

SACRED SITES: THE SOCIAL-SPIRITUAL AND FEMINIST PRACTICE OF
CONTEMPORARY LATINA/O NARRATIVE

BY

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DISSERTATION

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ABSTRACT

“Sacred Sites: The Social-Spiritual and Feminist Practice of Contemporary Latina/o Narrative” identifies and reads an archive of established and emerging genres of Latina/o narrative—Chicano/a movement and women of color feminist print culture, “multicultural” women’s writing, young adult and science fiction narrative, and “world literature”—to show that the interplay among writing, representational politics, and spirituality can form a contested nexus for revaluing Latina/o cultural production and mapping Latino/a experience and identity in the context of global capitalism. By reading these texts in the context of their material and social conditions of possibility, especially within the university and literary establishment, I argue that the texts deliberately blur the boundary between symbolic/spiritual dimensions of cultural production and the physical/material politics of culture. I refer to this often gendered writing, interpretive, and political practice as “social-spirituality” and contend that it extends the political and artistic tradition of women of color feminism into the 21st century. As I show, this textual practice maps queer networks of affiliation and possibility beyond the more traditionally legible analytics of race, ethnicity, kinship, nation, and gender. As a result, social-spirituality also displaces neoliberal narrative tropes of authenticity, individualism, rationality, and transactional interpretive value.

“Sacred Sites” also works to develop a social-spiritual method of reading to recover the often-obscured spiritual labor of writing and storytelling and its connection to cultural production, circulation, and reception off the page. Teasing out these connections, the project shows the way that even mainstream and well-circulated narrative works can generate material and imaginative networks that recalibrate Latino/a identity and culture through the very act of and approach to cultural production. Despite neoliberalism’s very real investment in Latina/o cultural

work, this dissertation aims to show that attention to spirituality in contemporary Latina/o narrative can reveal and instigate different narrative strategies and identities that challenge the uneven distribution of power and imaginative possibilities of the neoliberal project.

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INTRODUCTION

WRITING, READING, SPIRITUALITY & THE POLITICS OF LATINA/O STORYTELLING

“My ‘stories’ are acts encapsulated in time, ‘enacted’ every time they are spoken aloud or read silently. I like to think of them as performances and not as inert or ‘dead’ objects (as the aesthetics of Western culture think of art works). ...[they]...contain[s] the presences of persons, that is, incarnations of gods or ancestors or natural and cosmic powers. ...The ‘witness’ is a participant in the enactment of the work in a ritual...”—Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera* (89-90).

“What the live audience ends up experiencing is a stylized anthropomorphization of their/our own postcolonial demons and hallucinations—a kind of cross-cultural poltergeist. The space between self and other, us and them, fear and desire, becomes blurred and unspecific. ... the performance/installation functions both as a bizarre set design for a contemporary enactment of ‘cultural pathologies’ and as a ceremonial space for people to reflect on their attitudes toward other cultures”—Guillermo Gómez-Peña, *Ethno-techno* (85).

The performance artist Guillermo Gómez-Peña and his rotating set of performers—La Pocha Nostra—are responsible for some of the most radical, controversial, and thought-provoking performance pieces in the late 20th and early 21st century. These performance pieces often respond to the effects of globalization, neoliberalism, technology, multiculturalism, appropriation, and migration through interactive “living museum”-style installations that comment sharply on representational practices (Gómez-Peña 79-80). In these pieces, the performers exhibit their “highly decorated” and “ethnic” bodies and allow the audience, both in

person and virtually, to engage with them at their will and based on their own fears and desires (Gómez-Peña 81). Symbols, rituals, and languages are continually re-arranged as part of the group's attempt to dissolve borders, including those between theory and practice and between performer and audience (Gómez-Peña 78-79).¹ Similar to Gloria Anzaldúa's statement about her writing in the epigraph above, La Pocha Nostra's performances reflect and enact a time-bound political moment (i.e., one that is "encapsulated in time") and one that is unique for each viewer/witness. Most importantly, though, we see both artists referencing a spiritual dimension to confront unjust political and social circumstances and the usefulness of art as a conduit for this practice. As Gomez-Peña describes, their performances are "anthropomorphization[s]" of the "postcolonial demons" that we live with and experience daily despite their ghosted presence. The metaphor of the performance as a "cross-cultural poltergeist" is particularly apt for explaining how the performance/poltergeist foregrounds what is otherwise unseen in society and confronts and disturbs viewers with it (85). More subtly, in Anzaldúa's description, her stories are imagined as imbued with spirits and [cosmic] presences and it is the readers' (interpretive) duty to participate in the ongoing ceremony or enactment of these powers.

In both artists' statements, nonetheless, there is a necessary engagement with the spiritual realm on both the part of the artist/performer and the reader/witness. Crucial to this mutual engagement is the understanding of ritual and ceremony (and its attendant symbols, icons, pageantry, etc.) as important components of belief and world making and, therefore, a viable way to map the often unseen or felt experiences of (post)colonialism, globalization, and neoliberalism in artistic representation. Thus, although a turn to the spiritual for these artists and those studied

¹ One of Gomez-Peña's most well-known performance/installation pieces is *The Couple in the Cage: Two Undiscovered Amerindians Visit the West* with Coco Fusco. In this piece Gómez-Peña and Fusco performed the identity of the Other (i.e., an aboriginal couple in a cage) for largely white audiences at mainstream museums while touring from city to city (Fusco 51).

in the following chapters denotes a turn to the unseen, to the world of belief, and to the unfamiliar, it primarily serves as an imaginative resource for artists and cultural workers that may or may not intersect with orthodox religion.² In fact, encountering the spiritual in these texts does not promote an orthodox or “right” way to be (i.e. resistant/un-resistant, moral/immoral) so much as a way of being that is active, creative, cognizant, and relational. The confrontations or encounters created by La Pocha Nostra’s performances or Anzaldúa’s stories are not the desired outcome, but are intended to instigate other social, material, intellectual and spiritual connections. As Gomez-Peña explains, he hopes participants and performers alike will turn to “Others (academics and activists) ... to help [them] understand those demons” (Gómez-Peña 85). In this way, Anzaldúa and Gómez-Peña are both explicitly involved in aesthetic and epistemological re-valuing projects through the spiritual aspects of art and its world-making capacity.

While the type of declarations made by Gómez-Peña and Anzaldúa may be more common in the performance art realm, they are less common in studies of literary and narrative culture. Particularly, we do not tend to think of stories (other than oral) as embodied or performative and we are less inclined to study the way a text can create new epistemologies at the local site of engagement that may then radiate outward in intellectual, material, and symbolic ways (e.g., intersecting with educational and government institutions, local communities of readers/writers, local politics). Under this configuration, texts can be both relational and place-making while simultaneously being influenced by neoliberalism’s unequal social and political relations, displacement, and co-optation. Anzaldúa’s (and other women of color feminists’) theorization and practice of an embodied writing and art and a deliberate emphasis on

² See page 18 for a thorough discussion of my use of the terms spiritual, spirituality, metaphysical, transcendent, etc.

foregrounding both ghosted experiences of gender, sexuality, race, and class as well as “unnatural connections” to the spiritual realm, resonates with La Pocha Nostra’s own performance theory. Might narrative texts be considered in a theoretical framework similar to La Pocha Nostra’s that is rarely (if at all) considered for contemporary literary and narrative studies? This project affirms that they can by turning first to women of color feminist print culture to establish this practice—what I call social-spirituality—and then moving into a selection of highly self-conscious, performative, and embodied Latina/o narrative productions that represent both established and emerging popular artists and genres.³

With its emphasis on embodiment, reflexivity, ritual, and unnatural spiritual connections as a response to our contemporary globalized moment, Gómez-Peña’s work can also help introduce the objectives of *Sacred Sites*. Specifically, this project charts a counter-approach to neoliberal era narration and interpretation—from its beginning as a women of color feminist response to nationalist and mainstream feminist movements—by reading contemporary Latino/a narrative productions (novels, film, essays, etc.) that respond to neoliberalism and its transformations to subjectivity, citizenship, individualism, language, and experiences of space and time through a spiritual imagination.⁴ The embodied and spiritually-attuned prose and

³ While La Pocha Nostra operates within a very different artistic genre with very different conventions and audience expectations from the texts and artists I study, both critically play with stereotypes and myths, draw attention to performance (and textuality) and have similar interests in creating a “utopian” site that is not yet in existence, but that is “a marker in the political distance, a philosophical direction and a path we often lose” (Gómez-Peña 80). Exploring similarly “utopic” sites across even the most “commodified” texts and genres is part of this project’s purpose.

⁴ This project uses both the terms “Chicano/a” and “Latino/a,” although not interchangeably. I understand the term “Chicano/a” as originating from the 1960s civil rights movements and, particularly, the Chicano/a movement during which many disenfranchised Mexican Americans adopted the term “Chicano” as an affirmative, class, ethnic, and race conscious identity marker (Rodríguez “The Locations” 190). Thus, in the project “Chicano/a” is often deployed as a way to index this history and its specific impact on identity and cultural production. The more capacious

practice I identify undercut neoliberalism's ideological and material transformations, but most forcefully its imaginative hold on narrative and interpretation, while creating visions of other networks of value. By turning to the field's most iconic as well as its newly emerging and popular writers, *Sacred Sights* promotes a critical approach that focuses on alternative valuation of language, representation, evolving identity practices, and interpersonal relations that respond to neoliberalism.

SACRED SITES/SIGHTS: A SOCIAL-SPIRITUAL PRACTICE AND INTERPRETIVE LENS

My interest in thinking about contemporary Latino/a narrative production in a neoliberal context did not immediately begin with an attention to spirituality. I began by examining the conditions of material production for Latina/o narrative such as mainstream and independent publishing, production processes, academic circulation networks, and marketing strategies. I soon noticed, however, a distinct and captivating feature of women of color feminist writing: the foregrounding of previously ghosted experiences of gender, sex, race, and class (including the labor and instruments of cultural production), as well as an attention to the spiritual and affective work of writing as working class women of color. Moreover, this feature was deeply connected to their politicized approach to artistic representation. Rather than maintain a separation between the conditions of production—material and spiritual—and the cultural product, this (social-spiritual) practice of narrating critically and creatively interweaves them. In contrast, both neoliberal and anti-neoliberal considerations of Latino/a culture have tended to overlook this

term “Latino/a,” which developed later and in response to different geographic and historic concerns, references those residents of the U.S. who are descended from Spanish-speaking nations and Latin America. Following this definition, “Latino/a” can include Mexican Americans and Chicano/as, but does not connote the specific geographic and historic context as the term “Chicano/a.” In this project, both Chicano/a history and identity and the emergence of Latino/a identity are significant and co-constitutive of the contemporary and ever-changing experience of Latina/os in the U.S.

spiritually and materially inflected textual and political practice. As others have noted, the critical discourse around post-1960s (neoliberal) Latina/o culture and cultural politics largely emanates around the co-opting forces of capitalism rather than attending to the ways that this body of work has developed alongside and in response to capitalist expansion and neoliberal economic and social policy (Machado Sáez and Dalleo, Dowdy). Thus, by considering the legacy of social-spirituality in contemporary Latino/a writing, I aim to unpack a more textured analysis of its imbrication with and response to neoliberalism. As I will explain further, the spiritual component of social-spirituality is crucial for this analysis since it develops in a register that is often unfamiliar and largely detached from the discourse of neoliberalism.

My title, *Sacred Sites*, and particularly the multiple meaning of “sites/sights,” provides an apt framework for thinking about the spiritually attuned writing, storytelling, and interpretive practice I trace. First, “sites” registers the significance of the materiality of culture—from the site of the physical text itself and its constructed narrative to the sites of labor that transcend its pages and the physical networks of readers, artists, and influential figures that the stories intersect. Second, “sights” indexes the imaginative work of envisioning other possibilities beyond a neoliberal regime and value system. Finally, and echoing Michael Dowdy’s compelling work on Latino poetics and neoliberalism, “sites/sights” can also draw our attention to the effects of neoliberalism on the concept of “time, space, and borders” and, most importantly, the necessity of “conceptualizing Latino place(s) through displacement” (5). In the context of a social-spiritual practice, this latter point is even more pointed given women of color feminist’s deep interest in the different “locations” from which women experience gender. As Clara Román-Odio explains, Gloria Anzaldúa, in particular, theorized a physical and psychic location “that was conducive to new knowledge production—historical, personal, collective—and liberation” (10). The narrative

work in the texts under consideration extend this concern into the 21st century by explicitly re-theorizing and mapping the physical and spiritual “locations” (against neoliberal interpretive frames) that Latino/a writing and storytelling can index and co-create.

The “sacred” in *Sacred Sites*, as I am defining it, necessarily modifies “sites/sights” to index the political significance of the spiritual component of a social-spiritual narrative practice. In traditional religious parlance, the sacred or sanctity involves being set apart as holy or deemed “especially dear or acceptable to a deity” (“Sacred”). As Desireé Martín explains, however, the concept of sanctity has historically been unstable, both within and outside of the church. Drawing from this instability, a significant body of Chicano/a and Latino/a cultural production engages a more flexible concept of the sacred (Pérez *Chicana*, Delgadillo, Martín). As I explain more in the forthcoming chapters, this revised sanctity is necessarily in dialogue with a public, mediates between the human and divine, and can easily move between national, cultural, ethnic and other borders (Martín). In fact, Martín argues that cultural production may resemble or even merge with devotional practices, meaning that cultural production can facilitate an alternative and political performance of sanctity (26-27).

For my purposes of identifying and unpacking the idea of a social-spiritual narrative and interpretive practice for 21st century popular Latina/o narrative, Gloria Anzaldúa’s work and legacy are especially helpful for thinking about spirituality in a material and social way and as a necessary component for queer and radical visioning (Delgadillo 13-14).⁵ From her earliest

⁵ In this project, queerness is not solely a reference to non-heterosexual sex, but also indexes unexamined, uncharted, and visionary social and political relations. Following José Muñoz, queerness can “exist[s] for us as an ideality that can be distilled from the past and used to imagine the future” (1). Under this formulation, queerness is also, importantly, performative. As Muñoz explains, “it is not simply a being but a doing for and toward the future” (1). In later chapters I also draw on Martin Manalansan’s notion of “queerness as mess,” which poignantly captures the “material and affective conditions of impossible subjects as well as an analytical

published work, but increasingly in her later work, Anzaldúa maintained a keen and revisionist sense of the political importance of spirituality, especially for multiply oppressed queer Chicana and Latina subjects. Anzaldúa's most significant contribution is her understanding of spirituality as deeply intertwined with the body, the physical and natural world, and our relationship with others and the environment or our social realm. These interconnections can be seen in *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987) through her discussion of writing in "Tlilli, Tlapalli: The Path of the Red and Black Ink," her incorporation of Mesoamerican religion into theorizing her own identity and role in a collective culture, and even in her concept of a borderlands and a mestiza consciousness. Moreover, as scholars have recently explained, it was Anzaldúa's concern with spirituality that pre-occupied her most in the years leading up to her death (Keating "I'm," Keating "Archival," Bost).

Never settling on a term to describe her spirituality, Anzaldúa used two terms to explicitly describe this aspect of her life: "spiritual mestizaje" and "spiritual activism." Spiritual mestizaje refers to her mixed blood embodiment as a mestiza woman, as well as the mix of different cultures, religions, and viewpoints that she inherits or self-consciously engages and that are fundamental to transforming her own identity as a queer Chicana feminist and for producing knowledge about the world (239 *Borderlands*). Studying Anzaldúa's work on the concept, Theresa Delgadillo notes that in *Borderlands* the author "works her own experience of spiritual, social, emotional, and intellectual journeying to theorize the significance of the U.S.-Mexico border in the creation and potential for the Chicana subject, particularly the queer Chicana subject" (1). Anzaldúa's idea of spirituality is also elaborated in her unpublished 1999 manuscript "Spiritual Activism: Making Altares, Making Connections" that is part of the Gloria

stance that negates, deflects, if not resists the 'cleaning up' function of the normative" ("The Messy").

E. Anzaldúa Papers acquired by the University of Texas. The simultaneous indexing of both an embodied, “blood” or inherited spirituality as well as a self-fashioned one is appropriate to Anzaldúa’s emphasis on spirituality that is not an escape from the material world, but a way to better participate in it. In this way, the term spiritual activism becomes more vivid and apropos. As Anzaldúa explains:

When you become a spiritually active person, one who treats spiritual work as a political issue and who does outer- as well as innerwork, you start conceiving, or reconfiguring, the different component of reality in a different way. [...] By expanding your ‘take’ of reality, you make connections, not only to the physical, psychological and spiritual worlds, but also to political realities (“Spiritual” 2-3).

Here, what begins as internal spiritual work that, for Anzaldúa, draws from an array of spiritual practices, can lead to an altered perception of reality including political realities, as well as the spiritual energy that is needed to work to change these realities.

Anzaldúa’s practices/rituals that provide her with a spiritual reserve for social change are perhaps the least elaborated on in Anzaldúan scholarship. “Spiritual Activism” gives us further insight here also. If the first portion of the essay is primarily about the interconnectedness of spirituality with embodied, material and social realities, the second section titled “On the Process of Image Making” is more squarely about the rituals and spiritual practices Anzaldúa engages that enable her to make bridges “between the life of the mind, the life of the body, and the life of the spirit” or the connecting activity she calls “el mundo zurdo” (the left handed world) (Anzaldúa “Spiritual” 4). In this section she describes two kinds of image-making rituals: making altars and “feminist image making” through meditation and visualization. Both of these practices allow her to connect to an unseen and other-worldly realm (while still remaining in the

material one), to produce images and writing that can expand our current perceptions and that can be “loaded” or charged with “luminosity,” to be more centered and available to others, and to find connections between herself, nature and others that are otherwise not readily accessible. Importantly, as Delgadillo explains, “the elaboration of specific difference and more abstract theory remain tightly interwoven throughout [*Borderlands*] and apply to the cultivation of new levels of consciousness about the material, social, and conceptual frameworks through which we define ourselves” (5). In other words, Anzaldúa’s spiritual practices lead to a different way of being in the world and a different practice of art that is not about resolution, but about constant reflection and recreating.

Both Anzaldúa and Martín emphasize the significance of politically engaged narrative and cultural production that generates art as a sacred act. As I will show in this project, the sacred (and spiritual) pushes the boundaries of our imagination as readers and critics in important ways. The spiritual practices Anzaldúa describes—both image-making practices, but especially the practice of meditation and visualization—are slow and deliberate practices that require discipline, vulnerability, quiet, and spiritual attentiveness—all qualities that are not highly valued and that operate on a different value system than capitalist culture (and, in some ways, literary studies scholarship). Indicative of her concern with epistemic revaluation, Anzaldúa contrasts her image-making process (envisioning) to other “symbolology systems” and particularly those in the academy: “Just like Psychology, just like Anthropology, just like Physics. But this [her system] is not considered scientific” (“Spiritual” 5). Through her image-making and, more generally, her spirituality, Anzaldúa’s work attempts to produce a queer epistemology.

Thus, rather than a flight of fancy or escape from material reality, the sacred (as it has been reconfigured by Latina/o cultural workers) occurs in the quotidian of everyday life.

Nonetheless, one critical trajectory for interpreting 21st century narrative (and postmodernism) is to understand the non-representative (spiritual or otherwise) as a retreat from meaningful representation (Saldívar “Historical,” Hungerford, Irr). To the contrary, as Jose Muñoz elaborates in his eloquent resuscitation of critical utopianism, such a rejection of aesthetics in the case of queerness “is nothing like an escape from the social realm, insofar as queer aesthetics map future social relations” (1). Likewise, the texts I study ask readers to think queerly beyond the “here and now” and a transactional and neoliberal approach to reading contemporary Chicano/a and Latino/a literature. The social-spiritual pushes back on this tendency by turning to a spiritual register; and like Muñoz’s examples of critical utopias, the texts I turn to draw from the past to imagine and map a queer future. In Muñoz’s own words, “...queerness exists for us as an ideality that can be distilled from the past and used to imagine the future” (1).

Resonant with 21st century aesthetics, the texts under consideration self-consciously represent writing and narrating, explore the boundary between reality and “unreality,” assess the experience of racialized embodiment in the globalized Americas, and, importantly, explore the way a flexible spirituality can productively complicate staid notions of all three. While representations of folk spirituality, particularly a Catholic-indigenous spiritual hybrid, are common tropes of 20th century Chicana/o and Latina/o literature and culture, the social-spiritual representations I study strategically incorporate spirituality as a *strategy* for narrating displaced Latina/o lives in a way that constellates a different value system for cultural representation in neoliberal capitalism. Thus, social-spirituality is both a political approach to artistic representation and an interpretive practice. Textually, it represents writing and narration as simultaneously social, embodied, deeply material, and spiritually-attuned. Further, it is through the texts’s engagement with a flexible spirituality that social-spiritual narratives attempt to

queerly narrate, make sense of, and map diasporic Latina/o lives, experiences, and expressions at a moment when valuation systems of the nation state, the market, and mainstream religion have proven unsatisfactory. This project thus contributes to the fields of Latino/a studies and literary studies in three main ways: 1) it investigates the impact of and response to neoliberalism within Latino/a narrative; 2) it contributes to our knowledge of the way that spirituality can be used politically by Latina/o artists; and 3) it re-centers women of color feminist thought and praxis within contemporary literary studies and showcases how it is useful for theorizing new political and narrative directions in Latina/o cultural production.

GLOBALIZATION, NEOLIBERALISM, AND LATINA/O CULTURE

While “globalization” has been a buzzword in humanities and social science departments for many years now, a careful accounting of its meaning is still hard to come by. Even more, while a vague understanding of globalization as the heightened and rapid movement of capital, bodies, and commodities across national borders, the increasingly hegemonic economic theory of neoliberalism is often subsumed within the “catch-all” quality of the former term. In contrast, David Harvey traces the theory of neoliberalism to a specific year (1979) and to the statecraft of then U.S. Federal Reserve leader Paul Volker and British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, who revived a minoritarian economic doctrine and transformed it into the dominant principle of economic management (2). This economic theory, however, is distinctive in that it also extends into the social and political organization of society. As Harvey explains: “Neoliberalism is...a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade” (2). In this way, while globalization may be the predicted expansion of capitalism into ever larger and

international realms, neoliberalism “refers to new rules of functioning of capitalism” (Dumenil and Levy qtd in Dowdy 8). In its role as the dominant interpretive framework for global capital, then, neoliberalism has also captured a significant portion of our contemporary imagination for human, social, and cultural potential and well-being. In other words, neoliberalism has largely captured our discourse of value and even of philosophical belief in the U.S.⁶

The degree to which neoliberalism has impacted Latina/o cultural production, however, has not been a frequent topic of scholarly discussion. Most notably, scholars such as George Yúdice and Arlene Dávila have made important contributions to our understanding of the effects of globalization and neoliberalism on the production, circulation, and reception of Latin/o culture. In their respective studies, *The Expediency of Culture: Uses of Culture in the Global Era* (2003) and *Culture Works: Space, Value, and Mobility across the Neoliberal Americas* (2012), both Yúdice and Dávila are interested in thinking about the neoliberal emphasis on the “use value” of culture (i.e., what culture can “do”). While Dávila focuses on the unequal access of certain populations to participate in the culture industry (as producers *or* as consumers), Yúdice explores the unexpected collaborations and cultural activism that this “expedient” view of culture can generate. Both, however, emphasize the methodological need for American and Latino/a studies scholars to attend not only to a formal analysis of culture, but also to the cultural institutions that regulate and administer cultural production and to be accountable to the political effects of knowledge production across the globe.

With regard to specifically literary cultural production, there are even fewer studies that focus on the impact of neoliberalism (Dowdy 8). Among these, Jodi Melamed’s 2011 *Represent*

⁶ For an analysis of the “faith” in neoliberal economic practices, especially in international economics, and the lack of empirical or theoretical evidence supporting this faith, see Sonali Deraniyagala’s “Neoliberalism in International Trade: Sound Economics or a Question of Faith.”

and Destroy: Rationalizing Violence in the New Racial Capitalism stands out for its comprehensive approach to studying the institutionalization of minority literary culture and the (co-opting) role of the state and capital in its production, circulation, and reception.⁷ Particularly, in her assessment of “neoliberal multiculturalism,” Melamed documents the neoliberal demand to read minority literature (now often called “global literature”) from the perspective of the privileged global citizen and with the aim to provide simplistic information about a “foreign” culture, to facilitate connection with “good” minorities and an explanation of “bad” minorities, as well as to facilitate the self-care of elites vis-à-vis the notion that diverse literature provides readers with anti-racist moral value (158-161). Melamed also identifies and reads some literary texts as “race radical” and in defiance of these co-opting tendencies. *Represent and Destroy* provides rich and diverse evidence for its thesis, but one reductive effect of the study is its creation and maintenance of a binary between “good” or politically viable and “bad” or politically unviable literature that may elide the complex dynamics of neoliberalism and culture. Addressing this complexity more fully, albeit not directly through a neoliberal analytic, Roderick Ferguson’s *The Re-Order of Things: the University and its Pedagogies of Difference* (2012) studies the way that the university operates as an archival force that incorporates but also regulates difference, and the way that minority cultural forms and practices represent complex relationships between institutionality and textuality in a post-civil rights time period (Ferguson 16). Finally, Michael Dowdy’s more recent *Broken Souths: Latina/o Poetic Responses to Neoliberalism and Globalization* (2013) gives equal consideration to the way that minority

⁷ Beginning with post-WWII literary production and concluding with the post-2000 literature of the “neoliberal multicultural” era, Melamed details a range of co-opting forces that pivot around the university, as well as a handful of “race radical” texts that work against the aforementioned disciplinary tactics.

literary production has responded creatively to the constraints and effects of neoliberalism while still taking into consideration the institutional role of “mechanisms of literary production” (ix).

Although both Ferguson and Melamed answer Yúdice’s call to critically and thoroughly analyze cultural institutions, they also tend to elide the often-intangible symbolic and aesthetic element of artistic production that cannot be solely reduced to legible critiques of structural oppressions. As I explain further in Chapter 1, this approach tends to create a less than helpful binary between the minority artist/culture and the institution. In this way, anti-neoliberal discourse on narrative value that pivots around how fully or not fully narrative culture is commodified or how directly it can be connected to quantifiable and material political change—evidence itself of neoliberal rationality—may inadvertently reinforce neoliberal values. Moreover, as the remaining chapters explore, this approach also creates a deeply gendered marginalization of symbolic culture, aesthetics, and even literary studies. To the contrary, Dowdy considers the symbolic culture and aesthetic features in the texts he studies as “provid[ing] glimpses of potential otherwises and alternative values” (xi). As he explains, by attending to the global designs of neoliberalism and the place-based poetics that register “strange intersections of global invasions,” *Broken Souths* avoids the tendency in U.S. Latino studies to interpret these concerns more narrowly as “‘political’ and identity-based” or, with regard to language, through “postmodern aesthetics” (Dowdy xi). In fact, Dowdy rejects postmodernist celebrations of fragmentation through his elaboration of plural souths (places in displacement) that crucially offer the “possibility of other possibilities” (7).

Importantly, both postmodernism and neoliberalism have contributed to the waning concern for what some may call a utopian impulse, the “possibility of other possibilities,” or, in José Muñoz’s words, the “not yet here” (1). If neoliberalism reduces literature to rationality,

efficiency, choice, and “no meaning outside the market,” postmodernism’s focus on fragmentation and an absence of “truth,” “experience,” “identity,” or “knowledge” only amplifies the former’s interpretive concerns (Brown 43, Moya *Chicana* 442).⁸ In this context, *Sacred Sites* responds to Ferguson’s call to develop modes of interpretation that are “in the institution” but also not bound by its dominant operating procedures. Like Dowdy’s project, this dissertation and the social-spiritual analytic it proposes calls for a different way to talk about narrative value, especially in a Chicano/a and Latino/a context, and turns to a strand of popular narrative culture’s attention to spirituality for interpretive guidance. Appropriately, one major challenge for thinking through alternative value systems for Latino/a literature and culture is the often-invisible historical intertwining of capitalism with dominant belief systems and the formation of secular (and non-secular) cosmologies that incorporate the values of capital and deeply influence our language of valuation. A critical turn to the spiritual (and this obscured cultural history) thus allows us to think about the way value has been simultaneously tied to the spiritual and to capitalism, colonialism, and its civilizing project. Following this lead, I unpack the way that even popular or “mainstream” cultural workers and their cultural production can operate within the confines of neoliberalism while still critiquing its uneven effects and revaluing the very work of Latino/a narrative and storytelling via the social-spiritual.

SPIRITUALITY AND ITS DISCONTENTS

Since Chicano/a and Latino/a narrative first gained a public audience, the spiritual world (both western and non-), religion, and its accompanying iconography and ritual have held a prominent place in this tradition. Perhaps this is because, as Anzaldúa notes, spirituality has

⁸ While postmodernism has been a useful theoretical apparatus for Chicana/o and Latino/a feminists, as Paula Moya explains, critics have acknowledged the limits of its own normative claims that uphold the “‘truth value’ of no truth” (441).

characteristically been “set against the category of the ‘real,’ which it interrogates by its difference” (“Subjected to”). For Chicana/os and Latina/os, there already exists discomfiture with the unmarked and unquestioned ‘real’ of white, dominant society, which more easily facilitates considerations of “unreal,” spiritual or religious dimensions. As Delgadillo explains, Chicano/a literature is “A body of literature infused with the multilayer religious imagination of the Americas [and] often imaginatively addresses the many disparities that haunt us” (32). No doubt influenced by the work of Anzaldúa and other Chicana feminists such as Cherrie Moraga, Sandra Cisneros, and Ana Castillo who critically examined and re-purposed the politics of spirit (previously adapted by male Chicano movement leaders), recent scholars have in turn prioritized spirituality as an analytic for Chicano/a and Latina/o art and literature. This output has flourished in the 21st century with scholars such as Laura Perez, Theresa Delgadillo, Clara Román-Odio, Desirée Martín, and Orlando Ricardo Menes contributing scholarly monographs that help facilitate our understanding of the significance of spirituality to Latina/o and Chicana/o lives and art. This contemporary scholarship, however, has tended to focus on art by or representing female Chicanas (not Latina/os) (Perez, Delgadillo, Román-Odio) and primarily cultural work produced before the turn of the 21st century (Perez, Delgadillo). As a result, contemporary discourses of Latina/o spirituality inadvertently re-inscribe (non-traditional) spirituality as women’s terrain, gendering the discourse itself as feminine and devaluing its criticality in the still masculinist and secular academy. Why, then, might we turn our attention toward (social-) spirituality at this moment in history? Any such explanation must first begin with the term “spirituality” and a meditation on what it enables and forecloses in the context of Latina/o narrative and culture.

In this project, spirituality refers to an organizing principle for understanding the self, its relation to others, and the environment. As I mentioned earlier, it also serves as an imaginative resource for artists and cultural workers that may or may not intersect with orthodox religion.⁹ As Clara Román-Odio explains in her study of the iconography of the Virgin of Guadalupe in Chicana cultural production, the work she examines turns to spirituality as a form of “transmutation” or change and as a space to “construct their understanding of the world—material and spiritual—and to develop their politics” (2-5). Likewise, a social-spiritual practice includes (and critiques) material and social conditions, but also looks beyond the physical and knowable world to orient itself on a daily basis. This might include turning to ancestral myths and creation stories, to a popular but sanctified Latina/o icon or cultural practice, or to recent invocations of Chicano/a and Latino/a sacred imaginaries that imbue everyday life with intangible, but no less significant meaning. Importantly, this spiritual attentiveness also indexes a longing for something different than the status quo and a belief in the possibility of something more. The social-spiritual accomplishes this in the texts by working simultaneously in two directions: 1) by indexing the divine and not physically present and 2) by indexing the socially ghosted experiences of race, class, sexuality, gender, etc. and the Latina/o diaspora. Together, these two components bring to the fore the often invisible effects of globalization and neoliberalism while suggesting the possibility of something else. In this way, the term “spirituality” necessarily references often-suppressed desires and belief. Spirituality is, therefore, different from more general terminology such as “metaphysical,” “transcendent,” “supernatural” or even affective experiences. While all of these more general terms could be used to describe a

⁹ It should be noted that “spirituality” in U.S. vernacular is, unsurprisingly, a western construct. As a result, the use of the term “spirituality” or “spiritual” to describe Mesoamerican or other pre-contact cultures reflects an already inadequate vocabulary and terminology.

component of a spiritual event, on their own they do not have any connection to the world of belief that “spirituality” does.

Finally, the hard and fast division between the material and spiritual realms and between “reality” and the fantastic that is typical of a western (and particularly Christian) understanding of spirituality is much less distinct in the context of the texts I study. For instance, the Oxford English Dictionary defines both “spiritual” and “spirituality” as in “distinction to [the] bodily, corporal, or temporal” (“spiritual”). To the contrary, the practice I’ve identified as social-spirituality deeply connects spiritual awareness to relational, embodied, and lived experience. This is not to say that social-spirituality is entirely divorced from religiosity. To the contrary the intertwining of western and non-western spirituality into Latina/o narrative practice forces us to grapple with the sedimentation of spiritual *and* religious practices and beliefs in the Americas and their alternative realities and value systems that inform daily life, as well as the spiritual qualities of writing, storytelling, and culture.¹⁰ As Irene Lara and Elisa Facio explain in their collection *Fleshing the Spirit: Spirituality and Activism in Chicana, Latina, and Indigenous Women’s Lives* (2014), “the academy... largely devalues or misunderstands spirituality, both as a serious academic topic and as an integral aspect of being alive” (3).¹¹ Consequently, a social-spiritual practice also works to queer our contemporary, often ahistorical and narrow perspective on religion and spirituality.

Despite a general resistance to critically considering spirituality in the academy, religion currently plays a significant role in U.S. politics. The “religious right,” in particular have

¹⁰ Following Delgadillo (and Anzaldúa), I differentiate religion from spirituality in that, in western parlance, the former is typically associated with institutional, organized, and established religious traditions, while the latter refers to non-western and non-institutional ways of relating to the sacred (3).

¹¹ This concern is also echoed by Román-Odio, Menes, Perez *Chicana*, Keating *Luz*, and Delgadillo.

dominated the discourse with concern regarding “religious freedom,” which has been expanded in practice from the constitutionally protected “right to worship” to the more nefarious right to discriminate against those whose beliefs differ from the majority. A discourse of secularism, therefore, is often the liberal counter-response to the religious right, which is not without its own set of problems. Namely, from the perspective of secularism, religious or spiritual practice is regarded as irrational, backward, anti-modern, and repressive (Warner et al 24, Jakobsen and Pellegrini 2). This secular political orientation toward religion and spirituality applies to both U.S. domestic politics, as well as to transnational politics. Scholars such as Jasbir Puar and Saba Mahmood have critically explored the damaging political effects of such a secular orientation, particularly with regard to religion in the Middle East. Puar’s work reveals how post 9-11 state sanctioned reports on terrorism deem religion as “always already pathological” and, therefore, constituent of the most dangerous (i.e., irrational) form of terrorism, while Mahmood’s study of minority religions in Egypt suggest how secular governance has made religious tensions worse and even more unequal. Even more, mainline Protestant Christianity (but not evangelical Christianity) remains an acceptable form of religion from the perspective of secularism (Puar, Jakobsen and Pellegrini). Following these scholars among others, this project begins from the presumption that spiritual and religious discourse has largely been hijacked by the religious right and liberal secularism at a time when imagining and believing in other possibilities is an individual and political necessity.¹²

¹² Recently, important activists and scholars have turned their attention to the political significance of spiritual and restorative justice activism. Discussing this turn, Angela Davis explains the importance of being accountable in mind, body, and spirit to the type of changes we seek: “We can’t simply assume that somehow, magically, we’re going to create a new society in which there will be new human beings. No, we have to begin that process of creating the society we want to inhabit right now” (van Gelder). Additionally, the renowned lawyer, activist, and legal scholar, Michelle Alexander, has expressed her interest in exploring spirituality as a means

In the Americas, this (selectively) secular position, especially toward non-dominant religious traditions and practices, has a long and illustrious history. Since colonial contact, a European Christianity (including Spanish Catholicism) has dominated if not steamrolled other religious and spiritual traditions. Indigenous, African, and syncretic or hybrid spiritual traditions, however, have not been eradicated by colonialism and highlight the great resilience of people of color on a continent marked largely by extreme physical and cultural violence against them. Moreover, the colonial clash of differing worldviews and the forceful domination by European Christianity are ongoing events that reverberate into the present and influence our understanding of foundational political and social concepts such as public and private, individual and collective, democracy, morality, modernity, and, most important for the purposes of this study, the role and value of art and culture. In fact, our current political and social relationship to artistic representation is deeply connected to a history of colonialism, capitalism, and spirituality and morality. As a result, most of the texts I study (Chicano movement documents, the work of Gloria Anzaldúa, Sandra Cisneros, Alex Rivera, Nancy Farmer, Junot Díaz), incorporate Mesoamerican spirituality and belief in a way that denaturalizes a Christian spirituality and, I suggest, influences—to varying degrees—the underlying western assumptions about writing and storytelling, spirituality, and politics and power. Specifically, the spiritually-attuned storytelling in the texts represent writing and storytelling without the demand for authenticity, authority or an organic whole. At the same time, the writer or storyteller is still imbued with political power despite their exploratory, embodied, imaginative, and relational role. For this reason, I'd like to briefly discuss the distinctions between Mesoamerican and European American spiritualities that

for social justice by resigning her post as a law professor to join Union Theological Seminary as a visiting professor from 2016-2021, where she will be studying, researching, and teaching on the need for an inter-faith, multi-ethnic, multi-racial liberation theology (“Michelle”).

impact our assumptions about artistic representation and its political and social purpose in our neoliberal moment.

Cultures of Value: Mesoamerican and European American

Prior to colonial contact, Mesoamerican culture, religion, and politics were fully developed in the area surrounding what is now Mexico City. I turn to the Aztec culture in particular because it was the seat of power at the time of colonization and, thus, the site of colonial conflict. Central to understanding the Aztec religious system and authority is the sacredness of the human body. In this tradition, sanctity exists in *all* human bodies, but is especially significant in certain types of humans such as “prophets, founders, magicians, seers, or saints” (Carrasco 59). These special figures embodied “the most sacred values and teachings of a tradition, providing it with a central image or exemplary pattern for proper conduct and religious devotion.” Moreover, it was by telling stories about these individuals that the community effectively expressed certain values and authority (Carrasco 59). All human bodies, however, were considered to be containers of “sacred forces” and had the potential to return this energy to “the celestial forces that created it” (Carrasco 65-67). For instance, Aztecs believed all humans to have *teyolia*, a divine force that animates the human heart; however, priests, *hombre-dioses*, artists, and the men and women who impersonated deities during rituals had a more abundant supply (Carrasco 69). A significant detail I’d like to keep in mind with regard to the Aztec system of religious authority, however, is its hierarchical structure. Although it is tempting to romanticize the religious and political systems of pre-contact civilizations, it is also misleading. The Aztec religious system included and elevated artists and other figures as part of a central value system. Keeping in mind this alternative social and political valuation might help us to

denaturalize our own present day value system and to consider the different ways it might be envisioned.

As members of the elite class then, artists, and especially those working with language, played a major role in Aztec religious systems and ritual. As David Carrasco explains, the Aztecs put great emphasis on developing eloquent speech forms and metaphors. In fact, those who were dedicated to and carefully trained in the use of language were referred to as *tlamatinime* and used language to “raise philosophical questions about human nature and its relations to ultimate truth” (Carrasco 79). The Aztecs also believed in a world beyond human existence—both in the world of the dead and in the world of the gods—that contained a crucial foundation for human existence or an ultimate truth. Accordingly, they sought ways to open the human personality to these other and deeply significant realms. One of the ways they achieved this connection between human and divine was through the art of words, songs, and paintings or what the Aztecs called *xochitl* and *cuicatl*, flower and song (Carrasco 80). This idea of “flower and song” or of speaking in metaphorical dualities that signify one concept—in this case, poetry or truth—is based on a religious significance of duality. In Nahuatl cultures the cosmos were originally ordered by a “supreme dual God, *Ometeotl*,” thus, through this similarly dual rhetorical style “poetry and human personality became linked to the divine duality above” (Carrasco 81). As Carrasco reminds us, similar to the Aztec belief in the embodiment of sacred energy, “so the power and truth of celestial forces could be encapsulated in the spoken word” (81). In this tradition, the human and divine are linked by spiritually-infused words and concepts. While we do see secularized remnants of this way of thinking about writers and storytellers in the history of American letters (particularly through the cult of the individual author), as we will see in the

brief discussion below on western literary traditions, any explicit or serious reference to the writer or storyteller as engaged in a spiritual practice is uncommon.

As I've alluded, one reason for the rejection of spirituality in the academy is the western de-linking of spirituality from the notion of "progress" and capitalism or what has widely been acknowledged as the rise of secularism (Weber, Jakobsen and Pellegrini). If at first artists were also considered conduits between human and divine, the rise of Enlightenment ideology solidified a teleological narrative in which "reason progressively frees itself from the bonds of religion and in so doing liberates humanity" (Jakobsen and Pellegrini 2). This secularism, however, was not universal and emerged out of a specifically European and Christian context. As Max Weber elaborates in his touchstone study, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905), secularism's freedom from religion was also equated to a freedom for the market. Specifically, secularism's "market freedom" was attached to the reformed Protestant religious practice of "worldly ascetism" or bodily regulation that reflected a predetermined, Calvinist salvation. (Jakobsen and Pellegrini 2-3). This reformed Christianity also sought to purge religion of its folk practices and, in doing so, emphasized a more definitive split between spirit and body that would also extend to an idealized disembodied approach to reason (Warner et al 16).¹³ Ultimately, although secularism claimed to "universally" separate religion from reason, a reformed Protestant Christianity was always linked with the origin of secularism and, thus, was valued as the religion that best exemplified and conformed to its tenets. In this way we can also understand the more pointed U.S. demand for "secularism" among non-Protestant and non-Christian religious practices.

¹³ Following Chuck Taylor's position in *A Secular Age*, Warner et al claim that secularism was not the direct effect of capitalism, but of spiritual motives. At the same time, they acknowledge that capitalism was part of the matrix of factors that shaped the rise of secularism (16-17).

Also significant for our understanding of spirituality, religion, and a valuation system is secularism's implicit claim to morality. Since secularism is narrated as progress toward "greater intellectual freedom and more knowledge, leading eventually to governance by reasoned debate and ultimately to democracy and peace," there is a distinct moral implication sutured into its imperatives of increased reason, reduced religion, and the free market (Jakobsen and Pellegrini 4). This moral implication is still evident in today's promotion of neoliberalism and its disinterestedness in spirituality, belief, hope, etc. as a socially progressive ideology (including neoliberal perception of literary studies). In this way, morality is not solely tethered to religious or spiritual discourses or practices. Finally, secularism's emphasis on the privatization of religious belief is significant for us to consider. Under a secular ideology, in order for reason to abound in the public sphere, religion must be contained in the private sphere of personal belief. Again, a reformed Protestant tradition is the exemplar of this value. Notably, Catholicism—with its public and communal practices—has not always aligned with the public/private divide connected to secularism and Protestant traditions. Moreover, as Janet Jakobsen and Ann Pellegrini highlight, several Marxist revolutions in Central America were indeed influenced by radical Catholicism, thereby challenging the progress-secular equation. (5,10). It will be important to keep this history in mind when turning to texts such as Nancy Farmer's *The House of the Scorpion* and Sandra Cisneros' *Caramelo*, which represents the political potential of an embodied, spiritual, and relational folk (i.e. Mesoamerican influenced) Catholicism for countering dominant myths and practices.¹⁴

¹⁴ For a more pointed turn to Mesoamerican spirituality as a decolonial, queer, and anti-racist practice, see Cherríe Moraga's more recent creative and critical work such as her plays *New Fire* (2012), *Digging up the Dirt* (2010), *The Hungry Woman: A Mexican Medea* (2005) and her collection of essays, *A Xicana Codex of Changing Consciousness* (2010).

Before moving away from our discussion of the value systems generated by the interconnections of capitalism, spirituality, and progress, it is important to consider the racialized implication of this dynamic vis-à-vis the European colonial project and the development of “modernity.” Specifically, it is through the colonial encounter with other populations that the idea of religion as a universal was developed and then individual religions were re-valued based on their proximity to the most “liberatory” Christian religion of the colonizers. In the words of Michael Warner, Jonathan VanAntwerpen, and Craig Calhoun,

...the colonial governance of non-Christian peoples was one of the central contexts in which Europeans developed their understanding of religion, the state, and themselves. Not only that: the new ways of knowing that were developed to deal with religious difference—including a commonsensical definition of religion itself—supplied the cognitive differentials that made colonialism sustainable. (27).

In other words, colonialism was sustainable because of a colonial epistemology that involved religion. A key component of this epistemology according to Anibal Quijano is the conceptual split between the body (i.e., nature) and the soul—where subjectivity and reason were supposed to be housed—theorized by Descartes in the 17th century. Following this “scientific” logic, certain races were simultaneously condemned for not being rational subjects and for lacking in soul or spirit. As a result, they became exploitable.¹⁵ “The body [without soul or spirit] was and could be nothing but an object of knowledge” (Quijano 555). Since this exploitative colonial logic still characterizes a globally hegemonic model of power that is prevalent today, Quijano

¹⁵ The same body/soul dichotomy was also applied to gender dynamics where women and particularly women of color were deemed “much closer to nature” (Quijano 556).

has coined the term “coloniality of power” to index this ongoing context. Thus, capitalism, progress, and spirituality are all at the heart of modernity and neoliberalism’s valuation of populations of color and their knowledge production (or lack thereof), as well as the rationale for the maintenance of colonialism’s exploitative violence (533). Nonetheless, both critics and proponents of neoliberalism tend to share a secular epistemology and teleology. In this way, the work of spirituality is often outside the parameters of neoliberalism’s value system and, while this does not grant spirituality an automatic or essential quality of resistance, it does represent a blindspot in the neoliberal project and its critique.

Given these dramatic post-Enlightenment changes to the way life is organized and meaning is made, the public’s understanding and engagement with artistic representation also changed. While artistic work was still linked to an elite group, it was also re-valued in a way that would connect it to capitalist notions of progress, efficiency, and mastery, rather than contemplation, exploration, and imagination. Walter Benjamin’s essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” provides a useful meditation on the shift in understanding the function of art after the advent of mechanical reproduction. Concerned by this shift, for Benjamin, a work of art that is alienated from its own material embodiment (presence) and “unique existence” through reproduction no longer maintains, what he calls, its “aura”; the aura is also very much connected to the ritual element or “cult value” of art that I have already addressed. Importantly, Benjamin connects the desire for mechanical reproduction to societal changes related to the increasing “masses” in contemporary life. Specifically, he notes the growing urge to “get hold of an object at very close range by way of its likeness, its reproduction.” This, Benjamin explains, is the result of a perception whose “sense of the universal equality of things” has heightened to the degree of accepting the reproduction of

unique objects (223). Today we see a parallel experience of art, particularly when vetted through the university system. One “Latino/a” novel is equivalent to any other, despite the complexity and diversity the very term “Latino/a,” and can be taught without deep knowledge or context of its “unique existence” in order to satisfy the needs of “diverse” syllabus making or the “global” requirements of university degree plans. Moreover, as scholars have already critiqued, under contemporary circumstances of cultural reproduction (*vis-à-vis* canon making), the desire to dissect from the text (to “bring closer”) otherwise unseen details removed from the material history and context of the art object, is still readily apparent. Under these conditions, Benjamin pronounces that art is no longer about a ritual or cult value, but about politics. That is, the politics produced by the different angles, composition, and framing that is typical of mechanical reproduction and that is not conducive to “free-floating contemplation” (223).¹⁶ Of course, we can see a precedent to this type of interpretation in colonial assessment of non-western art that is valued, primarily, as an object of knowledge.

