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Speculative Refractions: Migrant Aesthetics of Asian and Latinx Americas

A Dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

English

by

Heejoo Park

June 2022

Dissertation Committee:

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University of California, Riverside

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Speculative Refractions:
Migrant Aesthetics of Asian and Latinx Americas

by

Heejoo Park

Doctor of Philosophy, Graduate Program in English
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Dr. Stephen Hong Sohn, Co-Chairperson
Dr. Richard T. Rodríguez, Co-Chairperson

My dissertation explores contemporary Asian American and Latinx speculative fictions that critique racist and xenophobic discourse on migration by highlighting the unequal distribution of freedom of movement against alternatively imagined worlds. This project takes a comparative approach to differentially racialized migrants and their descendants, represented in the literary productions of Karen Tei Yamashita, Malka Older, Ling Ma, Silvia Moreno-Garcia, Sabrina Vourvoulias, Gish Jen, Carmen Maria Machado, and Anjali Sachdeva. Reclaiming language and aesthetics that have historically alienized Asian Americans and Latinxs, my dissertation analyzes various aesthetic strategies of resistance that emerge from this body of work.

My analysis of Asian American and Latinx racial formations in the United States focuses on a mutual struggle over the dominant discourse on immigration that creates false binaries between apparently good/bad and legal/illegal immigrants. Such a narrative renders members of Latinx and Asian American communities in the United States as

foreign regardless of their residency or citizenship status. I suggest that aesthetics that foreground and stem from migrant worldviews enable readers to visualize the often-obscured multi-directionality of migration and its myriad causes rising from colonialism, settler colonialism, global racial capitalism, and climate change. Furthermore, this migrant aesthetics placed in speculative fictional contexts urge us to move beyond geopolitical borders in plotting for planetary survival in the Anthropocene.

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Introduction

Anxieties around the borders of the United States have had reverberating effects in recent decades: the proposal to build a physical barrier along the U.S.-Mexico border, imposition of travel bans on Muslim immigrants, motions to repeal the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), an expansion of expedited removal by the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (I.C.E.) during a global COVID-19 pandemic. These entanglements of current immigrant issues call for historical and comparative analyses. Yet, recent scholarship has problematized how we *compare* and engage in *comparative* analytics. Micol Seigel, for instance, notes that the transnational turn¹ in American studies – a move towards transpacific studies, hemispheric studies, and postcolonial studies beyond a national framework – offers us insightful critiques of hegemonic methods presupposing *a priori* essences while explicating similarities and differences between two or more units. Seigel attributes the transnational turn to the anti- and postcolonial scholarship of critics such as Frantz Fanon, Edward Said, and Elsa Barkley Brown, which questions the neutrality of comparison as a method by uncovering the effects of colonialism on processes of subject formation and by extension, comparison of subjects.

In *The Difference Aesthetics Makes* (2019), Kandice Chuh also contends that “comparison is at the heart of liberal-colonial epistemologies, that affords the dichotomous logic by which sorted into different groups and kinds – as more and less

¹ Seigel, Micol. “Beyond Compare: Comparative Method after the Transnational Turn.” *Radical History Review*, vol. 2005, no. 91, 2005, pp. 62-90.

capable, emotional, ideal, human – in correlation with the demands of racial capitalism and cis-heteropatriarchal ideologies” (114-5). Under the logic of liberalism and colonialism, comparison gives power to one who compares from one’s subjective position. Thus, Chuh inquires whether illiberal humanisms, which seek to divest from bourgeois liberal humanism, could “bring forward an understanding of human beingness to be defined not by discrete and self-possessed individuality but instead by constitutive relationality” (xi). Following Chuh’s call to reorient ourselves, my research engages in comparison from an illiberal humanist position, exploring and critiquing the representational discourses through which nation-states juxtapose one racial group with another to justify the uneven and unequal valuation of lives.

Specifically, my dissertation makes a case for critically linking Asian American and Latinx literary productions by foregrounding migrant worldviews that emerge from complex, transformative coalition-building across differences against racist and xenophobic narratives of immigration. Therefore, *Speculative Refractions: Migrant Aesthetics of Asian and Latinx Americas* attends to how writers of Asian and Latin American descent excavate marginalized histories across the globe to draw upon their unrealized possibilities to imagine more just and sustainable futures.

The idea for this project started as a series of observations about narratives of contagion that were so prevalent in recent Asian American and Latinx speculative fictions. What does it mean for writers to employ outbreak narratives, which have historically rendered members of their diasporic communities into what may be called

racial contagions?² This question led me to explore other equally pressing realities that shape the aesthetics of Asian American and Latinx speculative fiction. I was interested in how writers sought to reclaim speculative fiction tropes, in which Asian Americans and Latinxs literally and metaphorically transform into fear-inducing and awe-inspiring figures – spies, aliens, monsters, shapeshifters, cyborgs, and others – populating our social imaginaries. My project thus investigates how tactical uses of speculative aesthetics can help refract racist and xenophobic discourse on migration, reflect the unequal distribution of freedom of movement across the globe, and ultimately suggest possibilities of working in solidarity across divides to balance the scales.

Asian American and Latinx Racial Formations

Engaging with the intersections of Asian American studies and U.S. Latinx studies, my dissertation advances the cross-field dialogue required to examine aesthetic strategies of resistance shared across two racialized groups regarded as foreign, regardless of their citizenship and residency status. Although the racial formations of Asian Americans and Latinxs cannot be equated, I argue that it is vital to closely examine how both groups have been cast as aliens, whose migration is misrepresented as a single event, unidirectional and voluntary. Such a narrative also creates false binaries between apparently good/bad and legal/illegal immigrants. I suggest that aesthetics that

² Notable works on narratives of contagion and the racial formation of Asian Americans and U.S. Latinxs include Nayan Shah's *Contagious Divides* (2001) and John Mckiernan-González's *Fevered Measures* (2012). Shah explores the relationship between public health and Chinese immigrant in San Francisco from nineteenth century to mid-twentieth century whereas Mckiernan-González's focuses on how the Texas-Mexico border were transformed into medical borders after a series of campaigns, which sought to control Mexicans, Mexican Americans, and African Americans between 1848 and 1942.

foreground migrant worldviews enable readers to visualize the often-observed multi-directionality of migration and its myriad causes rising from colonialism, settler colonialism, global racial capitalism, and climate change. When moved to speculative dimensions, this migrant aesthetics urges us to move beyond geopolitical borders to plot for planetary survival in the Anthropocene.

I apply comparative analytics across and within these racial groups to acknowledge the difference in ethnicity, nationality, class, gender, and sexuality of individuals and communities grouped under racial umbrellas “Asian American” and “Latinx.”³ The master narrative, which renders both groups as inassimilable aliens, assumes that Latinx and Asian American immigrants have an unshakeable connection to the language, foods, and kinship structures of their ethnic and national origins. Simultaneously, such a narrative systematically erases the damaging material effects of unequal distribution of privilege and oppression along various axes of social identities to preserve white supremacy and sanitize the national history of the United States.

Although my project focuses on Latinx and Asian American literatures, it is impossible to investigate such without considering the differential racial formations of African Americans and Native Americans in the U.S. In *Racial Transformations:*

³ As Lourdes Torres discusses in her 2018 article, “Latinx?”, there has not yet been a consensus on the adoption of “x” in Latinx. Authors of the works that I cite in my dissertation, likewise, have chosen to use various iterations of the terminology: Latino, Latina/o, Latin@ and Latinx. In using the term “Latinx” for my own research, I aim to create a dialogue with the writers of speculative fiction who have increasingly been embracing the term as well as critics such as Rigoberto Márquez, who have been exploring the potential of the “x.” For Márquez, the term can be “defined as a political identity that centers the lived experience of queer, non-binary, gender non-conforming/creative and/or trans individuals” (qtd. in Torres 284).

Latinos and Asians Remaking the United States (2006), Nicholas De Genova explains how white U.S. nationalism was formed through the subjugation of Indigenous people and other people of color:

There is a key to unlocking the hegemonic polarity of whiteness and Blackness that has so enduringly distinguished the racial order of the United States, especially as that tyrannically drawn binary has defined the decisive parameters for the racializations of ‘Latinos’ and ‘Asians’ and all other groups historically racialized as neither white nor Black. That key is to be found in the history of the U.S. nation-state’s subjugation of Native Americans. (1)

Therefore, it is crucial to forge coalitions based not on presumed identifications but shared disidentification. Subsequently, disidentifications from liberal-colonial epistemologies help generate effective decolonial and illiberal counternarratives.

Likewise, I use the term “migrant” to signal opposition to the xenophobic and racist discourse on migration rather than assume that the Asian American and Latinx communities are perpetual foreigners and immigrants or that racialized immigrants in the U.S. only consist of those from Asia and Latin America. Moreover, in exploring the national and transnational dynamics, I follow Junyoung Verónica Kim’s approach to Asian-Latin America as a method that does not treat “Asia” or “Latin America” as natural givens. According to Kim, “Asia–Latin America as method involves negotiating and juxtaposing different systems of knowledge that bear on it and, by so doing, intends to shed light on the subjectivities that arise through such encounters” (101). While acknowledging that the writers I examine are situated in North America, I question how we might continue to engage with different modes of knowledge in a relational and non-hierarchical manner.

In recent years, a growing scholarship linking U.S. Latinx studies and Asian American studies has produced monographs that each explore different intersections: Jayson Gonzales Sae-Saue's *Southwest Asia: The Transpacific Geographies of Chicana/o Literature* (2016), Jeehyun Lim's *Bilingual Brokers: Race, Literature, and Language and Human Capital* (2017), Susan Thananopavarn's *LatinAsian Cartographies: History, Writing, and the National Imaginary* (2018), and Long Le-Khac's *Giving Form to Asian and Latinx America* (2020). To explore the interracial politics of Chicana/o activism, Sae-Saue shifts the focus from the U.S.-Mexico border to racial dynamics surrounding the Pacific Rim and examines Asia and Asians at the margins of Chicana/o writing. Thananopavarn employs Mary Louise Pratt's concept of the contact zone to move away from liberal-colonial practices of comparison that Seigel and Chuh problematize.⁴ Thananopavarn further articulates *LatinAsian contact zone* as "a place in which people of Latin American and Asian descent not only constitute groups with unique histories but intersect in ways that reflect centuries of global labor migrations and U.S. military interventions abroad" (4). These two critics thus provide models for comparative analytics that depart from one based on explication of similarities and differences. Instead, Sae-Saue and Thananopavarn probe the deeply interconnected histories of colonialisms (Spanish, Japanese, U.S., etc.), military interventions, and diasporas across the Pacific Ocean and the Americas. Lim and Le-Khac also approach the issue of comparison from different angles. In investigating shifting attitudes towards bilingualism, as a liability and

⁴ Mary Louise Pratt introduced the concept of the "contact zone" in a 1991 keynote address to the Modern Language Association titled, "Arts of the Contact Zone."

an asset, Lim examines Asian American and Latinx literature that reflects how the racial formations of Latinxs and Asian Americans in the U.S. have focused on the language practices of these two groups. Lastly, Le-Khac suggests “Asian and Latinx America” as a method to claim that “Asian Americans and Latinxs share specific challenges,” but more significantly that “neither group, as they have formed in the last fifty years, can be fully understood unless we grasp how they have been shaped in mutual relation” (7). Building on such scholarship, I offer reading practices for linking Asian American and Latinx communities even when they are represented in non-realist, speculative fictional contexts.

Speculative Fiction and Migrant Aesthetics

The texts curated in my dissertation by Asian American and Latinx writers employ speculative aesthetics and tropes to imagine otherwise. Indeed, as many critics have pointed out, imagining an alternative to reality is not inherently an act of resistance. For instance, in the introduction to “Speculative Life,” Jayna Brown and Alexis Lothian explain, “In our dystopian present, the term *speculation* is associated with an epistemology of greed, a sanctioned terrorism, and a neo-imperialism organized around the capture of abstract futures and the subjugation of transnational labor forces.” Accordingly, speculative fictions by contemporary Asian American and Latinx writers – Karen Tei Yamashita, Malka Older, Silvia Moreno-Garcia,⁵ Ling Ma, Sabrina Vourvoulias, Gish Jen, Carmen Maria Machado, and Anjali Sachdeva – reflect imaginations based on the “epistemology of greed” that historically have and continue to

⁵ Although Silvia Moreno-Garcia is a Mexican Canadian writer, I examine her alongside U.S. Latinx and Asian American writers due to the importance of Mexico and U.S.-Mexico border in her fictional works.

subjugate marginalized populations. However, their works also refract such speculations founded upon imperial desires to allow other possibilities to emerge. As Brown and Lothian emphasize, “speculation means something else for those who refuse to give its logic over to power and profit....it may be in our imaginative worlds that we catch glimpses of utopian possibility beyond our present paradigm.” Thus in my analysis of these literary productions, I focus on speculation’s ability to distinguish layers of representation as it relates to migrant subjects and migration: first, the often-obscured complexity of migration and its causes; second, the xenophobic discourse on migration that is narrow in focus and fails to account for migrations that do not follow the linear trajectory from the Global South to the Global North; third, the narratives of resistance that allow migrants to narrate their stories and determine their futures.

In exploring what may be called migrant aesthetics in contemporary speculative fiction that separates these layers of representation to produce counternarratives, I build onto emerging scholarship on speculative fiction, race, and migration. In *Migrant Futures: Decolonizing Speculation in Financial Times* (2018), Aimee Bahng explores the dynamics between speculative finance and speculative fiction “as two forms of extrapolative figuration that participate in the cultural production of futurity” (2). According to Bahng, the notional value used in the derivatives market is “alien currency from another time, from a time out of joint, from the future anterior” (1). She argues that this “alien currency” creates futurities in which people who are alienized, including racialized migrants, are barred from entering. In *Latinx Files: Race, Migration, and Space Aliens* (2021), Matthew David Goodwin approaches the concept of an alien from

yet another angle. In his work, he reclaims the figure of a space alien from the xenophobic legacy of science fiction to “express the concerns of Latinx communities, not as the Other but as the Multitude” (Goodwin xv). Goodwin’s reclamation further reveals how what may be science-fictional for one person may be a lived reality for another, especially if we focalize through a non-white, non-Eurocentric perspective.

In the introduction to *Altermundos: Latin@ Speculative Literature, Film, and Popular Culture* (2017), Cathryn Josefina Merla-Watson and B. V. Olguín emphasize that “racial formation in the United States has been experienced as nothing less than apocalyptic or world-ending for people of color” (13). These critics’ statement also highlights the need to scrutinize the positionality from which one engages in comparative analytics concerning speculative fiction, which determines the difference between the human and the nonhuman, natural and supernatural, real and unreal, fantasy and truth. In *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction* (1977), Darko Suvin provides the most influential definition of S.F. as works that achieve cognitive estrangement through “an imaginative framework alternative to the author’s empirical environment” (8). However, we must expand on Suvin’s concept and examine what objects of reference are cognitively estranging and to whom. Seo-Young Chu, for instance, turns Suvin’s concept inside out in her work, *Do Metaphors Dream of Literal Sleep?* (2011). Chu reconceptualizes science fiction as “a mimetic discourse whose objects of representation are nonimaginary yet cognitively estranging” (Chu 3). According to her, science fiction can be defined as a “high-intensity mimetic representation” of referents that are difficult to capture, in contrast to realism, which employs “low-intensity mimetic representation” (Chu 74). In

this regard, what critics define as science fiction or realism can be understood as existing on a continuum rather than in separate planes.

Shifting how we understand cognitively estranging referents can be applied to speculative fiction more broadly. In Junot Díaz's *The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, for instance, the protagonist Oscar's words illustrate how the act of determining what is science-fictional or fantastical is a highly subjective enterprise: "What more sci-fi than Santo Domingo? What more fantasy than the Antilles?" (6). Furthermore, the narrator adds, "What more fukú?" (Díaz 6). This moment reminds us that situations some regard as apocalyptic and destructive on an unimaginable scale may not be so for others. For multiply marginalized characters, an apocalypse may be indistinguishable from their daily struggle to endure and survive in what we perceive to be a reality. Thus, my dissertation demonstrates how speculative fiction in recent years has become an arena in which Latinx and Asian American writers actively produce counternarratives in our current historical conjuncture.

While there are variations in how "speculative fiction" has been defined, I use the term to denote a maximally inclusive category, expanding on Stephen Hong Sohn's critical approach in "Defining and Exploring Asian American Speculative Fiction." Hence, I employ "speculative fiction" to explore a fluid continuum of genres – science fiction, fantasy, horror, utopian and dystopian fiction, magical realism, and paranormal romance – without drawing a harsh line between supernatural and scientific modes of speculation. In defining the contours of Asian American speculative fiction, Sohn employs what Colleen Lye has called "maximal inclusiveness," which indicates the

expansiveness in which cultural critics delineate the boundaries of Asian American literature (4). Despite Lye's concerns, he contends that "maximal inclusiveness enables cultural critics to define the field through the racial ancestry of the writer and to undercut the expectation that the author's ethnoracial background must be reflected directly in the fictional world" (Sohn 1-2). Building on his argument, I suggest that critically linking "Asian American," "Latinx," and "speculative fiction" together is a project that requires an expansive approach.

Regarding speculative fiction, Marek Oziewicz explains that the term has "three historically located meanings: a subgenre of science fiction that deals with human rather than technological problems, a genre distinct from and opposite to science fiction in its exclusive focus on possible futures, and a super category for all genres that deliberately depart from imitating 'consensus reality' of everyday experience." The third meaning not only understands "speculative fiction" as a supercategory but also affords more autonomy to its subcategories. Similarly, John Rieder advocates for taking a descriptive rather than prescriptive approach to defining S.F., explaining that "the project of comprehending what sf has meant and currently means is one to be accomplished through historical and comparative narrative rather than formal description" (206). While Rieder focuses on science fiction or S.F. in particular, his approach applies to the super-category of speculative fiction that I employ in my work. For example, taking a descriptive approach towards speculative fiction allows me to place works produced in the 1990s, such as Karen Tei Yamashita's *Through the Arc of the Rainforest*, alongside literary productions

that have been published more recently in the 2010s and 2020s without dehistoricizing the contexts in which those earlier texts were created and disseminated.

For Latinx and Asian American writers, the super-category of speculative fiction provides a valuable platform for discussing how their works are often miscategorized as magical realism, which undermines the heterogeneity of Asian American and Latinx literatures that employ subgenres of speculative fiction other than magical realism. Some texts I examine in my dissertation, published between 1990 and 2020, have been marketed as science fiction, fantasy, or horror, while others have not been explicitly categorized as such. However, I make a case for reading the following texts specifically as works of speculative fiction: Karen Tei Yamashita's *Through the Arc of the Rainforest* (1990); Malka Older's *The Centenal Cycle* series that consists of *Infomocracy* (2016), *Null States* (2017), and *State Tectonics* (2018); Ling Ma's *Severance* (2018); Silvia Moreno-Garcia's *Certain Dark Things* (2016); Sabrina Voruvoulis's *Ink* (2012); Gish Jen's *The Resisters* (2020); Carmen Maria Machado's *Her Body and Other Parties* (2017), and Anjali Sachdeva's *All the Names They Used for God* (2018). Employing speculative fiction as an umbrella category for these texts allows me to focus on how they critique the logics of inclusion and exclusion that make categorization possible. My goal here is not to *label* or, as Rachel Haywood Ferreira notes, *retrolabel*⁶ any number of texts as "Asian American," "Latinx," and "speculative fiction." Instead, I am interested in

⁶ Ferreira, Rachel Haywood. *The Emergence of Latin American Science Fiction*. Wesleyan University Press, 2011.

studying patterns of speculative aesthetics that emerge from this body of work that crosses over generic, racial, and national boundaries.

While the increasing mainstream recognition of Asian American and Latinx works of speculative fiction is undoubtedly exciting, I suggest that it further calls for interpretive methodologies that put pressure on the ideological underpinnings of the genre's aesthetics. Accordingly, Isaiah Lavender argues, evoking W.E.B. Du Bois, race matters even when constructed in otherworldly contexts: "To transcend various repetitions of the color line...by exploring the possible worlds of S.F. and lifting blacks, indigenous peoples, and Latinos out from the background of this historically white genre" (6). Moreover, as feminist and critical race scholars of speculative fiction have emphasized, it is essential to remember that not all speculative fiction shares anti-racist and decolonial frameworks and visions. For example, in *Bodyminds Reimagined* (2018), Sami Schalk explains that "some texts reify social categories and their related stereotypes, even in nonhuman contexts...most apparent in representations of the racialized Other through the figure of the alien, robot, or cyborg" (134). However, writers of color are increasingly doing more than diversifying the field of speculative fiction in terms of increased representation of authors and characters of color. These writers assume more active positions, repurposing speculative fictional tropes to resist collective amnesia and shift the readers' attention to histories of racialized and gendered violence across the globe.

In my examination of Asian American and Latinx speculative fictions, I also challenge the notion that the interest of minoritized writers in creating the fantastical

fictional worlds based on non-Western myths, legends, folktales, and religious tales can be easily mapped onto their ethnoracial background. One such example can be found in the effective repurposing of shapeshifter legends from various cultures. In “Recovering Gloria Anzaldúa’s Sci-Fi Roots,” Susana Ramírez argues that Anzaldúa’s unpublished bilingual science fiction stories expand on her theoretical conceptualization of *nepantler@s* as “agents constantly moving in between time and space and beyond the material body to challenge, expand, and reimagine the ‘reality’ of these constructs” (61). For instance, in “Werejaguar” (1991), Anzaldúa draws from Mesoamerican mythology to create a half-female, half-jaguar entity that uses her supernatural powers to subvert both colonial and colonial and heteronormative imaginaries. Therefore, as Mariana Ortega argues in relation to Anzaldúa’s oeuvre, these werejaguars do not signal a return to ethnocentric mythical identity so much as Anzaldúa’s struggle to “explain both the multiplicity and oneness of self” that inhabits the borderlands geographically, culturally and metaphorically (18). Moreover, the werejaguars channel her desire to bridge the spiritual and the material transformations.

In a similar vein, Ken Liu’s short story “The Good Hunting” (2012) hybridizes the figure of yet another shapeshifter, the Chinese fox spirit, *hulijing*, with the Asian female cyborg to critique the two extremes of the West’s imagination of Asia: Saidian Orientalism⁷ and Techno-Orientalism as theorized by David Morley and Kevin Robins.⁸

⁷ Edward W. Said. *Orientalism*. Vintage Books, 1979.

Instead of being relegated to either the past or the future, Liu's figure of the chrome fox, embodied by Yan in his short story, also moves between time and space to challenge the neocolonial spatiotemporal imaginary that renders Asian Americans into inassimilable aliens. In an alternate vision of China presented by Liu, Yan is initially born as a *hulijing* who can assume the shape of a fox and a woman. However, Britain's colonization of Hong Kong and the construction of railroads⁹ damage the magic of the land so much that Yan loses her ability to return to her fox form. Trapped in her human form and unable to hunt for self-sustenance, she engages in sex work to survive as a nonhuman being who assumes the appearance of an Asian woman under British colonial rule. Unfortunately, the violence she experiences as a racialized and sexualized other does not end there and results in one of her clients mutilating her body to fulfill his fetish for cyborg bodies. To reclaim her bodily autonomy and take revenge, Yan asks her human ally and engineer, Liang, to upgrade her mechanized body to allow her to change into a chrome fox.

⁸ David Morley and Kevin Robins introduced the term in their article, "Techno-Orientalism: Futures, Foreigners and Phobias" (1992), and expanded on techno-orientalist stereotypes that were produced due to the West's anxieties about Japanese expansionism in "Techno-Orientalism: Japan Panic" in *Spaces of Identity, Global Media, Electronic Landscapes and Cultural Boundaries* (1995). In the introduction to "Alien / Asian: Imagining the Racialized Future," Stephen Hong Sohn further elaborations on Techno-Orientalism as a variation of Saidian Orientalism, which is characterized by an "ambivalence" due to "a desire to denigrate the unfeeling, automaton-like Alien/Asian and an envy that derives from the West's desire to regain primacy within the global economy" (7).

⁹ While Liu's short story takes place in an imaginary past of China, the construction of railroads in Hong Kong alludes to the relationship between the Transcontinental Railroad in the U.S. and the racial formation of Asian Americans. On this subject, read Julia H. Lee's monograph, *The Racial Railroad* (2022).

Speculative Refractions

As demonstrated above by Anzaldúa and Liu's works, the question of politics is inseparable from that of the aesthetic. For Latinx and Asian American speculative fiction writers, the aesthetic choices are often political, allowing them to revise the migrant and refugee narrative that follows a linear progression of departure and arrival. Aesthetics in this context then is less about artistic taste and more a matter of time and space. Latinx / Asian American migrant aesthetics channeled through supernatural elements, such as ghosts, monsters, and deities, counteract neocolonial spatiotemporal imaginary that keeps Latinx and Asian American populations ever frozen as immigrants crossing the terrestrial, oceanic, and aerial borders of the United States.

Corresponding with their desire to reflect the complexity of migration and its conditions, the works of speculative fiction examined in my dissertation share a willingness to mix and rearrange genres. In an interview conducted by William Orchard and Yolanda Padilla, Ramón Saldívar argues that the generic hybridity of genres and themes expressed by a new generation of writers of color must be situated within the problematics of racial formation and sociohistorical racism in the United States.¹⁰

Cathryn Josefina Merla-Watson and B.V. Olguín suggest that Latina/o speculative fiction is a cultural *mestizaje*¹¹ that actively blends the boundaries of subgenres within

¹⁰ William Orchard and Yolanda Padilla, *Bridges, Borders, and Breaks: History, Narrative, and Nation in Twenty-First Century Chicana/o Literary Criticism*. University of Pittsburgh Press, 2016.

¹¹ Cathryn J. Merla Watson and B.V. Olguín. "From the Horrific to the Utopic: Pan-Latin@ Speculative Poetics and Politics." *Aztlan: A Journal of Chicano Studies*, vol. 41, no. 1, 2016.

speculative fiction. In the context of Asian American literature, Betsy Huang notes how writers *regendre*¹² speculative fiction with its long Orientalist history to resist the prescriptive narrative of immigration and assimilation. Therefore, while I use the super-category of speculative fiction, I closely examine how its subgenres are transformed in each of the texts I analyze.

Although I have created an artificial construct in which a work by an Asian American author is compared with a work by a Latinx writer in each chapter, my goal is to simulate the experience of reading both works in tandem. If we shift our focus from major characters to minor characters and the narrative spaces they are afforded, there are more stories and crosscurrents to uncover. Yet, there remains a challenge: minor characters must nonetheless disappear from the narrative space at one point or another due to their perceived minor-ness within a novel. While scholars such as Alex Woloch¹³ and Jeremy Rosen¹⁴ have examined minor characters and minor character elaborations, most of their focus remains on the dynamic between the oppressor and the oppressed based on class, race, and gender. However, I am interested in the relationship between major and minor characters, who are mutually marginalized from their societies, both real and imagined. By juxtaposing two works of fiction that have an affinity in both thematic

¹² Betsy Huang, *Contesting Genres in Contemporary Asian American Fiction*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.

¹³ Alex Woloch, *The One Vs. The Many: Minor Characters and the Space of the Protagonist in the Novel*. Princeton University Press, 2003.

¹⁴ Jeremy Rosen, *Minor Characters Have Their Day: Genre and the Contemporary Literary Marketplace*, Columbia University Press, 2016.

and formal qualities, I fill the gap left by the disappearing minor characters and develop alternate methods of comparative analysis.

In each of my chapters, I discuss how the cross-examination of Asian American and Latinx speculative fiction can make visible the correlation between various thematic concerns and formal strategies of resistance. For example, in Chapter One, “Speculative Geographies: Remapping Asian and Latinx Americas,” I read Karen Tei Yamashita’s *Through the Arc of the Rainforest* (1990) alongside Malka Older’s *The Centenal Cycle*, a series of cyberpunk thrillers consisting of *Infomocracy* (2016), *Null States* (2017), and *State Tectonics* (2018). By doing so, I explore alternate relations to land that resist the logic of capitalism in its old and new forms, which continues to extract value from Indigenous knowledge, lands, and migrant labor across Latin America and Asia. Both Older and Yamashita’s works generate what I call “speculative geographies” that radically alter and denaturalize current geopolitical borders. These alternatively imagined geographies bring attention to the securitization of borders that allow capital and labor to pass through yet enact violence upon marginalized individuals seeking passage.

In addition, I highlight how Yamashita and Older’s speculative geographies are connected thematically. Japanese American writer Yamashita’s novel is set primarily in an imaginary place called the Matacão in Brazil. At the same time, Cuban American writer Older’s series begins in Tokyo, the former capital of Japan, in the twenty-second century. When combined with historical referents, speculative aesthetics bring into focus the interconnectedness of Asian and Latin America as well as Latinxs and Asian Americans in the United States through histories of migration and circulation of capital

and labor. Although *Through the Arc* precedes other works considered in the dissertation by decades, revisiting this novel is crucial for connecting the development within the last decade to Asian American and Latinx speculative fictions that reach further into history.

Primarily set in Brazil, Yamashita's novel depicts the dynamics between the global and local. The novel employs supernatural elements by adopting the first-person perspective of a nonhuman, extraterrestrial ball that hovers around the forehead of Kazumasa Ishimaru, a Japanese railroad engineer who migrates to São Paulo, Brazil, in search of work. Many literary critics have noted that *Through the Arc* expands Asian Americanist discourse from trans-Pacific to hemispheric dimensions. Chuh argues, for instance, "This interplay between the familiar and the foreign is arguably the defining quality of Yamashita's work, and it is precisely for that reason that her works might productively serve as a base upon which we might formulate an Asian Americanist hemispheric studies" (632). My analysis expands from such scholarship by connecting Yamashita's work to transpacific Latinx studies.

The Centenal Cycle situates Latinx literature in trans-Pacific geographies from the opposite direction. In the first installment of the series, *Infomocracy*, Older engages in a cross-ethnic narration and writes her cyberpunk novel from the perspectives of Ken and Mishima, who are of Asian descent. Like Yamashita, Older draws on the histories of migration that triangulate Asia, Latin America, and the United States. Ken, for instance, is a Brazilian of Japanese descent¹⁵ like Kazumasa, who currently lives in what used to be

¹⁵ Brazil is currently home to the largest Nikkei (Japanese descendant) community outside of Japan. For more research on Japanese Brazilian diaspora, see Mieko Nishida's monograph, *Diaspora and Identity: Japanese Brazilians in Brazil and Japan* (2017).

Tokyo in a world in which nation-states have become obsolete and replaced by micro-democratic units called centenals that participate in a global election system.

Exploration of global racial capitalism continues in Chapter Two, “Undead Borders: Mobilizing the Supernatural Outbreak Narratives.” Here, I juxtapose Ling Ma’s *Severance* (2018) with Silvia Moreno-Garcia’s *Certain Dark Things* (2016) to examine how these writers repurpose supernatural figures to subvert narratives of outbreaks that render migrants and their descendants into racial contagions, which pose threats to physical and national borders. As theorized by Priscilla Wald,¹⁶ a paradigmatic outbreak narrative appears as an unlikely candidate and an unwieldy tool for de-pathologizing populations that physically and metaphorically inhabit the boundaries of nation-states. Yet, I contend that the resilience and mutability of such narrative structures continue to challenge and inspire writers of speculative fiction, who belong to more than one group historically perceived as a contagion to the national body. The outbreak narrative that provides a significant connective thread between *Severance* and *Certain Dark Things* is ultimately unsettled due to its interaction with other narrative genres. Furthermore, through their aesthetic and political intervention, Ma and Moreno-Garcia expose the colonial and global capitalist exploitation of marginalized populations, creating the conditions of poverty and disease.

