americans to read, especially if they are attempting to understand the novel as a realistic glimpse into the Chicanx experience. However, by writing the footnote as its own tale inside the larger

framework of the novel, Cisneros ironically suggests to the audience that they need not pay too much attention to her exploration of Sabina. The footnote reads as one of the so-called healthy lies that she apologizes for before she even begins the narrative, even ending with a direct reference to the reader, bringing them into the alleged fiction of Sabina, who asks "*Was it all right that I have away the mushrooms?* Tú, what do you say?" (195). Cisneros goes as far as clarifying Sabina's question: "Tú*, reader, she is asking you*" (195). The question is posed as an exit from the fiction she has woven through her footnote. Cisneros draws the reader back to reality after her description of Sabina's life and legacy, making sure that they know that they have just heard an account of fiction. This assurance, of course, is false, and allows the expected reading experience to continue, uninterrupted by Cisneros's own momentary humor. Cisneros tells the truth, giving an accurate portrait of Sabina, but it does not conform to expectations, so she dismisses it as *puro cuento*. The hidden truth of Sabina is sweet like *caramelo*, but only for those who are willing to reconsider the historical context.

Conclusion

The opening irony of *Caramelo* accordingly should be viewed as a controlling factor in how the novel is analyzed. Cisneros's historical footnotes focus in on the 1960s as a moment that needs reconsideration. If critics see the footnotes as Cisneros's attempt to mediate the conversation surrounding the novel, this must be because her references disrupt traditional historical understanding in a way that would make the work inaccessible to Anglo-American readers. Cisneros knows that her writing has gained currency as exemplary of the Latinx experience, but she does not want to completely

concede her authorial power. Under the surface of the array of historical moments lies her challenge to the sentiment and affect that ground the novel as realistic and valuable for white U.S. readers. Leen argues that Cisneros's novel should not be reduced to "a palatable, Third World commodity" by the Anglo-American mainstream (188). Cisneros, too, covertly acknowledges this possibility and does guide readers to an assessment that paints her work as an assimilationist celebration, though her underlying message challenges this anticipated outcome.

Caramelo succeeds not in its capacity to uphold prevailing narratives about Chicanx integration into the white U.S. mainstream, but in its ironic resistance to the history it recounts. Readers who have reacted to the novel clearly recognize 1960's images as familiar moments, and their analyses highlight how—because Cisneros includes these images—the U.S. culture has accepted and exalted Chicanxs. Nostalgia for the Sixties becomes a shared experience that stabilizes any uncertainties about Lala's and Cisneros's panethnic difference. This stability is false, though, providing security and trailing readers away from the irony that is included in the historical footnotes Cisneros adds as explanations. *Caramelo* aims to reconfigure the understanding of U.S. history by providing an alternative vantage point, providing what Lukacs calls "an increase in the quality of our knowledge" (7). Cisneros's careful oscillation between verisimilitude and fiction, maybe never landing exactly on one, mimics her symbolic *rebozo*, but she confronts her readers and provides them with easily accessible readings, keeping the potential for subversion under the surface. If readers do approach the text playfully, with humor as Cisneros does, they find the potential for a recuperative, corrective vision of

history that is not controlled by their desire to engage with an ethnic spectacle. McCracken writes that Cisneros "invites readers to question the ostensible objectivity and truth of historical documents by coming to terms with the subjectivity and fictionality of such records" (179). *Caramelo*'s objective is not to allow for a cultural border crossing that integrates Chicanx into the Anglo-American tradition, but rather to place all readers on the limns, challenging us to engage with fact and fiction in ways that weave together disparate accounts of history. *Caramelo* is confrontational and playful, slyly refusing its status as an ethnic commodity, but it still allows those who aren't in on the joke to enjoy the show.

II.

Activism, Genre, and the Subterranean *latinidad* of Carmen Maria Machado's *Her Body and Other Parties*

> And, like, I was raised with weird Latinx gender shit that I'm still trying to unload and unpack.
>
> —Carmen Maria Machado, May 4, 2018 (@carmenmmachado)

As I move from Cisneros, I aim to keep her textual artifacts—*caramelo* skin and the heirloom *rebozo*—in mind. Though I argue that these devices have led critics to inefficient readings, they do serve an important purpose in *Caramelo*. Cisneros constructs signposts that make her cultural difference legible; non-Chicanx readers can use these two symbols to begin to empathize with and understand *chicanidad* at a very basic level. Even if, as I have argued, these guides are not Cisneros's dominant narrative strategy, her use of *caramelo* and *rebozo* as cultural artifacts provides a basis for how other Latinx writers might organize their works. Cisneros's prevalence in Latinx studies and in American literature affords her the opportunity to set this kind of standard and control the conversation surrounding her own work. If her strategy works, how can less-prolific Latinx writers use her techniques to give their audience access to a similar cultural difference? Furthermore, if Cisneros's footnotes coyly combat assimilationist readings of her novel, in what ways do other Latinx texts challenge expectations about their ethnic authenticity?

Carmen Maria Machado's writing, not unlike Cisneros's, is ripe with activist potential. The eight short stories that comprise her 2017 debut *Her Body and Other Parties* weave elements of science fiction, fantasy, and realism together to startle hegemonic notions of gender and sexuality. Where Cisneros crafts a novel that corrects and elucidates a Chicanx presence in contemporary U.S. culture, Machado's stories are particularly relevant in the wake of new feminist movements like #MeToo, body positivity, and queer activism. In some ways, her investment in these movements informs the way her work is received. Lila Shapiro's profile of Machado for *Vulture*, "Misogny Is Boring as Hell," even begins by situating *HBAOP* as a collection that "was published just two days before news broke" exposing Harvey Weinstein and setting the contemporary Hollywood iteration of #MeToo into motion (Shapiro). Shapiro's profile comes almost one year after *HBAOP*'s debut, a period in which it received countless accolades including being named a finalist for the 2017 National Book Award, winning the National Book Critics Circle's John Leonard Prize, and, in a more popular realm, being produced as a television series by FX.

Machado's collection garnered acclaim in the modern feminist moment for good reason, but it is perhaps the author's own involvement in #MeToo that best conveys her role in this conversation. In May of 2018, Machado took to her Twitter account to supplement accusations against the Dominican-American author Junot Díaz by Zinzi Clemmons and Monica Byrne. She recounts how Díaz "went off on me for twenty minutes" after she asked him about his "protagonist's unhealthy, pathological relationship with women" (@carmenmmachado "During"). This anecdote spans several

tweets, but Machado makes her point clear, recalling "how quickly his veneer of progressivism and geniality fell away; how easily he slid into bullying and misogyny" (@carmenmmachado "But"). Machado's experience with Díaz acts more as supporting evidence than exposé. Her purpose is not to add her name to a list of accusers, but instead to corroborate the accusers' attempts to disrupt misogynistic norms. Sharing her experience not only added her name to the #MeToo narrative, but also gave Machado's writing traction and relevance. Shapiro, whose profile almost exclusively deals with how Machado "offer[ed] a signal boost" to Díaz's accusers, describes how the stories "have reverberated […] with the prophetic force of a soothsayer's divinations" (Shapiro). *HBAOP* emerged and exists as a reminder of the forces that have propelled contemporary feminist discourses to a fixture of the mainstream U.S. consciousness. These are the prevailing factors that influence readings of the collection, but not the only ones that require consideration.

Machado's tweets about Díaz are not a simple dismissal of the author, though; while her role as a participant and activist in #MeToo is clear, she acknowledges possible trouble in exposing an eminent Latinx writer. She does not back down from her allegations but does show an understanding of the complexities surrounding the accusations against Díaz: "And it sucks for a very particular reason: people of color are so underrepresented in publishing, we have deep attachments to those who succeed. People are defensive about JD because there are so few high-profile Latinx authors. I get it." (@carmenmmachado). Machado carefully navigates through her experience because there are clear stakes at play. As a Latinx writer herself, she is reluctant to contribute to a

conversation that may damage the reputation of an important Latinx voice because representation is so important. Díaz's important legacy presents a challenge to Machado but also further develops her literary identity. While she ultimately shares her story, she is hesitant to do so because she is in some way trying to flesh out a space for herself in the Latinx literary tradition that Díaz helped develop. Machado seemingly does not want to begin to dismantle a literary category that her writing exists within.

That being said, *latinidad* is not overtly present within *HBAOP*, complicating Machado's self-identification as a Latinx writer. The only clear ethnic marker at all comes not in the collection's fiction, but instead in its front matter with Machado's dedication to her Cuban grandfather, "quien me contó mis primeros cuentos, y sigue siendo mi favorito[7]" (i). This dedication provides a clear connection between Machado's heritage and her literature. Storytelling is contextualized here as an ethnic tradition that Machado follows through her work. She need not prove her position or leave clear signs of *latinidad* in her writing, but her work's connection to gender activism does seem to ignore this dedication and the collection's potential as Latinx literature. My aim is to trace *HBAOP*'s *latinidad* among the complexities of Machado's genre-bending, feminist stories. With the lack of easy-to-locate ethnic signposts, the body itself stands out as a possible artifact that can help read the stories. The prevalence of the body—itself made central in the collection's title—supports Machado's feminist activist role, but is it possible that the body can become a site for the emergence of *latinidad*? The collection's dedication further supports a Latinx reading of *HBAOP*. Like Cisneros's *rebozo*, the

[7] "who told me my first stories, and still is my favorite"

female body, present in every story in the collection, can guide readers to analyses that privilege the new feminist movement. *Latinidad* is still there somewhere, hiding under the surface, waiting to be embodied.

If *HBAOP* presents the female body as a tool that aids in producing easy, consistent readings, the haunting disembodied figures that riddle several of her stories turn the spectacle of the body into a nonevent. This conflict between presence and absence is especially evident in "Eight Bites," and "Real Women Have Bodies." "Eight Bites" tells the story of a woman who undergoes bariatric surgery but is left with the baggage of her old body haunting her home. "Real Women Have Bodies," presumably the collection's title track, takes place in a reality where women are suddenly disappearing, and the narrator discovers the transparent ghosts of women stitched inside the prom dresses of the shop she works at. These figurations are reminders of the body not only as a site of celebration and reverence—the titular *Other Parties* perhaps—but also as places where unresolved conflicts emerge and become even more startlingly apparent. The women in Machado's stories interact with bodies that are lacking and absent, and their presence suggests a conflict that is not easily resolvable. Whether ghosts or unknowable, disembodied figures, these conflicts interrupt the stories' underlying themes of gender and sexuality, instead inspiring incoherent readings that are pessimistic about possible progress and acceptance. I would suggest that the disembodied are even more important than the physical bodies in Machado's collection because of their occlusive nature; these ghosts are not supernatural generic conventions and require careful consideration as integral parts of her narratives.