One may ask, then, how my identification of a social-spiritual narrative and interpretive practice does not simply re-enforce the evaluative binary of “sacred” v. mass commodity art that, as Benjamin admits, has been reiterated for many years now. To answer this question it helps to consider Benjamin’s larger thesis regarding art in the age of reproduction. This thesis is that: “Fascism sees its salvation in giving these masses not their right, but instead a chance to express themselves. [...] Fascisms seeks to give them an expression while preserving property. The logical result of fascism is the introduction of aesthetics into political life” (241). In this argument we see a parallel with critiques of liberal and neoliberal adaptations of power

¹⁶ Film and photography are the exemplars of Benjamin’s thesis on mechanical reproduction and art. Textual reproduction may not experience as invasive effects from mechanical reproduction, but the role of editors, paratexts, and marketing techniques are a few comparable examples.

(represented by the university in Ferguson and Melamed) that incorporate difference—both physical bodies and cultural production—while rejecting any systemic or structural changes to the apparatuses of power that otherwise maintain the subjugation of difference. Thus, for my purposes of thinking about the political potential of a social-spiritual writing and interpretive practice, its significance is not in its ability to re-impart art’s “aura” or “cult value,” but rather its ability to center material and historical politics without defaulting into a transactional or scientific approach to cultural consumption that both Benjamin and Melamed highlight. The spiritual aspect imbues the text with less transactionable elements while still being grounded in the material and social. Together, these elements create a “place-ness” to the narrative that is not entirely map-able and, therefore, is partially constructed by and constitutive of its author’s (and their creative network’s) enacted decolonial epistemology.

NARRATIVE, AESTHETICS, AND THE “NOT QUITE THERE” OF SOCIAL-SPIRITUALITY

The concept of aesthetics has shown up several times in the various histories and theorists I have discussed. Under postmodernism, a fragmented, hybrid, and “meaningless” aesthetic emerges. José Muñoz describes a Blochian aesthetic that captures the “... anticipatory illumination of art, ... a surplus of both affect and meaning within the aesthetic.” And Benjamin’s concept of the “aura” indexes a material presence that is also connected to an aesthetic or affective experience of authenticity (vis-à-vis distance). Although social-spirituality is largely about a practice of writing, storytelling, and interpreting that is enacted and manifested or foreclosed in the texts I study, there are also some frequently occurring aesthetic features in all of the texts. Perhaps most notably, there is a self-conscious representation of writing, narration, and storytelling. Also important is social-spirituality’s often excess of words, intertextual references to both high and low culture, and ambiguous boundaries between the material and

spiritual realm. It is a mode of narrating that moves in multiple directions at once. As a result, social-spirituality also maps uncharted experiences in uncharted ways and often leaves readers unsure about a narrative “point”—an important response to neoliberal interpretive methods. Again, to turn to Muñoz, “The utopian function is enacted by a certain surplus in the work that promises a futurity, something that is not quite there” (7). In the case of social-spirituality, what is “not quite there” is a queer narrative strategy or practice that does not reinforce liberal, neoliberal, and heteropatriarchal imaginative and material norms.¹⁷

Recently, Amy Hungerford has turned to the seemingly unlikely connection among postmodern American literature and religious belief. As she elaborates in her work, there is much more sincerity in postmodern literature than one might originally surmise. For her, that sincerity arises in the belief in literature, in words, and in undefinitive meaning. In Latina/o literature of the late 20th and 21st century, this belief is also a belief in words (and the speaker of words), but unlike Hungerford’s postmodern belief that she traces from the likes of literary critics such as Matthew Arnold and a history of religion in the U.S., I see social-spirituality diverging from that history in the 1970s and 80s with the intervention of women of color feminists, a genealogy I briefly elaborated upon earlier. Social-spirituality diverges from Hungerford’s postmodern belief in that, for her, contemporary literature uses religious elements (devoid of meaning) to confer authority upon the texts in a plural society where no one belief can stand unchallenged. For Latina/o subjects, however, a postmodern condition of plural belief systems has been a lived

¹⁷ As is probably evident, social-spirituality certainly has some overlap with postmodern aesthetics. Unlike postmodernism, though, the indeterminate narrative representation is emerging from historically and socially grounded realities. And while identity is far from static, it is still a significant orienting experience for the narrative. Finally, the text’s genuine portrayal and engagement with spirituality defy postmodernism’s disenchantment with metaphysical truth narratives.

experience since colonization. Thus, many Latina/o religious or spiritual practices are already multiply layered and do not provide significant access to the sense of authority that Hungerford's texts access. To the contrary, the practices index a long history of survival through alternate systems of meaning making, the centrality of writing, reading and storytelling for creating and maintaining these systems, and their necessity for challenging the most mundane ways that capitalism has organized our everyday lives.

The Chicano/a movement re-ignited art for wisdom, for truth, and for "community," but also marginalized the efforts and contributions of women and queer individuals who have been potent cultural and spiritual healers across Chicano/a and Latino/a history. We still have a notion of truth/wisdom/morality that colors our daily endeavors even when we do not profess a certain belief or spirituality. As Warner et al explain "It is not only the religious who have some 'beliefs' that go beyond the conclusions of—and indeed are orienting for—ordinary reason" (11).

Following these unspoken values, neoliberalism re-instrumentalizes culture for capital. By turning to women of color feminists and their concern with gender and sexuality, embodiment, and ghosted physical and spiritual experiences, we can see an intervention into the neoliberal exchange value understanding of art and culture. As I will show in the project, this intervention expands into ideas of individualism and collectivity, belonging and citizenship, and authenticity and authority. Hence, gender and sexuality remain central analytical components for social-spirituality.

NARRATIVE OF RENDAS: LATE 20TH AND 21ST CENTURY SOCIAL-SPIRITUAL INTERVENTIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

In David Carrasco's overview of Mesoamerican religions, he notes that the realm of rhetoric, both oral and written (e.g., Florentine Codex), as a medium for divine communion created a parallel value system to the "mystic-military religion of the Aztec warrior class." In his

words, instead of blood, the tlamatime used language “to communicate and make offerings to the gods” (79). In this way, an elite class participated in an alternative way to organize reality, value culture, and think about higher truths and meaning. As I explain in my first chapter, in the late 1970s and early 80s, women of color feminists similarly intervened in thinking about the value of narrative and artistic culture and its relationship to gendered, raced, classed, and sexed embodiment. While the Aztec tlamatime were enabled by a hierarchical system, women of color feminists were enabled by the expansion of capitalism (more in chapter 1). During the Chicano/a movement, culture was too often produced and maintained at the expense of women’s bodies, minds, and spirits. The work of women of color feminists allowed their embodied (raced, sexed, gendered, classed) words and ideas to become sacred instead of sacrificial. They too created a new offering to the gods—both the metaphorical gods that order and value society such as education, capitalism, and state, as well as a more literal offering to ancestral gods that honors an obscured cultural history and the continued belief in change.

Recent theoretical developments in cultural, literary, and Latino/a studies, however, have too easily dismissed the insights of women of color feminism for 21st century critical analysis (Soto, Moya “Dismantling,” Moya “The Search,” Alvarez et al). As Paula Moya notes regarding Audre Lorde’s work: “Lorde’s theoretical insights, by contrast [to Junot Díaz’s], have lately been neglected within literary criticism consigned by many literary scholars to the dustbin of recent history as an exemplar of the kind of ‘identity politics’ they are grateful to move beyond” (“Dismantling” 232). My own recent experience at the 2016 annual conference of the Society for the Study of Gloria Anzaldúa (SSGA) confirmed the extent of this dismissal. Here, at a pre-conference workshop, the facilitators asked participants to describe how Anzaldúan thought had impacted and been developed in their work. One after the another, scholars of all stripes—

graduates students, independent scholars, and senior professors—offered their accounts and each expressed some level of concern regarding the “legitimacy” of Anzaldúan scholarship. One of the facilitators bravely pointed out the common thread in our accounts and the disservice it did to an already marginalized body of work [women of color feminism]. The best word to describe the trepidation among the (mostly female) participants is shame, and it evidenced the ongoing embodied sacrifice (psychological, spiritual, physical, material) that this work of intersectional feminism seems to still demand.

Nonetheless, the work of women of color feminism, both critical and utopian in impulse, seems to be more necessary than ever. With regard to Anzaldúan scholarship, within the last several years the Gloria E. Anzaldúa papers have been collected and archived at the University of Texas’s Nettie Lee Benson Latin American Collection, which has generated a new surge of Anzaldúan scholarship including the publication of her unpublished work in *Light in the Dark/Luz en lo Oscuro* (2015) and the translation of *Borderlands/La Frontera* into Spanish. Moreover, as the edited collection *Translocalities/Translocalidades: Feminist Politics of Translation in the Latin/a Américas* (2014) explains, there is still much work to be done to theorize and forge these translocal and transnational feminist connections (Alvarez et al). As my chapters will show, the use of women of color feminist spirituality as a strategy for narration allows writers to cross borders—both physical and figurative—to explore variations in identity, subjectivity, space and time, and—most prominently—ways (and limitations) of narrating. In particular, paying attention to a social-spiritual approach to narration brings women of color feminist concern for a politics of location and knowledge production to bear on the ever-loosening grip on Latino/a identity. Although the texts in this project are written and interpreted primarily from a U.S.-based perspective, they all engage a destabilizing transnational and

translocal imaginary. In this way, a social-spiritual analysis could bring women of color feminist concerns into conversation with newer theoretical paradigms such as theories of the global south (see Chapter 4). At the same time, it could also cause us to consider the different contextual associations of spirituality in different geographical locations (e.g. Latin America, Caribbean) and how these play out in different narrative strategies and politics. Finally, as long as a modernist, liberal, and neoliberal system of rationality and value remain in place, it would do us well to carefully consider the way marginalized subjects turn to the spiritual to remake and re-narrate the world.

A LATINA/O SOCIAL-SPIRITUAL ARCHIVE AND PRACTICE—PROJECT OVERVIEW

This project is itself invested in a social-spiritual interpretive practice and, thus, seeks to locate queer connections in unexpected places such as the text's theorization of writing and storytelling, its engagement with the spirit world, and its reception. The epigraph from Gloria Anzaldúa that opens this chapter speaks to these connections and is one that captured my attention over ten years ago precisely because of its similarly jarring and queer understanding of art and creative expression. Interspersed with metaphysical concepts about the "presences of persons" and "incarnations of gods or ancestors or natural and cosmic powers" that are often unwelcome in the academy, it was not until I visited the Gloria E. Anzaldúa papers that I began to better understand Anzaldúa's re-evaluative work on writing, theory, spirituality, and activism. Instead of finding a well indexed, organized structure for accessing Anzaldúa's life and works I was confronted by the cognitive and material disarray of the 200-plus boxes of archival material. Beyond the perhaps typical opacity of scholarly archives, the Anzaldúa papers are extra confounding because of the sheer borderlessness of their content. To name just a few inclusions, Anzaldúa scholars will sift through writing notes scribbled on the back of doctor's appointment

reminders; rectangular clippings of her writing; receipts—and notes on the receipts—from speaking gigs; various spiritual texts and prayer cards; countless essay revisions with handwritten commentary and post-it notes; and much, much more. Despite the pristine, authoritative, and quiet library facilities at the University of Texas where her work is housed, it is fruitless to try to sort out Anzaldúa’s intellectual or creative output from her bodily, spiritual, financial, and personal life experiences. In her final creative act, Anzaldúa reiterated the performative quality of her “stories” and their shamanistic ability—or, perhaps, imperative—to, as she explains, “transform the storyteller and the listener into something or someone else...” (88).¹⁸ In the words of Suzanne Bost, rather than looking to an authoritative archive to confirm or reject what we know about the author, “the process of authority is...continued into the present and future, into the work done in the reading room and beyond” (622).

As a result, my project methodologically attempts to be attentive to the material, spiritual, emotional, and intellectual mappings of the contemporary narratives I examine, as well as to the unseen and translocal networks of readers or “witnesses” that the texts interpolate and that include critics, lay people, students, book sellers, politicians, etc. None of these connections are necessarily stable, but they are nonetheless critical in helping us to map the ongoing work of Latina/o narrative culture as an active and promising agent of alternative knowledge production. Thus, against many established critical pathways, *Sacred Sites* brings together concepts of spirituality and value, queerness, representational politics, and neoliberalism within a range of popular texts created by both Latino/a and non-Latino/a artists. Following Anzaldúa’s later work (and, arguably, the direction of Latino/a Studies as a developing discipline), I include texts

¹⁸ According to AnaLouise Keating who is among those in charge of Anzaldúa’s estate, “Anzaldúa had carefully packed and stored these materials in every room of her house in Santa Cruz, California” (“Archival” 161).

authored by men and women, from multiple ethnic backgrounds, and that identify as both Latino/a and non-Latino/a. This also falls in line with the women of color feminist method of anthologizing that includes multiple voices from multiple backgrounds and that attempts to have conversations across these differences. This methodological approach also avoids reifying the idea that spirituality is only a woman's political practice. As I have suggested, this non-identity based approach also resonates with the emerging critical framework of global south studies that looks at representations and connections across variously raced and sexed marginalized populations in the southern hemisphere.

In addition to women of color feminism, my project is also indebted to cultural studies methods. The texts I study represent established and emerging popular genres and enjoy a relatively wide circulation, which makes them useful for considering the effects of capital, literary and academic institutions, and neoliberal ideology on Latina/o narrative culture. Following the methodological concerns of cultural studies scholars such as Michael Dowdy, Arlene Dávila, and George Yúdice, this project also pays attention to the production, circulation, and reception of the texts under consideration and the often invisible circulation networks that are crucial to understanding the texts' criticality. As a result, each chapter focuses on a primary institution or discursive realm within which the narrative is produced and circulates. Following recent studies on the production of ethnic and postcolonial literature, the two primary institutions my project focuses on are the academy and the mainstream publishing market (McGurl, Brouillette, Huggan, Melamed, Ferguson). This focus is especially useful for mapping the way that women of color feminist concerns and insights do not always travel legibly across different genres and reception networks.

Chapter 1 focuses on the role of the university in facilitating the emergence of Chicano/a and Latino/a letters, its longstanding intimate relation with the state and how both these factors contributed to the emergence of a women of color feminist and a social-spiritual writing practice. Specifically, I focus on the development of Chicano movement and women of color feminist print culture such as *El Grito*, Kitchen Table Press, and *Third Woman* and contend that a social-spiritual narrative practice emerged in response to the different ways that men and women occupy institutional space. I then trace this practice into the so-called liberal multicultural era of popular Latina writers such as Julia Alvarez, Sandra Cisneros, and Helena María Viramontes. Far from solely commodifying Latina/o cultural production, a women-of-color-feminist approach to writing and narrative persisted during this time period. Moreover, despite reductive pronouncements of the value of material vs. symbolic politics, this chapter provides a textured analysis of the university space, cultural politics and their importance to Chicano/a and Latino/a knowledge production and activism. From this perspective, the university and literary studies are not only a “...privileged tool that white Americans can use to get to know difference...” but a contestatory space that helped produce various critical writing practices and narrative traditions (Melamed xvi).

The second chapter turns to the institution of mainstream publishing in order to more fully explore the social-spirituality of Latina “multicultural” writing that first received recognition from mainstream publishing houses. Specifically, I analyze changes in the publishing industry leading up to and during the time of the multicultural “Latina Boom” and the biographical and social history of the single most recognizable Latina writer to date, Sandra Cisneros. I then consider Cisneros’s 2002 novel, *Caramelo*, in the context of her career-long experience as a “multicultural” writer for a mainstream press. In this view, Cisneros’s embodied

literary celebrity and narrative in *Caramelo* enact “metaphysical melodramas” that map felt experiences of the Latina diaspora and critique (neoliberal) nationalist and transnationalist containment of Latina joy. In the context of the publishing industry’s evolving demands, we can thus see Cisneros’ social-spiritual narrative practice that comes to fruition in *Caramelo* and that extends beyond the page in her embodied performance of a pleasurable, postnational Latinidad.

The third chapter remains within the realm of mainstream publishing and cultural production by turning to the most recent popular marketplace for Latina/o writers—the young adult (YA) and science fiction (SF) market. I first contextualize the complete lack of diversity in this publishing and marketing realm and, thus, the hard earned space that the authors I study have carved from which to engage a Latino/a political imaginary that is diverse and future-oriented. I then turn to the persistence of a specifically Latino/a spiritual imaginary that emerges in two rather distinctive YA or youth oriented narrative productions—Nancy Farmer’s *The House of the Scorpion* and Alex Rivera’s film, *Sleep Dealer*. In looking at these text’s particular engagement with the Chicano movement concept of Aztlán, I argue that spirituality is still a dynamic imaginary resource for representing Latino/a experience, but, as these texts show, it is still often constrained by deeply gendered and heteronormative imaginative bounds. As I analyze in my close readings of the texts, women are the primary caretakers of spirituality as a political practice and if men choose to engage this realm, it is only possible if they are simultaneously engaged in a heteronormative relationship. As a result, a fledgling women of color feminist social-spiritual narrative practice which can be seen in the texts is foreclosed or, at best, resisted, in favor of more traditional, masculine material political action. I conclude by turning briefly to the contemporaneous YA novel *Mexican Whiteboy* (2008) by Matt de la Peña and the Tucson Unified School District’s ethnic studies ban, which forcibly removed literary and cultural texts

(including de la Peña's) from school classrooms. The novel thematizes the protagonist's own creative (written) quest for an authentic Mexican homeland (Aztlán) only to be confronted by its non-existence and the prominence of the school-to-prison pipeline for young men of color. In the context of the ethnic studies ban and its polarized response from students, teachers, community members and politicians, the visioning potential and social-spiritual practice represented in de la Peña's novel and which enables spaces for young people of color to imagine, create, and explore new, "unnatural" connections, is clearly political in both material and symbolic ways.

Finally, the last chapter returns back to the space of the university to examine the (discursive) role of world or global literature on Latino/a narrative culture and politics. I first turn to examine a shift in the reception of Junot Díaz's work from his first publication *Drown* in 1996 to the publication of *The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* in 2008 and from immigrant literature to "decolonial," "world," or "global" literature. I then turn to my more extensive analysis of how the critical reception of *Oscar Wao* has systematically downplayed the queer, feminist, spiritual chronotope developed in the novel at the expense of understanding new directions in Díaz's narrative project, as well as the significance of women of color feminist theory and practice for a decolonial, world literary project. The chapter concludes by considering how both *Oscar Wao* and Díaz's own political activism provocatively unite and trouble the otherwise antagonistic categories of U.S. Latino cultural politics and world literature through a women-of-color-feminist, social-spiritual practice.

A social-spiritual writing practice highlights the constant imbrication of the immaterial and material effects of writing and storytelling and its importance for thinking about narrative value in the neoliberal era. Moreover, as we see across the four chapters of this project, this critical dialogue also helps to queerly map the multi-temporal sense of place and subjectivity for

contemporary Latino/as in spite of the very real effects of globalized displacement on this population. Thus, in addition to critiquing the damning effects of neoliberalism on Latino/a populations, the social-spiritual narrative focuses on the creative and productive strategies of writing and storytelling that remain future-oriented and politically visionary. It is particularly important that through the interweaving of the spiritual and the indeterminacy of the narrative, the texts convey not only hope, but also a pleasure and urgency in writing and narrating.

When I think about social-spirituality and this pleasure and urgency of narrative, I am reminded of one of Anzaldúa's thought images collected in her archive entitled, "Tomando Poder" or "Taking Power." In the rather simplistic drawing there is a roughly human shape, left arm in the air with finger pointed upward and right arm pointed perpendicular to the body in a similar gesture. At the top of this figure are the two title words, the first written in a green color and the second in a red that matches the body. The words state the present progressive imperative, "Tomando Poder" or "Taking Power." For me, it is the image that captures my attention first with its odd cross between the raised fist symbol of political resistance and a quintessential "disco fever" dance move. Combined with the no nonsense title, it is hard to not interpret the imperative as one that enlivens the body and spirit even as it may also be an struggle. This struggle comes across in the (unstable) faceless, genderless, and raceless body that stands in contrast to the steadfast cult of identity and individualism of our moment. It also resonates with Anzaldúa's desire for, in her words, "the freedom to carve and chisel [her] own face, to staunch the bleeding with ashes, to fashion [her] own gods out of [her] entrails" (*Borderlands* 44) that she describes in *Borderlands* and again in *Making Face, Making Soul* and that is clearly empowering but also painful. Finally, the Spanish caption of the image with its double meaning of the word "tomar" (to take and to drink) suggests the necessity of taking and

deploying power through the body. In a similar way, the embodied pleasure and displeasure of storytelling, writing, interpreting, and imagining is at the forefront of social-spirituality and it is a crucial component for understanding, resisting, and revaluing the terms of the neoliberal imagination.

CHAPTER 1

CHICANO/A AND LATINA/O KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION: THE ACADEMY, THE STATE, AND WOMEN OF COLOR FEMINIST WRITING PRAXIS

“For decades Chicanos have supported, through taxation of our income and exploitation of our labor, institutions of higher education. In return we have received virtually nothing.” –“El Plan de Santa Barbara,” 1969

“Awareness of our situation must come before inner changes, which in turn come before changes in society. Nothing happens in the ‘real’ world unless it first happens in the images in our heads.” –Gloria E. Anzaldúa

Rarely has the role of the public university as an institution been under such close scrutiny in the U.S. as it has since the financial crisis of 2008 and the subsequently increasing awareness of our interconnected, global economy. With increased rhetoric of supra-national business markets and infrastructures, and shrinking federal funding for higher education, investigating the role of this distinctly national institution is ubiquitous among those inside and outside its halls¹⁹. One particularly strong and relevant critique of the contemporary university is its increasingly neoliberal values and infrastructure. Following David Harvey, neoliberalism is a political economic theory, which asserts that “human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade.” Since neoliberalism is the hegemonic contemporary discourse in the U.S., the role of the state under neoliberalism is

¹⁹ Jeffrey J. Williams, Professor of English at Carnegie Mellon, writes on his blog, Edu-factory.org, about the emergence over the last two decades of a field he calls “critical university studies” that focuses primarily on the critique of higher education.

to uphold an “institutional framework” that can support such practices” (2). Neoliberalism is thus not only an economic theory, but also a way of governing under late capitalism.

Given the centrality of neoliberalism to the state, it is unsurprising that it has also heavily encroached upon the operation and purpose of the university. Following a host of other scholars, Jodi Melamed points to the “retooling of American universities to produce a transnational managerial-professional class for global capitalism and how this retooling has impacted the teaching of literature” as evidence of the increasingly neoliberal university. In her study, *Represent and Destroy*, Melamed takes a more comprehensive approach to understanding the compromised relationship between the university, literary studies, and ethnic American literature in a post-World War II context. She specifically argues that during this time period, state-sanctioned (rhetorical) anti-racisms and literary studies worked to separate the concept of race from material conditions (i.e. capitalism). Although she does trace out a resistant tradition of ethnic literature (which includes women of color feminist work)—what she calls race radical literature—the primary distinction between the “race liberal” and “race radical” falls along the lines of either an ideological critique (i.e., exposing the lie of racial liberalism) or the text’s ability to act as a guide for more “material” anti-racisms. She also turns to the author of a text’s activist profile in order to support the text’s race radical position. As a result, the recurrent tension between “material” anti-racisms and symbolic antiracism is the dominant fault line for these texts. Other scholars such as Roderick Ferguson, Sarah Brouillette, Graham Huggan, and Mark McGurl have made similar critiques that can largely reduce post-war ethnic American cultural expression to symbolic pawns of power.²⁰

²⁰ Importantly, there are a few scholars who have challenged this seductive, if not depressing, interpretation of specifically Chicano/a and Latino/a literature. Elena Machado Sáez and Ralph Dalleo critically investigate this position in their study *The Latino/a Canon and the Emergence*

While Melamed offers valuable set of indices for a critical narrative project, they are also relatively narrow and static parameters with which to think about culture and race radical literary projects. As she explains, under radical anti-racism “culture does not just have the ability to mold human behaviors and attitudes, rather *culture* is a name for a dynamic-moving base of epistemology, knowledge, social-relations, and material forces interlinked and in contention that sediment heterogenous and uneven experiences of the everyday” (Melamed 100). Thus, building off of Melamed’s work, this dissertation reconsiders and extends what might constitute as “race radical” in the 21st century to include texts that re-value our understanding of culture through a social-spiritual lens that captures both the material and imaginative significance of cultural production for racialized Latina/o populations. It also considers “activist” networks beyond individual authors to include other writers, readers, writing workshops, and online sites that also intersect narrative culture in material ways and maintain a women of color feminist tradition of an embodied, relational, spiritual, and intellectual writing practice.

Critiques of neoliberalism, the university, and literary studies have at times also tended to over generalize the state’s power to produce “official anti-racisms” that apply across diverse populations of color and a wide historical time frame. Consequently, there is the tendency to obfuscate the productive educational and political efforts achieved by populations of color as a result of the civil rights movement, the Chicano/a movement, and, particularly, women of color feminist writing and activism.²¹ With regard to the historical experiences of Chicano/as and

of Post-Sixties Literature (2007) and, more recently, Michael Dowdy’s work on Latino poetics and neoliberalism, *Broken Souths: Latina/o Poetic Responses to Neoliberalism and Globalization* (2013), further pushes back on a binary ideological position of resistant/non-resistant in favor of a more complex rendering that better reflects the reality of contemporary U.S. Latina/os.

²¹ To be clear, Melamed understands the 1960s and 70s social movements (and the demand for new studies and knowledge) to be “robustly materialist” if not short lived (93). By the 1980s she

Latino/as with education and knowledge production (including narrative production) specifically, the critical mappings of these studies do not always paint a complete picture. Thus, in this chapter I unravel divergent Chicano/a and Latino/a experiences with “official anti-racisms,” the university, and cultural production. In doing this, I trace parallels between persistent critiques of the Chicano/a movement’s emphasis on cultural production (over more “material” politics) to critiques of Chicana and Latina “mainstream” and “multicultural” literature of the 80s and 90s and, more recently, to contemporary critiques of ethnic literary studies as largely symbolic strategies of neoliberalism to manage culture and diversity for capital. While it would be naïve to dismiss these critiques wholesale, so too, I contend, is it dangerous to bypass the very real social and political effects of “symbolic” politics, especially when they intervene in the powerful and political realm of knowledge production and in alternative coalition or network building as I argue women of color feminist work continues to do. Moreover, binary approaches to political activism obfuscate important historical nuance, as well as reinforce the familiar heteropatriarchal (“La Malinche”) narrative of the indigenous woman as traitor and the inefficacy of feminist politics.

To ground this chapter, I begin by tracing the history of the university in relation to the U.S. state and demonstrate its long (well before neoliberalism) partnership; at the same time, I explore how the imperial desires of the state have opened the university to previously unrecognized forms of Chicano/a and Latino/a knowledge production. Moreover, I explain how literary studies has historically been a contentious realm of knowledge production, making it ripe for the development of Chicano/a movement epistemology. The second section focuses more centrally on women of color feminists’ distinctive relationship to the university and its effect on

suggests that anti-racist, materialist knowledge, especially by women of color feminists, had been driven underground (117).

their embodied, social-spiritual writing and reading praxis that is evident in their print culture. Contrary to contemporary periodization, I demonstrate the longevity of women of color feminist's social-spiritual approach to writing as a political practice that extends into the so-called multicultural women writers of the 1980s and 1990s and, as this dissertation argues, into a strand of 21st century narrative production.

WHOSE UNIVERSITY?: THE UNIVERSITY, THE STATE, AND CHICANO/A AND LATINO/A LETTERS

This section focuses on the racialized historical relationship between the state and the university, as well as the impact of the student protests and subsequent civil rights concessions made at some universities on the production of Chicano/a writing and literary culture. To a lesser extent, I discuss the development of Puerto Rican and African American organizing in New York City and the creation of the open admissions program at the City College of New York in Harlem in 1970. Although this section focuses more heavily on Chicano and Chicana activism and writing because of the magnitude of the print culture archive for this group, it is crucial to recognize that any one group's success during this highly energized moment is also largely due to the momentum and power of multiple groups organizing across the nation. Likewise, as the remaining chapters of this dissertation will also demonstrate, the gains made by Chicanos/as—the largest Latino/a demographic in the U.S.—also impact other Latino/a writers.

Importantly, prior to the social movements of the late 1960s, writing by Mexican Americans (including Tejanos and Californios) did, indeed, exist. This writing was often published in Spanish and written for fairly regional audiences. Mexican Americans who published in 19th and 20th century newspapers were often those who enjoyed the most

widespread circulation (Martín-Rodríguez 14)²². My intention is not to disqualify these pre-movement textual antecedents, but to juxtapose and make connections across the different moments of Latina/o print culture and to re-evaluate the importance of the post-civil rights material *and* symbolic gains for Latina/o textuality. For writing, when accessible, has been an important aspect of culture and identity making for Chicanas/os and Latinos/as and, as Marissa Lopez notes in *Chicano Nations*, a forum for thinking about the nation, about self in relation to others, and for imagining alternative futurities—all important nodes for analysis in our current social and political context (2011). Therefore, I ask: how did the student protests of the late 60s and early 70s, the social-spiritual practice of women of color feminists, and the incorporation of Chicano/a and Latino/a letters into the infrastructure of the university impact the trajectory or understanding of this writing?

Likely Bedfellows: the University and the State

Before the student protest movements of the 1960s and subsequent university concessions such as the creation of Chicano/a studies programs and Quinto Sol Press—the first Chicano/a specific press dedicated to Chicano/a writing—much had transpired that already embroiled the public research university, the state, and racialized bodies in complicated ways. As Manuel Martín-Rodríguez describes, international engagements such as World War II and the Korean War, of which Mexican-Americans participated disproportionately, drastically expanded veterans' awareness of and relationships with those racialized in similar (and dissimilar) ways. Moreover, Mexican Americans' participation in these wars eventually opened up the university space for further inter- and intra-racial interactions through the passage of the

²² For work on pre-movement Latino/a writing, see Raul Coronado's *A World Not to Come: A History of Latino Writing and Print Culture* (2013), Kirsten Silva Gruesz's *Ambassadors of Culture: The Transamerican Origins of Latino Writing* (2002) or Marissa Lopez's *Chicano Nations: The Hemispheric Origins of Mexican-American Literature* (2011).

GI Bill, which I discuss later (Martin-Rodriguez 15). Similarly, although perhaps with a lesser degree of archival evidence, Mexican American womens' experiences outside of the home also impacted this imaginary. As Emma Perez documents in her touchstone study *The Decolonial Imaginary*, in the late 1930s and 1940s diasporic Mexican women in Texas joined social clubs to both prove their ability to be good Americans *and* maintain their cultural heritage. In the process, these women came face-to-face with racism and at times even confronted this racism collectively. These extra-regional and extra-domestic experiences (furthered by U.S. military involvement) helped Chicanos/as imagine a collective group or audience with which to share their stories and experiences. Moreover, these experiences were precursors to the political organizing that would later emerge in the university setting of the late 1960s and within the Chicano/a movement.

The GI Bill or the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944 yielded similar, if not more sustained political effects, by bringing Latinos/as from various backgrounds and places into a common space—the university (Martin-Rodríguez 15). The space of the university created real time interaction between ethnic groups that was distinctive from other political spaces previously accessible²³. Namely, the GI Bill linked access to higher education with democratic citizenship. In both its language and implementation, the Bill furthered the so-called democratization of higher education that made access to higher education a basic right while at the same time solidifying the links between education and national security concerns (Loss 117-119). Further, although Mexican American veterans during the 1950s were not known for their radical political

²³ It should be noted that African-Americans (and queer men who were discharged dishonorably) did not benefit from GI Bill to the extent of other populations. According to Christopher Loss, the Bill's "decentralized administrative structure combined with entrenched, often legal discriminatory practices by banks and colleges prevented millions of Americans from tapping the benefits due them" (116).

organizing, they were nonetheless politically organized. Similar to the women's groups described by Perez, these first generation college students reflected the politics of their time and joined professional or "liberal reformist" organizations such as the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC) that acknowledged the presence of racism, but worked for "political accommodation and assimilation" as a means to equal status (Muñoz).²⁴ Although these organizations promoted a politics that aspired to whiteness, they were among the first to publicly and collectively claim their cultural heritage to mainstream society and to attempt to address issues of racism.

Out of these early experiences with Mexican American political organizing, a few radical leaders emerged from the rank and file (Muñoz 49-51). With the change in political climate in the mid-1960s, some of these leaders began to move away from a politics of respectability and accommodation. In 1964 at San Jose State College, Armando Valdez organized the Student Initiative (SI), the first group dedicated to the needs (beyond assimilation) of Mexican Americans and Mexican American youth in particular (Muñoz 51). By 1967, more race-oriented student organizations had developed on campuses across the nation such as the Mexican American Youth Organization at St. Mary's University in San Antonio, Texas, the Mexican American Student Organization (MASO) at the University of Texas at Austin, and the United Mexican American Students (UMAS) at the University of California, Los Angeles, and several other California colleges. By 1969 the organization that would be most involved in the creation and development of Chicano/a studies, the Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán (MEChA), was founded at the University of California, Santa Barbara and is still in existence on college campuses today.

²⁴ See also Henry Ramos's work on the American G.I. Forum, a Hispanic-American organization created in 1948 to prevent the mistreatment of Hispanic veterans.

At the same time, on the east coast Puerto Rican and African American students were creating and joining student organizations aimed at remedying the de facto segregation that the civil rights movement had drawn attention to. At Brooklyn College (of the City University of New York system) in 1968, the Black League of Afro-American Collegians (BLAC) was formed, which, along with the Puerto Rican Alliance, became major forces on campus (Biondi 163-4). In 1969, they presented the university administration with 18 demands that included open access for all Puerto Rican and Black students, as well as Afro-American and Puerto Rican institutes controlled by Black and Puerto Rican students, faculty, and community (Biondi 165). Even prior to this organizing, the Young Lords, a largely Puerto Rican social and civil rights youth organization that began in Chicago, were already involved in this type of activism as early as 1954 (Fernandez 143)²⁵. The Young Lords eventually developed a New York chapter composed predominantly of first generation college students who were dissatisfied with their college experience, which they felt to be riddled with discrimination, unsatisfactory curriculum, and financial aid (Fernandez 144). As a result of ongoing protests and organizing at Brooklyn College and City College of New York in Harlem, as well as the often-violent responses from law enforcement, in 1970, an open admissions policy was enacted across the City University of New York system (Biondi 177-78).

These intra- and inter-racial connections that developed throughout the 50s and 60s are indicative of the social dimension of the university that were conducive to political organizing. Although the national political climate (including the Black Power movement) and the momentum created by local political struggles such as the United Farmworkers' labor movement led by Cesar Chavez and the land grant struggle in New Mexico under Reises Tijerina's

²⁵ Although primarily composed of Puerto Rican youth, Johanna Fernandez claims the Young Lords membership to be 30% black and non-Puerto Rican Latinos/as (146).

leadership impacted the conditions of possibility for the Chicano and Puerto Rican student movements, the university also provided a necessary link for youth organizing (Muñoz 59). With the university as a (relatively new) gathering place, students potently combined their desire for knowledge with their growing interest in racial politics—a combination so threatening to state power that they were often subject to infiltration by police and undercover FBI officers and provocateurs (Acuña 350-51, Muñoz 172-74). In short, international military involvement (and its resulting GI Bill and extra-domestic connections)—an antecedent of what has come to be called “globalization” or the rapid movement of bodies, ideas, capital, and commodities across multiple national and intranational borders—helped to facilitate the radical shift in student experiences and political demands on university administrators.

The GI Bill, of course, was not the first interaction between the nation state and the academy that had racial implications. As Loss argues in his study, the federal government’s involvement in higher education steadily increased between World War I and the 1970s. Moreover, following Bill Readings and Clark Kerr’s studies on the U.S. public research university, we learn that the modern Western institution was modeled after Wilhelm von Humboldt’s German university (i.e., University of Berlin), whose unifying function was the instruction and cultivation of “culture” among its students rather than the Kantian “reason” that was at the heart of Oxford, Cambridge, and other Enlightenment influenced institutions. Although the cultivation of the “rational” subject certainly retained its privilege in the US institution, Readings argues that the American university and all of its activities revolved around the regulatory idea of a *national* culture (15).²⁶

²⁶ For the German idealists, culture meant “the sum of all knowledge studied and [the] cultivation and development of one’s character as a result” (Readings 15). In line with Enlightenment mores, all learning was *individually* edifying for the rational subject.

Indeed, a brief look at the major developments in the history of the public research university reveals a close connection between the needs of the state and the university's curricular development. These needs oscillate between those of a strategic economic and militaristic order and those concerned with upholding the state's purported political values of equality and democracy. For instance, the Morrill Acts of 1862 and 1890—the national legislation enacting one of the most marked shifts for research universities—responded to the rapid industrialization of the economy and the need for more skilled knowledge in agriculture and industry by subsidizing land grant universities that would teach agriculture, engineering, and well as military tactics. Even prior to this legislation, the City College of New York was founded in 1847 as the first free college to serve the children of the poor in New York²⁷ (Biondi 171). The Morrill Act of 1862, however, was specifically aimed at white uplift, as public research universities did not admit black or Native American students. Later, the 1890 Act required schools to either admit black students or create separate institutions for them (Ferguson 85). As Roderick Ferguson explains, the public research university, even at this early juncture, was quickly becoming a space for the state to resolve conflict between racial hierarchy and democracy (86), albeit around a predominantly black/white racial dynamic.

Within the realm of literary studies in the university, the importance of literature for nation building has been well documented (Anderson 1982), leading to the predominance of national paradigms for its study. Over the last four decades these national and often positivistic paradigms have come under increasing critical scrutiny. Ferguson, for example, turns to the analysis of 19th century literature in order to document and critique the university's ability to

²⁷ Over a century later, Puerto Rican and African American students protested the miniscule presence of black and Puerto Rican students at the university (9% total) and temporarily gained an open admission policy for anyone who wanted to attend (Biondi 177-78).

create a state archive of “national culture” that often portrayed race relations as more sanguine and uncomplicated than they actually were.²⁸ In 2010 Dennis López proffered a similar critique of the Chicano movement’s progression toward literary nationalism, arguing that the editors of *Quinto Sol*—the first Chicano/a dedicated press housed on Berkeley’s university campus—were no less susceptible to using literature to craft a one-dimensional representation of Chicano/a nationalist culture that aligned with a masculinist Chicano identity and suppressed any deviation (203). In this way, we see the university and literary studies operating as a mediating space “between the state and the people” or a parastate, as Loss explains (1-3). For the purposes of this chapter it is important to recognize the *longstanding* partnership between the needs of the nation state and the university, with literary studies playing a key role not only in facilitating that arrangement but also in making visible its ideological contours.

In fact, the history of literary studies and liberal arts education in the university has a unique and oddly ethical impulse to it that tellingly parallels the later incorporation of ethnic studies into the liberal arts curriculum and reveals the longstanding ideological discomfiture of these programs within the university. Liberal arts programs were first developed in the university after the Civil War. While literary study prior to this point had focused on a western tradition, with little to speak of for American literature, the post civil war climate required unifying American stories and the study of American literature fit the bill. Unlike the classics departments that preceded it (but similar to early Chicano Studies programs), American literary study did not have the gravitas of tradition behind it, but was summoned because of a social and national need.

²⁸ Benedict Anderson articulated the relationship between print culture and nation building in his classic text, *Imagined Communities*, wherein he argues that nationalism hinges on the creation on an “imagined community” that is unified not by any actual similarities in religion, background, ethnicity, etc., but through the subscription to common fictions or narratives about the “imagined” national community.

McGurl, who highlights the unique social, spiritual, and epistemic qualities of literary studies, aptly characterizes the liberal arts education as “the bastard offspring of religion and science” (39-40).²⁹ With these qualities of U.S. liberal arts and literary studies in mind, it is easy to see how, by the 1940s, as Jodi Melamed argues, the study of literature was being promoted as an anti-racist (i.e., humane) practice for readers to encounter Others, experience sympathy, and (superficially) reduce their prejudice—a national prerogative during the Cold War era (63).

While, as Melamed describes, the logic of literary studies alone as an antiracist technology is clearly flawed, I do want to highlight the important connection between literary studies as an “ethical” endeavor and the Chicano/a movement interest in cultural politics and women of color feminists’ re-visionary work. It is my contention that there is still some purchase in considering the role of reading practices and narrative performances for productively engaging race and other modes of difference. As the history I just recounted shows, narrative or storytelling is deeply connected to social relations, the relationship between the nation state and its citizens and, in recent years, the people’s interaction with each other in a way that exceeds the nation state.

Thus, engaging more closely with Melamed’s critique of literary studies, I would like to draw out the unique material and cultural intervention into this history made by Chicano/a movement activists and, even more dramatically, by women of color feminists. After the backlash on the civil rights movements and on the cultural politics of the Chicano/a movement (from both the left and the right), women of color feminists were among the first and most committed to recuperating and highlighting the varied social dimensions of narrative and culture.

²⁹ Somewhat humorously, James English recounts that as early as the turn of the 20th century, English departments began expressing anxiety regarding their status and purpose in the university—a common sentiment still today (English 5)

Radical thinkers (who were also connected to the university) such as Gloria Anzaldúa and Barbara Christian, among others, emphasized the power of an embodied, relational, self-reflexive and conscientious (e.g. ethical) writing and representational practice that was not confined to a single nation or to literary culture and that understood writing and art as an imperative political praxis. In this project, I refer to this artistic and political response as a social-spiritual practice. I contend that close attention to the material (including textual) and historical contexts of these events should cause us to reconsider what has perhaps too simplistically been narrated as Chicana/o and Latina/o “incorporation”—both bodily and culturally—into the liberal, neoliberal, and imperial university. I also focus on elaborating the persistent social-spirituality of late 20th and 21st century Latina narrative and theorize this in relation to women of color feminism’s urgent understanding of culture. What emerges is a different story about race/identity, Chicano/a and Latina/o literature, and its historical and ongoing place in the academy.

The Chicano Movement and Quinto Sol Press

As the brief history of the university above indicates, many historical factors (including the state and its global interventions) shaped the conditions of possibility for the Chicano/a movement and the subsequent creation of the first Chicano/a Studies department and Chicano/a Press, Quinto Sol. Interestingly, the founding of Quinto Sol Press in 1967 at the University of Berkeley by a handful of graduate students and social science professor, Octavio I. Romano V, predates the very first Chicano/a Studies department, established in 1968 at California State College (now University) in Los Angeles (Cutler “Quinto Sol”), indicating the organic and dynamic process of these grassroots developments in the late 60s. Moreover, as John Alba Cutler’s research has revealed, the “Quinto Sol group” first began as a graduate student group in

1964 that advocated against structural inequality in U.S. higher education that had systematically excluded Mexican Americans (“Quinto Sol” 266). Changes at the time were taking place not as delineated by a centralized (cultural nationalist) plan, but by the dynamic activism, mobilization, and pressure instigated by students, faculty and other social movements. As a result, I tend to follow Michael Soldatenko’s reconsideration of the origin of Chicano studies as not exactly a direct, one-to-one outcome of the student movements, but as the result of a number of ideological and social changes that opened an opportunity for collective hope that was, to use his phrase, “disruptive of the institutional imaginary” (15).

Further, although often glossed over in histories of the Chicano/a movement and of Chicano/a studies, the battle for change did not end once Chicano/a studies programs were founded and student protests and walkouts ended. Many activist students and faculty in the university experienced ongoing struggles and difficulties in maintaining the spaces they had gained.³⁰ Against the resistance from those in the academy defending the status quo and the existing curriculum (often in English or Spanish departments), *Quinto Sol* publications maintained a steady output of Chicano/a print culture that helped generate an audience and establish credibility (or cultural capital, as Cutler explains) for a body of work and people that were otherwise excluded from the material resources of the academe. Between the years 1968 and 1979 at least three Chicano/a dedicated presses, five Chicano/a and Latino/a dedicated journals, and two Chicano/a anthologies (each with two editions) were developed and all were in some way connected to the university space.³¹ To this day, the development of Chicano Studies

³⁰ See Yvonne Yarbo-Bejarano’s article, “Reflections on Thirty Years of Critical Practice in Chicana/o Cultural Studies,” for her account of the tumult caused by the incorporation of Chicano/a Studies at the University of Washington in the 1970s.

³¹ In 1967 *Quinto Sol* Press was founded and in 1968 they began publishing the journal *El Grito* out of the University of California, Berkeley. Later, in 1976, *El Grito del Sol* succeeded *El Grito*

programs remains one of the most tangible outcomes of the Chicano and civil rights movements. Quinto Sol Press was instigated with the charge to counter epistemological biases rampant in universities. Much like the epistemological impetus that eventually brought Chicano/a Studies and African-American studies to fruition, Romano and a few graduate students created the Press to publicly rebut the myriad social science studies that pathologized Chicano/a and Puerto Rican culture as unsuitable for modernity. Responding to the use of the term “culture” in its broadest (and most Humboldt-ian) sense, *El Grito*, the press’ first journal, published mostly critiques of these sociological studies. Not long after its inception, however, Romano and the other editors of the journal became increasingly concerned with literary culture and invested heavily in publishing literary writing that could also, quite literally, counter earlier representational stereotypes.

Since then, many scholars have returned to examine Quinto Sol’s literary turn and have critiqued its move away from more systemic analysis of race (sociological) in favor of what is understood to be the representational politics of Chicano literary nationalism. In his 2010 article “Goodbye Revolution—Hello Cultural Mystique,” Dennis López analyzes the implications of Quinto Sol’s literary nationalism and argues that it resulted in the creation of a pre-selected (male, heteronormative) canon with an exclusive ideology (200). López also points to other

after Quinto Sol split into two different entities (Martin-Rodriguez *Life* 17). In 1969, Quinto Sol published the anthology, *El Espejo* and two editions of *Voices*, an anthology of Quinto Sol articles (López “Goodbye” 190). Only a year later, the University of California, Los Angeles began publishing *Aztlan: A Journal of Chicano Studies* that remains a premier journal of Chicana/o and Latina/o studies. In 1973 the journal *Revista Chicano-Riquena* started its print run out of Indiana University in Bloomington as did *The Bilingual Review* journal out of City College of New York. The first journal of Chicana feminist scholarship also began publication in 1973 in the journal *Encuentro Feminil*. The larger presses, Bilingual Review Press (Arizona State University) and Arte Público (University of Houston) began operations in 1973 and 1979 respectively. Arte Público was established by the founders of *Chicano-Riquena* and Bilingual Review Press by the creator of *The Bilingual Review*.

critiques of cultural nationalism (including some ironically published in *El Grito*) that lament the reduction of revolutionary politics to rhetoric (193). It is important, though, to consider the historical context of the journal's shift in content, as well as the material demands of that context. As the writers of the 1969 Chicano/a educational manifesto "El Plan de Santa Barbara" explain, "The demand for a relevant educational experience is one of the most important features of the contemporary Chicano cultural renaissance" (40). Quinto Sol served as the primary Chicano/a owned and operated press at a moment when Chicano Studies programs were proliferating across the southwest with minimal resources for curricular material. By 1970, approximately 65 campuses in California had some form of Chicano Studies program (Soldatenko 36), and that does not account for the development across the greater southwest. Further, in 1968 congress passed the Bilingual Education Act, mandating that public schools in districts with large numbers of non-native English speakers implement bilingual classes with appropriate curriculum (Acuña 386). It should be no surprise then that *El Grito* frequently ran promotional ads for Quinto Sol books as educational tools for the classroom (Martin-Rodríguez 19).