Severance is often described as a zombie apocalypse novel, while *Certain Dark Things* is introduced as a vampire noir. However, both novels exhibit slipperiness that

¹⁶ Priscilla Wald, *Contagious: Cultures, Carriers, and the Outbreak Narrative*. Duke University Press, 2007.

resists categorization. Those who are fevered in Ma's novel are not flesh-eating zombies, and Moreno-Garcia's Tlahuelpochmimi are living vampires from Aztec legends with pulsing hearts. In *Severance*, Ma embeds the Asian American migrant experience within a narrative that hybridizes the outbreak narrative, the zombie narrative, and the ghost narrative, among others. Similarly, in *Certain Dark Things*, Moreno-Garcia blends the border narrative with the outbreak narrative, the vampire narrative, the narco-narrative, the detective narrative, and romance. Most significantly, by merging the supernatural with the outbreak narrative, both writers make it difficult for the contagion, the monster, and the racialized migrant to collapse together.

This unsettling of multiple genres in a single text, I argue, is a strategic move that shifts the focus from racial contagions to the conditions under which infectious diseases are created, spread, and disproportionately affect marginalized populations, transforming them into racialized, sexualized Others. It is important to note that both authors expand Wai-Chee Dimock's concept of "regenreing"¹⁷ to create what may be called a multi-genre novel that refuses to be contained within a single subcategory of speculative fiction. I argue that this impulse to employ several different genres in a single literary text is driven by each genre's tendency to reproduce an Otherness and use it to regulate its generic boundaries. To avoid such, both Ma and Moreno-Garcia pit one genre against another to prevent the narrative from reproducing a single metaphorical Other, which conflates differences in race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, class, and able-bodiedness.

¹⁷ Wai-chee Dimock, "Introduction: Genres as Fields of Knowledge." *PMLA*, vol. 122, no. 5, 2007, pp. 1377-1388.

Specifically, I focus on how the undead figures of the zombie and the vampire are reconceptualized in both novels.

Lastly, I examine Sabrina Vourvoulias's *Ink* and Gish Jen's *The Resisters* in Chapter Three, titled "Transfigurative Performances: Bio/Necropolitics of Life." Both novels feature dystopian versions of the United States in which permanent underclasses have been formed along the axes of citizenship and compatibility with a fully automated society. Although the state denies racial logic embedded in creating and managing these underclasses, non-white immigrants and their descendants are overrepresented within the ranks of *inks* and *Surpluses*, respectively, in Vourvoulias and Jen's fictional worlds. Both groups are subject to extreme methods of biopolitical and necropolitical governance: surveillance, segregation, mass incarceration, deportation, and more.

Against such techniques of oppression, each novel explores different strategies of regaining control over their embodiment that I call "transfigurative performances." Initially, alterations of bodyminds are forced upon the underclasses – the Inks and the Surpluses, respectively – ranging from the administration of identification tattoos and insertion of GPS chips to forced sterilization and long-term exposure to toxic chemicals. Yet, the Inks and the Surpluses do not remain as passive "victims" of violence. Instead, they also resist through voluntary alterations of their bodyminds. I employ the term transfiguration to indicate agency and the speculative aesthetics involved in such actions. In *Ink*, the Chicana protagonist Mari is a shapeshifter who can take the form of a jaguar-like *nagual* from Mesoamerican myths and can fight against dwarf-like manifestation of evils called *kaibils*; Gwen, the Afro-Asian protagonist of *The Resisters*, has a golden arm

that allows her to become the first and only Surplus pitcher for AutoAmerica's Olympic baseball team. Both Mari and Gwen's abilities incur undesired attention from oppressors. However, those abilities enable these women to survive and inspire others to regain control over their bodyminds through fantastic and technological means.

Yet, neither Vourvoulias nor Jen present their main protagonists, Mari and Gwen, as saviors or leaders of the rebellion within narratives that revolve around an individual's extraordinary ability and personal character. More significantly, uprisings in both writers' works are imagined as the result of the collective efforts of the Inks and the Surpluses. All who engage in transfigurative performances challenge systemic violence under white settler colonialism, whether born with or without extraordinary abilities. What begins as artistic, athletic, and everyday performances that allow the underclasses to take refuge from oppression and make life livable ultimately merge with fantasy and science fiction tropes to enact a more significant change. In *Ink*, a body art performance is turned into a scene of protest and a spiritual battleground when the shapeshifters join. In *The Resisters*, the members ChinRussian (AutoAmerica's rival superpower) baseball team are transformed from cyborg-like Techno-Orientalist figures into humans when the Olympic baseball final becomes a rally for Surplus rights.

In the epilogue, I shift the focus of the argument sustained in *Speculative Refractions* to gender and sexuality as they intersect with race and ethnicity in two short story collections through structures of feeling. Carmen Maria Machado's *Her Body and Other Parties* (2017) and Anjali Sachdeva's *All the Names They Used for God* (2018) offer fabulous stories with cross-ethnic and non-racialized narrative perspectives, which

call for taking radical feminist of color approaches to bodily autonomy. Machado's "Real Women Have Bodies," tells the story of women who contract a mysterious disease that makes their bodies increasingly transparent until they finally disappear; Sachdeva's story "Pleiades" features genetically modified septuplets, who fight for their lives even though anti-geneticists call them abominations and mysterious immunodeficiency disease begins to afflict them one by one. Through a close analysis of these two stories, I inquire how migrant aesthetics might be interpreted in works that revolve around a desire to stay rooted rather than cross boundaries. I suggest that even though the ethnoracial backgrounds of the writers are not directly reflected in these stories, a discussion of rootedness vis-à-vis issues of women's bodily autonomy allows the readers to examine the struggles that women of color in diasporic communities face in particular.

In developing analytical frameworks throughout the chapters, I emphasize relationality as theorized by women of color feminists. In *Decolonizing Diasporas: Radical Mappings of Afro-Atlantic Literature* (2020), Yomaira Figueroa deploys relationality as a "decolonizing methodology that allows for the critical linking of diasporic and exilic communities that emerge from the Hispanophone Afro-Atlantic" (25). As Figueroa demonstrates through her work that connects Spanish-speaking African and Afro-Latinx diasporas, relation as a method allows us to acknowledge and contend with the material effects of differences produced within people under the categories of "Latinx" and "Asian American," complicated further along the axes of ethnicity, nationality, class, gender, and sexuality. Through *Speculative Refractions*, I aim to take on a study that remaps the relations between real and imagined Asian and Latinx Americas.

Chapter One:
Speculative Geographies: Remapping Asian and Latinx Americas

Work on comparative U.S. racial formation is still at odds with American history, which disconnects the study of slavery from immigration studies of Asians and Latinos; the histories of gender, sexuality, and women is often separated from the study of race (37).

Lisa Lowe, *The Intimacies of Four Continents*, 2015

Surveillance capitalists have skillfully exploited a lag in social evolution as the rapid development of their abilities to surveil for profit outrun public understanding and the eventual development of law and regulation that it produces.

Shoshana Zuboff, “Big Other,” 2015

In the new digital era, surveillance, data mining, and the mapping of resource-rich territories work together as complexly interlinked, rather than discrete, manifestations of hegemony that extinguish Indigenous and rural communities, such as in the regions in South America that I study.

Macarena Gómez-Barris, *The Extractive Zone*, 2017

The explosion near the industrial waterfront in Beirut, Lebanon, that occurred on August 4, 2020, brought attention to the Kafala system,¹⁸ the sponsorship system under which many migrant domestic workers in the region have been carving out their lives. In one viral video, an unidentified African woman was seen shielding a toddler from glass shattered by the blast. Similarly, other security camera footage emerged, showing nannies

¹⁸ The Kafala system refers to a sponsorship system that requires migrant domestic workers to receive sponsorship from individual employers or *kafala* to enter Lebanon and many other Gulf States. Amrita Pande critiques the state’s delegation of violation of immigrant rights to individuals through this system and advocates for shifting the focus back on the state. She contends, “the sponsorship system of migration and recruitment in the region (the Kafala system) not only creates conditions for much of these violations, but also systematically produces a new population of readily exploitable workers — the category of ‘illegal workers’” (Pande 415).

and other domestic workers rescuing young children in their charges, which were then circulated in media as the heroism of the masses. Yet, the virality of those stories sharply contrasted with the difficulty of finding out how many migrant workers were affected as opposed to citizens included in official reports. According to the Daily Mirror, around 250,000 foreign laborers were living in Lebanon; 25,000 were from Sri Lanka, many of whom had lost jobs and shelter after the COVID-19 pandemic (Fonseka). Even before the explosion, the plight of these houseless migrant workers was multifaceted as they were unable to return home due to the closure of borders and the high cost of repatriation flights. As these interlocking issues demonstrate, the immediate violence of disasters like the Port of Beirut explosion unveils the everyday violence that must be thought across national, racial, and ethnic divides.

As artificial as they are, borders have become the naturalized logic through which those situated in the Global North orient their everyday lives into proprietary relations to time and space within the nation-states. The distinction between the Global North and the Global South has effectively exposed the socioeconomic inequalities generated and exacerbated by global capitalism. Nonetheless, those terms, too, rely on border logic that creates an inside and outside. Indeed, imagining a world without borders is a utopian project that seems to be always slightly out of reach. Yet, to move beyond such a conceptual impasse, borders may be better understood as a set of contingent processes rather than fixed sites and events around which problems must be solved. This chapter extends this line of inquiry and engages with what writer and activist Harsha Walia defines as “border imperialism,” encompassing four interconnected phenomena:

first, the mass displacement of impoverished and colonized communities resulting from asymmetrical relations of global power and the simultaneous securitization of the border against those migrants whom capitalism and empire have displaced; second, the criminalization of migration with severe punishment and discipline of those deemed ‘alien’ or ‘illegal’; third, the entrenchment of a racialized hierarchy of citizenship by arbitrating who legitimately constitutes the nation-state; and fourth, the state-mediated exploitation of migrant labor, akin to conditions of slavery and servitude, by capitalist interest. (9)

As a mode of analysis, border imperialism offers a comprehensive framework for connecting collective struggles that seem disparate and idiosyncratic due to spatiotemporal divides. Thus, Walia’s concept reveals how existing connections across the borders can be obscured while others are fabricated to provide alibis for maintaining racial hierarchies within settler colonial states such as the United States and Brazil. In response to such a global game of optics, Kristin Hoganson and Jay Sexton suggest taking a “transimperial” approach to de-exceptionalize the U.S. and emphasizing America’s entanglements with other empires: “Awareness of the bridges between empires and the traffic they have carried also brings into focus the counterveiling construction of barriers and walls. Approaching the past with connectivity can help us place interimperial rivalries and conflicts in the larger context of coexistence” (7). Such an approach reveals how various border-crossings result from asymmetrical power dynamics between nation-states and, more significantly, overlapping empires.

At the same time, the broad frame of border imperialism also presents a representational challenge, which has also been at the center of recent scholarship on race and the environment. Rob Nixon, for instance, makes a compelling argument regarding two types of ecological violence. He contends that while we are adept at recognizing violence as “an event or action that is immediate in time, explosive and spectacular in

space, and exploding into instant sensational visibility,” a different kind of violence often remains invisible to our eyes (Nixon 2). In contrast, we are less attuned to what he calls slow violence, “incremental and accreditive, its calamitous repercussions playing out across a range of temporal scales” (Nixon 2). Similarly, the challenge presented by the pervasive reach of border logic is also one of scale. At what scale can the numerous lives made precarious through securitization of borders be effectively accounted for and the multilayered violence they experience? In response, I analyze works of speculative fiction by two authors, Karen Tei Yamashita and Malka Older, to explore what kind of recalibration in our scalar thought might be possible to imagine a viable alternative to borders that divide.

Through the Arc of the Rainforest is a novel by a Japanese American writer set in Brazil; *The Centenal Cycle* is a trilogy by a Cuban American writer that begins in Japan. Published almost three decades apart, Yamashita’s debut novel and the first installment in Older’s series, *Infomocracy*, reflect the history of the Japanese diaspora in Brazil and speculate on the trajectories of evolving forms of colonialism and capitalism across regions in Latin America and Asia. Reading *The Centenal Cycle* alongside *Through the Arc*, I shift the temporal and spatial scales to underscore how excavating the past marked with violence fueled by imperialist and capitalist agendas provides a foundation for imagining a more just and sustainable future. These alternate futurities subsequently call for a reconsideration of our relations to land and its multispecies inhabitants, which move beyond the artificial restrictions imposed by geopolitical borders.

Speculative Geographies

Examining globalization from the perspectives of migrants, both *Through the Arc* and *The Centenal Cycle* series use aesthetics of speculative genres to counter the narratives that continue to displace the causes of political, economic, and ecological crises onto the bodies of racial others migrating from the Global South to the Global North. Accordingly, examining these texts together requires a cross-border imagination. Cultural critic Lisa Lowe has called attention to the difficulty of writing across gaps in the historical archives produced by various types of borders in her comprehensive work, *The Intimacies of Four Continents* (2015): “work on comparative U.S. racial formation is still at odds with American history, which disconnects the study of slavery from immigration studies of Asians and Latinos; the histories of gender, sexuality, and women are often separated from the study of race” (37). Lowe’s observation demonstrates how the logic of geopolitical borders extends to other boundaries between academic disciplines and literary genres.

Through the juxtaposition of Yamashita and Older’s literary interventions, I examine speculative geographies presented in fictional worlds that closely resemble our own, which functions to denaturalize current geopolitical borders. These radical reimaginings of places familiar to us and their boundaries make visible on multiple scales how border control continues to evolve as a crucial technique of global capitalism. Rather than present the readers with narratives that foreclose possibilities, these writers offer brief moments of relief from the advances of border imperialism in the fictional worlds they create and urge us to continue imagining how its damaging effects might be

undone. These moments suggest that undoing border imperialism and implementing alternate, viable relations to land are long-term, multigenerational projects that cannot be mapped onto linear time.

Through the Arc is a text that refuses to be contained and spills over literary genres' spatial and temporal borders. The novel pivots around a mystery presented by a plastic-like substance called the Matacão, initially discovered by a Brazilian farmer Mané Pena in the bedrock of the Amazonian rainforest. The Matacão, which appears to be "some sort of impenetrable material" with "a slick shiny surface" (17), proves to be highly versatile as it can almost magically be transformed into any object. The Matacão is thus absorbed into global capitalism's extractive logic, swiftly becoming the site of capitalist fantasy embodied by the three-armed American businessman, J.B. Tweep. The commodification of the Matacão in the novel by a U.S.-based multinational corporation called GGG closely reflects Brazil's transformation in the 1980s and 1990s. According to James Petras, "Brazil became one of the leading extractive commodity exporters in the world...aided and [abetted] by the massive entry and penetration of imperial multinational corporations and financial flows by overseas banks" (470). Through her novel, Yamashita portrays the devastating effects of global capitalism, which displaces marginalized local populations by exacerbating asymmetrical power relations between nation-states. As it is later revealed, the unsustainable extraction of the Matacão destroys the rainforest so much so that it almost becomes devoid of life. Moreover, such all-consuming models of capitalist extraction take away the very means of sustenance and the life chances of locals living on the land, such as Mané Pena and his family.

Yet, it is not humans in the novel who narrate the devastating effects of extractive capitalism. Instead, the narrator is a nonhuman extraterrestrial sphere composed of the same material as the Matacão, which hovers around the forehead of the main character, Kazumasa Ishimaru, who migrates from Japan to Brazil in search of new challenges.¹⁹ With the employment of such speculative elements, Yamashita situates the novel's economic, social, and environmental catastrophes within a longer trajectory of colonial violence in Brazil and throughout Latin America. According to Macarena Gómez-Barris, old and new forms of colonialism "all depend on prior civilization projects, in which the Global South has long been constructed as a region of plunder, discovery, raw resources, taming, classification, and racist adventure" (3). However, she argues that the destructiveness of capitalism is not totalizing, which leaves "potential for forms of life that cannot be easily reduced, divided, or representationally conquered or evacuated" (Gómez-Barris 4). Such potential also emerges in *Through the Arc*. Yamashita portrays the rainforest as an ecological unit that exceeds the geopolitical borders of nation-states created and maintained by humans.

Furthermore, the rainforest emerges as a living entity that cannot be easily conquered despite all the sufferings it endures. The end of the novel, therefore, presents the readers with an image of restoration rather than destruction: "The old forest has returned once again, secreting its digestive juices, slowly breaking everything into edible

¹⁹ According to Mieko Nishida, Japanese immigration to Brazil first began in 1908 when the country was "in desperate need of cheap labor for its coffee cultivation to replace the European (especially Italian) immigrants who had virtually stopped arriving in Brazil by the beginning of the twentieth century" (20).

absorbent components, pursuing the lost perfection of an organism in which digestion and excretion were once one and the same. But it will never be the same again” (212). Although it will never be quite the same, the forest returns, signaling that not all possible futures have yet been lost.

If *Through the Arc* reaches into the past to imagine ways to escape from the grasps of extractive capitalism in the present, Older’s *The Centenal Cycle* series speculates a near-future world to move towards alternate possibilities. Set in the twenty-second century, Older’s post-cyberpunk political thriller series conjures up a world in which a new form of political governance called *microdemocracy* has emerged under the supervision of Information. This supranational organization, Information, holds the key to the microdemocratic world as it serves the combined functions of the United Nations and Google. Moreover, nation-states have all but disappeared in this futuristic world. Those that remain are called “null states,” a derogatory term indicating that such a form of governance is declining. Yet, the world has not become entirely borderless. Instead, the former territories of participating nations have been divided into numerous population-based geographic units of *centenals* – each of which comprises 100,000 people – and subsequently incorporated into a union of microdemocratic systems. As the popular vote for each centenal determines which government they belong to until the next election, the geopolitical borders take on a more distributed and mutable form.

The first installment of the series, *Infomocracy*, thus opens in the wake of the third global election held every ten years, in which citizens of each centenal vote to choose their government from a comprehensive list on their ballots – Philip Morris, Heritage,

Policy1st, Liberty, 1China, etc. – without being restricted by their respective geographic locations. For example, Japan’s former capital Tokyo is described as an aggregate of centenals that belong to different governments. Still, an agreement between them allows uniformity across the city for infrastructures such as public transportation. Yet, power dynamics remain among the microdemocratic governments. As the government elected by the most significant number of centenals across the globe gains the privileged status of the Supermajority, election seasons become ripe with political scandals. Even as the Information devotes its personnel and other resources to maintain the transparency of the election process, most the governments continue to find ways to spread dis- and misinformation to win more votes and centenals.

In the series, Older notably presents microdemocracy as a nascent and imperfect system that has only existed for two decades. Considering the geographical expansiveness of *The Centenal Cycle*, the series is fittingly narrated from multiple points of view. Upon a closer look, however, each of the three books in the series focuses on a woman of color whose identity is not tethered to a place of origin but is still gendered and racialized in this post-national world: Mishima, a biracial woman of Japanese descent who is an Information data analyst turned private consultant and spy; Roz, a Black woman who is one of the prominent directors of S.V.A.T. (Specialized Voter Action Tactics), a nonarmed special force mediating cross-border conflicts; and Maryam, a queer Southwest Asian engineer who aids a coup against Information to end its monopoly. While all three women are initially in favor of the current global order upheld by Information, they realize that such a centralized control of surveillance technologies

prevents the microdemocratic system from evolving in a way that creates less precarity for all. Thus, despite being supra-national and post-racial, Information proves to be an imperfect foil against the extractive force of capitalism in all its evolving forms.

Ultimately, in *State Tectonics*, the series' final installment, disparate political and ecological threats converge to create a seismic shift within the microdemocratic system. The ending then ushers in a future in which Information is displaced as the sole judge of objective truth, allowing contending sites of knowledge to emerge.

Examined together, the speculative geographies of Yamashita and Older dispute the idea that current geopolitical borders are immovable objects on the map around which resistance to global capitalist extraction, displacement and exploitation of marginalized populations, and climate crisis must be imagined. First, I look at how both writers speculatively shift borders to amplify the uneven and unequal flow of labor and capital. Next, I argue that ecological and political disasters in their texts trigger responses within the fictional worlds, exposing the limitations of imagining planetary survival according to Westernized notions of statehood, citizenship, and humanitarian aid. Lastly, I turn to the final moments in *Through the Arc* and *State Tectonics* to further speculate on the possibilities for viable alternative forms of governance focused on building coalitions rather than extracting values.

The Limits of Capitalism: Towards Ecological Governance and Microdemocracy

Focusing on reclaiming lifeways represented by the rainforest, I argue that *Through the Arc* critiques the unsustainability and destructiveness of capitalist and colonialist governance and gestures towards the possibility of what might be called ecological governance from below. In the context of environmental policies, Frank Biermann proposes the concept of the earth system governance, defined as “the sum of the formal and informal rule systems and actor-networks at all levels of human society that are set up in order to influence the co-evolution of human and natural systems in a way that secures the sustainable development of human society” (Biermann 329). My use of the term ecological governance, however, aligns more closely with what Leilani Nishime and Kim D. Hester Williams call “a fugitive ecological relation to the neoliberal state” (252). In this context, ecological governance can emerge from the below, in a state of fugitivity, and not solely from the top.

Against the anthropocentric assumption that humans have an inviolable authority over nature, I emphasize how humans and nonhumans are all part of the ecological system in which interspecies entanglements abound. According to Anna Tsing, “interspecies entanglements that once seemed the stuff of fables are now materials for serious discussion among biologists and ecologists, who show how life requires the interplay of many kinds of beings” (vii). Yamashita’s fabulist novel brings to the fore those entanglements through the polyvocal and multi-genre narratives that refuse to be summed up neatly.

Even when the future seems to be held captive by the violent capitalist imagination of the state and multinational corporations, *Through the Arc* snatches the end from their grasp into a path that is still uncertain but open with possibilities. In previous scholarship, critics have robustly engaged with the Matacão both as a substance and place. As many scholars, including Rachel Lee, Ursula Heise, and Kandice Chuh,²⁰ have noted, the Matacão serves a symbolic function as a substance that is characterized by its malleability and durability:

When the means of molding and shaping this marvelous material were finally discovered, the possibilities were found to be infinite. Matacão plastic could be molded into forms more durable and impenetrable than steel; it was harder than diamonds and, at the same time, could be spread out in thin sheets, as thin as tissue paper with the consistency of silk. (142)

This sentiment towards a seemingly “natural” resource ripe for extraction renders the rainforest a site of neocolonial capitalist governance. However, the Matacão ultimately refuses to abide by the wishes of multinational corporations that collude with the state. Ultimately, the Matacão betrays the desires of J.B. Tweep and the GGG by toppling down the entire industry along with Chicolandia, a theme park made with the Matacão and named after Chico Paco, a pilgrim turned celebrity for a radio station. A bacteria called rickettsia, a known cause of typhus, also causes the Matacão to disintegrate, collapsing GGG’s global capitalist ventures. However, the unexpected rebellion carried out by microbes is not portrayed as triumphant, as it entails a significant loss of both

²⁰ Notable works among previous scholarship on *Through the Arc of the Rainforest* include Rachel Lee’s *The Americas of Asian American Literature* (1999), Ursula Heise’s “Local Rock and Global Plastic” (2004), and Kandice Chuh’s “Of Hemispheres and Other Spheres” (2006).

human and nonhuman lives. Yamashita suggests that continuing such extractive practices will collect an even heavier toll.

To sustain the fantasy embodied by the Matacão, GGG obscures labor performed by two racialized figures, Mané and Kazumasa, making the former hypervisible and the latter invisible. In the Asian American context, Colleen Lye has explored how yellow peril and model minority narratives converge into “a form whose most salient feature, whether it has been made the basis for exclusion or assimilation, is the trope of efficiency” (5). Expanding on Lye’s concept, Michelle Huang considers plastic a racial form even when not indexed by Asian and Asian American characters in the text. Huang contends, “The durability of race, which much like plastic particulates, photodegrades but never biodegrades, demands an exploration of how Asian American racialization materializes and circulates even in the absence of readily identifiable human bodies” (105). Her analysis of how race endures even in the absence of Asians or Asian Americans is applicable to the Matacão. Contrary to initial assumptions, the Matacão is revealed as the unwanted and overlooked byproduct of extractive capitalism: “Enormous landfills of nonbiodegradable materials buried under virtually every populated part of the Earth had undergone tremendous pressure, pushed ever farther into the lower layers of the Earth’s mantle” (202). In engaging with *Through the Arc*, my analysis shifts back to focus on the material processes in which racialized bodies and their labor are erased, leaving only plastic residues.

Mané’s sudden rise into hypervisibility, for instance, obscures the exploitative logic by assuming the false appearance of a rags-to-riches story, of a redistribution of

wealth to the marginalized. As such, Quynh Nhu Le situates Mané specifically in Brazil's *mestiçagem* discourse, "which often romanticizes racial mixing and overwrites violent and sexualized histories of colonization and plantation labor" (103). Notably, Mané appears racially ambiguous in the novel when he is introduced as a person who survives on what the rainforest offers, fishing and tapping rubber from the trees. However, his way of life is disrupted when the government cuts down his rubber trees to privatize the lands. In a pivotal scene, one of the officials hands him documents and tells him to start cultivating the emptied-out piece of land: "Couple of weeks, we'll send an agronomist 'round. Get you started; show you how to plant. Whole new way of life, Seu Mané. Meantime, if I were you, I'd get some barbed wire, fence it properly. Congratulations. Just sign here" (16). And yet, the promised agronomists never arrive. In such context, Mané can be read as a character who has been absorbed into the *mestiçagem* discourse, which erases the existence of Indigenous people and justifies the seizing of their land for the settler colonial state's future.

Mané discovers the curative powers of feathers precisely when torrential rains caused by climate changes wash away what little that remains, "the tillable earth in one southern region of the Amazon Basin" (16). The feathers are understood to be imbued with supernatural powers; rubbing them on the ears and other parts of the body cures illnesses ranging from earaches to depression. However, it is not a coincidence that Mané is the one to discover. Unlike the agents of the state or multinational corporations, he understands that the rainforest is an ecological system that sustains both humans and birds. In contrast, the Amazonian rainforest appears as a primal space composed of raw

resources within the settler-colonial imaginary. In a sense, Mané's local knowledge is what manifests the magical healing abilities of feathers.

Unfortunately, the disruption of Mané's ways of life does not end there, as GGG notices the potential for his knowledge to be further commodified. Although Mané initially gathers feathers that the birds have shed, GGG begins to harvest them directly from the birds and later mass-produces artificial feathers made from the Matacão plastic to be distributed at a low price worldwide. Le argues that refashioning Mané into the father of featherology and his subsequent rise to global fame "tracks specifically the ways Indigenous-based epistemologies become commodified and then translated to a non-Indigenous public, thereby implying a lost legitimacy as a knowledge system forged in the community" (112). Offering a different perspective, Ashley Cheyemi McNeil reads Mané as a more complicit character who is actively involved in the cultural commodification of Indigenous knowledge. In either case, the feathers transform and lose their magic once they are captured by the logic of extractive capitalism aided by Western notions of science. When even Mané can no longer distinguish an organic feather from a synthetic one, he is forcibly severed from the Indigenous mode of knowledge and folded into Western epistemologies.

In contrast to Mané, Kazumasa is made invisible when it is discovered that the sentient extraterrestrial sphere that hovers on his forehead functions as a detector for untapped reservoirs of the Matacão. The supernatural ability of the sphere initially affords Kazumasa's mobilities – migration to Brazil from Japan and upward socioeconomic mobility. However, that ability is consumed by GGG's corporate empire.

As the Matacão continues to be extracted from the earth, Kazumasa increasingly loses bodily freedom as the magnetic pull between the Matacão and the sphere also strengthens, requiring him to be restrained so that he would not plummet to the ground and meet an untimely and gruesome death. Such bodily risks are made even more significant by corporate spies seeking to kidnap Kazumasa. To ensure GGG's monopoly, J.B. restricts the freedom of Kazumasa and the sphere through unfair contracts and hides them from the public in various safe houses:

That Kazumasa and I were the key to Matacão plastic was a secret which even Tweep could not keep under wraps for long....J.B. had to step in with his own spies and whisk Kazumasa around to throw everyone off his tracks. There were days when, in order to shake some obstinate tail, Kazumasa and I were checked into and out of a dozen seedy hotels in a dozen towns and outposts, only to be left on some hidden forest runway supposedly known only to smugglers. (145)

Kazumasa's role in GGG is literally and metaphorically made invisible as even those close to him in personal life, such as his love interest Lourdes, cannot know his whereabouts. Yamashita critiques the economic motivations underpinning global capitalism, in its old and new forms, through the nonhuman narrator. The sphere remarks on how difficult it will be for Kazumasa to regain freedom due to the amount of surveillance they are placed under: "No one could find us, nor could we escape" (150). Kazumasa believes he has been sworn into secrecy for the greater good of society. However, the sphere on his head is aware that such decisions are based on the neocolonial logic that regards Greenland, central Australia, the Antarctic, and other

tropical forests as pristine lands to be plundered to maximize the profits of global corporations.

At first glance, *The Centenal Cycle* appears to present a utopian world in which the greater good of the society is no longer just an excuse to entrench inequities under racial capitalism further as it is in *Through the Arc*. Although Older does not elaborate on how most of the nation-states around the globe could reach a consensus peacefully to form a global microdemocratic system, this radical premise for the near future emphasizes how undoing geopolitical borders requires almost miraculous conditions of possibilities. At the same time, microdemocracy is not conceived as an unattainable fantasy. Instead, it is described as an attainable and necessary foundation for creative modes of resistance to emerge and reduce the harm generated by the securitization of borders. The movement of people and capital across the borders enabled by the centenal system is certainly not new, as indicated by one of the central characters in the series, Ken.

Like Kazumasa, Ken is also Japanese Brazilian. Born in a Sony-Mitsubishi centenal in Brazil, he relocates to Tokyo, Japan as a teenager after losing both his parents to an unknown cause. Ken's personal history, made public through Information, indexes the Japanese diaspora in Brazil, central to *Through the Arc*. And yet, migration, as well as return migration, manifest in different ways within the twenty-second century microdemocratic world, in which some obstacles have been removed while new ones have emerged:

[Ken's] personal history, though not readily available, is easier to find: born in a Sony-Mitsubishi centenal in São Paulo, to issei. Seven years younger than [Mishima] is, but she had suspected as much. Orphaned at twelve. High School in Japan. Moderate Sony-Mitsubishi scholarships to support him through that, but no follow-up for university. Instead, that just-above-menial-level job at one of their plants. (*Infomocracy* 220)

In Ken's case, international relocation is made logistically simpler. He moves from one Sony-Mitsubishi centenal to another without changing his citizenship status and losing eligibility for government aid. Moreover, the handheld devices used by those in the microdemocratic world offer translation services, which mitigates linguistic barriers Ken may have faced in Japan. Even so, such a move incurred by personal loss still involves a degree of precarity. For instance, Ken remarks that he does not have "any wealth to speak of" (*Infomocracy* 30). With hopes for upward mobility and a lifestyle of a global trotter, Ken takes temporary employment as a campaign worker for a government called Policy1st, disguised in plain sight as a postgraduate student traveling to different centenals. While pretending to be a student giving talks and attending events, Ken privately gathers and disseminates intel that could swing votes in favor of Policy 1st.

In a society saturated with surveillance capitalism, albeit one moderated by a non-corporate entity and like Information, Ken is exploited as what Esko Suoranta calls a data/flesh worker who functions as a collector of data:

The data Ken displays is not false, but it is misleading, and this is what enables him to complete his mission. He can appear trustworthy and ask questions without raising suspicion or creating a bias against his employer. This personal data-gathering is augmented by other similar pursuits to inform policy – within the data/flesh interface, the information worker functions as a collection node.

Even though the misleading data that Ken distributes to targeted centenals wins votes and the intel he gathers informs strategies of Policy1st, he remains an under-compensated,

unofficial worker kept out of the decision-making process in the government. Ken wishes to regard his supervisor Suzuki Todry as a mentor figure who is genuinely interested in his mentee's career development. Yet, in return for his dedication, Ken only receives an offer to be Suzuki's personal assistant, which is a promotion in name only. Despite his commitment to the cause, Ken is unable to secure an official, full-time employment within Policy1st. In addition to Ken, other minor characters who are campaign workers for various governments suggest that data/flesh workers' precarity persists globally.