Machado places herself inside both new feminist and Latinx literary traditions, though one identity category has received more attentions than the other since her collection's publication. She seems to lean more toward contemporary popular culture in her activist role to provide her audience with familiar themes and tropes. Rather than opting for ethnic subversion, making her ethnicity legible, Machado errs on the safe side to control the conversation surrounding *HBAOP* and at least somewhat assure literary success. It is interesting that Machado also opts for safety in her experience with Díaz, who she clearly paints as a misogynist though she struggles in dismissing his important Latinx voice. Her hesitance is made physical by the absent bodies in her collection. These bodies produce conflict that lurks under the surface of the stories, hinting towards larger issue and simultaneously altering the spectacle of the female body to an anticlimax. The stories are broad enough in their gender politics that inclusion and intersectionality do not even come in to play; hiding in the subtext somewhere is a struggle to come to term with *latinidad*, made visible through Machado's imagery. I argue that, rather than acting as an outright celebration of new feminist activism, *Her Body and Other Parties* conceals ethnic tensions, diverting readers with popular horror conventions and ghostly bodies that physicalize the collection's absent *latinidad*.

Genre Trouble: "Simultaneously Defying and Attracting Categorization"

The recency of Machado's collection means that it has not received much scholarly attention. I turn to the collection's reception in order to begin to think about how identifying its literary status can help in finding outlets to analyze the stories further. Though praise is common among the reviews, the authors of these critiques are

challenged when it comes to labelling *Her Body and Other Parties* under a heading of one particular genre. Parul Seghal, John Powers, and Sean Guynes offer reviews of the collection that struggle to label the collection efficiently, which leads to ineffective readings. Machado's collection does nod to science fiction and psychological horror and draws on storytelling traditions, as her dedication to her grandfather suggests. However, identifying *HBAOP* as a collection of disparate genres does not seem to be an available strategy for reviewers, and the generic confusion adds to the tension bubbling underneath the surface of Machado's narratives.

Seghal describes the collection as almost folkloric in the *New York Times*, titling her review "Fairy Tales About the Fears Within" and calling Machado's stories "eight fables" about the present state of the world (Seghal). This comparison is perhaps not surprising considering the ways contemporary readers are revisiting tales by the Brothers Grimm and Hans Christen Andersen and rediscovering certain gory, unsettling elements[8], but Seghal seems convinced that the stories are, in some sense, modern fairy tales rather than narratives that contain folkloric tropes. She doubles down on her chosen label, calling the text "a love letter" to the genre and praising Machado as being "fluent in the language of fairy tales" (Seghal). It is surprising that Seghal is so committed to this label in her review, and it seems reductive to think about stories that are full of complicated, intersectional issues as being comparable to fairy tales. She is not alone in this choice,

[8] Published within a month of Machado's collection is Hilary Mitchell's "12 Fucked-Up Stories That Disney Fans Won't Believe Are Real," a Buzzfeed.com listicle that unearths the shocking details within the source materials for several Disney films. Mitchell's writing is a good indicator both of the fact that the general public is reconsidering the "truth" about fairy tales and that Seghal's review makes Machado's collection accessible and relevant to a contemporary, non-literary audience.

though; *NPR*'s John Powers also hints at the folkloric undertones of *HBAOP* but adds that the collection "cross-pollinat[es] fairy tales, horror movies, TV shows and a terrific sense of humor" (Powers). The comparison to fairy tales persists for Powers even among a host of other popular genres; it is almost as if connecting the stories to a familiar genre makes them more sensible and accessible.

The fairy tale label is further complicated by *HBAOP*'s first story, "The Husband Stitch," which both Powers and Seghal praise in their reviews. The story is a pseudo-*Handmaid's Tale* with less overt violence and more wit; its narrator recounts stories she was told as a child, admitting that she is "unafraid to make more of them" as the reader is left to wonder about the mysterious green ribbon tied around her neck (7). The story is compelling, and Powers even makes the claim that it "is destined to be anthologized for decades" (Powers). Machado, then, could presumably be endorsing the folkloric label and even leading her readers to it, but her narrator is as pessimistic at the same time: "Everyone knows these stories—that is, everyone tells them, even if they don't know them—but no one ever believes them" (5-6). Though Seghal leans heavily into her assertion that Machado is crafting fairy tales, the narrator in the collection's opening story seems to at once acknowledge and dismiss this notion. She acknowledges the possibility that her story, like others, will be passed down, told and retold as a new fairy tale, but ultimately dismissed as mere fantasy. "The Husband Stitch," then betrays Machado's dedication, decentering the Latinx storytelling tradition and denying herself this voice. Seghal's review provides an almost expected label for the stories but misses

the mark in its ability to address the text's contradictions. *HBAOP* is aware of all the strangeness it contains and does not make it easy to identify what exactly it is.

Guynes, reviewing the collection for *World Literature Today*, picks up on some of the popular genres Powers suggests as potential genres, but he refuses to categorize the stories neatly inside one generic box. Guynes describes the stories as an amalgamation of "gothic, fan fiction, and TV recap" that never truly lands anywhere determinate, instead "simultaneously def[ying] and attract[ing] categorization" (70). Attempting to classify Machado's writing is indeed an attractive way to show mastery over it, even though its blended genres and styles actively resist clean identification. Guynes smartly refuses to categorize the collection, though, and he completely ignores the possibility of the fairy tale as a lens for reading *HBAOP*. Guynes does give a more considered perspective, aware of the complexities of Machado's stories; however, categorization becomes difficult as more choices are introduced. Guynes's choices for possible genres themselves are an odd mixture: he suggests the popular forms of fan fiction and television with the literary gothic, contrasting traditions that even further destabilizes *HBAOP*'s status. His review echoes and expands upon something Powers picks up on when he says that Machado is "[s]teeped in pop storytelling" (Powers). The collection presents itself as a publicly-consumable tome of genre stories, though there is possibility to read it as erudite literary fiction. These reviewers attempt to place a finger on the collection and label it in order to show that they understand what the text is—or perhaps is not—doing.

Machado's own response to questions of genre seems to shift as time has progressed and as her writing has gained currency. In a 2015 interview with Sabrina

Vourvoulias from the Latinx news source *Al Día*, Machado is asked about her literary style and invites exploration and fluidity rather than rigidly defining her work. She responds first by asserting that she writes according to her own convictions and that she "love[s] the interstices" that come with being a writer who writes "non-realism in a literary style" (Vourvoulias). There is a connection between Guynes's review and Machado's self-analysis in that both acknowledge difficulty of Machado's generic multiplicity. She is happy to occupy a space somewhere between two contrasting headings. Interestingly, this response follows a brief list that Machado gives to categorize her fiction: "metafiction, liminal fantasy, magical realism, all written in a literary style" (Vourvoulias). This assertion, unlike her praise of possible intersections, complicates identifying *HBAOP* and, in a way, undoes the ambiguity she follows with. It is worth noting that Machado had sold the collection at the time of this interview, but it was not published until almost two years later (Vourvoulias).

Combatting all the reviews, Machado herself has expressly commented on her own status as a writer through her Twitter account, often addressing the same kinds of contradictions that Guynes's review suggests. Recently, Machado seems to take greater issue with the rift between genre and literary fiction and, implicitly, the way her work exists somewhere between the two. For example, she has addressed a December 21, 2018 tweet by Matthijs Krul which claims "90% of so-called 'literary fiction' is garbage and people are absolutely right to prefer reading fantasy, sci-fi, and romance novels" (@McCaineNL). Her response quotes his original tweet, expressing her frustration with his opinion: "*begins pushing boulder up the hill, again*" (@carmenmmachado).

Machado is as to-the-point as she can be with her response, denoting the struggle that she faces as a writer who actively produces work that fits inside both categories. The metaphorical boulder is being pushed to address a simple question: why can't writing be both popular and literary? Seghal, Powers, and Guynes show that the contrasting opinions apply to *HBAOP*, and both Machado's earlier and recent responses indicate that she is aware of the contradictions but does not find them productive. This is not an isolated incident for Machado, either: she also endorses a tweet by Colin Dickey that argues "'literary fiction,' 'literature' (or the 'literary'), and 'classics' are three distinct, sometimes overlapping, categories of writing" and in December 2018 she responds to a since-deleted tweet, urging for a better awareness of "anti-intellectual and reductive" discourse between "genre & lit folks" (@colindickey, @carmenmmachado "*rubs"). The overlapping that Dickey describes in his tweet recurs throughout Machado's commentary on her writing. Contrasting these tweets with Machado's earlier interview with *Al Día* indicates a shift in the way she engages with her own work once it has been picked up by a major publishing house. She is smart to combat the rigid genre labels to begin to deconstruct the limitations that they place on her work as well as that of others. This new tone is possibly a way for her to control the conversation surrounding her work, though her stance ultimately remains unclear. With all the subterranean tension that is present in *HBAOP*, it may be more useful for Machado to keep readers guessing rather than provide them with tools to access the intricacies of her narratives.

I find it unproductive to try to place *HBAOP* under one heading, though I do see value in reading the collection as simultaneously occupying popular and literary

positions. While there are no ways to engage with something unidentifiable, *HBAOP* has options to choose from. Somewhere between high art and marketplace fiction, it occupies a liminal position that we should respect as valid and useful in analyzing the collection. If these stories exist between two genres, this is only a mimicking of the contradictory present and absent conflicts that are the centers of her stories. Seghal's efforts to identify the collection under a popular genre attempts to make it decipherable for a wide audience, albeit in a flawed manner, while Guynes's considered, more literary approach also evades clear identification. I suggest that pushing on these contrasting labels (as I aim to push on the contrasting conflicts within the stories) will only help to elucidate what readings can be achieved and what is beneath the collection's surface, ready to be illuminated.

"Horrific" Access, "Gothic" Subversion

Though I have concluded that it can be simultaneously popular and literary and that neither is more significant, I find it useful to categorize *HBAOP*'s contrasting generic identities with two terms: Horror and Gothic. For my purposes, the label of Horror applies to the popular conventions of cinematic horror discussed by Philip Tallon and Wheeler Winston Dixon, while Gothic refers to the traditions of the literary Gothic and modern science fiction as described by critics Elisabeth Anne Leonard, Monika M. Elbert, and Wendy Ryden. It is true that these terms are related, and it can be argued that Horror is a subset or derivative of the Gothic. However, my interest is not in fleshing out eighteenth-century generic differences, for example, between Matthew Lewis's *The Monk* and Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho*. Instead I aim to make these terms

useful in analyzing Machado's contemporary American short stories; these terms act as access points into her collection. *HBAOP*'s complexity and unusual contents necessitate logical points of entry, and I propose that these two terms can adequately express the dueling genres' implications.