Thus, Quinto Sol likely began publishing literature and literary criticism because it could meet an immediate and material demand of the changing education industry and Chicano/a and Latino/as growing place within it.³² As Cutler argues after examining the social history and operation of the Chicano/a press, as well as its diverse literary output, "Quinto Sol literature did not need to depend on appeals to authenticity—on reproducing Chicano/a culture in the ethnographic sense—because it asserted itself as a redistributive force into a field of inequality, sponsoring working class Chicano writers and marketing itself to institutions of varying prestige"

³² Chicano/a centered scholarship in other disciplines might also have required prolonged or inaccessible research, training and equipment. The infrastructure to support this work was simply not in place yet.

(287). In other words, in its turn to literary culture, Quinto Sol used literariness to “produce” culture and to harness the re-evaluative powers that cultural capital provides. The power of literary discourse was not simply to represent Mexican Americans uni-dimensionally, but to interpret, provoke, and re-value their marginalized experiences while materially adjusting who had access to this power through deliberate circulation networks—work that necessitated a tangential relationship to the university. Thus, in considering *El Grito*’s “shift” from material to cultural politics, it’s important to not lose sight of its contestatory epistemological impulse that met a very real material need that overlapped with but cannot be reduced to the representational politics that scholars have come to critique. Moreover, while critiques of an emerging heteronormative, male-centered Chicano/a cultural nationalism are certainly not unfounded, it is important not to let them overpower our interpretation of every facet of Chicano/a activism. This is even more important given the longevity of the material (male, effective) v. cultural (female, ineffective) politics binary that, as I’ve shown, colors contemporary analyses of contemporary literary studies and ethnic American literature. In these analyses, scholars affirm that “real” political action must remain primarily attentive to the rational and practical effects of knowledge that can be empirically correlated to real bodies, while marginalizing the work of culture and its imbrication in material conditions. At its best, the Chicano/a movement pushed back against such rigid constraints on the concepts of knowledge and politics.

In retrospect, Chicano Studies departments and Quinto Sol press worked hand-in-hand at making explicit the demand for a critical consideration of Chicano/a literature, experiences, and social concerns. In drawing out and fostering this audience, these institutions also brought into relief (and continue to do so) those uninterested and even resentful of Chicano/a cultural politics and social concerns. This demarcation would help better theorize Chicano/a and Latino/a

racialization beyond the then-typical (and still recalcitrant) black/white divide.³³ Unlike African Americans, whose status as a subjugated racial group was publicly debated for many years, Chicanos/as and Latinos/as' oppression was less publicly apparent to mainstream society until the civil rights and Chicano movement. In fact, it was not until the little discussed or commemorated case of *Hernandez v. Texas* in 1954 that Mexican-Americans and other non-white or black racial groups legally became a protected class under the 14th amendment ("Gus Garcia Day"). Likewise, while a few African-Americans were able to contribute their voices to abolitionist causes that had a somewhat expansive circulation and, later, a black modernist literary elite enjoyed connections and outlets abroad for their work, Chicano/a and Latina/o writing did not find similar traction.³⁴ Simply put, post-1848 Chicanos/as had starkly limited access to public discourse via the written word for upwards of a century.

Therefore, although Melamed traces a series of "official" anti-racisms adopted by the state (and utilized by the university) throughout the second half of the 20th century in order to contain more material anti-racisms, these formulations do not always neatly correlate with Chicano/a and Latino/a experiences of race. For instance, Melamed refers to the period immediately after World War II up until 1964 as a period of "race liberalism," wherein the state adopted a stance of liberal nationalism that sutured "Americanness" (and capitalism) with the moral (and global) responsibility of addressing and correcting the race problem between blacks and whites. Studying the famous US generated sociological report by Gunnar Myrdal, *An*

³³ Notably, Chicana feminists and lesbian feminists also brought much needed attention to the prevalence of sexism and homophobia within the Chicano community and the interlocking oppressions of sex, class, race, and gender.

³⁴ Those whose work did achieve print publication outside of the newspaper genre such as Maria Amparo Ruíz de Burton, did so with much difficulty and with limited circulation (Martin-Rodriguez *Life* 11). Ruíz de Burton's work has only recently achieved more widespread readership because of its republication by the Recovering the Hispanic Heritage Project sponsored by Arte Público Press based at the University of Houston.

American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy, Melamed astutely shows how the document paved the way for the race liberal novel as a technology of official antiracism by never addressing economic structures; pinning the cause of racism on white attitudes and lack of sympathy; connecting these attitudes to the US's ability to successfully model democracy on a global scale; and grossly delimiting the normative ideal of a black person worthy of the benevolence of reformed white attitudes (56-7). As evidenced by Melamed's reading of Myrdal's report, however, many racialized groups such as Native Americans, Latinos/as, and Asian Americans were not addressed by the state's "official" grappling with and crafting of a race liberal narrative.³⁵ In fact, as Lee Bebout reminds us, Chicanos, in particular, "had been largely effaced in popular and official discourses of US history" (4).

During the time Melamed designates as race liberalism, there are minimal outlets for Chicano/a or Latino/a generated expression, nor is there a discernable "official anti-racism" that acknowledges racism against Chicanos/as or Latinos/as. Michelle Habell-Pallán's work on the "Mexican Players" that performed at the Padua Hills theatre in California between 1931 and 1974 provide a good example of Chicano/as' lack of autonomy over their own public expression and the state's non-existent concern for domestic discrimination against Chicano/as at this time. Habell-Pallán historicizes the players' performances as entirely orchestrated by the white theatre owner's imagination (i.e., the "Spanish Fantasy Heritage") and as enactments of President Roosevelt's "Good Neighbor Policy" to smooth relations with Latin American nations. Within the context of the Good Neighbor Policy, Habell-Pallán explains that the Padua Hills theatre had *explicitly* little to do with improving domestic race relations with Chicanos/as (25-31). There is not even a façade of US anti-racism for Chicano/as and Latino/as at this time. While Melamed

³⁵ Jose Antonio Villarreal's novel *Pocho*, published in 1959 by Knopf Press is a rare example of a Chicano text published by a mainstream press before the 1960s.

makes a compelling case for the importance of a race liberal narrative that addressed U.S. racism in order to expedite the nation's Cold War global aspirations, it also reveals the myopic vision of dominant "anti-racist" correctives and the unincorporated status of Latinos/as as a racialized group from this purview. Of course, the state's attempt at *not* acknowledging racial oppression among Latinas/os and maintaining the fictional black/white divide is just as strategic as acknowledging a level of prejudice against black Americans. However, elucidating this strategic obfuscation allows us to better understand the recuperative and revolutionary spirit of the Chicano/a and Puerto Rican student movements, Chicano/a Studies, and Quinto Sol print culture that relied heavily on the university. Despite contemporary critiques of the efficacy of "minorities" joining a "public" discourse via institutionalization, I suggest that these material and epistemological changes within the university are indeed important for social change and have productive political ramifications beyond Chicano/a cultural nationalism and a single identity category.

Although Melamed's interest in the "race liberal" anti-racism of the Cold War time period and its attendant impact on literary studies are less frequently commented on by scholars of Chicano/a and Latina/o literature and culture, the subsequent phases she delineates of official anti-racisms (and their literary components)—"liberal multiculturalism" and "neoliberal multiculturalism"—have been discussed at length. Of specific concern to critics of liberal multiculturalism is the promotion and publication of literature by ethnic authors to facilitate simple information retrieval and cross-cultural "encounters" through textual representation as an end in and of itself (i.e., to better the liberal subject) (Dalleo and Machado-Saez 2007, McCracken 1999, Melamed 2011). To use George Yudice's term, a similar concern exists under the "field forces" of neoliberalism, however, in this case the supreme rule of the market makes

consumption of ethnic “culture” useful only insofar as it can enhance the management of resources for capital accumulation (Dávila *Culture* 2012, Melamed 2011). The centrality of these debates to Latino/a studies and studies of American ethnic literature merit consideration here with regard to Chicano/a and Latino/a culture and knowledge production. Further, since Chicana and Latina women’s writing are frequently invoked with regard to “liberal multiculturalism,” I would like to bring these debates into conversation with the history of Chicana and Latina textuality inside and outside the academy. If Chicano/a literary production was not incorporated into earlier modes of official anti-racism vis-à-vis the university, was it not just delayed until the oft-cited multicultural and neoliberal approaches to racism and to ethnic literary production?

In the next section I explore this question by turning to the history and work of women of color feminists of the late 70s and early 80s—the beginning of the benighted multicultural time period—alongside the history and work of the so-called Latina Boom writers of the late 80s and early 90s. It is during this latter time period that Latina writers began having their writing published by mainstream presses and then subsequently taught at universities. For it is not inconsequential that women of color feminists began publishing their extremely influential work, often under the imprint of their own independent presses, right before and during the canon wars and at the height of liberal multiculturalism. Taking these proximal events into consideration, I focus on a critical comparison of the two—their conditions of possibility, critical reception, and legacy—as well as their relation to and distinction from the previously discussed Chicano print culture. Specifically, I argue that multicultural and neoliberal critiques framing women of color feminist writings as “material” activism and later mainstream (female) writers as fodder for multicultural liberalism replicate the binary between cultural and material politics already expressed with regard to Chicana/o print culture, as well as reinforce the La Malinche narrative

and the inefficacy of feminist politics. Further, this characterization of contemporary Latina/o and Chicano/a writing contributes to the myriad list of reductive “forces” that some critics argue have dictated the creation and reception of ethnic literature (McGurl 2009) and that disregard the long history of women of color feminism, its uses of the university, and its extended social networks that persist throughout the period of multicultural liberalism and beyond.

REVISITING WOMEN OF COLOR FEMINISM: LABOR, VISION, AND THE SOCIAL-SPIRITUAL VALUE OF WRITING & READING

“For the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house. ...And this fact is only threatening to those women who still define the master’s house as their only source of support.”—Audre Lorde, “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House”

If we follow the narrative that the Chicano movement and its materialist activism resulted in the development of independent publishing outlets and the creation of Chicano studies departments, it is also well-documented that Chicana textual production was not always embraced by this infrastructure as easily.³⁶ While Chicana feminism developed from within the Chicano movement and never considered itself apart from the concerns of race and class, growing disenchantment with the sexism and heterosexism of movement leaders and mainstream white feminism led Chicana feminists and lesbian feminists to create their own “counterpublics”

³⁶ A good example of the disconnect between Chicano-dominant publishing venues and women of color publishing interests is uncovered by Sandra Soto in her study *Reading Chican@ Like a Queer*. In her chapter on Ana Castillo, she highlights correspondence from October 1979 between Castillo and Nicolas Kanellos, the editor of Arte Público Press, wherein he misreads her erotic poetry collection as salacious and aimed at seducing the reader rather than as a woman of color affirmative emphasis on self-love. More importantly, he then misinterprets her defensiveness about his reading as indicative of her lack of confidence rather than as a genuine political conviction.

in the form of working groups, caucuses, and publications (Blackwell 137-141).³⁷ As many scholars have highlighted, it is this disenchantment along with a growing awareness of third world and international feminist struggles that led Chicana and lesbian feminists to reach out to other women of color to forge alliances, and to seek alternative outlets for expressing their experiences of oppression that were radically different from Chicano men and unacknowledged by Chicano print culture. The term “women of color” feminism describes this cross-ethnic, cross-nation, cross-race, cross-sexuality coalition of women that moved beyond an antiracist, antisexist critique (Blackwell 193).³⁸ As Ellie Hernandez explains, it is from the practice of women of color feminism that Chicano cultural politics ultimately moved from a largely masculinist, nationalist discourse to a postnationalist one that better embraced differences of gender and sexuality (51).

A Chicana feminist critique of cultural nationalism also led to a distinctly transnational and translocal practice that emphasized self-expression and self-representation (Hernandez 55-7). However, unlike earlier Chicano activists who understood “self-determination” to reference a unified (male, heterosexual) Chicano subject, through its coalition with other women of color, Chicana feminism sought to forge coalitions through difference (Hong xvi). As Grace Kyungwon Hong puts it, women of color feminism focuses on coalitions that might arise through “disidentifications and contestations” rather than only through identification and sympathy (xix). It is this emphasis on a heterogenous self-expression and self-representation that led to the grassroots development in the early 1980s of two significant women of color presses—Kitchen

³⁷For further information on the development of Chicana feminism, see Sonia Saldivar-Hull’s *Feminism on the Border: Chicana Gender Politics and Literature* (2000).

³⁸ Grace Kyungwon Hong makes an excellent clarification about the label “women of color” in her book, *The Ruptures of American Capital* (2006), arguing that it does not denote a static identity of *all* women of color, but rather a practice and methodology (x).

Table Press and Third Woman Press. Resoundingly, critics agree that the development of these presses was the material effect of radical and effective political organizing, albeit largely around the cause of cultural production. Revisiting the conditions of possibility for these presses, I try to understand why women of color-identified presses were deemed necessary, how they were developed in relation to the academy and the Chicano/a movement, and how they relate to the later Latina Boom in literary production.

Women of Color Feminist Press

In 1980, African American feminist activists and writers, Audre Lorde and Barbara Smith—frustrated by being relegated to “special issues” of journals, rejected by mainstream presses, and edited by white feminist publications—began discussing the creation of their own woman of color dedicated press. In collaboration with a number of other women of color, including several Chicanas, they decided to create a press that would publish women of color of all racial, ethnic, and class backgrounds. A year later, Kitchen Table Press was officially founded (Smith “A Press” 11)³⁹. Importantly, Kitchen Table Press was not women of color feminist’s first attempt at intervening in the production and distribution of knowledge, particularly with an emphasis on literary culture. During the struggles leading up to the open admission policy at City College of New York, Toni Cade Bambara was an important mentor to students and City College hired Barbara Smith to help design the black studies program (Biondi 171-73). As Smith explains in her 1989 essay, “A Press of Our Own Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press,” the development of Kitchen Table Press, the first of its kind in North America, was the material

³⁹ An important precursor to Kitchen Table Press is The Combahee River Collective, a group of black women (including Barbara Smith) who began meeting in 1974 in Boston and who refused to separate the politics of race, sexuality, and gender (Freedman 326). Their famous “A Black Feminist Statement” was published in Kitchen Table’s *This Bridge Called my Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (1981).

manifestation of efforts put forth since the early 1970s by a group of women of color feminists determined to “... make visible the writing, culture, and history of women of color” (11).

Indeed within a Chicana feminist tradition, even before the founding of Kitchen Table Press, Chicanas involved in the movement had been publishing local newspapers, magazines, and journals about their experience since the early-1970s. As Maylei Blackwell documents, *Hijas de Cuahtémoc*, one of the first and most influential Latina feminist organizations, was responsible for writing and publishing the similarly titled feminist newspaper, *Hijas de Cuahtémoc*, which was used to share the concerns, ideas, and activities of Chicana activists (2, 137). Although the newspaper initially began as a way to focus on issues at California State University, Long Beach, the second issue sought to inform Chicanas statewide, and the third issue intended to inform a national audience at the National Chicana Conference in Houston, Texas in 1971 (Blackwell 144). This rapid progression of engendering local, state, and then national Chicana feminist interpretive communities is indicative of the desperate demand for this type of communication that *Hijas de Cuahtémoc* filled and the centrality of the university as a space to begin these practices. Further, although *Hijas de Cuahtémoc* only ran for one year, the political project of *Hijas* continued with the publication of the first journal of Chicana feminist scholarship, *Encuentro Feminil*, in 1973. Although *Encuentro* was a journal dedicated to scholarly work, it also succeeded in forging campus and community connections that were evident in the articles published, which often focused on community struggles and collected data from local organizations (Blackwell 146). As Maylei Blackwell argues and as I will further elaborate, these university-based print cultures laid the groundwork for later women of color feminist textuality (and contemporary Chicana and Latina writers) through both their emphasis on dialogue and their commitment to innovative forms (154-55).

What sets Kitchen Table apart from its earlier predecessors, though, is its cross-ethnic, cross-sexual, cross-race foundation and political project. Thus, it is important here to emphasize the “why” and “how” of Kitchen Table Press. It is easy to read the development of the press as a parallel event to the earlier founding of Quinto Sol—a reaction against exclusion. Kitchen Table, however, was not just the result of exclusion, but of an exclusion from those already excluded. As a result, Lorde, Smith and the other women were highly cognizant of the propensity to further exclude when creating an “inclusive” group and were careful not to simply replicate the patterns of white feminists and men of their own racial backgrounds. One of the primary ways Kitchen Table Press warded against further exclusion was by partnering with women across ethnic, racial, and sexual lines. Up until this point in history, as Smith recalls, no one had ever done such a thing: “This was one of our bravest steps; most people of color have chosen to work in their separate groups when they do media or other projects” (11). While their immediate goals were to recover and promote the work and lives of women of color, the long term goals extended beyond this and aimed to impact the lives of racialized and working class men and even white men. The idea that oppression does not only impact the lives of those directly oppressed was central to women of color feminists understanding of power and an impetus for its coalitional politics (Anzaldúa “La Conciencia”, Smith “A Press”, Reagon “Coalition”)⁴⁰.

In the individualistic and for profit world of mainstream publishing and writing, the founding and operation of Kitchen Table by a *group* of (at first) unpaid women of color also broke drastically from the industry “norm.” Breaking from the norm, however, was not solely an act of differentiation in that it was also necessary for these women to work collectively at a task

⁴⁰ Individual women believed this to varying degrees but, overall, there was the belief that liberation from the bottom up, with black lesbian women occupying the very bottom, would result in liberation for everyone (Smith “A Press” 11, Combahee River Collective “Black Feminist Statement”).

that would have been impossible individually in terms of labor, funds, promotion, etc. Lorde and the other women knew very well that the fact of needing each other was part of what set them (and their politics) apart from others with white, male or heterosexual privilege and that, indeed, this was a political act. Specifically, women of color feminist thought and practice has come to be associated with the “multiplicity of identity” (or intersectionality), an understanding of the self as “embodied and embedded” in cultural and historical contexts, and an unwavering commitment to sustained self-examination (Moya “Dismantling” 234). The significance of a socially, materially, and culturally embodied and embedded identity can be seen in both Kitchen Table’s published works and in the rhetoric of those involved with the Press, which tended to emphasize the labor (emotional, physical, social, spiritual) of cultural production in ways that deviated from mainstream publishers and even Quinto Sol Press. It is no accident that Smith describes the group’s efforts in her article as “working to make visible” the writing, culture, and history of women of color. The work of testifying to the (ghosted) value of women of color feminist’s lives, history, and contributions, as the publications and history of Kitchen Table attest, was a labor against ambivalence, which is to say, a labor against the scarcity of resources, time, and care.

The very name “Kitchen Table Press” draws attention to this scarcity and the need for women of color to perform this labor not in the sanctified spaces of an institution, but in the traditional (and makeshift) space of feminine labor (Smith “A Press” 11). In *This Bridge Called my Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (1981), one of Kitchen Table’s most widely printed and successful texts, Gloria Anzaldúa writes “A Letter to Third World Women Writers,” acknowledging the challenges inherent in being a woman of color and trying to write. She explains:

I sit here naked in the sun, typewriter against my knee trying to visualize you.

Black woman huddles over a desk in the fifth floor of some New York tenement.

Sitting on a porch in south Texas, a Chicana fanning away mosquitos and the hot air, trying to arouse the smoldering embers of writing. Indian woman, walking to school or work lamenting the lack of time to weave writing into your life.

(“Speaking” 165)

In this passage we see Anzaldúa emphasize writing as labor and that for working-class women of color it is a form of labor that is not valued because it threatens to take them away from their jobs outside of the house that they need to survive, as well as from their domestic jobs they often occupy as caregivers—both of which often support white, male privilege. As indicated in her description above, women of color writers, including Anzaldúa, are exposed and vulnerable to the elements of both the weather and poor living conditions. The outside environment/public and inside/private worlds are equally filled with obstacles for women of color writers. This dynamic is also reflected in the title of Smith’s article, “A Press of Our Own Kitchen Table,” which alludes to and plays with the title of Virginia Woolf’s famous essay “A Room of One’s Own” by rejecting the liberal demand for a private space for contemplation and emphasizes instead the importance of the means of production (“press”), as well as the collective (“our”) over the individual (“one’s own”). This, of course, is a drastic revision of the U.S. education model described earlier that understands learning for personal edification and a notion of collectivity based on sameness (e.g., “Americans”). Finally, as is subtly alluded in her passage, writing for women of color is also a work of spiritual will. The image of Anzaldúa, naked in the sun and envisioning other women and their personal obstacles, evokes a meditative quality. Likewise, Anzaldúa closes the letter with the assertion for women to “Write with your eyes like painters,

with your ears like musicians, with your feet like dancers. You are the truthsayer with quill and torch. Write with your tongues of fire. [...] Put your shit on the paper” (“Speaking” 171).

Combined with the essay’s full title, “Speaking in Tongues,” the necessity for women of color to not only speak from the body, but to be visionaries who speak from the innermost spiritual realms is also apparent. This writing Anzaldúa engages is not business-as-usual, but requires intense spiritual will against the countless forces that oppose it.⁴¹

This intermingling of the spiritual and physical as well as the private and public that writing demands for women of color is also incorporated into the form of their textual production. For instance, in *This Bridge*, the backmatter includes a “Biographies of the Contributors” section and a selected bibliography of writing and collections by and about women of color. These unconventional inclusions, especially for academic writing, would soon become conventional for Kitchen Table Press (as would the anthology genre). These additions are reflective of the simultaneously private and public, embodied, spiritual, and social nature of the work of women of color feminist writing. Specifically, in the “Biographies” section, which includes 29 of the contributors’ bios, the distinction between a writer’s personal life and aspirations and their public writing are dissolved. In this case, identities (i.e., ethnic, sexual, personal experiences, etc.) are listed right alongside credentials such as books published and jobs held in order to make the writing possible. While many contributors held positions in the university or college, others such as Moraga note their diverse work experience that includes being both a teacher and a waitress. These juxtapositions bring writers’ often hidden social and

⁴¹ See also Anzaldúa’s vivid description of her battle to write in *Borderlands/La Frontera* where she explains: “I make my offerings of incense and cracked corn, light my candle. In my head I sometimes will say a prayer—an affirmation and a voicing of intent. Then I run water, wash the dishes or my underthings, take a bath or mop the kitchen floor. This ‘induction’ period sometimes takes a few minutes, sometimes hours. But always I go against a resistance. Something in me does not want to do this writing” (89).

personal relationships to bear on the act of generating and producing writing for distribution.⁴²

Unfortunately, they also attest to the exhaustion and labor involved in being a writer of color, which deviates from liberal romantic notions of intellectual labor and creativity.

To return to Anzaldúa's letter, she also makes clear the other revisions to dominant understandings of domestic social life that are needed to be a writer of color.⁴³ For instance, she highlights the family she had to leave and the patriarchal structure of the nuclear family she rejects in favor of living with a female housemate who supports her writing and its infringements on the traditional (private) domestic space. In a sense, writing while occupying domestic space brings the voices and problems of others into the home space, shattering its illusive sanctity and taking time and attention away from traditional domestic tasks. The choice Anzaldúa makes to create family from "this community of [women] writers," not only suggests the possibility of creating family by affinity, which many scholars have noted, but also the intimate sociality of the act of writing for women of color. Going a few steps beyond Quinto Sol's approach to literature and culture, writing for women of color is visionary, spiritual, social, embodied and generates knowledge and value—what I call, a social-spiritual writing practice. This practice breaks with the sanctity of the heterosexual family in order to reconstruct an embodied, affinity-based (yet not monolithic) coalition. Thus, while the work of Quinto Sol maintains the private/public binary intact, *Kitchen Table* breaks with this duality and, therefore, goes beyond a straightforward (or

⁴² This also resonates with John Alba Cutler's assertion that the inclusion of the academic credentials in the biographies of the Premio Quinto Sol award recipients seems to deliberately harness the cultural capital of the university while expanding it to working class Chicano writers (277).

⁴³ An interesting and contemporaneous counterpoint to *This Bridge Called my Back* and its explanation of women of color feminist writing praxis is Richard Rodriguez's 1983 *Hunger for Memory: The Education of Richard Rodriguez*, which vehemently delineates and defends the rigid line between his public, non-ethnic self and his (rapidly diminishing) private and ethnicized self.

additive) “feminizing” of the public sphere. The enduring work of Kitchen Table Press puts into practice and demonstrates the political necessity of a social-spirituality that revises previous assumptions about culture and materiality and that, throughout the dissertation, I will argue is particularly apt for understanding the cultural politics of Latino/a narrative into the 21st century.

The intimate sociality and introspectiveness that women of color feminists bring to the act of critical writing, however, should not be interpreted as a transcendence of the more material aspects of running a politically engaged and independently operated press. In addition to their writing, most of the women affiliated with Kitchen Table also maintained jobs outside the home to support their writing. Since many of the women involved in Kitchen Table were writers and activists, more than a few worked in the university.⁴⁴ In her biography of Audre Lorde, Alexis De Veaux tells readers that in 1980, “teaching [at John Jay] remained an important, expressive aspect of who [Lorde] was, as did her \$35,000 a year salary” (269). Writing about the founding meetings for Kitchen Table Press, De Veaux also reports that, with the help of Smith’s friend who was a professional fundraiser, Kitchen Table was able to secure a significant donation from a private donor. The group further relied on Lorde’s financial support, as she donated a significant amount of her earnings from readings to the operational costs of the press (De Veaux 277). Therefore, partly funded by their affiliations and abilities cultivated by the institution, as well as the beginning of a burgeoning, albeit narrow, women of color feminist literary market (only Lorde’s work—and only some of it—had experienced a level of mainstream success), Kitchen Table Press was operational. As Hong emphatically notes in her discussion of women of color feminism, “women of color feminist practice must be situated within a genealogy of liberal capitalism, as naming the crises and erasures of that genealogy” (xii). Indeed, while Melamed

⁴⁴ Toni Cade Bambara, Audre Lorde, Gloria Anzaldúa, Cherríe Moraga, and Barbara Smith, among others worked as university educators at one point in time.

notes the use of the technology of the race liberal novel for official antiracism, Kitchen Table Press and women of color feminism used the technology of the anthology to name and intervene in the framing of the racialized, gendered, and sexualized experiences that, as Hong explains, liberal capitalism depends on, but seeks to keep quiet and private.⁴⁵

While the collaborators for Kitchen Table Press elected to create a press dedicated to publishing books by women of color, Chicana and Latina women in the Midwest were also collaborating on the creation of a Latina controlled journal dedicated to publishing the creative work of “Latinas and other Third World Women” (Alarcón 5). In 1981, the journal *Third Woman* was founded under the direction of Norma Alarcón at the Indiana University in Bloomington. The relationship between *Third Woman* and the university was more tightly bound than Kitchen Table’s. In order to create and sustain the journal, Alarcón secured funding from various academic units including Chicano-Riquena Studies, Latin American Studies and Women’s Studies. At the same time, Alarcón worked to maintain the journal’s independence by not allowing it to be housed in a single department and even learning how to typeset herself (Ramírez “Alternative”). As Sara Ramírez explains in her essay on *Third Woman*, the journal was intended to be coalitional, but still independent. Moreover, unlike Kitchen Table Press that was able to rely to some degree on the literary acumen of Lorde, *Third Woman* had no such figure. Although the founding of *Third Woman* included the likes of Sandra Cisneros and Ana Castillo, at the time neither was very well published. *Third Woman* continued its run as a journal for five years before Alarcón moved to the University of California, Berkeley, where she transformed the journal into a press, keeping the same name and publishing numerous Latina and women of color writing for the next 15 years (Ramírez “Alternative”).

⁴⁵ Blackwell also refers to anthologies as part of women of color feminism’s pedagogy of liberation.

Third Woman, with its emphasis on transnational coalitions with other women (primarily Latina and Latin American women), like Kitchen Table Press, was an enactment of women of color feminism that viewed writing and publishing as central to its political mission. In an interview, Alarcón explains this position: “I very strongly felt that if women didn’t...publish...themselves, we would not learn what we needed to learn in order to organize a kind of literary movement or a...reconfiguration through writing of our reality...and that we’d always be subordinated [to] and dependent on the guys, no matter how generous they were” (Alarcón qtd in Ramírez). Concerned with making visible such erasures and furthering Chicana and Latina cultural and political practice, *Third Woman* turned to working across national, ethnic, sexual, and racial differences. At the time, this development required establishing a presence from which to assert political and cultural claims. During the Chicano movement, Chicana women were isolated by their culture, which labeled them traitors, and they were isolated by white feminism, which largely ignored matters of race (Blackwell 143). Hence, similar to Kitchen Table Press, the transnational alliances forged by *Third Woman* were forged out of political necessity. As Ramírez recounts from her interview with Alarcón: “...the number of Latinas publishing their work in the United States—in particular, the Midwest—during the early 1980s was so small, she [Alarcón] and her colleagues at *Third Woman* decided to turn their attention to various regions of the country and to Latin America as a means of ‘forming a network, an articulation of women’ (Ramírez “Alternative”). Alarcón even recounts writing a book review for the journal under a pseudonym in order to make the editorial staff appear more robust and to bring forth this network even before it existed (Ramírez “Alternative”). While Kitchen Table Press made explicit the “ghosted,” off the clock labor required to maintain its operations, *Third Woman* literally imagined its desired outcomes in order to work within and

against the constraints of the institution. In both instances, engaging with and believing in the largely invisible women of color feminist networks of value—both in existence and germinal—were crucial to the (world-making) politics of a social-spiritual writing practice. These strategies of both Kitchen Table Press and *Third Woman* carved textual and physical private-public spaces from which Chicanas and Latinas could comment and intervene in politics and culture while contributing to the women of color literary movement that they were helping to usher in. Today, this legacy continues as Third Woman Press initiated a revitalization project in 2011 that has raised enough funds to collect manuscripts, maintain a website, and publish its first book (“About”). The first book they planned to publish is an anthology in the tradition of *This Bridge Called my Back: Writing by Radical Women of Color*. In March 2015, SUNY press issued a new, fourth edition of *This Bridge*.

In recent considerations of women of color feminism and print culture, however, critics often truncate the history and impact of women of color feminism when faced with the rhetoric of liberal multiculturalism and the mainstream success of Chicana and Latina writing beginning in the late 1980s (Moya “Dismantling”).⁴⁶ As Jane Juffer explains in her article “The Limits of Culture: Latino Studies, Diversity Management and the Corporate University,” the fear among scholars of what was considered activist history, literature, and culture circulating within institutions—market-based or academic—seems to make working through or disidentifying with certain oppressive structures that much more difficult. As a result, women of color print culture is periodized in one of the following ways: 1) with women of color feminist writing as separate from the “multicultural” publishing success of Latina (or other minority) writing, implicitly

⁴⁶ As mentioned earlier, Hijos de Cuahemec began publishing material in the early-70s, while Kitchen Table Press remained in operation from 1981-1997 (Smith “A Rose” 205) and Third Woman Press until 2005 (Ramirez “Alternative”).

labeling the former “good” and the latter “bad” (Dalleo and Machado-Sáez 2007, Melamed 2011, Ferguson 2012); 2) completely ignoring women of color feminist writing as both an antecedent to (and part of) the multicultural moment, despite its temporal proximity⁴⁷ (McCracken); or 3) lumping all writing by women of color into one large multicultural and neoliberal time period, erasing the major paradigm shifts of the time.⁴⁸ Also, because Chicano/a movement narratives rarely emphasize the centrality of women’s activism to the movement and most of their work in print culture goes unacknowledged, this rendering of women of color feminist history reduces its impact to, at best, a nine year time span and, at worst, complete erasure.

I propose, however, that there is not so much of a rigid break between the work of women of color feminists and the beginning of the Latina Boom or even between more contemporary Latino/a literature, but rather a change in conversation regarding the uses and value of literature. During the era of liberal multiculturalism, overly celebratory critics often claimed literature could be resistant to many oppressive structures, whereas *how* it might be able to do so was not discussed at all (Juffer 2001). Unlike with the writing of women of color feminists, the labor, social, and affective structures and networks of literary production were once again obscured. At the same time, Chicano/a and Latina/o literature was either supposed to do everything or nothing at all politically. Unfortunately, critics who spoke out against these over-the-top celebrations of multicultural literature tended only to reinforce this binary rather than getting at the fact that there was more to social activism than literature and that there was more social activism to literature than critics could or were comfortable asserting. While this

⁴⁷ As an index for the multicultural era, Allan Bloom’s “canon war” fueling text, *Closing of the American Mind* was published in 1987.

⁴⁸ See the *Norton Anthology of Latino Literature* (2010), which refers to this time as “Into the Mainstream: 1980-present.”

critical rhetoric may have somewhat foreclosed the reception of Latino/a literature (i.e., book reviews, critical articles, dissertations, etc.), as I will argue below, it did not entirely sever ties to earlier women of color feminist work and its emphasis on building material and spiritual networks of people of color, the intimate relationality of reading, writing and narrative, and its ties to (tangible) empowerment and change. I also suggest that, ironically, in our current neoliberal context that requires everything and everybody to account for its economic or market utility, writers and artists are beginning to reclaim the conversations started by women of color feminists regarding the political, spiritual, and material uses of literature and culture in a way that strategically disidentifies with neoliberal imperatives (see Ch. 2).

The Latina Boom and the Multicultural Rhetoric of the Late 80s and 90s

After joining the collection of writers and “articulation of women” enunciated by *Third Woman*, popular Latina writers Sandra Cisneros and Ana Castillo went on to publish many pieces of their writing with mainstream presses and with great success. After first being published in 1983 by the small Chicano/a press Arte Público, in 1989 Cisneros’s now classic collection of vignettes, *The House on Mango Street*, was published by the mainstream Vintage Press. Hers was the first text published by a mainstream press from a Chicana writing about Chicana themes (McCracken 11). Shortly thereafter, Plume published Dominican American Julia Alvarez’s novel *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents* (1991)⁴⁹, Ballantine published Cuban American Cristina Garcia’s *Dreaming in Cuban* (1992) and in 1993 Castillo’s novel *So Far From God* was reprinted by Norton followed by her other works *Sapogonia* (1994), and *My Father was a Toltec and Selected Poems* (2004) published by Anchor books. Once mainstream publishers realized that literature by Chicana writers actually had an audience (a common

⁴⁹ Prior to the Plume publication, stories from Alvarez’s novel had also been published in *Third Woman*.

reservation even today when ethnic themes are taken up in literature⁵⁰), the doors to the publishing world seemed to open slightly.

In addition to reaching popular audiences, writing by these Latinas is also highly anthologized and frequently taught in literature, women's studies, ethnic studies, and sociology classrooms across the U.S. In the realm of literary publishing, however, an ethnic readership is rarely understood as the primary audience for Latina/o literature, causing publishers, reviewers, and other literary "professionals" to promote a text's "universal" themes and accessibility to mainstream (i.e., white) readers.⁵¹ This, of course, has led many cultural critics to understand mainstream Chicana and Latina literature as commodified by the publishing industry. Nonetheless, as Arlene Davila explains in her study of the growth of targeted "Hispanic/Latino" marketing, solely paying attention to an end product rather than the "political-economic interests and processes" involved in its production, as well as its consumption by those it is intended for, drastically limits the understanding of the representation and its social-political consequences (*Latino* 5).

Keeping the process of literary production in mind, it is clear that many Chicana and Latina writers in the late 80s and early 90s continued writing for people of color and, specifically, a woman of color audience—a very important aspect of *Kitchen Table* and *Third Woman*/Third Woman Press.⁵² In his 2003 study *Life in Search of Readers: Reading (in)*

⁵⁰ The 12-year-old Latino/a literary blog, *La Bloga*, has published numerous articles by authors and scholars regarding the white privilege that structures the mainstream publishing world. See author Michael Nava's guest post, "Guest Opinion—Latina/o Literature and the Literary Establishment: A Study in White Privilege," for a pertinent example.

⁵¹ Helena Maria Viramontes recounts her own experience with this publishing bias when her creative writing professor suggests that she write less ethnocentrically and more generically about "people."

⁵² In fact, in Smith's essay on Kitchen Table Press, she recalls that: "To us, one new reader of color is just as important as a hundred non-Third World customers" ("A Press" 12).

Chicano/a Literature, Martin-Rodríguez rightly connects the popular success of these Chicana writers to the growth of women of color publications facilitated by Kitchen Table Press, Third Woman Press, and, more generally, the growth of Chicana feminism (69-71). Specifically, he reads the “critical and popular success” of Gloria Anzaldua’s *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987), Ana Castillo’s *Mixquiahuala Letters* (1992), Erlinda Gonzalez-Berry’s *Paletitas de Guayaba* (1991), and Sandra Cisneros’s *The House on Mango Street* (1983) as a consequence of their sustained literary attention to matters of gender and their ability to write for a female audience. I agree with Martin-Rodríguez’s assessment of Chicana writers’ distinctly feminist practice of writing to and for the readership and literary gap that they themselves represent, however, I would extend this assessment to even some of the most popular (i.e., mainstream) and frequently anthologized Latina writers and texts published throughout the 1990s such as Julia Alvarez and Helena María Viramontes. Amidst the larger context of “selling marginality” (Davila *Latinos*) that characterizes the rhetoric of multiculturalism, these texts maintain a woman of color audience in mind through their coalitional (transnational), embodied, social, spiritual and politically motivated understanding of writing and reading that extend the work of women of color feminism into the realm of the popular and the late 20th century. The chapters that follow will consider how this popular/populist dynamic can also be apprehended in some of the new textual and discursive spaces of Latina/o literature in the 21st century when we maintain a hermeneutic that is attentive to women of color feminist’s emphasis on social-spirituality.

In order to better contextualize the critical and popular reception of Latina writers in the 1990s, it is first important to understand the resistance to issues of gender in newly developed Chicano studies curriculum that preceded it and the active counter resistance by women of color feminists. As Maylei Blackwell argues, the inclusion of concerns about gender and sexuality into

emerging Chicano/a studies curriculum was not simply a “part of the multiculturalism of the 1980s” as it is often historicized, but actually “a struggle of early women of color feminists during the very founding of Ethnic Studies programs.” Beginning with Chicana feminists’ resistance to the lack of inclusion of women in the 1969 *El Plan de Santa Barbara: A Chicano Plan for Higher Education*, women of color visions drastically altered the space of the university by arguing for the inclusion of Chicana women as subjects whose experiences were worthy of study and not just worthy as wives and mothers (Blackwell 196).

As a result of these hard won struggles, while new scholarship was being developed, early Chicana/o studies curriculum often included Chicana feminist print culture from the early-70s such as newspaper and journal articles (Blackwell 197). These print cultures fostered the inclusion of women of color issues and activism in the university and also brought attention to the creative work of early women of color writers who would later achieve more widespread success. The inclusion of Chicanas in the university, though, was an ongoing struggle.

Throughout the 1980s, Chicana scholars struggled to be recognized as such, leading to the organization of several Chicana collectives on campus aimed at resisting this discrimination such as the 1981 *Mujeres en Marcha* at the University of California, Berkeley and the 1982 formation of *Mujeres Activas en Letras y Cambio Social* (Women Active in Letters and Social Change) (MALCS) at the University of California, Davis. MALCS is still active today, publishes a scholarly journal—*Journal of Chicana/Latina Studies*—and hosts an annual summer workshop intended to mentor Chicana/Latina scholars and generate scholarship and criticism (Blackwell 204).⁵³

⁵³ As the 2012 publication of *Presumed Incompetent: The Intersections of Race and Class for Women in Academia* attests, women of color and of non-normative sexual orientation continue to experience blatant and subtle forms of oppression within the walls of academia.

Speaking to the historic importance of educational institutions for the emergence and success of Chicano/a literature, Nicolás Kanellos, founder and director of Arte Público Press, explains how Chicana writing that circulated in the university fundamentally broke down barriers to larger audiences. Kanellos recalls that during Arte Público Press' early years, most of the books they published were targeted at educators and academics. He notes 1984 and Arte Público's publication of Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street* as a key turning point for this transition beyond an academic audience (Galehouse). Clearly, the political organizing and curricular groundwork laid by Chicana feminists leading up to, during, and following the founding of Chicano/a studies fostered a space of interest and cultural capital for Chicana writing that later extended beyond the borders of the institution. As Martín-Rodríguez argues, it is the text's presentation of the female-to-female tradition that sets it apart from its mainstream predecessors and can be read as a response "to an entire body of 1960s and 1970s" male-centered literature (80).

While Chicana feminist activism within the university primed the conditions for the academic success of Chicana and Latina writers, it requires a different understanding of the relationship between the university and the state/political economy to understand how it could have impacted capital's interest in Chicana and Latina letters. For Roderick Ferguson, this requires that we abandon our understanding of the university as merely a reflection of state and civil society. Instead, following Kant, he argues that the university should be understood as "the laboratory that produces truth and political economy's relation to it—...a primary articulator of state and civil society" (Ferguson 11). This understanding also coincides with Loss' findings from his study of U.S. higher education in the twentieth century, as well as Cutler's understanding of Chicano/a harnessing of cultural capital to instigate material changes beyond

the university. Consequently, following Ferguson, the 1960s social movements can be understood as having put pressure on the university's archival practices, allowing difference into the establishment, but simultaneously creating new regulations that also exclude (Ferguson 11). For inclusion within institutions requires legibility, which in turn requires codification and limits that capital could take up and model its understanding and representation of difference. This understanding of the university as influenced by outside (activist) forces that in turn shape capital and state, however, places a lot of power within the university, particularly with regard to academic processes of codification and efforts at legibility. With this in mind, it is significant to remember that writers such as Cisneros and Castillo were part of the women of color movement that, as Blackwell explains, started in the community, entered the university, and returned to the community with "its cross border visions of social change" (195). Perhaps, then, there are two types of legibilities at play with regard to Chicano/a and Latino/a incorporation into the university—one that gets codified by the institution and capital and another that is always in flux by authors, communities, and alternative networks of women and queer readers. The latter, I suggest, become visible through attention to a social-spiritual writing and interpretive practice.

It is certainly controversial to consider that activist sentiment could return to the community in the form of a novel or collection of essays, however, Chicana and Latina writers who began writing after the publication of other women of color recount just such an experience. In a self-authored 1995 *Washington Post* article, Julia Alvarez, author of a number of novels, poetry collections, essays, and children's stories, recalls her experience of becoming a writer and its intimate connection to her experience as a bi-cultural Dominican American immigrant. She describes searching fruitlessly for "a vocabulary or context to write about the issues [she] had faced or was facing." It wasn't until she read *The Woman Warrior* (1983) by Asian American

feminist writer Maxine Hong Kingston that she began to understand her experiences. As she explains it, it was then that she was able to write her stories, knowing that there was a “name” for what she experienced and that it was “not just [her] personal problem” (“On Finding”). Continuing to search for a way to contextualize (and socialize) her experience, she discovered a handful of Latino writers, but it was not until reading Cherrie Moraga, Alma Gonzalez, and Mariana Romo-Carmona’s anthology (published by Kitchen Table), *Cuentos: Stories by Latinas* (1983), that she experienced a watershed moment for understanding her experience and her writing as not only possible, but also legitimate and valuable.⁵⁴ Alvarez’s experience is an example of the network effect of a social-spiritual writing practice that does not necessarily mirror a reader’s own experience, but engages them and allows them to envision their own realities and to speak them out loud. In this way it is collective without being fully unifying and, in the case of women of color and queer people, it is always political. Moreover, in the case of Alvarez, the relationality of a bicultural, racialized experience conveyed in *Cuentos* was able to interpolate Alvarez as a racialized (non-assimilative) subject—an outcome that is never negligible.⁵⁵

Alvarez’s experience described above, as well as her work (along with other popular Latina writers such as Cristina García) also gestures to the importance of transnational feminism at the discursive level. While Alvarez’s experience reading Kingston and, particularly, *Cuentos*

⁵⁴ Poignantly, in Sandra Cisneros’ introduction to the 25th anniversary edition of *The House on Mango Street*, she recalls that before Norma Alarcón brought her and other US Latina writers together in dialogue, they “had no idea what [they] were doing was extraordinary” (Cisneros “A House” xxiv).

⁵⁵ As Laura E. Gomez theorizes, the trend of Latino/a people identifying as non-white—the 2000 census reported 39% of Puerto Ricans and 47% of Mexican Americans prefer to identify as “some other race” over “white”—can be interpreted as resistance to earlier pressures to assimilate and claim the benefits of whiteness as other immigrant groups have done in the past (157-59).

(a collection of U.S. Latinas and Latin American women) is not equivalent to the coalitional politics of those involved in Kitchen Table Press, it is a facet of coalitional politics in that it brings the differences and similarities of women of color to the foreground through the textual collection of their cumulative stories. Further, this format also defies the rigid categorizing impulse of academia. In the case of Alvarez, *Cuentos* also brought her into oral and written discourse with other women of color, creating a social network of writers and readers whose collective work is greater than the sum of its individual parts (Alvarez “On Finding”). Prior to Alvarez’s successful novels (and later Junot Díaz and other Caribbean Latino/a writers), the idea of a Latino demographic including “more than Mexicans” and the “Americas” as spanning a geographical territory larger than the contiguous U.S. landscape (with Hawaii, Alaska, and Puerto Rico as odd addendums) was not part of the U.S. popular imaginary. Unfortunately, as gender and race scholar Sandra Soto has highlighted and critiqued, contemporary scholars have all too quickly dismissed ethnic studies and women of color feminism (often under the broad label of “multicultural” studies) for doing just the opposite—for being homogenizing and parochial in comparison to “transnational feminist studies” (“Where” 112).

This impulse toward a transnational understanding of the oppression of women of color is also evident in the work of Chicana writers in the mid-90s such as Helena María Viramontes. Much of Viramontes’s writing focuses on the lives of women living in the global fall out zone of the US-Mexico border such as her frequently taught first novel *Under the Feet of Jesus* (1995). Like Alvarez, Viramontes’ writing demonstrates how the reach of U.S. politics extends even beyond the US-Mexico border and into Latin America as demonstrated in her short story “Cariboo Café” that relates the suffering of mothers of Central American victims of war and political violence to the domestic suffering of women of color in the U.S. by writing both of their

stories, side-by-side in her collection *The Moths and other Stories* (1995). Moreover, Viramontes' writing embodies women of color feminism's call to "draw strength from the very conditions seen as sources of inferiority by the oppressor: her sex, her race and culture, her class. ...exploring the personal in relationship to a collective identity" (Yarbo-Bejarano "Introduction" 10). Although Alvarez and Viramontes are from different class backgrounds, they both contribute to the tradition of women of color feminism that is, in fact, committed to thinking through differences and working for change that would benefit all women, regardless of class, race, or sexuality.

If multiculturalism, as an ideology and a time period, was characterized by a sudden interest from major institutions in ethnic representation—through physical bodies or the inclusion of ethnic art or culture—the university space, as I have already discussed, has been a model establishment for this movement. That the incorporation of these bodies and cultures has been a seamless plan of power to recuperate "real" resistances and transform them into empty symbols, however, clearly overlooks the history of these struggles, as well as the processes of production and reception of Chicano/a and Latino/a letters that attest to more than a straightforward incorporation and foreclosure of its (political and transnational) sociality and imaginative potential. As Barbara Smith explains in her essay on Kitchen Table Press, "It was their [women of color] work, not Madison Avenue's, that laid the political and ideological groundwork...for the current eighties renaissance of writing by Black and other women of color" ("A Press" 11). Given my analysis above and throughout the chapter, it should be clearer how these multicultural writers should not be understood as traitors or sell outs to multiculturalism, but as important extensions of the third world women's movement whose effects continue to be felt even into the 21st century. Despite, and perhaps especially because of, the ongoing struggle

against (neo)liberal, capitalist co-optation (inside and outside of the university), it is crucial for critics to continue to discern and assert these traditions.