Although precarity of various kinds still exists in *The Centenal Cycle*, Older speculates whether it might be possible to close the gap between privileged and the less privileged forms of migration. With the nation-states no longer functioning as authorities on who should be allowed to move when and where, the microdemocratic world succeeds in drastically reforming the legal processes for immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers that are often designed to deter the movement of marginalized populations more than they enable it. However, Older's series also demonstrates how debates around the regulation of international migration might extend into the twenty-second century.

As an anarchist, Domaine emerges as one of the primary opponents of microdemocracy and the changes brought under this new form of governance. In *Infomocracy*, he hires a freelance designer in Addis Ababa to launch anti-election infomercials to discredit Information. While Domaine is not against the loosening of immigration control itself, he argues that microdemocracy is problematic as it results in "the concentration of ideologies – and, in some cases, ethnicities" (*Infomocracy* 42). Domaine believes that concentrations will result in increased conflicts stemming from

ideological differences. However, the designer, Shamus, points out that he cannot take the ability to move across the borders without fearing oppression for granted. As a member of the Black diaspora in Ireland, he contends: “The fact that you’re antielection just tells us that wherever you lived before it started, you were privileged. Don’t you remember what it was like? Except for that global few for whom borders didn’t matter, you were affiliated with there you were from” (*Infomocracy* 42). Even though Domaine’s concerns are valid, Shamus’s critique reveals the pitfalls of conceptualizing migration in the abstract without considering the lived experiences of individuals and groups who have historically endured various forms of displacements within and across national borders. Likewise, Ken’s perspective as a member of the Japanese-Brazilian diaspora and a return migrant is overlooked as his job requires him to remain as the collection node for data.

In the world of *The Centenal Cycle*, a challenge emerges as it becomes more difficult to locate which marginalized populations are being mined for information and labor. It is not uncommon, for instance, for an individual to become citizens of multiple governments in one’s lifetime without having to cross international borders. On the surface, therefore, everyone in the microdemocratica world seems to be equally integrated into the global surveillance network without distinction. Macarena Gómez-Barris, however, emphasizes that extractive practices of capitalism evolve along with the development of surveillance technologies. She argues, “In the new digital era, surveillance, data mining, and the mapping of resource-rich territories work together as complexly interlinked, rather than discrete, manifestations of hegemony that extinguish

Indigenous and rural communities, such as in the regions in South America that I study” (Gómez-Barris 7). By setting her series in the not too distant twenty-second century, Older makes space for readers to reconsider surveillance capitalism in the twenty-first century.

Due to the amount of routine surveillance encroaching upon the privacy of individuals, many readers have classified *The Centenal Cycle* series as dystopian fiction. However, the image of the near future conjured up by Older is not much different from that of the present described by Shoshana Zuboff: “Invented at Google and elaborate at Facebook in the online milieu of targeted advertising, surveillance capitalism embodies a new logic of accumulation. Like an invasive species with no natural predators, its financial prowess quickly overwhelmed the networked sphere, grossly disfiguring the earlier dream of technology as an empowering and emancipatory force” (11). In the fictionalized twenty-second century, notable differences are that surveillance technologies are more widespread, visible, and openly acknowledged. Further, Older speculates whether a benevolent form of surveillance could exist if moderated by a supranational nonprofit organization founded upon democratic ideals.

Therefore, *The Centenal Cycle* is not so much centered on depicting a completed project of a utopia or dystopia but instead focuses on the promises and failures of microdemocracy to manage the economic landscape shaped by surveillance capitalism. As the series develops, numerous fractures in the microdemocratic system begin to emerge, such as the political tension between the microdemocratic system and the null states, which do not participate in the global election. More significantly, Older’s

projections into the future reflect on the present and past instances in which people conflated different forms of democracies with the values they could either uphold or undermine. Against such a view of democracy as immune to critique, Achille Mbembe specifically critiques the legacy of pro-slavery democracy in the United States, which depends on the maintenance of racialized hierarchy: “Two orders coexist within it – *a community of fellow creatures* governed, at least in principle, by the law of equality, and a category of *nonfellows*, or even those without part, that is also established by law. A priori, those without part have no right to have rights. They are governed by the law of inequality” (17). For the *nonfellows*, a democracy that does not recognize their human rights is not a justifiable system. Like Mbembe, Older approaches democracy as an ideal that has never been fully realized. But instead of declaring democracy a failure, she suggests how it might be reconceived as an ongoing project.

The cognitively estranging effects created by a world divided into centenals rather than nation-states in *The Centenal Cycle* prompt the readers to reexamine the prescriptive understanding of democracy and focus on what lies beyond such closed imaginations. As Lauren Berlant argues, “localism and xenophobias are resurfacing in the political at the same time as more inclusive forms of popular imaginary emerge” due to the infrastructural pressures in the twenty-first century that range from environmental to economic disparity (262). Thus, Older speculates what could happen after a new political system is implemented, not enough to resolve all pressures but just enough to identify the crucial works that need to be carried out and provide foundations for more viable alternatives. In the series’ final installment, *State Tectonics*, narrative plots that seem

disconnected due to the distance between geographic and demographic concerns are revealed to be deeply connected. Through this resurgence of imperialism across a different set of borders, Older's work inquires whether it would be possible to foster a sustainable and flexible model for political engagement that allows the system to continue to evolve and avoid becoming stagnant.

As the first installment in the series, *Infomocracy* explores the moment in which a revolutionary change implemented to generate greater democratic participation and political agency finds itself at another crossroads. One of the significant limitations of the microdemocracy that becomes the driving force of the conflict in Older's trilogy is that those who held power within the previous world order have preserved their positions, albeit in different forms. Lisa Duggan examines such a moment in the history of the United States: "the New Deal consensus was dismantled in the creation of a new vision of national and world order, a vision of competition, inequality, market 'discipline,' public austerity, and 'law and order' known as *neoliberalism*" (x). Despite the intentions of key architects of microdemocracy, the first global election in Older's near-future world similarly results in major corporations and former superpowers forming neoliberal coalitions that stand against downward redistribution of power: "The new Heritage coalition of wealthy, experienced global corporates ignored the accessibility of Information, produced their standard glossy misinformation, and not only took the Supermajority but won centenals where, analysts agreed, it was demonstrably not in the interests of the people living there to vote for them" (*Infomocracy* 79). Likewise, the second election fails to push Heritage, the incumbent Supermajority, out of the office and

encourages more formerly multinational corporates to form their governments to consolidate power.

This trend observed through two global election cycles in the series show how truth, technology, and power remain intimately connected even without nation-states serving as vessels of power. As a proponent of Information, Mishima believes that the failure lies in how truth was presented: “She had her own theory: Information workers, with their ingrained culture prioritizing rigorous truth, struggled to slap motivational music or abstract view and happy faces onto their datasets, and it showed” (*Infomocracy* 80). Yet, she realizes that truth and technology are never apolitical, neutral, or objective as she further investigates election schemes. Whereas Heritage represents the coalition of European governments and corporations built on the legacies of colonialism, its contender Liberty evokes white supremacist nationalism even in the absence of both race and nation in the discourse. In the pre-election debate, Liberty’s leader remarks that the government will prioritize the freedom of its citizens over others: “We also respect the rights of our own citizens, their needs, economic fulfillment, and pursuit of happiness. And especially, of course, their freedoms. And we will defend that” (*Infomocracy* 92-93). While Liberty also grants citizenship to non-white people, their very notion of individualized freedom positions them closer to more minor, overtly white supremacist governments.

An ideologically problematic minor government like AmericaTheGreat, for instance, forces people of color to migrate away from the centenals controlled by them. Yet, Information takes a laissez-faire approach to the so-called “quasi-democratic

governments,” arguing that they will not have a chance to grow their influence in the microdemocratic system that allows its members to make sufficiently informed decisions (*State Tectonics* 61). As a result of Information’s refusal to intervene, AmericaTheGreat succeeds in painting Nakia, a non-white director of the New York Hub, as “a partisan abusing her power” (*State Tectonics* 60). Furthermore, Nakia is suspended from her job for advocating for fellow residents of color, who will be leaving their long-time homes in New York City against their will, an honorable act that Information’s algorithmic tribunal nonetheless declares politically biased and thus unacceptable professional behavior.

Mishima observes that such attacks of quasi-democratic governments on marginalized communities and those who advocate for them are condoned by “more powerful groups that, if less fascist in their ideology, still bend toward segregationist or colonialist tendencies” (*State Tectonics* 62). For example, another major corporate government, PhilipMorris, maintains the segregationist divide between its producer and consumer centenals, suggesting the persistence of global racial capitalism. Therefore, even as Information claims to uphold humanitarian ideals, Nakia questions the organization's underlying values: “we all know Information is never going to value our well-being over their reputation for neutrality, but what option did I have?” (*State Tectonics* 306). As exemplified by this case, neither the microdemocratic election system nor Information is genuinely committed to social justice. Instead, their mutual goal is to maintain strenuous peace in the name of neutrality, even if it involves turning a blind eye toward injustices experienced by minorities.

Beyond Disaster Capitalism

To further critique the extractive logic of industrial and surveillance capitalism within their speculative fictions, Yamashita and Older use disasters as narrative devices that unearth deeply entrenched but often-obscured inequalities within systems that purport to afford greater geographical and economic mobility for people. The term disaster capitalism has been used to capture the phenomenon of large corporations generating profit from the spectacle of disasters, which Naomi Klein explains as an “orchestrated raid on the public in the wake of catastrophic events, combined with the treatment of disasters as exciting market opportunities” (6). The privatization of rebuilding New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina in 2005 provides one such example. In *Markets of Sorrow, Labors of Faith* (2013), Vincanne Adams writes, “In the end, they were able to profit from the human tragedy, turning sorrows into opportunities for capital investments” (7). According to Adams, “market-oriented solutions and the mechanics of disaster capitalism multiplied by the problems of race-based violence in a city already troubled by a large racial disparity” (38). Rather than focus on the manifestation of disaster capitalism compellingly described by Klein and Adams, I explore the use of disasters towards different ends. I suggest that disasters mapped onto speculative geographies enable us to critique inadequate responses from both public and private sectors to the devastation of human and nonhuman lives.

In *Through the Arc*, the differential process of commodifying the knowledge and labor of Indigenous and migrant workers is responsible for the absences created around Matacão. Whether through hypervisibility or invisibility, both Mané and Kazumasa lose

self-determination and are consumed as resources for the empire-building projects involving the collusion between governments and multinational corporations. GGG also wreaks havoc on the rainforests in Brazil through the exploitations of its workers. Such entanglements corroborate Ruth Wilson Gilmore's claim that socioeconomic and environmental justice cannot be achieved in separation. She defines racism as "the state-sanctioned or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death" (Gilmore 28). In Yamashita's novel, the Brazilian government's sanction of GGG's capitalist projects results in the increased exploitation of those at the bottom of the racialized socioeconomic hierarchy. Eventually, racist domestic and foreign policies lead them to premature death through environmental destruction.

To counter such effect of racism on the environment, I follow Ashley Cheyemi McNeil's proposal to re-envision Matacão as the generative site of what she defines as spatial subjectivity: "If we perceive nature as a space that is itself a subject and also engenders subjectivities, rather than as a rhetorical nation-building object, then we can work through covert mechanisms of oppression in radically productive ways" (206). According to McNeil, spatial subjectivity disrupts the false dichotomy of nation and nature. It debunks the belief that humans are the only sentient beings in the biosphere that have required intelligence to govern the animate and the inanimate. Disruption of the dichotomy between nation and nature, human and nonhuman, also brings into question which groups of people have continued to be left out of the boundary of the human through forces including but not limited to racism in its various instantiations.

In both *Through the Arc* and *The Centenal Cycle*, ecological and political disasters are depicted as intertwined problems exacerbated by border imperialism's containment tactics. Disasters do not occur by accident in terms of vulnerable embodiments created at the intersection of race, gender, and environment. Julie Sze argues: "Pervasive and historical patterns of pollution exposure, toxic contamination, and environmental destruction are not accidental but rather embedded in systems of exploitation. These patterns are exacerbated by neoliberalism, which idealizes market, capital, and consumer subjectivities over communitarian notions of belonging or justice" (109). From this perspective, disasters emerge as an amplification of the intended function of the system. In *Through the Arc*, such failings of state governance manifest as a series of epidemics that affect everyone, from the most vulnerable to the most privileged. Yet, it takes a considerable time for the typhus epidemic to be recognized as a national crisis. When the disease spreads to the marginalized communities, it does not trigger a state-wide response as the lives of the poor are deemed expendable. However, the bacteria that causes typhus, *rickettsia prowazekii*, does not remain within the underprivileged communities as the rich imagines. Only when it begins to affect the Brazilian elites does the epidemic receive attention. Thus, even though the disease itself does not discriminate, marginalized populations are disproportionately affected by the typhus epidemic due to their lack of access to adequate healthcare. Such discrepancy exposes the entrenched inequities across race and class within Brazil, which puts certain people more at risk than others.

Furthermore, the epidemic reveals how various ecological and social systems cannot be contained within artificial borders. Just as the Brazilian government imagined the typhus to be only affecting the poor neighborhood, those in the so-called First World continue to imagine the ecological, social, and political disasters as endemic to the Third World. Thus those in the First World believe that the spread of typhus is containable and controllable along the geopolitical borders: “Wait until they find a vaccine, they thought. Epidemics, plagues, drought, famine, terrorism, war – all things that happened to other people, poor people in the Third World who cavorted with communism and the like. When we travel, we don’t drink the water, some said. Terrorists shouldn’t be negotiated with either, others said” (184). Here, discussions of epidemics, plagues, droughts, and famines are interlaced with the rhetoric of ideological containment, thus casting natural disasters as moral punishment for the supposed communists and terrorists.

When customers of GGG and the followers of featherology around the globe send cards, those echo hollowly as empty gestures unaccompanied by material forms of aid. The sympathy cards do arrive. However, no one is left alive to receive them. Mané and his wife Angustia lose their youngest children to typhus and eventually succumb to the disease themselves. The epidemic does not spare even Mané’s secretary at the GGG. In the context of *Through the Arc*, Aimee Bahng critiques the misconception that the First World and the Third World exist in separate spheres: “Rather than animating the Matacão plastic as an invasive foreigner, Yamashita insists that it is the disavowed slag of capitalist overaccumulation and hubris.” She further argues, “If the Amazon rainforest yields a seemingly new raw material that turns out to be the recycled detritus of the so-

called civilized world, then what is excavated in the Third World is already tangled in the machinations of the First World” (Bahng 35). Due to that oversight, an epidemic even deadlier than the typhus spreads through the very logistics of global capitalism that binds Mané, Kazumasa, J.B., and other major characters’ fates together.

People at the top of the socioeconomic order who survive the typhus epidemic that sweeps Brazil hold onto the fantasy of immunity. But that fantasy proves to be powerless against the second epidemic that appears supernatural. To the surprise of the rich, the two epidemics are revealed to have a common origin. The rickettsia travels via a minute species of lice to birds' feathers and eventually to humans, causing typhus (198). In that process, the rickettsia also comes into contact with the Matacão plastic and disintegrates it at a molecular level. The people who have voraciously consumed the Matacão, even making processed food products out of it, are literally and metaphorically destroyed by that which they had devoured. The Matacão that they had ingested causes health problems as it dissolves within the human body. Therefore, it can be argued that the second epidemic, which causes mysterious illnesses in people, brings to light the various societal problems that the typhus epidemic had begun to expose but was still disregarded by the most privileged. Moreover, as rickettsia continues to ravage on, it targets the lifestyle that those people have become accustomed to in a global capitalist society: credit cards made with the Matacão dissolve, causing disruptions in financial transactions; buildings built with the same material crumble down. J.B.’s Chicolandia is affected the most as the theme park made almost entirely out of the Matacão becomes erased from the map.

Instead of dealing with the source of the problem, however, the Brazilian government enacts yet more violence by using Dichlorodiphenyltrichloroethane (DDT) to cause mass death of birds in the rainforest surrounding the Matacão as well as human residents whose lives are deemed equally expendable. J.B.'s partner Michelle Mabelle, a French ornithologist, is one of the few in positions of power among those who oppose the use of DDT. Yet, she fails to extend her empathy for the birds populating the Amazon rainforest to the people who live in the same habitats. Throughout the typhus epidemic, “[Michelle] had remained like foreigners [who] often remain in war zones and military dictatorships, writing home to their friends and families to tell how the situation isn’t as bad as the press makes it out to be, strangely immune to the turbulence surrounding them” (203). However, after the mass death of the birds, she leaves Matacão with her triplets and her personal “exotic” collection of birds, on a private jet to her family in Southern France. Her response to the various crises in Matacão reveals how problems can be exacerbated by conservationist efforts and ecocritical thoughts that do not account for the local people who have the most to lose in the matter.

According to Nixon, “disregarding local human relations to the environment to implement American- and European-style conservation agendas” leads to asymmetries of power that ultimately benefit governments of the Global North, NGOs, and transnational corporations but not those in the Global South. Due to the series of epidemics, Michelle, who has benefitted from the asymmetry, experiences losses like the others as J.B. commits suicide after his corporate empire falls. Nonetheless, her privilege allows her to leave the Amazonian rainforest and its birds behind without further meeting further

consequences. In contrast, the local residents' fates are inextricably tied to that of the rainforest. The image presented at the end of *Through the Arc* is accordingly bleak, considering that it depicts what survived despite capitalist extractions and violent state governance:

A band of children were chasing each other. These few children, having escaped the typhus epidemic and the DDT, had crept cautiously from their homes to find great sport in tossing pebbles at the Matacão, taking turns at biting off the brittle remains and sliding down the sides of this widening valley. Now that the Matacão had disappeared, the children remained, habitually meeting in what was now an enormous pit. (210)

The number of children at this moment is noted as “few,” which implies that many more either have fallen ill or died due to typhus, the DDT, and their lasting harmful impacts on their health. Even so, the children make the damaged terrains of the Matacão into their playground as it is their home, which they cannot afford to or may wish to leave in the first place. But unfortunately, both the death and survival of children are precisely what remains outside Michelle's purview and the aid of Global North.

As demonstrated in *Through the Arc*, extranormal events, both natural and manufactured disasters, demand that boundaries that exist in the status quo be abandoned. In *The Centenal Cycle*, Older speculates how the localized practices that emerge from catastrophes may be proactively applied from such recognition. In addition to affording greater freedom of movement for immigrants like Shamus, those who find themselves unexpectedly displaced due to disasters of various kinds are also afforded more agency in this fictional world. Throughout the series, Older strategically uses disasters, ranging from natural to political, to put the microdemocratic world's response system to the test and to continue to place pressure on the logic of borders. Mishima, Roz, and Maryam –

the younger generation of women of color who occupy important positions within Information – are forced to confront the reality that the current system cannot meaningfully include the counsel of people most affected by political, economic, and ecological disasters.

In *Infomocracy*, Older uses an earthquake as a plot device that reveals both the immediate explosiveness of such violence and the slowness of everyday violence that becomes more visible in the wake of a seismic shift. While the Tokyo earthquake indexes the Great Kanto Earthquake of 2011, its fictionalized depiction reveals how the diverse populations affected are often overlooked in disaster responses. The network outage, caused by a strategically timed political sabotage after the earthquake at the Tokyo Information hub, provides an opportunity for the major characters to become aware of the gaps that have always been there but went unnoticed. When Ken is recruited by Information to gather data in Doha to compensate for the outage, he encounters Sri Lankan migrant workers who are anxiously waiting to find out news about their families back home:

Ken's translator tells him that they're speaking Sinhala. This is enough, he thinks he could go back and write it up ('Doha: Qatari population more annoyed than worried; foreign workers from Sri Lanka nearing panic') but he is reluctant to take data without giving something back. He can too easily imagine their situation: far from home with no way of communicating, maybe no safe way of getting back. Anything could be happening there. (*Infomocracy* 241)

While Ken's freelance job only requires him to extract information from the migrant workers in the street and move on, he becomes aware that such a bureaucratic and delayed response is not enough for the immediacy of the disaster felt by those working far away from their families. As Suoranta argued, Ken is a data/flesh worker who

“functions as a collection node” for Information as well as Policy1st. However, Ken personally offers to bring back news of these migrant workers’ hometowns from the Information office, which goes beyond his role as a temporary worker for Information.

After the earthquake, Tokyo quickly receives humanitarian aid as the world’s attention had already been turned towards the city currently hosting pre-election debates. Various microdemocratic governments compete to provide support, using the earthquake as an opportunity to develop a positive reputation with the public. As Domaine notes, such a response demonstrates the continuing disparity between the issues that receive attention internationally and those that do not: “Meanwhile, is anyone raising money for...I don’t know two million people in Central Asia who will die of starvation or exposure this winter?.... The world ignores those problems. Governments don’t want to talk about it, and the international community can hide behind these shitty elections as through so-called micro-democracy makes everything okay” (*Information* 135). As he explains, these stories hidden in plain sight deflect accountability onto the disinterested public instead of governments. Even after the boundaries between nation-states dissolve, the continuing challenges faced by migrant workers, for instance, reveal how much more radical envisioning of belonging is required.

Seeking reformation within the institution after the earthquake, Information launches special task force units called Specialized Voter Actions Team (SVAT). In *Null States*, Roz is appointed to be a part of the SVAT team dispatched to a conflict zone in Central Asia. She is sent to centenals that share borders with the warring states of Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, and parts of the former People’s Republic of China that remains

as a null state. There, her team prepares to relocate refugees, who are expected to cross the borders into the microdemocratic system when the armed conflicts begin. As an organization not affiliated with a military force, Information acts as a humanitarian intermediary responsible for keeping the refugees alive and well until they can find a government and a centenal to relocate to and start a new life. In that sense, Information provides a better alternative to the current system in which the refugees have to plot survival for an indeterminate time:

Information is staffing a refugee fair to match the newcomers with micro-democratic governments. Some of the governments have restrictions, requiring documentation on criminal backgrounds or trades and skills, but for the most part, refugees are recognized as a good bargain. Treat them well, and they will vote for you more loyally than citizens who were born in your centenal. (*Null States* 341)

In this scenario presented in Older's trilogy, the obstacles the refugees face are significantly reduced. According to Mai-Linh Hong, the current refugee regime "serves mostly a gatekeeping function for wealthy nations, mitigating the costs of refugee crises while fulfilling the humanitarian needs of a tiny percentage of the 70.4 million people who live in indefinite, forced displacement worldwide" (34). The system employed by Information prevents refugees from being suspended in such limbos. Yet, the integration of refugees into the micro-democratic systems still leaves more to be desired as it is still imagined as a transaction in which the government measures the value that could be gained by offering citizenship. Moreover, such a refugee relocation program depends on surveillance technologies that gather massive data to find a matching and willing government for every refugee without fail. The creation of the S.V.A.T. team suggests that the system continues to face its limits in dealing with old and new conflicts.

The need to recenter localized knowledge to confront global capitalism increasingly becomes urgent as conflicts and disasters ensue in *The Centenal Cycle*. When Roz and her S.V.A.T. team are sent on a mission to former Sudan to assist the country's transition to microdemocracy, she discovers that the start-up fund supplied by Information is not being used for its intended purposes. Instead of implementing information infrastructure such as feed cameras, the assassinated governor Abubakar Ahmed Yagoub, called "Al-Jabali," had been using the fund to build solar farms, manufacturing complexes, and sewage water purification systems. Roz initially takes Al-Jabali's choice to be a refusal to accept progress and adhere to what she calls "timelessness" or traditions of the past (*Null States* 165). She believes that other locals like Al-Jabali do not fully understand the benefits of advanced technology that have become the norm in developed parts of the microdemocratic world.

However, the deputy governor Suleyman confronts the colonialist paternalism undergirding Roz's notion of progress, which does not let the people in Kas, a region in former Sudan, decide what they need to live and thrive. He contends: "for our lives as a whole, we must answer yes to some types of progress, no to others, so that we can keep what we need and improve what we can" (*Null States* 79). Suleyman gestures to the infrastructure built with Information's funds to meet local needs and further adds, "In any case, I find it interesting that you think of this as the past... This could just as easily be the future" (*Null States* 79). Each SVAT team consists of diverse members in terms of race, ethnicity, and gender, including Roz from a different region in Africa. However,

Suleyman's debate with Roz reveals how multiculturalism continues to be deployed to maintain the racialized structure of global capitalism.

In *State Tectonics*, political and natural disasters that have been investigated separately due to their respective geographic focus all converge together to reveal the flaw of the global microdemocratic system. Initially, it is only suspected that the highly controversial mantle tunnels in their development stages caused the Kanto Earthquake, which took place in *Infomocracy*. The timing of Liberty's attempt to fabricate the election results in the wake of a power outage caused by the earthquake is also deemed a mere coincidence. Yet, the tunnels are eventually revealed as the site of continuing imperialist desires of the powerful governments in the twenty-second century: "That is the part of the appeal of mantle tunnels: if Information courts continue to rule in favor of a borderless subterranean, it will bypass all the multilateral negotiations and complex investor agreements required for train lines" (*State Tectonics* 310). While the mantle tunnel projects sponsored by 888 (Chinese) and Philip Morris (Swiss-American) are hailed as the sign of microdemocracy's maturity that allows governments to work for the public interest across borders, the lack of transparency around its political and ecological impacts suggests otherwise. Through the project's chief environmental engineer, an independent contractor not directly affiliated with any of the microdemocratic governments, Roz discovers that Liberty has been using an unauthorized subterranean tunnel to hide their Intranet hidden from Information. She further realizes that this clandestine network is responsible for Liberty's surprise attack on Information hubs

during the second global election. Such actions undermine the tenets of objective truths that Information upholds to enable microdemocracy.

The growing fissures within the microdemocratic system create a geopolitical as well as a tectonic shift, as hinted by the title of the last book in the trilogy, *State Tectonics*. Maryam, an engineer, emerges as one of the major narrators towards the end, as she transitions from a reluctant to an active participant in taking away power from Information. While Older refuses to provide a monolithic view of those who are part of the anti-system movement, Taskeen Kahn best represents the ethos of *The Centenal Cycle* despite her refusal to be affiliated with any other entity besides herself. While she had been one of the major architects of Information in its inception, she is revealed to be the puppet master-like figure who has been aiding insurgent groups with varying interests and values to deconcentrate the power. Referring to the history of resistance that connects Beirut, La Habana, and Lima – places that has been past and present home to Maryam – Taskeen emphasizes that political systems need constant renewal. She remarks, “Thankfully, we are finally at the stage where we can truly have a bloodless revolution” (*State Tectonics* 384). Yet, Taskeen is not characterized as a villain as her target is not microdemocracy but Information, which she defines as “the giant undemocratic blockage in the system” (*State Tectonics* 385). For her, creating multiple, competing sites of information is a necessary step for the evolution of microdemocracy. But, she is neither a hero. The insurgent groups she helped behind the scenes act according to their own agenda, some of which result in violence that could have led to bloodshed: the ex-Information workers who have defected to null states divide into subgroups depending on

whether they aim for rebuilding or mass destruction; the former Supermajority, Heritage, uses its significant military prowess to reclaim its place in the microdemocratic world, deploying targeted precision bombs to cut off power sources of data hubs and cause Information to crash.

Ruin and Renewal

The penultimate ending of *Through the Arc* provides a scene of renewal that is romanticized but simultaneously exposed as flawed: “[Kazumasa] immediately moved Lourdes and the children onto a farm filled with acres and acres of tropical fruit trees and vines and a plantation of pineapple and sugarcane, sweet corn and coffee. Rubens wheeled happily around the guava orchards, and Gislaine sat in the branches of jaboticaba tree, sucking out the sweet white flesh of its fruit from their purple-black skins” (211). Furthermore, with the extraterrestrial sphere gone from his forehead, Kazumasa is described to now have a “tropical tilt of his head” (211). While the imagery depicts a tropical paradise, the history of plantations in the Caribbean and Latin America and the introduction of monocropping suggest that the violence caused by the excavation of Matacão cannot be erased from the soil. In the context of Cuban American literature, Maia Gil’Adi argues that “sweet and seemingly innocent, sugar instigates addictive pathologies that revisit colonial, imperial, and racial violence without turning to aesthetic remedy” (98). Sugar then evokes an apocalyptic aesthetic of unrelenting colonial violence that outlasts the empire itself. Seen as an extension of the sugar apocalypse, Kazumasa’s plantation, which is filled with pineapple, sugarcane, sweet corn, and coffee, is a site haunted by the consumptive pleasure that is still destructive and thus far from a paradise.

Yet, the novel provides another ending that provides a cyclical view of history based on remembrance instead of amnesia. Although the sphere is gone from Kazumasa's forehead, it continues to exist as a witness to history on a different temporal plane: "Now the memory is complete, and I bid you farewell. Whose memory you are asking? Whose indeed" (212). Just as the conquest of Indigenous lands and the Atlantic slave trade have been erased in the paradisiacal reimagination of the plantation, the destruction of Matacão and its human and nonhuman inhabitants may also be obscured in settler colonial history. However, the sphere provides the readers with a view of anonymous dancers engaged in the practice of Candomblé, an African diasporic religion in Brazil:

Press your face into the earth where the odor of chicken fat and blood and incense still lingers and the intense staccato of the drums still quivers long after the gyrating bodies of dancers – spinning until their eyes glaze over in trance, sweat spraying forth from the tips of their loins – are gone. The acrid stink of tobacco churned in human sweat and cane brandy still saturates the morning air. (212)

Here too, the sweet smell of cane brandy is interlaced with the ritualistic act of remembering. According to Le, "Candomblé centers Indigenous elements and epistemologies that have emerged out of settler colonialism and enslavement while also incorporating residual forms and formations from Indigenous culture prior to invasion" (115). Thus, both the sphere and Candomblé represent an alternative archive of knowledge that refuses to be extracted by colonialism and capitalism in their evolving forms.

In *The Centenal Cycle*, Information's loss of monopoly gives rise to alternate archives of knowledge. In Kas, Roz encounters a long strip of a wall that presents graphic news and political satires for people who frequent the marketplace. She initially

dismisses the art on the wall as nonessential because it contains data already available to everyone or will be once funds are allocated by Information to build the necessary infrastructure. However, Roz's assessment overlooks the significance of localized knowledges and expressions rooted in communities. Yet, localized interpretations of global events painted by hand onto the wall provide a more nuanced portrayal of power dynamics at play:

The first panel she sees is about the mantle tunnel proposal. The Might V's are holding their hands up, palms out, telling everyone to hold up and slow down, while all around them cartoons of other major governments are urging, scientists are shrugging, business people are offering bits, and in a tiny leftover corner, someone has already started digging – presumably a reference to the scandal from the last election, when then-Supermajority Heritage started a tunnel without approvals. Unless the cartoonist knows something Roz doesn't. (*Null States* 104)

Even though Roz initially underestimates the residents of Kas as people who are late in joining the future represented by Information, she realizes that their intuitions captured what only she had begun to investigate. Even as the co-heads of the current Supermajority Policy 1st, Vera Kubugli and Veena Rasmussen, are calling for a more in-depth investigation of the safety of Heritage and 888's mantle tunnels as depicted in the panels, the conflicting interests of everyone involved, including the "Mighty V's," prevent microdemocracy from achieving transparency despite Information's efforts.

After the de-monopolization of Information, competing data providers begin to flourish. As Mishima walks by, a pop-up catches her attention: "NEW SUPERMAJORITY MIRED IN SCANDAL! 888 caches of secret communications found in mantle tunnel" (424). More significantly, however, she sees the real-time correction made by those at the bottom of the Information's hierarchy still working to

“disput[e] mired and scandal although not the substance of the headline” (*State Tectonics* 424). Such a moment shows how everyone will begin to actively engage in debates rather than passively receive so called facts from a single organization, Information. Older suggests that this change will push the microdemocracy into new directions. The series likewise ends with the younger generation represented by Ken, Mishima, Roz, Maryam, and Nakia of New York and Amran of Doha continuing to imagine different futures after the bloodless revolution instead of arriving at an easy consensus. When they each call for more open, human, and human data services, Mishima hesitates as she is reminded of Taskeen and the founders of Information: “*This is what the thought when they created Information*” (*State Tectonics* 428). However, in the end, she decides to put aside her pessimism for a moment and chime in as she cautiously accepts the optimistic view as constant and incremental changes are what she believes will allow people to dream and build a better future.