I interpret the Horror in in Machado's writings as a tool that illuminates her work as accessible and familiar. I would like to return to Guynes's review briefly, as he does observe the Horror that I allude to. His review does seem to respect Machado's own desire not to be placed inside one specific category; however, Guynes does pick up on the folkloric undertones that Seghal brings into focus. He refuses to commit to a concise label, instead describing Machado's genre-bending stories as "horror fables" (70). As I made clear earlier, I do disagree with identifying these stories as fairy tales, though thinking about them through a lens of Horror makes them more accessible and understandable, especially considering the prevalence of Horror as a popular media genre. Guynes's identification aligns with what Tallon writes about Horror in his essay "Through a Mirror, Darkly: Art-Horror as a Medium for Moral Reflection." Tallon imagines Horror as a modern extension of Aristotle's narrative theory in *Poetics*, able to show us how "art interacts with, and disturbs, the way we see the world" (34). Horror, despite its use of the fantastic, is not meant to ostracize readers, but rather comfort them in a sense; the presence of supernatural or uncanny elements reifies reality. These tropes, though strange, are stabilizing and reassuring because they contrast the reader's lived experience. Horror is "rooted in what feels most safe and secure" according to Tallon, in order to illuminate readers' sense of security in real world institutions (39). Tallon sees

Horror as having didactic potential, but his argument ultimately centers access. By negating the monotonous experience of everyday events with unexpected, terrific utterances—Machado's disembodied figures, for example—the difference between truth and fiction become apparent. Fear provides stability, making readers aware that what they encounter in their experience with the text is only imagined.

Dixon's *A History of Horror* further contextualizes popular Horror as an established, accepted tradition in the United States' consciousness through the medium of film. While Dixon provides an extensive history that spans the late nineteenth century to the near present, my focus in his writing is on the period between 1940-1970, which he labels a "Rebirth" for the genre. Dixon asserts that Horror underwent a change and found a wider audience during the 1960s, moving away from the "burlesques" of classic monster images towards a "flat, unapologetic presentation of the world" (65, 72). Like Tallon, Dixon sees Horror as a tool that stabilizes verisimilitude despite the fear associated with it. Dixon's reading of this foundational period begins with Alfred Hitchcock's 1960 film *Psycho*, an "unsettling, riveting, and mesmerizing" imagining of mundane life, and ends with Roman Polanski's *Rosemary's Baby* in 1968, which he describes as "disturbingly convincing" (76, 107). He positions these films interestingly as plausible and startlingly so. Where Tallon is more optimistic, contrasting the terrifying elements of Horror with the relief that its contents are not real, Dixon suggests that Horror texts offer up startling replicas of familiar experiences. This is certainly relevant to Machado's stories, which rely on a grounded sense of reality to make the strange elements present that much more alarming. Machado's bodies are not countered by

unbelievably fantastic foes, but instead by easily imaginable ghosts. Dixon's writing works as a history of the genre, and is therefore more objective than Tallon's, though both critics come to similar conclusions. Horror as a label illuminates points of entry into texts through comparison and contrast with the real world. Whether seen as shockingly plausible or reassuringly impossible, the uncanny provides familiarity in what would otherwise be an unusual setting. In my understanding of *HBAOP*, Horror is Machado's strategy for making her conflicts plausible and realistic. She picks up on the conventions of the popular genre to secure a sense of verisimilitude rather than fantasy in her narratives.

If Horror is the term I use to show how *HBAOP* is accessible as a popular text, the Gothic is my way to investigate existing literary criticism that aids in reading the collection. As I alluded to earlier, identifying a literary text as Gothic places it under the banner of a tradition that extends back to the eighteenth century. For my purposes, examining the genre as a whole is unproductive and would diminish my interests in Machado's writing.[9] Instead, I am focusing on analyses of twentieth and twenty-first century American Gothic literature, particularly texts that challenge social norms in the way Machado's collection does. Elbert and Ryden, for example, discuss Gothic tropes in late-nineteenth century naturalism keeping in mind how "Gothic tropes come readily to the fore in our current cultural crises" (1). The uncanny that is traditionally associated

[9] This is not to say that I am ignoring Gothicism as an established tradition or nitpicking through the criticism to find scholars whose work is applicable to mine, as some of the tropes I discuss are undoubtedly present in even the earliest Gothic novels—Elbert and Ryden's description of the Gothic's ability to "evoke and confront the anxieties of an age" comes to mind as an example that applies both to the eighteenth and twenty-first centuries (1).

with the Gothic, whether it be in supernatural irruptions, ghosts, or something else inexplicable, work as reminders of relevant social issues according to these critics. It is easy to see then how Machado's blend of present and absent bodies suggests readings that privilege feminist activism; the supernatural elements of her stories become reminders of what Elbert and Ryden call cultural crises. These two critics do not argue that Gothic conventions simply elucidate social issues, instead suggesting that the tropes allow marginalized figures to "scream back to dominant hierarchies" (7). Gothic fiction has a subversive potential that cannot be ignored in my analysis considering Machado's self-appointed status as a feminist activist. Her use of the fantastic, while fraught with complexities that I will continue to examine, has this potential to fight against hegemonic forces. *HBAOP*'s subversive potential is made obvious by Machado's attempts to enter popular cultural discussions and movements.

More modern iterations of the classical Gothicism, like science fiction, also provide strategies for looking at Machado's stories as literary texts. Leonard writes of science fiction's potential to "[render] the invisible visible" in *The Cambridge Companion to Science Fiction*, like more traditional Gothic "reveal[ing] something about the era in which the stories were written" (257). To be clear, Leonard, Elbert, and Ryden discuss similar possibilities. While all are interested in the ways that Gothic brings cultural issues to the forefront, Leonard's discussion of the genre provides a direct contrast to my figuration of Horror. Gothic, rather than reassuring readers with familiar tropes and realism, "subverts any comfortable escape" (Leonard 257). The popularity and familiarity of Horror is not present within the Gothic, which attempts to unearth and

explain cultural issues through disruptive fantasy. The safety of reality is not possible in the Gothic because the oppressive nature of reality is being challenged. Again, identifying Machado's collection as a work that promotes new feminist ideals becomes clearer with this lens, but there are other avenues for exploration. My focus on *HBAOP*'s *latinidad* is less clearly related to Gothic disruption. For Leonard especially, race and ethnicity challenge the Gothic's subversive power because race is typically unclear or ignored because it is "irrelevant to the events of the story" (254). Machado seems to follow this generic convention, using it to her advantage to conceal ethnicity among evident feminist images. The Gothic allows her an escape from a Latinx label because its traditions do not typically work to challenge ethnic and racial tensions.

Gothic and Horror as generic categories both seem to reinforce expected readings of *HBAOP* and support Machado's attempts to mediate her role as a feminist agent. Her mediation needs to be reconsidered to begin to engage actively with the collection, though. I am more interested in Horror as an applicable label for the collection; it allows the fantastic, supernatural elements of Machado's stories to act as steadying devices rather than frightening interruptions. The disembodied women that appear throughout *HBAOP* are somehow familiar images that reinforce the split between the text and the real world, and I aim to keep this notion in mind.

"Social Death" and the Latinx Presence in Machado's Fiction

Thus far, I have discussed the problems and implications of genre in relation to Machado's collection; however, I have yet to fully comment on perhaps the most relevant part of my analysis: *Her Body and Other Parties*'s status as a collection of Latinx short

stories. As I began to discuss in my introduction, the collection does not make an ethnic identity apparent. Ambivalence is a hallmark of the collection, from its evasion of generic identification to its covert avoidance of a Latinx label. Machado's tweets about Díaz identify an awareness of her place in the Latinx literary tradition, but she is unclear and at times tense about her own identity. In a piece she wrote for the *New York Times* in September 2018, "Cuba: My Brother, My Teacher," Machado details a trip she took to Cuba with her brother. Encountering the places her grandfather grew up, she notes that physically being there is challenging: "I always thought that visiting Cuba would click things into place, but instead I merely found new mysteries" (Machado "Cuba"). Tension arises in her nonfiction writing when she addresses her ethnic identity, even reflecting that she is "neither one place or another" and "ambiguous" in terms of her Latinx identity (Machado "Cuba"). Her hesitance towards chastising Díaz, I have argued, suggests an acknowledgement of her own *latinidad*, yet her she clearly communicates some uncertainty about how she understands her racial and ethnic identity. It is not my place to police Machado's identity or any possible struggles she faces, but these contradicting viewpoints make analyzing the Latinx presence in *HBAOP* more complicated. Locating *latinidad* in the stories is my goal despite the texts' ambivalent stance.

Though there are gaps in her language that conceal an overt ethnic label, Machado's writing still opens itself up to being read as indicative of her Cuban-American identity and her related stress. I would like to consider the ways that Machado's ethnic ambivalence and ambiguity may manifest in the text and allow *HBAOP* to be read as contemporary Latinx fiction. Useful in my discussion are Toni Morrison's

conceptualization of the "Africanist presence" in American literature and Orlando Patterson's notion of "social death." Morrison has discussed the presence of race and ethnicity as something implicit within the language of American literature whether or not it is the main subject of a text. In her essay "Black Matters," she writes about an "Africanist presence," arguing that canonical American literature needs to reconsider the history of Africans and African Americans in the United States (6). Machado and Morrison's ethnic identities may be different,[10] but Morrison's import in American literature and culture in general makes her point applicable. Morrison suggests that issues of race are often not overt but marked by "silence and evasion" that lead to an alternative language "in which the issues are encoded" (9). According to Morrison, race does not need to be at the forefront of a text for the writing to encompass racial tension; under the surface, the language contains the issues at hand and can render them visible. Morrison's suggestion that a nonwhite presence pervades all U.S. literature is essential to understanding the collection following Machado's personal anxieties surrounding race. It is fair to read *HBAOP* as a work of Latinx fiction, then, because Machado's language can make visible the struggles surrounding her ethnic status; a kind of Latinx presence is hidden under the collection's surface. Morrison's conception of the Africanist presence as "an extraordinary meditation on the self [and] a powerful exploration of the fears and desires that reside in the writerly conscious" makes this presence clearer *HBAOP* (17).

[10]Another complicating detail that I will not address fully is the fact that Machado is a white-passing Latina while Morrison, even having achieved monumental success at the time of her essay's publication in 1990, needs to be more assertive and confrontational to prove her point as a black woman. Morrison's theory is relevant, but the stakes are lower for Machado, who can avoid an ethnic label and whose stories are published 27 years after Morrison's essay.

Machado's own uncertainties about her *latinidad* manifest in her writing because, as Morrison posits, language unavoidably contains and conveys these internal tensions. Even as she questions her own *latinidad*, Machado's writing is coded with a Latinx presence that has been but should not be ignored.