CONCLUSION

One of the most valuable and dangerous (therefore, contested) effects of both the Chicano movement and women of color feminism was the forceful emphasis that culture does not occur in a vacuum, but rather is shaped by and shapes its makers and its historical context. As Hong describes, for women of color feminists, culture was not mere airy, aesthetic representation disconnected from the material and social world, but part of “a system of meaning making, a system ordered by relations of power” (Hong xii). In Smith’s article, she affirms that the women associated with Kitchen Table Press were writers and activists who “cherished the written word” and believed in its power as a decolonizing tool that “contributes to the liberation of women of color and of all people” (Smith “A Press” 12). And while many contemporary scholars highly value both the development of Kitchen Table Press and its literary output because it represents a very material wresting of power from traditional sources (i.e. mainstream media), they tend to overlook the heart of the Press itself, the belief in the symbolic and material (social-spiritual) power associated with writing and a politically engaged writing practice. Smith herself (and later Cisneros) articulates wrestling with the value of material versus symbolic politics, concluding:

After seven years I have started to see things differently, perhaps because I have had time to experience the difference it makes for women of color to control a significant means of communication, a way to shape ideology into a foundation for practical social and political change (“A Press” 13).

As I’ve shown in this chapter, the tension between symbolic or cultural and material politics can be extrapolated to the tension between so-called institutional and anti-institutional

radical politics that characterize the history and practice of Chicano/a and Latino/a studies. As a result, histories of women of color feminism are often truncated and tend to provide little emphasis on the space of the university as a contested space that has both enabled and restricted the decolonial praxis of women of color feminists.

In this chapter, I have tried to draw out the ways, both flawed and effective, that the university space and the bodies within it have furthered and restricted radical racial and sexual politics. The brief glimpse I provide earlier of the history of the university and its relationship to literary studies speaks to the understanding of culture as something social, spiritual, and material, as does Melamed's and Ferguson's analysis of how power can and has reduced minority difference into something to be "known" and "aware of" through the ever-dynamic and often uncategorizable realm of culture. The spectacularization of the canon wars during the liberal multicultural era also attests to this and, as Melamed explains, was a distraction to "an active politics of transformation" (much as gay marriage can be for queer politics). Nonetheless, the struggle for control over "systems of meaning making" was ongoing and more robust than the canon wars made visible.⁵⁶ (93) The canon wars reduced the anti-race, anti-sexism, anti-homophobia struggle to just one interpretive strategy—one of quotas and binaries and institutional legibility—rather than the broader and messier interpretive strategies that women of color feminists insist on factoring into any analysis.

The problem, however, with referring to the canon wars as a "counterinsurgency" to more meaningful, material anti-racisms, as Melamed does, is that it sets up its own binary between direct action style activism and activism connected to cultural production. For Melamed, an ideal "race radical" text operates as a "guidebook" for this preferred type of direct

⁵⁶ For more on this topic see also James Lee's *Urban Triage: Race and the Fictions of Multiculturalism* (2004).

action. Given the dominant narration of the (majority) bodies at the helm of 1960s and 70s direct action (particularly in the Chicana/o context) and those associated with the cultural politics of the 80s, it is clear that the female gendered activism is on the less effective side of the binary⁵⁷. Moreover, this binary organization tends to reify certain types of representation as good and others as bad, which replicates the very neoliberal hierarchization (of multicultural bodies) in the university being critiqued by Melamed. Ironically, this type of thinking is never more present than in the dominant understanding of the wave of Chicana and Latina writers that began to enjoy mainstream success in the late 80s and early 90s, marginalizing women of color yet again from access to a cultural politics of resistance.

I began this section on women of color feminism with the perhaps overly referenced quote from Audre Lorde regarding the inadequacy of the “master’s tools” for tearing down the “master’s house.” However, I also included a subsequent line, which qualifies the first by indicating the need to build support systems outside of the master’s house in order to make the prior revolutionary claim apprehendable. Women of color feminism performed this through a difficult relational, social, spiritual, and material politics of writing and representation. Today, we often pay lip service to women of color feminism, but are not interested in either believing in the power of the written word or in enacting the type of relational, coalitional politics in the space where we have the most impact—the university space, where, indeed, the social and material comes into contact with the symbolic every day. With regard to latter, it is understandable that a certain cynicism has developed given the over the top celebration of multicultural achievements by institutional leaders and critics, combined with the minimal

⁵⁷ This is not to diminish the work of Chicano/a movement female activists such as Dolores Huerta among others, but to emphasize how this binary further entrenches the dominant narrative of women working in the cultural realm and men in the material one.

material or systemic change that has transpired. To adopt this position too rigidly, however, is to reduce the literary work of Latinos/as to mere pawns of power (administrative, state, market), far removed from any connection to the social or material. Further, without being willing to explicitly speak to the power of words, the symbolic, and its relationship to the social, the field of literary studies—a large component of Chicano/a and other ethnic studies—will not be able to withstand external pressure regarding its central importance to the future of the academy much less to a general public.

In a 1981 essay, black feminist Bernice Johnson Reagon speaks lucidly to a different but resonant crisis—making the coalitional work of women of color crucial for everyone’s sake.

Addressing her audience, Reagon says,

And what I’m talking about is being very concerned with the world you live in, the condition you find yourself in, and be[ing] able to do the kind of analysis that says that what you believe in is worthwhile for human beings in general, and in the future, and [to] do everything you can to throw yourself into the next century (365).

There has been much scholarly debate regarding the foreclosures and generative possibilities associated with increased globalization, the shrinking nation and public sphere, and growing consumer “nations” and privatization. Following the associations I have explored above regarding the ethical imaginings that have been attached to (and detached from) the idea of culture, in the remaining chapters of this dissertation I will explore some of the spaces globalization continues to take Latino/a literature and the unpredictable affiliations—both textual and transtextual—that are generated. I explore how a social-spiritual writing practice enables Latino/a literature, culture, and its practitioners to re-value narrative and to extend its political significance into the next century that is now upon us.

CHAPTER 2
READING ETHICS/READING ETHNICS: POST-60S LATINA/O LITERARY
CULTURE, NEOLIBERALISM, AND THE SOCIAL-SPIRITUAL MELODRAMA OF
SANDRA CISNEROS AND *CARAMELO* (2002)

In a letter posted to Sandra Cisneros's web page on December 3, 2013, she writes about her most recent public engagement in San Antonio, Texas, stating "If I wasn't a spectacle that night on the float, I was when I was folding myself into that taxi cab" ("Letter"). Referencing the "tremendous [Mexican] headdress" she wore while floating down the San Antonio River as the "Grand Marshall" for the Paseo del Rio 2013 River Parade, Cisneros echoes a familiar critique lodged against her literary celebrity status. Indeed, scholars such as Ilan Stavans and Suzanne Chavez-Silverman, journalists, fellow writers, and other public commentators have made critical note of not just the hypercanonization of Cisneros's work, but also her own performative response to this status within the U.S. literary world. While Stavans and Chavez-Silverman partially attribute her celebrity to her self-presentation and persona or, as Stavans says, her "nasty, taboo-breaking attitude" (Stavans "Sandra" 30), others see her as pandering to multicultural and neoliberal attitudes about race and ethnicity (Obejas 1993; McCracken 1999).⁵⁸ These concerns, although often overlooked as insignificant, can cloak deeper cultural and national anxieties about the actual possibility and desire for cross-national and cultural connections, the raced and sexualized role of female leaders and artists, and the desire for art or culture to remain untouched from market considerations.

This chapter first addresses the contemporaneous literary culture that Sandra Cisneros found herself a part of in 1976 when she arrived at the Iowa Writer's Workshop and that sets the stage for understanding her sustained response to that culture, which includes her founding of the

⁵⁸ See also Tey Diana Rebolledo's "The Chicana Bandera: Sandra Cisneros in the Public Press Constructing a Cultural Icon (1996-1999)" that respond to these critiques against Cisneros (130-31).

Macondo Workshop, the Alfredo Cisneros del Moral Foundation, various opportunities for writers and readers, and her carefully crafted public persona. As we will see, this response has involved a delicate balance between engaging mainline literary culture and strategically disidentifying with its nationalist, sexist, racist, and classist traditions to help foster a popular Latina literary culture, of which she has become an icon. It is through Cisneros's developing postnational politics that we can also begin to understand her social-spiritual lived and writing practice. For postnationalism maps neatly onto social-spirituality by forging coalitions beyond nation/race, by focusing on intersectional and embodied experiences of gender and sexuality, and by fostering self-reflection and analysis of the often invisible, but unique space that the Latino/a diaspora occupy between national and transnational binaries.⁵⁹ Picking up where postnationalism leaves off, a social-spiritual practice maps the material and spiritual ways Latina/o diasporic subjects are, in José Muñoz's words, "not quite there yet" with regard to transnationalism as it is often discussed in the academe or the mainstream media.⁶⁰ Thus, I analyze Cisneros's career

⁵⁹ I use the terms Mexican and Latina/o diaspora to refer to the population of people living within the current geographical boundaries of the U.S. who have migrated (or descended from migrants) from the regions of Mexico and Latin America (which includes parts of the Caribbean), respectively. In this project, diaspora references both people who have physically moved a great distance as in the more traditional definition of the term (Clifford 246), as well as to those who may have only moved in a non-linear fashion around the border region (Perez 80). As Emma Perez explains, part of the reluctance to address a Mexican diaspora has been a resistance to thinking about Chicanos/as and Mexican Americans in the U.S. as living with the psychological and material affects of colonialism in the U.S. (6). I, thus, strategically use the term to move away from an understandings of "Chicano/a" and "Latina/o" as indexing a stable racial and political history and identity. "Diaspora" also better dialogues with a social-spiritual practice that is attentive to various and overlapping networks of experiences. Unlike the term "immigrant," diaspora is more sensitive to differences of gender and race and does not come laden with the implications of assimilation. While a traditional understanding of diaspora identifies a crucial longing for a homeland that unifies the diaspora, a decolonial take on diaspora looks to the constant shifting and reconstruction of this homeland (Perez 78).

⁶⁰ It's important to note that transnational literary study has itself been critiqued for its complicity with the demands of the neoliberal university to produce a managerial class of "global citizens" (Melamed 140). See also Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's "Poststructuralism,

trajectory as a very public display of her messy and evolving relationship to her identity as a postnational woman and Mexican diasporic subject that rejects nationalism and transnationalism to wholly explain her experiences and identity. Further, I suggest that her career trajectory also critically engages with the tenets of neoliberalism and its relation to “minority” literary culture. As in the previous chapter where I challenge the binary between institutions and political resistance and symbolic and material activism, in this chapter’s first section I show how Cisneros’s social-spiritual writing practice (although beginning at the Iowa Writer’s workshop) has worked against neoliberalism by actually drawing attention to the precarious economic conditions of being a writer in contradistinction to neoliberal approaches that gloss over these conditions in favor of an “authentic” and autonomous cultural sphere.

The second section looks more closely at Cisneros’s social-spiritual approach to culture through her most recent writing and her literary celebrity. I begin with a close reading of her 2002 novel, *Caramelo*, and conclude with an analysis of her deliberate and performative public persona. I interpret *Caramelo* as an embodiment of her social-spiritual writing and political practice that challenges rigid identity boundaries within Latino/a and Chicano/a studies. Like Cisneros’s embodied public performances, I read the novel as an instance of “performative” social-spiritual writing, wherein the novel’s deliberate and explicit attention to the textual space of literature draws our attention to form, genre, and language, and their intersections with the material and spiritual realities and social networks of the Latina/o diaspora. Specifically, through the text’s creation of metaphysical melodramas, Cisneros is able to emphasize the complicated nexus of sexual desire and national and familial belonging, while drawing critical attention to the important role of the gendered, sexed, raced, and inspired female storyteller for mapping these

Marginality, Postcoloniality and Value” (2003), David Palumbo-Liu’s *The Ethnic Canon* (1995) and Inderpal Grewal in *Transnational America* (2005).

dislocations. When read in the context of Cisneros's extremely visual and public performance as a sexualized "American Mexican" woman and the consistent critiques she receives for this presentation, it is clear that *Caramelo* troubles the notion of a redemptive transnational literary culture, focusing instead on the small pleasures of a social-spiritual approach to culture that is cobbled together, reclaimed, and renewed—an ongoing practice for the Latino and Latina diaspora. Invoking this practice in her novel, Cisneros also displaces liberal and neoliberal desires to read for social or cultural advancement, or for simple access to ethnographic style information.

"I DIDN'T KNOW HOW TO BE A WRITER": U.S. LITERARY CULTURE AND CISNEROS'S EMERGING POSTNATIONAL PERSPECTIVE & PERFORMANCE

In the many biographies, interviews, and studies of Sandra Cisneros, her recollection of coming face-to-face with her own difference during a fiction writing class at the famed University of Iowa Writer's Workshop is a mainstay. Her first time away from family and her hometown of Chicago, Cisneros recalls feeling alienated by the predominantly white, middle- to upper middle class peers and culture at Iowa. As she explains it "I knew I was a Mexican woman. But, I didn't think it had anything to do with why I felt so much imbalance in my life, whereas it had everything to do with it" (Cisneros qtd in Rodriguez Aranda 65). This "imbalance," of course, is what led Cisneros to recognize the distinct contribution she could make through writing and the eventual development of her so-called literary voice (Mirriam-Goldberg 43). While Mark McGurl's most recent interpretation of this event in Cisneros's life attributes her feelings of disaffiliation to the irresistible force of literary culture's (i.e., the creative writing program's) demand for it (331), I interpret it as the moment Cisneros recognizes herself as a postnational subject because of her "otherness"—her "race and class difference" and her developing "feminist consciousness" (Cisneros qtd in Calderon 173). It marks the beginning

of her lifelong journey of exploring this postnational condition—both within herself and among those she encounters—and that gives shape to many of her stories.

In Ellie D. Hernandez's study, *Postnationalism in Chicana/o Literature and Culture* (2009), she contends that the emergence of politicized gender and sexual subjectivities out of the Chicano/a movement also facilitated the development of Chicano/a transnational culture as sites of identity production and as a discourse on difference (6). This is evidenced in the previous chapter through the emergence of women of color feminist print culture that methodologically and ideologically eschewed national and racial boundaries. Importantly, Hernandez's conception of the postnational does not disavow Chicano/a cultural nationalism, but understands it as an ongoing and dynamic process that only becomes rigid and inflexible through a dominant discourse.⁶¹ In the case of Chicano nationalism, the discourse became dominated by masculinist, heterosexist ideologies, but did not remain that way. As Randy Ontiveros notes, since every nation can develop its own gender and sexual norms, nationalism is not de facto patriarchal (176). Also, for Hernandez, postnationalism is not diametrically opposed to capital, but rather is "enabled but not supported by the advance of global capitalism" (6). Chicana/o postnationalism, thus, indicates the importance of cultural nationalism to Chicanos and Chicanas—the largest national group that makes up U.S. Latinas and Latinos—as part of their cultural memory and their mode of entry into public discourse, while still being receptive to the many ways that Chicano/a cultural production and identity has indeed been impacted by increased global flows of capital, people, and goods. At the same time, this term is distinctive from the more loosely

⁶¹ In fact, since nationalism and postnationalism are not diametrically opposed in Hernandez's configuration, she understands the entire leftist political project to be a form of postnationalism that lost the trajectory of its own discourse on difference (28).

applied terms “transnational” or “global,” which Hernandez claims often index a privileged and elite global class that does not readily represent most Chicanas and Chicanos.

The duality and multi-directionality of Chicana/o postnationalism is significant and also resonates with a social-spiritual writing and lived practice. Indexing this dynamism at different points in her text, Hernandez variously characterizes the Chicana/o postnational as an “in between state,” (6) an “adjustment phase,” (12) and an “odd positioning” (26)—all to explain the “dislocation of Chicana/os caught or suspended between the national order and an emerging transnationalism” (4). Hernandez does not, however, explicitly address another important layer of complexity to Chicana/o postnational identity that is also the result of being implicated in economic and cultural flows of global exchange and exploitation—the increasing Latino/a population ~~and its impact on this postnational identity~~. As a non-native Texan—a strong geographical center, along with California, of Chicanismo—and having grown up in Latina/o neighborhoods of Chicago (Jussawalla and Dasenbrock 295-296), Cisneros’ work and public commentary pushes the limits of a “Chicana/o” postnationalism, exposing its relevance and disconnects in the context of a larger Latina/o diaspora in the U.S. In this chapter, I also attempt to theorize the workings of a *Latina/o* postnationalism in Cisneros’ work and public persona that do not so much define, but register as a presence on a spectrum of Latina/o diasporic identity. The postnational is of particular importance to my analysis of Cisneros and *Caramelo* because it allows room for productive engagement with the spiritual and material legacy of Chicana/o nationalism while shedding light on the multiple and sometimes vexed political subjectivities of contemporary Chicana/os and Latina/os. I also unpack how changes in the literary market reflect and construct the tension associated with this developing identity.

To return once again to Cisneros's recognition of her own "difference" at Iowa, it is relevant to note that this turning point was jarred in the context of a collective textual reading. At the time, Cisneros' poetry writing class was reading Gaston Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space* (1958), which details how the structures we know of as "home"—moving in his text from images of cellars to various rooms and attics—impact our perception, memories, and imagination (Jussawalla and Dasenbrok 301-302). But Cisneros knew no such home. The homes she was most familiar with were the impoverished "third floor flats" she grew up in (Cisneros "Ghosts"). Bachelard's text that Cisneros and her classmates read was, ironically, a translated copy from its original French publication. Yet, from her experience it is obvious that it was Cisneros and not the ideas of the text that needed translation. To use Alicia Gaspar de Alba's term, Cisneros was the "alter-Native" in the classroom, the person that is "both indigenous and alien to the United States" (18). This anecdote also reminds us that the education system in the U.S. has always been epistemologically (and Eurocentrically) "transnational," which means a "transnational" approach to literary studies is not de facto "resistant" to dominant culture. Thus, the most relevant "transnational" scholarship critiques these long standing biases, the U.S.'s coercive exchanges with the global south, or brings to light alternative value networks (as we'll see via a social-spiritual reading of *Caramelo*) and minor transnationalisms.

That Cisneros, at 22-years-old, was only just then facing this clash of cultural and socioeconomic difference is both odd and, at the same time, typical for people of color from "ethnic" neighborhoods. Growing up in a Chicago neighborhood full of racialized others and even attending Loyola University, a diverse institution with campuses spread across the city of Chicago, had not exposed Cisneros to her own difference. As she explains, she never even considered herself a "Chicana" until her experience at Iowa (Binder & Wolfgang qtd. in

Calderón 174). Put another way, it was not until her engagement with mainline (white) literary culture that Cisneros needed to access the racialized, classed, and sexed “Chicana” voice that Chicana/o cultural nationalism had made more accessible. For Chicana/o nationalism had rhetorically and performatively turned racialized shame into pride in much the same way that Cisneros would coax depictions of class, race, and gender inequality into a form of textual pleasure through her stories of “third floor flats” in *The House on Mango Street*.⁶² More than finding her literary voice, Iowa was also the beginning of Cisneros’s public engagement with her multi-national subjectivity that can best be described as “postnational.” Moreover, Cisneros’s postnational subjectivity can be understood as developing alongside her social-spiritual understanding of culture that brings forth connections and experiences that have otherwise been ghosted by dominant discourses. It is through a social-spiritual writing practice in *Caramelo* that Cisneros is able to map a sense of place and pleasure in the face of displacement for Latina/o diasporic subjects.

Since Cisneros’s time at the Iowa Writer’s workshop, she and other participants have spoken about the institution, and it is more apparent how she would have felt out of place and “othered” during her time there. In Eric Olsen and Glenn Schaeffer’s book, *We Wanted to Be Writers: Life, Love, and Literature at the Iowa Writers’ Workshop* (2011), they collect numerous responses and anecdotes about the program from graduates of the Workshop between the years 1974-1978, including Cisneros. Resoundingly, the culture at the Workshop is described as masculinist, patriarchal, sexist, competitive, replete with boxing workouts followed by rounds of

⁶² Cisneros began, but did not complete *The House on Mango Street* while at the Iowa Writer’s Workshop. The project was also not part of her MFA thesis (Caldwell *Superstitions*).

beer.⁶³ In fact, a lot can be gleaned about literary culture at the time of Cisneros's attendance at Iowa from Olsen and Schaeffer's collection, including the expansion of capitalism into the always-tenuous writing profession and the Workshop's neoliberal refusal to address the impact of these changes on working class writers and writers of color. Echoing McGurl's concern for disaffiliation, Olsen and Schaeffer instead discuss the anxiety Iowa writers faced because of their inability to independently break into the literary scene with their "inexorable brilliance and bad manners" as their predecessors had done because the economy simply no longer allowed for aspiring writers to survive by writing for literary journals and living the bohemian life in Greenwich Village (75). These young writers lamented the need to be professionalized through an institution that they had to apply to and pay to attend. As Ted Solatoroff, a literary editor at a trade-publishing house, explains in his 1984 article "The Publishing Culture and The Literary Culture," the encroachment of capitalism on the publishing industry via mass market standardization (e.g., big bookstores and corporate takeovers of publishing imprints) was drastically altering the formerly close (and, one could say, often *enclosed*) relationship between literary culture and publishing culture.

If, as Hernandez explains, capitalism is the source of human rights movements and cultural expression, the shifts in the economic market being registered by Iowa participants were also related to the advance of capitalism into the realm of "difference" (e.g., gender, race, sexuality) and, subsequently, implicating difference in spaces where it was "otherwise unintended" such as literary culture (12). As Olsen and Schaeffer recall "...the old [literary] manners were being shoved rudely aside by our current commodity-driven world, where

⁶³ A 2001 article in *The New Yorker* about another top-ranked writer's workshop, the Bread Loaf Writer's Workshop in Vermont, also attests to this white, male characterization of "literary culture" being fostered at these cultural enclaves (Mead). The 90s, however, were a time of intense struggle over "diversity" in literary culture.

demographics, gender, ethnicity, and above all marketability are the yardsticks by which literary talent is measured and presented to the American public” (185). Even more shocking to many workshop participants, Iowa writers were told, “only woman (sic) over forty bought novels, so deal with it” (185). Thus, even aspiring “literary writers,” as those at Iowa understood themselves, could no longer assume their reader as the universal white, male subject the way their predecessors had likely done. These social and political conditions likely created even more dissonance between Cisneros (and other writers of color) and her peers at Iowa.

Nonetheless, these market and economic shifts in the literary field, although shocking to many participants at the Iowa Writer’s Workshop during the mid 1970s, had been underway for several years by then. Among dominant trends impacting publishing since 1945, the consolidation of book publishing imprints through mergers and acquisitions is paramount (Schiffrin), paralleling similar developments in other industries (Grecco et al 10). Similarly, while prior to the 1970s books were sold on a small scale to independent bookstores across the U.S. and editors were hired “all too frequently because of old college connections,” the development of chain bookstores and mass merchandise discount stores altered this often romanticized model (Grecco et al. 23). The new model of publishing meant a dramatic increase in book sales, with bestsellers sold at large discount stores comprising the largest percentage of sales. The new and consolidated distribution channels across the country also meant that publishers could more narrowly market a specific book in a specific region based on better tracking of sales and interests in that region (Grecco et al 23-25). Hence, publishers became aware of all kinds of readers (including women over 40!) and their reading interests that previously were unseen and, therefore, unacknowledged. This trend, of course, would continue to expand into the multicultural market of the 1990s but had its roots more generally in the post

war economic shifts that pushed industries to access “deep capital” in order to survive financially (Grecco 32). Thus, a combination of changing economic structures and social concerns resulted in a major change in the literary market. Capital’s demand for greater profits and a large scale, mass-market business model also necessarily required attention to consumer and social interests, which sometimes included civil and human rights movement issues over more elitist and narrow models of literary “taste” and exclusion.

Despite the restructuring in the publishing industry and the apparent changes in the marketplace, the faculty at Iowa chose to keep the “real world” away from its writers by not discussing with them the material logistics of being a writer such as finding an agent, soliciting manuscripts, and making a living while doing so (Olsen and Schaeffer 204). Cisneros has spoken out about this characteristic of the Iowa Writers’ Workshop, recalling that she had to learn the business side of the literary field by making mistakes once she left Iowa. As a result, in her own writing workshops that she develops and hosts, the Macondo Writer’s Workshop, she brings in agents and editors to talk with aspiring writers precisely to prevent the same kind of elitist obfuscation of material realities (Olsen and Schaeffer 222).⁶⁴ That the Iowa Writer’s Workshop would withhold information about the “real world” of writing is a testament to its neoliberal approach to culture. For, when it comes to culture, neoliberalism promotes the façade of an authentic creative lifestyle without addressing the material and economic structures and exploitations that undergird it. If concern for the economic bottom line is the imperative of neoliberalism it is only a concern as it affects a small percentage or the upper echelon of the

⁶⁴ The Macondo Writer’s Workshop, founded in 1995 by Sandra Cisneros has been folded into the Macondo Foundation also founded by Cisneros, but managed now by the Guadalupe Cultural Arts Center in San Antonio, Texas. The Macondo Foundation, as well as the Writer’s Workshop, is dedicated to creating a rigorous but supportive environment for writers of all genres who are dedicated to using their craft for the social betterment of underserved communities (“Macondo”).

population. Cisneros's alternative workshop is equally concerned with economics but in a way that validates the concerns of a much greater portion of the population. In this way we see how Cisneros's social-spiritual writing practice represents a different kind of aesthetic project that does not disregard material needs at the behest of more esoteric and abstract concerns.⁶⁵ As I discussed in the previous chapter, writers of color can seldom assume to be able to write without a means to survive financially because the threat of poverty is often all too real—a tangible effect of systemic racism and an increasingly globalized, neoliberal economy.

These anecdotes from Olsen and Schaeffer's book combined with other studies of the publishing industry go far in elucidating the advance of capital into literary culture and the shifts it brought about well before mainline publishers embraced Cisneros's and other Latina/o work. In other words, both post war economic changes and the social movements of the 1960s (feminist, sexual, racial, etc.) all played a hand in facilitating the mainstream publishing interest in women of color writers such as Cisneros in the late 1980s and early 1990s. They also demonstrate the literary field's persistence in seeking to uphold the idealism of the separation of the economic market or media industry from the literary arts and how this arrangement works to maintain even greater inaccessibility to arts production for women and people of color. This stubborn desire for separation also flies in the face of the more practical approaches to workshops that Cisneros embraces, and does nothing to actually resist the encroachment of

⁶⁵ In April 2014, best selling Latino author Junot Díaz posted an article he authored entitled "MFA Vs. POC" in which he describes the overall lack of concern in MFA programs for discussing and writing about a reality informed by systemic racism as experienced by people of color. As a graduate of Cornell's MFA program and having held faculty positions at two MFA programs, Díaz goes on to attest to the continuing disconnect between the literary culture constructed in these workshops and the material, psychic, spiritual, and emotional lives of people of color. Following Cisneros's lead, in 1999 Junot Díaz and several other writers of color founded an alternative writer's workshop for people of color, the Voices of Our Nation Workshop ("Overview").

capital into more and more realms of everyday life. To the contrary, as I will show, Cisneros' social-spirituality—both embodied and textual—have worked to disidentify with aspects of contemporary literary culture such as multiculturalism, neoliberalism, and transnationalism that do much to separate the aesthetic, pleasurable, and “authentic” aspects of culture from its material and social reality—especially the most complex aspects of that reality. In doing this Cisneros has worked, often imperfectly, to revise and revalue existing notions of “how to be a [Latina/o] writer.”

Becoming “La Sandra”

After graduating from the Iowa Writer's Workshop, Sandra Cisneros returned to Chicago where she counseled Latino/a students at the high school and college level while also working on what would become *The House on Mango Street*. After receiving a National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) grant in 1982, Cisneros was able to complete *The House on Mango Street*, which was published in 1983 by Chicano/a press, Arte Público. Although Cisneros moved around a bit while writing—spending some time in Massachusetts and some in Europe—after the publication of her collection, she moved not to New York City as other aspiring writers might have done, but to the southwest where she took a job at the Guadalupe Cultural Arts Center in San Antonio, Texas (Clemens Warrick 56). Not only was Cisneros's perplexing migration the reverse of many aspiring writers, but it also was the opposite pattern of a large portion of the Mexican diaspora in the U.S. who have traditionally migrated north in search of jobs and financial security. Embedded in this movement, I suggest, is a deliberate choice not to return to an originary

homeland as other writers and Chicano/a movement artists have done, but to drastically remap popular Latina literary culture through a social-spiritual approach to culture.⁶⁶

Cisneros's move to Texas was, of course, also a practical one. With *The House on Mango Street* immediately receiving good reviews from critics, Cisneros knew her writing and its particular language and style had an outlet and needed to be nourished. In an effort to do just that, she sought to move closer to Mexico, a place she claims her and her family had more emotional ties to than Illinois, and where she could be around people who spoke and lived Mexican language and culture daily (Jussawalla and Dasenbrock 295). As she explains "...I need to live here [San Antonio] because this is where I'm going to get the ideas for the things I need to write about." San Antonio was the "closest [she] could get to living in Mexico and still get paid" for filling the Latina/o literary void she helped enunciate (Cisneros qtd in Jussawalla and Dasenbrock 288). That San Antonio was also an affordable place for an artist to live was an added bonus.

The complexity of the "Latino/a" literary void Cisneros aimed to fill, and the Tejana voice and experience in particular, would quickly become apparent to the young author. While Cisneros could indeed become immersed in "Mexican" culture in ways she could not in Chicago, Mexican diasporic cultures across the U.S. are diverse, complicated, and often politically various. Just two years after her move to Texas Cisneros published the essay "Tejana Flowers: In Search of Tejana Feminist Poetry" in *Third Woman*, which openly critiques the complicit brand of feminism her contemporary Tejana writers were espousing in their poetry. Leveraging her

⁶⁶ Chicano writers such as Oscar Zeta Acosta and José Antonio Villarreal, among others, have explored the desirability and accessibility of a Mexican homeland for Chicanos both textually and, in the case of Acosta, in his own lived experience. With regard to remapping popular literary culture, the effort continues as new literary journals such as *Huizache*, published out of the University of Houston in Victoria, Texas, work to continue to unearth and develop a southwestern literary tradition.

outsider status in Texas, Cisneros claims, “because I’m no Texan, nor anybody’s *comadre*, I feel a certain privileged liberty to have my say” (73). Coming from a different experience of the Mexican diaspora, Cisneros was able to critique some of the Tejana feminist’s political blindspots. As Hernandez explains, the shift from a Chicano/a discourse to a postnational one allows discussions to move to a self-critical location, one that “accounts for the present, the past national shortcomings, and global critique” (31). This bold and critical feminist voice regarding Tejano/a, Mexican American, and Latino/a patriarchal cultures has characterized the scope of Cisneros’s career and has played a large role in shaping her notoriously love-hate relationship with the state of Texas and San Antonio in particular.⁶⁷ Unlike the multicultural gloss that paints especially Latina writers as passive, cultural healers, and conduits of cross-cultural exchange, Cisneros’s words break free of this trap and confront in addition to heal. Moreover, this public voice is coterminous with Cisneros’ embodied Latina social-spiritual practice that shows the truth—simultaneously ugly and joyous—of Mexican diasporic and postnational identities.

Thus, despite Cisneros’ early confrontation with native Texans (the first among many), her decision to remain a resident of San Antonio for more than 25 years should be understood as indicative of her desire to explore and expound on these intra- and inter-ethnic conflicts that are a part of the Latina/o diaspora and a social-spiritual impulse for relational, social, and cross-difference examination. In fact, it is apt that rather than relocating to a “global city” such as Los Angeles or New York City, Cisneros remained in San Antonio—indeed, a postnational city *par excellence*. As the site of the Alamo, the most famous battle between Texas and Mexico leading up to the U.S.-Mexican War, as well as a number of Spanish missions, San Antonio is laden with

⁶⁷ Even in her most recent interviews, Cisneros asserts the unique and unexpected identity of the Mexican diaspora in Texas. As she explains in a 2013 interview for the Library of Congress’s “A Celebration of Mexico,” “people [in Texas] consider themselves Texan or American first, then Mexican” (Allen “Sandra”).

remnants of its colonial and troubling transnational history. Beyond these historical presences, the city's current population of over 1.3 million people, 63 percent of which are "Hispanic," are spread across largely class and racially segregated enclaves. And although the city boasts of its Mexican cultural influence, it has also suffered from its own Mexiphobia and inferiority complex (within the state and nation) because of its Mexican heritage.⁶⁸ All of these qualities make Cisneros's move and long term residence in San Antonio important to understanding the development of her postnational relationship to Mexico, as well as her social-spiritual practice that is already apparent in her work with the writing community and in her outspoken, critical attitude that foregrounds otherwise ghosted experiences of Latina gender and race.

Cisneros's ongoing residence in San Antonio almost operates as a direct analogue to her own developing postnational consciousness and social-spiritual practice. If early on Cisneros was optimistic about the city's proximity to Mexico and its bi-cultural richness (Jussawalla and Dasenbrock 288), through grappling with and experiencing first hand its colonial specter, she increasingly becomes more aware and actively critical about how far from happily bicultural or "Mexican" the city truly is. Interestingly, her political force and iconicity seem to develop in tandem with her postnational and social-spiritual approach to writing and culture, which is increasingly displayed in her physical self-presentation, public persona and her most recent novel, *Caramelo*.⁶⁹ Her development into the icon of "La Sandra," of course, has not always been well received by a range of interested parties—from fellow authors and literary critics to

⁶⁸ In a 2013 interview with Jake Silverstein for *Texas Monthly*, Cisneros talks about Tejanos being distrustful of her when she first arrived to San Antonio because she was from the Midwest and, therefore, must think she was better than them (this idea is also echoed in a 1992 interview with Feroza Jussawalla and Reed Way Dasenbrock). These feelings, as Cisneros notes, are not uncommon in a space with such a blatant colonial history where feelings of inferiority have been ingrained into people's consciousness (Silverstein "Artist").

⁶⁹ As I explain further in the subsequent section, this dynamic likely has to do with the way that Cisneros's writing and public persona work alongside and against neoliberal cultural values.

city council people, media personalities, and fellow San Antonians. In the next section I will look at specific examples of “La Sandra’s” social-spirituality and the specific critique it can enable. In addition to an analysis of how these instances reflect Cisneros’s social-spiritual approach to culture, I analyze how the reactions from the public reveal the (national) anxieties about transnational connection, racialized female leaders, the role of art in politics, and how these conflicts have helped fuel other popular Latina/o writers and literature.

CURATING A SOCIAL SPIRITUAL LATINA/O NARRATIVE IN SANDRA CISNEROS’ *CARAMELO* AND BEYOND

I would like to turn now to an example of social-spirituality in Sandra Cisneros’s 2002 novel, *Caramelo*, which generates a narrative that is unhinged from an authentic ontological, national, transnational or political Latino/a identity and yet elaborates the power and pleasure of female storytelling to map the felt experience of living in the borderlands as a diasporic Latina subject. Specifically, I will focus on how *Caramelo* creates a social-spiritual narrative map of meaning through a sanctified Latina/o popular culture and how the melodramatic genre facilitates this representation. Moreover, by articulating the expansive and diffuse scope and power of storytelling to historic, economic and spiritual realms, social-spirituality in *Caramelo* works to revalue Latina/o literature and culture against the grain of global capital that primarily values information and transactional exchange. Finally, I conclude the chapter by affirming social-spirituality as an embodied, lived approach to culture by looking at Sandra Cisneros’s own politics of embodiment that navigate the reductive strictures of national and transnational belonging in favor of a performance-based, spirit-attuned, and relational practice that foregrounds the power of culture and its constituent element of belief in the unseen. Let’s turn now to *Caramelo*.

More than anything else, *Caramelo* is a novel about telling stories. Full of half-truths, and melodrama, the stories in *Caramelo* primarily concern the adolescent narrator, Celaya, her Mexican American family, and a mounting narrative tension with the deceased “awful grandmother.” Although we know that the awful grandmother has been interrupting Celaya’s narrative from the afterlife throughout the novel, it is not until the end that we are given the premise for this most unusual narrative device. When Celaya finally confronts her grandmother’s ghost, she finds out that the grandmother is stuck “halfway between here and there” and needs Celaya to tell her life story so that those she hurt might forgive her (407). Detailing Celaya’s qualification for the task, the awful grandmother explains, “You’re the only one who can see me” and “You’re good with talk” (407-408). It is Celaya’s abilities to observe and to speak that qualify her for the job of narrating her grandmother’s stories from beyond. But it is also notable that Celaya is the only sister in a family of seven brothers and that *she* is the only one who can see her grandmother. As Heather Alumbaugh explains, the novel sets Celaya up as exceptionally aware of the stories around her—both of her family and in literature—and Celaya often refers to herself as a “metiche, mirona, mitotera, and hocicon,” specifically gendered epithets for “loud mouth” women that also qualify them as excellent storytellers (61). Her distinctly embodied narrative style is what facilitates Celaya’s ability to “see” her deceased grandmother, who herself is a sexed, raced, gendered, and classed woman, albeit very different from Celaya.

In *Caramelo*, the significance of embodiment is also reflected in the novel’s formal narrative structures. For instance, the narrative is broken into 86 episodic vignettes largely narrated by Celaya, but also interspersed with interjections from the awful grandmother. Footnotes also add to the text’s narrative form and accommodate its plentiful cultural and historical references. The result of these devices is the sense of a permanently present

temporality or an ongoing performance given by a physically present narrator. Even the footnotes seem like personal asides for our ears only. As Amara Graff notes, it's as if "the narrator is telling the story to an audience" (4). At the same time, although the episodic quality and dueling narrators offer physicality to the narrative, the device of the deceased grandmother alerts the reader to the significance of the spirit world for expressing different narrative networks, value, and possibility. That the deceased grandmother needs (narrative) healing from her living granddaughter further points to the importance of an embodied and active spirituality. Moreover, rather than using the awful grandmother as a hierarchical symbol of wisdom and organic Mexican national culture, *Caramelo* re-orientes the narrator's quest for knowledge and identity across various realms of Latina/o, Latin American, and U.S. popular culture, family stories, histories, and myths that are also deemed sacred.

It is this narrative remix and the multiple border-crossings and displacements that prompt many scholars to interpret *Caramelo* as providing a transnational commentary about a bicultural, "third space" Mexican American identity and experience (Johnson Gonzalez, Heredia, Calderon, Graf). For instance, Graf examines *Caramelo* as a translation of the telenovela form or a Mexicanized melodrama; while Bill Johnson Gonzalez focuses on Celaya's unique and literal translations from Spanish to English as crafting a place from which to "mount a critique in two directions" (5). Likewise, Juanita Heredia focuses on the novel's ability to critique the politics of gender on both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border and Celaya's ability to craft her own "third culture" at the border. (See also Calderon 2004). More than a mix or critique of two national cultures, however, *Caramelo*'s scope of storytelling and the sedimented layers of cultural, political, and familial histories it unearths far exceed the parameters of nations. The networks of icons and stories that *Caramelo* crafts easily surpass the temporal boundaries of the narrator's

immediate family and, thus, respond less to recent migrations and instead document the affective experience of over 100 years of displacement. Turning to a spiritual realm that surpasses national boundaries helps to convincingly represent the impact of this time span. The fact that the narration nonetheless has such a present-ness to it only furthers my assertion that the text documents a felt experience in the borderland that cannot be literally transcribed, but that nonetheless exists among the Latina/o diaspora and emerges in a social-spiritual narrative.

A key tangible element of the social-spiritual writing practice in *Caramelo* is the narrative map of Latina/o popular culture that Celaya constructs. As I've alluded, *Caramelo* offers a prodigious narration of family stories, biographies, sayings, histories, and myths, and the cumulative effect is a narrative map of otherwise invisible Latina/o and Latin American popular history, culture, and beliefs. One of the most striking aspects of this "map" is its rapid juxtaposition of anecdotes about Latina/o, Mexican, Latin American, and pan-American figures. From the obscure stories of U.S. born entertainer Yolanda "Tongolele" Montes to the Mexican but Americanized icon Rita Hayworth (née Margarita Cansino) and from glosses of Mexican films and comics to the la llorona myth, these are just a few of the icons that bear as much narrative importance as the stories of Celaya's own family members. For some critics, this plurality of stories is interpreted as a lack of coherence. Specifically referring to the novel's audio version, Ann Burns writes: "these tapes require one's full attention, but the tale (with much repetition and snail pace progression, hence little drama) refuse to captivate" (71). From the perspective of the social-spiritual, however, the (re)telling of these iconic but often obscured tales from the global south alongside the intergenerational stories of the Reyes's pan-American past brings a much-needed sanctity and pleasure to Celaya's act of female storytelling.

In Desiree Martin's study of Chicano/a culture and what she calls "secular sanctity," she notes the close proximity of the sacred and celebrity culture. In order for a story, practice or individual to be deemed sacred, it needs to be in relationship with a public. As Martin explains, "Both saints and celebrities require the adulation of the public for their very existence" (20). Following this trajectory we can see how Cisneros's superfluous map of popular icons performs a sort of hagiography of Latin/o cultural expression. The sanctity of culture, and narrative in particular, is further increased by the intertwining of the deceased grandmother's interjections as well as by Celaya's explicit references to *la divina providencia* or the female creative spirit as the best storyteller of them all. Together, these devices begin to construct a network of cultural value that attempts to index the intangible aspects of storytelling (and of the diasporic experience) and, therefore, push back against neoliberal frameworks of authenticity and transaction. As Alumbaugh states: "Any reader has to be willing to traverse linguistic, cultural, and epistemological boundaries in order to fully reckon with the complexity of [Cisneros'] migratory narrative" (72)

Of course, many artists and cultural critics have attempted to articulate the intangible aspects of cultural expression as a way to locate its distinctive value (see Hungerford 2010). The distinguishing feature of the social-spiritual narrative in *Caramelo*, however, is that its assertion of storytelling as a sacred act does not consequently distance itself from the body or from materiality. In fact, while the myriad popular Latina/o references constellate a veritable hagiography, many of the individual nodes (or stories) on the narrative map locate the very bodily, material, and political aspects of expressive culture. For instance, *Caramelo* plots the physical locations across the Americas where artists worked while rising to fame; tells the tales of artists' economic downturns; and relates stories of the professional livelihoods of those who

worked in and around the arts (275, 192, 229). The novel also shows how desire factors into cultural production (and, later, how culture factors into politics) by archiving the pop culture destinies of Josephine Baker whose “destiny” drastically changes upon meeting her lover Billy Baker and the many artists (including Frida Kahlo) who were romantically involved with the female singer Pánifla Palafox (142, 181). In the world of *Caramelo*, stories and culture permeate and influence our economic, political, and romantic lives and, in the case of Latina/o diasporic subjects such as Celaya, can provide the raw material for carving a narrative (and artistic) sense of place in the face of displacement. Moreover, this narrative map attests to the mental and spiritual terrain of diasporic Latina/o subjects whose sense of home cannot be located firmly in the physical world. As Celaya reflects near the end of the novel: “...these things, that song, that time, that place, are all bound together in a country I am homesick for, that doesn’t exist anymore. That never existed. A country I invented. Like all emigrants caught between here and there” (434). As the narrative map in *Caramelo* attests, this place does exist and it is constantly being shaped by Celaya through her creative will, which provides pleasure and meaning to an existence that does not fall neatly along politically charged notions of identity and belonging. Building from this premise, I’d like to turn now to the melodramatic genre and explore how it further contributes to *Caramelo*’s social-spiritual narrative practice by providing an embodied form that can simultaneously delight in and critique Latina/o cultural identity, as well as its often-romanticized national and transnational discourses.

Sandra Cisneros’s Social-Spiritual Melodramas

Amidst the narrative constellation of Latina/o popular icons and histories, *Caramelo* also relates the intergenerational desires and family histories of the Reyes family who live in the U.S., but maintain emotional and familial ties to Mexico. The novel accommodates this expansive

temporality and plural characters through many of the devices I have already mentioned such as its seriality and the dueling narration between Celaya and the awful grandmother. These conventions, especially when combined with the novel's thematic interest in romantic love and desire, also align *Caramelo* with the generic conventions of melodrama. In fact, *Caramelo*'s development of a social-spiritual network of Latina/o culture and storytelling is largely dependent on this melodramatic genre. If, as I argue, the novel creates a social-spiritual network or map of Latina/o culture, melodrama is the necessary landscape for this map.

Other scholars have noted the melodramatic quality of Cisneros's work and they often interpret it as translating or critiquing the *telenovela* or the Mexican soap opera (Graff, Torres, Saldivar-Hull, Griffin, Almeria). These readings interpret the text as creating a particularly Mexican-style melodrama or providing a critique of the limitations of the genre. From a social-spiritual perspective, however, melodrama provides more than these readings suggest. Specifically, melodrama provides a very particular, gendered and raced narrative form that is itself embodied and lies between the concepts of the national and transnational. Melodrama has a long and illustrious history in Mexican popular culture and, most notably, in Mexico's Golden Age of cinema (whose film titles, plot lines, and histories are referenced frequently in *Caramelo*), but it also has a more pan-American history. In Susan Dever's study of Mexican cinema and melodrama, she explains that melodrama in Mexico emerged during a post-revolutionary moment that sought a renewed Mexican nationalism. As she elaborates, melodrama has been used as "a mediator and redresser of social injustices"—either in support of power or to contest power imbalances (8). Moreover, within Mexican and Mexican American contexts, it is women actresses in melodrama who have most profoundly mediated the nation state and hispanidad and, because Mexico's melodramatic cinema drew actors from among

various Latin American and U.S. Latino/a talent, the genre is also importantly Pan-American Latino/a (Dever 12).

By working from within this genre (via the self-conscious social-spiritual narrative), *Caramelo* more than translates or critiques it, but dwells in this space, experiencing its pleasures and its exploitative effects. This approach, of course, is likely closer to the felt experience of the contemporary borderlands than a binary “oppressed v. oppressor” narrative style of earlier immigrant novels. As Jose David Saldívar explains, Cisneros’s work is “not imbued with a moralizing thematics” (153). Melodrama provides the format for highlighting complex interpersonal relationships that do not easily divide along national, gender, or class lines. As a result, any critique in *Caramelo* of melodrama or, more precisely, the racist, sexist, classist, but romanticized narratives it generates, occurs from *within* the form and is able to simultaneously enjoy the genre’s distinctive, outsized pleasures. *Caramelo* also shows us a different way of reading that is lateral/networked (instead of hierarchichal/linear) and puts ideas and characters into conversation with myriad other everyday elements of life from material and economic to spiritual or mythic. As Saldívar notes, Celaya is not as interested in the “turning points that make up the plot of *Caramelo*” so much as the Latin American influenced “historias, fillers, the healthy lies, the will to poesis, fabrication, dissimulation, infamia, and exaggeration” that make up most of the novel (178). In other words, *Caramelo* is interested in what people do with stories: embody them, mobilize them, sacralize them—the social-spiritual aspects of narrative and culture.