From such a point of view, the endings of both *Through the Arc* and *The Centenal Cycle* series’ openness can be read as renewals rather than uncertainties left in ruins caused by epidemics, earthquakes, and resurrections. Indeed, speculative fictions are not the only modes in which we can imagine an escape from border imperialism. However, the speculative geographies in the works of Yamashita and Older effectively draw our attention away from past and present geopolitical borders of nation-states in search of other ways of connecting local and global issues. Further, their modes of imagining otherwise are not simply alternate to our reality but one that incorporates a multiplicity of voices, especially racialized migrants whose labor is desired but not their integration as

full members of the nation-states. Finally, to answer an inquiry that I began this chapter with, I suggest that speculative geographies perform the crucial function of adjusting the scales so that these migrants are not reduced to informational nodes and numerical data. In these alternate accounts of globalization, the numerous lives made precarious through the securitization of borders and the multilayered and intersectional violence they experience are not forgotten but remembered. In the following chapter, I shift attention to the processes in which the bodies of the racialized migrants are used to maintain geopolitical borders with the aid of outbreak narratives that render migrants into contagions that must be contained or eliminated to preserve the health of a nation.

Chapter Two: Undead Borders: Mobilizing the Supernatural Outbreak Narratives

The emergence of a novel strand of mutated coronavirus first reported in Wuhan, China, in 2019 – officially referred to as COVID-19 by the World Health Organization (WHO) – renewed the Yellow Peril narratives long associated with those of Asian descent in the Western media and revealed how racism constructs narratives about an emerging communicable disease of a global scale. In January 2020, a local French newspaper, *Le Courier Picard*, sparked controversy by using explicitly Sinophobic headlines: “*Alert jaune*” (Yellow Alert) and “*Le péril jaune?*” (The yellow peril?).²¹ In response, French Asians on social media critiqued how the mainstream media’s coverage of the COVID-19 fuels the racist violence they experience in public spaces through the hashtag #JeNeSuiPasUnVirus, which was also circulated in English as #Iamnotavirus. The resilience of Yellow Peril narratives further attests to how racialized individuals in the West / Global North are almost always assumed to be foreign, regardless of their residency or citizenship status. The hashtags expose how xenophobia and racism foster an environment in which cognitive and verbal slippages frequently occur, transforming persons with rights to health care (*je* / I) into “racial” contagions (*un virus* / a virus) that must be removed from public life and eliminated. Furthermore, the reclaiming of the “I” by users of the hashtag in narrating their own personhoods calls into question who has the privilege of being a Western humanist subject by default, an “I,” and who does not.

²¹ For more information on the hashtag #JeNeSuiPasUnVirus, see Darren Boyle’s article “French Asians hit back at racism with ‘I am not a virus’ hashtag after newspaper runs ‘Yellow Alert’ coronavirus headline.”

Although migrants are not the only ones who are mobile, their movements are exclusively associated with threats to the nation-state, such as epidemics. In *Movement and Ordering of Freedom* (2015), Hagar Kotef provides a crucial insight into how racialized migrants from the Global South are marked differently not only by their mobility but also by the perception that their movements are “excessive.” The current global crisis induced by COVID-19 acutely demonstrates how the presumed foreignness of the racialized populations, including but not limited to migrants, becomes the justification for the state to render their lives expendable and deportable. In the context of the United States, such racialized narratives of contagion purposefully obscure how migrant workers from Asia and Latin America constitute a significant portion of the workforce redefined as “essential” during the COVID-19 pandemic – grocery, farm, and delivery workers as well as healthcare professionals.²²

Medical anthropologist Katherine Mason, for instance, reveals implicit bias in the valuation of human lives through her case studies of past responses to global pandemics: “Underlying all of these cases is the assumption that some people (wealthy, white, ‘civilized’) are more worth saving than others (poor, nonwhite, ‘backward’). The latter groups are perpetually seen as sources of disease, whereas the former are victims” (20). Mason’s argument is also applicable to the current pandemic in which the latter groups are disproportionately put in harm’s way while simultaneously lacking adequate

²² See Marin, Nina and Bernice Yeung. “‘Similar to Times of War’: The Staggering Toll of COVID-19 on Filipino Health Care Workers.” *ProPublica*, 3 May 2020.

resources for health care.²³ Yet, those discriminated against are prevented from seeking redress as they are rendered into public health risks, as in the case of migrants claiming asylum at the border.

In my first chapter, I explored how speculative geographies might be utilized to denaturalize current geopolitical borders and their continued securitization. In this chapter, I examine how the shifting of genres and their boundaries could be mobilized to challenge the medicalization of borders aided by outbreak narratives situated in anti-immigration contexts. Specifically, I focus on Ling Ma's *Severance* and Silvia Moreno-Garcia *Certain Dark Things*, two novels that revolve around supernatural outbreak narratives but refuse to be contained in a single genre. These novels, I argue, subvert discourses that render migrants into racial contagions, which pose threats to bodily and national borders, through their tactical remixing of genres. Shen Fever and Croeneng's disease, respectively, in these novels predating the COVID-19 pandemic, provide an arena in which xenophobic misnomers such as "China virus" or "Kung-Flu" can be critically analyzed.

Further, I examine how the narratives about Asian American and Latinx migration are radically revised from the migrants' perspectives through strategic employment of both realist and nonrealist genres, including specific genres that are often coopted to mark social groups deemed non-normative as less than human: the zombie narrative, the ghost

²³ In her article, "Racial Capitalism: A Fundamental Cause of Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) Pandemic Inequities in the United States," Whitney Pirtle demonstrates how racial capitalism shapes the racial and socioeconomic inequities in COVID-19 and calls for public health and health education research to "look beyond interventions focused to individual and interpersonal characteristics and more to institutions, environments, and ideologies" (3 - 4).

narrative, the vampire narrative, the detective narrative, and the narco-narrative. Whereas Ma transforms the zombie into the fevered, undead figures with an unknowable origin despite the alleged connection to Shenzhen, China, Moreno-Garcia takes an opposite approach by rendering the vampire as knowable, albeit with multiple, culturally specific origins, including the Tlahuelpochtli from Aztec legends. Through analyses of these two novels, I suggest that reimagination of the supernatural outbreak narrative has a liberatory potential to disrupt the exclusionary logic of geopolitical borders and generic borders, opening a space for alternative logics of belonging to emerge.

In “Genres as Fields of Knowledge,” Wai-Chee Dimock argues, “The membership – of any genre – is an open rather than closed set” (1378). In addition, she coins the term *regenreing* to reconceptualize the interactions between genres as a “cumulative reuse, an alluvial process, sedimentary as well as migratory” (Dimock 1380). *Regenreing* especially holds political potential when it involves a literary genre such as the immigrant narrative. Betsy Huang, for instance, has examined the role of *regenreing* in unsettling the sedimented knowledge produced about Asian Americans. She argues, “if we seek to broaden the vocabulary of Asian American identity and representation, we must make it more difficult to superimpose old stories on new subjects and genericize them into old, familiar categories” (146). This recent shift in genre theory thus offers literary scholars an opportunity to investigate further the connection between aesthetic experimentation and transformative politics. Therefore, my focus in this chapter will be on the dynamics between genres within each novel that disrupt the logic of inclusion and exclusion regarding both genres and populations, which then creates space for alternative logics of

belonging that account for migrant subjectivities. However, I diverge from previous scholarship by emphasizing the unresolved tensions between genres rather than the alluvial process of regenreing. Instead, I argue that Ma and Moreno-Garcia's novels indicate a desire to further delay the consolidation into a new genre by appearing to belong to one, all, or none of the genres at once.

Reimagining the Supernatural Outbreak Narrative

An outbreak of communicable disease has long been the object of people's fear and fascination, from the bubonic plague to AIDS, SARS, MERS, H1N1, Ebola, and COVID-19. Yet, narratives about outbreaks are rarely just about diseases. In *Contagious*, Priscilla Wald compellingly reveals how scientific, journalistic, and fictional accounts of disease emergence make visible, the transmission of dangerous microbes and evolving attitudes toward territorial, social, and cultural boundaries. She argues that outbreak narratives "promote or mitigate the stigmatizing of individuals, groups, populations, locales (regional and global), behaviors and lifestyles, and they can change economies" (3). Moreover, those narratives do not simply function as cautionary tales about the communicability of diseases but have consequences that extend beyond the domain of public health, such as the rendering of foreign and racial others as inherently pathogenic to the national body.

Focusing on the Texas-Mexico border between 1848 and 1942, John Mckiernan-González explains how the discourse on public health has been shaping geopolitical borders long before the Mexican Revolution. "When American and Texan authorities imagined that smallpox or yellow fever might appear in Texas [in the 1890s]," he

explains, “they envisioned that Mexicans were bringing this disease from Mexico, or that Mexicans of all nationalities were reservoirs of this disease in the United States” (Mckiernan-González 278). Even though the disease itself did not discriminate and affected Americans and Mexicans alike, this problematic conflation of race and disease shaped domestic public health policies. Similarly, Nayan Shah’s examination of immigrants in San Francisco’s Chinatown from the nineteenth century to the early twentieth century reveals how Chinese Americans were excluded from the purview of both *public* and *health* through racialization: “The health of Chinese women and men mattered only instrumentally. Medical professionals represented the Chinese as a pestilence, a danger for the white public. Physicians sent them to the ‘pesthouse,’ not the hospital” (251). Such a historical account shows how public health itself is a contested category dependent upon excluding specific individuals and groups from biopolitical governance even as they are still subject to the state’s necropolitical power.

Even when outbreak narratives emerge in cognitively estranging speculative fiction, racial logic often remains the lens through which one’s proximity to the contagion is determined, regardless of whether the disease in question is natural or supernatural. Thus, scrutinizing how we narrate an outbreak in the realm of the supernatural helps us understand medical racism that locates the disease within the body rather than the conditions the body is put under, providing the foundation for the politics of public health. The outbreak narrative carries, at its core, the desire to contain migrants and other marginalized populations deemed unassimilable either in heavily policed urban ghettos or on the other side of the border.

In her studies, Dahlia Schweitzer argues that outbreak narratives in American culture since the 1990s, specifically, show anxieties towards “three types of increasingly ineffective boundaries: first, between the personal body and the body politic; second, between individual nations; and third, between ‘ordinary’ people and potentially dangerous disenfranchised groups” (2). Supernatural outbreak narratives build onto these discourses, often ascribing literally and metaphorically monstrosity to racialized bodies associated with contagious diseases. Through this process, the migrant, the contagion, and the monster collapse into one another. Therefore, examining how such supernatural outbreak narratives are formed as a genre is crucial in unraveling such a process. In *Racial Worldmaking: The Power of Popular Fiction* (2017), Mark Jerng suggests that genre and race are mutually constitutive:

Genres activate certain ways in which racial meaning will be used in the composition of a world – establishing situations and justifying actions while making others seem less possible or realizable. At the same time, race shapes genre. As a possible set of referents, as narrative anticipations, and as the social structuring of meanings, race composes expectations for what the world might look like and activates rules for knowing the world. (16)

Jerng’s understanding of race and genre helps illuminate how racial meaning is activated in supernatural outbreak narratives. Therefore, I argue that understanding how constructions of identificatory categories require narrativization opens the possibilities of reversing damaging consequences by producing counternarratives.

Out of all the supernatural monsters that populate our imagination, the undead, vampires in *Certain Dark Things* and zombies in *Severance*, have had enduring popularity as metaphors for cultural anxieties around the transgression of physical, social, and national borders, leading to critiques of what lies underneath those same anxieties.

Much of the existing scholarship has focused on how the vampire and the zombie have been adapted from their local origins as the Transylvanian Dracula and the Haitian zombi into universal metaphors that signify concerns about the effects of accelerating globalization. In *Vampires and Zombies: Transcultural Migrations and Transnational Interpretations* (2016), editors Dorothea Fischer-Hornung and Monika Mueller also explore how the functions of these undead figures have drastically changed “[w]ith every culture and age creating the vampire and zombie it needs” (10). Yet, they equally emphasize the significance of contextualizing each variation of vampires and zombies: “Contemporary vampires can be both perpetrators and, more recently, victims; zombies have gone from enslaved victims of a bokor, the zombie master, to flesh-eating, brainless, and insatiably out-of-control devouring monsters” (Fischer-Hornung and Mueller 4). As these scholars have noted, metaphors often run the risk of reducing identificatory categories such as race into a static subject or object rather than a set of ongoing and historically contingent processes of racialization that a heterogeneous group of people is subjected to. I argue that both Ma and Moreno-Garcia avoid the limitations of a single metaphor by using multiple genres that pit against each other and resist metaphorization.

Although I do not consider postapocalyptic fiction as a separate variable in my examination of *Severance* and *Certain Dark Things*, its prominence within contemporary speculative fictional landscape warrants a brief discussion in relation to the overall argument of this chapter, Theodore Martin argues for a different approach to the postapocalyptic genre, shifting the focus from what changes to what stays the same:

The formal dilemma of the postapocalyptic genre is how to pass the time, and the way it resolves this dilemma is through the banal regimens of survival. Survival, then, is not just what apocalyptic narratives are about; it's what makes their narratives in the first place. It also makes them a certain kind of narrative, one committed to endurance and routine – the most basic and repeatable gestures of daily existence – rather than to change. The tedious routines of survival require us to read the genre from a different angle: less as a speculative vision of the future than as a rendering of the monotonous rhythms that structure the contemporary. (162)

While survival is also of primary concern of the protagonists of *Severance* and *Certain Dark Things*, it has a different valence from the kinds of survival that takes place in the texts that Martin uses to exemplify contemporary postapocalyptic fiction. In both novels, what must happen beyond an individual's survival is the question that burns until the narrative ends, in which the main characters brave yet more uncertain futures.

Fevered American Dream: The Yellow Peril and the Model Minority

Although Ling Ma's *Severance* has been primarily categorized as a zombie apocalypse novel by many readers, others have also drawn attention to the novel's generic slipperiness. The most direct, notable effect of such genre experimentation was that a debut novel by a Chinese American author was not exclusively received as an immigrant novel. This reception is noteworthy considering how works by Asian American writers have long been unanimously forced into the mold of the immigrant novel despite the rich diversity in their thematic and formal concerns. In an interview with the Asian American Writer's Workshop, Ma explains how she also felt the pressure to produce an autoethnography while she was enrolled in an MFA program:

In grad school, when a faculty member told me to write about ‘where you come from,’ that was my worst nightmare. Though *Severance* contains an immigrant narrative, it was something I initially resisted – and of course, it had to be wrapped up in an apocalyptic conceit. You could argue that the immigrant narrative and the apocalyptic narrative are similar in that they’re traditionally organized around a Before and an After. (Lue)

Not surprisingly, the resistance to writing a “traditional” immigrant narrative is one of the major forces that shape the structure of *Severance*. To bend the rules of the genre and prevent an autoethnographic reading, Ma opens the novel with a prologue that conceals any clue about the narrator’s identity in terms of race, ethnicity, gender, and age. Moreover, Ma deliberately misleads the readers by narrating from the first-person plural “we,” only to switch to the singular first-person “I” towards the end. It is further revealed that “I” was not a part of the “we” when the Shen Fever epidemic began as the anonymous narrator confesses: “The truth is, I was not there at the Beginning.... The truth is, I had stayed in the city as long as I possibly could. The whole time, I had been half waiting for myself to turn, to become fevered like everyone else. Nothing happened. I waited and waited. I still wait” (7). It is not until the end of the prologue that readers are finally introduced to the narrator and protagonist, Candace Chen, a 1.5-generation Chinese American woman from Fuzhou.

Set in an alternative past of 2011, *Severance* chronicles a supernatural disease, which decimates most of the world’s population by turning those infected into zombie-like beings called the fevered, who are forever trapped in their memories until their bodies eventually decay along with the mind. Although a global pandemic sets up its premise, the novel is narrated solely from the first-person perspective of Candace Chen, moving back and forth across four different periods of her life before and after the

epidemic. The disease, Shen Fever, is named after its presumed place of origin, Shenzhen, and shares a strange intimacy with Candace as she has been working pre-pandemic as a manager of overseas bible production plants in China's special economic zone (SEZ) for a publishing company in New York. Ma leaves it intentionally vague throughout the novel whether Candace is fevered, immune to the disease, or simply not yet fevered within the novel's time frame. With no one left in her family but her unborn child nicknamed Luna, she chooses to hold her ground in her Manhattan office until the city becomes uninhabitable for her. While still ambivalent about what must be done to survive in a fevered world, Candace is found by a former IT technician called Bob, who promises to lead a group of survivors to a haven he calls the Facility. Yet, Candace realizes that she cannot raise her child in a community filled with such nostalgia and authoritarianism, eventually escaping Chicago with the help of her mother's ghost. With the ending, the novel comes full circle as it is implied that Candace is narrating the prologue from a further point in time.

The narrative's driving force, Shen Fever, is initially described by the government and CDC²⁴ as a fungal infection transmitted by breathing in airborne spores. Yet, the novel does not feature characters who have access to institutional resources and can verify such information. Instead, as noted in the prologue, the survivors only consist of “brand strategists and property lawyers and human resources specialists and personal

²⁴ This description is strikingly like that of the mutated version of the *Ophiocordyceps unilateralis*, a type of insect-pathogenizing fungus that turns ants into zombies, which provides the premise for Mike Carey's novel, *The Girl with All the Gifts* (2014). Yet, unlike Carey's novel that revolves around two characters – a military scientist and a second-generation zombie who further spreads the spores – Ma's novel does not feature surviving characters who can verify Shen Fever's origin and modes of transmission.

finance consultants” (3), whose white-collar jobs are rendered useless in the pandemic. They conduct online searches to find existing theories about Shen Fever; however, the Internet shuts down along with other infrastructures. Throughout the novel, it remains deliberately unclear whether Shen Fever is a fungal infection originating from China. For the readers, the only other knowledge of the Shen Fever and “the fevered” comes through the narrator Candace’s observations.

While the novel is only focalized through Candace, there are two different narrative voices in effect: a retrospective voice that belongs to the post-pandemic Candace, who has witnessed all the events in the novel, and a voice that belongs to the pre-pandemic Candace, who follows the linear progression of time. The bitemporal narrative voices provide incomplete but complementary knowledge about “the fevered,” which contrasts sharply with the information disseminated through official channels. A document titled “Shen Fever FAQ” resurfaces halfway through the novel, separating the previous chapter devoted to the post-pandemic narrative symbolically from the next chapter that returns to the pre-pandemic narrative. This sequence blurs the boundaries between the uninfected, healthy survivors and the fevered, prompting the readers to keep asking questions: Is Candace uninfected, or has she become fevered as well? Does her status even matter?

As in the case of the SARS (severe acute respiratory syndrome) outbreak in 2003, Shen Fever exposes the xenophobia present in media coverage of pandemics. Although Shen Fever is “not contagious between people” and “transmission through bodily fluids is rare” (149), it incites public anxieties about ever-increasing contact with the foreign in

the global capitalist economy within the novel. Yet, Ma offers a counternarrative by refusing to take an interest in investigating whether Shenzhen was the region the outbreak originated from or not. The novel simply states that “the first case of Shen Fever was reported in Shenzhen, China in May 2011” (149). While there are hypotheses circulating online, one prominent doctor conjectures but fails to confirm that the new strain of fungus *Shenidioides* “had inadvertently developed within factory conditions of manufacturing areas, the SEZs in China, where spores fed off the highly specific mixture of chemicals” (210). While Ma lets Shen Fever remain a mysterious and supernatural disease that affects the memories, she indexes other scientifically discovered diseases – SARS and pneumoconiosis – to critique the underlying conditions of global capitalism that are obscured by a racialized understanding of epidemiology and thus often overlooked in short term measures to contain the spread of the disease.

As many scholars have argued, the racialization of communicable diseases draws attention away from socioeconomic inequality that creates the conditions of possibility for such epidemics. In *Severance*, Candace, who works as a manager of overseas bible production in China, notices how her clients exhibit drastically different attitudes towards two life-threatening diseases that are both plaguing the people in Guangdong province, known for its manufacturing industry. Such a dark underbelly of global capitalism is best represented in one of Spectra’s products, the Gemstone Bible, “marketed toward preteen girls...[and] packaged with a keepsake semiprecious gemstone on a sterling alloy chain” (23). *Severance* emphasizes the irony of how a religious text is commodified into a luxury product at the cost of human lives.

In a pivotal phone conversation, the production editor at an Atlanta publisher shows anxiety toward Shen Fever: “This doesn’t have anything to do with the Shen Fever thing that’s been in the news, does it?” (24). In contrast to Shen Fever, pneumoconiosis does not elicit much concern. When Candace explains that workers have been cutting gemstones in dire conditions without ventilation and have thus contracted pneumoconiosis by inhaling dust, the editor simply replies after a telling silence: “I don’t want to sound like we don’t care, because obviously, we do, but this is disappointing news” (24). She further adds, “So what I need you to do, Candace...is to replace the supplier, find another gemstone source...Because, honestly, if you can’t produce this, then we’re going to look elsewhere, maybe even in India” (25). To publishing companies in the U.S., workers in China are merely expendable labor forces interchangeable with workers in India. Here, Ma provides a critique of how global capitalism’s reliance on the exploitation of labor creates conditions for diseases both communicable and non-communicable in the geographic regions that it spreads to.

Historically within U.S. cultural and juridical imaginary, Asian Americans have been inscribed as perpetually foreign through a limited definition of immigration as a single event: unidirectional, illegitimate, and voluntary. Legal scholar Neil Gotanda points out that “the stereotype of foreignness became a regular dimension to the racialization of Asian Americans” (8). Thus, it is significant to note how the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 provided a legal foundation for prohibiting immigration or granting citizenship status based on one’s race, thus creating the figure of an illegal immigrant and alien citizenship. Even in the multicultural and colorblind era of the post-

1965 Immigration and Naturalization Act, the legacy of exclusion acts continues.

Cultural critic Colleen Lye reminds us of the continued logic that undergirds Asian American racialization over these periods. She argues, “yellow peril and model minority are best understood as two aspects of the same, long-running racial form, a form whose most salient feature, whether it has been made the basis for exclusion or assimilation, is the trope of economic efficiency” (Lye 5). Her emphasis on Asiatic racial form and its resilience is crucial in understanding the maze-like structure of Ma’s debut novel.

In the novel, Ma provides a microscopic view of the pre-pandemic United States to reveal how race and racism operate, under the camouflage of colorblindness, on her Asian American narrator. Although the CEO of the Spectra, Michael Reitman, neither mentions Candace’s race nor gender during the job interview, the dynamic between the two reveals how both categories of identities operate in relation to labor in the so-called postracial era. Although Michael’s office appears minimalist, it is a virtual exhibition room for objects created by Asian fashion and interior designers: Rei Kawakubo, Yohji Yamamoto, and Issey Miyake. Without realizing the irony in it, Michael suggests to Candace that those artworks are created or purchased at the cost of low wage workers in Asia who are exploited by publishing companies such as Spectra:

Right. Issey Miyake. He smiled for the first time. So this pleated cover requires a certain hand detail work that printers here in the United States and even in Canada just aren’t capable of. It’s cheaper to produce more labor-intensive book projects like this in Southeast Asia, even factoring in the cost of shipping. To say nothing about the four-color printing (74).

At this moment, Candace becomes racialized and gendered, specifically through aesthetic objects in the office space. The book on Japanese fashion design placed in Michael’s

office emerges not as a mere prop that highlights Candace's qualification for the job but as evidence of how her race and gender are coded in the colorblind workplace.

Once hired by Spectra, Candace is appointed as a manager who oversees the production of bibles, which of all the books "embodies the purest form of product packaging, the same content repackaged a million times" (23). There is, however, a darker side to this packaging as one of the products, the Gemstone Bible, is ornamented at the cost of human lives as its manufacturing process damages the lungs of the workers. Paradoxically, the text representing the Judeo-Christian belief of the West is produced in Post-Socialist China at the hands of factory workers, who "grind and polish semiprecious stones" and inhale dust from those stones that cause pneumoconiosis (24). Yet, despite its deadliness, the lung disease is deemed inconsequential by publishing houses in New York, a mere logistical inconvenience.

As a character complicit in maintaining global capitalism, pre-pandemic Candace is characterized by her attachment to what Lauren Berlant calls cruel optimism, a condition "when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing" (1). This optimistic attachment's cruelty is intensified at the beginning stage of the Shen Fever epidemic. Distinguishing cruel optimism and melancholia, Berlant describes the former as a case in which "the subjects who have x in their lives might not well endure the loss of their object/scene of desire, even though its presence threatens their well-being because whatever the content of the attachment is, the continuity of its form provides something of the continuity of the subject's sense of what it means to keep on living on and to look forward being in the world" (24). In that sense, cruel optimism motivates

Candace to gladly accept a large sum to keep operating Spectra's Manhattan office when everyone is escaping New York City with their family in fear of Shen Fever. Candace's attachment to the promise of a good life that her increased salary would bring is what would prevent her from living that life if the theories that Shen Fever is transmitted by inhaling microbial, fungal spores attached to goods being shipped to the U.S. from China are true. Therefore, her choice to stay seems to reflect the ease with which she falls back into the position of model minority par excellence.

Yet, there is a deliberateness to Candace's action that complicates the figure of the model minority. She dismisses Michael's paternalistic concern by claiming that the job will make her time "more worthwhile" (218). This optimism is cruel because she may not be able to gain the upward mobility that the new job promises after all if the world as we know it does not survive Shen Fever. Yet, she suggests that economic gains might not be the reason that she accepts the job offer: "But I don't have any living family – in the U.S., I mean. So I would have stayed in New York anyway. I've lived here for five years – it's home to me by this point" (218). While her tone is not notably laced with passion, she does lay a claim to New York as her home, which emerges as a stronger motivator.

Therefore, Candace's decision to stay lays the grounds for her post-pandemic narration, which is marked by her refusal to distance herself from the fevered. She often muses: "But what is the difference between the fevered and us? Because I remember too, I remember perfectly. My memories replay, unprompted, on repeat. And our days, like theirs, continue in an infinite loop. We drive, we sleep, we drive some more" (160).

While Candace does not risk her own life and that of her unborn child to save “the fevered,” she does feel empathy for a being that is dehumanized in the novel.

Moreover, her discomfort with using armed violence against the fevered in the guise of euthanasia exposes how the racial diversity of the group of survivors merely serves as an alibi. Those within the group who hold guns, such as Bob and Todd, mask their investment in white supremacy and heteropatriarchy under the pretense that they are safeguarding the reproductive future of the postracial United States. Thus, Candace’s empathy for the fevered turns into a wave of slow-burning anger, not towards the pandemic itself but towards structures of exploitation that have been proposed as the only possible ways of life in the continuum of pre- and post-pandemic world. Rather than feeling anxious about a loss of health, Ma’s version of the outbreak narrative shifts readers’ focus towards the structures that incurred the loss in the first place and calls for radical empathy.

In *Severance*, Ma draws zombie fiction as a frame of reference but asserts that “the fevered” are not quite zombies. While sharing characteristics such as the loss of subjectivity with the zombies, the fevered do not easily fit into either side of the discussion about zombies as cultural signifiers. The characters in the novel themselves debate whether the figure of the fevered should be regarded as a zombie at all. In one of the dialogues between Bob and Candace, the former argues that the fevered are undead beings that are more dead than alive, a zombie. At the same time, the latter contends: “What are you saying? Because number one, the fevered aren’t zombies. They don’t attack us or try to eat us. They don’t do anything to us. If anything, we do more harm to

them” (29). Bob emerges as a central antagonist of the novel because of the oppressive, violent white heteropatriarchy he perpetuates. Reflective of his position, Bob’s words also appear antithetical to the unfolding narrative around him. The fevered neither appear as a mob nor a solitary creature enslaved by their zombie masters.²⁵ However, Bob insists that the fevered be read and zombies and terminated.

The fevered are not flesh-eating zombies often found in popular media. The nonviolent, non-cannibalistic nature of the fevered alters the outbreak narrative that seeks to eliminate the supernatural itself. For instance, Andrea Kitta notes, “The supernatural has often been thought of both as contagious and as having the ability to contaminate others” (46). Yet, as the fevered neither pose an immediate physical threat to the survivors nor are proven to contaminate via fungal spores, the uninfected have no need to flee from them. On their journey to the Facility, Bob’s group engages in ritualistic gatherings of resources by “stalking” residential buildings. During those stalks, the role of the predator and the prey are reversed for the surviving humans and zombie-like fevered. When the inhabitants are found to be fevered but not quite dead, the rooting is called a “live stalk.” In her first “live” stalk, Candace observes a trait of the fevered that others refuse to acknowledge. After looking at the Gowers – a father, a mother, and a son – looped in a “rote” and “systematic” movements of preparing dinner and consuming them, Candace remarks, “the variations were what got to me” (62). Although the fevered

²⁵ Apart from this, there has been a concerted effort to reclaim the Haitian roots of the zombie myth as well as critique the continuing legacy of colonialism in the Caribbean as in the case of Junot Díaz’s short story, “Monstro” (2012) in which the disease that zombifies the population is named “La Negrura” in the Dominican Republic.

seem to have lost consciousness and are trapped in “a fever of repetition, of routine,” she realizes that they are capable of creating variations in that “the routines don’t necessarily repeat in an identical manner” (62). Even as Bob forces her to shoot the young Gower girl to show allegiance, Candace feels empathy for the fevered girl gripping onto her humanity. She hesitates to participate in execution in the guise of euthanasia in their own homes.

Unlike most non-immigrant characters, the notion of home is more complicated for Candace. The title of the book not only refers to a severance package one gets after being laid off by one’s employer but also to how Candace was severed from her birthplace and family, first through migration and then through the death of her parents. Even as she too entertains nostalgia at times, especially of her past visits to Fuzhou, she does not treat it as a place or time that she must return to at the cost of others. The fevered, like the zombie, signals a loss of subjectivity, but the novel depicts the loss in a different manner as the fevered succumb to their nostalgia. In *Zombies, Migrants, and Queers* (2017), Camilla Fojas points out that in both the original and remake of *Dawn of the Dead* in 1978 and 2004, “humans take refuge in the U.S. temple of consumerism: the shopping mall” (68). She further argues in the context of post-Great Recession cultural productions in the United States that “it is no accident that zombies emerge in this post-economic crisis moment, this moment of disorientation when the nightmarish outcome of a debt society is garishly exposed as the collapse of a system of debts that cannot be repaid” (68). Yet, Ma twists this genre expectation further by having the group of survivors set out on a pilgrimage of sorts towards a mall from Bob’s childhood. Bob

purposefully misleads his group of survivors into following him to a promised land that they are destined to reach. The Facility turns out to be Deer Oaks Mall in the suburbs of Chicago, “a beige complex with signs boasting a Macy’s, a Sears, and an AMC movie theater with eight screens” (160). In a pivotal moment, Bob, who has shown no mercy to the fevered, is revealed to have already been infected by Shen Fever for some time.

While it is unclear whether Candace is indeed immune, her complicated notion of home is what allows her to be empathetic towards the fevered, who become otherized through their diseased status.

Undead Borders: Race, Migration, and Indigeneity

Just as Ma deviates from the popular zombie narratives, Silvia Moreno-Garcia also reconfigures the vampire narrative through a vampire heroine who is born, not made, thus remaining connected to her family, kin, and communities. In *Severance*, Bob mentions the vampires when he argues with Candace about whether the fevered are zombies. Not surprisingly, zombies and vampires emerge as two dyads of undead figures in this conversation:

With vampire narrative, the danger lies in the villain’s intentions, his underlying character. There are good vampires, there are bad vampires.... Now, on the other hand, he continued, let’s think about the zombie narrative. It’s not about a specific villain. One zombie can be easily killed, but a hundred zombies are another issue. Only amassed do they really pose a threat. This narrative, then, is not about any individual entity, per se, but about an abstract force: the force of the mob, of mob mentality. (29)

What is telling here is Bob’s belief that formulas of narrative genres are resistant to change. However, *Certain Dark Things* foregrounds the shared histories of the vampires and the humans that triangulate Europe, the Americas, and Asia.