It is possible that Machado's avoidance of *latinidad* has aided critics in reading the collection as full of new feminist thought rather than one of Latinx intersectionality. The lack of clear ethnic markers despite Machado's dedication and clear investment in Latinx representation suggest that *HBAOP* does not need to be read as Latinx fiction because it has crossed a boundary and exists within the Anglo-American literary mainstream. This suggestion is corroborated by critics like Seghal and Powers, who view the collection as a sort of mythic, feminist meditation. Particularly because of the way I use Morrison's exploration of language's inherent racial coding, I would argue that reading *HBAOP* as a text that has comfortably assimilated to the mainstream is reductive. The collection's prescient social commentary should not be the controlling factor in analyses; rather, it is challenging precisely because Machado leans on gender and sexuality as familiar literary tropes because she does not need to worry about validating her *latinidad*. As Ylce Irizarry asserts, scholars tend to search for the ways Latinx authors represent the tension between the Anglo-American perspective and their own (6). Irizarry's introduction to what she calls *The New Memory of Latinidad* speaks to some of the gaps in Machado's narratives. Reading *HBAOP* as Latinx fiction proves difficult because the easily discernible conflicts of her stories are relevant not just to Latinx subjects. Problems of difference arise only in terms of gender, sexuality, and the body, all

relevant topics to Latinxs but also attractive to Anglo-American readers. The connection between her literature and activism further removes Machado's fiction from its *latinidad* because it actively resists traditional strategies for reading Latinx fiction. Irizarry carefully notes that contemporary Latinx writing often "[asks] what happens to communities when arrival loses its centrality as a narrative trope" (15). Machado has no need to lament her ethnic difference because it has nearly disappeared; she need not actively use her writing to attempt to bolster her *cubanidad* to a topic worthy of conversation. With an existing history of writers having already struggled for representation, Machado does not need to carve out a space for her own voice: she emerges with a clear position in an existing community. Even if her writing has arrived and transcended the literary margins, this perceived success does not discount the presence of *latinidad* in *HBAOP*. Machado configures herself inside the Latinx community, yet her images, rather than building a sense of belonging, isolate her female characters and provide only ghostly shells of bodies as possible communities.

If Latinxs no longer need to concern themselves with arrival as a controlling narrative strategy, what then happens to the community when it no longer needs to prioritize representation? Irizarry notes that Latinx as a catch-all label ignores the differences between the panethnic groups that have roots throughout Latin America and the Caribbean (6). However, the generic Latinx label seems to be undergoing a further collapse in Machado's fiction. The Latinx presence remains embedded in her language, but she struggles to represent her group membership because it may be undergoing what sociologist Orlando Patterson calls a social death. Patterson's work, like Morrison's, does

not directly discuss Latinx people and instead compiles data and statistics on slavery in the United States. Patterson theorizes that Africans who were sold into slavery "no longer belonged to a community" and became "nonbeing[s]" (38). Patterson argues that the horrors of slavery destroyed community bonds, and, without group membership, slaves ceased to exist as social beings. Irizarry's work, in a sense, seems to demonstrate an optimistic future removed from Patterson's study. She meditates on writers who have transcended into a larger, mainstream group membership and who can communicate openly with many people, unlike Patterson's suggestion that the racial others have "ceased to belong […] to any legitimate social order" (5). Of course, the two study distinctly different periods of time, but Patterson's idea of social death seems to reappear in Machado's collection. It is a far stretch to compare her position in the contemporary period to that of slaves in the early American period, and I in no way mean to do so; however, her hesitance to accept her ethnic identity does echo Patterson's theory in a surprising way. Patterson writes that socially dead bodies are defined by "an indelible defect which weighs endlessly upon [their] destiny" (38). Machado's writing, too, struggles to overcome the mark (or absence) of group membership, perhaps concealing or ignoring *latinidad* in order to overcome stresses it may bring. Machado's fiction does manage to render these anxieties visible though, whether intentional or not.

In her attempts to remain ambiguous, Machado's writing attempts to close itself to the type of analysis I am interested in. I intend to apply Morrison and Patterson's theories in conjunction to unearth the *latinidad* encoded in *HBAOP*. As I mentioned earlier, my purpose is not to corner Machado into the Latinx category or to assign her an

identity that she rejects. Her own complicated relationship with her ethnicity makes this reading even more pertinent. Machado participates in modern feminist discourse and acknowledges her own complicated identity; critics have not yet drawn connections between her ambivalent stance on race and the conflicts she describes in her narratives. There is an inherent Latinx presence in *HBAOP*, but it is not conveyed with discernible signposts. Instead, buried in popular genre tropes, Machado covertly considers the uncertainties associated with modern notions of *latinidad*.

Machado's Ghosts: Rendering Latinx Ambivalence Visible

Her Body and Other Parties does not rely on ethnic artifacts to lead readers to conclusions about its stories. Instead, overtly Latinx signs are replaced with disembodied figures, a physical representation not only of Latinx anxieties but also of Patterson's socially dead subjects. Machado does fully describe these apparitions, but there is also a subterranean undertone to the way she approaches conflict. Whether located in the shell of the narrator's body in "Eight Bites" or the apparitions of women sewed into dressed in "Real Women Have Bodies," Machado conjures empty, negated bodies to take on social issues. Combined with the context of hernonfiction writings and her social media presence, I aim to read the text as a manifestation of these internal struggles. The specters and empty figures of *HBAOP* seem to stand in for a troubled sense of *latinidad*, speaking to the troubles of confronting and accepting ethnic identity, particularly in a post-assimilationist literary moment. Machado clearly communicates a feminist stance, but her writing conceals ethnicity to a point where it can almost be questioned whether

discussing *latinidad* is relevant to the collection. I argue that the text necessitates this kind of reading to fully understand what it accomplishes.

Perhaps the most overtly activist story in the collection, "Eight Bites" is Machado's literary foray into body positivity. The narrator, following in the tradition of the women of her family, undergoes a bariatric procedure which limits her to only the titular eight bites of food per meal. As she recalls memories of her mother's eating habits and asks her sisters about their experiences, she eats her last meal before the surgery as doubts enter her mind. She begins to think about death row inmates who also have a "final" meal but reassures herself that her experience is not the same: "Their last meal comes before death; mine comes before not just life, but a new life" (155). The tension of the story becomes evident in this early passage; the narrator imagines herself almost as if she is being reborn, convincing herself that stripping herself of her old body will be generative rather than a type of loss. This conflict remains almost subterranean, swirling around in the narrator's mind rather than becoming physical—at least at first. Her anxieties only increase after the operation is completed. As she peels a grapefruit, which feels to her "like dismantling a human heart," she notes, "I can hear it. Behind me. Above me. Too large to perceive. Too small to see" (163). Swirling in the background is an unknown presence that continues the internal strife introduced during the narrator's final meal. At this point, the presence is indescribable and ephemeral, existing seemingly in multiple places and indeterminately sized. The revelation and the horror of the story arises in its final moments, when the narrator realizes that the spirit that is haunting her in her home is a ghost "which was [her] body once," a shell of her past self that she was "a

poor caretaker" to and must now carry with her (167). Up to this point, the story almost reads as realism, and the insertion of this unknowable form is the story's only horrific utterance. By the story's end, the narrator's attempts to live a new life in a new body are thwarted by the constant reminder of her past body, one that she acknowledges she denigrated and disrespected. The specter of her old body now haunts her, a chilling reminder that she can never escape her past life and a suggestion that living in one's own body is enough, regardless of size.

While reading this narrative as a meditation on body activism further corroborates Machado's participation in the contemporary feminist movement, the underlying anxiety of Machado's language, I suggest, mimics a strained relationship to Latinx identity. The narrator's attempt to alter herself ultimately fails because she cannot escape the presence of her former body, but even before this conclusion can be reached, there is a good deal of suffering that she must work through. Post-surgery, she reflects on her "transformation" with rhetorical questions that communicate both uncertainty and anguish: "this pain, this excruciating pain, it is part of the process—and will not end until—well, I suppose I don't know when. Will I ever be done, transformed in the past tense, or will I always be transforming, better and better until I die?" (160). A simple reading of this passage determines that the pain associated with the procedure is clouding the narrator's judgment. However, applying Morrison's Africanist presence—here transfigured into a Latinx presence—makes ethnic tension apparent. The female body stands in and becomes a tool that conceals the tensions surrounding contemporary *latinidad*. Attempting to strip the body of this presence produces pain, but it also poses

the question about if the alterations will ever be complete. A generation away from the struggles of immigration and colonization and having comfortably settled into mainstream dialogues, has the Latinx presence integrated itself into the Anglo-American mainstream? Machado's self-identification and participation in Latinx dialogues answers that question negatively, but there is a tension to even answer the question at all. It is as if somehow, like the narrator, Latinxs' participation in a contemporary tradition clouds an essential part of their personhood, yet they do not know how to challenge this pressing alteration.

"Eight Bites" covertly suggests that, as Latinxs' literary agency grow, their *latinidad* may have to diminish; the shell of her narrator's body makes physical this loss of community, perhaps even highlighting a socially dead Latinx body as the outcome of her possible success. Machado's own ambivalence about her ethnic identity seems like an especially relevant way to read the narrator's final confrontation with the shell of her former body. By stripping away her past self, the narrator is forced to acknowledge her loss and confront her newfound pain:

> "I will look where her eyes would be. I will open my mouth to ask but then realize the question has answered itself: by loving me when I did not love her, by being abandoned by me, she has become immortal. She will outlive me by a hundred million years; more, even. She will outlive my daughter, and my daughter's daughter, and the earth will teem with her and her kind, their inscrutable forms and unknowable destinies" (167).

Again, the potential to read this passage as a meditation on body politics and self-acceptance is clear. The tensions that Machado's language suggests, however, indicate deeper anxieties than a surface reading allows. She invents the ghostly remnants of her narrator as a reminder that the trauma of the past will outlive the present and subsequent generations. The disembodied form is inescapable and will live eternally as a reminder of, in this case, a lack of love. Modern attempts to understand *latinidad* manifest in the text in this moment. The Latinx presence is literally rendered as a ghostly figure, separated completely from the story's agent though lurking behind the scenes, haunting Machado's narrator as she proceeds onwards. There is a sense of loss that pervades this story. Here, the sense of community disappears as in Patterson's study of the socially dead, and the women—both narrator and author—are left with a constant reminder that they are divorced from their group membership. Ethnic tensions become displaced in Machado's narrator and she is left with the unavoidable uncertainty of *latinidad*.