While Saldívar’s analysis of Celaya’s narrative zeroes in on the less transactionable and excessive aspects of storytelling, it doesn’t consider the gendered quality of these forms (e.g., melodrama, rumors, exaggeration) and the attention they may be drawing to the imbrication of

gender, sexual desire, family, and (trans)national belonging. As I've already noted, *Caramelo* is steeped in stories that focus on desire, unrequited love, and family more so than on explicit issues of transnational identity, exchange or hybridity—although, in our contemporary moment, these cultural concerns are perhaps too readily signified through border crossing and contact zone settings such as those in *Caramelo* (Pease 14-15). Thus, Cisneros's social-spiritual formal and thematic emphasis on gender and sexual displacement help to foreground her critique of the romanticized national and transnational narratives that the Latina/o subjects grapple with in the novel.

The specific relationship between sexual desire and racial, national, and gender displacement comes to a head in a much-overlooked scene in the novel that takes place during a family trip to Acapulco. In this scene, the awful grandmother discredits Zoila's (Celaya's mother) familial belonging along the lines of national *cum* racial belonging: that is, for her improper Spanish use and for "being dark as a slave" (85). She simultaneously accuses Zoila of using her sexuality to advance her class position by marrying Celaya's father, Inocencio. While this scene certainly "engag[es] the politics of gender and race in Mexican and Mexican American relations" as Juanita Heredia contends in her transnational reading of *Caramelo*, we also see how these battles are not just fought discursively but through and often at the expense of women. The debacle only ends when the grandmother asks her son to choose between her or his wife and ostensibly between his Mexican culture and the "barbaric" culture he shares with his family in the U.S. At this pivotal moment, Inocencio does the unthinkable (in Mexican culture, at least) and chooses his wife. Instead of riding home with the family, the awful grandmother is sent back to Mexico City on a bus along with, as she describes it, "an inferno of Indians" (79). The vexed

national, sexual, gendered, raced, and classed identities confronting this transnational family could not be any more apparent than in this pivotal scene.

Tellingly, the awful grandmother is sent home in parallel fashion to Candelaria, the indigenous daughter of the Reyes's maid who we later learn is also Celaya's half sister and who was also put on a bus back to Mexico City just prior to the grandmother (Cisneros 37, 79). As we later discover, this is not the only similarity between Candelaria and the grandmother. As a child, the awful grandmother is abandoned and later taken in by her future husband's family as *their* hired help. As a servant, she soon becomes the sexual object of her employer's young son, Narciso. And it is only by chance or what the grandma romantically calls "el destino" or destiny that, when she becomes pregnant, Narciso does not flee north as he desires and as Celaya's father later does under similar circumstances. In other words, both Candelaria's mother and the awful grandmother were in similar vulnerable circumstance—made more vulnerable by the coloniality of power that undergirds much transnational movement—at different points in time with Reyes men. The social-spiritual emphasis on plural and lateral networks of relation helps (invested) readers to make these connections that otherwise defy traditional patterns.

Although Candelaria is only a minor character, the entire novel begins and ends with memories from the Acapulco trip, and the dynamic between the Reyes family and Mexico is altered after the scene I just discussed. No longer an idyllic, romantic place in the minds of Celaya's father or the children, they begin their transformation toward becoming postnational subjects who are neither Mexican nor American; not Chicano/a nor properly transnational as a brief scene with the U.S. Border Patrol and Inocencio's missing citizenship papers painfully reveals (375). But it is only Celaya who engages in a creative and decolonial mapping of this felt experience in the borderlands. In fact, the formal gendered elements of Cisneros's social-spiritual

narrative that reach in multiple directions and showcase complex relational networks respond to and critique the equally complex racial, sexual, and gendered oppressions that are too easily elided by more familiar critiques of nationalism and transnationalism. For instance, in Maria Herrera-Sobek's interpretation of the novel, she emphasizes the use of popular culture such as telenovelas to demonstrate the complexity and hardship of women's lives at the hands of (transnational) patriarchy and she contends that the politics of the novel resist the concepts of racism, patriarchy, and capitalism (158). This type of reading, though, overlooks the awkward and unresolved moments in the text where the indigenous Candelaria is sexualized by Celaya and her brothers and later fetishized for her caramelo skin color by Celaya. When practically every character and storyline is somehow tied up in a melodramatic story of romance and betrayal, consumption and excess, Cisneros prompts us to practice self-reflection by looking at unexpected moments of colonial desire (i.e., from the protagonist) and at our own interpretive desires and longings that might underwrite race, gender, and sexual oppression and that capitalism then exploits.

At the same time, the social-spiritual narrative does not foreclose the possibility for joy and pleasure in the imperfect telling of these diasporic stories. Speaking to what we do with stories, another way that the melodramatic is thematized in *Caramelo* is through Celaya's frequent use of Mexican melodramatic films and performances to interpret the personal stories she tells. In other words, the embodied form of melodrama is then re-deployed in a new and meaningful way. For instance, when telling a story about her father's military service in WWII and her grandmother's undying devotion to him, she includes a footnote interpreting this same event through its representation in the film *Salon Mexico*: "For a super-sentimental story of Squadron 201, see Indio Fernandez's splendid *Salon Mexico*, a classic. Note the Mexican

matriarchy scene between the injured returning pilot and his angelic mother. This scene alone will explain everything” (207). Neither entirely celebrating, nor entirely denigrating *Salon Mexico*, this comment, among many others, shows the narrator living, writing, and manipulating the melodramatic form from within. By dwelling in the melodramatic, Celaya can use the form as a tool—for pleasure and for critique—and not simply as a revised genre that confines her or that is complete. She can engage in writing as a creative and political act that, in the words of Anzaldúa, is an act of “spiritual excavation, of (ad)venturing into the inner void, extrapolating meaning from it and sending it out into the world” (“Making Face” xxiv). This process, like her concept of *nepantla*, is recursive for Anzaldúa, which we also get a sense of in *Caramelo*, as the story ends where it ultimately begins—with Celaya promising her father that she will never tell her family secrets (and the secret of Candelaria especially). This, of course, ironically sends us back to the beginning of the novel and her storytelling.⁷⁰

I would like to conclude by thinking about how a social-spiritual approach to Latina/o writing and culture can change the terms of its valuation by turning to an example from Cisneros’s own lived experience. Five years before publishing *Caramelo*, Cisneros was at the center of her own melodrama. Having just painted her historic, Victorian style home in San Antonio a festive shade of purple, she no sooner upset city officials. While traveling to tend to her dying father and writing *Caramelo*, Cisneros claims that she grew tired of the original beige

⁷⁰ Among Anzaldúa’s theories of writing, spirituality, and politics, her concept of *nepantla*—a Nahuatl word for “in between”—builds on her earlier work and, as AnaLouise Keating explains, “underscores and expands the[ir] spiritual, psychic, supernatural, and indigenous dimensions” (Keating “From” 8). While her more well-known theories of a borderlands or *mestiza* consciousness could more readily be celebrated as a consciousness to be achieved, *nepantla* is a process that occurs across different stages of life and that is perpetually “painful, messy, confusing, and chaotic” (Keating “Entre” 8-9). *Nepantla* is a practice and a way of being, and literary and cultural expression is a central product of this being. In fact, Anzaldúa theorizes *nepantla* as especially viable for artists and cultural workers (Anzaldúa “Navigating” 3).

color of her house and wanted to paint it a color that would reflect “the colorful spirit of south Texas and Mexico” (Yerkes “Seeing”). Following a social-spiritual practice, Cisneros turned to cultural expression to revive both the region’s spirit and her own. The city, however, was unmoved and claimed Cisneros’s color was “too modern” to be historically accurate (Lowry). The dispute turned into a citywide debacle regarding, ironically, which transnational histories and cultures—Mexican American or the neighborhood’s historicized German American—were appropriately modern to be deemed historical. When Cisneros painted her historic home an electric “Corsican” purple, she also pushed the limits of her access to the publicly sanctioned “transnational” neighborhood. With her decision to challenge the city, however, she revealed her unwillingness to comply with either a properly national or a properly transnational identity, as well as her commitment to using cultural expression to recuperate a distinctly domestic pleasure from a deeply colonial space. As she explains in an early news article about her house, “I hope my periwinkle house will encourage baja and Lavaca residents to be even more colorful” (Yerkes “King”).

For months, Cisneros’s house elicited debates across various news media, as well as critiques that were unsurprisingly racist and sexist, but also decidedly classist, reverberating the idea that community leaders or activists, especially women, should not enjoy any personal pleasures. Anonymous callers to the *San Antonio Express News* left messages calling Cisneros a “bitch,” and were quick to associate her outspoken and unremorseful persona with her less than feminine “bad attitude.” Other callers expressed their grievance along the lines of her failed national belonging, complaining: “If they want to live in Mexico, why in the hell don't they, ah, she, go back where she came from?” (Yerkes “Now”). But the most troubling responses attacked her race, gender, and class simultaneously. These critiques often incorporated excerpts from

Cisneros's fiction as a way to call her out for being disconnected to the "real" concerns of the poor community she originated from and that she writes about (Lowry; Rimer). This approach aims to punish Cisneros for being an inauthentic minority leader and for stepping out of the role of the long suffering Mexican woman, which we see via the awful grandmother in *Caramelo*.

Despite these attacks, Cisneros rallied against the Commission by leveraging counter-histories, and performative, and visual elements of resistance. Sometimes these tactics delivered forceful blows to city officials such as when Cisneros delivered an in-depth report on the history of her neighborhood in front of national and international news correspondents while decked in "a ruby red dress, lime green shall, and cowboy boots"; and other times they worked alongside the city's neoliberal initiatives for tourism, since tourists loved to see Cisneros's purple house and to sign petitions to "save" it. As we saw in *Caramelo*, Cisneros's social-spiritual practice is not about an authentic way to be a Chicano/a or Mexican. Instead, through her social-spiritual approach to culture, Cisneros puts forth an embodied critique in all its glorious imperfections—in this case, lots of purple outfits, purple ribbons, and theatricality—but that nonetheless lives and acts pleasurably in the decolonial space between personal and public, secular and spiritual, and national and transnational.

As I've shown, social-spirituality has a genealogy derived from women of color feminist spirituality, but places significant emphasis on an ongoing process of embodied, social, and spiritual (affective) interaction with writing and cultural expression. A social-spiritual narrative and practice does not erect mutually exclusive boundaries around the realms of artistic or cultural production, economics, spirituality or social interaction. We see this developing in Cisneros's career trajectory, particularly in her insistence on living in the borderlands and on calling out its complex racist and patriarchal ways (regardless of who may be implicated) and in creating

alternative spaces for writers of color to develop a writing practice that does not replicate the binaries of art and capital, symbolic and material or individual and collective. Moreover, through Cisneros's social-spiritual curating of Latin/a popular culture and melodrama in *Caramelo*, she makes it difficult to pin down a "real" experience of the Mexican diaspora and enacts a critique that performs the gendered casualties of romanticized nationalism and transnationalism without putting the narrator above or distanced from these paradigms.

CONCLUSION

Beginning with her very first mainstream published writing, *The House on Mango Street*, Cisneros has been committed to writing stories (and poems) that anyone can access and enjoy in their everyday lives (Cisneros "A House" xvii). As such, she has never shied away from incorporating popular narrative styles and literary genres into her work such as melodrama, fairytales, biblical stories, and picture books that engage with mainline literary culture as it has evolved beyond an entirely elitist, taste-based enterprise. Consequently, other aspiring Latina/o writers who have come after Cisneros such as Cristina Garcia, Matt de la Pena, Carla Trujillo, Michelle Serros and most notably Junot Díaz have referenced the importance of women of color feminists, including Sandra Cisneros, to the foundation of their work. As I will show in the my final chapter, Díaz's award winning novel, which also works in the interstitial realm of popular and "literary" fiction, effectively deploys the popular in service of the decolonial (Moya "Dismantling"). While these authors are not representative of all the writers who write "popular" literature in the 21st century that deals with Latina/o subjectivities, they do represent a segment that is distinctly influenced by the civil rights politics of the 60s and 70s even as they move beyond and tackle issues of an ever-growing Latino/a diaspora, unstable identities, and capital's continued encroachment into more and more areas of everyday life.

Importantly, the social-spiritual narrative and practice that I have elaborated in *Caramelo* and Cisneros's public persona foreclose certain types of determinative readings that neoliberal and liberal ideologies demand. There is not a definitive experience of Latindad that can be accessed in these literary and embodied texts. Nor is there an obvious appeal for empathy from the reader or observer as is typical in liberal interpretive structures. Moreover, through its "low-brow" form and Cisneros's commitment to popular and accessible literature, *Caramelo* dwells in the borderlands to experience its pleasures and pains and to show the material reality behind neoliberalism's artistic celebration of diversity; but *Caramelo* never dwells so much that it gives the sense of final conclusions about the characters or their culture. This is what reviewers find both unnerving (Burns) and part of the book's pleasure and ebullience (Sayers).

References to the "spirit" of a place or what it means to document and communicate with the unseen are typically deemed incomprehensible by the academy and by dominant western culture, especially when they do not align with moneymaking imperatives. In Joseph Murphy's study of the widespread growth across the U.S. of botanicas or Latina/o religious stores, he begins by noting the opacity and deep misunderstanding with which many non-Latina/o observers see these spaces. These enclaves, however, represent deep layers of different Pan-American spiritualities that take root, usually in the barrios, of major U.S. cities and attest to the presence and experience of their Latina/o and African American patrons. Moreover, the carefully curated collection of devotional items inside the stores—candles, oils, statues, books, potions—and the detail with which the shop owner prescribes these to patrons becomes the foundation for the store's longevity. Referring to this interpersonal and interspiritual practice, Murphy affirms and quotes a study from the 1960s that concludes: "...[this] program is bringing more hope, security, satisfaction, and happiness to the [barrio] than all the 'poverty programs' vainly

attempting to solve urban problems” (Winslow qtd in Murphy 20). While there is certainly room for multiple restorative programs and systemic changes to end the cycle of poverty in Latina/o communities, this quote points to a different value system at play via the local botanicas. In a sense, Cisneros is involved in a similar curating process except with overlooked Latina/o, Latin American, and Mexican stories and icons that represent different realms of Latina/o identity and that she carefully arranges in empowering ways, while still acknowledging their limitations.

CHAPTER 3

AZTLÁN UNDONE: KINSHIP, STORYTELLING, AND LATINO/A SPIRITUAL IMAGINARIES IN YOUNG ADULT AND SCIENCE FICTION NARRATIVES

“To think about the future is to open up a space of possibility and it’s something that has never happened in science fiction cinema in the Global South.” –Alex Rivera, Interview with M. Guillen, 2008

“This land was Mexican once, was Indian always and is. And will be again.”—Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera* Third Edition, 2007

This chapter looks at several popular young adult (YA) and science fiction (SF) texts’ critical engagement with a Latina/o spiritual imaginary at the turn of the 21st century. In the last 10 years, both of these genres have seen exponential growth in the literary market at large and both are significantly interested in future-making (at the individual and social levels) (Koss 2009). Latina/o participation within these genres, however, has only recently increased and is still fairly rare in the SF genre (Martín-Rodríguez *With a Book* xviii). Thus, I take a close look at two different SF dystopian texts that represent Latina/o subjectivity, the border, and the legacy of the Chicano/a movement in the U.S. southwest—Nancy Farmer’s award-winning young adult novel *The House of the Scorpion* (2002) and Alex Rivera’s equally acclaimed SF film, *Sleep Dealer* (2008). Both of these texts are invested in revising the idea of Chicano/a and Latino/a discursive space and kinship as well as Chicano/a and Latino/a futurity vis-à-vis the Chicano/a movement concept of Aztlán or the mythic Chicano homeland. In this sense, they fit easily within a Chicano/a and Latino/a literary canon that has often engaged with these themes. Even more, these texts privilege spirituality as an apparatus with which to undertake these revisions; and, unlike past narratives, spirituality does not unfold as a marker of an authentic and lost

Mexican identity that is incompatible with the present or with alternative future-making. To the contrary, social-spirituality—a practice that encompasses writing, reading, storytelling, interpreting, and queer relationality—emerges as central to imagining a different, less heteropatriarchal future for Latina/os as much in Farmer’s *The House of the Scorpion* as in its conspicuous foreclosure in Rivera’s *Sleep Dealer*.

At the same time, both narratives are told from the perspective of a heterosexual, masculine protagonist who requires the insight of a female figure to access a social-spiritual practice (genuinely in Farmer or superficially in Rivera), confirming a continued gendered and heteronormative representational bias in YA (and speculative fiction YA) writing (Koss, Bradford, et al.). Moreover, a different interpretive bias may extend into literary critical realms where *The House of the Scorpion*, with its white, female author and more obtuse politics, is never critically read in the context of Chicano/a or Latino/a cultural politics while *Sleep Dealer* remains widely discussed and celebrated in critical circles. Given this disparate literary history and the overall disregard of the Latino/a spiritual imaginary in both texts, I contend that recent criticism has too narrowly focused on more transparent representations of material effects of globalization and neoliberalism that they fail to consider how myth, spirituality, and social-spiritual practices can negotiate the former.

I conclude this chapter by reflecting on Arizona’s House Bill 2281 (HB2281) that effectively banned a number of fiction and non-fiction texts taught in the Tucson Unified School District’s (TUSD) (now defunct) Mexican American Studies program and that dealt with Chicana/o identity, history, oppression, and social justice topics. Despite scholars’ concerns that state power has largely incorporated symbolic decolonial archives into a regime of diversity and affirmation (Ferguson, Melamed, McGurl), the events surrounding HB2281 (and imitative

legislation in other states) reflects the ongoing conflict over culture that is especially relevant for Latino/as who are perpetually rendered as foreigners in the U.S. Reading print and online news coverage, as well as student reactions to the legislation, it is clear that the banned texts and their pedagogical and envisioning potential are an important component of a decolonial ethnic studies program that the state has come to recognize as powerful. In this way, I affirm that popular texts engaging a Latino/a spiritual imaginary—such as Matt de la Peña’s *Mexican Whiteboy* (2008), which is on the banned list—can be more than individualist discursive iterations and, through their social-spiritual networks (in and beyond the text), hold the potential to individually and collectively generate a sacred space or site/sight for readers of color. The concern and care for the TUSD Mexican American studies program by students and faculty resonate with Desirée Martín’s description of “secular sanctity” or the “popular devotional practices in the borderlands [that] fundamentally emphasize the personal, intimate relationship between [devotee and saint]” and the power of “creating one’s own narrative of faith” for marginalized people (2-3). The social-spiritual aspects of the texts under consideration index this power that goes beyond neoliberal interests in reader identification, empathy, cultural transaction or even a blueprint for social change. But, first, I’d like to turn to a key concept in this chapter, Aztlán—a mythic Chicano/a homeland—and its imbrication with family, gender, and Latino/a discursive space.

AZTLÁN AND CHICANO/A FUTURITY

In 1969 Chicano activist and leader Rodolfo “Corky” Gonzalez presented the manifesto, “El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán,” [The Spiritual Plan of Aztlán] to more than a thousand participants at the Chicano Youth Liberation Conference⁷¹ (Muñoz *Youth* 78). Scholars trace the

⁷¹ Participants at the Chicano Youth Liberation Conference were also crucial in drafting and agreeing upon the resolutions in “El Plan,” most notably poet Alurista and historian and poet, Juan Gomez Quinonez (Muñoz *Youth* 76-8, Rodríguez *Next* 20).

term Aztlán to Aztec mythology recorded in late 16th century Spanish writing and believe it refers to “the ancient home of the Aztec nation to the north of Tenochtitlán [Mexico City]” (Watts 305). Renowned Chicana, lesbian feminist Gloria Anzaldúa traces the term to accounts of 12th century Aztecs who resided in an Edenic Aztlán, today’s U.S. southwest, until migrating south again (at the behest of Huitzilopochtli, the God of War) to what would become Mexico City (26-27).⁷² In both accounts, the ancestors of contemporary Chicana/os considered Aztlán home for many years, providing a space of belonging and history for Mexican American and Chicana/os in the 1960s. Within this historical context, Gonzalez’s invocation of Aztlán as a figurative space (with a material and mythic history) allowed Chicano/a activists to both claim a unified history and to envision a (spatially) unified and utopian future. Moreover, while many various acts of resistance against Chicano/a racial oppression had already occurred by this time, “El Plan” was the first time this figurative space was invoked as a way to index these acts with the idea of Chicano nationalism (Bebout 76).

The myth of Aztlán provided Chicano/as with a new origin story that, like many SF narratives, could project into the past and future simultaneously, allowing Chicana/os to construct their own “future history” (i.e., their present). This aspect of Aztlán is especially significant because it allowed Chicano/as and Mexican Americans to connect to an indigenous, Aztec past that, as Lee Bebout explains, “honors what had long been dishonored” by making it the very “foundation of cultural consciousness” (3). Additionally, since the Chicana/o movement was characterized by heterogeneous and geographically diverse political activism, there were significant political consequences for such a unifying myth. As an origin story, however, Aztlán

⁷² Although, historically, Aztlán is known to be located simply “north of Mexico,” in the Chicano imaginary it is more broadly associated with the U.S. Southwest and the land Mexico lost to the U.S. with its 1848 signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo.

too easily came to reference an authentic, holistic existence and community (modeled by the heteronormative family, as I discuss later) that could be recuperated for a more “utopic” future. This “wholeness” is often indexed in Chicano/a movement discourse and documents through references to the “spiritual.”

To return to “El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán,” the title is indicative of this cosmological and unifying narrative force. “El Plan” is made up of five sections: preamble, program, nationalism, organizational goals, and action. As a whole, the document lays out the terms of Chicana/o nationalism as the means to liberation. Specifically, the document addresses those united by “blood” (i.e., race, genetics) and struggle against the “foreigner ‘Gabacho’” [white man], and hails them as part of a “Bronze people,” “a Bronze culture,” and even a “Bronze continent” (“El Plan” 403). Unity, the first bullet point under “organizational goals,” is heavily emphasized as a precondition for national autonomy and liberation in “El Plan.” Moreover, this unity is forged not just through the experience of material oppression, but through a psychological and spiritual oppression also inflicted by imperialism and white supremacy. Particularly, “El Plan” asserts that the restitution it demands is not solely for “past economic slavery [and] political exploitation,” but also for “ethnic and cultural psychological destruction” (“El Plan” 405). Among this “destruction” one must consider Chicana/os’ loss of a spiritual vision, first in the loss of indigenous spiritual practices and worldviews and then in the loss of self-determination and identity. In this way, “El Plan” reasserts a spiritual vision for Chicana/os by casting the “values of our people”—“life, family, and home”—as distinctive from “the gringo dollar value system” (“El Plan” 405).

As Richard T. Rodríguez explains, since sociologists and historians regularly deemed the Chicana/o family dysfunctional or inferior, it was both common and recuperative for movement

leaders to claim the heteronormative Chicano/a family as a microcosm of the revolutionary Chicana/o public sphere. Thus, although the movement was made up of many different components, “the deployment of the family principle nonetheless figured prominently in various organizational practices and discursive strategies...” (Rodríguez *Next* 23-24, 21). The downside of such “familial” political arrangements, as many scholars have argued, is its exclusionary approach to who counts as family, as well as the “natural” family hierarchy that re-emerged along the lines of gender in the movement construction of “La Familia de La Raza” (Rodriguez *Next*, Blackwell, Torres *Chicana*). In fact, while “El Plan” notably inverts colonial language conventions, deeming Chicana/os the “inhabitants and civilizers of the northern land of Aztlán” and Europeans as the “foreigner ‘gabacho,’ it also maintains and perpetuates patriarchal and other oppressive discourses. Specifically, the document asserts a paternal (e.g. our forefathers, brotherhood) and biological claim to land and power that easily subjugates women, non-traditional family structures, and native american groups.

In 1991, Donna Haraway’s touchstone essay, “A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century,” put forth a theory for non-familial, non-reproductive connections vis-à-vis the figure of the cyborg, “...a hybrid of machine and organism,” that avoids the western (and Christian) compulsion for “original unity” and enables an argument for partial connections and partial explanations (149, 151). Haraway cautions against even alternative myth-making (such as Aztlán) that belies a desire for original unity. Instead, she argues for “pleasure in the confusion of boundaries [between machine and organism] and for responsibility in their [discursive and material] construction” (150). Haraway is self-conscious, though, about eradicating the concept of unity (and of hope or belief) all together. Rather than thinking in dualisms of organic (i.e., natural unity) v. technology, which she claims

Marxists, feminists, and women of color feminists still tend to do (160, 174), she asks readers to be accountable for the ways communication technology and biotechnology shape and are shaped by myth.⁷³ In other words, she call for a socialist feminism that does not accept the assumption of a natural or organic wholeness that must be re-constituted and prefers to delight and think critically (or queerly) about strange and “un-natural” possible combinations. The alternative of an organic, unified “nature” for Haraway, however, is not necessarily “cynicism or faithlessness that is some version of abstract existence” (152-53).⁷⁴

In a similar way, my readings in this chapter think about the way myth and spirituality shape the communication technology of the SF texts under consideration, and what mythic structures have been used to avoid or to re-inscribe the binary of natural unity (e.g. humans, heterosexuality, etc.) vs. technology. As I’ve described, “El Plan” employs a rhetoric of “restitution” that is grounded not only in in material wrongs, but also in Chicana/o moral and cultural values that resist a racially mediated materialism. Thus, while “El Plan” puts forth patriarchal and authoritarian language, its assertion of Chicano/as as spiritual beings with varied values and worldviews is among “El Plan”’s most enduring effects. In a sense, this gesture toward thinking about Chicano/as as spiritual beings is also a gesture to toward thinking about them as cyborgs. In this view, Chicano/a subjects are no longer just flesh and bone (or laboring bodies), but assemblages that have the capacity to generate connections and formations beyond

⁷³ For a critique of Donna Haraway’s “A Cyborg Manifesto” see Chela Sandoval’s “New Sciences: Cyborg Feminism and the Methodology of the Oppressed” (1995).

⁷⁴ Within the context of this project, it is relevant to note that neoliberalism has largely produced a culture of rationality and calculation. A culture of neoliberal rationality has emerged where, in Wendy Brown’s words, “there is no morality, no faith, no heroism, indeed, no meaning outside the market” (Brown “Neoliberalism” 45). As a result, contemporary narrative representations that depict the (irrational) unseen or immaterial are more likely to be glossed over as superficial by critics (see also Chapter 4).

the material world.⁷⁵ Perhaps this explains why the spiritual aspect of Aztlán has especially been taken up by women of color feminists such as Gloria Anzaldúa (see “The Homeland, Aztlán / El Otro Mexico”) and Cherrie Moraga (see *Loving in the War Years* [1983] and “Queer Aztlán: The Re-Formation of Chicano Tribe”) who complicate an indigenous based Aztlán and Chicana/o spiritual identity with more expansive attention to gender, sexuality, and kinship (Watts). Indeed, a discourse of the family that has departed from its most conservative iterations remains politically relevant in contemporary Chicana/o and Latina/o theory and fiction.⁷⁶ As Haraway explains, “sex, sexuality, and reproduction are central actors in high tech myth systems that structure our imaginations of personal and social possibility” (169). Since family is intertwined with sex, sexuality, and reproduction, it remains an important political realm for Chicana/o and Latina/o literature and film. It is no surprise, then, that the texts I look at in this chapter equally bring together the hauntings of Aztlán through their union of family, myth, spirituality, and communication technology (writing and storytelling).

FUTURE FICTIONS: MYTH AND THE LATINO/A SPIRITUAL IMAGINARY IN THE HOUSE OF THE SCORPION AND SLEEP DEALER

Given the connection of Aztlán to Chicano/a myth, identity, and alternative worldviews, my analysis of its explicit and implicit appearance in contemporary Latina/o science and young adult fiction may seem pedestrian. With regard to these texts and to recent Latina/o narrative culture, however, Aztlán as a mythic structure has been relatively overlooked.⁷⁷ In fact, even

⁷⁵ For more on this line of thinking, see Catherine Ramirez’s “Cyborg Feminism: The Science Fiction of Octavia E. Butler and Gloria Anzaldúa.”

⁷⁶ In addition to women of color feminist theoretical work, see also contemporary literature such as Sandra Cisneros’s *Caramelo* (2002), Felicia Luna Lemus’ *Trace Elements of Random Tea Parties* (2003), and Myriam Gurba’s *Painting their Portraits in Winter* (2015).

⁷⁷ Beyond the women of color feminist work mentioned earlier and Lee Bebout’s *Mythohistorical Interventions* (2011), see also Randy Ontiveros’s chapter, “Green Aztlán: Environmentalism and the Chicano/a Visual Arts,” and Maria Josefina Saldaña Portillo’s

though Farmer's critically acclaimed YA dystopian novel, *The House of the Scorpion*, takes place on the (former) U.S.-Mexico border and explicitly invokes Aztlán to identify the nation-space formerly called Mexico, the scholarship, reviews, and author interviews do not explore this intertextuality with Chicano/a cultural politics and instead focus on the novel's treatment of biotechnology.⁷⁸ This rather obvious critical gap suggests just how far removed the discourses of YA, SF and Chicano/a and Latino/a cultural politics often are.

In part, this critical disjuncture is likely because speculative and science fiction genres have largely been constructed and perceived as white, male literary genres by the mainstream publishing industry (Ramírez "Afrofuturism/Chicanofuturism," Maguire).⁷⁹ This publishing bias hinges on the faulty assumption that SF readers read for the pleasure of identification when, in fact, most SF theory asserts the opposite (i.e., cognitive estrangement). Accordingly, publishers presume there is no audience for SF writers of color and, therefore, no interest in the particular racial histories, vernaculars, or social practices that SF writers of color might depict.⁸⁰

epilogue, "Toward an American 'American Studies': Post Revolutionary Reflections on Malcom X and the New Aztlán."

⁷⁸ Most reviewers and literary critics focus on the ethical challenges of the bio-technological processes the novel represents or the novel's generic interest in social change. See for example Naarah Sawers' "Capitalism's New Handmaiden: the Biotechnical World Negotiated Through Children's Fiction," Abbie Ventura's "Predicting a Better Situation: Three Young Adult Speculative Fiction Texts and the Possibilities for Social Change," Elaine Ostry's "Is He Still Human? Are You?: Young Adult Science Fiction in the Posthuman Age," Stephanie Guerra's "Colonizing Bodies: Corporate Power and Biotechnology in Young Adult Science Fiction," Hillary Crew's "A Not So Brave World: The Representation of Human Cloning in Science Fiction for Young Adults," and Kathleen Harris's 2004 review in the *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*.

⁷⁹ There is a slim publishing record of science fiction writing by Chicano/as and Latina/os that includes Isabella Rios's 1976 *Victuum* and more recent publications by Rudy Ch. Garcia, Ernest Hogan, and Rosauero Sanchez and Beatrice Pita. One might also consider Luis Valdez's play, *Los Vendidos*, as interfacing with science fiction concepts for its Chicano/a movement critique.

⁸⁰ This publishing bias has been attested to through various articles on Latina/o literary blog, *La Bloga* (Hogan "Chicanonautica," Nava), as well as a conference at University of California, Riverside, on April 30, 2014 that addressed the topic of Latino/as and science fiction entitled "Latino Science Fiction Explored."

Conversely, based on the reception of *The House of the Scorpion*, white SF authors are so unexpected to take up racial politics that even when they do, it is largely unacknowledged. These generic boundaries also maintain a divide that places people of color outside of modern, scientific discourse and limited to the realm of folklore, superstition, spirituality, and magic.⁸¹ By contrast, Darko Suvin defines science fiction as “the literature of cognitive estrangement,” whereby ordinary realities are defamiliarized, but presented with such scientific detail as to adhere to some sort of familiar (i.e., rational) system or, as Isiah Lavender suggests, the “natural rules of the universe” (Suvin 5-6, Lavender 29). These “natural rules,” however, have often aligned with scientific methods of apprehension or western ways of knowing and it has been the work of postcolonial science fiction to use these conventions for critical [denaturalizing] ends. (Langer 8-9).

Importantly, the role of myth in understanding and applying technology is implicit (although not discussed) in the Suvinian definition of science fiction. Specifically, for Suvin, it is the SF text’s development of a “fictional (‘literary’) hypothesis” with a “totalizing (‘scientific’) rigor” that enables a critical cognition or the “use of imagination as a means to understand our reality” (6, 8). In other words, the myths undergirding the scientific process (e.g. progress, modernity, objectivity) are implicitly deemed necessary and unquestioned. In fact, Suvin posits SF as distinctive from myth in its creative horizons, explaining: “Where the myth claims to explain once and for all the essence of phenomena, SF first posits them as problems and then explores where they lead” (7). Following Haraway, however, I do not simply want to reject the

⁸¹ Critical readings of U.S. Latina/o literature often highlight the use of magical realism even when such readings require a stretch in our understanding of the concept. Unlike science fiction, magical realism presents a defamiliar environment that does not adhere to the “natural rules of the universe.” For a criticism of this response to Latina/o writing, see Marta Caminero-Santangelo’s essay “‘The Pleas of the Desperate’: Collective Agency versus Magical Realism in Ana Castillo’s *So Far From God*.”

idea of myth, but to think about the way it can also shape communication technology (writing, reading, interpreting, storytelling), our perception of these, and their ability to re-shape myth in other realms (including biotechnology). We will, therefore, need some language to distinguish between established, hegemonic myth and dynamic, re-visionary myth that social-spirituality engages. For SF and social-spirituality overlap in their interest in “a hope of finding in the unknown the ideal environment, tribe, state, intelligence or other aspect of Supreme Good (or to a fear of and revulsion from its contrary),” but the latter is not limited by the parameters of scientific rigor (Suvin 5, Csicsery-Ronay 49-50). In the following sections, I will refer to the former, hegemonic myth with a simple unqualified noun (i.e., myth), while a more dynamic, fluid, envisioning myth will be referred to as “sacred myth.” It is also important to recognize that a social-spiritual practice and approach to communication technology is conducive to the development and evolution of the latter, “sacred myth.” I will describe and explain my use of the term “sacred” further in the following sections.

Re-visiting Aztlán in The House of the Scorpion

The significance of Aztlán (and its intertext) in Farmer’s *The House of the Scorpion* is explicit and hard to overlook since it structures the novel’s unfolding action. In the novel, the southwest U.S.-Mexico border region has been drastically revised to include the nations of Aztlán, Opium, and the U.S. The action takes place in the not-too-distant future and primarily in the border space between the U.S. and Mexico—what was formerly known to Chicanos/as as Aztlán, but which is now a privately owned drug-producing nation called “Opium.” To the south of Opium, in what was formerly Mexico, is now the nation of Aztlán, and to the north is still the U.S., although its “exceptional” status remains only an illusion in the minds of the most vulnerable citizens of Aztlán.

This scrambling of national space and its attendant nationalisms is not a mere backdrop to the novel's plot, but serves as a key precondition for the "novum" or the "cognitive innovation [that] is a totalizing phenomenon or relationship [that deviates] from the author's and implied reader's norm of reality" (Suvin 64). Following Suvinian theory, the defamiliarization we experience reading science fiction is the result of the development of a New Thing or novum that drastically alters the organization of society and the way it is perceived (63). In *The House of the Scorpion*, the revised national arrangement is the result of Opium's drug lord, El Patron's, proposition to the U.S. and Mexico 100 years ago that would "solve" both their drug and "illegal" immigration problems. Urging the U.S. and Mexico to "set aside land along their common border" for the growing of drugs, El Patron promises to "stop the flow of Illegals" and to not sell drugs to the U.S. or Mexico, only "peddl[ing] their wares in Europe, Asia, and Africa" (169).⁸² El Patron's plan is then made possible by the development of new technology that allows him to stunt the brains of captured "Illegals" so they can only perform a single task, as well as the technology to produce clones of himself that will ensure the Empire's survival. This biotechnology is *the* central "defamiliar" element in *The House of the Scorpion*. Nonetheless, the action of the story is primarily concerned with the conditions of possibility—including drastic privatization, deregulation, and the role of myths in creating dangerous technologies—that led to the development of the novum, as well as the effects of this technology for individual and collective identity, kinship, and the idea of being "human."

⁸²There are clearly echoes between this "ideal" political agreement and other historical political arrangements between the U.S. and Mexico that sought, for example, the disbursement of Mexican land to the U.S. in exchange for Mexico's debt forgiveness (see the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo) or the unofficial ceding of the border territory for corporate exploitation and "free trade" in the hopes of Mexican economic prosperity (see the North American Free Trade Agreement [NAFTA]). As in Rivera's film, Farmer depicts and subtly critiques the way science and technology are seen as defacto modes of political and social progress.

Importantly, the preconditions for the new biotechnology correlate with a neoliberal political and social ideology. With the creation of Opium, El Patron is able to secure not only his drug empire, but also a political state of exception. Under El Patron's governing system, the drug industry is legalized and no regulations govern the state's research and technology or its attendant environmental degradation. Moreover, El Patron's agreement to not sell drugs in the U.S. or in Aztlán provides a superficial veneer of progress while displacing the problems of the drug trade onto other more distant locales, a common effect of neoliberalism's highly uneven distribution of economic development (Dowdy 4-5). Thus, the novel's dystopic representation of transnational development is a facile one that is not interested in alliances or cooperation with other nations, but only in capitalist enterprise.

Correspondingly, Opium is not a vibrant multicultural city, but a simulacrum of one. In an attempt to preserve the quaint charm of his childhood, El Patron has fashioned Opium in a manner that replicates his Mexican hometown, replete with no air conditioning or advanced farming equipment to tend to his crops. Except even this aesthetic retrofitting is not applied equally in Opium. El Patron's household has the luxury of air conditioning and high technology security and surveillance. As we will see, this grossly uneven access to technology is supported by and reinforces myths of individual exceptionalism that value certain subjects more highly than others. As Michael Dowdy explains, "Neoliberalism's emphasis on radical individualism in the form of *homo econimus* (economic man) augments this unevenness and uncertainty by placing the onus of navigating structural constraints totally on the individual, regardless of her access to resources" (5). Given the dire social and political conditions in Opium, it is perhaps telling that Farmer chose to index the nation formerly known as Mexico with the name Aztlán. Although far from a utopic space, the nation of Aztlán (in the novel) still maintains a utopic

potential through its inhabitants' public practice of sacred myth and their ongoing desire for something more than the status quo. As we will see, Aztlán and Matt's social-spiritual development gesture to the possibility of other realities.

Looking back on the notion of Aztlán for the Chicano/a movement, many scholars agree that it is not the physical, geographic national space that was most important, but the imaginative and overdetermined space it indexed that reflected the varying concerns of an underserved Chicano/a population (Perez-Torres, Alarcón "The Aztec," Padilla). In a similar way, this is how Aztlán creatively and thematically develops in *The House of the Scorpion*. For Farmer, who was raised in Yuma, Arizona, the U.S.-Mexico border region is her own childhood home. While not Chicana, Farmer recounts being influenced by the many stories and people who populate this distinctive region (Brown "Nancy"). Even more, in an interview with *Publisher's Weekly*, Farmer recalls how current problems facing the U.S.-Mexico border were also part of her childhood memories that haunted her as a writer. As the interviewer explains, "Even when she was a girl, she says, the area was a treacherous place for Mexicans to cross into the U.S.: 'The Ajo Mountains are covered with cactus. A lot of illegal [sic] immigrants come through because it's so easy to cross the border. On the other hand, it's so dry and dangerous that people die there all the time, of thirst'" (Farmer qtd in Brown "Nancy" 155). In another interview for *School Library Journal*, when Farmer is asked about the inspiration for *Opium*, she brings up ongoing problems at the border such as immigration and drug trafficking and explains "This is a old problem and I felt impelled to write about it" (Horning 50). Despite the emphasis by scholars, reviewers, and interviewers on the novel's critical portrayal of biotechnology, in most of Farmer's interviews regarding *The House of the Scorpion* or its sequel *The Lord of Opium* (2013), she brings up the centrality of the U.S.-Mexico border for these novels, as well as the

personal resonance of its stories (Brown “Nancy,” Horning, Blasingame, Levy). While I do not want to suggest that Farmer is an unproblematic ally or latter day proponent of Chicano/a movement ideology, I do believe that her familiarity with the border region combined with her often discussed extensive writing research, makes her a writer who is critically aware of and dialogues with the idea of the border and Chicano/a cultural politics in her novels.⁸³ Importantly, though, she does not engage Chicano/a cultural politics through a dystopia/utopia binary—as, perhaps, “El Plan” originally invoked with the nation of Aztlán—or, as some critics assert, through a binary of humanism/posthumanism (Sawers, Kerr). Instead, *The House of the Scorpion* provides us an opportunity to consider how a contemporary writer, even one outside the Chicano/a literary tradition, might contribute complex meaning to the ongoing palimpsest of Aztlán vis-à-vis a Latino/a sacred imaginary.

Thus, while many scholars focus on the role of biotechnology and cloning in *The House of the Scorpion*, focusing instead on the U.S.-Mexico border’s social and political preconditions for the novel’s “novum” (including the formation of the nation of Aztlán and its apt intertext), does not deflect from critical conversations about neoliberalism or liberal humanism—two topics at the forefront of scholarly analyses (Sawers, Ventura, Ostry, Guerra, Crew).⁸⁴ In fact, a focus

⁸³ In an interview with Kathleen Horning, Farmer acknowledges reading a book by popular Latino writer Luis Urrea about the environmental degradation on the Mexican side of the U.S.-Mexico border and the way it impacts the lives of the most impoverished Mexican citizens (50, 2003). One can only assume that this was one among many texts she read while researching the border. *The House of the Scorpion* also betrays an interest in the complicated idea of nationalism through its portrayal of Tam Lin—one of Matt’s most trusted adult friends and El Patron’s bodyguard—as a former Scottish nationalist who was picked up by El Patron in lieu of imprisonment for his radical national activities.

⁸⁴ At the turn of the 21st century when Farmer is writing and publishing *The House of the Scorpion* (2002), the U.S.-Mexico border and immigration policy reform are key topics in mainstream political discourse. By 1999, only a handful of years after NAFTA was signed into law, then-presidential hopeful George W. Bush defined immigration reform as one of his highest national priorities (Gutierrez 2). The rhetoric around this hot-button issue remained paternalistic

on the border history and its sacred imaginary via the intertext of Aztlán brings into sharper focus the novel's critique of both neoliberalism and liberal humanism.⁸⁵ Specifically, if neoliberalism and liberal humanism are the pre-conditions for the dystopia or the novel's "novum," one has to consider that the novel is, indeed, critical of these policies. As Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, Jr. explains "a novum is a negative apocalypse ... separate[ing] the significant time of the human species into a past and a future...the novum reveals history's contingency: that, at any point history can change direction and, consequently, its meaning..." (55-7). In order to fully register the two-way interaction between past and future, the intervention of the novum is usually set in the future, as it is in *The House of the Scorpion*. In this way the past or "pre-history" of the SF text is still part of the reader's future, creating a fertile vantage point for a critical reading of what has yet to happen and its relationship to the reader's current historical conditions. This relationship is especially acute in what Sheryl Hamilton and Neil Gerlach call "social science fiction," wherein the novum is often the result of a human invention and is therefore deeply implicated in its conditions of possibility. Consequently, I suggest that the novel's acute and critical description of neoliberalism and the mythic discourse of cloning (i.e., liberal humanism) vis-à-vis border politics and the Chicano/a spiritual referent of Aztlán sets the reader up to question the limitations of these ideologies. This critique is especially poignant since the protagonist, Matt, turns out to be the 9th clone of El Patron raised specifically to provide

and intervention-oriented. Thus, both Farmer and Rivera's imaginative attention to this region and its socio-political concerns from a perspective that de-centers the narrative role of the U.S. state is important.

⁸⁵ As Sawers explains, "Liberal humanism credits the individual human body with dignity and the right to freedom. Embedded in this doctrine is the right not to be used as a 'thing,' not to be alienated from the self's body, which would restrict freedom" (171). The development of capitalism alongside liberal humanism has also sutured the notion of property rights into understandings of liberal humanism, further complicating the ethics of a biotechnology (neoliberal) "market" (Sawers 171-72).

organs to the 140+ year-old drug lord. As a clone, Matt is forced to confront and deconstruct the material, technological, and discursive structures that uphold his exclusion from the male dominated and failed utopia that is Opium. It is precisely through Matt's paradoxical coming of age story—he must learn about his (non) identity as a clone and the conditions leading to this development—and his recourse to relational and spiritual communication technology that we can most vividly see the gendered work of a social-spiritual practice for re-valuing the myths of technology, both biotech and communication. Matt is in a position to read the relationship among myth, subjectivity, power, and spirituality and to revalue the importance of a Latino/a spiritual imaginary (e.g., Aztlán, Mexican folk spirituality) through a social-spiritual approach to interpreting, storytelling, and re-imagining the future. Moreover, rather than uphold rigid ideals about liberal individualism or other myths as Kerr and Sawers suggest, *The House of the Scorpion* shows how flexible spirituality can work at the boundaries of such concepts while simultaneously putting forth a revised masculinity that is self-aware of its inscription in patriarchal dominance, is teachable, and co-operative. Although the novel depicts a male protagonist who requires the help of women to access the social-spiritual, unlike in *Sleep Dealer*, this staid representational strategy enables a reflective critique of its very structure.

Myths, Sacred Myths & Matt's Social-Spirituality

As in *Sleep Dealer*, the shaping of Aztlán as an imaginative and social-spiritual archive for the 21st century occurs primarily through a narrative focalization on myth and spirituality. Beyond the Chicano/a myth of Aztlán, *The House of the Scorpion* deploys and trades in a variety of myths familiar to the U.S. and Mexico including folk tales of the chupacabra and la llorona; the popular national parable of “rags to riches”; and origin stories such as the Biblical story of Genesis (Kerr). All of these myths, to varying degrees, facilitate and maintain the novel's

(deeply gendered) dystopian qualities. Moreover, when faced with critical decisions and thinking, Matt turns to myths and stories as well—indigenous inflected and folk Catholic—that vibrantly animate the lives and actions of those with the least power. In this way, Matt is cautious of textual and traditional accounts of history and puts more stock in lived stories that are collaboratively (and corroboratively) told. This, of course, is significant for social-spiritual storytelling, interpreting, and writing. Since *The House of the Scorpion* is a coming of age story focalized through Matt's development, my textual analysis focuses primarily on his response to the myths and sacred myths that he encounters and his developing social-spiritual practice. As we will see, a numbing capitalist individualism (tinged with elements of ethnic nationalism) reigns supreme in Opium and leaves minimal room for any alternative worldviews or spiritualities.

The most prominent and potent myth driving the action in *The House of the Scorpion* (and organizing life in Opium) is El Patron's "rags to riches" story. Many times throughout the novel we hear El Patron recite his story of being a deeply impoverished, orphan boy in Mexico (now Aztlán) and the sole survivor among his siblings "with a burning desire to survive" (58). At first (and before Matt understands he is El Patron's clone) Matt is enticed by El Patron's story and is "instinctively" attracted to the old man's appearance and mannerisms. In other words, Matt is attracted to his genetic "sameness" or kinship that he feels with El Patron. This instinctive solidarity that Matt first feels for El Patron echoes an emphasis on biological kinship as a key structure of Chicano/a political organizing and cultural nationalism. In a sense, Opium—forever preserved in a fashion that mimics El Patron's quaint Mexican hometown 100+ years earlier—can be understood as the extreme limits or perversion of ethnic nationalism and the manifestation of a (male-dominated) mythic homeland. In Richard T. Rodríguez's analysis of

the movement poem “I am Joaquin” by Rudolfo “Corky” Gonzalez, he reminds us of this tendency in the poem’s rhetoric that requires the male father figure to not only generate a text that would speak to “the people,” but “to *become* the people” (*Next* 33). Pushing this transfiguration even further, in *Opium* one individual man not only becomes the people, but some of the people (i.e., the clones) become him. *Opium* is, in effect, a dangerous combination of unchecked ethnic nationalism and capitalist individualism, and Matt quickly loses interest in El Patron’s “rags to riches” story. In fact, its frequent re-telling only serves as a reminder of El Patron’s unnaturally long life and Matt’s unnaturally short one. Further, it is not just Matt that responds negatively to the old man’s story. El Patron has been repeating the same story for many years, so even the elites of *Opium* listen on “look[ing] bored” (101). The “rags to riches” myth belongs solely to El Patron and enlivens no one but himself.