Moreover, Moreno-Garcia's version of vampire subspecies and their connections emphasizes the deep and intertwining connection between colonialism and migration:

Before the arrival of Spaniards to Mexico, the Tlahuihpochtin were a high caste of priests and priestesses, dressing in bird feathers and wearing jade necklaces.... These Mexican vampires made their way to the Philippines during the colonial Spanish period, giving rise to stories of the manananggal, supposedly a flying witch who sucks the blood of humans. (318)

Both precolonial and a product of colonization, the manananggal appears in the Tagalog folklore as "an older, beautiful woman capable of severing its upper torso in order to fly into the night with huge bat wings to prey on unsuspecting pregnant women in their homes, using an elongated proboscis-like tongue that sucks the hearts of fetuses or blood of unsuspecting victims" (Nadeau 256-257). While the Tlahuihpochtin can be of both gender, women hold more physical and political power than the men, who are called Ichtacaini. By suggesting that the Tlahuihpochtin could be the inspiration for the folklore concerning manananggals, Moreno-Garcia points toward the effects of Spanish colonialism on the populations in Mexico and the Philippines. Furthermore, this demonstrates the necessity of envisioning supernatural creatures, such as vampires, as configured comparatively.

Moreno-Garcia's vampire-noir novel²⁶ exposes a similar problem that Latinx writers face in the publishing industry: being restricted in their choice of genres or having their completed works misclassified as magical realism. In the Mithila Review's roundtable on "Latin American Science Fiction, Fantasy, and Horror," which featured

²⁶ While currently out of print, *Certain Dark Things* garnered attention with the success of her latest novel, *Mexican Gothic* (2020), and is now scheduled to be republished in 2021.

fellow Latinx writers Sabrina Vourvoulias, David Bowles, Ernest Hogan, William Alexander, and Carlos Hernandez, Moreno-Garcia explained her fluid conception of the boundaries between genres and the frustration she feels when pigeonholed into the category of Latinx magical realist writer:

I write magic realism. I was interviewing Karen Lord, and she was talking about how culturally Caribbean literature doesn't differentiate from the fantastic and the mundane as sharply as Anglo literature, and it's the same for Mexico. The sharp divide is not there, it's more muted. I love magic realism. I also write what might be called science fiction, fantasy, and horror. The problem comes when people want to shove you in the Magic Realist box, and you can only be that one thing. They don't want you to do horror or science fiction, or if you do it, You've Done It Wrong. It's frustrating. (Hernandez)

Here, Moreno-Garcia reveals the problem that many contemporary diasporic Latin American writers face and the need to decenter Anglo-American perspectives in the writing and studying genres. Accordingly, her works have consistently challenged the boundaries of literary genres and geographical imagination in North American fiction by centering on Mexico.²⁷

In *Certain Dark Things*, the Aztec legend is further transplanted into urban spaces to represent postcolonial Mexico instead of a romanticized past. As Amal El-Mohtar notes in her book review, Mexico City is represented not as an exoticized imaginary

²⁷ Moreno-Garcia's debut novel *Signal to Noise* (2015) is a book about magic and music set in the 1980s Mexico City, inspired by her parents who were radio announcers; *The Beautiful Ones* (2017) is a blend of fantasy and historical romance set in an alternate universe during the Belle Époque, in which people have telekinetic powers; *Gods of Jade and Snow* (2019) is a fantasy that brings together the 1920s Jazz Age Mexico with the Mayan mythology; *Mexican Gothic* (2020), as the title indicates, is a gothic romance set in the midcentury Mexico; *Untamed Shores* (2020) is a noir set in 1970s Baja California.

place but as “a real place, a city with history, districts, subways, with beauty and ugliness, with problems...a lived-in place, a place for her characters to know and navigate completely outside an Anglo gaze.” By situating her vampire protagonist in a culturally specific background and “lived-in” setting, Moreno-Garcia resists the possible interpretation of Atl as an empty vessel for racialized and gendered others. In her blog post, “Build-A-Vampire,” Moreno-Garcia also elaborates on her world-building process:

[Atl] is contrasted throughout the book with other authentic vampires who have European origins and seem to be the basis for the vampire as found in pop culture, like Dracula. Society in *Certain Dark Things* is inundated with portrayals of Euro vampires, but the Mesoamerican ones are less visible. This is a slight parable of the way Mexican society is inundated with Anglo culture: walk by a Mexican bookstore, look at the SFF section, and witness that it’s all books in translation.

Even as the Mexican vampires signal the colonial legacy of the Americas, they are not relegated to a lost and irretrievable mythic past in the novel. Instead, they are described as being a part of postcolonial modernity, inhabiting the urban spaces of Mexico City alongside other vampires and humans.

Even though *Certain Dark Things* takes on the form of the vampire narrative, the novel shifts the reader’s attention to intra- rather than inter-community dynamics that move beyond the logic of us vs. others. Moreno-Garcia’s novel is not only narrated from the perspective of Atl, the female vampire protagonist, but also from the third person limited perspective of major characters, including Domingo Molina (the human love interest of Atl), Ana Aguirre (a detective in Mexico City), Nick Godoy (the vampire antagonist of European origin), and Rodrigo (a human employee of Godoy’s often called a Renfield by the vampires). Rather than identifying one as either the perpetrator or the victim, the novel’s multiple narrative perspectives encourage the readers to grapple with

the difference between the vampires and the humans as well as between the Tlahuipochmimi and other vampire subspecies.

Set mainly within Mexico City, the novel begins from the perspective of Domingo, a local teenager. After being forced onto the streets by his abusive stepfather, he collects garbage to make a living. However, his life is altered when he encounters on the subway a beautiful woman, Atl, who turns out to be not a human but a vampire. Moreover, she confesses that she is a fugitive running away from the Necros, a rival clan that has murdered all her family members. Atl realizes that she needs the help of her newfound allies in the city to escape both her vampire and human antagonists and finds a way to cross the southern border into Guatemala and eventually to Brazil. Thus, Moreno-Garcia's vampire heroine is not portrayed as an all-powerful supernatural entity but as one with vulnerabilities. Not having met Atl's kins before in his life due to growing up in a vampire-free city, Domingo also draws knowledge about "exotic" vampires from the popular comic books he reads (3). However, as those comics are also dominated by Anglo-American imaginations in the likes of Dracula, he realizes that they fall short of providing him with accurate information about vampires native to Mexico. Atl, likewise, has a lot to learn about humans. She is a morally ambiguous character not only because she is a Tlahuipochtli that must feed on the blood of young humans for survival but also due to her status as the heiress of a narco-gang that exploits teens like Domingo who live in precarious conditions. Meeting Domingo thus prompts Atl to question the ethics of her family business even though she has never considered humans as her equals before.

From the outset, Moreno-Garcia diverts the focus of an outbreak narrative from the routes of the transmission of the disease to how the unequal distribution of wealth engenders such health crises, ultimately leaving the poor to die without getting proper care. In contrast with *Shen Fever* in *Severance*, the nature of Croneng's Disease is clearly defined in *Certain Dark Things* and disassociated with the vampires. Contrary to what humans believe, it is indicated that vampires are not the carriers of contagion. Through Atl, readers learn that vampires are also immune to the disease through ingesting contaminated human blood may cause them minor health issues: "There were tons of people with Croneng's disease running around these days. It was a virus that made humans hemorrhage from the nose and gave them sores, spoiling the blood supply so that now on top of cancers, STDs, AIDS, and tuberculosis, vampires had to also watch their food to make sure it wasn't tainted with this new disease. Vomiting dirty blood was no fun" (16). Yet, Atl observes that "humans ha[ve] a way of blaming vampires for everything these days," including the spread of Croneng's disease (16). In the city-state of Mexico City, an organization called Sanitation assumes charge of responding to the epidemic along with the police. However, Domingo questions whether the organization indeed serves the public when "all they did was ship them to that old convent in Coyoacan they had turned into a crappy sanatorium, and if that was full they were off to Iztapalapa" (98). Here, the Sanitation is portrayed as more interested in using surveillance techniques to remove the poor, the deviant, the sick, and the vampires from the commons. Someone like Atl can either be incorrectly identified as a carrier of contagion for being a vampire or a diseased human due to her unusual appearance. Therefore, it is not a

coincidence that Atl is discovered by her enemies through details included in a sanitation report of her hiding place even though she had escaped to the roof when the officers came to inspect.

Atl is very much aware of the monstrosity ascribed to her by humans that further intersects with her race and gender. In *The Dark Fantastic* (2019), Ebony Elizabeth Thomas argues that many existing scholarships on race and fantastical fiction like Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's *Monster Theory* (1996) focus on works in which "fantastic beasts, witches, zombies, vampires, dragons, manticores, shades, and the rest of a monstrous menagerie" appear analogous "to those who are positioned as different in the real world" (qtd. in 20). In response, she poses a question that calls for a shift in the critical inquiry: "If monsters and people of color inhabit the same place in our stories, what would it be like to read monster theory from the monster's perspective?" (Thomas 20). While she primarily focuses on the Black women characters in works of fantasy, her question also speaks to the significance of having a Mexican female vampire act as the main protagonist of *Certain Dark Things*. Through this lens, Atl, too, can be read as the monster that speaks back to those holding normative positions in the real world.

While "vampire" is used as an umbrella category in Moreno-Garcia's novel, it does not presuppose a universality that can be ascribed to all the subspecies, especially the Tlahuipochmimi. Therefore, the vampire in this fictional world does not serve as a metaphor for racialized others. Instead, readers are invited to note how vampire subspecies are differentially racialized. For example, Atl notes, "Nobody could accuse Mexican vampires of being pale" (120). Furthermore, she indicates that she can tolerate

the sun, unlike the European ones (18). Even as Atl belongs to a different species from humans, these details show how she perceives her racialization. At the same time, she suggests how a vampire is neither a universal term nor an exact translation of who or what she is.

Drawn from the folklore, Tlahuipochnimi is not Moreno-Garcia's unique creation. Yet, studies on how popular tropes circulate transculturally further reveal the less known connection between pre-Columbian vampires and the European ones. For example, in her study of the emergence of the vampire in Mexican films such as Fernando Méndez's *El vampiro* (1957), Carmen Serrano argues that these films draw from a complex genealogy of vampire-like figures in the Americas as well as that of the European version codified by Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897). She emphasizes, "The vampire is a mythical being that was already part of the pre-Columbian Mexican imaginary, which influenced European vampire folklore and subsequent vampire literature and film" (Serrano 151). Furthermore, she points to a significant element that distinguishes the pre-Columbian vampire from its European counterpart:

Bats in Latin American autochthonous cultures were not usually associated with evil; instead, they were perceived as powerful creatures, mediums, and sometimes gods....The pre-Columbian bat's association with the sacred is erased when the American bat species reaches the opposite shore of the Atlantic. There, the bat becomes a fear-instilling and malignant being, these being among the usual qualities associated with the contemporary vampire. (Serrano 153)

In her study of vampires, Serrano draws a distinction applicable to Atl in *Certain Dark Things*, though she is associated more with the birds than the bats. Atl's family crest is a hummingbird in honor of Huitzilopochtli, the Aztec god of war. Moreover, the Tlahuipochnin can sprout wings and fly. When Atl uses her ability in a moment of danger,

Domingo notices that she has partially transformed into a giant bird: “it was a bird’s face, though it lacked a beak. Instead of hair, she had lustrous feathers” (152). Yet, despite the association with different animals, both versions of the pre-Columbian Mexican vampires are similar in that they are considered sacred rather than evil, which alters their place in the world.

Through the provincialization of the European vampire trope, Atl emerges as a rich and complex history, not reducible to an evil monster or an unspecified racialized other. Atl’s name, for instance, means water in Nahuatl. However, it also refers to *atl tlachinolli*, translated as “water that scorches the earth,” a metaphor for a war that reinforces her association with Huitzilopochtli (193). Identifying as indigenous, Atl rejects the European gaze that she is often subjected to in her native land. While she reluctantly adapts to her surroundings to survive, she exercises her agency by rejecting what the colonizers of all species have brought to the Americas:

Domingo paused to pay his respects, making the sign of the cross. Atl merely stared at the face of the religious icon. Her family had been priests of the God of War, and though they no longer worshipped in the same fashion, she had no desire to follow the customs imported by the Europeans. Saints and virgins and angels. (158)

At this moment, Atl refuses to acknowledge the Virgin of Guadalupe for political rather than religious reasons. In contrast with the Tlahuipochmimi, who are positioned as indigenous, the Necros are connected to the Spanish colonizers: “In the times of the Aztecs, when the first Necros arrived upon our shores, they quickly spread disease among the local vampire populations. Many members of my family died simply due to coming in contact with the Necros, greatly reducing our capacity to fight against the invaders.

Germs can be much more effective than swords” (103). This association extends to religion. As Moreno-Garcia writes, “almost all Necros follow the Christian faith, albeit in a modified form” (321). As the only vampire who is a Revenant, a subspecies originating from Russia, Bernardino occupies a more complicated position. Also, a long-time resident of La Roma, he claims to have treated patients during the Mexican Revolution, which indicates that he has been involved in human history (217). Moreover, his kind is not only capable of taking life from both vampires and humans but also of giving life force to other vampires. While all the vampires occupy complex ethical positions of varying degrees in this fictional world, the Necros remain the primary antagonists of the novel due to their past and present involvement in violent colonial practices.

By incorporating the histories of the Americas and Mexico in particular, *Certain Dark Things* deviates from other contemporary vampires that are multicultural. Regarding contemporary U.S. cultural productions such as *Twilight*, *The Vampire Diaries*, and *True Blood*, Nicole Rabin argues that vampires have become “a symbol of multiracial identity as seen within the multicultural discourse that pervades American popular consciousness.” According to her, these twenty-first-century vampire narratives are not preoccupied with racial purity as in Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*. In Stoker’s novel, the Romanian Count is portrayed as a hypersexual, racialized man threatening the purity of British women such as Mina Murray. But, these vampire narratives in the twenty-first century are different from *Dracula* in that they reflect a particular brand of multiculturalism. In the context of *True Blood*, Rabin further argues, “All the characters are friends despite their racial, class, and sexual differences; the society of Bon Temps

epitomizes the politics of multiculturalism where differences are accepted as a means for maintaining the status quo.” Moreno-Garcia, however, takes a different route by not opting to settle for an incomplete interracial alliance that does not challenge the status quo in terms of socioeconomic and political inequalities. Instead, the novel is more interested in exposing the structures that make it difficult for long-term alliances to be formed and sustained to significantly change society.

In *Certain Dark Things*, the dynamics of a union between a vampire and a human between Atl and Domingo includes but extends beyond a racial-sexual taboo. Referencing William Shakespeare’s 1914 play, *The Tempest*, Atl remarks on the stark power differential between the two in addition to the taboo that exists around sex between vampires and humans: “*It would be like Miranda bedding Caliban*, she mused, and immediately regretted the thought. Some Necros slept with humans, but it was not a polite thing to do” (121). In comparison, Domingo shows much less inhibition due to not having encountered a vampire before, let alone a beautiful woman who appears to be close to his age: “He guessed he should have been afraid of Atl, but he wasn’t. The terror wasn’t there” (136). What ultimately rises as an obstacle for Atl and Domingo’s relationship is not necessarily the issue of racial and species purity but a difference in power, particularly in the sense that she needs to consume his blood for her survival. When Nick’s poisonous bite injures her, Atl realizes that her instinct might drive her to take Domingo’s life: “*Kill him*. The thought made her blink and stumble, the rain sliding under her jacket, under her clothes, chilling her” (213). Although Atl manages to repress

this desire to kill and feed, this incident prompts her to agonize over whether the choice to continue the relationship with Domingo despite their differences is an ethical one.

The power dynamics between Atl and Domingo also play a significant role in reshaping the border narrative in *Certain Dark Things* and reveal the importance of pushing against normalized genre expectations. In *LatinX* (2019), Claudia Milian, for instance, critiques the spectacularization of the U.S.-Mexico Border obscures, such as the migration of unaccompanied minors from Central America – El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. She writes, “Looking at the bottom of the Central American map, attempting to look up – to Mexico, to the United States, and to the plurality of borders people cross, defying the illusion that there’s only one physical border, the-Mexico – U.S. border – I turn to the spectacular production and ‘documentation’ of the LatinX child migrant” (35). As Milian emphasizes, the children found at the border have crossed not one but multiple borders. Furthermore, the presence of those children indicates an absence created by those who did not make it to the U.S.-Mexico Border. Like Milian, who looks up from the bottom of the Central American map to emphasize the plurality of borders, Moreno-Garcia decentralizes *the* border by turning the map upside down. Writing from Canada, she passes over to the United States and takes her heroine from Sinaloa to Mexico City and south to Guatemala and Brazil.

Certain Dark Things displaces the U.S.-Mexico border as the only site of migrant crossing by shifting the gaze to the Caribbean and South America. Scholars such as Douglas Massey have drawn attention to how the U.S.-Mexico border is disproportionately spectacularized compared to other terrestrial and oceanic borders.

Massey argues that in the American imagination, the border between Mexico and the United States “has become a symbolic boundary between the United States and a threatening world” (160). Furthermore, he explains how various threats to the nation-state continue to be mapped onto the border: “What makes the southern U.S. border stand out uniquely as a symbolic line of defense in a threatening world is centuries-old framing as a barrier to ominous threats: to the institution of slavery in 1836; to full employment in 1929; to the capitalist way of life in 1954; to the victory in the Cold War during the 1980s; to the war on terrorism, drugs, and microbes today; and throughout the American history to the ‘brown tide rising’ to the south” (Massey 176). Yet, in Moreno-Garcia’s novel, both migrations into and out of Mexico deviate from the south to north formula.

When Atl becomes a fugitive from the Godoy’s – a clan of Necros, refugees from Central Europe themselves – she flees southward toward Mexico City instead of going north to the United States. The U.S.-Mexico border poses a threat even for a Tlahuipochtli with superhuman strength and abilities like Atl, the U.S.-Mexico border poses a threat. Atl is aware that political corruption will allow the rival narco-vampire gang to use border surveillance technologies to their advantage. The direction of Atl’s journey is not merely a plot device: it repeatedly challenges the limited understanding of immigration exclusively as a move from the Global South to the North. Mirroring disbelief the readers might have, a former human ally of the Iztac’s, Elisa Carrera (a.k.a. Veronica Montalaban), also asks whether Atl’s decision to head south is a reasonable one. Yet, Atl explains that Guatemala and Brazil represent a future in which survival is possible for her: “The Necros dominate the North, so that’s a no go. They don’t own

Guatemala. Not yet. There will be checkpoints, but with the right papers I can make it down into South America. It's easier this way" (132). In looking towards the south, Atl's narrative diverges from mainstream North American fiction that imagines "sending" countries in Central and South America only as "sending" and not "receiving" countries.

Instead of using diversity within the vampire and the human population in the service of neoliberal multiculturalism, Moreno-Garcia uses the ethnoracial differences of her characters to allude to existing histories of migration. Furthermore, her choice to situate supernatural beings such as vampires in a realist setting makes it possible to draw parallels between fiction and reality. In the context of Asian American literature, Monica Chiu has critiqued how Chinatowns, Koreatowns, and Little Tokyos appear in mainstream narratives as what she calls Asian playgrounds incorporated into Orientalist fantasies as "geographical places that are inhibited by darker, seemingly more sexual and passive subjects" (29). She further problematizes how these places are appropriated as playgrounds that contradictorily represent both pleasure and threat, often in the form of a "pathological danger" (Chiu 47). Yet, Moreno-Garcia depicts neighborhoods such as Zona Rosa with layers of history rather than an emptied out racial playground for sexual and criminal activities to take place:

Zona Rosa had been famous as a gay area, and many gay clubs still remained, but since the late '90s, a good chunk of it had transformed into Little Seoul, with a multitude of Internet cafes, restaurants, and clubs geared toward Koreans, dominating streets around Florencia. There were also a few men's clubs, some fancier than others, and a lot of nightclubs, both Korean and Mexican, several of them adorned with a rainbow flag, which identified them as GLBT-friendly zones. (25)

These Asian-Latin American connections drawn from reality are also accompanied by their fictional counterparts. While they remain minor characters in the novel, the presence of Wu's in northern Mexico, who are presumably Chinese jiangshis, alludes to the history of Chinese migration to Mexico. Similarly, the presence of Obayifos, drawn from the folklore of the Ashantis in West Africa, parallels how the enslaved people of African descent were forcibly brought to Brazil through the Middle Passage during the seventeenth century (278). Again, such minor characters populate the fictional world, in which myths about migrations are debunked.

In changing the direction of the migrant narrative, Moreno-Garcia also overturns the assumption about who has claims to the nation and the land. Thomas's inverted thesis – “the monster polices the borders of the possible” (22) – applies to *Certain Dark Things*, which is narrated from the perspective of the monster:

The monster is policed whenever it leaves terra incognita – the liminal spaces monsters are allowed to inhabit. It is deemed unreasonable for the monster to defect her home, unseemly for her to travel outside her delimitations, or unthinkable for her to enjoy her own monstrous culture. From the hero's point of view, this policing makes sense. From the perspective of the monster, it is nonsense. (Thomas 22)

Here, Thomas reveals in the context of fantastical narratives how monsters' movements are inscribed as excessive. In *Certain Dark Things*, Elisa remarks on the position of the vampires in relation to the humans: “No one wants more vampires in their territory anymore. Most governments consider you a plague, you know? They've now got a police force dedicated to handling your kind” (133). Like most humans in this fictional world, Elisa classifies Atl as a vampire without distinguishing between the subspecies and clans.

Yet, Atl defends her family's claim over the land that they have occupied since the pre-Columbian era and rejects the notion that they are a "plague" to the human society: "They were not a plague, nor vermin, nor common killers that hid in the shadows. Not the Tlahuelpocmimi. Not her family" (134). From the perspective of Atl, a monster native to the land, it does not make sense that she must leave her own home. In her analysis of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, María Josefina Saldaña-Portillo explains: "The treaty re-graphed the geo of the former northern Mexican region into the U.S. Southwest, establishing not only new boundaries of nation but an infelicitous boundary between indigenous and Mexican racial identity. The bifurcation of indigenous and mestizo identities was required by the racial geography of the United States" (133-134). Likewise, the superimposed boundaries of racial geographies in the Americas displace the indigenous vampire Atl from her ancestral home and force her to keep moving for survival rather than a desire to have a better life elsewhere.

Being of Use at the End of the World

Initially, Candace also seems to represent the immigrant subject who has arrived on the U.S. territory and has successfully assimilated to its political and economic system to be of use in exchange for a "better" life. In *Severance*, Ma incorporates the elements of the ghost narrative to change the course of the immigrant narrative governed by the model minority myth in the post-1965 era. Janna Odabas argues that the ghost narratives, which hold prominence in Asian American writing, emerged specifically as a regenreing tool in the 1960s when the pan-ethnic Asian American identity was formulated. She writes, "Foregrounding interconnection and complicity, the ghost figures highlight

ambiguity and contradictions as inherent to any conception of history or identity” (Odobas 11). This is also applicable to *Severance* as Ma uses references to the ghost figure to reconnect individual and collective memories that have been “severed” from Candace, including her name and other words in Mandarin and Fujianese. When she meets Balthasar, a local manager at the printing facility in Shenzhen, she scans her mind for the word “immigrate” but comes up short (87). Furthermore, she learns from him that her name must have been inspired by Li Bai’s famous poem “Thoughts in a Still Night.” Notably, Ma does not reveal Candace’s Chinese name to the readers, which thus creates an absence.

Candace lacks both family and home at the beginning of the pandemic. Yet, the ghost narrative recovers both for her, although they are not strictly based on the biological and physical notion of family, home, and nation. Instead of having the past haunt her characters, Ma turns them into figurative and literal ghosts. After her mother, Ruifang, dies after suffering long from Alzheimer’s disease, Candace moves to New York and creates a blog called *NY Ghost* that documents life in the city through photography. The blog’s title explains how Candace has figuratively become a ghost after her loss: “The ghost was me. Walking around aimlessly, without anywhere to go, anything to do, I was just a specter haunting the scene” (41). When Candace revives *NY Ghost* the second time, the blog’s focus shifts from herself to the affective economy of a larger network of survivors around the globe. Noticing how Shen Fever has transformed New York City, she remarks how she feels compelled to create an archive of the city as the sole witness to it: “Even if capturing the city in deterioration was an insurmountable

task – New York was too vast and I was too small; there were places too far or too dangerous for me to reach – I didn't want to stop" (257). Although Spectra's request is what purportedly keeps her in Manhattan, no one is left around to ensure that she carries out the contract. Although Candace is not monetarily compensated, and the work of photographing the ruins might be considered useless, the desire of the followers of the photo blog keeps her going. Furthermore, Ruifang's last words to her daughter are given a new meaning outside the context of the model minority paradigm in the post-pandemic world: "I just want for you what your father wanted: to make use of yourself, she finally said. No matter what, we just want you to be of use" (190). While still following her mother's wish, Candace chooses to be "of use" not to the nation that collects debts from its immigrants but to a community of people experiencing a loss.

As a figurative ghost – an orphaned immigrant with a mixed feeling of being both an insider and an outsider in the adopted country – Candace captures the city from the perspective informed by her personal history. In *Ghostly Matters* (2004), Avery Gordon argues that haunting understood as a social phenomenon, "describes how that which appears to be not there is often a seething presence" (8). In Ma's alternative past, indexed by the Occupy Movement of 2011, the Manhattan Island is reclaimed by those at the lower end of the economic order when the top echelons have succumbed to Shen Fever or have fled from it. One of Candace's photographs shows the ghetto palm – a plant that migrated from China to Europe and finally to America in the late 1700s that has "lived on this land almost since the formation of this country" (252) – taking over the city in the absence of gardeners. Yet, *NY Ghost* does not offer an elegy for the city in ruins but

depicts what thrives despite the apocalypse with a sense of awe. In the absence of tourists, a former carriage horse “with its blinders still on, and a harness decorated with bells” becomes free to “[trot] along purposefully, cheerfully, unhurried, down Broadway” (253). Marveling at the horse’s newfound freedom, much like hers, Candace records that moment with a photo and captions it: “If a horse rides through Times Square and no one is there to see it, did it actually happen? If New York is breaking down and no one documents it, is it actually happening?” (254). Such a moment shows that not only humans like Candace but also animals and plants flourish in the absence of capitalist logic to continuously extract profit at a high cost.

During one of these photo assignments, Candace comes across another person of color and shares a moment of solidarity with him. She meets a middle-aged Latino taxi driver Eddie, who tells her that he joined a colony in upstate New York only to return to Manhattan, the only place he considers home: “I’ve lived in New York my whole life. I’ve lived in Spanish Harlem, in Morningside, in the Bronx. This place is home.... Besides, now that all the white people have finally left New York, you think I’m leaving?” (261). Also, as a follower of *NY Ghost*, Eddie urges her to recover erased immigrant histories through her blog: “You should put on your blog something about how New York belongs to the immigrants, how I was once the first point of entry for foreigners. The history of it, you know?” (261). Eventually, he also succumbs to the fever. However, even in his fevered status, Eddie is the one who aids Candace in escape in the “nostalgia-yellow” cab, “a Ford Crown Victoria, an older fleet model that cab companies had almost phased out” (7). Even in these ever-continuing moments of deterioration, the laboring

migrant bodies that have been perpetually made invisible are revealed as essential workforces that sustain life in the city.

The migrant narrative is further transformed by the employment of the ghost of Ruifang. Pointing out the limitations of previous scholarship on spectrality, Lawrence Minh-Bùi Davis argues, “The ghost as utilitarian metaphor has erased any inkling of the ghost as a supernatural phenomenon, and this, as much as the multipurpose tool it provides, is its contribution to academia’s management of the ‘multicultural’: erasure of a dangerous threat” (31). He further emphasizes the necessity of conceptualizing a ghost as a ghost, not as a figurative metaphor, to counter Western rationalism’s racializing and the gendering of popular knowledge of the supernatural as mere superstition espoused by uneducated women from the Third World. Therefore, it is not a coincidence that an Asian American woman, Ruifang, appears as a ghost in *Severance*. However, Ma makes it difficult for the ghost to be read as a metaphor for how the memories of the deceased haunt the living. When Bob imprisons Candace in one of the empty shops at Deer Oaks Mall, she encounters the ghost of her mother:

I drift off to sleep in the middle of the afternoon. At some point, in a visitation too lucid to be a dream, my mother comes in and sits next to me. The bed compresses under her weight. The bed compresses under her weight. She is wearing the navy skirt suit, the outfit in which she was buried. I feel her cool hand on my forehead, checking for fever. Like the Sunday mornings when I’d pretend to be sick to get out of going to church. (243)

Ma’s restoration of the ghostly figure’s corporeality literalizes the racialized and gendered migrant histories that haunt the twenty-first century “multiracial” United States.

Moreover, Ruifang's ghost embodies not the woman she has been but one she could have become. The literal, corporeal ghost enacts a different kind of memory. Even as Candace hesitates to make an escape from Bob, Ruifang presses on: "You get the key, you get the car, then you get out...Ai-yah, yesterday was the right time. Last week, last month. Things will change for you after you give birth" (269). With her mother's help, Candace takes one of the cars and drives in Chicago's direction. Candace remembers that Ruifang once dreamed of moving to Chicago and pursuing a professional career of her own rather than remain a supportive housewife to her husband: "I'd work in a building like this one...But if I do that, you'd have to stay home. You'd stay home and I'd go to work. Okay?" (289). This final revelation subverts the model minority myth that *Severance* has been tantalizing the readers with and frees Candace and her unborn daughter, nicknamed Luna, from the burden of living up to that myth.

The next generation, Candace's unborn child, likewise does not signal reproductive futurity. Rather, Luna enables Candace to metabolize her anger towards Bob, who patrols every night to keep the gates of the Facility closed: "[Luna's] a teakettle at full boil, whistling shrilly at fever pitch, as if enraged. Tonight, she is enraged" (227). The Facility run under Bob becomes a microcosm of the United States as he reveals his identification with the nation itself as well as settler colonialism, neoliberalism, and heteropatriarchy: "[T]his place is special and important to me, even if it's just a nothing mall to you.... I know what you think about this place. You don't respect it. You don't respect me. You don't respect our rules. You or your friends [Janelle and Evan]. You put yourselves in danger, meaning you put the whole group in danger. And I can't just

overlook that” (247). Bob’s veiled threats to Candace during her imprisonment in one of the shops eerily resemble those of anti-immigration measures proponents. In her study of the contemporary U.S. empire, Mimi Thi Nguyen explains the conditions of subjectivity imposed on the racialized populations that the U.S. claims to provide for, such as Vietnamese refugees: “Made to desire a presumably complex personhood that circumscribes agency and consciousness as autonomous and self-governing, while bound indefinitely to those particularities of race or gender that are traces of his or her debt, the subject of freedom is obliged persistently, without possessing fully, a liberal ideal” (19). This dynamic between the debtor and the indebted that Nguyen analyzes can also be applied to the microcosm of the survivor group led by Bob. Bob offers Candace the freedom to walk around the corridors of the mall unsupervised. However, what she must do to regain her true freedom is to escape the structure of the debt economy entirely.

Moreover, the future that Luna would carry on creates an alternative to the heteropatriarchal family. Although Luna’s biological father, Jonathan, is the one who is initially more critical of the global capitalist future that serves the interests of the world’s economic elites, he fails to imagine an alternative and literally disappears from the text: “The future just wants more consumers. The future is more newly arrived college grads and tourists in some fruitless search for authenticity.... Manhattan is sinking” (13). Instead, Jonathan’s memories and unfulfilled aspirations as a fiction writer help Candace imagine what alternate life she and her mother might have led in Chicago: “[H]e lived in an apartment on Milwaukee Avenue, above a laundromat. And he took the 56 bus, which stopped right outside his apartment, downtown.... During nights and weekends, he would

write. Then he would go to work” (137). Therefore, Candace’s decision to find life in Chicago instead of in New York or within the confines of the Deer Oaks Mall signals a refusal to dwell on nostalgia that justifies the maintenance of the status quo.