"Real Women Have Bodies," too, utilizes ghostly bodies as a narrative strategy. The narrator works in a prom dress shop in an alternate reality where women's bodies are fading into nothing. The narrator first sees the "see-through and glowing" women in a viral video, but immediately notices similar forms being sewn into the dresses that are made for her shop, the bodies becoming a part of the garments like "an ice cube melting in the summer air" (134). The narrator struggles with this knowledge and leaves her job, moving in with her partner, Petra, whose body also begins to fade away, switching from views of "a skeleton, ropy muscles, the dark shapes of her organs, [and] nothing" as they binge television programs (143). As the textual world questions the disappearing women

and become increasingly skeptical, the narrator's story concludes with her returning to the shop and loosening the women from the dresses, urging them to leave (146-7). Like "Eight Bites," "Real Women Have Bodies" is almost surprisingly plausible; it is grounded in a familiar reality that, like Dixon and Tallon, suggest, is secure and reaffirms the practices of the reader's world. Machado's specters are the supernatural, Horror elements of the story, but they help to maintain a readable, imaginable space. If not for the transparent women, the story would verge on realism. Its consideration of women's bodies as subversive and challenging sites is an equally stabilizing technique. Machado's fiction twists contemporary, popular norms just slightly so that a dystopian feeling emerges, yet her fiction is reassuringly plausible to modern readers. This familiarity works to further conceal the tensions that are inherent in her language.

Machado's ghostly women in this instance are once again suffering, though these apparitions are more active than the bodily shell in "Eight Bites." As she looks at the forms stitched into dresses, the narrator sees their "fingers laced through grommets" and wonders "if they are holding on for dear life or if they are trapped" (137). Although she can see the ghosts, she can neither identify their feelings nor their intentions. The narrator struggles to determine if the disembodied women, hidden in dresses, are calling out for help or if they are being repressed within the fabric. Her question is relevant because it again speaks to struggles Latinxs go through in order to understand their ethnicity. It is unclear exactly how Machado personally expresses with her *latinidad*: her reluctance to criticize Díaz shows that she is holding on to her identity and trying to bolster it as much as she can, though her visit to Cuba provides only more anxiety about what her place is.

These women struggle, too, and, in fact, conceal themselves in dresses in a way that may echo Machado's currency in #MeToo: the overtly feminine becomes a mask for indiscernible tensions that lie underneath the surface. I do not mean to suggest that Machado's involvement in popular social issues has not been intersectional, as the way I contextualize her *latinidad* relies on her acknowledgement of representation in terms of Díaz. Still, it is interesting that her fiction and her personal activism mirror one another and that both confound rather than clarify. The tensions remain unsolved in both instances.

The narrator's attempt to free the ghostly women tries to resolve conflict, but in doing so the ethnic uncertainties remain exposed and unresolved. If disembodiment is a trope common in Machado's stories, a final scene ripe with possibilities is another. The narrator begins to cut away and unlace the dresses, urging the ghostly women to "'Get out.'" She notes how the dresses are "looking more alive" than previously as the apparitions remain "blinking, unmoving" (147). It is interesting that the garments become more alive as the narrator removes the ghostly forms because Machado is once again describing the stripping away a dead specter to breathe new life into something. Death, as "Eight Bites" demonstrates, fosters anxiety. Here again, under the surface of the language, ethnic ambivalence is literalized by these apparitions. If the dresses, as I argue above, can stand in for an easily attainable feminist reading, it is possible that the story removes the ghosts to make Latinx tensions visible. This reading is complicated by the ghosts' struggles, though. The conflict in this scene is more about the ghosts refusing to leave than it is about the narrator's longing to set them free. These disembodied women

cannot escape and must remain motionless, a constant reminder of an uneasy anxiety. Though the dresses seem alive—more so than the narrator can remember—the ghosts are a reminder that a rebirth leaves traces of the past. Machado's story allows itself to act as a site for subversive gender politics, but it also uses disembodied forms to remind the reader of the difficulties of coming to terms with *latinidad*.

Machado's stories, for all their progressive potential, depict unresolved conflicts that halt activist readings; considering my analysis of these disembodied figures as a Latinx presence, Machado's specters make evident the complications of coming to terms with ethnicity for present-day Latinxs. There is an interesting interplay between technology and the narrative action that I hinted at earlier in my analysis of "Real Women Have Bodies," and in its final moments it again comes to the fore: the narrator hears a news report that tells viewers not to trust the disembodied women, that "they must be lying about something, they must be deceiving us somehow" (146). It feels as though Machado is using a news report, an easily recognizable, contemporary detail, to further contextualize the struggle of understanding the Latinx presence. Her stories do speak to a current cultural moment because of contemporary references like the news report, but do not come to conclusions about how to resolve ethnic anxieties. The ghosts emerge throughout the collection as reminders of the difficulty that comes in accepting a Latinx label.

Conclusion

Her Body and Other Parties presents *latinidad* through a series of disembodied women who conjure feelings of ambivalence regarding ethnic labels. Machado's own

uncertainty regarding her Latinx identity leads me to this analysis, but I do not mean to suggest that she is addressing personal struggles. Instead, *HBAOP* presents a textual representation of a trend toward ethnic ambivalence as a whole in contemporary Latinx writing. Even though she self-identifies as a Latinx writer in her discussion of Junot Díaz and her collection's dedication, Machado's collection does speak to the anxieties that manifest themselves in twenty-first century writing. While the apparitions do affirm the readers' sense of reality with familiar genre tropes, I read these figures as the place where the uncertainty manifests itself in her language. It is true that the stories never engage with *latinidad* directly, but the language is imbued with an unavoidable Latinx presence. The ghosts, seemingly dead, communicate their pain and bring both "Eight Bites" and "Real Women Have Bodies" to uncomfortable closes. There is no apparent resolution in these stories because the disembodied forms, weighing heavy on the page and in the reader's mind, are almost incommunicable. Machado's hauntings become a manifestation of the trouble of cleanly defining *latinidad* in contemporary literature.

As I have asserted above, Machado's critical success perhaps comes as a consequence of her lack of evident racial and ethnic markers throughout the collection. *HBAOP* has thus far avoided categorization due to readers' struggles to place it neatly inside one genre. This genre confusion is productive in elevating the collection, though, because the uncertainty of categorization allows it to exist somewhere between literary and popular and therefore appeal to a wide variety of readers. It is sitting within what I configure as Horror and Gothic categories: accessible, realistic, and familiar while also subversive and activist. The intersections of genre have garnered Machado acclaim, but

cultural intersectionality seems to be all but ignored in discussions of her collection. It is impossible to separate Machado's writing from its *latinidad*; her language is coded with an ethnic presence and converts the ambivalence into clear imagery. These apparitions should be unearthed to gain a truly intersectional reading of *HBAOP*. Irizarry rightfully points out that "fiction is a discursive space within which individuals can explore—but not necessarily affirm—their ethnic cultures' practices" (8). *HBAOP* promotes gender, sexuality, and body equality clearly, and hidden underneath the present bodies are Latinx artifacts that speak to contemporary concerns about *latinidad*.

Machado's concern in rendering her collection accessible is not unique. Because it is not necessarily concerned with the possibility of assimilation and integration, *HBAOP* centers access and familiarity for readers. For example, I have already discussed Cisneros's reliance on her status in the American literary canon in conjunction with readings that highlight *Caramelo*'s assimilationist potential. This strategy, I argue, guarantees readership; Latinxs handpick certain genre categories and utilize certain narrative strategies to conform to the expectations of what twenty-first century Latinx fiction is supposed to accomplish. To be sure, readers relate to texts more easily when they operate from existing traditions, but difference also becomes less legible when authors' concerns turn to the audience and the possibilities of critical acclaim. Machado seemingly is not preoccupied with her work's success, and her refusal to be narrowed into a single genre category speaks to this. Still, *Her Body and Other Parties* operates covertly to protect itself and remain attractive to the widest audience possible. Machado's writing does reveal the struggles of locating and defining *latinidad* after the collapse of

ethnic categories, but it also works inside an existing trend that sees Latinx writers masking their ethnic identities in order to assure their fictions' successes.

III.

Metafiction, the Literary Marketplace, and Rita Hayworth: Assessing the Expectations of the Latinx Novel in Salvador Plascencia's *The People of Paper*

I suggest in the preceding chapter that Carmen Maria Machado's use of genre tropes acts as a stabilizing signpost that conceals the possible Latinx presence embedded in her ghostly figures. Audiences are not startled by the absent bodies she portrays because they reinforce a real world where such apparitions do not exist. Her collection's positive reception may come as a consequence of her publicly activist persona, but her genreric form also contributes to her text's acclaim. The stories' Horror elements further comfort readers and provide Machado with a site where she can simultaneously veil and make visible her ethnic ambivalence. This reliance on familiar tropes and forms is a useful way for Latinx authors to reach an Anglo-American audience; by appropriating the structures of the white American literary tradition, can Latinxs render their fiction more visible and more approachable for non-Latinx readers? Reading Latinx texts as extensions of existing, accepted genres can help remove the expectations associated with these narratives: namely an overtly political tone and an explicit focus on ethnic difference. I aim to keep these outcomes in mind in this chapter and explore how the use of literary traditions thought to be Anglo-American devices guide—or perhaps misguide—analyses of Latinx literature.

An example of this application of Anglo-American tropes can be found in Salvador Plascencia's 2005 debut novel, *The People of Paper*. Plascencia's novel adopts a number of experimental techniques: polyphonic narration laid out in columns across the

page, allusions to popular figures like Rita Hayworth, visual black boxes concealing parts of the narrative, and magical realism in the side plot of his titular paper person, Merced de Papel. These strategies all add interest and a style to the novel, but perhaps his most notable and important device is metafiction. The story begins simply: the protagonist, Federico de la Fe, is abandoned by his wife because he cannot stop wetting the bed, and thus he leaves Mexico with his daughter Little Merced, eventually arriving in the town of El Monte, California. De la Fe, having always felt "something in the sky mocking him," discovers that the planet Saturn is the source of his problem and stages a war with the help of the town's flower pickers, a gang he dubs El Monte Flores (28). Saturn's tyrannical presence over EMF is unmasked, though, when he is revealed to be Salvador Plascencia himself in the novel's second section (102). This turn to metafiction adds to the struggles that de la Fe is facing, giving the reader and the EMF member who has infiltrated Saturn's home a view into the author's mind. Saturn loses interest in de la Fe as he laments the loss of a partner, and he literally restarts the novel—including a new title page and dedication—more than halfway through the narrative. This reveal changes the scope of Plascencia's work, making the introspective act of writing more visible while also calling into question the author's presence and control over the novel.