To the contrary, following Desirée Martín’s work on secular sanctity and *santones* [secular saints] in the borderlands, in order for a story, practice or individual to be deemed sacred, it needs to be in relationship with a public. As Martin explains, “Both saints and celebrities require the adulation of the public for their very existence” (20). This dependence on the public makes the production of sanctity (in western tradition at least) democratic and inclusive and “confers both intimacy and agency to the masses” (Martín 20). Therefore, the human relationship to the sacred can offer an important tool for thinking beyond the (sometimes nationalist) heightened individualism of liberal and neoliberal subjectivity that we find in *Opium* and in some institutionalized religious perspectives of the sacred.⁸⁶ Through Matt’s (and others character’s) response to El Patron’s “rags to riches” narrative, it is clear that the frequently regurgitated myth of highly individualistic success provides very narrow parameters for

⁸⁶ See my discussion in the introduction chapter of the different relationships to the sacred in the Americas.

participation or interest. Although El Patron seeks to delude himself and others into believing that his prosperity is according to a “natural order” or a mythic originary whole, indeed, it is entirely contrived and manipulated. In fact, there is very little in *Opium* that elicits any kind of public, collective experience of the sacred. In fact, events that typically connote the sacred such as births, deaths, marriage, etc. have been dramatically altered in *The House of the Scorpion*. At the same time, the existence of both traditional and less traditional understandings of the sacred are hinted at throughout the novel. Particularly, this energy seems to coalesce around the female presences of Matt’s caregiver, Celia, and his young friend, Maria. Matt finds comfort in Celia’s familiar Virgin Mary nightlight, chipped and variously adorned by its devotee; he gazes longingly at a church hidden in the poppy fields that only Celia and the other servants are able to attend; Maria regales him with tales of St. Francis that push the (liberal) philosophical boundaries of what constitutes a human; and he is deeply impacted by a *dia de los muertos* celebration in Aztlán. Finally and, most tellingly, Matt’s life is ultimately saved by Celia’s *curandera* or faith healer knowledge and practice.

As this overview indicates, folk Catholic spiritual practices such as Marian devotion, *dia de los muertos* celebrations, and *curanderismo* take center stage in Matt’s coming of age. These rituals are based on sacred myths, which, at least in lived practice if not official doctrine, are always in flux and engaged with a public. Sacred myth facilitates living with the desire for utopia, but not believing in it as the sole endpoint or as something one *must* strive for in order to obtain a certain status. Instead, like the practice of social-spirituality, sacred myth allows living with the contradiction of horror and hope, loneliness and collectivity. In *The House of the Scorpion* sacred myths are redemptive and confront individualism and patriarchy. To the contrary, High Catholic myths already have utopia and its participants hierarchically defined

(those with souls, those who are forgiven, etc.). Hence, Matt's interaction with the priest in Opium that treats clones as inferior to humans is drastically different from the *dia de los muertos* ritual he accidentally observes in Aztlán. Further, in Opium, the invocation of sacred myths takes place privately or underground, while in Aztlán, these practices are still public and participatory. This is also a major way that the novel depicts the physical and mythical space of Aztlán as still holding utopian potential.

Most important, though, is Matt's recourse to a social-spiritual interpretive practice in order to negotiate between the binaries of human and non-human (liberal humanism) and between individual desires and collective imagination. If the "rags to riches" myth and liberal humanism uphold El Patron's "natural" ascendancy to power and control over technology, it also upholds Matt's "natural" inferiority to "humans." Throughout the novel Matt vacillates between denying his status as a clone by distinguishing himself from the "eejits" (i.e., robotic laborers) and accepting his own inferior status. For this reason, critics such as Naarah Sawers and Ryan Kerr critique the novel for simply expanding a rhetoric of liberal humanism and individual rights. As Sawers explains, *The House of the Scorpion* "reinforces the kind of subjectivity and agency that enables harvesting of others' organs as an assumed moral right—regardless of its more overt intention to critique this practice;" (171). This argument is especially supported by the way those who care for Matt explain his value and status as a clone to him such as El Patron's bodyguard, Tam Lin, and Matt's young companion, Maria. What this reading fails to understand, however, is that the ideal liberal subject is already precarious because of the history and character of the U.S.-Mexico border, the status of women in Opium, and even El Patron's own personal background. Turning to these material realities helps Matt to incorporate others'

stories of oppression and marginalization along with his own experiences and, eventually, his spiritual experience in Aztlán, when interpreting his role (or lived story) in *Opium*.

By making a socio-politically and culturally recognizable U.S.-Mexico border as the setting of her SF novel, and a formerly impoverished Mexican male (cyborg) as its dystopic anti-hero, Farmer is working with imaginative material already at odds with liberal subjectivity. As El Patron recalls, he and his family were so poor and the ruling elite were so rich that the latter would host a parade and party to be attended by the poorest children, only to watch them scramble at the feast and ogle the luxurious estate (101). Denied the status of self-evident “human dignity” as a child, as an adult El Patron embodies the tendency to rather perfunctorily access this subjectivity rather than to critically dismantle it. (Ironically, El Patron accesses this subjectivity by becoming a cyborg himself.) This makes El Patron a quintessential neoliberal racialized token subject or global citizen (Melamed). More importantly, since El Patron—the novel’s anti-hero—already represents the possibility of a more expansive liberal subjectivity, it is unlikely that the novel would represent this ideological expansion as an adequate solution. Additionally, even some of the privileged elite in *Opium* such as Felicia—the wife of El Patron’s great grandson—find the liberal subjectivity characterized by “self-possession and sovereignty that underpin the right not to be used as a thing...” elusive (Sawers 174). As Celia explains to Matt, when Felicia tried to run off, “El Patron had her brought back—he doesn’t like people taking his possessions...Mr. Alacran doesn’t talk to her anymore. He won’t even look at her. She’s a prisoner in this house...” (124). Hence, attention to the U.S.-Mexico historical context and the gendered, classed, and racialized border subjects who cannot fully access liberal humanism should draw readers’ attention to the novel’s critique of this ideology.

As a guide for the (YA) reader then, Matt grapples with the limits of the liberal,

individual, rights-bearing subject as an adequate solution to Opium's dystopia. Rather than simply accepting Tam Lin or Maria's comforting pronouncement that he is distinctive from the other clones, Matt employs a social-spiritual interpretive practice by examining his own experiences and his interactions with those deemed different from him. When Matt comes face-to-face with other cyborgs (eejits or clones), he initially feels disconnected or repulsed by them, but eventually analyzes his own feelings of superiority more closely. After coming face-to-face with another clone that had been rendered brain dead—only El Patron's clones are left "intact"—Matt repeatedly returns to the image of the "creature" to deliberate over their similar subjectivities. Identifying his intelligence as a distinguishing feature, Matt tells himself this story repeatedly: "*I'm different. I wasn't created to provide spare parts. ...The old man took great pride in the boy's accomplishments. That was not the behavior of someone who planned to murder you later*" (191-192). But slowly Matt realizes the lie of his myth of exceptionality and identifies vanity as the primary reason El Patron left Matt's brain unaltered. "He felt like he'd been yanked from a high cliff. There was still the terrible fate of the other clones to consider. *My brothers*, thought Matt" (192). Moreover, on several instances, Matt's posturing of superiority brings out tyrannical qualities in himself and, just like the other men in control of Opium, his exercise of power oppresses women in Opium the most forcefully (104-108). This is not the end of Matt's intellectual grappling with the myth of individual, rights-bearing humanity. Matt goes back and forth between understanding the clones and eejits simultaneously as different and as kin, to rejecting them as being beyond relation. As Farmer explains in an interview, "I don't answer questions. I throw them out for readers to consider" (Levy 2013). Farmer's authorial position places her in opposition to both liberal multicultural or neoliberal multicultural literary production that, as Melamed explains, tends to spoon-feed a "right" or "wrong" way to manage

or relate to racialized or othered subjects. As we have seen, however, this less didactic aspect of *The House of the Scorpion* is not very legible if we do not first take seriously the terms of the novel's imaginative world including the U.S. Mexico border and the Latino/a sacred imaginary that foreground not just a generic concern for bioethics, but for a racialized, historicized, and gendered otherness. The political and social conditions of the U.S.-Mexico border that lead up to the novum in *The House of the Scorpion* are not just decorative, multicultural backdrop, but the very material and intellectual reasons for the dystopic rendering that Matt is compelled to analyze.

The engagement of sacred myth and a social-spiritual storytelling and interpretive practice critically factor material, social, bodily, and spiritual conditions into myth-making. As I have detailed, for Matt this looks like critical self-reflection on established myths, particularly in the context of historical and material circumstances, as well as through relationships with those who are different from himself. It is this (queer) relationality of social-spirituality—its ability to generate lived practices that extend kinship networks and re-consider the concept of “natural unity”—that helps Matt resist liberal humanism and neoliberalism, as well as to revalue the Latino/a spiritual imaginary and, especially, Aztlán. If Matt's unnatural relationships with social and material history, cyborgs, and his own interiority prompt a critical attitude, his engagement with the spiritual world in Aztlán helps solidify his commitment to unnatural connections and to the unseen possibilities they may instigate (i.e., the future of Aztlán). Social-spirituality creates ever more contradictory (unnatural) conjunctions that alter the status quo of power and expand our networks of relationality. In this way, as we will see, Matt's encounter with the *dia de los muertos* celebrations in Aztlán elicits from him a more profound response than many of his other more jarring experiences.

Aztlán Redone: Social-Spirituality and Envisioning More

When Matt first experiences el día de los muertos celebration, El Patron has just died (thanks to Celia's *curandera* handiwork) and Matt has fled to Aztlán to reach Maria's mother, Esperanza, in hopes that she will be able to help rehabilitate the power structure in Opium. Tellingly, Matt reacts with a mix of wonder and fear that is distinct from his reaction to any of the other surprises he discovers in Aztlán (or Opium), which include hovercars, labor camps, and extreme environmental degradation. Matt is equally in awe of the beautiful decorations, food, and celebrations that surround the gravesites as he is in shock that anyone would want to "celebrate death." When he asks the woman why they have "a party for Death," she simply responds, "because it's a part of us" (Farmer 350-351). In Opium, death has been turned not just into a risk (or "thing") that can be minimized, but something that can be opted out of under the right economic and technological conditions. In Aztlán, though, death still has the ultimate sacred and contradictory power of being both very much "a part of us" and also a part of something mysterious and unknown. Through the día de los muertos celebration, there is the unique ability to join the known and unknown, the living and the dead, in a collective kinship.

Unlike El Patron's "rags to riches" myth, which has a somewhat shallow and insular history within the U.S., the day of the dead is a spiritual practice based on indigenous and Catholic belief that has been observed throughout Mexico for almost 3,000 years (Covarrubias 403). As Alexandra Covarrubias explains, "Like most Mexican traditions and religious practices, *el Día de los Muertos* is a syncretic ritual with elements borrowed from both Spanish Catholicism and pre-Columbian religious beliefs" (403). From the indigenous perspective, the festival marks the belief in three deaths: the death of the body, the death of the spirit, and—the most feared—the death of the soul, which occurs when there is no longer celebrants alive to remember the departed. The day of the dead, then, acts as a way to prevent this last type of death.

When the Spanish invaded, they arranged for these indigenous feast days to align with the Catholic All Souls' Day and All Saints' Day (Covarrubias 404). Unlike in *Opium*, Aztlán still enables social-spiritual public practices that acknowledge and enact the multiple histories of a land, bringing to the fore, as Anzaldúa has, the indigenous primacy and distinctive worldview (see epigraph).

Up until this point, the myths that circulate in Matt's day-to-day existence in *Opium* render the human-animal, human-spirit and other cyborg iterations as not only subhuman (as, for instance, a pet might be), but as aberrations (e.g., *la llorona*, the *chupacabra*). In the instance of the *dia de los muertos* celebration, Matt experiences the bringing together of two ways of being (alive/dead) and thought (indigenous/Spanish) that are not only simultaneously acknowledged, but also celebrated. Although typically the only "official" time when Mexicans commune with their departed, the opportunity for reverent and joyful blurring of the boundary between life and death, body and spirit is significant in its revaluing of who and what counts as honorable or sacred. For non-practitioners, the *dia de los muertos* is just another celebration, but for those who open themselves up to the spirit world it enlarges their network and possibilities for meaning making and resistance to the neoliberal myths of individualism, self-determination, and exceptionalism that are rampant in *Opium*. In *The House of the Scorpion* the political potential of this blurred boundary is symbolized by Matt's ability to escape from his labor camp captors because of the *dia de los muertos* skeleton mask he wears (352).

As Covarrubias explains, the *dia de los muertos* celebration brings together the living and deceased, the young and old, and the extended community. Moreover, it brings multiple disparate things together in a way that thinks *with* alterity instead of against it. This practice is actually anticipated throughout the novel in the way that Matt manages to survive and escape

Opium not through his own intellection, but primarily because Maria and Celia work with his difference instead of seeking to alter his status as a clone or advocate for his rights. This is especially apparent through Celia's careful poisoning of Matt with her curandera medicine that renders Matt's body essentially unviable for a transplant to El Patron. In fact, the language of "rights" does not come up at all for Matt or his closest friends and allies, and is only discussed in reference to Esperanza, Maria's mother, who is deeply committed to altering the system through legislation. In contrast, Matt becomes suspicious of this type of solution precisely because it usually gains one person's rights at the cost of another. As Matt wonders, "she was willing to leave her daughter, what means she will not just leave the eejits [the robotic laborers]" (367). At stake here is a commitment to legal narratives, the same that solidified and uphold the myths of hard work being rewarded and earning individual rights through citizenship and that often make concessions that leave harmful power structures intact. Undoing and re-writing these narratives through law is too slow and too unimaginative. Working within the Latino/a sacred imaginary that is accessed and re-written in lived, daily practices—although not as expedient as we might like—proves in the novel to be more creative, social, and powerful than any legal work.

Liberal Humanism and Literary Discourse

While Aztlán is far from a utopia in *The House of the Scorpion*, it has utopic potential because it still values and has room for collective participation in the mythospiritual. As Matt searches for a way to live out his troubling identity and inheritance as El Patron's genetic clone, these experiences of the sacred such as the dia de los muertos celebration, Celia's faith in and empowerment by the Virgin Mary (a female rather than male deity) and curandera practices, and Maria's inspiration to act differently drawn from St. Francis, offer him alternate, social-spiritual openings to interpret his subjectivity and his relationship to others. *The House of the Scorpion* is

dissatisfied with a lot of (mythical) liberal, neoliberal, and nationalist narratives and their related power structures. As we experience through Matt, the historical and material circumstances of the border and the relationship between the two nations yield many questions and few simple answers.

At the same time, I would suggest that the literary discourse surrounding this novel (as well as several other texts that this project explores), does not sufficiently distance itself from liberal humanism (and the inherent, supreme value of the material rights-bearing human) in order to critically consider the role of spirituality or religion as a resource for political critique and for envisioning different “unnatural” connections. This bias has a long intellectual history in western society and the university (see my introduction and chapter 1) that separates rational or empirical knowledge from the spiritual or symbolic. In its current iteration in literary studies, this bias tends to delineate literature (especially that written by people of color) as either materially radical or aesthetically detached from cultural politics and representation. In fact, this assumption drives Abbie Ventura’s negative assessment of *The House of the Scorpion* based on its lack of a (legible) literary map for social change, as well as the many critical assessments that repeatedly overlook the text’s intertextuality with Chicano/a movement cultural and spiritual politics.

For Matt, a social-spiritual practice involves interpreting the stories and myths that surround him (liberal humanism, rags to riches, etc.) in a way that is self-reflective of his own embodied experiences and thought processes, material and historical contexts, and his experiences with others and the spirit world. This interpretive practice, which involves a variety of unnatural connections, in turn yields different imaginative structures and beliefs that can resist myths such as liberal humanism that undergird exploitative biotechnology. This can be seen throughout the novel as Matt confronts his own gender bias and self-corrects by listening to

Celia and Maria and being open to instruction (380). Moreover, he also comes to resist the authority engendered by Esperanza even though she affirms his position of absolute authority (and “humanity”) (367). Most importantly, though, it is only through his experience with the (gendered) spiritual realm that Matt is able to mediate the complex realities of his world. Acknowledging this significance and the often overlooked gendered labor of maintaining spiritual knowledges, the novel asks us to consider the value of a Latino/a sacred imaginary for imagining alternative futurities. A social-spiritual practice and the development of sacred myth are not facilitated solely by symbols or creeds (manifestos), but by ongoing lived experiences and queer or unnatural relationships that should be the responsibility of all genders, cyborgs, humans, and non-humans. Through a social-spiritual lens, the invocation of Aztlán in *The House of the Scorpions* is indeed a sacred myth and one worth re-visiting in thinking about the representation of Latino/a futurities, kinship, and neoliberalism.

AZTLÁN 2.0: SLEEP DEALER AND THE CHICANO/A SACRED PAST

Similar to Farmer’s novel, Alex Rivera’s award winning sci-fi film, *Sleep Dealer*, is set on the U.S.-Mexico border in the not too distant future and deals with Latino/a subjectivity, technology, kinship and a Latino/a sacred imaginary. Specifically, in the film, new technology has allowed the U.S. to close its borders to Mexico, while still maintaining the surplus of inexpensive human labor it has historically drawn from its southern neighbor. Forecasting the development of virtual labor technology, the film portrays Mexican laborers who migrate to the border town of Tijuana to receive “node” implants that can then connect their bodies to virtual labor being performed across and beyond the border. Given the film’s explicit portrayal of the use of drones by the U.S. government for unmanned air strikes—a present-day reality—this “unmanned” style of labor suggests the next possible step for this technology. As a result of this

shift in labor relations, the majority of the film takes place in a dystopic border region that acts as a stop-gate for desperate Latin American laborers and plays on viewers' fears of the blurred boundary between human and machine, as well as the limits of technology to "connect" one another across national and social boundaries.

Similar to Farmer's novel (and other texts that engage a social-spiritual practice) *Sleep Dealer* trades heavily in narrative and visual intertextuality.⁸⁷ From the outset, the film presents viewers with a familiar Chicano/a and Latino/a generational narrative, wherein the young protagonist's "modern" ways are in tension with the older generation's more traditional way of life (see, for example, Richard Rodriguez's *Hunger for Memory* (1982), Cristina Garcia's *Dreaming in Cuban* (1992), Josefina López's play, *Real Women Have Curves* (1996), etc.). *Sleep Dealer* begins hundreds of miles south of the border in the small town of Santa Ana del Rio, Oaxaca, Mexico, where the young protagonist, Memo, is frustrated with his father's insistence that they continue working a traditional *milpa* crop growing system.⁸⁸ In Santa Ana del Rio, this practice has become all but impossible after a U.S.-based company dams the nearby river, essentially privatizing this natural resource and selling it back to local residents at exorbitant prices. The father-son tension parallels and humanizes the film's central tension between its critical representation of what I call a "sacred past," which harkens the heterosexual, spiritual homeland of the Chicana/o "Aztlán," and a viable future for the protagonist and his family.

⁸⁷ In an interview, Rivera explains that his goal is to make a film with a legible and accessible political critique for popular audiences. Therefore, "the film functions as myth, at an intellectual, abstract level" (qtd in Orihuela 183).

⁸⁸ The milpa is a Mesoamerican agricultural and sociocultural practice related to a Mayan lifestyle. Typically, milpas refer to recently cleared fields that are then planted with a dozen or so crops including maize, beans, avocados, melon, squash, sweet potato, etc. The milpa cycle calls for two years of cultivation and up to 8 years to let the land lie fallow (Benson).

Sleep Dealer's portrayal of an indigenous and agricultural past that haunts the border region specifically conjures associations with the Chicano/a movement, which, as I've already noted, drew heavily from and re-valued its indigenous heritage and relation to the land in the Southwest. Likewise, Memo's patriarchal family structure and the father figure who works and finds his identity in the land echo dominant movement concerns. Although Rivera himself is Peruvian American, his use of Mexico as the film's setting speak to the symbolic importance of Mexican America and the Chicana/o movement for contemporary Latina/o cultural politics and futurity. At the same time, Rivera adapts movement themes to reflect contemporary social and political conditions. For instance, Rivera's focus on a Mexican subject who is from a town hundreds of miles from the nearest U.S.-Mexico border and who never actually immigrates to the U.S. deviates significantly from the movement's focus on U.S. Chicanoa/os. Unbound from the concern of inclusion and rights for U.S. Chicanos/as, Rivera de-centers the U.S. citizen-subject and shows the deep economic, military, and cultural reach of U.S. relations with Mexico that extend well beyond the border.⁸⁹

Before delving any further into the film's critical engagement with the past, present, and future, however, it is first important to address the film's intermittent use of parody to critique the dominant understanding of technological and social "progress." As Amy Sarah Carroll and Marcus Heide have pointed out, *Sleep Dealer* plays with generic conventions of popular films about globalization that take place in rural Mexico or at the U.S.-Mexico border. For Carroll this is emphasized through the film's "undocumentary" conventions (e.g., combining myth with realism, fiction with documentation) that challenge "the naturalness of narratives of free trade,

⁸⁹ The extension of border politics well beyond the border region has been a development of the 21st century and includes increased surveillance and militarization (under the regime of Homeland Security) throughout the interior of Mexico and even Central America (Duran).

modernization, and progress” through humor (387). Similarly, Heide focuses on the film’s use and satirical exploitation of “the cultural significance of the ‘transnational style’” of globally marketable contemporary films (96). The undocumentary or satirical transnational aesthetic is most pointed in the clichéd dusty settings of rural Mexico and the primitive trappings of its citizens, especially considering their juxtaposition with high-tech U.S. security systems and flat screen TVs for importing U.S.-based entertainment that pepper the otherwise “underdeveloped” landscape. In one early parodic scene, Memo’s mother is shown wearing a peasant-style blouse and skirt while cooking tortillas for the family in a rustic, outdoor kitchen. Meanwhile, her sons watch U.S. reality television on the flat screen TV that hangs on an adjacent wall. On one level, the stereotypical rustic images highlight a very real disparity in the distribution of global wealth; on another level they ridicule (through their excessiveness and juxtaposition with technology) the persistence of such stereotypical images that are not representative of contemporary Mexican life.⁹⁰ As Rivera explains in an interview, his work is critical of nostalgia (i.e. the “sacred past”) and the spatial dimensions of temporality that, as he explains, tend to regard the “first world [as] the future; third world [as] the past” (Decena and Gray 134).

Unfortunately, Rivera’s critique of nostalgia only goes so far. Unlike the example I just described that simultaneously critiques the untruth (Mexico does not homogenously look so stereotypically “past”) and the truth (there is a disparity in wealth distribution), the film as a whole only focuses on a critique of negation (i.e., this is not progress), while overlooking Luz’s social-spiritual vision and work that facilitates this critique. Although Rivera’s film goes a long way in bringing the topics of science and technology, the border, and racialized labor to popular culture, I critique the gender and sexual politics of *Sleep Dealer*, wherein the male protagonist

⁹⁰ According to the Kaiser Family Foundation, 78% of Mexico’s total population lives in urban areas (“Urban Populations”).

(as in *The House of the Scorpion*) may only access and engage a social-spiritual practice that connects across differences through technology when mediated by a woman and, particularly, through a patriarchal and heterosexual relationship. For it is Luz who dreams about and attempts to change the mythology of technology to support empathetic cross-gender, cross-class, cross-nation (inorganic) connectivity. At every turn, however, her efforts are foreclosed and co-opted to re-inscribe male dominance of technology and female subordination. As I discuss further, this reliance on masculine/feminine divide regarding who can access the social-spiritual (and *how* it can be accessed) drastically limits the models of kinship and solidarity that the film otherwise depicts as crucial to resisting the neoliberal economic-ization of all relations and resources—human or non-human.

A Future with a Past: Gender, Sexuality, the Sacred Past, and Storytelling

Beyond the film's formal investment in past-oriented narrative and visual intertextuality, *Sleep Dealer* is thematically interested in the role of the past and memories for disrupting notions of the future. The protagonist's name, Memo, alludes to the centrality of memories in the film, as does its driving action. At the film's outset, Memo is exasperated by his father's desire to maintain the family's milpa and with the elliptical question he poses to Memo: "Is our future a thing of the past?" But when Memo's father is killed because his son's amateur "cyber hacking" is intercepted by a U.S. security company and misconstrued as an "aqua terrorist," Memo begins to grapple with his own memories, the "sacred past," and the many ways his family's future could, indeed, be interpreted as "a thing of the past."

Sleep Dealer's first visual presentation of the "sacred past" occurs during the opening sequence, which begins with a montage of color-saturated (mostly green and blue) images of body parts connected to machines at the "sleep dealers," the factories where laborers perform

their virtual work for 12-plus hour shifts. As this montage moves from close-up shots of the worker's eyes, laboring arms, and then face, there is a brief flashback scene depicting a procession of women in peasant style clothing; the women are holding chalices and their faces are looking downward. The scene quickly ends as the worker re-gains focus on his labor. Although the scene is very brief and it is impossible to understand its context in the moment, it is clear from the women's posture and procession that the occasion is somber and meaningful. Moreover, the brevity of the memory emphasizes its tension with the present scene of disciplined and mechanized labor. As we later learn, the worker is Memo and the memory is of his father's funeral procession, notably represented through the emotional and spiritual work of women. Here, the sacred past is represented without satire and through women and their work at the boundary of life and death. While the film may reject the simplistic nostalgia represented by Memo's father, this scene alludes to Memo's reliance on the emotional and spiritual labor of women to help him envision a future beyond both the sleep dealers and the milpa.

As a whole, *Sleep Dealer* is resistant to the idea of a past that is "sacred" because it represents an ideal, pre-modern way of life or an "authentic" ethnic identity. After all, at the film's conclusion Memo rejects the opportunity to return to his hometown and to carry out his father's way of life. Nonetheless, memories such as the one described above are still depicted as significant in the film because they represent personal vulnerability and points of possible connection, as well as a chink in the veneer of technology's narrative of progress (and masculine self-sufficiency). As we have seen in Laura Pérez's, Gloria Anzaldúa's, and Desirée Martín's work, the sacred is not only inclusive, but it represents a confluence of the human and divine. Particularly, Memo's intermittent memories of Oxaca—often tellingly at the border of life and death—drag the "third world" into the "city of the future" (i.e., Tijuana, Mexico) where it comes

into conflict with the latter's demand for ever-increasing efficiency. It is in these disruptions to the march-step of efficiency and progress that the film creates openings for alternative futurities. Memo, however, is only superficially interested in these openings and it is the social-spiritual work of listening across difference (not always "productive"), reflecting, and writing performed by Luz (Memo's love interest) that enables these openings and the film's narrative itself. In the end, though, the narrative Luz attempts to bring forth is not her own, but Memo's (the film's literal narrator). As Rivera explains in an interview: "The idea that I tried to convey at the end of the film is that the film itself was an uploaded memory from Memo" (qtd. in Orihuela and Hageman 178). Let's take a closer look at these gendered and sexed dynamics that allow a re-inscription of technology as male-dominated and destructive, while subordinating women's social-spiritual labor that is co-opted by the former.

Not long after Memo sets out on his journey to Tijuana does he meet his love interest, Luz (i.e., Light). Luz describes herself as a writer—a fairly cliché and non-threatening profession for women in popular film—and she begins to ask questions about Memo's past to generate material for her "stories." As the film's narrative unfolds, the relationship among gender, sex, technology, and storytelling becomes more entwined and more problematic. Although the new "node" technology for virtual labor satisfies both the labor and sex market—the nodes allow for a new kind of sexual experience—the latter turns out to be just as circumscribed by unequal power relations as the former. While the nodes allow for a new kind of sex, the traditional power relations of heteronormative sex remain frighteningly in place. When Memo first arrives to Tijuana in search of a "node job," the suggestive name for node implantations, he eventually meets a coyotec—the name for a node supplier that indexes the Mexican immigrant's need for a "coyote" to cross the border—who solicits him for what he needs. Clearly vulnerable, Memo

clutches his backpack that holds his money, eyes wide open, and follows the man into a dimly lit room where he is to receive his “node job.” The echoes of an “illicit” sexual encounter are abundant: Memo is solicited in a back alley and enters a darkened room with a man who will inevitably penetrate his body to perform the implantation. This queer sexual encounter, however, is thwarted in the most predictable and homophobic way. Upon Memo’s entering the darkened room, the coyotec turns off the lights, pummels Memo in the head, and takes off with his backpack. This possible queer connection, even one that is characterized by financial transaction, ends in violence.

After this homophobic experience, Memo is once again on the streets until he re-connects with Luz who offers him a node job and, more importantly, a redemptive (heterosexual) relationship. Although scholars such as Sharada Balachandran Orihuela and Andrew Carl Hageman have read Luz’s role as a coyotec (and node worker herself) as disruptive of conventional gendering (in an otherwise “patriarchal quest for reclamation”), closer inspection reveals a re-inscription of traditional and heteronormative gender roles (181). For instance, Luz’s act of providing nodes for Memo is not of her own volition. Rather, Luz’s job as a “writer” for TruNode, the “World’s Number One Memory Market,” requires that she learn more about Memo so she can continue to write her “story” about him that will then be uploaded and sold on the “memory market.” Since Memo’s story has generated the most consumer interest, she is forced to continue writing it if she is to continue to support herself financially. At least at the beginning of her relationship with Memo, Luz is pimped out by TruNode to build an intimate relationship with him. Even worse, given that Memo has just lost all his money, one has to wonder if Luz even gets paid for the node job or if it is, at best, a write-off for uncovering Memo’s story for TruNode. By all accounts, Luz is a resilient and resourceful female character, but in no

meaningful way does the film portray her or her relationship with Memo as truly challenging the system of patriarchy or the heteronormative family that, as the film shows, help facilitate larger scale exploitation. Although Luz is doing the penetrating with the node job, her actions are not her own and are circumscribed by heteronormative and patriarchal power structures.

Most significant for my interest in the social-spiritual is that Luz's writing and stories are also not her own. In the first scene where we see Luz "writing," she connects to the computer and begins to dictate her story. While describing her impression of Memo, the computer interjects and asks her to "please tell the truth." Since the computer is physically connected to her body it is able to operate as a surveillance device and, in an effort to uncover only the facts or the "simple, easy to remember details," censor Luz's narration of the events as she remembers them. Thus, Luz's job dictates not only what topics she should speak on, but how she should speak about them. Her body is a vessel to transfer information just as Memo's is a vessel for transferring energy. The cyborg technologies in *Sleep Dealer* that so easily connect people sexually and across borders do very little to enable meaningful, boundary-breaking relationships that are cognizant of and accountable to myth as Haraway suggests. Luz is the only character that resists the dualism of organic (natural) unity v. technology by attempting to use technology for empathy, friendship, and envisioning a better collective future (beyond heterosexual alliances). As a result, it is only through Memo's relationship with Luz that he gains awareness of the myths of progress and Third World inferiority that undergird the new labor technology. In the end, though, Luz isn't even cast in the role as the translator or storyteller of events; Memo takes that role, leaving Luz as the gendered and sexed facilitator of what the movie ambiguously calls "connecting" and which, as I will explain, is related to the staid idea of the "sacred past" that Rivera attempts to reject.

To return to the opening scene and its representation of the sacred past, critics such as Christopher Gonzalez and Orihuela and Hageman identify in this scene the tension between human and machine as central to the film. It is interesting, however, that a key gesture to the “human” in that scene is through a funeral procession and at the boundary of human life and death. Similar to the unmapped space of the film’s expansive border setting (does it *really* exist?), the space between life and death is largely unknowable by technology and progress and often is a space where women’s social-spiritual knowledge and willingness to engage the unseen prevails. As Memo’s work at the sleep dealers continues and his vision becomes more and more impaired (those with more tenure than him are entirely blind), it becomes clear that he too is in a border space, but rather than connect with other cyborg workers in the labor camps (mostly men), he turns to Luz (i.e., “light”) to regain his “envisioning” capacity.

It is only through Memo’s relationship to Luz and her need to recover his “testimony” or memories that Memo is able to navigate this border space. For one, his connection to her, which is fostered through his telling stories about his past, allows him to understand his current condition and gain a political consciousness. Secondly, and more materially, it is the sale of Luz’s stories that enable Memo to leave his job at the sleep dealer before he goes blind or dies. As it turns out, Rudy, the guilt-ridden U.S. drone operator responsible for killing Memo’s father, was buying Luz’s stories in order to locate and “connect” with Memo. Once he obtains this information, he crosses over to Mexico and seeks Memo out. Although *Sleep Dealer* strongly promotes technology as able to facilitate transborder, transclass connections through its portrayal of Rudy and Memo’s meeting, it is revealing to consider how Rudy first ingratiates himself with Memo through a memory of shared experience. In his first conversation with Memo, Rudy tells him that, “before the [border] wall,” he used to visit his grandmother in Mexico and eat in the

very same place they are eating. Memo and Rudy's connection is built on similarity and, like the Chicano concept of Aztlán, national and racial similarity bridged through heteronormative familial experiences. The two men ultimately devise a plan for Rudy to use his knowledge and access of drone technology to demolish the dam in Santa Ana del Rio that has made the river accessible to local inhabitants. Importantly, this action also liberates Memo from having to support his family via the sleep dealers.

On the surface, this connection between two males, one a Mexican American former member of the U.S. military and the other a Mexican migrant laborer seems to represent the possibility for transnational solidarity. However, if the male-male penetration of the node implantation scene had to end in homophobic violence that could only be rectified through a heteronormative relationship, so too does the transnational connection between Memo and Rudy need to be mediated by a heteronormative relationship. More pointedly, Memo requires Luz's social-spiritual work of listening (across difference), writing, and re-purposing of the sacred past (beyond heteronormative kinship relations) to facilitate the connection between Memo and Rudy. Although Luz's writing for TruNode is mechanically distilled to include "only the facts," she "wish[es] it were a story" and envisions the potential of connecting across difference and "letting people see what I see." Memo claims to believe also in the power of Luz's storytelling when he tells her near the film's end: "He's [Rudy] here because of your stories." But as Luz has already asserted, her writing does not produce stories, but commodified information. The power of Luz's stories, though, is not in what gets uploaded, but in the work of telling and listening across difference, of critically engaging the past in collectively imagining the future. Unfortunately, in *Sleep Dealer*, Luz does not get to narrate a story. Like *la malinche*, the legendary Nahuatl woman who was the "lover, translator and tactical advisor" for Hernán Cortés, Luz is the traitor who

sells information about her people to unknown interested parties (Alarcón “Chicana’s” 182). Unlike Malinche, though, Luz does not have the abilities of a translator. To the contrary, Memo takes over this role as translator through his ability to interpret events. The film, after all, is supposed to represent his uploaded memories. Read this way, the film demonstrates the need for women in heterosexual relationships to perform emotional and social-spiritual labor (i.e., envisioning and attempting to craft something meaningful from the unseen and unknown) that can then enable men’s homosocial and revolutionary acts.

At times it is difficult in *Sleep Dealer* to determine where the parody begins and ends. The information Luz provides through her “writing” is clearly critiqued as a commodity in the film’s not-too-distant future. Therefore, one wonders if Luz’s faith in “connecting” and telling stories is merely a romantic and equally commodified vestige of the past akin to the film’s nightclub photographer who we see carrying around an old-style camera, despite his use of a digital one to actually take pictures. And yet, Rivera appropriates that self-same “faith” to motivate Memo’s quest to envision a different future. As Memo declares at the film’s conclusion “I will get connected and fight.” For Memo, to “connect” is to do so technologically (e.g., drones) and relationally (e.g., Luz and Rudy), and what flows among and motivates these connections are unacknowledged stories and myths.

Despite my critique of the gender and sexual politics in *Sleep Dealer*, my intent is not to discount the film’s significant contribution to SF narrative storytelling from a Latin American and Latina/o perspective. As Christopher Gonzalez explains, the science fiction genre has traditionally been inaccessible to low-budget filmmakers because of the production expenses associated with the genre’s visual effects. What I do want to draw attention to is the way that social-spirituality, with its orientation toward the unseen and unknown, is itself future-oriented.

Where science fiction is interested in defamiliarization, social-spirituality is interested in denaturalization. As Catherine Ramirez explains in her essay analyzing the “cyborg feminism” of Gloria Anzaldúa and science fiction writer, Octavia Butler, both writers accomplish this denaturalization through the figure of the cyborg, “the ‘alien,’ the homeless, the one who passes, negotiates, and concedes, the prohibited, the hybrid, the queer, and/or the colonized” (393). Haraway also extends the concept of the cyborg to women of color who are “refused membership in categories of race, sex or class” (Haraway qtd in Ramirez 384).

Memo, Luz, and Rudy are all cyborgs and yet, as my reading of the scene where Memo is looking for nodes highlights, the boundary between self and other vis-a-vis a metaphorical gay sex act is as rigid as the hypersecuritized U.S.-Mexico border, dramatically limiting connections or solidarity beyond reproductive or familial relationships (despite new developments in technology). In this way, we come to the film’s rather unsatisfying and nostalgic conclusion wherein, after a momentary experience of direct action against the privatized water companies, Memo and Luz settle down together in Tijuana where they are shown tending their very own milpa.

In contrast to the cyborgs in *Sleep Dealer*, Gloria Anzaldúa theorizes a cyborg mestiza best epitomized by what she calls the *coatlicue* state, a process and state of being characterized by extreme openness named after a “part human, part animal Mesoamerican fertility goddess” (Ramirez 391). Even beyond the obliteration of the borders between self and others (human, animal, machine), Anzaldúa’s cyborg mestiza opens herself to the spirit world. As others have similarly argued about critical science fiction, the cyborg mestiza’s openness to the spirit world is not escapism or self-indulgent, but crucial to her mestiza consciousness and future making. The only time in *Sleep Dealer* where we encounter this type of openness to existing in the space

between human and non-human is in the brief flashback to Memo's mother during his father's funeral procession. As Anzaldúa explains, the *coatlicue* state is typically brought on by a conflict or traumatic event and opens us up, if we are willing, to psychic and imaginative realms we would otherwise not experience (*Borderlands* 68-69). Luz describes her desire for this type of connection, but she is contained at every turn by male-dominated technology and enterprise. Through Luz's writing censorship, even the most minimal use of feminine imagination is shut down in lieu of the well-worn imaginative paths of the male hero, no doubt influenced by the SF genre itself. Given that Memo's desire for change is punctuated by his appropriation of the social-spiritual (mediated by women of color), *Sleep Dealer* pointedly lays bare—albeit through its deficiency—the need to privilege this type of work in order to produce more radical coalitions and imaginative myths and technologies.

As I have shown through interviews, scholarship, reviews, and textual analysis, Rivera is clearly influenced by the idea of the power of narrative and its ability to tap into the sacred (beyond parody) and to construct a new future—even if that future looks discouragingly similar to its past in the realms of gender and sexuality. Scholars and film critics have been quick to pronounce Rivera's work visionary and, as I've discussed, in many ways it truly is.

Alternatively, scholarship on *The House of the Scorpion*, penned by a white female, completely overlook her intertextual work with future-oriented, Chicana/o movement concepts, as well as her centering of feminine, non-traditional spiritual practices. Whereas in *Sleep Dealer* the sacred past largely operates as a (gendered and sexed) trope, for *The House of the Scorpion*, the sacred provides moments of utopian potential—moments for re-thinking the future through different, less-expected perspectives (e.g., a mix of indigenous, folk, and Catholic spiritual practices). Moreover, Matt, the novel's protagonist and hero, represents a teachable male-identified subject

that is open to learning from various people and realms, and, in this way, is able to challenge religious and state-sponsored liberal humanism and neoliberalism. Both texts provide examples of how Chicana/o movement visual and narrative intertextuality continues into the 21st century and, more importantly, how the social-spiritual can be incorporated (and critically invisible) in politically revealing ways.

CONCLUSION

In the contemporaneous and equally celebrated YA novel *Mexican Whiteboy* (2008) by Matt de la Peña, the protagonist, Danny, similarly grapples with his raced masculine identity and belonging. Having largely retracted from verbal communication with others, Danny writes fictitious letters to his absent Mexican father and pens a fantasy life to make him proud. The letters never make it to Danny's father, though, since he is serving time in prison rather than living in Mexico with his "real family" as Danny believes (de la Peña 28). Moreover, Danny's reading and writing literacy become shameful to him because they are not easily accessible to his male family members and, therefore, set him apart even further (de la Peña 90).

In de la Peña's novel, as in Farmer and Rivera's texts, the technology of writing, storytelling, and communicating across difference is raced, gendered, sexed, and classed. Under these circumstances, then, where do young men of color go to imagine, create, and explore new, unnatural connections (as, perhaps, Memo seeks to do in the beginning of *Sleep Dealer* through his "hacking")? In *Mexican Whiteboy*, the answer is clear. With poor public schools, subpar athletic and extra-curricular programming, young men turn to the streets to express their political and creative energy. In heavily Latino/a (and likely hyper-policed) areas such as the novel's National City, California, young men of color often end up in prison like Danny's own father, where the myth of the uncivilized black/brown men is justified and perpetuated. Thus, the prison

as analogue for Mexico is even more revealing about the faulty idea of male, masculine “authenticity” in *Mexican Whiteboy*. If, in Danny’s mind, his father left his (mixed race) family in order to “be around more Mexicans” and, ironically, in prison he more than likely is, the novel offers a pointed commentary on the lack of spaces for people of color to come together, listen to one another, and envision their future outside of state regulated detention spaces or poverty. The technology of communication and the technology of biopolitics may, indeed, be closer than we would like to think.

This thematic concern of *Mexican Whiteboy* came to material fruition in 2010 when the value of a creative, intellectually- and spiritually-engaged education for students of color in the Tucson Unified School District (TUSD) was deeply misunderstood and its Mexican American Studies programs were deemed out of compliance with Arizona’s recently passed law, HB 2281. The law states that school districts risk losing 10% of their state funding (about \$15 million) if their curriculum commits any of the following prohibitions, which include: “1) advocate ethnic solidarity rather than treating pupils like individuals, 2) promote resentment toward a race or class of people, 3) are designed primarily for pupils of a particular ethnic group, and 4) promote the overthrow of the U.S. government” (Cabrera et al, “State”). Rather than fight the application of the law, the school board voted instead to slowly dismantle the program from the inside by diluting the content of in-progress Mexican American studies classes, removing the classes from the core curriculum, and instead making them (not for credit) elective courses (Cabrera et al).⁹¹

⁹¹ The constitutionality of Arizona’s HB2281 has been appealed several times. In the first instance in 2012, Judge Wallace Tashima found the law mostly constitutional with the exception of its application that solely targets Mexican American studies classes—providing evidence of “discriminatory intent” (Planas “Arizona’s.”) The law then underwent review by a three-judge panel of the 9th Circuit U.S. Court of Appeals in 2015, which came down more stringently on the law. The most recent decision asserts that the law could be challenged because it “(a) constituted government-sanctioned viewpoint discrimination, which the First Amendment almost

Ironically, de la Peña's *Mexican Whiteboy* was included on the TUSD's banned book list under the newly revised curriculum ("A Copy").

The attack on TUSD's Mexican American studies program came after several reports deemed the program largely successful at increasing graduation rates and student performance among TUSD students (60% of whom are Latino/a) and after Superintendent Huppenthal's own independent review found the program to be in compliance with the law (Phippen, Planas "Arizona's," "(De)segregation," "Cambium"). Moreover, student reactions to HB2281—which included student self-organization into an activist group (e.g. United Non-discriminatory Individuals Demanding Our Studies [UNIDOS]), concerted displays of civil disobedience at school board meetings, testimony in legal action, and an ongoing interest in the curricular decisions that impact their education—also indicated the material and spiritual significance of the program for those it was aimed at serving. As one article explains: "In most areas throughout the country, teenagers are trying to avoid going to school. In Tucson, we have the opposite: students fighting for their rights, risking everything for their education" (Cabrera et al). As TUSD and HB2281 evidence, the ethnic studies classroom in Arizona is an important educational space for students of color to intellectualize, reflect, contextualize, and respond to American experiences that are relevant to their lives and their futures. In the midst of many other unwelcoming or inaccessible spaces, TUSD's Mexican American studies classes offer students a "sacred site" wherein students can read, write, and communicate about their experiences and to individually and collectively re-envision their realities.

categorically forbids, and (b) was overly broad in violation of the Due Process Clause," agreeing with Judge Tashima that the law targeted classes "designed primarily for pupils of a particular ethnic group" (LoMonte). The ultimate fate of the Mexican American Studies program in Arizona is yet to be determined, but a 2015 article in *The Nation* claims that the attention the law has brought to ethnic studies has done more to drum up interest in ethnic studies in surrounding states, particularly in California (Phippen).

Concern regarding diversity and multiculturalism in educational institutions and literary studies are relevant and timely, but, as the case of the HB2281 law indicates, it is not the only concern involving education and Latino/a cultural politics. Without careful contextualization, these analyses could also reinforce the neoliberal containment of the creative and envisioning capacities of people of color. As Arlene Davila has explained in her work on neoliberalism and the culture industries, very rarely is work by people of color understood outside of a white (multicultural and transactional) interpretive practice or as being relevant for other communities of color (*Culture*). The same is true, as we've seen in this project, with Latino/a narrative production. Thus, we have texts such as *The House of the Scorpion* and *Sleep Dealer*'s rather interesting SF portrayals of the U.S.-Mexico border that interface in complex ways with Chicano/a movement concepts of family, kinship, unity, and myth, but that are primarily discussed in terms of technology and material activism.⁹² As a result, the literary discourse overlooks the ongoing significance of the technology of myth, storytelling, and spirituality for shaping other technologies and material realities. These symbolic structures, largely engaged by women of color, often work at the edge of liberalism and neoliberalism via a social-spiritual writing and interpretive practice that thinks beyond the symbolic/material divide and forges a space for unnatural connections among storytelling, spirituality, difference, and change. Like Anzaldúa's letter to third world women, these practices are "SOSs" to people of color (and allies) to revalue and hold space for the symbolic and spiritual work of culture. As is the case with Arizona's HB 2281, these spaces of alternate value are all too often under attack.

⁹² As of 2017, *Mexican Whiteboy* still has no published literary criticism.