Reimagining the Unimagined Communities within the Borders

The vampire and the border narrative are further reconfigured when they merge with narco-noir, which is in itself a mix of narco narrative and noir. *Certain Dark Things* shifts its focus to reveal the systemic problems of criminalizing migrant figures through the hybridization of multiple genres. Especially, Moreno-Garcia’s noir achieves such effect by aligning more with Latin American *novela negra*. Mexican writer Paco Ignacio Taibo II argues that a *novela negra* “begins by telling a crime, and ends by telling how that society is” (Saldo). Cynthia Schmidt-Cruz further explains the ideological shift that takes place between the classic detective fiction and *novela negra*:

The ideological charge of [the detective fiction] implies the maintenance of the status quo and an unquestioned trust in the law and the bourgeois order. The *novela negra* inverts these ethical and aesthetic principles as it questions the established order, portraying an unjust and immoral society based on the domination of the powerful over the weak and the rich over the poor through exploitation and violence. (xvi)

Likewise, Moreno-Garcia portrays an “unjust and immoral society” through the perspectives of her characters. Detective Ana Aguirre, who chases after the narco-vampires, suspects of murders in Mexico City, is the only character invested in law and order within the novel. She is acutely aware of the injustices of keeping the appearance of judicial order at the cost of the weak and the poor.

As previous scholarship on detective narratives has shown, the figure of the detective has traditionally been white, male, and solitary in their operation.²⁸ Yet, Ana Aguirre is a woman and a single mother who must fight against sexism in her own police department among predominantly male coworkers. Ana remarks, “Between the jerks at work and these fucking vampires going around eating people, she’d had it” (270). Yet, as a woman who has persevered against prejudices, Ana shows compassion for younger women of *Deep Crimson*, who are not much older than Ana’s daughter, Marisol. Furthermore, she even shows sympathy for Atl, even while knowing that she is a vampire and not having had conversations with her.

Ana Aguirre of *Certain Dark Things* is different from traditional detective characters in that she is a reluctant participant. For instance, she reveals that she did not come to Mexico City in search of vampires but to avoid vampire gangs in the North. While Ana is prepared to investigate vampire-related crimes and kill them if necessary, neither hatred nor thrill drives her to be the one on the hunt. Even when Ana is purportedly chasing after Atl and Nick, who have infiltrated Mexico City, she is more often seen fighting the gender and class inequality within the police and in the city than vampires. While Ana is off duty, she observes how the police fail to protect the most vulnerable of its citizens:

²⁸ For more information on the figure of the detective in American literature, see *A History of American Crime Fiction* (2017) edited by Chris Rackowski. Ralph Rodriguez also provides a study of how Chicana/o authors repurposed the detective narrative from the perspectives of minorities in *Brown Gumshoes: Detective Fiction and the Search for Chicana/o Identity* (2005).

At the Tacuba subway station, Ana saw two dozen police officers – called “Robocops” because they were wearing superheavy uniforms, gear more appropriate for an old Schwarzenegger flick than anything else – take out their clubs and start beating the living shit out of a bunch of illegal street vendors who were peddling their wares near the stairs. The local city government was cracking down on street vendors and vagoneros, and this, in turn meant cracking skulls. Sure, they called it ‘relocating,’ but it did not amount to that and the vendors always came back, anyway. (112)

Although the vendors and vagoneros are unarmed, the “Robocops” outfitted with uniforms fit for combat with the vampires are seen wielding physical force to displace them from the streets. Ironically, the Robocops are absent when the fights involving vampires occur in Mexico City.

Prior to the novel’s timeline, Ana moves from Northern Mexico to Mexico City with high hopes for upward mobility: “Mexico City, they had told her, was different. The police force there was being reformed. Before, women could only aspire to be traffic cops or belong to the incredibly sexist Ladies Auxiliary....Detective Aguirre had a nice ring to it. At a bare minimum there were no vampires in Mexico City” (109). Ana’s strength as a detective derives from the folkloric knowledge about supernatural beings such as vampires passed onto her by her grandmother, which enabled her to kill eight vampires without losing her own life. Yet, she is faced with the reality of deep-rooted sexism within law enforcement and accepts the offer from the Deep Crimson to be their consultant. Ana remarks: “She certainly wanted those two vampire narcos off the streets. She was not interested in more random murders. Deep Crimson members were no saints, but who was she kidding, it wasn’t like the cops were any better” (117). Unlike in the Western movies that Ana grew up watching, however, she finds herself on the losing side in the world of noir despite her efforts to carry out justice. Deep Crimson’s surprise

attack on the vampires ends in a bloodbath, and the death of Kika, a young member of the gang, significantly weighs heavily on Ana.

Therefore, Ana's death towards the end of the novel is neither a cautionary tale for women who venture out of their gendered roles nor a heroic tale of sacrifice that reestablishes the status quo. Initially, it seems like Ana is an idealist whose quest for justice ends in failure. Indeed, Nick Godoy uses his ability as a Necro to control Ana's mind with a poisonous bite even before she gets a chance to investigate him properly. Yet, Ana perseveres, reclaiming a degree of agency for herself by fighting against the mind-controlling venom. Furthermore, her action inadvertently aids Atl's escape, preventing another woman's death, albeit a vampire: "As she lay dying, the connection from the vampire now forever severed, she smiled" (304). The fact that the only female character who can survive violence in the novel is the one with a vampiric strength sheds light on the gendered as much as a racialized form in which the everyday violence takes shape.

Against such a backdrop, the narcos in *Certain Dark Things* appear as the unlikely heroes for the population neglected by the government as in the narconovelas and narcodramas. In *Drugs, Thugs, and Divas* (2019), O. Hugo Benavides argues, "Narco-dramas exhibit the failure of government and explain why a population must engage in dangerous and criminal behavior to ensure human dignity in socioeconomic and social terms" (156). Yet, Moreno-Garcia bends the expectation of the genre regarding the gender of narcos. According to Luis Astorga, "the image of the Mexican narco goes back all the way to the 1920s, when Mexicans were already trading illegally across the border to support not only themselves but whole communities that were being left out of

the state's redistributive practices" (qtd. in Benavides 17). Like Atl's mother, Iztac, the leader of the human gang, is also a woman called Valentina. Despite engaging in unlawful activities, Deep Crimson caters to the needs of the city's marginalized population more than the police do, albeit for not entirely altruistic purposes. To Ana's disbelief, Valentina argues that she cares about the well-being of the city's residents: "I have many spiritual concerns. Everybody does. I'm sure you've noticed the state of the world. All the diseases afflicting us: drug-resistant strains of gonorrhea and tuberculosis, that horrible Croneng's disease, increasing cases of sterility, rampant violence in the streets" (114). Moreover, gangs like Deep Crimson more than the police keep Mexico City free of vampires compared to other regions in the country.

As previously mentioned, Moreno-Garcia creates Atl as a complex character who is marginalized but also complicit in the system of exploitation instead of portraying her female vampire protagonist as either the perpetrator or the victim. When Domingo suggests seeking help from the police, Atl explains how she is an outlaw in more than one way within Mexico City: "What do you think they'll do first? Throw me in a cage because I'm a vampire or because I'm a narco?" (96). She confesses to Domingo that she is not just a fugitive but an heiress to the Iztac clan's drug cartel. Furthermore, Atl gives Domingo a short history lesson on the development of drug cartels in northern Mexico, which reveals the complex moral position she occupies:

They started in the '40s, cultivating opium. The Americans wanted it and Sinaloans harvested it. Then in the '60s it was pot. Everyone in the hills was harvesting it. It was small stuff, though. It was the '70s when it got real. Cocaine was hot.... Vampires control the drug trade now. (102)

Unlike the dominant narrative that regards the drug trade as an epidemic that spreads from the south of the border to the north, Atl points out that both sides, the United States and Mexico, are complicit in the demand and supply of the drugs. Whether they are humans or vampires, the narcos are neither absolved of their crime nor romanticized. Although Tlahuipocmimi does not kill or enslave humans as the Necros do, Atl realizes that she has never had taken an interest in their lives or had empathy for them. In addition to using humans for blood supplies, Iztacs have in the past recruited teenagers such as Domingo for their drug operations. Atl recalls, “They’d offer them a hundred pesos to stand at a street corner and keep watch for them, in case the cops were in the mood for busting one of their joints” (128). Once outside the sheltered space provided by her clan and forced into fugitivity, Atl realizes that the luxuries she had enjoyed came at the cost of humans in vulnerable socioeconomic positions such as Domingo. In the end, she chooses to let Domingo stay behind so that he may have a chance at life.

Whereas Mexico City is only a temporary haven for Atl, it represents home for Domingo. The inclusion of Rodrigo’s perspective in the novel shows the readers how outsiders regard Mexico City: “[It] was an apocalyptically dysfunctional place at the best of times, what with the pollution, the flooding, the teetering concrete slums, and the city sinking into the lakebed upon which it was built. However, that day, with the sun hiding behind thick clouds and the rain coming down so heavily, it was damn hellish” (170). Yet, Mexico City is not configured as a place that Domingo must escape. While most of the characters in the novel are either engaged in criminal activities or part of the law enforcement, Domingo chooses a way of life that does not involve harming others, even

though his job as a garbage collector garners little respect. He bittersweetly remarks, “If I were a superhero, my power would be invisibility” (98). Yet, he takes pride in the skills that he has earned through his profession: “Collecting garbage sharpens the senses. It allows us to notice what others do not see. Where most people would spy a pile of junk, the rag-and-bone man sees treasure: empty bottles that might be dragged to the recycling center, computer innards that can be reused, furniture in decent shape. The garbage collector is alert. After all, this is a profession” (1). Through what most people consider filth and waste, Domingo carves out a life for himself.

Ultimately, Domingo plays an essential role in Atl’s escape, not because he has supernatural abilities or a wealth of resources, but because he has an insider’s knowledge of Bordo Blanco, a landfill on the city’s outskirts: “Bordo Blanco overflows into the State of Mexico, okay? It’s not supposed to, but that’s the way it is.... Once you get across the drainage canal, you’re outside Mexico City pretty fast.... There’s a path.... Look, the landfills are not ruled by cops, they’re ruled by the people there” (255). A landfill is a place that is neglected by the state. But for that very reason, it becomes a place in which border logic can be thwarted. In that sense, Bordo Blanco can be described as what Nixon calls an unimagined community:

If the idea of the modern nation-state is sustained by producing imagined communities, it also involves actively producing unimagined communities. I refer here not to those communities that lie beyond the national boundaries but rather to those unimagined communities internal to the space of the nation-state, communities whose vigorously unimagined condition becomes indispensable to maintaining a highly selective discourse of national development. (150)

The Bordo Blanco is a place where those deemed “surplus people” (Nixon 151), such as Domingo, are left to find sustenance in an unsustainable condition. Yet, the novel makes the people within the landfill visible to emphasize the strategies of collective care and survival emerging from such communities.

Towards a Migrant Futurity

In both supernatural outbreak narratives, *Severance* and *Certain Dark Things*, the female protagonists survive until the very end. Yet, neither novel offers a conventional happy ending as there is no guarantee that survival will be sustained. Significantly, the first line of the *Severance* foretells the winding paths a life-after might take: “After the End came the Beginning” (3). Rather than a rupture, this Beginning after the End suggests a move forward that resists historical amnesia. As hinted, the novel leaves the readers with yet another beginning that is not without hope for Candace: “Beyond the bridge is more skyline, more city. I get out and start walking” (291). Similarly, in *Certain Dark Things*, the novel ends with an epilogue. Domingo dreams of Atl walking off into the uncertain yet hopeful future horizon: “Atl stepped forward, into the jungle, the trees rising very high above her head.... She paused for a moment, raising her head as if someone had called her name. She smiled. Almost immediately, she pressed forward, sinking into the endless greenery of the jungle. The chatter of the birds spread, as if they were welcoming the girl” (311). Borrowing Lisa Lowe’s words, I argue that these multi-genre novels ultimately shift our attention from a linear progressive temporality to a past conditional temporality, which provides “a space of reckoning that allows us to revisit times of historical contingency and possibility to consider alternatives that may have been

unthought in those times, and might otherwise remain so now, in order to imagine different futures for what lies ahead” (175). These novels remind us that we should not forget the past(s) that could have been unto which we must understand the present and imagine alternate future(s) or at least defer *the* future already set into motion by imperial and capitalist impulses. Through such a process, each of the genres – the supernatural (zombie and vampire) outbreak narrative, the migrant narratives, the ghost narrative, and the narco-noir do not end with the capturing and the inoculation of the monster, the contagion, the migrant, the ghost and the criminal but begin anew with what kind of future might be possible for those figures once their pasts have been reimagined.

Chapter Three:
Transfigurative Performances:
Bio / Necropolitics of Life

And I now call it *Nepantla*, which is a Nahuatl word for the space between two bodies of water, the space between two worlds. It is a limited space, a space where you are not this or that but where you are changing. You haven't got into the new identity yet and haven't left the old identity behind either—you are in a kind of transition. And that is what *Nepantla* stands for. It is very awkward, uncomfortable and frustrating to be in that *Nepantla* because you are in the midst of transformation. (237)

- Gloria Evangelina Anzaldúa, *Borderlands / La Frontera*, 1987

On September 14, 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic, Project South, Georgia Detention Watch, Georgia Latino Alliance for Human Rights, and South Georgia Immigrant Support Network filed a complaint on behalf of immigrants detained at the Irwin County Detention Center (ICDC). In the complaint, a protected whistleblower – Dawn Wooten, a licensed practical nurse – raised concerns about the unjust and inadequate measures at ICDC to prevent the spread of the COVID-19 among the detainees. One of the alarming details also included the high number of hysterectomies performed on Spanish-speaking immigrants detained at ICDC. According to the complaint, “[one] detained immigrant told Project South that she talked to five different women detained at ICDC between October and December 2019 who had a hysterectomy done. When she talked to them about the surgery, the women ‘reacted confused when explaining why they had one done’” (“Project South”18). Testimonies from numerous immigrant women revealed that many had undergone hysterectomies without consent and

explanation. A year after the filing of complaint and investigations, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) announced that they would be ending the use of the ICDC facility in Ocilla, Georgia, along with ending a contract with another private facility, the C. Carlos Carreiro Immigration Detention Center in North Dartmouth, Massachusetts (Aguilera). While these detention centers were singled out as exceptional in terms of their abuse of detainees in the DHS's announcement, events in Georgia and Massachusetts reveal the differential application of biopower at the borders of the United States, including restriction of migrant women's reproductive rights.

The alternate pasts and futures created by Sabrina Vourvoulias's *Ink* (2012) and Gish Jen's *The Resisters* (2020) do not seem distinct from our historical present as they capture current functions of border securitization. In the introduction to the 2018 edition of *Ink*, fellow Chicana writer Kathleen Alcalá writes that it is about a nation "much like the one we live in today, which is why six years after it was first published, *Ink* is still pertinent and coming out in a new edition" (13). Such parallels between the fictional and the real world prompt us to inquire whether the definition of dystopia may remain as "not of this world" or the role of dystopian literature in an increasingly polarized and hostile world. In searching for an answer to such inquiry, I take a cue from Alcalá, who calls Vourvoulias's work along with that of Carmen Maria Machado, Daniel José Older, and others, "the New Journalism," which she describes as works that are "not confined to words printed on the page but has an energy that calls for a multi-dimensional, multilingual form capable of being summoned out of thin air or painstakingly copied out by hand" (16). Building on this concept of New Journalism, I focus on how Latinx and

Asian American writers employ speculative and dystopian aesthetics not simply to make the fictional world full of suffering and pain but to uncover violence that already exists in our world that disproportionately affects marginalized populations.

To such ends, both Vourvoulias and Jen's work depict dystopian versions of the United States, in which existing anti-immigrant sentiments have grown exponentially, restructuring the fabric of social life. In *Ink*, the legal statuses of racialized migrants and their children are inscribed onto their bodies in the form of color-coded permanent tattoos: blue for citizens, green for permanent residents, and black for temporary migrant workers. While the statuses of inked migrants are not ostensibly classified further based on race or one's country of origin, the tattoos reveal how the racialization process transforms migrants into Inks whose personhoods are denied by the state. Oppressions that these migrants encounter are certainly not new. However, the nonrealist aesthetics of the novel brings those realities to the surface. In *The Resisters*, Jen takes a similar approach, creating a distant future in which those who would have been classified as Inks in Vourvoulias's novel have already been mass deported out of the U.S., now called AutoAmerica. In the absence of racialized migrants, AutoAmerica creates a new, permanent social underclass called the Surplus, who are not exploited for their labor but exposed to both immediate and slow deaths to be ultimately expelled from the body of the nation. Under these dystopian regimes, the Inks and Surpluses are forced to endure the state's transformation and even mutilation of their bodies and lifeways in the name of order and control. Yet, neither group is presented as passive recipients of such violence.

In both novels, these underclasses transfigure themselves through magic, science, and sheer will to survive and thrive in what is increasingly becoming an uninhabitable world.

In the previous chapter, I discussed how the supernatural outbreak narrative could be repurposed to undo the process in which the monster, the contagion, and the racialized migrant are collapsed into one another. In this chapter, I first analyze the oppressive structures of *Vourvoulias* and Jen's fictional worlds through theories of biopolitics and necropolitics. Next, I examine how an aesthetic strategy of resistance that I call transfigurative performances occurs not at the scale of the genre but the scale of characters and their bodyminds in works of speculative fiction by Latinx and Asian American writers. To transfigure means "to change the appearance of a person or thing very much, usually in a very positive and often spiritual way" ("Transfigure"). Against the state violence, the marginalized reclaim and transfigure their bodyminds to camouflage and survive. Yet, these transfigurative performances of the *Inks* and *Surpluses* do not stop there but ultimately lead to protests and rebellions against the oppressive structures.

Here, I use the term bodymind, after Margaret Price from a feminist disabilities studies context, to emphasize that the mind and body are not distinct but intricately connected. According to Price, the bodymind is "a sociopolitically constituted and material entity that emerges through both structural (power-and violence-lade) contexts and also individual (specific) experience" (271). The bodyminds of characters who belong to the underclasses of *Vourvoulias* and Jen's fictional worlds are initially changed through the necropolitical governance of the state, which ultimately seeks to exploit,

maim, and expel the marginalized populations from the nation. In *The Right of Maim: Debility, Capacity, Disability* (2017), Jasbir Puar thus critiques discourses that espouse the binarization of bodily capacity and bodily debility under neoliberalism: “These discourses reproduce neoliberalism’s heightened demands for bodily capacity, even as this same neoliberalism marks out populations for what Lauren Berlant has described as ‘slow death’ – the debilitating ongoingness of structural inequality and suffering” (1). In dystopian versions of the U.S., these slow deaths occur alongside more direct taking of people’s lives.

For the oppressed in *Ink* and *The Resisters*, however, the bodymind is not only what the state seeks to control but also the site of everyday resistance that leads to rebellions. In exploring the intersections of the human body, social violence, and theatricality of public protests, Alberto Guevara focuses on Nicaraguan workers who have suffered due to the pesticide *nemagón*, which multinational companies have continued to use in their banana plantations even though they had been banned in the U.S. and other countries in the Global North.

For several years now, thousands of these *nemagón* sufferers with their families have staged a number of public protests in Nicaragua. They have partaken in several highway marches of up to 140 kilometers from their communities to the capital, Managua. In 2005 and in 2007, after two such long marches, they set up tent cities in front of the Nicaraguan Parliament to demand recognition and compensation for the violence done to them. In other public displays, they have carried out a hunger strike, symbolically buried themselves alive, and threatened to march naked on the streets of Managua. (Guevara 2).

The protestors’ bodies and their performances articulate the social violence that has been inflicted onto them. Guevara suggests that this articulation could be understood as the theatricality of the flesh, which “highlight[s] the non-verbal aspects of spectacle as

important communicative spaces for displaying bodily experiences as political forms of action” and “makes visible the otherwise hidden structures of violence affecting marginalized groups in Nicaragua” (4). Likewise, the bodyminds of the Inks and Surpluses make visible the structural violence they have experienced. However, I argue that transfigurative performances take the readers further into speculative dimensions, whether it moves toward fantasy as in the case of jaguar-like shapeshifters, *naguales*, or toward science fictional terrains as in biochips and exoskeletons that appear in both novels.

Creating the Other: Inks and the Surplus

Instead of creating entirely new axes of oppression to construct a stratified dystopian society, Vourvoulias uses Ink as an all-encompassing category for the immigrants to amplify how the freedom of mobility in the twenty-first century continues to be constrained along with the identificatory categories such as race, ethnicity, gender, class, and nationality. From the perspectives of multiple characters with various identities, *Ink* exposes how immigrant issues cannot be separated from a broader consideration of a nation-state’s creation and maintenance of categories of differences among the population it controls, including citizens. The novel first begins from a non-ink perspective of Finn, an Irish American journalist, who remarks that “pre-ink” days seem like “fairy tale days” (29), even though the move to strip the rights of all racialized migrants and their U.S.-born descendants began in recent years during his adulthood.

Although the novel does not provide specific historical references, the law that requires inks to wear tattoos is reminiscent of Arizona State Bill 1070 and its variants,

which would have required immigrants over eighteen to carry documents always or face misdemeanor charges. In *The Latinx Files (2021)*, Matthew Goodwin describes a striking moment during a rally protesting the bill in 2010: “A young boy in the crowd held up a sketched homemade poster that contained a space alien, and the statement ‘Soy Terrestre, NO ME ARRESTE’ (I’m a Terrestrial, DON’T ARREST ME)” (41). Like the space alien in the poster that refers to both immigration and race, the tattoos visible on the skin of the inks call out the promotion of racial profiling. While it is mentioned that a Spanish immigrant like Charlie Sheen is also considered an ink, most white European immigrants and their children seem to be conspicuously exempt from wearing tattoos or being subjected to population control.

Among the Inks, those who are undocumented and thus have counterfeit tattoos occupy the most precarious position. Yet, the law targets the very being and bodies of inks rather than individual behaviors deemed illegal, such as not having documents. According to Lisa Marie Cacho, “[i]f following the law (legitimate or not) determines whether a person is moral or immoral, it is all but impossible for people assigned to certain status categories to represent themselves as moral and deserving” (4). For instance, a blue-tattooed Ink and a non-Ink individual may both be citizens who have not violated any law. However, the blue tattoo on the inked individual can be presented as evidence of a crime even in the absence of other proof attesting to such criminal behavior, whereas the non-Ink individual’s unmarked skin affords them the privilege of being presumed not guilty. As Cacho suggests, such double standards are justified through the illegalization of immigrants, which is perceived as “necessary outcomes of law-breaking rather than

effects of the law or as produced by the law” (4). In *Ink*, the readers become witnesses to the process that turns racialized migrants into outlaws even before new policies or laws are announced or implemented. Regardless of whether the tattoos are counterfeit or not, Inks consisting of racialized migrants are made illegal by the state.

One example of such a law is the language ban, which illegalizes the native languages of the Inks and transforms them into “illegal” aliens. To demonstrate the effects of such a ban on those who are forbidden to speak in their mother tongues publicly, Vourvoulias shifts the narrative perspective from Finn to Mari, a mixed-heritage Mexican American woman with citizenship. As one of the last Inks employed by a government organization called the Hastings Population Control Office (HPCO), Mari has the rare exemption for the English-only ordinance. Precarious though it may be, she can use her relative privilege as an HPCO officer to translate the words of Father Tom into Spanish for his predominantly Latinx congregation wishing to celebrate Mass in their native language. The language ban imposed on Inks and exemptions to it given to those in the law enforcement expose a discriminatory perspective on bilingualism, which is considered an asset for those occupying privileged positions when it is viewed as a deficiency for the underprivileged. Even when non-Anglo individuals are fluent in English in a manner that may be conventionally perceived as “unaccented” or “standard,” they are predetermined as unassimilable aliens regardless of their language proficiency.

The foregrounding of Latinx Inks in the novel reflects how “English Only” movements in the U.S. developed in states bordering Mexico and targeted Spanish language and speakers. As Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o eloquently argues, “Language carries

culture, and culture carries, particularly through orature and literature, the entire body of values by which we come to perceive ourselves and our place in the world” (16).

Therefore, to ban one from speaking in one’s native language is a profoundly colonial technique of erasing the colonized people’s culture and history. Such a ban is ironic given that Spanish is also a legacy of colonialism in Latin America that resulted in the erasure of Indigenous populations and languages. And yet, scholars such as Tiffany Davis and Wendy Moore explain that Spanish has become “*raced* in a way that no other non-English language has” in the context of the racialized social structure of the U.S. (682). Therefore, both the “English Only” movement and the language ban function as justification for racially othering Latinxs, regardless of their ability to speak Spanish or English or their legal statuses. While foregrounding the white racial framing of Spanish and Latinxs in the U.S., Vourvoulias offers a pan-Ink identity that extends beyond Latinxs. Against the state’s constant production of racial boundaries, the pan-Ink identity in the novel forges cross-racial and cross-ethnic solidarity without erasing the heterogeneity of the inked migrants.

Even as Inks adapt in different ways to injustices, including the language ban, the peñas – coffeehouses turned underground network centered around Latinx Inks – emerge as a crucial site for creative resistance for migrants of all backgrounds and statuses. When Finn encounters another woman conversing with Mari in Spanish, he glances down her wrist. He notices that the woman, Nely, is a black-tattooed temporary worker barred from getting a language exemption. Yet, before agreeing to guide Finn to one of the peñas, Nely code switches from English into Spanish to challenge him: “¿De veras, güero? ¿Y

cómo nos vas a entender cuando hablemos, eh? Porque allí nadie, pero nadie, habla inglés (Really, blondy? And how are you going to understand us when we speak? Because nobody there, no one will speak English)” (31). In that moment, Nely reverses the linguistic power dynamics so that Finn, an outsider she calls a “güero,” must demonstrate his ability to understand Spanish to be granted entry to a peña. Neither the gangs nor the peñas they operate can be understood solely in terms of legality as the very status of the inks have been illegalized and criminalized by the state.

According to Cacho, “people subject to laws based on their (il)legal status – ‘illegal aliens,’ ‘gang members,’ ‘terrorist subjects,’ – are unable to comply with the ‘rule of law’ because U.S. Law targets their being and their bodies, not their behaviors” (6). Such examination of legal systems explains how the Inks in the novel are made ineligible not just for citizenship but also for personhood. Even as the gangs operating the peñas and those who frequent such venues both run the risk of being criminalized along multiple axes, they are afforded personhood within peñas, including being able to speak in their own native language. These fugitive places become increasingly linked to survival as it becomes perilous to simply walk on the street as 10 p.m. curfews are imposed on the Inks. Furthermore, restrictions on public transportation and other policies are implemented to segregate the Inks and control their everyday behaviors.

Interestingly, *The Resisters* depicts a futuristic version of the United States where there are no more recent immigrants who would be categorized as Inks in Vourvoulias’s novel. Still, the novel shows how white supremacy quickly moves onto a new target, non-immigrants who are marginalized based on other identity categories. Jen situates such

racial dynamics in a world where current nation-states have merged into surveillance states governed by Big Brother-like artificial intelligence due to the growing scarcity of habitable lands and the reliance on automation in responding to climate change. Although transnational in its scope, the novel primarily takes place in the alternate version of the United States called AutoAmerica, which is run by Autonet, a.k.a. “Aunt Nettie,” an omnipresent A.I. merged with the Internet to have near-total access to all information in the country.

The oppressive control of Aunt Nettie is unevenly distributed, however, as AutoAmericans have been sorted into two tiers of socioeconomic classes: the Netted, the producers whose jobs have not become extinct in the post-automation era, and the Surplus, the consumers who have become wards of the state due to unemployment. While Aunt Nettie claims to be unbiased and solely focused on maximizing economic efficiency, her decisions are far from apolitical, as demonstrated by “Ship’EmBack,” the mass deportation of most if not all noncitizens residing in AutoAmerica. Grant Chastanet, the father of the novel’s main protagonist Gwen, recalls that he lost his job as a direct result of the decision to deport immigrants: “[A]s the young head of an English as a second language program, I still had immigrants to teach and obligations to juggle. This was some time ago, now – before Ship’EmBack” (7). After implementing a xenophobic policy such as Ship’EmBack, Aunt Nettie begins to sort its citizens into two, the Netted and the Surplus. According to the official narrative, people who possess professional skills compatible with the Autonet were classified as the former; people deemed un-retrainable in the era of automation were sorted in the latter group. Yet, Jen provides a

counternarrative to the official history offered by Aunt Nettie through her narrator, who has been classified as a Surplus after losing his employment.

According to Grant's account of AutoAmerican history, automation itself is revealed to be not the sole driving force behind the extinction of entire professions.

Instead, he explains that the Surpluses were forced to become dependent on the state:

Today Aunt Nettie would no doubt use the term "Surplus" – "Unretrainables" having been aggregated with "Unemployable" such as the elderly for the purposes of administering our Basic Incomes...Of course, some people were Retrained. And it goes without saying that not all the Unretrainables were coppertoned, like me. A great many were angelfair. But it was hard not to notice that Unretrainables did somehow include everyone coppertoned, as well as everyone spy-eyes, like Eleanor, and everyone odd-bodied, too, not to say the odd-godded – Muslims, for example. It was, one had to say, quite a coincidence that the underclass looked as it did; groups like AutoAmericans Against Apartheid called it the New Segregation. (7)

The overrepresentation of minoritized people in the Surplus class reveals how white supremacy prevails even as AutoAmerica promotes "Spectrum Thinking" (98), neoliberal multiculturalism repackaged for an Autonet-run future society. New words coined by Jen, such as "Spectrum Thinking," cast the world of *The Resisters* as not as our own, and this cognitive estrangement prompts the readers to scrutinize how white supremacy operates in AutoAmerica and, by extension, the United States of the past and present. A former academic and "coppertoned" man of Afro-Caribbean descent, Grant argues that it is not a coincidence that the state's permanent social underclass is composed of those who are deemed "odd" for not being able-bodied, white, heterosexual, Christian, and from middle to upper class. The Surpluses, comprised of multiply marginalized people of color, are included in the nation but only just barely to not be deported along with immigrants. The Netted's belief that the Surplus should be grateful for not having to work for a living

believes the condition under which the latter group must live. The odd-skinned, odd-bodied, and odd-godded Surpluses, unlike the mostly “angelfair” Netted, are required by law to have RegiChips inserted into their bodies that send GPS signals to Aunt Nettie, significantly restricting their freedom.

Although there is a limited opportunity for one of the Surplus to attain the status of the Netted, the country remains effectively segregated with little to no contact between the two sides: “Aunt Nettie didn’t have to segregate Netted from Surplus, in short; what with Basic Incomes so modest, we self-segregated as easily as sand and water. Of course, long ago, many of us Surplus would have been the help on which the Netted relied, in which we would not only have known them but known them intimately” (36). This segregation through income and zonings leads to the gap of knowledge between the Surplus and the Netted widening. Ultimately, the Surpluses are contained in their disenfranchised residential areas filled with AutoHouses (state-regulated houses with built-in surveillance systems) that tend to be smaller than those in the Netted areas and ShelterBoats (houseboats) in Flotsam Towns, which are created after more lands become submerged due to the rise in sea levels.

When any individual AutoAmerican attempts to resist the authoritarian rule and fight for human rights, especially the rights of the Surpluses, they are placed under even more strict surveillance, such as Grant’s wife Eleanor, a former lawyer and “spy-eyed” woman of Asian descent. In a passionate conversation with her daughter, Eleanor condemns both the Autonet and the Netted for allowing such violation of human rights to continue: “Why do they treat us like parasites when they’ve gone out of their way to deny

us work?” (95). Whereas the Netted are afforded freedom and privacy, the Surpluses are legally required to have RegiChips inserted at birth, allowing Aunt Nettie to track their locations. Along with the chip, AutoHouses and Living Points control all aspects of the supposedly surplus populations. Michel Foucault has famously described biopolitics as “the power to make live and let die” (241). Yet as anthropologist Tani Murray Li points out, there remains the question of when and how the power to let die would be activated in which “governing authorities would elect not to intervene when they could, or select one subset of the population for life enhancement while abandoning another” (66). In the context of rural Asia, Li explains, “a new round of enclosures that have disposed large numbers of rural people from the land; and the low absorption of their labour, which is ‘surplus’ to the requirements of capital accumulation” (67). Li’s study thus helps explain how “surplus” populations are created and disproportionately exposed to the state’s power to let die.