Metafiction alters *POP*'s already complicated structure but does not increase the chaos felt in the catalog of characters or the multivocal narration. Instead, amid the experimentation, Plascencia's self-referential introspection serves as a reminder of familiar literary tropes. Metafiction is not a literary device exclusive to the contemporary period, but Plascencia seems to be referencing specific writers from 1960s like Thomas

Pynchon, John Barth, and Kurt Vonnegut whose work fits within the postmodernist movement. These authors have garnered attention and remained important figures in academic discourses surrounding American literary movements and the larger discussion of the canon. I draw this conclusion in part because Plascencia has expressed an affinity with postmodernist writers. In an interview with Max Benavidez, Plascencia explains that *POP* is almost a fusion of two contrasting elements of his persona: he talks about blending "the bizarre and tender sense of humor of writers like [Donald] Barthelme and Vonnegut" with the cholo culture he grew up with (27). There is no exhaustive discussion of these figures, but their relation to Plascencia's work is clear just in passing. Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse Five* and Barthelme's *Snow White*, for example, both oscillate between different voices and position the author as a textual artifact, either leading readers astray or becoming a controlling factor in interpretation. Plascencia adopts these strategies, as he indicates, partially as homage, but also undoubtedly as familiar structures that grant access to readers, giving them a sense of security that allows them to interrogate the Chicano author's debut novel. He applies the tools of writers whose place in scholarly, literary discussions are established to possibly bolster his own writing to that same level.

In the same way I question Sandra Cisneros's academic footnotes in my first chapter, I am skeptical of Plascencia's use of high postmodern technique as well. *POP*'s second section, rather than further developing de la Fe's crusade against Saturn, nearly brings it to a halt. The EMF's struggle is ignored momentarily while the textual figuration of the author takes time to explain his own sadness and his own struggle; the

novel begins with de la Fe as the primary agent, only for his enemy, Saturn/Plascencia, to eclipse his rank. It becomes difficult to pick a side in this textual warfare once the author becomes involved: he becomes the agent rather than his fictional hero. Critics have not expressly addressed this reversal of power, but instead use it to corroborate readings that depict Saturn/Plascencia as a tyrannical figure who is countered and conquered by EMF's protest. These readings, which I will return to later in my analysis, focus on the subversive potential of the novel in order to interpret it as a narrative of social justice—a perfectly acceptable, expected reading of Latinx fiction. Cisnero's *Caramelo* is also interpreted this way, though in her novel the entrance of the authorial voice undermines readerly expectations. Is it possible that Plascencia's metafictive middle section is operating in a similar way? He inserts his own persona into the text perhaps to assure readers that his novel is a standard, political Chicanx narrative. The postmodernist structure helps critics achieve these readings, placing the novel within an existing tradition. Plascencia appropriates a familiar form as Cisneros does, and even uses the Saturn/Plascencia character as a *rebozo*-like artifact to allow access into his textual world. Where in *POP*, then, does Plascencia counteract these readings and challenge the expectations of Latinx fiction, rendering it something more than just a narrative of cultural integration or Chicanx exceptionalism?

Plascencia's textual self-reference does provide stability, but in exhibiting dominion over his own characters he—like Cisneros—is pointed out to be a liar, blending fact and fiction. The dual Saturn/Plascencia figure is raised up as an artifact, a reminder of the conventions and traditions of existing, accepted novels. The authorial presence

reigns not just over EMF and de la Fe, but over the reader, who searches for access points and attempts to make meaning of *POP*. They need not trust everything Saturn/Plascencia says, however. Rita Hayworth's appearance in the novel makes this tension clear. Plascencia includes Hayworth as a character in the text to steady the narrative's chaos and provide a familiar image. As readers discover once EMF enters Saturn/Plascencia's world, the details of Hayworth's life and identity as a Chicana are invented. In this instance, the metafiction undoes the narrative itself by loosening the security of a popular reference, showing that the omnipresent voice of Saturn/Plascencia is not in control, though he purports to be. Authorial Plascencia's postmodern trope provides entry into the text, placing it inside an established genre, but the textual Saturn/Plascencia's omniscience and ability to "foresee all surprises" disappears as the characters and readers invade his interior world (103). EMF's battle against Saturn/Plascencia's tyranny defies these expectations by allowing the gang members—Latinx subjects fighting oppression—to reclaim their narrative and literally "[walk] south and off the page" as the novel draws to a close (245). Hayworth, too, leaves the novel freely and freed of the untrue elements the novel uses to paint her as an exceptional Chicana subject. While Plascencia feigns familiar postmodern erudition with his use of overt metafiction, *The People of Paper* challenges the limitations placed on Latinx fiction by diminishing the author's agency and suggesting that his authority over the text is inherently misleading.

The Limitations of Social Justice Readings

The issue of form in Plascencia's novel has inspired critical readings that span different disciplines, though several scholars focus on the ways that it can resolve

injustice or promote a pseudo-utopian equality. The readings in a sense simplify *POP*'s complexities to achieve concise readings that easily identify its potential as Latinx fiction. Anne Mai Yee Jansen and David J. Vázquez tend towards this kind of analysis, albeit with different strategies. Both focus on very specific textual moments and read them with appropriate critical lenses, which I believe is a useful way to approach *POP*. Because of the fragmented narration and the complicated juxtaposition of the textual real worlds, focusing on a singular element of the novel makes meanings more apparent. These critics' narrowed foci provide a basis for how I will read Hayworth's presence, though their results produce anticipated readings that are not necessarily useful in my work. Jansen and Vázquez wade through the narrative's chaos but still arrive at interpretations that privilege largescale political uplift.

Jansen's reading of *POP*, "(Dis)Integrating Borders: Crossing Literal/Literary Boundaries in Tropic of Orange and The People of Paper," accentuates the novel's "magical realism" and "avant-garde poetics" to discuss its relevance to issues of immigration and border crossing (102). Labelling elements of Plascencia's work as magical realism is something I struggle with, as I do not think the category is necessarily effective. As magical realism scholars Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris note, the genre oftentimes showcases how different cultures interact with and resist hegemony in a way "that would be irreconcilable in other modes of fiction" (6). It is not surprising then that Jansen argues that Plascenica's work "create[s] intersections between magic and politics, using magical realism to critique social injustice and imagine alternatives to current immigration politics" (103). She applies the magical realism label to the moments

where Baby Nostradamus and Little Merced conceal their thoughts with black boxes in the narrative as a resistant strategy that challenges Saturn/Plascencia's oppressive presence (110). This focus is not necessarily useful or applicable to my work, as I intend to look at how Plascencia's narrative strategies work to stabilize rather than lament his Chicanx difference. Jansen generally reads the narrative as oppositional and counter-hegemonic because the fantastic elements blend truth and fiction. Her engagement with magical realist tropes produces an expected reading of *POP*, focusing on active subversion and resistance. Jansen does move towards possible historical implications, offering an interesting suggestion that the EMF's protests against Saturn's narration "broadly parallel the kinds of strikes utilized by agricultural labor organizations" (109). Here she applies relevant histories of Chicanx farm workers to draw attention to the way the narrative blends magic with a lived reality. This reading begins to connect the authorial, metafictive presence of Saturn/Plascencia to something larger than the text; Jansen sees the fictional rendering of the author as a symbolic representation of larger power structures that impacted Chicanxs. Still, though, Jansen ultimately posits that the novel utilizes magical realism, unsurprisingly, to draw attention to ethnic inequality rather than fully developing the symbolic relationship between the text's world and United States history. She tends towards predictable analyses of Chicanx fiction, following guidelines that presume Plascencia's text contains activist, subversive potential.

Different from Jansen's essay, Vázquez's "Toxicity and the Politics of Narration: Imagining Social and Environmental Justice in Salvador Plascencia's *The People of*

Paper" presents an ecocritical reading of the novel. He begins his essay by identifying critical lenses that are often used to read the text: poststructuralism, postmodernism, and digital humanities (55-6). His strategy seems to be to place himself outside of these literary categories to suggest that his conclusions will differ from existing discussions of Plascencia's work. Vázquez's intentions at least appear different as he proceeds, providing a clear link between environmental justice and Latinx literature. He notes Gloria Anzaldúa's discussion of the Chicanx homeland Atzlán in *Borderlands/La Frontera* as a foundational moment of this connection and describes the contrasting rural and urban spaces depicted by authors like Cisneros and Junot Díaz as places where Latinxs respond to issues like "climate change, toxicity, urban space, and food justice" (60, 63). Vázquez identifies images of decay throughout Plascencia's novel, like a fungus that spreads among EMF while they pursue Saturn, as well as the "surreal mechanical tortoises that lay waste" to the borderlands as sites where the novel crosses into environmental territory (69-70). Since the novel is narrated in a fragmented way, these images are less memorable and not prevalent in critical discourse surrounding Plascencia's work. Still, they make Vázquez's point clear: Latinx and environmental issues do overlap in *POP*. Despite this interesting, alternative focus on nature, he does ultimately suggest that the novel "make[s] visible ideologies of racism, environmental degradation, and toxicity that work in concert to oppress Latina/os in greater Los Angeles" (56). Even though he employs an unexpected critical framework to read *POP*, Vázquez concludes that the novel renders inequality legible. The rotting environment in El Monte serves as a reminder that the novel's Latinx subjects are constantly facing

multiple forms of unavoidable oppression. In making these issues visible, Vázquez further bolsters social justice as an outcome of Plascencia's writing.

Alternative Theories: Postrace Aesthetics, Barthes, and the Literary Marketplace

Putting these social justice interpretations of *The People of Paper* aside, Ramón Saldívar, Geregor Maziarczyk, and Jennifer Harford Vargas all offer considered readings of Plascencia's novel that address its narrative structure without overtly political conclusions. Instead, these critics put *POP* in communication with larger systems of power to interrogate how the novel form affects the ways readers approach it. Saldívar returns to the novel throughout his scholarship, and even uses it as an example for what he calls the "postrace aesthetic" of contemporary literature. He identifies the major features of this aesthetic to be an engagement with postmodernist tropes, a blending of generic forms, an investment in "speculative realism," and an exploration of racial politics in the twenty-first century ("Second" 4-5). These categories not only apply to my own interests in the novel but also speak to the work of Vargas and Maziarczyk, who both address the postmodernist metafiction of Saturn/Plascencia. Though the post-Obama political climate in the United States makes his theory a kind of utopian ideal, Saldívar's postrace aesthetic allows readings of *POP*—and other contemporary works—to move beyond the expectations of political activism and into different critical territory.

To be sure, Saldívar is uninterested in reading Plascencia's novel as a site where social change can occur, an outcome that he calls "the utopian goal of earlier ethnic fiction" ("Historical" 595). I have taken issue with these readings in the previous section of this chapter, and perhaps this stances comes as a consequence of the prevalence of

Saldívar's analysis of *POP*. He argues that the novel uses avant-garde narrative strategies to challenge readers' expectations. The presence of Saturn/Plascencia, rather than "return[ing] us to the historical" world and restoring some sense of order amongst the polyphony of narrators, the novel's metafiction renders the author "totally discreditable" (580). To Saldívar, Saturn/Plascencia should restore a sense of security, but ultimately does not. The appearance of the author in the middle of the novel has the potential to center the chaos of the events happening in El Monte. Instead, the "invasion of the authorial world" works to "[shatter] the illusion of realism" (580). I will argue that Plascencia's reference to himself is a stabilizing force, but this does not mean that I do not agree with Salvídar's position. He is concerned with the ways that the narrative helps describe racial relations in the contemporary period as a fictional escape; the illusion of inclusion and a postrace reality is shattered by the author's inability to restore balance to the chaotic world he has created. Plascencia/Saturn's arrival halts expected readings that do privilege the novel as a tool to resolve injustice. I am following Plascencia's lead, as I too do not aim to read *POP* in this way.