CHAPTER 4
LATINO/A WORLDLINESS, NARRATIVE VALUE, AND SOCIAL-SPIRITUALITY AS
QUEER PRACTICE IN *THE BRIEF AND WONDROUS LIFE OF OSCAR WAO*

“Isn’t all fiction (and nonfiction) magical realism? Aren’t we all making shit up? And, if we do it well enough, it can feel surreal.” –Sherman Alexie, Interview with Jess Walter, 2013

In 2011, Liana Lopez captured a provocative claim about Latina/o literature made by public intellectual and Latina/o literary scholar Ilan Stavans. In the teleconference interview about the state of Latina/o letters, Stavans asserts that Latina/o literature has “yet to become truly international” (Lopez “January”). The interview, which was conducted by and posted to the online women’s book club *Las Comadres para las Americas*, specifically pertained to Stavans’ work as the general editor of the first ever edition of the *Norton Anthology of Latino Literature* (2010), making Stavans’ claim even more authoritative. For Stavans, the emphasis that Latina/o authors place on family and on being included in the nation indelibly circumscribes their literature within a national framework. By this understanding, Latina/o literature is fatally delimited by its concern with the (individual) experience of ethnic identity and its lack of concern for more global issues that would otherwise expand its intellectual scope (Lopez “January”).⁹³

Stavans’ position on Latino/a literature’s “worldiness” is both perplexing and predictable. On the one hand, Stavans’ claim seems deeply contradictory given the not infrequent publication of Latino/a literature in multiple languages that Stavans himself has recognized as indicative of

⁹³ Interestingly, in his 2009 chapter on Spanish language books in the United States, Stavans asserts that Latino/a literature became “global” after Sandra Cisneros’s *The House on Mango Street* was published in both English and Spanish (400). In his later assessment, thematic content seems to trump a bilingual circulation.

its “global” status (Stavans “Bilingual”)⁹⁴. Moreover, world literature scholar David Damrosch has suggested that world literature encompasses “...all literary works that circulate beyond their culture of origin, either in translation or in their original language” (4). Following this line of thinking, literature by U.S. minorities such as Latina/os have engaged in world literary discourse for many years. As I explain in chapter 1, Chicano/a and Latina/o writers first began writing from and for their local, ethnic community and, even today, many authors are writing from a culture that is “foreign” to many non-Latino/a U.S. readers. Thus, once Latino/a literature gained national circulation even, it could effectively be considered a part of the world literary network.

At the same time, few if any Latina/o writers have been considered meaningful contributors to the historically grandiose, if not somewhat vague, idea of “world” literature that was first theorized by Goethe in 1827 as *weltliteratur*. Under Goethe’s somewhat elitist elaboration, world literature engaged in an international literary market where “nations [unequally] bring their intellectual treasures for exchange” (Strich qtd in Damrosch 3). This is not a dissimilar formulation from Pascale Casanova’s more recent and controversial explanation of the contemporary state of world literature in her book *The World Republic of Letters* (2004). In this study, Casanova sets out to explain and document how literary capital circulates around time and the globe, placing emphasis on the development of literary (capital) epicenters (namely Paris) and the strategies writers from more peripheral locations have engaged in order to access this capital. While Casanova’s study is already ambitious and cannot be expected to cover the experiences of all “minor” literatures in the world republic of letters, it does leave many unresolved questions with regard to the gaping absence of U.S. “minority” writers among

⁹⁴ Although *The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* has been translated into more than 15 different languages, there are multiple examples of Latina/o letters translated into at least one other language beyond English. See for example writing by Sandra Cisneros, Ana Castillo, Rolando Hinojosa, and Oscar Hijuelos among others.

others.⁹⁵ It is, however, Latino/a authors' absence within this philosophical and literary hermeneutic that I believe Stavans is most concerned about gaining access to.⁹⁶

Broad scholarly interest in world literature or a notion of "globality" has only recently been re-invigorated and was preceded by the so-called "transnational turn" in literary studies, which also struggled in its early stages to include Latino/a literature in its non-U.S. centric considerations of American literature. While many scholars leading up to the turn of the 21st century shifted their analysis to literary histories, influences, and circulations that exceeded both the borders of the U.S. and the Eurocentric genealogy of "traditional" American literature, fewer included the literary work of Chicana/o and Latina/o artists in their purview.⁹⁷ This mode of interpreting Chicano/a and Latino/a literature contributes to the idea that this literature only relays regional stories that often document the (one-way) effects of transnational and global forces of inequality (i.e., global capitalism) on specific, local, raced populations. Under this formulation, a representational model emerges that presents a dominant force of global capital (typically associated with the U.S. economy) that comes into violent contact with a more

⁹⁵ For a smart critique of the limitations of Casanova's work, particularly from a postcolonial and post-Cold War perspective, see Debjani Ganguly's "Global Literary Refractions: Reading Pascale Casanova's *The World Republic of Letters* in the Post-Cold War Era."

⁹⁶ Stavans' criteria for what qualifies as "international" literature are, admittedly, unclear, but his emphasis on exemplary authors such as Philip Roth and on the importance of a wide, recognizable literary circulation beyond a U.S. market echo contemporary conversations about "world" literature (Stavans "Bilingual," Lopez "January," Stavans "Is American"). Moreover, Stavans' earlier comment about the publication of Latina/o literature in Spanish as indicative of its increasing "global" status confirms his logic that revolves around circulation and language plurality (2009).

⁹⁷ For exceptions see Rachel Adams' work in *Continental Divides* (2009), Marissa Lopez's *Chicano Nations* (2011), Kirsten Silva Gruesz's *Ambassadors of Culture* (2002), and Karen Kaplan's essay, "Left Alone with America: The Absence of Empire in the Study of American Culture," in her and Donald Pease's touchstone edited collection *Cultures of United States Imperialism* (1994). Still, in the last example, Chicano/a and Latino/a literature is gestured to while the other examples largely highlight the lack of concern for more contemporary transnational circulations and translations in Chicano/a and Latino/a literature and culture.

primitive, homogenous, and idealized minority culture. Thus, as Michael Dowdy explains, Latino/a literature and culture tends to be discussed in narrow terms of “political” and “identity-based” concerns or with regard to a language of “postmodern aesthetics” (xi). At worst, Latino/a narrative has been understood primarily as a fictional account or report of personal experience and trauma (McGurl, Irr). Correspondingly, the complexity of neoliberalism (the economic and social policy of global capitalism) “remains undertheorized in U.S. literary studies and, in particular, in Latino literary studies” (Dowdy 8). Besides being overly simplistic and inaccurate, this approach to Latino/a narrative asserts a false local/global binary does not lend itself to a methodologically sound transnational approach to literature that, as Wai Chee Dimock explains, should foreground “entry points to a broad continuum [of world literatures]” (8 *Shades*). To the contrary, this early model of literary transnationalism precluded its own dialogue with many Chicano/a, Latino/a, and women of color cultural workers who theorized interconnected, relational and often transnational (or translocal) feminist practices and cultural expression.

Responding specifically to the methodological disconnect between the transnational literary turn and post-60s Chicano/a and Latino/a literary and cultural studies, Ellie Hernandez proposes the term “Chicano postnational” to account for the ways gender and sexuality (in addition to race) account for the emergence of Chicano transnational culture (1-2). Distinct from other approaches, Hernandez asserts that for Chicano/a and Latino/a people, engagement with global or transnational culture cannot result in an entire abandonment or disavowal of the nation through which they only recently gained a modicum of rights, representation, and political gains. Hernandez explains that her approach to Chicano/a postnationalism emerged from working within the framework of transnational feminism and finding it difficult to accommodate (intersectional) concerns of U.S. women of color (3-4). Chicano/a postnationalism became a

succinct way for her to categorize the dislocation of Chicanas/os caught or suspended between the national order and an emerging transnationalism (Hernandez 4).

Issuing a similar critique, Sandra K. Soto's 2005 article "Where in the Transnational World are US Women of Color?" takes to task the marginalization of women of color feminist concerns and contributions to transnational academic enterprises. Even among more recent transnational feminist scholarly work such as the essays collected in the 2014 *Translocalities/Translocalidades*, scholars still address the ongoing struggle to maintain the intersectional (embodied) theoretical concerns of U.S. women of color when attempting to build transnational or translocal feminist connection. As Claudia de Lima Costa explains, "...within the United States, Chicana/Latina [theoretical] productions have not always counted on effective apparatuses of dissemination given the still pervasive dismissal of subaltern knowledges within the U.S. academy" (26). Correspondingly, sustained attention to the body, gender, ethnicity, race, sexuality, class, and ability are all too easily evacuated from a transnational framework. As we look back on this marginalized legacy of women of color feminist theory, it is not difficult to perceive its correlation to Stavans' critique that Latino/a literature fails to be "international" because of its over-investment in family (a key site of gender and sexuality formation) and national (ethnic) concerns. As I will continue to explore in this chapter, there is a clear (and gendered) distinction between the values espoused by women of color feminists and the values of "world" literary culture.⁹⁸

⁹⁸ In this chapter, the term "world" literature refers to the most ambitious category of literature first theorized by Goethe that indexes the highest achievement of literary capital. The term "global" literature also indexes literature that circulates widely and has multiple national readerships, but also may be applied more loosely than "world" literature. Global literature often encompasses postcolonial and Anglophone literatures and, as we will see, some scholars lament its liberal inclusion of contemporary literature. At other times, scholars will interchangeably use the terms global and world literature. Transnational literature (as well as "international") has the

The opposition between (a “politicized”) world literature and women of color feminist theoretical paradigms has only been further compounded by Mark McGurl’s now heavily cited study of post-war American literature, *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing* (2009). In this study McGurl argues that the professionalization of writing through university creative writing programs has been the single most influential effect on postwar American literature. Moreover, he argues that the aesthetic effect on this literature (now produced by institutions) has been one of systematization, albeit generated from a system “ingenuously geared to the production of variety” (McGurl x). With regard to my concern for women of color feminists’ attention to the body, McGurl also identifies “personal experience” as achieving a “functional centrality” in the postwar period. Specifically, he identifies the postwar aesthetic category of “high cultural pluralism,” which combines the modernist penchant for “autopoetics” (i.e., personal experience) with “a rhetorical performance of cultural group membership preeminently, though by no means exclusively, marked as ethnic” (56).⁹⁹ By this token, whether aspiring to a national or international readership, writing about cultural experiences (for non-white U.S. authors) is not an act of creative or political freewill, but one of compulsion and of (“inauthentic”) economic necessity for those who wish to have their work published. Interestingly, McGurl traces “high cultural pluralism” to a period even before “multiculturalism,” although he acknowledges that both terms are indeed synonymous. By abstracting these terms (the former having significantly less political vitriol) and linking them to a systematic production of literature, McGurl essentially depoliticizes writing by authors of color that draw from personal experience and renders the self-reflective narration of lived experience

broadest application and can apply to any literature that deals thematically or is in circulation with multiple national cultures.

⁹⁹ The selections for the 2010 *Norton Anthology of Latino Literature* reflect the postwar aesthetic dominance of “high cultural pluralism.”

(by anyone) as a function of the market and creative writing institutions.¹⁰⁰ Thus, contemporary (ethnic) literature that is realistic, self-reflective, and expresses lived experiences of difference is often deemed myopic, insular, and un-attuned to larger, global concerns.¹⁰¹

While McGurl claims that he has no real problem with the advent of creative writing programs and their sweeping effect upon American literature, many critics have rightly found concern with, as McGurl puts it, “another incursion of consumerism into the University” (74). Not long after the publication of *The Program Era*, several scholars published noteworthy studies critiquing this very capitalist incursion that McGurl easily dismisses and the (institutionalized) role of American ethnic literature, culture, diversity, and literary studies.¹⁰² Echoing these concerns within Latino/a Studies, prominent literary scholar Ramon Saldívar published an essay in 2011 in *American Literary History* arguing that the pastiche of genres and self-reflexive narration in Junot Díaz’s *The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* and Salvador Plascencia’s *The People of Paper* were indicative of the author’s (and other 21st century writer’s) response to the end of a politically effective form of representation (“Historical Fantasy”). Clearly, the political potential previously associated with provocative literary representations of embodied experiences of difference was now being challenged.

¹⁰⁰ It should be noted that McGurl deems all writing by postwar writers as equally susceptible to systematization of the “program era.” Nonetheless, these claims are especially damaging to queer, feminist, non-normative writers, and writers of color given their historical inaccessibility to publishing outlets (see Chapter 1) and general societal marginalization, which are effectively erased under this paradigm.

¹⁰¹ Caren Irr’s study *Toward the Geopolitical Novel: U.S. Fiction in the Twenty-First Century* (2014) also echoes these sentiments, arguing that 21st century “geopolitical fiction” moves away from the personal trauma narrative in order to better address the more “cosmopolitan” and “socially critical” concerns of the new century.

¹⁰² See Jodi Melamed’s *Represent and Destroy* (2011), Roderick Ferguson’s *The Re-Order of Things*, and Sara Ahmed’s *On Being Included* (2012).

Although I do not agree entirely with Ramon Saldívar's assessment of Díaz's novel and what he calls a "postrace aesthetic of contemporary literature," I do appreciate and build from his careful analysis of the text's departure from "conventional" markers of ethnic American literature. In fact, this chapter explores how Díaz and *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, despite a fraught literary history, came to be the first U.S. Latina/o writer and literary work to be widely embraced and discussed as a part of a contemporary "world literature" canon, which I discuss in more detail in the section below. Specifically, I contend that *Oscar Wao* precipitously straddles two literary worlds—that of "world" or high literature and that of an ethnic, embodied women of color feminist literature. This discomfiture can be seen most clearly through an investigation of the often overlooked queer, feminist spirituality that is integrated into *Wao*'s narrative and that offers a brutal critique of the ubiquitous heteropatriarchal, racist, and capitalist scripts that dominate our contemporary imaginary.¹⁰³ In its place, the novel offers up a different imaginary that still meaningfully represents race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, ability, and class (embodiment), but that foregrounds the networked, relational and often imprecise and untranslatable aspects of diasporic experience and leverages them in service of a queer, world-building social-spiritual practice.

In the following section I will first focus on a shift in the reception of Díaz's work from his first publication (*Drown*) in 1996 to the publication of *Wao* in 2008 and from immigrant literature to decolonial, world, or global literature. What, if anything, caused this shift in Díaz's reception and how does it effect our interpretation of Latina/o cultural politics at a time dominated by global capitalism? I then turn to my more extensive analysis of how the critical

¹⁰³ Following Anibal Quijano's theory of the colonality of power (as well as Maria Lugones's consideration of gender and the colonality of power), this chapter assumes the critical connection between the concept of race, gender and the functioning of capitalism since the time of American colonization.

reception of *Oscar Wao* has systematically downplayed the queer, feminist, spiritual chronotope developed in the novel at the expense of understanding new directions in Díaz's narrative project, as well as the significance of women of color feminist theory and practice for a decolonial, world literary project. I finally show how both *Oscar Wao* and Díaz's own political activism provocatively unite and trouble the (otherwise antagonistic) categories of U.S. Latino cultural politics & world literature through a women of color feminist, social-spiritual practice. Despite little to no consideration of how women of color feminist theory and activism impact Díaz and his writing (Moya "Dismantling," Moya "The Search"), I focus on the text's deliberate emphasis on collective and queer writing and narration as intertwined productively with belief, spirituality (fuku, visions, prayer) and sexuality, and argue that these are not just aesthetic features but part of the novel's intentional construction of a writing practice and alternative valuation of Latina/o narrative. As with Cisneros's novel *Caramelo* and Farmer's *The House of the Scorpion*, the writer/storyteller-characters are less invested in authenticity—a concept that even critics of neoliberalism seem unwilling to fully part with—and are more interested in the relational and imaginative aspect of literature.¹⁰⁴

READING THE WORLD IN THE BRIEF AND WONDROUS LIFE OF OSCAR WAO

Although Latino/a writers have had limited visibility in the realm of world literature, scholars have recently revisited the genre to consider these exclusions. In particular, David Damrosch has a keen sense of the fluidity of the genre and reminds us that world literature is not a static designation to be achieved, but something that is always changing and made up of

¹⁰⁴ Despite a critique of the transactional, "authentic" ethnic representation in U.S. ethnic literature, critical neoliberal scholars also lament the lack of material politics or activism that might accompany literary or symbolic politics. Indeed, the latter is also searching for a transaction between literature and politics and creates a different type of "authenticity" that can be linked to more (materially) "political" texts.

various worlds, sometimes (or oftentimes) in collision and competition with each other (Damrosch 13-14). Similarly, world literature is not simply a plural or broad approach to reading and canonization. Instead, world literature is "...a mode of circulation and of reading ... applicable to individual works and to bodies of material, applicable for reading esteemed classics and new discoveries alike" (Damrosch 5). Reading practices, thus, emerge as highly significant for determining at any given time how or why a work of literature will be taken up in a world literary canon. And, as we know from the work of James English and Mark McGurl, both literary prestige (prizes, awards, etc.) and recognition by the academy are two primary forces that shape reading practices in the U.S.¹⁰⁵ Thus, turning to the evaluation of book reviewers, critics, and bodies of literary prestige can tell us a lot about the (current) criteria for world literature that Díaz's work hinges on.

Although Díaz's work was immediately embraced by the literary establishment, a survey of the discourse around Díaz's work in the early stages of his career reveals that an endorsement of his work as world literature (sometimes interchangeably called "global") did not occur until after the publication of *The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007) and specifically after its commendation as a 2008 Pulitzer Prize in Fiction winner. Prior to the publication of *Oscar Wao*, critics and book reviewers tended to interpret Díaz's first collection of short stories, *Drown* (1996), as a vivid new literary voice reflecting on (familiar challenges of) the immigrant experience (Torres-Saillant and Céspedes, DenTandt, DeWind and Kasinitz, Cowart, Augenbraum and Havens 1997, Stuhr-Rommereim, Riofrio). To the contrary, as Ed Finn explains, a closer look at the reception of Díaz's *second* book shows it destabilizing the realm of

¹⁰⁵ See James English's *The Economy of Prestige: Prizes, Awards, and the Circulation of Cultural Value* (2005).

literary fiction (with which world literature overlaps in its mutual concern for literary capital) and genre fiction (including “immigrant” literature).

In his study, Finn examines magazine and newspaper reviews, as well as online reviews and recommendations generated via Amazon and LibraryThing (“traces of digital consumption”) to identify impressions about the networks of literary culture that *Oscar Wao* circulates in and the process of canonization (9). From the Amazon recommendations, Díaz is contextualized in a variety of literary networks that suggest the scope of *Oscar Wao*’s destabilization of established reading practices across both professional and lay readers. For instance, in December 2010 Díaz appears in a contextual network of other Pulitzer Prize in Fiction recipients such as Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* and Zadie Smith’s *White Teeth*. By late December, though, Díaz’s top linkages include a more mixed bag of writers and texts including Michael Chabon (also a Pulitzer winner) and Caribbean classics such as Cristina Garcia’s *Dreaming in Cuban*, as well as the Spanish language translation of *Wao*. Finally, in January and February of 2011 Díaz appears in a network reflective of a “mainstream American canon” populated with authors such as Allen Ginsberg, Robert Haas, and later Toni Morrison and Don DeLillo (19). Most tellingly, though, when Finn limited results to recommendations that *persisted over multiple months*, Díaz was most regularly identified as “a peripheral member of a Latin Caribbean literary community dominated by Cristina García, Julia Alvarez, Sandra Cisneros and Esmeralda Santiago”—an all female group of writers who write about an immigrant experience and that seem to provide the substructure for Díaz’s acclaim (20). Moreover, the data from both the professional reviewers and the “lay” readers (Amazon & LibraryThing) corroborated the results of the most prominent nodes or reading networks (co-occurrences of proper nouns) (Finn 24).

If world literature is demarcated by ways of reading and circulation, Finn's detailed analysis provides us with evidence that there is no stabilized way of reading *Oscar Wao*, but that the text flashes in and out of various reading networks. When Díaz is discussed in reference to "serious literary fiction," however, he is in the company of mostly white males and when he is discussed as part of an immigrant literary tradition, mostly women of color (Finn 19). This is worth keeping in mind as we turn to scholarly reception of Díaz's "worldly" and "decolonial" text, which was in full effect by 2012-13. By this time, Díaz's name regularly appeared in publications such as *World Literature Today*, his work was discussed at world literature conferences and symposia, it was translated into over 15 languages, and he increasingly accrued awards and recognition from sources outside U.S. borders.¹⁰⁶

Beyond the affirmation of prestige and a wide circulation, scholars also regularly discuss certain long-debated features of an "ideal" world literature (and the countless ways contemporary texts fall short). More precisely, critics are more clear about what does not constitute world literature and they regularly affirm these negative qualities, which include: a formulaic narrative that is accepting of the given tastes of an "international middlebrow audience," a focus on the past, a U.S.-centric or familiar narrative, and an apolitical authorial persona.¹⁰⁷ As should be

¹⁰⁶ Among a host of other awards including a 1999 Guggenheim Fellowship, a 2002 PEN Malamud Award, and 2012 Macarthur Fellowship, in 2007 the Hays Festival and Bogota World Book Capital Award recognized Díaz as one of 39 acclaimed authors under 39 in Latin America. As Claudia Milian has noted, both Díaz and Peruvian American author Daniel Alarcon have been celebrated as writers who are "Latin Americans from the United States" ("Latino/a" 173). When scholars discuss Díaz and *Oscar Wao* in the context of world literature, they almost always begin with a litany of his accolades, as well as the text's translation into numerous languages and its wide circulation.

¹⁰⁷ These criteria are primarily derived from David Damrosch's *What is World Literature* (2003), and articles about world literature in the publications *n+1* and *World Literature Today* (see Stavans' "Is American Literature Provincial?" and the editorial piece in *World Literature Today* "What is American Literature?"), but they are also continually echoed in other critical work on

evident, some of these “concerns” are not dissimilar from the concerns of Stavans and the qualities of McGurl’s U.S.-based “program era” writing. Thus, regardless of wide circulation or translation, if a text displays these qualities, it may likely experience limited access to modes of circulation (e.g., journals, conferences, edited collections) restricted to world literature. Moreover, as a distinction from this “ideal” understanding of world literature, the editors of *n+1* discuss the alternative, albeit less prestigious, category of “global literature” that is appropriate for the many texts that deal with, in Caren Irr’s words, the “interconnected global environment of the new millennium,” but that do not meet the other criteria (2). The editors also lament that “global” literature indeed encompasses much of what we consider today to be contemporary world literature and indexes, as Damrosch explains, how today’s world literature has developed alongside the very developments of global capitalism (4). Melamed echoes this concern in her gloss of “global literature” that promises to make non-western cultures accessible to U.S. readers without requiring much specialized knowledge. Instead, these literatures tend to provide information about other cultures, to “connect” readers to (valuable) others that are similar to them and make them aware of those (less valued) who are dissimilar to them (161).¹⁰⁸ As indicated from these concerns (and the discourse of an “ideal” world lit), there is still a desire among some scholars for this literature to be outside of the bounds of a formulaic or contrived (capitalist) production (another kind of authenticity). As Finn’s study and the shift in reviewer reception show, however, *Oscar Wao* does not deliver along those lines. I lay out these parameters not as rigid definitions of a certain genre that cultural workers should aspire to or

world literature such as Graham Huggans’ *The Postcolonial Exotic* (2001), and Sarah Brouillette’s *Postcolonial Writers in the Global Literary Marketplace* (2007).

¹⁰⁸ See Sanjay Krishnan’s *Reading the Global* (2007) for a deeply historicized version of Melamed’s concern regarding a western “global” perspective.

achieve, but rather as useful marking points to explore canonization, literary value, and alternative networks of valuation.

Unsurprisingly, *Oscar Wao* has been scrutinized with regard to meeting the criteria of an ideal world literature. For instance, Stavans claims that even when immigrant writers like Díaz write about the world, “it is through a U.S. centric narrative” and the editors of *n+1* call *Oscar Wao* one of the “more significant and accomplished works of world literature,” but one that is nonetheless effected by the major limitations of contemporary “global” literature (“Is American Literature”). Interestingly, contemporary Latino/a studies and transnational literary criticism on *Oscar Wao* also tends to engage with or at least touch upon the same concerns as world literature critics. Specifically, critics are interested in exploring the existence of an “authentic” (real or representative) v. formulaic narrative style and the criticality of its U.S. centered popular references (Bautista, Pifano, Machado Saez, Saldívar “Historical Fantasy”). This considerable overlap between discourses of world literature and contemporary Latino/a and ethnic literature reveals a surprisingly similar concern for authenticity and a binary relationship between the U.S. and its others. The imbrication and echo of these conversations that Díaz’s text brings to the fore is important because it shows the way they both shape literary value in surprisingly similar ways despite their seemingly different concerns and exclusions. It also suggests that both world literature scholarship and contemporary Latino/a Studies & ethnic literary studies are yet resistant to the female dominated, women of color feminist narrative substructure (which tends to be familiar, U.S.-centric, formulaic [following McGurl]) that we see in Díaz via Finn’s digital analysis.

If the above discussion highlights the way criticism—from both lay and professional readers—reflects a destabilized but still narrow interpretation of Díaz’s *Wao*, Claudia Milian

provides another perspective regarding the *productivity* of *Oscar Wao*'s discomfiture in world literary and ethnic American literary discourse. Noting the recurrent recognition of Díaz as a trailblazing "Latin American" writer, as well as the uncategorizable excesses of Díaz's narrative, Milian asks that we consider 21st century Latino/a cultural expression as one of deracination that responds to the "wide-reaching form of Latin unbelonging and unhouseability that cannot be fully housed in the U.S. literature sector" ("Latino/a" 173-5). Under this formulation, the narrative in *Oscar Wao* works through its "gathering of Latinness that exceeds the 'original' way of seeing and reading the region as well as 'the Latino'" (Milian "Latino/a" 176). Crucial to this effect is Díaz's Borgesian approach to the practice of writing as reading and that is evident in his constant use of footnotes, quotes, and intertextual references. As Milian goes on to explain, Borges did not believe in a "true" [authentic] literary representation and instead constructed stories from the stories of others ("Latino/a" 187).

Another point of reference for this type of representation is, of course, women of color feminist writing that privileges (collectively authored) anthologies, mixed and impure genres, and collaborative work that trespassed (ontological) sexual, ethnic and racial boundaries. As Paula Moya explains, women of color theory and practice expressed three central tenants: that identity is mutually constituted by race, class, sex, and gender (intersectional); that humans are both "embodied and embedded" in complex social and ideological networks; and that we must continue to undertake often painful self-examination in "the service of personal and social change." In particular, as Moya explains, this embeddedness rejects the notion of an individual, autonomous identity in favor of one that is "highly interdependent and constituted through her interaction with other selves and with institutionalized ideologies of race, gender, sex" ("Dismantling" 234-35). Moreover, in line with this multiply constituted, embodied, social and

self-reflexive identity, women of color also mixed genres, discourses and forms (like *Oscar Wao*) in their cultural production. Specifically, Chicana, lesbian feminist, Gloria Anzaldúa did not limit herself to fidelitous representations of her experiences, but sought new representational tactics and forms that also drew heavily from what she was reading, her interaction with others, and spiritual insights. Perhaps this “unhouseability” is why women of color feminist work was rejected so strongly by many Chicano nationalists and why Anzaldúa’s work has recently enjoyed translation for publication and circulation in Latin America. Anzaldúa (and other women of color feminists) thus make relevant flashpoints for thinking about the “unhouseable” Latinness that Milian identifies in *Oscar Wao*; moreover, they can help us better understand that the slipperiness of the “Latin signifier” does not necessarily evacuate or dilute racial, sexual, ethnic, or gendered difference so much as narrate them without the baggage of authenticity or truthfulness that, as I’ve shown, continues to afflict Latino/a studies, world literature, and American ethnic literary criticism.

At the same time, while the “Latining” that we see in *Oscar Wao* may reflect a disinterest in the “truthfulness” of U.S. Latinidad, Caribbean-ness, and Latin American-ness, it does not necessarily correlate to a disinterest in the political act of representation. More accurately, *Oscar Wao* is deeply invested in the political act of storytelling and imagination. As Finn explains, the very repetition of the most prominent “nodes” (co-occurring proper nouns) across the two digital reading networks that he studies shows the “real dialog with multiple audiences” that Díaz’s language politics hinge on. Thus, rather than search for a “truthful” or authentic representation, a key place for us to apprehend the political quality of *Oscar Wao*’s Latined narrative is through its blurry representation of the “real” and the fantastic. This blurred representation imbricates Latin American magical realism, (U.S.-based) tropes of science fiction (SF) and fantasy narratives, and

Latino/a Catholic, Mesoamerican, and Afro-Caribbean spirituality. Rather than subordinating one or two of these interwoven aspects of Díaz's narrative under one (more significant) strand as other critics have done, I consider them working collaboratively to shape the Latined narrative. Specifically, I analyze the way the spiritual elements in the narrative foreground the move away from an "authentic" Latin American, Latino/a, or Caribbean experience in order to make room for a queer, women of color feminist, Latined social-spiritual narrative and political practice that is collaborative, anti-patriarchal, and anti-capitalist in its blurring of reality/fantasy, and spirit/material. This is particularly manifested in Yuniór's emergent social-spiritual narration that unfolds across the length of the novel and that I trace in the following section. Thus, as I've argued, *Oscar Wao* forces a reckoning among disparate "worlds"—national, ethnic, global, world, gendered, raced, and sexed—not by prioritizing the veracity of the many "worlds" he gives us access to, but by showcasing the healing power of the self-reflexive, collaborative, and imaginative act of world-making. This can be seen most clearly through the text's self-conscious (and feminist) emphasis on writing, reading, narration, and spirituality.

BEYOND AUTHENTICITY, BEYOND NEOLIBERAL VALUE: READING, WRITING, AND
INTERPRETATION AS QUEER PRAXIS IN THE BRIEF AND WONDROUS LIFE OF OSCAR WAO

"I'm not entirely sure Oscar would have liked this designation Fukú story. He was a hardcore sci-fi and fantasy man, believed that was the kind of story we were all living in. He'd ask: What more sci-fi than the Santo Domingo? What more fantasy than the Antilles?

But now that I know how it all turns out, I have to ask, in turn: What more fukú?"—Yuniór (Díaz 6)

With regard to *Oscar Wao*'s treatment of writing and representation, scholars have largely focused on the multiple narrative voices, linguistic styles, and intertextuality in Díaz's

novel as essential to providing, in Dimmock's formulation, access to a "continuum" of world literature (Finn, Hanna "Reassembling," Heredia, Machado Saez, Jay, Saldívar "Junot," Milian "Latino/a"). Since, as Damrosch explains, this continuum is not necessarily restricted to an elite world of letters and can involve multiple worlds of popular, folk, and high brow narrative practices, it is clear how Díaz's highly textured novel can provide openings to these networked and "worldly" realms of literature. Perhaps the most accurate accounting of Díaz's worldly Latina/o literature is José David Saldívar's notion of an emerging "...planetary framework marked by the Global South's narratological voices and poetics..." and that, contrary to McGurl's work on post-1945 U.S. literature, "has been promoted and translated into a genuinely planetary genre, outside the confines of U.S.-centric creative writing programs" ("Junot" 344). In this assessment, Saldívar alludes to the excessiveness of Díaz's narrative and the limitations of McGurl's readings of post-1945 ethnic American literature generated by his "program era" thesis, both of which I have also discussed.

Saldívar's notion of a planetary *genre* and his consideration of Díaz's genre play is also of utmost importance for not only thinking about *The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* as part of "the world-system of letters" ("Junot" 322), but also for understanding the political role of fantasy, magic, spirituality, myth and other elements of untranslatability in the novel. As Díaz explains in an interview with Paul Jay, the book's most interesting claims [about "New World masculinity"] "...unfold in the parts [of the novel] that get ignored by everyone, which [are] the arguments that the book is making in its genre claims..." (Díaz qtd in Jay 184). Importantly, genre has multiple meanings in the novel. According to Yuni, the primary narrator in *Oscar Wao*, by the time Oscar is in high school he is deeply committed to "the Genres" and "gorg[ed] himself on a steady stream of Lovecraft, Wells, Burroughs, Howard, Alexander, Herbert,

Asimov, Bova, and Heinlein, and even the Old Ones who were already beginning to fade—E.E. ‘Doc’ Smith, Stapledon, and the guy who wrote all the Doc Savage books...” (Díaz 21). In this sense, the “Genres” are a certain type of popular culture, lowbrow narrative—for Oscar, SF and fantasy—that play a large thematic role in shaping Oscar’s (and, more subtly, Yuniór’s) identity and understanding of masculinity. Additionally, Oscar’s (and Yuniór’s) interest in the Genres spill over into the aesthetic of the narrative under construction, constantly peppering it with SF and fantasy analogies and references. In this way, multiple dialoguing genres—that is, the conventions and preconceived ways people read—crucially inform the novel’s aesthetic and the imaginative world under construction (and interpretation). A mix of historical fiction, biography, magical realist, immigrant, and quest narrative, the intertwining of literary genres (writing styles) with plentiful SF, academic, literary, spiritual, and popular culture references, can cause readers to question what is the “real” story and what is superficial or aesthetic. As I’ve already shown, readers and critics wonder what is “authentic” and what is formulaic and, more subtly, what experiences can and cannot be translated. As I explain further below, it is this constantly evolving, collective, unforlosable, and untranslatable narrative that makes *Oscar Wao* distinctive and significant among both conceptions of world literature and ethnic literature and for mapping new narrative directions in Latin/a/o fiction. Moreover, it is through aesthetic attention to the (queer) spiritual that this narrative is made possible.

A primary entryway for us to think about the way that reading, writing, and untranslatableability (vis-à-vis spirituality) help index diasporic experience and facilitate a decolonial and queer narrative practice in *Oscar Wao*, is through an analysis of what Yuniór calls the fukú. The fukú is the curse of the Antilles that began at the time of the Spanish conquest and it is also a controlling device for understanding Oscar & Yuniór’s own queerness, which I argue

is essential for their attempts at narrating and facilitating a zafa, or the countercurse to fukú (Díaz 1). I will then turn to consider the ways that the novel deploys supernatural figures and narrates events instigated by a queer, feminist Global South spirituality (Afro-Caribbean, Mesoamerican, Latina/o Catholic) at the most critical junctures in the novel's action and that, ultimately, allow the narrative to persist. Moreover, Yuniór's willingness to narrate and preserve the significance of these events (despite their irrationality, lack of "authority," and queerness) is indicative of his emerging social-spiritual narration and commitment to the politics of storytelling even when they exceed their conventional reference points. In fact, a careful examination of these narrative turning points reveals that, although the narrator (Yuniór) and the protagonist (Oscar de León) are males, the female or queer characters and/or spirits are responsible for the persistence of the narrative (and the social-spiritual narration and practice it generates). Thus, unlike in *Sleep Dealer*, the male narrator in *Oscar Wao* facilitates the power of queer, feminist spirituality and storytelling with an awareness and critique of the way traditional masculine and heteronormative ideals have either devalued or appropriated these practices (especially from non-western traditions); Yuniór instead delivers these practices to (and allows them to exist via) women of color and queer characters.

Fukú, Zafa, and other Supernatural Narrative Elements

In Caren Irr's study of 21st century U.S. political fiction, she argues that this emerging tradition of writing, including Díaz's *Oscar Wao*, is largely influenced by the organizational logic of networked media systems. In addition to the influence of networked (digital) media systems, though, *Oscar Wao* is deeply invested in text-based media and the technology of writing and reading. Readers of *Oscar Wao* who actively participate in reading (and writing), especially science fiction and fantasy (highly participatory genres), but also literary fiction and

other genres, will be the most privy to the countless references in the novel. These readers will also likely be the most captivated by the novel's mythic framing ("They say it [fukú] came first from Africa...") that introduces the reader to an origin story of epic proportions—the story of the fukú Americanus or the curse of the New World and the novel's single most controlling literary device—as well as its metatextual and paratextual devices. In other words, book nerds and storytelling geeks will be most captivated by the text.

At the same time, even casual (western) readers of *Oscar Wao* will pick up on the mythic writing conventions that are introduced in the narrator's prologue and that cue our interpretation of "Stories that Matter" (often to a collective), whether we believe in them or not.¹⁰⁹ The metatextual references that the narrator makes about the act of writing ("while I was finishing this book"), as well as the myriad footnotes that intercept the unfolding story, also draw attention to the act of writing and storytelling as collective and significant. In fact, the entire prologue is as interested in the act and purpose of writing and storytelling vis-à-vis the concept of fukú as it is about the content of the story itself. As Yunior explains, fukú (the curse) is reflected and *enacted* in countless collective stories of the Dominican Republic and of the Dominican diaspora across time. Reinforcing the significance of textuality and storytelling, Yunior then explains that the only counter spell for the fukú is "Not surprisingly, ...a word [zafa]" (Díaz 7). This idea of a textual counter spell leads the narrator to suggest, "...I wonder if this book ain't a zafa of sorts. My very own counterspell" (Díaz 7). Before the reader has even cracked the novel's first chapter, Díaz has already emphasized the mythic and practical significance of storytelling and textuality.

¹⁰⁹ I agree that the novel was primarily written for a U.S. audience in a way that would push them to confront worlds that they otherwise would have little interest in (Hanna "Reassembling," Finn).

The mythic significance of the technology of writing (and, thus, narration) in *Oscar Wao* is also explained from the perspective of a Dominican diasporic subject (“Hail Dominicanis”) (Díaz 171). As I have noted, however, the importance of this narration is not because of its pure or authentic qualities—in fact Oscar’s term “Dominicanis” speaks to its alien-ness—but precisely because it is not any of these things and yet still attempts to relay the perspective and experiences of the Dominican diaspora. In fact, Yunió makes clear to the reader that Oscar is about as un-Dominican as it gets—both in his New Jersey barrio and back on the island. Moreover, Yunió subtly reveals his own “inauthentic” status, or his “otakuness,” in the diaspora and back home (Díaz 21). Particularly, the latter comes across through his hesitancy about the quality of his fukú story, claiming his own as, “[not] the best of the lot . . .” and explaining the diminishing belief in fukú among his generation (Díaz 6-7). Orthodox belief, authority, and authenticity, however, do not matter for Yunió’s narrative purposes. As he explains at the novel’s outset about fukú: “It’s perfectly fine if you don’t believe in these ‘superstitions.’ In fact, it’s better than fine—it’s perfect. Because no matter what you believe, fukú believes in you” (Díaz 5). As the ambiguous “you” reinforces, fukú (like racism, sexism and other oppressive systems) is not dependent on an authentic identity or a belief in order to implicate everyone.

In a similar vein of authenticity and (il)legibility, it is also important that Díaz does not narrate the experience of fukú under a different western or academic name. As Yunió describes it, fukú effects natural events, personal tragedies and perceptions, and exists in all dimensions of time (“the shrimp you ate today was the cramp that killed you tomorrow”) (Díaz 3). The curse can even extend to internally held prejudicial beliefs as in the case with Yunió’s “twelve-daughter Uncle” who believed that “he’d been cursed by an old lover to never have male children” (Díaz 5). While it is readily and consistently apparent that fukú indexes what could

otherwise be called the system of white, heteropatriarchal supremacy and capitalism, Díaz gives the curse a name that is at once unreal (“It’s perfectly fine if you don’t believe...”) and hyperreal (it effects everyone, everywhere, and in all dimensions of time).¹¹⁰ Fukú is both a name and a non-name in that it references something that may or may not exist and it does not hold up under strict academic, scientific, or even creative naming protocols (all alluded to in the novel numerous times through genre references, references to the academy, Oscar’s esoteric language, and by the frequent capitalization of Certain Words). The significance of fukú and, as a result, of Yunior’s narrative project in general, hinges on that which falls outside of the realm of direct translation (moving from one language to another) and authenticity.

It makes sense then to turn a critical eye toward other instances of illegibility or what Emily Apter suggests are untranslatable concepts that are often a part of a spiritual hermeneutic such as the novel’s appearance of a magical mongoose and faceless men, as well as La Inca’s miraculous prayer intervention in Beli’s near death experience. Interestingly, the untranslatable in *Wao* is often the raced and sexed survival experiences of a diasporic Dominican family (and of Yunior) that have otherwise been erased or forgotten. Through recourse to a queer, feminist spiritual realm, however, Yunior is able to convey these experiences as a network of relationships and stories (physical and metaphysical) that are multi-temporal and that largely live

¹¹⁰ In an interview with Paula Moya, Díaz explains that, for him, “the family fukú is rape” and, specifically, the “rape culture of the European colonization of the New World...” (“The Search” 397). This colonial rape culture, of course, is deeply connected to white heteropatriarchal capitalism that first emerged vis-à-vis European imperialism (and, as Díaz explains, extends to the rape culture of the Trujillato and the Dominican diaspora). (See Anibal Quijano’s explanation of the “coloniality of power” and Maria Lugones “coloniality of gender” for theoretical development of this concept Díaz indexes). Under this formulation, we can consider the idea of white, heteropatriarchal capitalism as a curse that we are all collectively and mindlessly under. Lola’s later indictment of Dominicans and Dominican Americans as “Ten million Trujillos...” and the novel’s stark tension between silence and complicity and speech and actions strengthen this interpretation.

on because of women and queer figures. In facilitating this unfaithful translation, Yuniors enacts a social-spiritual narration (connected, embodied, self-reflexive) to relay what is not quite perceptible and what is not quite nameable. The novel turns, thus, to a discourse of untranslatability to narrate significant events rather than to remain silent, to revert to established narrative devices, or to abandon the project of representation altogether. What emerges is a queer depiction of narration (zafa?) that centers women, queers, and a collective spiritual imaginary while re-coding heteropatriarchal masculinity as irredeemably problematic and inadequate for a decolonial narration or politics. *Oscar Wao* is about the power of a certain kind of not yet codified narrative representation.

Queering Oscar Wao

It may seem odd to consider the narrative we are presented with in *The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* as queer given Yuniors hypermasculine identity performance, the often sexist stories he relays, and Oscar's ongoing quest for a specifically heteropatriarchal romance. Rather than catalog the many ways that Yuniors critiques and undercuts his own hypermasculinity or the way Oscar resists the many attempts by his mother and others to "norm" his masculinity, I find it helpful to consider the way the novel distinctly does not present either Yuniors or Oscar as traditional (heteropatriarchal) heroes and, instead, leaves it open for readers to interpret how a feminist, queer spirituality, and writing can become tools for developing new stories (and ways of being). In fact, despite the titular indication that the novel is going to have Oscar as the protagonist or hero, Beli (Oscar's mother), Yuniors, and Lola (Oscar's sister) are stronger narrative presences in the text. As the title also indicates, Oscar's life is brief and senselessly (and misogynistically) tragic, and is presented largely in the context of more significant events that take place in his mother's life and in the past. Oscar's love and life

troubles are presented as just one node in his family's networked fukú troubles. Moreover, as I will explain later, Oscar's coming of age (and the novel's resolution) occurs apart from his sexual awakening, which further confirms a queer deviation from typical conceptions of a young protagonist and hero.

As for Yuniór, although his narrative voice is the most prominent, he is not deeply intertwined in the events he narrates so we do not often hear things from his first person perspective. At the same time, he does not assume a position of (detached) third person narrative control. In fact, he seems to straddle this line by being occasionally involved in the unfolding plot—as Lola's sometimes boyfriend and Oscar's sometimes friend—and at other times he seems to receive his information second hand from various family members.¹¹¹ In this way, Yuniór often admits to imaginatively filling in gaps of the stories he tells and to their being several different ways that a story could have transpired; he also does not grow or advance toward any sort of epiphany over the course of his narration—in fact, his character's most pronounced development is his increased concern about the *usefulness* of the stories he has written. As Monica Hanna notes, “the major self-revelations of Yuniór revolve around his development as a writer/intellectual” (“A Portrait” 90). In other words, Yuniór's major growth in the novel is his increasingly serious and queer interest in writing and narrating the De León's fukú story and possible zafa. Importantly, Yuniór picks up this queer commitment from Oscar who writes “From can't see in the morning to can't see at night” (Díaz 326). Any other character changes for Yuniór seem to be consequential to this crucial development.

¹¹¹ There is one moment in the text where Yuniór verifies a story about Beli by alluding to its transcription from a taped recording (Díaz 160). Another subheading—“Ybon, as recorded by Oscar”—indicates that what follows are Ybon's words (Díaz 289).

Echoing Yuniór's narration that is both a part of and apart from the De León's story (resonant with his non-familial status), Yuniór's writing practice is also influenced by, although not a replica of, Oscar's own queer relationship to writing and reading. We know from the beginning of the story that part of Oscar and Yuniór's friendship (apart from Yuniór's desire for Lola) has to do with their similarly queer interest in the Genres and in writing, even if, as Yuniór explains, he is better at "hide[ing] his [own] otakuness" from others than Oscar (Díaz 21). This similar and very nerdy attachment to fantasy and its language is never so evident as in the narrative Yuniór creates in *Oscar Wao*, which brilliantly and seamlessly interweaves rich SF and fantasy references and metaphors in a way that could only be produced by someone who is truly enmeshed in these discourses. José David Saldívar is, indeed, astute in his analysis of the queerness of Oscar's "closeted" reading practices and its many negative social consequences. Oscar's (and later Yuniór's) dedication to reading (and writing—"from can't see in the morning to can't see at night") does not align with the masculine, heterosexual ideals of either New Jersey barrio latinidad or Dominicanidad. Thus, as Saldívar argues, this queer practice of reading and writing that Oscar and Yuniór engage in is intimately connected to their "decolonial 'aesthetic education'" and "emergent, queered, dissident gender formation" ("Junot" 328).

Saldívar's attention to the queerness of reading via the closet metaphor in *Oscar Wao*, however, is just the beginning for thinking about the way reading, writing, and queerness operate in complicated yet productive ways in the novel. Particularly, Saldívar's analysis does not consider the (gendered and sexed) limitations of Oscar's reading and writing practices and how Yuniór re-orient his own narrative practice as a result. Saldívar focuses on and interprets Oscar's closeted reading practice as largely a space where he "is free to feel, fantasize, and love" and where the speculative realist fantasy he reads participates in the "decolonial aesthetics of

science fiction” (329-30). As Díaz has commented on in interviews, however, the aesthetics and culture of SF and fantasy have often been complicit in the sexist, racist, and heteronormative values of mainstream society (Jay). In fact, Yuniór shows us that the heteronormativity and binary understanding of gender that often characterize the classic SF and fantasy literature that Oscar reads also problematically color his expectations for a romantic relationship. Particularly, Oscar fantasizes about living out the role of the doomsday hero who “saves” and “wins” the woman of his dreams and, later, he problematically expects his platonic friendships to similarly evolve (Díaz 27, 187). When those friendships fail to evolve in such a way, Oscar is then prone to violent outbursts directed at his female love interests (Díaz 187). These heterosexist romance stories also infiltrate Oscar’s writing (especially early on) and they influence Oscar’s final and fatal attempt at love with Ybon near the end of the novel.

Alternatively, Yuniór learns about writing and his own masculinity and sexuality from Oscar’s life and writing. Unlike Oscar, Yuniór reads broadly (as indicated from his diverse array of intertextual references that exceed fantasy and SF) and socially, including his own social environs. As José David Saldivar and Yomaira C. Figueroa explain, Yuniór is a superb reader of more than just texts and his masculinity evolves through his writing and reading relationships (including his reading of Oscar’s sexuality and masculinity). Even after Oscar’s death, Yuniór is still reading Oscar’s writing and, in a sense, he is still in dialogue with Oscar through his own narration of *Oscar Wao*. As Milian has suggested, like Borges before him, for Díaz, writing is reading (both texts and others) and involves a large network that, in the case of *Oscar Wao*, reflects the competing ideologies that shape Oscar and Yuniór’s masculinity and subjectivity. Importantly, though, while Oscar performs a queer, closeted reading practice that reinscribes his

queered gender identity, reading and writing gradually queer Yunion—the text’s hypermasculine, Latino ideal—and his narrative practice.