In the future world of *The Resisters*, the already stealthy violence of “let die” is masked even further as AutoAmerica outwardly provides “make live” interventions for the Surplus who can no longer work. “If the population rendered surplus to capital’s requirements is to live decently,” Li argues, “it will be because of the activation of a biopolitics that places the intrinsic value of life – rather than the value of people as workers or consumers – at its core” (67 – 68). This perspective provides us insight into the condition under which the Surplus must live. Unlike the rural populations currently facing dispossession of lands in the twenty-first century, the Surpluses are provided with basic incomes, housing, and unlimited access to free food to sustain their lives. And yet,

through a dual system of surveillance and incentives called the Living Points, AutoAmerica seizes all aspects of life that make it worth living. While the Netted believe that the Surplus should be grateful for not having to work and produce, the latter group's lives are marked by relentless boredom and, as it is later revealed, by death.

Grant's narration reveals that the Surpluses are prevented from making their life more livable in material and immaterial ways. Refusal to adhere to the law results in punishments that range from deduction of Living Points that could be traded for benefits to incarceration. Yet, the Cannon-Chastanet's choose to resist Aunt Nettie by making small choices every day, such as playing baseball or knitting. By the time the readers are properly introduced to Eleanor, Grant's wife, she has already been arrested and received "distinguished treatment," a euphemism for torture, for using her past training as an immigration lawyer to expand the rights of her people (32). However, it does not deter Eleanor from growing a small garden filled with vegetables, herbs, and flowers in defiance of Aunt Nettie once she is released. As one of the few Surpluses to inherit land rights, she is able to achieve a degree of self-sustenance that allows her family to avoid consuming mass-produced food provided through what are called mall trucks:

Of course, the mall-truck food – NettieFood, as we called it – was free. In fact, we Surplus received Living Points for eating it, as we did for consuming generally: what with the efficiency boos of Aunt Nettie, the Netted overproduced wildly. But might those endless trays of dumplings and calzones and taquitos contain a mood-and-mind mute that amounted to a love sap – the ultimate aim of which was to reduce our numbers or, as we Surplus put it, to winnow us? Let's just say that our household grew our own food, thank you very much. (11)

As Eleanor's legal team later discovers, the NettieFood turns out to be infused with chemicals that expose people who consume it to slow death, which refers to "the mass

physical attenuation under global/national regimes of capitalist structural subordination and governmentality” (Berlant 754). According to Lauren Berlant, “Apartheid-like structures, from zoning to shaming, are wielded against these populations, who come to represent embodied liabilities to social prosperity of one sort or another” (765). As in the case of the so-called obesity epidemic in the U.S., unhealthy conditions are attributed to an inherent characteristic of a subpopulation, specifically working-class people of color, rather than the structural conditions they are put under. Jen highlights an already unfolding social phenomenon by tweaking it in a futuristic context. Salt, sugar, and fat in cheap fast food in the U.S. are replaced with unknown chemicals designed to debilitate the body of its consumers in *AutoAmerica*, which emphasizes the deliberateness behind real and imagined structural inequalities.

Environmental racism also manifests in *The Resisters* as Aunt Nettie’s deliberate contamination of Surplus residential areas. Eleanor’s investigation concludes that children who have experienced a sudden illness that left them disabled have been exposed to unidentified toxic emanations while playing on SurplusFields. The children confess that their arms and legs have slowly atrophied, causing them to become dependent on ExoLimbs (84). Moreover, they reveal to Eleanor’s team how they have been suffering from chronic pains due to the emanations: “The pain never stopped. They could take something for it but then they slept all the time and couldn’t wake up” (85). The revelation that the state that deliberately exposed the children to enfeeblers that gelatinizes their muscles and ultimately can lead to premature deaths also causes pain to the Surplus community.

Bio / Necropolitical Governance

In both novels, white supremacist dystopias do not stop with creating permanent social underclasses but repeat the dark histories of eugenicist population control that sought to reduce the number of subpopulations deemed undesirable. As indicated by the formation of HPCO, the Inks deemed to be rightless become subject to violent tactics of population control. Even Mari, a former HPCO officer with a blue tattoo, is not exempt from violent population control tactics when xenophobia escalates, which leads to cooperation between vigilantes and state agents. When the narrative perspective shifts from Finn to Mari, the readers are confronted with a piece of visceral evidence for Finn's story on border dumps and concentration camps called inkatoriums. Despite her relatively protected status, Mari is attacked and abducted by vigilantes in an alley away from public view. When she wakes up from a head injury, she finds herself in a van full of migrant children from Mexico and the Caribbean, "bonded by circumstantial – not family – blood" (78). Even in the dark, Mari senses that the children whose GPS implants had been forcibly cut out from their necks must have been kidnapped from their black-tattooed, temporary migrant worker guardians. To her horror, she realizes that the vigilantes must be taking these children to the border to dump them in the wilderness.

When confronted by Mari, the vigilantes justify border dumping on the basis that the children are illegal immigrants and thus undeserving of protection like Anglo children: "We didn't find GPS trackers when we cut their necks...Not even anchor babies...Just border jumpers" (92). While not much is revealed about the identity of the vigilantes beyond name and gender, they are depicted as civilians emboldened by the state's white

supremacy and the abuse of necropower on Inks. Despite Mari's pleas, the children, who are all not yet even ten years old, are taken to the U.S.-Canadian border to be dumped intentionally far away from checkpoints to either survive miraculously on their own or die. Such a moment demonstrates how the social deaths of illegalized immigrants do not always but can lead to actual, physical deaths. When Mari's blue tattoo is confirmed to be legitimate, the vigilantes separate her from the children and release her within the border to avoid legal complications. Yet before Mari is let go, one of the men sexually assaults her, leaving her with physical and psychological traumas that leave her vulnerable to be recaptured and taken to the inkatorium.

The border dumps and inkatoriums work as a twin system of necropolitics imposed on the Inks. As discussed in Chapter Two with Ling Ma's *Severance* and Silvia Moreno-Garcia's *Certain Dark Things*, diseases are racialized and associated with the inks to render them into pathological subjects. Yet, *Ink* delves into a connected but different process in which the state knowingly fabricates the presence of contagion within the racialized bodies to justify its necropolitics. Notably, the interiors of inkatoriums are first depicted through the eyes of a teenager, Abbie, whose mother is the administrator of the Smithville inkatorium. Initially, she is unaware of her complicity in a carceral system that she once believed to be humane. During her community service hours, she helps process incoming inmates at the sanatorium for inks and encounters a blue tattooed Vietnamese American boy called Pete Nguyen. It is revealed that Pete was reported by his school administrators when he threw up in class due to the rumors that inks are responsible for spreading various contagious diseases. Once the van arrives, Pete's status plummets from

a citizen to a non-alien, a category implemented to strip the state's protections from naturalized citizens and second-generation immigrants born in the country. By abusing the non-alien category, inkatoriums involuntarily admit minors with citizenship like Pete without parental consent. Although the workers at the inkatorium are aware that Pete is not contagious, they draw his blood to be tested for Chagas, Hansen's disease, tuberculosis, and the New Delhi superbug to uphold the guise that the Inks are public health risks. Abbie's narration reveals that authorities have led non-Ink civilians like her to believe the official story that the Inks are more susceptible to these diseases and must be separated from the public as a precaution, even in the absence of a diagnosis. Moreover, contrary to the claim that inkatoriums are medical facilities, Pete is treated less like a patient than a prisoner – head shaven, clothes incinerated, and inserted with a GPS chip. Without fully understanding what is going on in the inkatorium, Abbie feels sympathy for the young boy whose life has been upended, even hugging him before they part ways.

Unlike the minors who have little knowledge of pre-ink days, Meche, a Cuban American woman who is also admitted, challenges the authorities and points out that public health risk minimization is a mere alibi for controlling marginalized populations: “Hansen's isn't even particularly contagious. And of the 100 or so cases reported in the U.S. every year, about a third of them can be traced to contact with armadillos – not inks” (162). Neel Ahuja's examination of Hansen's disease encampments on the island of Moloka'i in the nineteenth century provides one of the many historical precedents for how race operates in the context of infectious disease control: “the public articulation of

race often operates through logics of profiling, which aggregate various phenotypic and epidemiological cues into thresholds for state intervention” (6). Through racial profiling and surveillance, Kānaka Maoli were presumed to be infected, forcibly quarantined, and criminalized, resulting in early Board of Health documents referring to them as prisoners and patients interchangeably. Although any individual with the disease could be quarantined in principle, white settlers benefitted from racial profiling that worked in their favor. Ahuja extrapolates from this incident to argue that “ebbs and flows of racial securitization work to mask the persistence of race in the structures of governance” (Ahuja 6). By referencing Hansen’s disease, Vourvoulis maintains a historical continuity in her alternate version of the U.S., exposing how race fundamentally forms the structures of settler colonial governance even as the targets of racial securitization may change.

Examined from such a historical perspective, it is not a coincidence that Meche’s story echoes that of Pete’s and most of the incarcerated Inks: “A guy riding a bike ran me down in front of the grocery store. Everyone’s so scared by the damned health alerts that, when they saw me on the ground and noticed the tattoo, they thought I was having a seizure” (163). The symptoms of illnesses are read as dangerous only when presented with tattoos. Moreover, the state and the healthcare professionals complicit in the carceral system are aware that the threat that Inks represent is not so much about public health as it is about upholding racializing hierarchies under global capitalism. Abbie’s mother, a white woman, for instance, deflects Meche’s accusation by pointing to her economic hardship: “What’s sentiment when your kid’s freezing in a cold house? ... That’s why I’m here, even knowing that most of you aren’t sick” (164). The underlying implication

of her words is that the presence of inks exacerbates the socioeconomic inequalities in the U.S. In other words, they are taking jobs and resources away from the non-Ink citizens. And yet, as Nandita Sharma contends, “being documented as unlawful or a guest worker is precisely what entraps a growing number (and proportion) of people into substandard working and living conditions while severely limiting their rights and mobility” (48). Furthermore, the subjugation of “unlawful entrants” or “guest workers” and Inks, as in the case of the novel, makes it possible for the marginalized among the citizens to be also coerced into less-than-ideal working and living conditions.

As indicated above, inkatoriums are not designed to prevent the spread of infectious diseases. However, operated according to eugenics and Malthusian theory, they serve a more insidious medical purpose: to reduce the population of Inks. Therefore, the government authorities are careful to mask their racist intents by portraying the Inks as supposedly diseased or criminalized individuals and hiding the atrocities committed to them from public view: “The administration keeps the images of the inks being loaded onto troop transports for deportation from public view. It’s a smart move. Numbers don’t mean anything until you see the scale of them in flesh” (439). The necropolitics of population control further manifests as nonconsensual sterilizations of incarcerated inks. In doing so, Vourvoulis excavates how the reproductive rights of the marginalized populations have been historically violated and anticipates the controversy around forced hysterectomies conducted in ICE detention centers that came to the surface years after the novel’s publication. In a striking resemblance to the real-life whistleblower, an African American doctor comes forward in the novel with damning information on inkatoriums:

But the reproduction rate of inks is much on the commission members' minds these days. Like, is there a consistently high fertility rate or is there a lot of variation between blue tats and greens? Or black tats and the other two? And if so, what does it mean in terms of population control if they close down the inkatoriums?... It means a sterilization program at the inkatoriums before they're shut down. (245)

In addition to giving the information, the doctor provides Finn with the evidence, a USB drive filled with footage showing Langdon Deliman Health Center, an inkatorium near the Algonquin Lake area, which pioneered a program that sterilizes the incarcerated Inks through implants. To Abbie's horror, one footage shows a sterilization procedure conducted at another facility, the Smithville inkatorium. On the screen, she witnesses her mother inserting the implants into Pete's arm with the full knowledge of what she is doing to the boy.

Whereas the future kids are being prevented from being born through sterilization, infants born within the walls of the inkatorium are forcibly separated from their birth mothers to be privately adopted. Abbie observes that mothers who have given birth "[sit] together heedless of ethnicity or tat color, and everyone else steers clear of them as if their especially horrible luck might rub off on contact" (168). Their children, however, are nowhere to be seen. Toño, the leader of a Mexican gang called Gavilanes, explains that the adoption of inks functions as a lucrative human trafficking business in which clients pay large donations to adopt white-passing ink children and incorporate them into non-immigrant, white, heteronormative families. Sponsored by the state authorities, workers at the inkatorium fabricate the birth records of infants who can pass as non-Ink and erase information about the coercive adoption process. Mari is also separated from her son when she gives birth while incarcerated. Finn and Mari succeed in tracking and

rescuing the baby; however, it is suggested that many more separated families may never be reunited as records are intentionally destroyed.

While the main characters of Jen's novel are not immigrants, it is notable that it takes place after Ship'EmBack, which in Vourvoulias' fictional world would have meant the mass deportation of all the Inked populations. Many reviewers have noted how *The Resisters* is markedly different in genre and style from Jen's previous four realist novels that depict Asian American diasporas. But, it is not surprising that the issue of surveillance takes center stage in *The Resisters*. Monica Chiu, for instance, explains that "Asian and Asian North American immigrants and citizens" have long been surveilled by the U.S. government "in the interest of Asian immigration control, job distribution, national security, and national health in both its literal and metaphorical terms" (1). Yet, Aunt Nettie soon realizes that mass deportation and racial segregation are not enough to maintain the status quo. The myth of AutoAmerican exceptionalism, which claims that life as a Surplus is better than life elsewhere, constantly requires the creation of new others. Therefore, Aunt Nettie reignites its rivalry with another surveillance state, ChinRussia, or "redoubling," as it is called.

ChinRussia, as the name suggests, is described as a state that has absorbed Russia, China, as well as most parts of Asia. As a crucial part of the redoubling effort, Aunt Nettie reinstates baseball as a legal activity to win against ChinRussia in the Olympics, which becomes a proxy war played out in the baseball stadiums reminiscent of the Cold War era. According to historian Rob Ruck, "[by] the early twentieth century, baseball in the United States had become the poster boy for a rising nation's democratic aspirations"

(227). And yet, even as the U.S. sought to champion liberal democracy's superiority over communism in all aspects, including sports, racism continued to undercut such efforts. The Cold War brought attention specifically to the Major League Baseball, which at the time excluded more people than it included: "Ironically, the democratic ideals that U.S. baseball proclaimed, but did not attain, were already on display in Havana. There, players of all nations and races played with and against each other in the Liga Cubana" (Ruck 227). Under such pressures, the baseball leagues in the U.S. started to reintegrate, albeit slowly. In *The Resisters*, AutoAmerica makes a similar move, recruiting Gwen Chastanet into its Olympic baseball team. As the daughter of Grant and Eleanor and an Afro-Asian woman and a pitcher with a "golden arm," Gwen is chosen for being "Blasian, female, and Surplus" in addition to her talents (35). This staging of diversity through the inclusion of Gwen serves to mask the deeply entrenched social inequalities, holding up the myth of AutoAmerica's superiority over ChinRussia.

Yet, ChinRussia, despite being a real place in the novel, very much remains an imagined place as information from or about ChinRussia is strictly controlled by Aunt Nettie. Grant realizes that he, like everyone else, has no knowledge of their supposed rival superpower: "We still traded with ChinRussia — everyone did — but no live ChinRussian had set foot in AutoAmerica since Ship'EmBack. So what were the ChinRussians like now? Did they have quicker reflexes?" (153) Furthermore, AuntNettie's propaganda constantly reminds them that the ChinRussians are significantly less human as they have embraced, HomoUpgrade, a genetic engineering technology used to alter human physiology. Using speculative aesthetics, Jen literalizes and critiques

Techno-Orientalism, which David Roh, Betsy Huang, and Greta Niu define as “the phenomenon of imagining Asia and Asians in hypo- or hypertechnological terms in cultural productions and political discourse” (2). According to these critics, the rise in Techno-Orientalism coincided with “the West’s project of securing dominance as architects of the future, a project that requires configurations of the East as the very technology with which to shape it” (2). Yet, the Asianized technology or technologized Asians are rendered as tools while the West remains the architect and the designer of the future.

Therefore, when Asians appear in Techno-Orientalists futures, they do not quite appear human due to their presumed approximation to technological beings such as the cyborg. When the ChinRussians do arrive, they appear genderless, unnatural, and almost cyborg-like to the AutoAmericans. They are described as being “all golden skinned — clearly the preference of their BioDesigners” with variations of bright eye colors and “densely packed groves of hair” that are mostly black (278-279). One of the players Vladimir Santiago, who has immigrated to Moscow from the Dominican Republic, is also described as appearing golden like the ChinRussians. The novel completes the Techno-Orientalist tropes by depicting how the AutoAmericans regard the ChinRussians also as not having the right kind of emotions: “most eerily of all, they were unfailingly cheerful and collegial not only with one another but with opposing teams, both on the field and off” (279). It is implied that even their personalities, as well as their physical qualities, might have been altered through technology. As a response, AutoAmerica attempts to make the appearance that their players possess “[s]omething beyond algorithms and beyond

Upgrades — something we were proud to call human” (154). Such a claim of being more “human” is ironic given that AutoAmerican baseball players also undergo procedures that alter and invisibly enhance their performance. Nonetheless, AutoAmericans are described as superior due to their ability to maintain humanity and not become the technology itself.

More significantly, Jen points out the hypocrisy of framing ChinRussians as inhuman when AutoAmerica treats its citizens as less than human. When Gwen is recruited to play baseball for the Net University, she encounters how much life is different for the Netted. Gwen realizes that the constant, intrusive, and violent surveillance and control of Aunt Nettie has restricted her ability to think and act of her own will: “Well, I wonder if I will always have an Aunt Nettie-shaped hole in my head. And what does that mean? Is that what it means to be Surplus?” (174). Unlike the Surplus, who are unknowingly given chemical infused mall truck food, the Netted are encouraged to consume healthy, organic food: “There being no mall trucks at Net U, Gwen and Pink and Sylvie all made coffee, tea, and hot chocolate, and kept snacks in the fridge – most of which were healthy, she reassured us” (125). It is telling that the Surpluses are discouraged from even growing vegetables in their gardens at the cost to the state. Ondi Nickelhoff, also of Afro Asian descent like Gwen, finds a place of refuge at her childhood friend Gwen’s house and learns their way of self-sustenance, including knitting. Yet, she is forced to betray her friend’s family when she is discovered to have hacked her RegiChip.

The extreme punishment that Ondi’s family receives indicates that who and what is criminal can be defined by the state in arbitrary manners. For violating an unjust law,

Ondi's family is forced to undock their houseboat and sail out to the sea. They are told to never come back within the terrestrial and oceanic borders of AutoAmerica. As much as the Surpluses are portrayed as being "lucky" for not having to work for a living, their very status makes them subject to what amounts to a death penalty for any challenge to the system, including ones that are minor such as Ondi's pranks. The punishment called CastOff, for instance, is more severe than the name suggests as houseboats are not equipped to travel international waters, and the sea has become more dangerous than ever due to climate change:

The storms that had begun to build and build in the last half century were now behemoths, with maelstrom winds and fusillades of rain.... Even on the calmer days, the swells were the size of buildings. Ondi said she could still feel the upupup crash, upupup crash in her stomach and legs; she could still feel the boat pitching wildly and hear the winds howling and howling – 'as if there were something the matter with them,' as she put it. The waves, too, crashed and crashed and crashed. Sometimes they were filled with trash. It never stopped. (60)

As indicated by the waves filled with trash, environmental pollution has irreversibly changed the climate, making "maelstrom winds and fusillades of rain" the norm. Thus, CastOff is a punishment designed to physically and psychologically wear out those who resist submitting to Aunt Nettie's control. When the Nickelhoffs try to make their way back to the shore, they are stopped by human Enforcers or bots on AquaDrones. Enforcers offer the family an option to "re-Register" or rejoin AutoAmerica but on one condition that one of them be "winnowed" (62). While it is not specified who must be winnowed or let die, Ondi's grandfather Barney, a one-hundred-fifteen-year-old Asian American man who used to be a veterinarian, sacrifices himself. Unable to escape the pain caused by his deteriorating body, which could not withstand life on the sea, he

decides to end his life and unburden his family. Witnessing Barney's suicide deeply traumatizes Ondi, who blames Gwen's family for filling her head with rebellious ideas that caused this tragedy, instead of Aunt Nettie, who indirectly decided on the fate of her grandfather.

Surveillance capitalism takes a further dystopian turn when it does not stop at shaping human behavior through reward and punishment. When neither proves to be effective in preventing Eleanor from resisting the system, she is arrested and injected with BioNet, which merges with her brain cells to take over cognitive functions. A metatextual moment occurs regarding the BioNet when Grant remarks, "It was like a program out of a science fiction novel, except that it wasn't" (238). During visitation hours, Eleanor attempts to explain the technology to Gwen: "you can think of it as a kind of mesh or lace although in fact it more closely resembles the amyloid plaques that were once associated with Alzheimer's, if you remember Alzheimer's.... It is tracing my brain activity and uploading that into a computer that can decipher it and also download information – making for a two way street" (237-8). As a step towards complete integration with the Autonet called the MindMeld, BioNet strips Eleanor of agency and identity. While she could choose to ignore the voice of Aunt Nettie carried through the sound systems in her AutoHouse, it becomes difficult to resist when it is coming from her brain.

It is also revealed that the Nickelhoffs were not CastOff because of Ondi's minor transgressions but because AuntNettie wanted Gwen's father to develop BioNet. The coercive assimilation of the Nickelhoff's into the white supremacist, authoritarian state is

likewise aided through technology like the violent subjugation of Eleanor. These optional cosmetic surgeries transform their phenotypical markers to appear racially white. Ondi is initially described as a teenage girl with a “streaked, now, with purple, but still – that red-and-gold Afro-puff” (43). However, after entering the Net University, Ondi alters her hair and skin color through a procedure called PermDerm and becomes “blond and angelfair” (249). She defends her choice to get a PermDerm like her parents, who appear white even though their biological child is Afro-Asian: “Why should I look coppertoned? Now I look like my parents. Isn’t that more natural?” (155). Yet, the names of other surgical procedures such as “AryanDerm” (255) for making one’s skin white and “Open’EmUp” (156) for the double eye-lid surgery expose the racism underlying what passes for aesthetic choices. While not all those who are Netted are angelfair, another Surplus boy Winny also receives AryanDerm to assimilate into the whiteness of the Net University.

Transfigurative Performances

As demonstrated thus far, the structures of oppression in both *Ink* and *The Resisters* not only create a neo-Apartheid but also implement divisions among the oppressed to prevent an uprising. The transfigurative performances of the thus shapeshift not only each individual but how those who are oppressed may alter their relations to one another within and beyond those structures. Through inkatoriums, Vourvoulias depicts how the framing of immigration as a public health issue is designed to prevent further the formation of solidarities between migrants and citizens around shared labor issues. One of the narrators, Abbie, observes that the lunchtime scene at the inkatorium is not so different from that of her high school: “We’ve got somewhere around 1,000 inks of all

kinds here now, and if you walk into the lunchroom, you'll see them sitting clustered into ethnic groupings. And within each group, they sit pretty much by the color of tat. Unspoken hierarchy, a lot like high school. The only ones who seem to cross the boundaries are kids too little to recognize distinctions other than size" (165). As the daughter of the administrator of Smithville Inkatorium and a volunteer, she too is complicit in maintaining this social hierarchy. While skin color and other phenotypes are still used to enforce racialized hierarchies in this alternate version of the U.S., one's status as an immigrant and its physical manifestation in the form of a tattoo mark one immediately as the other. Abbie's observation reveals how the Inks have also internalized this logic of inclusion and exclusion as they sit together by their tattoo color.

Yet, Vourvoulias portrays the inked migrants not only as passive victims of state power but as forces of resistance in both the real and supernatural world populated with shapeshifting *naguales* and dwarf-like monsters of greed, hatred, and despair called *kaibils*. Through such aesthetic strategies, migrants emerge neither as people to be controlled nor rescued but as those generating knowledge and social change. To escape state power and surveillance above ground, the inks in the novel shapeshift both literally and metaphorically. In a world that relentlessly enacts racialized and sexualized violence against migrant women, Mari and Meche draw upon the supernatural powers that allow them to survive and strike back at the oppressors. Both women shapeshifters with twin selves called the primordials, who can enter the spiritual realm, which invokes Gloria Anzaldúa's notion of *nepantla*, a Nahuatl word that means "in-between-space" outlined in her posthumously published work, *Light in the Dark/Luz en lo Oscuro: Rewriting*

Identity, Spirituality, Reality (2015). In this book, she expands her previous definition of nepantla in *Borderlands / La Frontera* (1987): “Nepantla is the threshold of transformation. Art and la frontera intersect in a liminal space where border people, especially artists, live in a state of nepantla” (Anzaldúa 56). For her, nepantla enables transformation as it bridges reality and imagination.

Likewise, in *Ink*, the primordials can make a change in the material and the spiritual world. Mari’s primordial awakens when there is danger, such as when white supremacist mobs burn down Ink neighborhoods: “*I smell the car. She doesn’t. Her nose is a poor instrument for such things.... If there is danger, I’ll fight for her as my kind always have, on my layer of the world. A layer her kind almost never credits with bringing about change. But it does. It does*” (209). In the form of a luminescent jaguar, this spiritual twin leaves the boundaries of Mari’s body while still maintaining the ability to affect the physical realm. During the night of the mob attacks, the twin roams the burning city and rescues the wounded. Because the magic is a two-way street, there is a side effect as the injury that the primordial sustains in its fight against the kaibils also appears in Mari during her sleep. However, from her first encounter with Meche’s twin, which takes the form of the Virgin of Guadalupe, Mari learns that she is not alone and there are many more like her. The primordials appear in different forms depending on the eyes of the beholder. While not all Inks have supernatural gifts, they can understand the primordials through the lens of their cultural myths and legends:

Perhaps predictably, the Central Americans and Mexicans at the table see her first. Myth and legend lives pretty close to the surface for many of us. The others who have sensed her before – and named sense with shapes from their own beliefs – see her now as I see her: a jaguar both ancient and eternal, eyes alive with the stuff of dream and nightmare. (231)

Mari shifts into a jaguar or nagual from Nahua myths that the others of Mexican descent recognize, but it is implied that others see her in varying forms. In that sense, Mari is an Anzaldúan werejaguar that holds multiplicity and oneness together. When the kaibil meets Mari, it claims that the U.S. is not her home and, therefore, primordials and Inks like her are not welcome. Yet Mari contends, “*This is home*” (225), regardless of the racialized divide between citizens with and without tattoos.

As a scientist and the heiress of a white Cuban family with a fortune, Meche utilizes her privilege and training to devise a way to aid Inks in avoiding detection by creating a synthetic material called Instaskin, which effectively covers up the tattoo that marks Inks as people not protected by the state. And to ultimately move Inks to safety, she operates an underground rescue network aided by her Cuban American gang and her rival Mexican American led by Toño Gavilán. The escape from the inkatorium led by Meche from the inside brings together people across different ethno-racial groups and legal statuses. The aid from Abbie and a network of Ink and non-Ink allies from the outside bridges division across categories of identity. In contrast to inkatorium’s cafeteria, which fosters hierarchy and mistrust, Meche’s house becomes a haven for all who need it. A hidden basement and roof serve as a safe house for a West African family, a Filipina nurse, and many more inks of various ethnic backgrounds. As a final measure, Abbie hacks into the HPCO database to restore Meche and Mari’s statuses to citizens from non-

aliens, a category created to strip the rights of blue-tattooed Inks. Yet, this is not an option for many others who have green, black, or counterfeit black tattoos. Thus, for them, Instaskin is a necessary camouflage that gives them a chance at survival by avoiding detainment and deportation.

These two modes of resistance, supernatural and scientific, merge in an art performance that becomes a turning point in the ongoing debates on immigration. Finn's supervisor, Melinda, sends him to cover an art performance when she finds information about it on a FedEx label. The performance begins, and the artist on the stage slowly divests herself of clothing one by one. A member in the crowd hands over a wooden cross, and the artist rubs it over her now bare body. When Finn is about to compose a headline for a scathing review of what he regards as faux radicalism, he notices that the artist is starting to pull the skin off her arms. Finn sees that the tattoos "line up each arm in blue, green, and black lines when the skin comes off, " which cannot have been government-issued (384). Just as a sense of surprise stirs the crowd, other people also peel off Instaskins, revealing single instead of multiple tattoos like the artist. It is not clear whether these people are indeed Inks or those pretending to be one in support of the Inks. Yet, police officers and population control agents respond immediately with force, using tasers and guns. In the middle of gunfire and shattering glasses, Finn senses that primordials have joined the fight and chases after a dappled figure, who he believes to be Mari's twin. However, when the creature turns around, it is the kaibil he has only heard about, "an etheric projection of the pure evil we human beings are willing to visit on each other" (387). Although the kaibil does not directly harm Finn, he is fatally shot from

behind while distracted by the creature. In the final moments, he has a bittersweet realization that his son, Gus, is also a primordial. Although Gus and Mari are not physically there, Finn is able to relay his final message to them through their spiritual twins, who had been fighting the kaibils.

This event that later comes to be referred to as the “Art Clash” inspires people across the United States beyond the cities close to the borders to fight for the rights of Inks and demand that the government takes responsibility for missing persons. Among them, an organization called FedEx Brigade brings together Inks and non-Inks in guerrilla protests:

The faces on the placards, two-dimensional and held up to a bright August sky, belong to the disappeared. Border dumped, in hiding, inkatorium residents. The ones killed in the Art Clash, as it’s come to be known. Their names are there. The numeric code of their tattoos are inscribed on the placards or if the tattoos are falsified, that’s written there, too. I wonder if it’s a trick of my eyes that so many of the two-dimensional faces look familiar. (399)

As the act of stripping off instaskins to reveal tattoos underneath signaled in the Art Clash, the placards show that these Inks cannot be reduced to the numerical codes of their tattoos like the FedEx shipping labels. The missing or deceased Inks are recognized as those with personhoods by Abbie, the protesters, and the community members. Finn, who was shot while covering the Art Clash event, represents the loss endured by the community though he himself is not an Ink. After being rescued from the illegal trafficking of children born in the inkatoriums, Gus is registered as the son of Finn, who is listed as a single father for an added measure of protection. Abbie remarks that it is nonetheless “another in a line of obliterations and unmakings for Mari” (394). For Gus, however, Mari endures being erased as the mother of her child and the wife of her late

husband, Finn. The seemingly endless line of placards shown by the FedEx Brigades suggests there are many more suffering like Mari.

Activism in *Ink* spreads not only through the streets but also through digital platforms. After Toño's death, Abbie rebuilds his gang, Gavilanes, while raising their daughter Lucy with Toño's brother Neto, who bond over the mutual loss. While she does not fully understand the nature of Mari and her primordial twin, Abbie claims that magic is one's power to make a change in the world regardless of the form it may appear: "I don't understand her magic nor she mine, but I can't forget that she was the first to recognize that virtual is every bit as powerful as primordial. The code that comes as naturally as breath to me is the gold strand I add to the skein her animal twin showed me at the inkatorium years ago" (394). These different types of magic that allow the fugitive inks to escape and survive ultimately transform the nation that had been fueled by hatred of the other. When the truth of the inkatoriums is exposed along with graphic footage, the public "reacts with fiery indignation to the televised images of young people driven, hobbled like cattle" (442). At the same time, unbeknownst to the general public, "flames literally dance across the layer of existence that acknowledges no boundary" (442). Readers, however, witness how "others with Meche's same elemental gift are fanning the indignation, too" (442). By joining forces, those with technology and magic both turn into nepantleras, who transform people across the borders and lead them into rebellions.