Maziarczyk adds an interesting layer to the discussion of Saturn/Plascencia's omniscient narration by applying Roland Barthes's "The Death of the Author" to the omnipresent author-character in *The People of Paper*. His essay "Bringing *The People of Paper* to Life" primarily looks at the ways that Plascencia's novel "blur[s] the distinction between real people and fictional characters" (61). If I follow Saldívar's lead in reading against social justice in the novel, I am also aiming to extend Maziarczyk's essay. My analysis of Cisneros engages similarly with issues of reality and fiction, and in this

chapter I return to this blending to highlight it as a possible trend in Latinx writing. Maziarczyk understands the authorial interruption midway through *POP* as a "literalization" of Barthes' deconstructive theory, diminishing the author's role as an agent and focusing on the text independently (63). He sees this metaphor in action in the novel's prologue. Antonio, the first and presumably only origami surgeon, compiles paper from classic novels to bring Merced to Papel to life, constructing her body and allowing her to enter the human world: "She stepped over her creator, spreading his blood across the polished floor" (Plascencia 15). In this moment, the death of author is no longer symbolic, instead realized as Merced de Papel leaves a bloodied, dead Antonio to enter the world. This prologue sets the tone for the novel, and, according to Maziarczyk, reinforces the idea that "the author has no control over a literary character/text once it is created" (63). This notion is almost counterintuitive considering the focus placed on Saturn/Plascencia, but after the reveal Saturn's tyranny does begin gradually to fade away. By employing Barthes, Maziarczyk begins to contradict social justice readings of *POP*, decentering the author and restoring agency to the characters and to the novel itself. EMF are not fighting the oppressive pressure of Saturn/Plascencia, but instead making a rift between reality and fiction evident. The characters betray the author by pointing out that what he says should not always be trusted.

If Maziarczyk argues that EMF and *The People of Paper*'s characters break away from the overwhelming presence of the author, Harford Vargas extends his discussion to include the issue of the novel as a structural device. She positions Saturn/Plascencia as an authoritarian narrator, punning on the fact that he acts as both textual dictator and literal

author of the novel. Her concern is how *POP* forces readers to interrogate its structure and question what factors affect the reading experience: "The novel asks us to take seriously the limitations of the novel genre as a mode of contestation, due to the power dynamics inherent in its formal structures and its status as a commodity in the literary marketplace" (12). As I have outlined earlier, the novel self-consciously secures its readership using familiar, postmodern forms. Harford Vargas notices this as well and asks readers to further consider these implications. She posits that de la Fe's war is an act of resistance against oppressive, tyrannical power structures, though her conclusions do not promote ethnic inclusion. Instead, she argues that the characters are fighting for their own volition over the author, resisting overdetermined readings that the novel form enforces (66). Harford Vargas anticipates social justice readings of *POP* and combats them by assessing the novel's commodity status; it is not enough to read Plascencia's text as a work of subversive art when it is also being disseminated as a consumer good. The characters' resistance against Saturn dispel problems of reading Latinx fiction omnisciently. To read *POP* as activist is reductive because it ignores the careful attention Plascencia's novel gives to its form and its identity as a novel. This is not unlike Cisneros's *Caramelo*, another novel that is self-aware of its status as a Chicanx novel and employs familiar textual signposts to reassure readers as they navigate through the text. I find Harford Vargas's discussion of audience and form in conjunction useful in analyzing Plascencia's writing and placing it inside a conversation outside of the anticipated political Latinx label.

Remnants of Postmodernism: Access, Appeal, and the Marketplace

Before moving to my own reading of Plascencia's narrative, I do want to interrogate the utility of reading *POP*'s postmodernist paradigms. Whether critiques generate new discussions or recycle expected outcomes of Latinx narratives, it is useful to look at1960s postmodernism in order to see how a twenty-first century novel applies or contradicts these recognizable tropes. Plascencia writes in the period after postmodernism, and thus I wish to address his choice to employ metafiction not as a remnant of a past literary tradition but as a deliberate, guiding tactic. I question whether the metafiction is used as a narrative device because the work is indeed not a novel of the postmodern literary moment. Robert Rebein's study of contemporary fiction after the period, *Hicks, Tribes, and Dirty Realists: American Fiction After Postmodernism*, offers a broad look at the legacy and politics of postmodern form as it applies to contemporary fiction, while Mitchum Huehls's essay "The Post-Theory Theory Novel" directly critiques Placencia's novel as a site where poststructuralist theory "self-destructs" (292). Both scholars offer insights into how to read *POP* against postmodernism rather than accordant with it. My interest is not in how metafiction contributes to the text's reputation and meaning but instead, following Harford Vargas, how Plascencia's choice of the trope makes the novel more attractive to readers in the literary marketplace.

Assessing the genres that emerge after the Sixties' high postmodernism, Reiben evaluates the role of the movement in subsequent fiction, problematizing its role in relation to academic circles and different demographic groups. Reiben's analysis begins with mention of "Barthelme, Barth, and Pynchon" as the stalwarts of this literary

movement, further confirming postmodernism's relevance to *POP* given Plascencia's own comments (2). This cohort of authors keeps appearing in responses to the novel because the unrelenting presence of their writing speaks to literary postmodernism's lasting impact on contemporary forms of fiction. Their prevalence, one might assume, indicates that their works appeal to many readers. Reiben unmasks this conclusion as untrue, though, positing that literary postmodernism's "primary home" was and is academia; it failed to garner the attention of casual readers, writers, and critics because of its "ridiculous" treatment of the real world and its "limiting […] strictures" (6). Reiben rebukes the movement's prominence in literary studies as something artificial. If these works have never escaped the university English department, why are their techniques and tropes still relevant contemporary writing? Here Reiben takes issue with the continued application of postmodernism. He asserts that this type of fiction, which "constantly hears [praise]," is for the most part not read by a large population, leaving "masterpieces" ignored because of their "ties to [traditions] that predate postmodernism" (7). Ironically, my choice to analyze Plascencia's novel confirms what Reiben claims: *POP*'s postmodernist approach is appealing and does garner academic attention. Plascencia's choice of metafiction does assure that his text is well-received in academic circles. It deliberately returns to the movement to secure that particular readership.

Huehls further critiques a reliance on postmodernist devices and even takes issue with how Plascencia's novel easily offers itself up for poststructuralist applications. He reads Plascencia/Saturn not necessarily as oppressive, but as something inevitable that is literally depicted in front of the reader's eyes. He argues that *POP*'s metafictive outburst

is not representative of "playful, freeing indeterminacy" and instead reminds readers that "someone [is] always determining the indeterminacy" (290). When EMF crosses into Saturn/Plascencia's world in the novel's second section, they are not actually acting of their own volition—the author-character's arrival does not conflate reality and fiction, but instead creates a blockade. De la Fe and Little Merced only walk off the novel's last page because the author has decided that they can. Huehls sees poststructuralist theory—particularly Jacques Derrida's famous adage "*Il n'y a pas de hors-texte*" from *Of Grammatology*—as "too easy" an interpretation: "*The People of Paper* thus wears its poststructuralism on its sleeve, but only to suggest the alienating, narcissistic emptiness of that particular approach to meaning and value" (291). De la Fe's war against Saturn/Plascencia's narration does acknowledge the novel's mode of production, but it also does not challenge any of the expectations of this production according to Huehls. The use of metafiction clearly suggests that readers apply poststructuralist strategies, like Maziarczyk's use of Barthes. Huehls proposes that *POP* explicitly presents itself as a theoretical text, and I would argue that this further bolsters its status as an academic commodity.

Plascencia's postmodernist tactics are effective because they do appeal to critics, hence the essays and chapters I have discussed thus far. Even as a text published several decades after the postmodernist literary boom, *The People of Paper* successfully appropriates this movement's metafiction to assure it will attract the attention of literary scholars. I arrive at this point wondering if it is productive to read Plascencia's novel as an extension of postmodernism at all. Is he somehow covertly critiquing the expectations

of the movement by so clearly inserting an authorial presence into the novel? The metafiction is a successful steadying tactic, but it is not as confrontational as critics would like it to be.

"Rita Hayworth was never Mexican": Restoring Reality, Undoing Fiction

Among EMF, Saturn/Plascencia, the Ralph and Elisa Landin Foundation, and Merced de Papel, one figure stands out among *POP*'s cast of characters: Rita Hayworth. Though Hayworth's fame originated in the 1940s rather than the 1960s, Plascencia's allusion to the pin-up model and film actress interests me because it is strikingly similar to Cisneros's reference to Raquel Welch in *Caramelo*. Both actresses are ethnically marked by the author of the texts they are found within, both act as exemplary Latinas who have managed to assimilate into the Anglo-American mainstream consciousness, and both—eventually—challenge assumptions that readers associate with their identities. I have argued that Cisneros asks her audience to reconsider Welch's ethnic status by contrasting her with figures like *la virgen* and the *curandera* María Sabina. Hayworth's *latinidad* is questioned in *POP*, although the reassessment happens because of Plascencia's interruptive metafiction. After establishing Hayworth's fictional identity, securing it through the novel's imagined reality, the truth is revealed during Saturn/Plascencia's breakdown: he falsified the story of Hayworth's *latinidad*, inventing a biography of a Mexican farmgirl turned Hollywood starlet. I intend to carve out a connection between the real world of Hayworth and the textual world of Saturn/Plascencia.

Rita Hayworth is introduced early in the *People of Paper*, even before Federico de la Fe declares war against Saturn/Plascencia's omniscient narration. As de la Fe and Little Merced cross the United States/Mexico border, Saturn/Plascencia notes that he is thinking "about dress factories and the technology of a country that would learn to soak color into the gray celluloid world of Rita Hayworth" (24). It is worth noting that the author-character here is relating de la Fe's thoughts about the actress. Hayworth enters the novel as a character a few chapters later, but this introduction to her positions her as an example of the exceptional American experience. De la Fe thinks of the possibilities of employment and Hollywood as he enters the United States, both raised up as ideals that he can only hope to reach as a Mexican immigrant. The reader at this point is not aware why Hayworth would be held in such high esteem, but her status becomes clear as the novel's different narrators share stories about the actress's *latinidad*.