Following this line of thinking, I would like to think about queerness even further and in a way that goes beyond non-normative sexual practices to include Yunion’s writing. While Yunion continues to brag about his hypermasculine and misogynistic relationship with women (that seek authority and control), his own writing gradually seems to give up narrative control in favor of collective, shareable, model-able creations that lack an authoritative representational scheme. This is evidenced in Yunion’s compulsion for incorporating others’ stories in the service of his (collective) own story (e.g., fantasy analogies and references), his direct lifting of other writers’ creative concepts (e.g. referring to himself as “the Watcher”), and his willingness to hand off his stories to someone else so that they can create something more powerful (e.g., Lola, Oscar, and eventually to Lola’s daughter).¹¹² Beyond going against western traditions of literary authorship and the capitalist enterprise of (original) literature, one way that we can think about this approach to writing as queer is with the help of Martin Manalansan’s notion of “queerness as mess.” For Manalansan, queerness as mess “refers to material and affective conditions of impossible subjects as well as an analytical stance that negates, deflects, if not resists the

¹¹² It is apt that Yunion refers to himself in the novel as “the Watcher” or, interchangeably, “your humble watcher” and “your faithful watcher.” The idea of a “Watcher” refers to a specific race of extraterrestrials created by the writers of the popular Marvel comic books and appearing for the first time in their series, *Fantastic Four* (See issue #13, April 1963). In the comic book series, the Watchers are among the oldest species and they are known for observing and archiving *all kinds* of knowledge about the Universe. They are also (semi)committed to not using their knowledge to interfere in the unfolding events of other civilizations. For Uatu, the Watcher that Yunion most identifies with, this policy proves difficult to maintain, and he finds himself having broken his pact of non-interference multiple times. In a similar way, while Yunion is not an all-knowing, categorizing & ordering kind of narrator, he is a narrator that is self-consciously collecting information, stories, and knowledge from others with an ethical and self-reflexive purpose. As a writer, Yunion is only as good as he is a Watcher with a keen and ethical sense of when and how to interfere.

‘cleaning up’ function of the normative” (“The Messy,” “The Stuff”). Yunior and Oscar are indeed “impossible subjects” caught between the experiences of the Dominican Republic and the diaspora and the sins and virtues of previous generations; but unlike Oscar’s writing practice, Yunior’s does not “clean up” well along normative genre or interpretive lines. As Manalansan explains, queerness is about “the potentials and possibilities behind quotidian practices and struggles of peripheral lives” (“The Messy”).

In the context of *Oscar Wao*, the queerness of Yunior’s writing can be indexed in his belief in zafa. Zafa reflects Yunior’s belief that stories are not just individual transactionable entities for quick and one-time consumption, but that they crucially link us to other people, ancestors, knowledge, and codes of survival.¹¹³ This queerness emerges most keenly through Yunior’s developing social-spiritual narration. In these narrative instances, Yunior brings to the fore previously ghosted or marginalized queer, feminist experiences of spirituality that help him narrate the unbelievable survival of Beli and the equally unbelievable network of actors, storytellers, and felt experiences that are pivotal for her persistence. In making his narrative network of stories and experiences even more diffuse, Yunior further destabilizes the first person, realistic testimonial connection to trauma narratives that have become familiar to immigrant narratives and that have drawn criticism for their predictable appeal to empathy and cross-difference “connection” in neoliberal contexts. The expectation for individual narrative authority, a hero, and an appeal to empathy are unfulfilled in *Oscar Wao* (Hanna “A Portrait”). Instead, there are no predictable scripts for how readers will react to the stories Yunior narrates.

¹¹³ In his own life, Díaz has repetitively rejected a narrative of exceptionalism with regard to his “literary genius,” going so far as to suggest that he “won the literary lottery” (Pugachevsky). Thus, similar to Cisneros, Díaz’s has advocated for other writers of color through the creation of a writer’s workshop and expressed his concern with MFA program as unsupportive of writers of color (“MFA v. POC”). For Díaz, writing is inherently relational and connected to power structures and not solely individual and self-reflective of an internal, unique knowledge.

As I have discussed already via the literary history of ethnic and world literature, this queer, collective approach to writing throws a wrench in critics' ongoing concern with (political) authenticity and (aesthetic) originality. The whole novel is, in essence, a messy narrative interference or zafa; an (un)faithful queer translation and witnessing.

(UN)FAITHFUL WITNESSING, QUEER SPIRITUALITY, AND SOCIAL-SPIRITUAL NARRATION

"We postmodern plátanos tend to dismiss the Catholic devotion of our Viejas as atavistic, an embarrassing throwback to the golden days, but it's exactly at these moments, when all hope has vanished, when the end draws near, that prayer has dominion" (Díaz 144)

"This is your chance. If blue pill, continue. If red pill, return to the Matrix" (Díaz 285)

In Yomaira C. Figueroa's article "Faithful Witnessing as Practice: Decolonial Readings of *Shadow of Your Black Memory* and *The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*" she calls readers to turn to women of color feminist Maria Lugones's concept of "faithful witnessing" to better understand and read resistance in Díaz's text. Following Lugones, Figueroa claims that faithful witnessing "makes visible the often unseen consequences of the colonality of power, knowledge, and gender" (643). Figueroa also notes the double meaning of "witnessing" that accommodates both legal and religious registers, but she does not take into account the way that *Oscar Wao* also incorporates queer, feminist spiritual events at the most crucial turning points in the story. This not only misses a significant aspect of *Oscar Wao*'s narrative, but also overlooks a major methodological intervention of Lugones' "faithful witnessing," which is to "take seriously the knowledge of those who have historically been silent, cast as ahistorical subjects, or considered insignificant" (Figueroa 644). As this project has argued and shown, women of color

feminist thought and spirituality have continuously been devalued, both inside and outside of the academy.

If faithful witnessing testifies to that which is both seen and unseen, Yunior's narrative attention to the metaphysical and spiritual in *Oscar Wao* clearly follows suit. Yunior regularly reminds readers that "We're trawling in silences here" and that "Even your Watcher has his silences, his paginas en blanco [blank pages]" (Díaz 243, 149). Following this logic, if something is unheard, it is also often unseen. But as the metaphor of "paginas en blanco" suggest, silences can still gain ghostly presences. In a similar way, the metaphysical phenomena Yunior describes may be "real" or have material effects and yet not be discussed or recorded. A primary example of this is the fukú, which Yunior describes as, "like all the most important things on the Island, not something folks really talked about" (Díaz 2). The narrative Yunior creates, therefore, attempts to speak what has been considered unutterable; it speaks what has not and possibly cannot be faithfully witnessed or translated.

Scholars' analyses of the metaphysical and spiritual narrative elements in *Oscar Wao*, however, have largely approached them as systems to be (partially) explained or mediated by the fantasy and SF references. Specifically, this interpretation understands the imbrication of the spiritual with the SF and fantasy references in *Wao* as a narrative necessity for delivering the brutal (yet marvelous) reality of the Dominican Republic to U.S. readers (Pifano, Lanzendorfer, Bautista). Others understand the incorporation of the metaphysical and spiritual in *Oscar Wao* as a way to intertwine (and simultaneously implicate) the realm of ethnic experience with that of the (white) mainstream (Finn). Alternatively, Ramon Saldivar interprets this aspect of the text's narrative strategy as compounding an already obtuse and critical stance toward the relevance of ethnic literary production in the 21st century ("Historical Fantasy"). In each instance,

nonetheless, the novel's quiet use of a feminist, queer spirituality for narrating crucial events are either conflated with the "fantastic" of the SF and fantasy references (Bautista, Pifano, Saldívar "Historical") or ignored altogether (Finn). While the novel is indeed "trawling in silences," which may, as Pifano explains, require "auxiliary" texts for translation and comprehension, it is important to take seriously Díaz's turn toward the opaque, often untranslatable resources of women of color writers and queer spiritualities to narrate the survival and persistence of the increasingly queer characters in *Oscar Wao*.

Further evidence for the significance of the spiritual in *Oscar Wao* is the unequal preponderance of fantasy and SF references, which are more consistently used to describe the outsized and hypermasculine violence, prejudice, and isolation that the characters experience.¹¹⁴ Unfortunately, these experiences have all too many intertexts and narrative predecessors. To the contrary, we see Yuniór turn to queer, feminist spirituality to narrate the persistence and survival of the de León family—a truly unthinkable and incomprehensible feat—and of Yuniór, who also works in a similar realm of illegibility and persistence. Pifano correlates this narration of metaphysical events with collective (second-hand) storytelling and those devoid of metaphysics with events Yuniór witnesses first hand or receives from a first person account. This bifurcation, however, reinforces the idea that only "indigenous" cultures are "impregnated by autochthonous influences and the supernatural," while more modern cultures turn to factual reportage (Pifano 8). To the contrary, Yuniór's emerging social-spiritual narration more accurately shows him resisting these binaries of authenticity and making room for a messy, queer testimony that takes

¹¹⁴ Whereas Yuniór's narration of chapter 1 (on Oscar's early life) is full of fantasy and popular culture references, footnotes, and humor, these references diminish in chapter 3's turning point narration of Beli's beating in the cane field and her miraculous survival. The same shift is detectable in the scenes leading up to Oscar's Fall (i.e., attempted suicide) (190), his parallel beating in the cane fields (293-300), and Abelard's (Oscar's maternal grandfather) arrest leading to the fall of the House of Cabral (Beli's once affluent family) (233).

seriously a quasi-religious, feminist spiritual narrative practice and undermines heteropatriarchal, capitalist order.

Before turning to Yuniór's social-spiritual narrative, it is important first to clarify the distinction between narrative events that are spiritual in nature and a social-spiritual narration that opens itself up to spiritual events and experiences and engages them in the narrative process. The latter allows the unknown, superfluous events and experiences of the Dominican diaspora to transfigure the textual narration and it is this narration that I'm interested in *Oscar Wao*. That Yuniór incorporates the spiritual not only into the stories that he receives secondhand (Beli's beating, Oscar's beating, etc.), but also into his own interpretation that concludes the novel and forecasts the future is further evidence that the spiritual is not solely a part of the collective past (and ethnic authenticity), but a part of the diasporic, queer, feminist future (Díaz 329). As many scholars have argued, the fantasy and other intertextual references help to shape a new, distinctly diasporic narrative, but the spiritual aspects of these narrative turning points also play a significant role and should not be wholly subordinated to the former. By turning to these (un)conventions, privileging women of color and queer ways of narrating, and ultimately holding a space for a future female narration, Yuniór does not just translate an experience into more easily comprehensible or known signifiers, but transfigures the text into something not entirely knowable and full of queer potential for narrating and resisting heteropatriarchal masculinity.

Textual Transfiguration: From Fantasy and Magical Realism to Social-Spirituality

After the initial introduction in *Wao* to the concept of fukú on the first few pages, the apparition of the man without a face is the first metaphysical event that Yuniór narrates. The man is first seen by Beli (twice), but is also seen by Beli's mom, Oscar, and eventually Yuniór. It is important that Yuniór incorporates these visions into his narration even if he does not experience

or understand them himself and even though they are speculative. It is even more significant since he admits that his own generation is less apt at believing in the fukú or at maintaining the “extraordinary tolerance for extreme phenomena” of previous generations (Díaz 7).¹¹⁵ Moreover, when Yuniór narrates Beli’s first apparition of the faceless man he does so in a way that expresses her confusion and suspicion of what she has seen—a distinct departure from the aesthetic of magical realism (Bautista).¹¹⁶ Beli’s next vision of the faceless man is narrated more cursorily, but still merits a reaction: “...when he [the abductor] turned toward her she saw that he *didn’t have a face*. All the strength fell right out of her” (Díaz 141 italics original). The second occurrence demonstrates less emphasis on the veracity of the event and more emphasis on its effect. Also, since the second vision takes place as Trujillo’s henchmen are abducting Beli, Yuniór’s more confident narration indexes his ability to believe and to react to the outsize horror of heteropatriarchal violence—crucial in the context of the novel’s critique of silence and developing social-spiritual practice.

While the novel continually references narrative silences and historical gaps that populate the lives of its characters (paginas en blanco), the faceless man apparitions become legible manifestations of these silences that break into the lives of women and queer people. That the faceless man is, indeed, male, reinforces the idea that men in particular (even well-meaning men like Beli’s father, Abelard) have been dangerously complicit in maintaining heteropatriarchal and

¹¹⁵ Soon after this admission, Yuniór then asks: “How else could we have survived what we have survived?” (Díaz 149). With this conclusion, Yuniór acknowledges that disbelief has been appropriated as a survival strategy, but one that also denies and keeps silent collective experiences of heteropatriarchal and colonial violence.

¹¹⁶ Unlike in classic magical realist texts where the fantastic and magical are presented as un-noteworthy amidst the everyday material reality of life, Yuniór describes Beli’s vision differently: “Beli didn’t know if it was the heat or the two beers she drank...but our girl could have sworn that a man sitting in a rocking chair in front of one of the hovels *had no face* and he waved at her as she passed...” (Díaz 135 italics original).

colonial violence at the most egregious and mundane scales. Men without faces, of course, are also men without vision. Although these men have bodies and, in at least one instance, can recognize others (the first faceless man waves at Beli), they seem to lack the ability to respond in meaningful ways. In each instance, the faceless men act as anti-witnesses that quickly appear and disappear or are somehow integrated naively into the scene of horrific violence. At the same time, the faceless men also resonate with the Mesoamerican indigenous (nahuas) religious belief in creating “one’s face (body) and heart (soul)” that Anzaldúa invokes in her edited collection, *Making Face, Making Soul* (1990). For Anzaldúa, women of color feminists must rip off the masks imposed on them and “begin to displace the white and colored male typographers and become ourselves typographers, printing our own words on the surfaces, the plates, of our bodies” (xvi). The dual signification of the faceless man, thus, reflects a primary tension in the novel: heteropatriarchal inefficacy and complicity versus an active, queer, spiritually attuned interpretation of one’s own reality or path.¹¹⁷

As a whole, Yunió’s narration of the “faceless man” visions prime us for accepting a social-spiritual narration that also creates in the novel a queer, Global South feminist chronotope. For it is significant that only women and queer(-ed) characters witness and presumably relay these metaphysical narrative events. These visions (and other spiritual events) provocatively link the atrocities of heteropatriarchy across time and space through multiple generations who have similar visions. For instance, both Beli and Oscar are beaten and have visions of the faceless man in the sugarcane fields, which also link the novel’s ongoing time and space to slavery in the

¹¹⁷ The vision of the faceless man is also not the first time that Mesoamerican religion and spirituality is indexed in the novel. The religious idea of *nagualismo* or shapeshifting—a popular belief among Mesoamerican and shamanistic religions, as well as women of color feminists—also makes several significant appearances in the novel.

Caribbean. Moreover, Oscar and Yunion have similar visions in New Jersey, which expands the time and space fluidity beyond the Caribbean to include the diaspora and to extend beyond networks of kinship. This is a queer representation of time and space wherein the experience of time is not teleological, it transcends life spans, and it can be experienced in multiple directions. Díaz could have easily used SF tropes to convey this experience of time, but spirituality connects back more readily to everyday felt experiences. It also bypasses the teleology of technological advancement and its connections to capitalist entrepreneurship and profit.

By extending the receptivity to these visions beyond family ties, Díaz also suggests that the *fukú* is not solely an individual or individual family's problem. As I will show, the very reach of the visions and other spiritual experiences far exceed the limits of family, nation, and ethnic identity. Women in La Inca's prayer circle, Clives the "evangelical taxista," Beli's "chinos" that believed in the "curse" and came to her aid, and many more disconnected individuals respond to the acts of violence seemingly because they too can recognize the all-encompassing hold (mind, body, spirit) of heteropatriarchal, white supremacist violence that undergirds the Trujillato (and grips its subjects) and because they believe in something better. Just as Oscar is "nada de Dominicano" and, really, rather alien in many contexts, the experiences of those caught up in Díaz's queer, Global South feminist chronotope exceed the existing understandings of Latin American or Latino/a solidarity. As Milian explains with her theory of "Latining," the concepts and experiences of "Latino/a" and "Latin American" slip out of their established signifiers (e.g., brown, magical realist, regional spiritual practices) and cross-pollinate with others. Of course, this expansion of networks beyond family, nation, or ethnicity works deeply against a capitalist impulse to blame failure (and success) on individuals or families (e.g. cultural pathology). Similarly, a desire for something better that is outside the confines of the existing system (e.g.,

more material goods, financial gain, heterosexual romance) as indexed by the spiritual is also significant for the novel's anti-capitalist imagination. Finally, receptivity to these visions and to verbally acknowledging and narrating them (what develops into Yuniór's social-spiritual narration) is **the way the novel queers time, space, family, and nation**. It is the primary way for characters to remain in contact with historical memory and with others. As Lanzendorfer notes, although far from a magical realist presentation of the fantastic, the treatment of the metaphysical and spiritual in *Oscar Wao* tilts in favor of its legitimate (but not mundane) existence. How, I ask, might this narration respond to the truly unthinkable, unwriteable horrors of heteropatriarchal violence?

I suggest that the faceless man visions not only serve as a premonition for the onset of hypermasculine and heteronormative violence, but that they also set readers up for a social-spiritual narrative practice that Yuniór is developing. While the whole novel is not narrated in this way, the social-spiritual narrative is developed and heightened during scenes narrating metaphysical and spiritual events and, importantly, the survival and persistence of the de Leon/Cabral family. In fact, in the scenes of violence against the de Leon/Cabral family, less emphasis is placed on narrating the violence as it is on narrating survival. This is especially true during the novel's pivotal scene where Beli is beaten, likely raped, and left for dead in the cane fields by Trujillo's men. It is this moment, as Yuniór explains, that catapults Beli into her new life in the U.S. and her role as the Queen of Diaspora. In this scene, Yuniór offers readers three differently spiritual explanations for Beli's survival of the near fatal beating: 1) the power of prayer by La Inca, Beli's grandmother, 2) the assistance of Beli's nagual or part animal, part human spirit, and 3) her own individual anger and ancestral rage (i.e., her Oya spirit). The faceless man visions that precede this scene leave readers open to the spiritual and metaphysical

scope of a dictatorship that would commit such atrocities, as well as the possibility of a survival that would draw from spiritual and imaginative resources and the visions and actions of everyday people willing to respond to the unseen (a de-centered, collaborative authority).¹¹⁸ It also crucially revalues the narrative under construction not for its truth or authenticity, but for its attention to the unseen (unfaithful witnessing) and to the “yet to be” as the more significant aspects of storytelling.

Yunior (as well as Oscar near the end of the novel) distinctly understands writing as a political tool—“a zafa of sorts”—although one that should always be questioned and unsettled. One way of unsettling writing and narratives is by turning to less familiar and less appreciated narrative perspectives that embrace the metaphysical and spiritual as unknowable and complex, but also as a part of life, death, survival, and resistance. With this approach there is a literal honing of a vision that is beyond the writer and what he/she can see, feel, and master. In Yunior’s recollection of Beli’s survival we can read him making room for and facilitating other narrative responses to violence—namely queer, feminist ones—as notable, plausible, and powerful.¹¹⁹ The same, of course, is true with the novel’s conclusion that literally holds textual room for Lola’s daughter to craft her own response to the ongoing legacy of colonial, white heteropatriarchal trauma.

Yunior’s Social-Spiritual Narration

¹¹⁸ As readers of *Oscar Wao* know, there is a minor narrative thread suggesting that Beli’s father, Abelard, was writing a book about Trujillo’s supernatural powers before he was arrested. The mysterious disappearance of any evidence of this book or of Abelard’s writing as a whole, combined with the novel’s emphasis on silence, prompts a connection between the narrative Yunior is writing and Abelard’s unfinished work.

¹¹⁹ Despite Yunior’s acknowledgement of the unexplainable, supernatural aspects of Beli’s survival, at different instances he also deems all three spiritual experiences as individually sound and valid explanations.

The first supernatural explanation for Beli's survival—intercessory prayer—is also the most superficially familiar to western readers. Immediately following Beli's abduction, Yuniór turns to depict La Inca's response to the devastating turn of events. Overcome by despair, La Inca reportedly feels "a hand reach...out to her and she remember[s] who she was. Myotis Altagracia Toribio Cabral" (Díaz 144). La Inca's deceased husband's spirit also reaches out to her and tells her "You must save her...or no one else will" (144). And so, La Inca turns her efforts to Olympian level prayer beside the image of La Virgen de Altagracia where she is soon joined by "a flock of women, young and old, fierce and mansa, serious and alegre...arriving without invitation and taking up the prayer..." (144). What Yuniór then describes, however, is not your typical bedside prayer vigil, but a kind of prayer that is performed "...to exhaustion and beyond...to that glittering place where the flesh dies and is born again..." (Díaz 145). In other words, what Yuniór describes is something closer to what Randy P. Conner, David Hatfield Sparks and Mariya Sparks call a "shamanic state of consciousness" or a trance wherein the shaman "...travels mentally or spiritually to other worlds or realms of consciousness in order to...communicate with a deity or spirit" (27-8).¹²⁰ The association of La Inca with a shaman is also appropriate given that many African and African diasporic spiritual traditions are characterized by shamanism (Conner et al 1). In this line of thinking (which persists in the subsequent episodes), it is significant that certain shamans have been "looked upon as individuals belonging to an alternate gender or genders..." and "...represented a blending of traits assumed by the cultures concerned to be masculine, feminine and god-like or supernatural" (Conner et al 28). This gender bending is a common trait among many of the spiritual references

¹²⁰ Also suggestive, a person traditionally becomes a shaman by family legacy or because they are called upon in their dreams or during an altered state of consciousness by deities or spirits the way that Socorro (Abelard's wife), Oscar, and, later, Yuniór are called (Conner et al 28).

in *Wao* and adds another dimension of instability to what Yunion already acknowledges as the contemporary reader's unstable perception of the opaque and queer realm of spirituality, particularly non-Western and non-patriarchal spirituality (see first epigraph).

If one quickly glosses over La Inca's communion with her dead husband and the divine remembering of her ancestry as Yunion does, it is possible to register La Inca's intercessory prayer as a relatively familiar and even passé western response to disaster. Like the faceless man visions, though, this intercessory event subtly primes readers for the aggregate queer, feminist, Global South spiritual narrative network Yunion crafts for telling Beli's survival story. Further, the idea of networks of people *and* spirits coming together to resist enforced silence is introduced in La Inca's prayer scene. For instance, at the beginning of this passage we are presented with the significance of ancestry for spiritual empowerment. La Inca draws her power to act by remembering "who she [is]." For many African and African diasporic shamanic spiritual traditions, lineage is crucial for determining a person's spiritual function. Specifically, in the Yoruban spiritual tradition, the most prevalent in the African diaspora, practitioners believe that each person is the "spiritual son or daughter of a 'father' and 'mother' orisha."¹²¹ Together with "the/our ancestors," the orisha "provide spiritual guidance and imbue those who believe with spiritual energy..." (Conner et al 1-3). Given this spiritual history, Yoruban practitioners have both genealogical ancestors and spiritual ancestors, and both are potent sources of spiritual power.¹²² Thus the ancestral call La Inca receives to intervene in Beli's abduction, both from a mysterious "hand" and from her husband, resonate on multiple levels of the Yoruban belief in

¹²¹ In the Yoruban tradition, orisha refer to the many deities that emanate from the Yoruban supreme being, Olodumaré. (Conner et al 3)

¹²² Aside from being the most prevalent African-diasporic spirituality, I also understand the Cabral/de Leon family (and specifically Beli) to be influenced by Yoruba as Yunion references Beli's "Oya spirit" in the novel and Oya is a particular Yoruban orisha (Díaz 79)

the lasting impact of one's ancestry on certain inherited spiritual functions. That La Inca also shares a middle name with the Virgen de Altagracia, the Latino/a Catholic spiritual mother and protector of the Dominican Republic, further suggests the spiritual significance of her ancestry and the many layers of spirituality that converge in this event. The reference to the Virgen also reinforces the predominance and power of women in everyday spiritual matters. These are women who desire more than violence and suffering in their lives.

Together with the women, spirits, ancestors, and the Virgen, Yuniór narrates resistance to the heteropatriarchal violence of the Trujillo regime via an emerging female-centered, queer spiritual network. This network is crafted subtly at first and described with Yuniór's characteristic jocular approach to all things Dominican. Nonetheless, as it is followed by two other increasingly spiritual events (described respectively as "a miracle" and "extreme phenomena") that are also credited with saving Beli's life, one might consider the impact of these events not as individual oddities, but as a particular constellation that opens doors for thinking about and narrating survival and resistance (Díaz 148, 149). More specifically, with each subsequent event, Yuniór lends himself more freely to narrate what he cannot fully understand or master and, in this way, unsettles the years of silence and heteropatriarchy that have accumulated around the history of the Dominican Republic and its diaspora.

The subsequent accounts of Beli's survival take place in the cane fields where, left for dead, she has two encounters with the spirit world. Similar to the first experience, the second episode relies heavily on the role and power of ancestor spirits and further builds a queer network of those involved in Beli's survival. Yuniór describes this second account of survival as being, "like the Hand of the Ancestors themselves, a miracle" (Díaz 148). In this miraculous moment, just as Beli is "set to disappear across that event horizon...she found in herself one last

reservoir of strength: her Cabral magis...” (Díaz 148). Like the earlier episode, Yúnior overlaps different spiritual traditions to narrate Beli’s survival. The word “magis,” for instance, is a Latin word that means “more” or “better.” Magis is a significant concept for Catholics of the Jesuit order and refers to the philosophy of doing more for Christ and, therefore, for others. In the words of Father Barton Geger, it is an expression of (collective) aspiration and inspiration. In the context of the passage in *Wao*, we can deduct that Beli’s “Cabral magis” refers to a familial inherited (“Cabral”) spiritual belief or aspiration for “more” action and for “better” conditions. This, however, is a somewhat perplexing interpretation given the Cabral ancestors’ penchant for silence and inaction.¹²³ In fact, La Inca (who is Beli’s father’s cousin) is the only ancestor who has reportedly taken any action against unjust situations throughout the course of the novel.

It is at this point where attention to the overlapping spiritualities at play in the novel can help our interpretive abilities. Earlier in the novel, Yúnior describes Beli as “...one of those Oya-souls, always turning, allergic to tranquilidad” (Díaz 79). In the Yoruban-diasporic tradition, Oya is an orisha known for change. According to Conner et al, the orisha Oya is “a woman warrior, a bringer of tempests, and a guardian of the dead” (259). Quoting G. Edwards and J. Mason, they further describe Oya as “the fury of the tempest...the sweeping winds of change...revolution...the destruction of the old society making way for the new” (qtd in Conner et al 259). This Oya spirit is evidenced in Yúnior’s assessment of Beli’s survival when he explains: “her coraje [anger] saved her life” (148). Thus, we can supplement our interpretation of the Cabral magis with what we know about the Yoruban Oya to place more emphasis on *spiritual* lineage than genealogical. Even within the Cabral lineage, it is worth noting that the networks of those (non-spiritual actors) who act out against oppression are exclusively female

¹²³ See Abelard’s story.

(Beli, La Inca, and Socorro—Abelard’s wife). Later in the novel, a queered Oscar and Yunion also take up the Cabral magis—again, not limited by biology—in their own fraught attempts at speaking out. For Yunion this attempt is the unfolding narration of the novel itself. Given the queerness of Oscar and eventually Yunion, it is apt that Oya is also among those orishas known as the protectors “...against...sexual prejudice...” and the “patron of gender variant and homoerotically inclined males” (qtd. in Conner et al 3, Conner et al 259). Again, we can do best at understanding the significance of the spiritual narration of Beli’s survival if we unpack some of its references and consider them against the thematic backdrop of silence and narration, as well as gender, sex, and race oppression.

If, as I’ve shown, the narration of these episodes has further developed a queer, feminist, Global South spiritual chronotope, it is important to stress that this chronotope is what enables Beli’s story to be told. In the final explanation of Beli’s survival, the controlling narrative function of the queer, feminist spiritual network cannot be denied, but it also cannot be fully understood without considering it in the context of the other two episodes. It is in the final episode that Yunion openly acknowledges the instability of the story he is telling because of its supernatural elements. Despite the spiritual being a common thread across this narrative account, Yunion explains “...now we arrive at the strangest part of our tale. Whether what follows was a figment of Beli’s wracked imagination or something else altogether I cannot say” (Díaz 149). And, thus, readers are forced to confront the instability and untranslatability of Beli’s ultimate survival—her emergence from the cane fields and into a different life. Moreover, readers can now fully consider the role of the spiritual in the narrative that has been unfolding and the political possibilities of such narration in the context of the novel’s themes of violence, silence, marginality, and belonging.

As I have explained, shamanism has played a central role in understanding the spiritual references in *Wao*, and the final explanation of Beli's survival continues in this vein. According to Yuniór, just as Beli is dangling between life and death, she has a vision of what appears to be "an amiable mongoose" (149). Unlike the other visions in the novel that are seen for only a brief moment, the mongoose stays with Beli, speaks with her, and ultimately guides her out of the cane fields. Beli's mongoose is also distinctive because of its appearance. The mongoose is described as noteworthy because of its "golden lion eyes and the absolute black of its pelt," as well as its larger than average size (149). In a footnote the novel explains that the mongoose is an animal with a migratory history not dissimilar to many Dominicans and Dominican Americans. The mongoose reportedly "Accompanied humanity out of Africa and after a long furlough in India jumped ship to the other India, a.k.a. the Caribbean." The footnote also suggests that the mongoose "has proven itself to be an enemy of kingly chariots, chains and hierarchies" and instead is considered to be "an ally of Man" (Díaz 151).¹²⁴ The mongoose, thus, can clearly serve as a symbol of the resistance and tenacity of migratory populations, particularly in the context of the black Atlantic.

A closer look at the way the mongoose functions in Beli's survival story, however, reveals that this symbol also has spiritual dimensions. Among the Paleolithic and Neolithic shamanic religions, metamorphosis was a central theme and included a "belief in the power of theriomorphic transformation—that is becoming an animal or hybrid human-animal..." Shamans were known to work with animals and spirit helpers and were "believed to hold the power to

¹²⁴ A *National Geographic* piece on the animal echoes these assertions and reports a chillingly parallel migratory history that includes being introduced to the West Indies in the 1800s specifically to control the rodent population in the sugar cane plantations. Even more, since the mongoose is described as an acutely intelligent and "nondiscriminatory predator," the article reports that the introduction of these animals "would come back to haunt these islands as mongoose threaten the survival of various native species" ("Mongooses").

transform themselves into animals” (Conner et al 27-28). With this awareness, Yuniór’s description of the visionary mongoose begins to appear even more extraordinary. First, Yuniór describes the creature as “what *would have been* an amiable mongoose *if not* for its golden lion eyes and the absolute black of its pelt” (Díaz 149 italics mine). Indeed, the typical mongoose has brown or grey fur and much less luminescent eyes (“Mongoose”). Second, the imagery of a black pelt animal with gleaming eyes has resonance in the spiritual traditions of the Azande who live in today’s southwestern Sudan, northern Zaire, and the southeastern corner of the Central African Republic. Among this group, a same sex homoeroticism was practiced from “remote antiquity until the beginning of the twentieth century.” Women who participated in same sex eroticism were also thought to have engaged in magical practices and served as spiritual functionaries. Specifically, in folklore, these Azande women were connected with the andandara, “a supernatural wildcat with gleaming ebony skin and luminescent eyes” (Conner et al 1). This is a significant connection given that the mongoose disappears once Beli escapes the cane fields and her survival then depends on a mysterious “blunt-featured woman with the golden eyes of a chabine.”

If the resonance between the “golden lion eyes” of the mongoose and the “golden eyes” of the blunt featured woman is not enough to suggest a possible shape shifting or animal-human metamorphosis, Yuniór provides readers several other suggestive hints. The blunt featured woman is the lead singer of the “perico ripiao conjunto” [music group] that comes across Beli’s beaten form on the road as they are driving home. As Yuniór describes, the driver stops the truck when he sees “something lion-like in the gloom with eyes like terrible amber lamps” (Díaz 150). Once again, the presence of the mongoose is alluded to, but it is the lead singer who, in a “curious” accent that parallels the mongoose’s own hard to place accent, forces the conjunto to

take responsibility for Beli and to deliver her to safety. With the woman's firm, assertive words—"we're not leaving her"—Yunior reports, "only then did Beli understand that she was saved" (151). In the blunt featured woman we also see a woman of unstable gender that upsets power hierarchies and that only magnifies her power in a way similar to the Azande women. At the close of the scene, Díaz leaves us a final piece of evidence for interpreting the lead singer as a shaman in shape-shifting co-operation with the mongoose. The footnote that describes the history and characteristics of the mongoose is placed not upon the first reference to the creature, but with the concluding sentence that describes the assertive and mysterious blunt-featured woman (Díaz 151).

Yunior concludes his telling of this fundamental moment with a perplexingly definitive statement: "Through the numinous power of prayer La Inca saved the girl's life, laid an A-plus zafa on the Cabral family fukú..." (155). This statement returns us to the first recounting of Beli's survival and reminds us of the religious, spiritual connotations of the whole ordeal, if not its opacity. For, despite its definitiveness, readers must pause and consider that it is not only La Inca's prayers that saved Beli, but a whole host of metaphysical events. In fact, what is consistent in the narration is its queer, feminist Global South chronotope that aids Yunior in witnessing to (not a delivery system/not palliative) the violence of a postcolonial Dominican Republic. This witnessing, of course, is not of the individualistic, first person variety, but a second hand account that ventures into metaphysical realms. The end of the novel expands the queer, feminist chronotope to include La Inca, Beli, the prayer women, la Virgen de Altagracia,, the mongoose, Oya spirits, Oscar, Lola, Yunior, and Isis. But if we look more closely, we can see that there are other actors who were also significant in imagining against the grain of the fukú and believing in something better. These figures include Clives the evangelical taxista who

rescues Oscar from the cane fields after his beating, the Cibaena lead singer/shapeshifter who insists on taking Beli to the hospital after her beating, and los Chinos who firmly believe and fear the curse, but nonetheless save Beli from the clutches of her abductors. This creates a network of actors not bound by nation, ethnicity, gender, or any other form of authentic belonging. The recourse to the metaphysical, I suggest, is a way for Yuniór to acknowledge the unspeakability and untranslatableability of the horrors of the cane field, while still speaking them into a quasi-hopeful existence. Like the fukú, Yuniór's social-spiritual storytelling goes beyond genre limitations and beyond the purely material (as others have noted), but not beyond the real. This developing social-spiritual narrative strategy is, of course, part of Yuniór's increasing queerness throughout the novel. Yuniór is not the sole author of this most important turning point in the novel, and he is openly narrating without full understanding or mastery. In his social-spiritual narration, Yuniór must approach narrating as a process that requires belief and social connectivity. This in itself works to queer the character of Yuniór from a cocky, self-assured, hypermasculine womanizer to one who lets go of these narratives in favor of listening and holding space for imagining other ways of being.

Oscar's Unfulfilled Social-Spirituality as Counterpoint to Yuniór

If Oscar is a queer and redemptive character because of his relationship to reading and writing and I extend that queerness to include his persistence in unraveling the fukú and the possibility that entails, we must also consider the way Oscar's queer potential is cut short and how Yuniór can be seen taking up this role. While the scene just described shows Yuniór abdicating his narrative authority to make room for the unknown and untranslatable, we are also shown the ways that Oscar resists and only slowly becomes more receptive to similar metaphysical experiences in his own life. In the end, though, Oscar cannot let go of the narrative

of obsessive heteronormative romance, resulting in his own death and the serious endangerment of his love interest, Ybon. To the contrary, since Yuniór's account of the story is also his reflection on Oscar's life and a deliberate intervention into how his and the De Leon family story is told, we can see Yuniór extending Oscar's queer potential. Specifically, by tracking moments of heightened metaphysical occurrence, we can see the limitations of Oscar's imagination and, later, the queer possibility that Yuniór takes up for Oscar through his social-spiritual narration of his own survival. In a sense, Yuniór's narrative telling leads to his own more fully realized queerness and the possibility for other narrative strategies.

Beyond Yuniór's social-spiritual narration of Beli's survival in the cane fields, the spiritual makes its way into *Oscar Wao* at several other crucial moments. Namely, Oscar (as well as Beli, Socorro, Yuniór) has visions leading up to or during violent, life-changing events that reluctantly prompt him to consider the material reality of the fukú and its imbrication with his romantic desires. One such event occurs after Oscar has been rejected, yet again, by a love interest and attempts to commit suicide by jumping off the New Brunswick train bridge. Just prior to jumping, Yuniór reports that Oscar sees something "straight out of Ursula Le Guin"—what Oscar would later describe as a "Golden Mongoose." But, as Yuniór explains, rather than "taking note of the vision and changing his ways..." Oscar just plummets into the darkness (Díaz 190). Later, however, Oscar tells Yuniór "It was the curse that made me do it, you know." Despite Yuniór's admonishing him for believing in "our parents' shit," Oscar is steadfast that "It's ours, too..." (Díaz 194). Oscar thus becomes increasingly more engaged with understanding his family history, La Inca, and the Dominican Republic and makes several trips back to the island. More importantly, Oscar has three more visions—once before he is beaten in the cane fields by Ybon's boyfriend, again while he is in the hospital, and once more before his death near

the novel's conclusion. These visions lead Oscar to extend his imagination beyond the worlds in his fantasy and SF novels and to consider the hyperreal worlds of the Dominican Republic. As Oscar explains to Yunion during his hospital stay and after the gravity of his family's history has become more apparent: "'Bigger game afoot than my appearances.' He wrote out the word for me: *fukú*" (Díaz 306)

Thus, despite the seeming centrality Oscar's quest for romantic love, his coming of age does not fall along the traditional lines of sexual maturation, but instead correlates with his imperfect coming to consciousness of the history and trauma into which he is born. Oscar, who never had much interest in doing much with other people unless it involved his beloved SF and fantasy, is suddenly compelled to return to the Dominican Republic after his attempted suicide, explaining: "My elder spirits have been talking to me" (Díaz 273). Indeed, Oscar dreams of the mongoose after his fall from the New Brunswick train bridge. Even as Oscar is becoming more concerned with the *fukú* and his family's past, though, he is still tied dramatically to the trappings of compulsive heteropatriarchy. Despite the call of his ancestors, Yunion reveals that Oscar was also secretly "imagining himself in the middle of all that ass-getting, imagining himself in love with an Island girl" (Díaz 272). And so the tale of Oscar's simultaneous coming of age and demise begins. In the Dominican Republic Oscar confronts many realities of a diasporic identity: he resists "that whisper that all long-term immigrants carry inside themselves ... *You do not belong*"; he actually sees the reality of Santo Domingo for what it is (including its "mind-boggling poverty"); and he finally settles into La Inca's home and is able to write (Díaz 276). He also, however, becomes hopelessly enamored with Ybon, a woman already romantically involved with a hypermasculine and violent Santo Domingo cop. It is the latter

experience that dominates the others in his life and that results in his own beating in the cane fields and eventual death.

Nonetheless, Oscar's interest in understanding "what ails us" does not dissipate simply because of his love interest in Ybon (Díaz 333). To the contrary, the two desires coexist somewhat uncomfortably and produce a tension between a rather well worn romantic quest narrative and a disturbing, unfamiliar metaphysical one. Oscar's near death beating only makes him all the more certain of the fukú's existence ("Bigger game afoot...") and its grasp on his life. In fact, while he is comatose Oscar has a dream that reinforces the grip of the fukú on Dominicans. He first dreams of an "Aslan-like figure with golden eyes" trying to speak to him over loud music. Later he recalls another dream of an old man with a mask on holding up a book for him to read, except when he looks closer he sees that "the book was blank" (Díaz 302). The inability to translate what he knows to be the unspeakable—the fukú, the violent heteropatriarchal legacy that courses through each of the characters' lives—literally haunts Oscar.

Yunior tells us that Oscar's life ends in the cane fields rather anticlimactically ("That's pretty much it" [Díaz 323]). To further amplify the futility of Oscar's quest, Yunior tells us that everything Oscar writes while in Santo Domingo is lost in the mail and never arrives to Patterson, New Jersey, as anticipated. This is a telling parallel to the unproductiveness of the path Oscar takes to respond to and resist the fukú. Instead, the text that does arrive to Patterson is Oscar's letter to Lola explaining that he did, indeed, have sex with Lola before his ultimate end. Although this letter nearly concludes the novel, it does not deliver the satisfaction that would be expected from such an ending for a romantic quest novel. When juxtaposed with Yunior's preceding description of Oscar's death, its aftermath, and the never materializing text, it is

impossible to interpret Oscar as a romantic hero (as much as he wished he were even to the end) or to interpret the ending as a resolved plug for heteronormative romance.¹²⁵ To the contrary we are left with Yunior, the parallel writer, Dominican, and queer figure, to help us make sense of the ending through his social-spiritual narration. If Yunior's narration of Beli's survival instigates a social-spiritual narration and a queer, feminist chronotope that turns to the unseen to de-center his own authority and "authentic" identity, it also occurs near the end of the novel just preceding Oscar's letter (243). Since Oscar's letter produces an unsatisfactory conclusion, we must turn back to Yunior's social-spiritual conclusion (that occurs on the novel's very last pages) and remember that Yunior's writing is the result of the lessons (positive and negative) that he has learned from Oscar.

After Oscar's death, Yunior reports having multiple dreams about him. He dreams about Oscar and himself in their dorm room at Rutgers with Oscar "anxious to jaw," but with neither of them able to utter a word. Another dream depicts Oscar wearing a mask and holding up a book for Yunior to look at, but, once again, the book's pages are blank. Finally, in some of his dreams, Oscar has no face. Given the backstory on these visions, it is clear that Yunior's dreams confront the inadequacy of Oscar's attempt at speaking the unspeakable and instigating a zafa to counteract the fukú. And so, after ten years, Yunior steps into his role as zafa-writer. Yunior abandons his ways as a womanizer and takes to writing "from can't see in the morning to can't see at night" (326). Importantly, though, his writing is not to take over in the role of hero or to aggrandize himself, but to make room for a new kind of narration—a zafa narration—that he will facilitate for Lola's daughter, Isis, to complete. To the very end, Yunior does not claim to know

¹²⁵ In his article on *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, Ramon Saldívar astutely notes the resonance between the final line in Oscar's letter—"the beauty! The beauty!"—and Joseph Conrad's "The horror! The horror!" from *Heart of Darkness*.

the solution to the problem (as Oscar erroneously does), but he toils along (un)faithfully at making room for other narrative voices, perspectives, and visions. The novel and its social-spiritual narration and queer, feminist chronotope is a textual example of unfaithful translation and witnessing that speaks and prepares the way even when the writer does not have the absolute authority or know the outcome. As Yunion explains "...maybe, just maybe, if she's [Isis] as smart and as brave as I'm expecting she'll be, she'll take all we've done and all we've learned and add her own insights and she'll put an end to it" (Díaz 331).

CONCLUSION: ZAFU OFF THE PAGE

In Díaz's own public life, the ability to speak out against systemic wrongs without a sanctioned level of authority and authenticity has taken center stage within recent years. Although the Dominican Republic political and literary elite once celebrated Díaz, he has steadily fallen from Dominican grace due to his political outspokenness. The backlash against Díaz heightened in 2013 after he and other writers including Julia Alvarez (Dominican American), Edwidge Danticat (Haitian American), and Mark Kurlansky issued a public response in the *Los Angeles Times* to a ruling by the Constitutional Court in the Dominican Republic that would strip citizenship from several thousand Dominican citizens of Haitian descent. The decision, also referred to as the "sentencia," asserts "Dominicans born after 1929 to parents who are not of Dominican ancestry are to have their citizenship revoked" (Kurlansky et al). Responding to this decision, the writers cite a history of anti-Haitian racism by the Dominican Republic and contend that this decision is only the most recent and damning installment.

Despite Díaz's popularity in the U.S. and Latin America, eight intellectuals in the Dominican Republic critiqued Díaz's position on the issue in a letter posted to the online publication *7 Días*. The group quickly resorted to questioning Díaz's "Dominican-ness," his full

knowledge of the nation's concerns, and characterized his interest in the nation of his birth as fake, unnecessary, and offensive (Planas 2013). Critiques along similar lines were issued from José Santana, the Executive Director of the Dominican Republic's International Advisory Committee on Science and Technology, who suggested Díaz first improve his Spanish before issuing his opinions on Dominican affairs, and actor/writer Giovanni Cruz challenged Díaz and Alvarez's literary merit and characterized their accusations as attempts to increase book sales. Finally, at the beginning of 2015 Eduardo Selman, the Consul General of the Dominican Republic in New York, revoked the Order of Merit award that had been awarded to Díaz in 2009 for his accomplishments that were deemed to symbolize "the most genuine values and principles of la dominicanidad." Similar to the prior chastisement that Díaz has received from Dominican leaders, Selman cites his outspoken criticism against the Dominican Republic's treatment of its Haitian citizens as "anti-Dominican" (Selman qtd. in Grandin).

In his interview with Paula Moya, Díaz claims that, "white supremacy is the great silence of our world" (394). By breaking this silence with his critiques of the *sentencia*, Díaz faces a de rigor undermining of his Dominican authority and authenticity in order to derail his outspokenness. On his facebook page, Díaz goes on to highlight the illusory quality of the "authenticity" logic, explaining: "All these attacks are bullshit attempts to distract from the real crime — the *sentencia* itself which has been condemned widely. All of us who are believers need to keep fighting against the *sentencia* and what it represents..." (Díaz qtd in Planas). It is thus easy to see how Díaz's concern with silence regarding race, colonialism, masculinity and the Dominican Republic (although not exclusively) extend into his own experiences and, as countless interviews confirm, inform his interest in breaking this silence through new narrative aesthetics and practices that break a literary and political culture of authority, individual genius,

and authenticity. The many highly interactive responses to *Oscar Wao* that have emerged among readers of the novel over the past ten years are evidence of Díaz's success in creating such a narrative that prompts readers to engage and create their own stories, simultaneously engaging ideas of heteropatriarchal romance and white supremacy. Among these popular responses to *Oscar Wao* are the annotated Oscar Wao website (<http://www.annotated-oscar-wao.com/>), a spate of odd collections of reviews of the novel sold on Amazon.com (e.g., *Women Love Girth: 100 Fattest Facts on The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* [2013]), and countless blog posts. One could easily interpret this as the market tokenization of a popularized author, but, as Finn's article (and these examples) evidences, the many enthusiastic responses to *Oscar Wao* emerge from the lay reading communities themselves. These texts encourage readers to play with the narrative, to think more about it, and to speak about it in ever evolving ways. In this way, *Oscar Wao* accomplishes a major political achievement in its ability to revalue storytelling, writing, representation, and interpretation along anti-neoliberal lines (although never fully apart from global capitalism).

As this chapter has shown, there are scripts of heteropatriarchal dominance and capitalism that dominate our narrative imagination, just as there are scripts for understanding and periodizing literature. The latter is not wholly problematic, as long as it is in dialog with critical insights in the field of literary studies including those from ethnic and feminist studies. My examination of *Oscar Wao* and its critical reception, however, clearly shows the way both contemporary world literature and even Latino/a literary studies bypass women of color feminist insights. By adjusting our focus to include these insights, *Oscar Wao*'s generic impenetrability and precarious positioning between "immigrant" literature and world literature makes more critical sense. It also sheds light on the ongoing significance of women of color feminist

theoretical work that persists even in popular 21st century Latina/o narrative. Through the narrative's queer, feminist chronotope and social-spiritual narration, *Oscar Wao* destabilizes notions of (authentic) ethnic identity, solidarity, and individualism in the contemporary moment and the way we can think about these ideas in terms of belief in the unseen (both horrific and emancipatory). It is apt, after all, that Díaz's response to his sentencia critics invokes those who are "believers" to speak out against this blatant form of racism. Through this (un)faithful belief and witnessing, *Oscar Wao* revalues writing and storytelling as crucial tools for decolonial world making, survival, and rejecting the seemingly all-encompassing heteropatriarchal capitalism and white supremacy. Moreover, with its disregard for authentic identity and commitment to devising new ways to tell a story, *Oscar Wao* provides a refreshing direction for world and Latino/a literature and one that might lead the way in considering critical oversights in both literary canons.

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