Plascencia grounds Hayworth in the text by introducing her under her real name and describing her upbringing in Mexico. In the novel's third chapter, the narration shifts from Froggy, a member of EMF, to Margarita Carmen Dolores[11] Cansino (41). As a child, Margarita is described as a plum farmer who waters her crops with salt water, by way of the sea and her own tears when necessary. Though she is a poor farmer, Margarita is seemingly nostalgic for this moment in her life: "as she danced with Fred Astaire in *You Were Never Lovelier*, she remembered the smell of mule piss and the burn of salt and

[11] In researching Hayworth, I find that there are some inconsistencies when it comes to the "Dolores" in her real name. Genealogy projects like *Ancestry.com* and *Geni* include Hayworth's second middle name, while most popular, easily accessible resources (like *Wikipedia* and *IMDB*) shorten her name just to Margarita Carmen Cansino. I wonder whether Plascencia deliberately includes "Dolores" at this early point in the novel to further reassure the supposed accuracy of his information.

longed for the days of tending plum trees" (42). Despite the appeal of Hollywood, Margarita longs for a pastoral, Mexican life. This representation of a hardworking, struggling Latinx is almost a Hollywood stereotype itself, however, and seems too affected to be genuine. The narration—given from a third-person perspective throughout Hayworth's sections—attempts to connect Hayworth to EMF, providing them with an aspirational figure who shares in their Latinx struggle. This mythmaking continues in Margarita's next section, where her intimate relationship with a lettuce picker proves that "the Love Goddess of Hollywood was democratic in her love" before she moves to California and is discovered by Hollywood executives (44). This turn is important because it shifts the focus from Hayworth's *latinidad* to her sexual aptitude. The perspective changes suddenly from an admiration of the nostalgic young plum farmer to a possible sexual conquest. Misogyny enters *POP* here and only grows as the novel inches towards Saturn/Plascencia's in-text self-reveal. By the end of chapter three, Margarita's heading has changed to Rita, completely altered from the initial portrait of the farmer girl:

> Rita Hayworth bleached her jet-black hair into a light shade of auburn. To emphasize her widow's peak, she used needle-shaped electrodes to push back her hairline. She pinched her cartilage until her mestizo nose was pointy. The in-house linguist at Fox Pictures touch Rita's tongue, teaching her how to unroll her *r*'s and pronounce words like *salamander* and *salad* without sounding like a wetback. (47)

The ending slur is telling: the narrative voice now sees Hayworth as a traitor, completely removed from her past and living a new life with a new appearance in Hollywood. This is the last bit of attention given to Hayworth until Plascencia's metafiction, and, at this point, redemption does not seem possible for Hayworth. The novel presents her abandoning her *latinidad*, altering her physical appearance, and then, finally, making a list of her lovers that excludes the lettuce picker (47). If Cisneros asks her audience to rehistoricize and reconsider the Sixties' Latina starlet, Raquel Welch, Plascencia's novel makes sure Hayworth is not so lucky. This chapter concludes with Hayworth's transformation completed. She is no longer an honest farmhand and instead has become an actress who puts the past behind her.

While Cisneros tells readers the truth about Welch, Plascencia is not so honest—at least at first. In terms of their veracity, these claims about Hayworth's ethnic heritage and upbringing are untrue. Hayworth was born in Brooklyn, her father a Spanish immigrant and her mother American. Her upward mobility is exaggerated as well; Hayworth performed as a dancer alongside her father as a child until transitioning to film in the 1930s. Thought this historical context is not presented in *POP*, it is important to consider the transfer of information that occurs inside the text. Hayworth emerges after a passing reference to one of EMF watching a movie and then transforms before the audience's eyes. She falls victim in a sense because the text presents her at first as a humble Latina subject and then portrays her assimilation into the Anglo-American mainstream via-Hollywood as treacherous. However, this stance is mediated through a narrative voice, one that I would argue is Saturn/Plascencia at this moment. The novel

demeans Hayworth by way of misogyny, a strategy that reappears in the author-character's section of the novel.

As the second part of the *People of Paper* begins, Saturn/Plascencia's sadness halts the narrative, forcing this textual representation of the author to work through a failed relationship; sadness turns to anger, and the novel surprisingly turns towards misogynistic language as a coping mechanism. Smiley, the gang member who enters Saturn/Plascencia's world, immediately notes that he has lost his agency and "surrendered the story and his power as narrator" (103). With this in mind, it is fair to assume that the narrative up to this point has been controlled by the author-character. At this moment he has given up his authority, and so the preceding work comes from his perspective. This explains the almost out-of-place reference to Hayworth: Smiley describes posters on his wall, one being "a poster of Rita Hayworth with a cigarette holder in hand, wearing her strapless *Gilda* dress"[12] (104). The reader can immediately conjure an image of the author sitting down to write, referencing the poster, and using it as a device to transfer his interior struggle onto the page; the metafictional tool succeeds here in a different way because it makes the imagined process of Saturn/Plascencia legible. Hayworth's story inside *POP* need not be accurate if she is standing in for someone else or some other issue.

The challenge of Plascencia's metafictive section is its turn towards misogynistic language to restore agency to the author-character. Hayworth is not the object of his ire,

[12] Another moment where Cisneros and Plascencia's novels intersect: Lala reflects on a poster of Raquel Welch in her iconic fur bikini, while Saturn/Plascencia decorates his workspace with an image of Hayworth. Both women's garments in these images have standalone *Wikipedia* entries, suggesting their relevance and iconic status in American culture.

though her imagined history does contain Saturn/Plascencia's struggle to overcome his partner leaving him. This plot development does feel a bit unnecessary and does not illicit sympathy, so I question its importance to the plot. The Saturn/Plascencia character enters the narrative to let his readers know that he is sad and unable to cope with a loss that is totally nonessential to de la Fe's story. He laments his loss but emphasizes the fact that his partner has moved on:

> Everything weakens. I lose control. The story goes astray. The trajectory of the novel altered because of him. They colonize everything: the Americas, our stories, our novels, our memories […] Don't say his name. I don't want him in here. I will scratch him out. (117)

Fulfilling his promise, Saturn/Plascencia does cross out the unknown man's name on the same page. The author-character is disabled by his loss almost pathetically, and even more confounding is his suggestion that he is in some way being colonized. This language seems just as lofty as the obvious metafiction in this section, as if both elements are working together in this moment to provide a real postmodernist image, Saturn-Plasencia becoming what Reiben calls a "glorious victim" of his condition (3). If this moment is supposed to be read as another postmodern signpost, providing a clear signal of the novel's scholarly potential, I see it as an ironic reminder that this type of fiction has a very narrow audience. It is difficult to sympathize with Saturn/Plascencia: he resorts to misogynist vulgarity on pages 133, 134, and 139 and then restarts his novel with a new dedication and title page, leaving out the original inscription "*And to Liz, who taught me that we are all of paper*" (5).

Liz is the enemy, though Hayworth has stood in for her at this point, but she is not helpless. Dispelling the postmodern erudition, she restores a sense of reality to Plascencia's novel. Chapters thirteen and fourteen give Liz her own voice, transitioning the novel for a moment from highbrow metafiction to steadying realism. Liz's short burst of narration is directly addressed to Plascencia/Saturn, as she accuses him of using "[his] hometown, EMF, Federico de la Fe, […] [his] grandparents and generations beyond them" all to create "a neat pile of paper" (138). Liz expressly comments on the novel's status as a commodity because she believes that the author-character has offered up his *latinidad* as a marketing strategy, all for "fourteen dollars and the vanity of [his] name on the book" (138). *POP*'s second section is slightly dramatic but for good reason. Liz counters the metafiction that has preceded her part of the story. She enters to remind Saturn/Plascencia that he is not creating just for the academy, but ultimately for something greater than himself. To denigrate the real, lived history of the Latinxs within the novel does a disservice to the text. Liz's section comes as clarity before a chaotic ending. She not only exposes the truth that "Rita Hayworth was never Mexican," but also refuses to let the actress stand in for her: "Sal, I will not be your Rita Hayworth" (136, 137). In rejecting the text's fictions, Liz and Hayworth work in conjunction to reestablish a sense of reality and fact. The confusion of *POP*'s narration dissolves as the two refuse to exist inside the confines of the novel. This refusal is why the novel restarts midway through; it must reaffirm the postmodernist trope as valid. Liz does not conform to Saturn/Plascencia's postmodernism and is thus rendered an enemy, refusing to allow verifiable fact to be commodified for the sake of *POP*'s critical success. De la Fe's war

against “the commodification of sadness” need not be worried about thanks to her intervention in Saturn/Plascencia’s self-pity (53). She refuses to accept the novel’s feigned status as a postmodernist commodity and upsets the author-character’s supremacy with an injection of realism.

Conclusion

If, as I have argued, Plascencia’s novel relies on a technique of literary postmodernism to secure an academic readership, Hayworth’s appearance in *The People of Paper* disrupts the erudite tone and instead suggests the fictional realm’s inventions cannot stand up to lived reality. The outcome is not that realism is an efficient mode of representation, as *POP* for the most part remains in the realm of the fantastic, somewhere speculative like Machado’s short stories. Instead, like *Caramelo*, the novel reminds readers of the truth surrounding a Latina who has seemingly transcended race, disallowing Saturn/Plascencia to scorn her in place of Liz. Hayworth’s *latinidad* almost disappears once her true background is discovered, but still she is not to be an object of disgust. Instead, Liz reminds us that Hayworth’s Latinx status is valuable; EMF wrongly adopt Saturn/Plascencia’s misogynist sadness and discredit Hayworth as an assimilationist sellout. Like Raquel Welch, though, her real identity diversifies the way *latinidad* can be read.

De la Fe’s siege does work, and Saturn/Plascencia oscillates in and out of the novel until it comes to a close, literalized by an oversized, graphic period on page 247. The dissolution of the author-character’s postmodernist, omniscient narration in the face of Liz’s exposé begs a question, though: is the war on omniscient narration simply a war

on overdetermined expectations for Latinx fiction? Plascencia's choice of form cements a readership and inspires critical analyses of his novel, and *POP*'s potential as a social justice narrative has been discussed. These factors place the text comfortably inside the Latinx literary canon; Anglo-American readers—and Latinxs, too—can draw these expected conclusions and see the novel's place in an existing tradition. Considering Plascencia's willingness to present himself within his own writing, even declaring war on himself, I would argue that the novel draws attention to larger struggles that Latinxs writers face. Readers want to make Latinx authors self-conscious, reading their own *latinidad* into their literature so that outcomes are inclusive and promote social betterment. Plascencia challenges this by making himself a character, creating a scapegoat that readers can latch onto both as a remnant of literary postmodernism and as a tool to read *The People of Paper* as a work of ethnic uplift. When the reader reaches Saturn/Plascencia, seeing him writing with the Rita Hayworth's poster in the background, they need to remember that Plascencia—the real-world author—still has a say and is challenging the novel's strategies. Hayworth is a reminder *latinidad* is flexible, even under the strict confines of metafiction. Anglo-American readers are given access to the text, but they need not bring their expectations about what Latinx literature is capable of with them.

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