Without supernatural abilities or resources, the Surpluses in *The Resisters* initially appear helpless against the unrelenting advance of Aunt Nettie over every aspect of their lives. Yet, they engage in transfigurative performances even when forced to adapt to

racist technologies. These performances specifically take place on the baseball fields. In the hands of those who resist American exceptionalism, baseball finally becomes the symbol of democracy that it could not be within the nationalistic context of the Olympics. In conceptualizing sports as a performance, Stephen Mumford lends insight into aesthetics that arise from team sports through emergence, which describes “types of cases where properties of whole are not found among their parts” (730). He further elaborates on how the concept of emergence could be applied to sports:

Some teams can be greater or better than the sum of the abilities of the individual players that make them up – were those players to be considered in isolation – while some can be worse. A good team plays as a whole, instead of as a collection of individuals. They become a unit that, if it is functioning well, affects the individual constituents and makes them better players. They become transformed through their participation in the whole. (Mumford 730)

In addition to suggesting how we might assess the aesthetics of sports, the connection Mumford draws between emergence and team sports provides an explanation for how Gwen and other members of the Resistance League are not only transformed but also enact changes through their participation in the Olympics. While Mumford focuses more on skills and outcomes in the competition, I argue that becoming “better” involves achievements of democratic ideals.

The Resistance League, an underground league comprised of Surplus youths, begins simply as Grant and Eleanor’s plan to have Gwen play and practice baseball with friends her age. To their surprise, the Surplus youths who have been oscillating between inertia and anger due to Aunt Nettie’s control over their lives respond eagerly to the idea of an underground league of competitive team sport. Baseball represents individual and collective goals that they can work towards when there have been no other venues of self-

actualization. Accordingly, Mumford argues that competition and the undetermined outcomes are a part of what constitutes the aesthetics of sports and differentiates it from other art forms: “While admiration of the human form is common to both dance and sport, then, if we add the competitive, indeterministic and emergent elements, then we start to get something that looks unique. If that is the case, it supports the view that sport plays a special and distinctive aesthetic role, providing an experience for the viewer that cannot be found elsewhere” (731). By not only watching but also forming baseball teams and a league, the Surplus youths are able to reclaim “the competitive, indeterministic and emergent elements” of their lives that had been denied to them by Aunt Nettie, who predetermines their day-to-day actions through various information technologies.

While playing baseball itself is not illegal, everyone involved with the league hacks their RegiChips so that they will not be required to play on Surplus fields at the risk of developing chronic illnesses. The league members also take extra precautions so that an abandoned football field they had reclaimed would not be found: “Instead it was all kayaks and pedal boats and paddleboards and dinghies, with staggered departure times and elaborate schemes for camouflaging the boat on the other shore. Some of the young people swam – staggering their departures, too, so as not to attract attention, and wearing black neoprene caps that proved such good camouflage they made some parents nervous” (26). Even with these risks, the Resistance League thrives as it becomes a sanctuary for its members and families wishing to carve out a life away from the gaze of Aunt Nettie. In addition to playing and watching baseball games, the members of the Surplus

community are able to relate to one another not as isolated individuals but as parts of a whole, which Aunt Nettie fears.

One such example within the league is the Thistles, an all-girl team led by a nineteen-year-old Andrea, who is only slightly older than her players. While Andrea is the youngest of the coaches, she is also the founder of “the original ShelterBoat for battered Surplus women – a SheltherBoat that went onto spawn a nationwide network of such havens” (41). Considering that AutoAmerica is winnowing the Surpluses, directly and indirectly, Andrea’s grassroots organization that leads to the creation of havens for teenage victims of domestic violence is even more remarkable. The Thistles comprised of Shelter girls thus emerge as a team with a camaraderie “far more organic and fluid” than that of the Lookouts, Gwen’s team and the strongest in the league (41). Andrea and her team make mistakes when they tattoo their arms with their team logo, a thistle, which might have led to the underground league being exposed. However, the tattoos later become a way for the resisters to organize beyond the league. Thus, the Resistance League provides a space in which grassroots movements that had already been in place could merge to form a wider network.

This everyday resistance that begins in the underground league finally infiltrates the Olympic games. A baseball league organized from below that consists of the Surplus youths unites the AutoAmericans and the ChinRussians, the Surplus and the Netted, against surveillance states and their atrocities against humanity across the globe. Disillusioned by the Netted world, Gwen comes back home to her Surplus neighborhood. However, with Eleanor still incarcerated in a prison that Ondi calls the “research center”

(252), Gwen cannot fully return to her old life. Aunt Nettie sends Ondi and Winnie to coerce Gwen to behave according to her will and rejoin the Net University and the Olympics team. On the one hand, Ondi takes on the role of a good cop: “I think Aunt Nettie just wants you to really take it in. So you can make a rational decision.... I don’t know. About your behavior, I guess. About being Problematic. And where it’s going to get you” (253). On the other hand, Winny assumes the role of a bad cop, brandishing a gun that Gwen has only seen in movies. They relay the threat that if a distinguished treatment is not deemed sufficient, Eleanor will be winnowed or lawfully murdered by the government. Left without an alternative, Gwen rejoins the Olympics to save her mother’s life.

In addition to critiquing those who become actively complicit in state-sponsored violence like Winny, Jen includes a critique of allies who center themselves. Gwen’s Netted roommates, Pink and Sylvie, for instance, engage in social media activism, “riding on the twin horses of Gwen’s popularity and Eleanor’s fame: for thanks to the Surplus Fields suit, Eleanor had, it seemed, become a cult legend to both the Surplus and Netted teams” (268). Then, after tens of thousands of relevant posts or “Sweets,” the reporters and fans come. Yet, Grant observes many signs of fans or protesters conveying messages such as “FUCK AUNT NETTIE, FREE AUNT NELLIE” when “Eleanor was, in fact, already free, or at least not imprisoned in the way they imagined” (269). Regardless of whether their intentions may be genuine, such a disconnect shows how the Netted need to unlearn their privileges to understand the Surplus's plight and help them in a meaningful way.

As a former student-athlete, Eleanor also uses sports as a metaphor to explain her everyday resistance to the influence of Aunt Nettie. Through the BioNet, Aunt Nettie forces unwanted thoughts and feelings onto Eleanor. Eleanor calls her efforts to push away Aunt Nettie's mental projections "inner fencing" (277). After the forced implementation of BioNet, she is at first unable to show any emotion, speak coherently, or even recognize her family. However, she begins to "spar with the other voice – to argue with it" (277). While Eleanor fights her own battles, Gwen rejoins the AutoAmerican baseball team but on her own terms. Although Gwen is the only Surplus member Aunt Nettie wishes to have on the team, other members of The Resistance League participate in the tryouts to show her support. Both Diego and Gunnar from The Lookouts roll up their sleeves to show her their Aunt Nellie tattoos, which they intend to flash at the Olympics games in support of Eleanor, Gwen, and other resisters.

Thus, with the help of her family, friends, and allies, Gwen overturns the Olympics as a platform for resisting the Autonet. In the final match between AutoAmerica and ChinRussia, chants of "Finish 'em up! Finish 'em up! / Gwen-nie! Gwen-nie!" (291) rises from the crowd. But when Gwen is just about to pitch, she learns that Eleanor, who had also been watching the game, has been kidnapped. More so than the impressive performance by Gwen, this moment triggers the beginning of a sustained rebellion against Autonet. At that moment, the focus of the competitions shifts from AutoAmerica versus ChinRussia to people versus the oppressive surveillance states that now rule various parts of the world. As in the "Art Clash" in *Ink*, (voluntarily) tattooed but GPS-chipped members of the Resistance League begin to shout: "The fans watched in

disbelief as those with tattoos waved their arms high. ‘They’ve taken Aunt Nellie! They’ve taken Aunt Nellie!’ they shouted. ‘They’ve taken Aunt Nellie! They’ve taken Aunt Nellie!’ (292). The chant spreads from the Resistance League to the Surplus fans and eventually to some of the Netted fans. When the EnforceBots and AttackDrones ascend onto the field, both the ChinRussian and AutoAmericans unite to swing their bats at the robots pointing guns at people. In a final attempt to quell the rebellion, Aunt Nettie assassinates Eleanor via Winny. However, her sacrifice and death fuel the uprising that ultimately moves beyond the baseball stadium.

Aesthetics of Rebellion

While the transfigurative performances result in igniting rebellions in both *Ink* and *The Resisters*, neither of the novels show a complete overthrow of the status quo. As in *Through the Arc of the Rainforest* and *The Centenal Cycle* in Chapter One, the endings suggest that there is much work to be done in order to create more socially just futures. However, a sense of hope is also required to sustain such work. In *Another Aesthetics is Possible* (2021), Jennifer Ponce de León explores the relationship between hope and aesthetics. She argues that what she calls *other* aesthetics reveal how those alternative futures can already be found in the present, even if they are under attack:

[Other aesthetics] illuminate practices of world-making that do not pass through the institutions of capitalist states or defer to the power of elites. Rather, they affirm the capacity of politicized and collective labor to create another possible world.

This other world appears to be a distant possibility when it is perceived from the point of view of hegemonic aesthetics. What these artists' work shows—and what I have tried to demonstrate—is that this world already exists. From the vantage point of counterhegemonic aesthetics, it is actual, even if fragile and under siege. The purpose of this book has been to open our horizons of perception so that this actual other world can be seen for what it is, in the hopes of contributing to its defense and future growth. (250)

Ponce de León's invocation of other aesthetics is applicable to the dystopian worlds created by Vourvoulis and Jen. From the hegemonic point of view, there is no alternative to the creation of permanent social underclasses, even as the governments keep the full extent of violent techniques of population control hidden from public view. Yet, other, counterhegemonic aesthetics generated by global movements, such as that of The International Errorist, suggest otherwise. Ponce de León explains that those movements by artist-activists reveal how “the manufacture of enemies and wars of varying types (against terror, crime, drugs, etc.) attempts to conceal the function of police power for securing capitalist accumulation, thereby also obfuscating the transnational dimensions of these processes” and provide “a crucial perspective on capital's global wars of pacification and efforts to destroy movements that might challenge its imperatives” (245). Likewise, the rebellions led by the permanent social underclasses, the Inks and the Surpluses, expose the state's policing of them is less about individual threats to public safety or health (as in the case of inkatoriums) but about maintaining racialized class hierarchies and distribution of resources along with those hierarchical structures.

In response to the rebellions, the elites of respective versions of the dystopian United States attempt to reclaim their innocence through collective amnesia, seeking to erase both the violence done to the oppressed and the rebellions. Vourvoulias depicts how the incarceration of the inks and other atrocities committed are euphemized as “Ink Incidents,” and the protest against them “limps along until its final skirmishes seem no more significant than a particularly hard-fought Super Bowl game” (442). Slowly the rights of Inks become restored but the novel ends with the notion that this “undeclared war” (442) has not even begun fully. Likewise, Jen does not finish the novel with a clear triumphant overthrow of AutoAmerica. Instead, it ends with an image of Gwen and her allies continuing Eleanor’s legacy with the Mall Truck case and the riots in the street that continues under the banner of “*Workless, not worthless*” (299), condemning the state’s rendering of an entire subpopulation into surplus and “worthless” lives. Yet, both novels suggest that what provides hope in the face of national amnesia is those who continue to remember, not forget, and relay their stories to each other and the next generation.

Epilogue

My dissertation has focused on mobility spurred on by interlocking forces of colonialism, global racial capitalism, and climate change or mobility hindered by racialized and sexualized violence. Yet, how might migrant aesthetics be analyzed in works that revolve around a desire for immobility? Especially in texts where the ethnoracial background of Latinx and Asian Americans are not reflected in the fictional worlds? In *The Promise of Happiness* (2010), Sara Ahmed problematizes the idea of happiness based on “an image of a world in which people are less physically and socially mobile” and “[a] nostalgic vision of whiteness is at once an image of racial likeness or sameness” (122). She further explains, “In mourning the loss of such a world, migration enters the narrative as an unhappiness cause, as what forces people who are ‘unlike’ to live together” (122). It is notable that this nostalgic vision of a less mobile world, which Ahmed critiques, is based on collective amnesia that erases Indigenous populations and colonial expansions that gave rise to both voluntary and forced migrations across the globe. In analyzing speculative short stories by Carmen Maria Machado and Anjali Sachdeva, I examine how the concept of rootedness and belonging might be disentangled from the nostalgia of white settler colonialism that imagines a less mobile, monoracial vision of the United States.

In “Real Women Have Bodies” from the collection, *Her Body and Other Parties* (2017), Machado depicts an alternate reality of the contemporary United States where a mysterious epidemic has been plaguing women. After the initial cases reported during the height of the 2008 recession, women across the country begin to fade, eventually

becoming translucent and immaterial. The unnamed first-person narrator of the story explains that experts have been unsuccessful thus far in confirming the nature of this phenomenon of fading women and how it is spreading:

No one knows what causes it. It's not passed in the air. It's not sexually transmitted. It's not a virus or a bacteria, or if it is, it's nothing scientists have been able to find. At first everyone blamed the fashion industry, then the millennials, and, finally, the water. But the water's been tested, the millennials aren't the only ones going incorporeal, and it doesn't do the fashion industry any good to have women fading away. You can't put clothes on air. Not that they haven't tried. (128)

The unknowability of this supernatural outbreak's origin or modes of transmission is similar to that of Shen Fever in Ling Ma's *Severance*. However, whereas Shen Fever does not seem to discriminate, the disease in Machado's short story is depicted as afflicting only women. Once women contract the disease, it is suggested that it is impossible to reverse or change the outcomes. When the women do fade completely, even though they are not quite dead, they eventually lose their grasp onto what is considered the planes of the world, making this mysterious disease a deadly one.

Even amidst the panic caused by fading women, however, life goes on, and the unnamed and racially ambiguous narrator of the story finds herself working at a dress shop at a mall called Glam. Although the dresses they sell are for various special occasions such as quinceañeras, proms, and weddings, the narrator observes that the dress shop has an unusually somber look, like "the view from inside a casket" that puts customers into "an existential crisis and then, a purchase" (125). The owner of Glam, Gizzy, claims that the "black hole" like the look of the shop is both a *memento mori* and a

merchandising display technique: “The black...reminds us that we are mortal and that youth is fleeting. Also, nothing makes pink taffeta pop like a dark void” (125). If the entirely black interior of the shop reminds the customers of their mortality, the dresses appear to be beckoning them from beyond the veil. One gown named “The Ophelia” after Hamlet’s fiancée, who drowns herself and looks “perpetually wet”; a dress with “strategically shredded, milk-colored silk” is named “The Banshee,” a female spirit from Irish folklore whose shrieks are omens of death (126). Human (Ophelia from Hamlet) or inhuman (the Banshee), these women who are the namesakes of prom dresses share proximity to death much like the blackness of the shop’s interior.

In addition to death, the imagery of watery creatures and bodies also connects women and the dresses. Imageries of aquatic animals such as seals permeate throughout the story. When a mother and her daughter come together in search of a dress, the narrator describes the daughter as having “seal hair” as if “she has just emerged from the ocean” (126). In exploring elements of fairy tales in Machado’s short stories, Jessica Campbell focuses on those that are connected to watery bodies, ponds, rivers, and oceans: “Considering the preeminence of aquatic imagery in ‘Real Women Have Bodies’ and the comparatively widespread familiarity with British culture in the United States, it is the selkie story that seems most directly relevant to Machado’s tale” (308). As Campbell argues, the Selkie, a fairytale creature that can shed her seal skin to appear in the form of a human woman, provides a useful lens for understanding the function of the prom dresses within the story. While a Selkie can inhabit both their human and animal bodies to live underwater and on the land, if a human discovers the seal skin and hides it, the

Selkie cannot return to its seal form. Campbell thus argues that the prom dresses can be read as serving a similar function to the Selkie's seal skin, even if the transformation might be not as fantastical: "The prom dresses in Machado's story are less powerful—one could, perhaps, argue that a teenage girl's donning of a prom dress enables her to transition from childhood to adulthood as a selkie's skin enables her transition to a different state" (309). Even Petra, the narrator's love interest and the daughter of one of the dress suppliers is also described in a similar language. "When she's hauling the gauzy dresses wrapped up in plastic," the narrator observes that "she looks like she's battling a giant prom monster – all petticoat undersides and rhinestone tentacles – with her bare hands, and that is not the kind of woman you idly mess with" (127). Yet, whereas maintaining the ability to change shape affords more agency to the Selkie, it remains more uncertain whether the dresses allow the same for the women, which warrants a closer look.

In many stories about Selkies, men purposefully hide the seal skins to take the beautiful women underneath as their wives and prevent them from returning to the ocean. Thus, a Selkie's reclamation and donning of the seal skin signals a challenge to heteropatriarchy. Although Machado's story does not explicitly reveal why women fade, it suggests that the white heteropatriarchal gaze that objectifies women is one of the many causes. While the employees of Glam are all women, Sadie's Photo next door is run by cis-gendered and heterosexual men who frequently harass other women who work or shop at the mall. One of the assistants, Chris, remarks that he desires "[h]ips and enough flesh for [one] to grab onto" in a woman (128). At this moment, he is depicted as

incapable of imagining women's value in contexts other than sexual intercourse. Further, his comments allude to the film that inspired the story's title, *Real Women Have Curves* (2002).

While all the characters remain racially ambiguous, the allusion to a film that features a coming-of-age tale about a first-generation Mexican American teenage girl allows an entry point for reading the "Real Women Have Bodies" as a story that highlights queer women of color's struggles under patriarchy. When asked about the timeliness of her short stories, Machado replied that while she did not intend for her stories to resonate with current events to such a degree, it is a result of her focus on how power operates on the bodies of those who are marginalized:

I'm not surprised by anything that's been happening in the news really. I'm obviously horrified, but not shocked.... I sold the book two years ago, so it's a weird confluence of events. I feel very aware of the ways power has always been manipulated around women, people of color, fat women, and fat people. And queer people have always experienced aggressions on their bodies, and now it's just coming to a head. (Leichter)

As her interview indicates, Machado's stories reflect how power operates on the bodies of those who are oppressed along the axes of gender, sexuality, race, and body size.

Even when discussing the women who fade, a male character such as Chris is unable to empathize with their plight and wonders what use men would have with women without material bodies, "without something to hold" (128). He adds, "if I want to fuck mist, I'll just wait for a foggy night and pull my dick out" (129). In contrast, he describes the unnamed queer protagonist and her same-sex lover as the opposite of "mist" and a "foggy night." Chris and other men working at Sadie's Photo nickname the narrator as the "stone girl" as she is "like a stone" and appears "solid" (128-9). Even her lover is

named Petra, a Latin word for stone. The solidness ascribed to these two women in a queer relationship asks us to question whether they might be free from heteropatriarchy and thus immune to the mysterious epidemic. However, to the narrator's dismay, Petra too begins to fade away: "I can see that her skin is more like skim milk than whole, that she seems less there. She breathes and the impression blinks, like she's fighting it. I feel like my feet are trapdoors that have sprung open, and my insides are hurtling out of my body" (139-40). The two women try every method circulating online; however, they are unable to stop the inevitable of Petra losing her material body.

Even as the faded women may appear as passive victims, their emotions and actions require us to reevaluate how we examine passivity. According to Rosie Braidotti, "those who have been undone by suffering can be the agents of ethical transformation" (qtd. in Ahmed 216). However, Ahmed contends that ethics "cannot be about moving beyond pain toward happiness or joy without imposing new forms of suffering on those who do not or cannot move in this way" (216). Suppose we understand the fading of women in Machado's story as being undone by heteropatriarchy and "bad feelings" about the bodies it produces. In that case, demanding that the women move from bad feelings towards good feelings such as joy or happiness to regain their material bodies cannot be an ethical approach. Some of the faded women choose to protest, "getting themselves into electrical systems and fucking up servers and ATMs and voting machines" (144). Yet, unable to understand and empathize with the faded women, people treat them as untrustworthy as they are "women who can't be touched but can stand on the earth, which means they must be lying about something, they must be deceiving us somehow"

(146). Society's response to the faded women further demonstrates how women and their stories are not heard or believed when they expose sexualized violence and demand that reparations be made.

Machado's story builds up to a climax in which it is revealed that other faded have been seeking refuge in the very prom dresses that Petra's mother makes and Gizzy sells. Campbell argues that while the dresses could be seen as made for the male gaze, they serve a different purpose as a place of refuge for the faded women: "These women, not the girls preparing for prom, are the ones who have a relationship to the dresses that resemble those of selkies and swan maidens to their skins" (Campbell 309). The narrator witnesses how one of the faded women lays her transparent body over the dress, waiting to be sewn into it: "She presses herself into [the dress], and there is no resistance, only a sense of an ice cube melting in the summer air. The needle – trailed by thread of guileless gold – winks as Petra's mother plunges it through the girl's skin" (134). It is unclear what the intentions of these faded women are. However, it can be construed that they regain materiality through the dresses and ultimately through the women who wear them. The narrator remembers that Gizzy's daughter had also faded and that Gizzy had been caressing the dresses hanging in the shop as if they were people and not just garments.

Furious over the revelation, the narrator breaks into Glam at night and cuts open the stitches in all the dresses to free the women who have faded like Petra. When the women are unstitched but do not move, she pleads with them that all that she is asking is that they leave and walk through the open gate to what she regards as their freedom. Yet, the faded women refuse to move: "From the blackness of the floor, I see them mall,

faintly luminous, moving about in their husks. But they remain. They don't move, they never move" (148). There, Machado leaves the readers to grapple with the story's ending, the horror at what has been happening to the women, and the complexity of the faded women who choose not to move.

To further wrestle with the question of immobility, I turn to Anjali Sachdeva's short story "Pleiades" in her collection *All the Names They Used for God* (2018). In this story, mixed-race Indian American writer Sachdeva narrates from the point of view of a character who appears to be white. The narrator, Adelpha or Del, is one of the septuplets genetically modified by their parents, all with "a wisp of dark hair" and "eyes that would turn from blue to brown" (233). As the title of the story "Pleiades" suggests, the identical septuplets are all female, like the seven sisters who were turned into doves by Zeus when they were fleeing Orion, a notorious womanizer who was trying to rape them. While the septuplets – Leda, Io, Zoe, Helen, Cassandra, Vesta, and Adelpha – are not named after the Pleiades sisters, many of them are named after other women in Greek mythology who also faced violence due to the sexual advances of men or male gods.

Del, however, tells the readers that her parents gave their children these names to showcase their knowledge of Greek without considering the myths behind their namesakes. As this revelation suggests, the septuplets are born into the world as their parents' experiment: "They had a firm belief in the power of science to fix everything, to create everything. This belief was their religion, and they liked to proselytize as much as any born-again Christian" (237). Thus, when they decide to have children, they seize it as the opportunity to push scientific frontiers. Society, however, refuses to accept this

unnatural birth. In front of a hospital in Los Angeles, a protesting crowd gathers with signs that say, “SEVEN DEADLY SINS and FRANKENSTEIN'S CHILDREN” (233). At the same time, newspapers come out with headlines such as “Forced Septuplets Really Alien Babies!” (234). Marked as nonhuman due to their genetics, the seven sisters are then rendered into monsters and aliens.

Unlike the racialized characters in *Certain Dark Things*, *Severances*, and *Ink*, whose alienization leads people to falsely associate them with contagious diseases, the septuplets in Sachdeva’s stories suffer from a mysterious illness suspected of having been caused by genetic modification. While this illness only affects the septuplets, Sachdeva’s choice to make the ultimate cause unknown serves a similar purpose to the contagious disease that remains unexplained in other speculative stories. The septuplets are viewed as monstrous beings whose illness is proof of their monstrosity, even though it’s not contagious. But the author refuses to reveal the cause of the illness. Initially, the signs that something is amiss appear as sisters grow older, and it becomes clear that they share somatic and psychological symptoms as if they were one person. Then, one by one, the septuplets succumb to different health complications: Vesta dies from a brain aneurysm while Leda is lost to pneumonia. For this reason, the septuplet’s parents and medical doctors theorize that a new form of AIDS or hemophilia may be connected to a kind of immunodeficiency that the sisters seem to have. However, none of the test results turns out to support these theories.

In a way, the sisters could be read as being punished for the hubris of their geneticist parents playing God. The story, however, focuses less on the ethics of

tampering with DNA and embryos than the injustice of the stigma placed on the sisters, especially when they are already under so much suffering. When Io dies, Del exhibits quiet anger towards the protesters who refuse to regard her and her sisters as human: “Anti-genetics protestors swarmed [Io’s] funeral, glowing with self-righteousness” (236). Unfortunately, even the death of Io and the grief of family members at the funeral are not enough to deter these anti-genetics protestors who want all the septuplets to be gone from the world.

As the sisters die one by one and there are only two of them left, Helen and Del, Del describes that the emotions and sensations felt by their sisters have not disappeared along with their deaths. Instead, Del posits that the past traumas seem to have transferred into the two remaining septuplets: “The emotion and sensation of seven people condensed into two bodies was too much for the bodies to bear” (239). She wonders, “Perhaps we were not truly separate people but parts of a whole, as a thicket of aspen trees all grow from the same network of roots” (235). Yet even her own parents fail to recognize the depth of their daughters’ suffering. They are depicted as unsympathetic characters whose resolve to find a cure seems to come from a sense that they could not afford to lose their scientific masterpiece. Del overhears their discussion to freeze or clone her body if she dies like her six sisters. This suggests that the parents regard their children as interchangeable with one another. Even without delving into ethical debates regarding cloning, such actions cannot ease Del’s suffering or prevent her premature death.

Like the fading women of “Real Women Have Bodies,” Del is left with a choice to take matters of her own body into her hands in the face of an inevitable outcome. In *Rootedness*, Christy Wampole examines the metaphor of rootedness in its variations. She points out that roots, when exposed, signal deaths: “We are able to scrutinize roots only when they are decontextualized, exposed by weather, age, disease, or human transplantation. Catching sight of a full root happens only in instances of violence, infirmity, or death...Roots commune with the dead. Their composition is reliant of decomposition” (14). In “Pleiades,” Del is confronted with the fate of witnessing her own roots being forcibly uprooted. A boy similar in age, Troy meets Del and remarks that “[t]he girl behind the wheel looks like a zombie, skin falling off her, patches of hair missing” (240). As if it is nature undoing what Del’s parents have done, her body disintegrates almost supernaturally. At that moment, Del is seen to hold onto another kind of root, a metaphor for home, self, and a sense of belonging. Wampole explains, “What becomes clear in the incessant reliance on the metaphor of rootedness is that the desire for temporal, spatial, epistemological, and ontological continuity is an elementary human need” (15). Even as anti-geneticists constantly deny her humanity, Del holds onto it and searches for her roots in a last act of defiance.

As her parents, especially after learning about the fate of the septuplets, are no longer able to provide a home for Del. Therefore, she decides to escape Mount Sinai Hospital in New York City and go on a cross country trip to her childhood home, a beach house in Santa Cruz that is filled with her memories of her sisters when they were all healthy and relatively happy. When it becomes almost difficult to travel on her own, she

meets Troy, who accompanies her for the rest of her journey. Troy observes that Del's flesh is about to give in: "The flesh is even softer than I'd imagined; my fingers sink into it until I can feel her bones through her skin, and below them the shuddering of her heart" (250). Yet, Troy notices that she carries a brightness in her that lights up when she laughs, even in that condition.

The end of this story and journey is nonetheless not a happy one. Del succeeds in reaching her destination, where a beachside amusement park is lighting up, starting with the Ferris Wheels, "sending up a blaze of bulbs and neon to replace the fading sunset" (248). However, Del is unable to transcend death. With the ghosts of her sisters watching over her, she becomes unraveled as one becomes seven, and seven back into one and then zero: "A moist breeze skims my shoulders and I feel myself dissolve, as if the salt air could unravel my genetic code like a piece of knitting" (251). But neither is death punishment for the abominations that should never have been born. The small victory is that Del could choose where and how she wanted to meet the end, free from her parents, doctors, and protestors, who all sought to control her body.

Through this comparative analysis of two fabulist stories, I suggest that the discussion of freedom of movement is inextricable from the freedom to stay and belong. Although *Speculative Refractions* have focused on speculative fictions by Asian American and Latinx women writers that feature characters with ethnoracial markers even when extrapolated into imagined futures and alternate worlds, the racially ambiguous narration of Machado and Sachdeva calls for a more expansive application of what may be called Latin-Asian migrant aesthetics.

Furthermore, my analysis of “Real Women Have Bodies” and “Pleiades” call for queer and feminist of color critiques to be positioned at the center rather than the margins at a time when the 1973 *Roe v. Wade* ruling may be struck down and jeopardize the reproductive rights of people with active uteruses.²⁹ As Dorothy Roberts explains, the discussion of abortion rights has focused on privileged, predominantly white middle-class women. She critiques how “[t]he mainstream movement for reproductive rights has narrowed its concerns to advocate almost exclusively for the legal right to abortion, further distancing its agenda from the interests of women who have been targets of sterilization abuse because of the devaluation of their right to bear children” (Roberts 79). According to Roberts, a reproductive justice framework is required to expand the current approach abortion rights. She adds, “the movement's social justice focus provides a concrete basis for racial, economic, and environmental justice, for immigrant, queer, and disabled people, and for systemic change in law enforcement, health care, and education” (Roberts 81). Whereas *Ink* and *The Resisters* discussed in Chapter Three explicitly address restrictions on women of color’s reproductive rights by revealing the ethnoracial backgrounds of their characters, Machado and Sachdeva’s short stories take an implicit approach, thus requiring a comparative analysis that reveals the added burden on women of color even when characters are white or racially ambiguous.

²⁹ A leaked draft of the Supreme Court’s deliberations on a case known as *Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Organization* suggests that the Court intends to strike down the 1973 *Roe v. Wade* ruling, thereby withdrawing the constitutional protection of abortion rights (Price).

In the 2015 edition of the groundbreaking work, *This Bridge Called My Back* (1981), Cherríe Moraga contributed a new preface titled “Catching Fire,” which reminds readers of the work’s contribution to women of color feminism in the twenty-first century. More significantly, she asks the crucial question as hopes of a more just world continue to evade, “And, now what?” (xviii). As Moraga argues, it is more important than ever to integrate feminist of color politics into issues that are not only national, as in the case of motions to overturn *Roe v. Wade*, but also transnational and planetary in scope:

Currently, at a grassroots level, the Climate Change Movement is forced to take note, as Native women in Canada wage local and international protest against the tar sands industry. Truly radical environmentalists are beginning to recognize that – without the counsel and active engagement of people of color, whose homes ‘neighbor’ the majority of dumping sites in the United States; without the leadership models of traditional and innovative Indigenous practices of sustainability; and, without the *organized* outcry of mothers, who personally suffer the illness of their children due to environmental contamination³⁰ – no mass movement to literally ‘save our planet’ can occur. (xix)

As shown in speculative fictions by women writers of Asian and Latin American descent discussed in my dissertation, crises of a planetary scale such as global pandemics and climate change and organized responses to them require imagination from the perspectives of those most affected by those crises.

In the case of the Kettleman City in California that Moraga references in her foreword, Julie Sze contends, “[e]nvironmental and reproductive injustices are intimately connected” (107). Living with environmental pollution is “a *broad* condition of

³⁰ In her notes, Moraga references the Mexican Mothers of Kettleman City’s campaign against the toxic waste dump in the San Joaquin Valley. In “Denormalizing Embodied Toxicity: The Case of Kettleman City,” Julie Sze also discusses the historical, racial, and spatial contexts of environmental and reproductive injustices in the predominantly Latinx farmworker community in Kettleman City.

contemporary life (and a factor in premature death)” (Sze 113). However, Sze notes that “the economic and environmental reality experienced by women of color and indigenous women cause them to suffer disproportionate burdens from global environmental pollution... with reproductive consequences that lay bare the brutalities of the current economic and environmental system and histories of domination and violence” (113). As Sze’s study demonstrates, the local and the global are inextricably connected in the issues of environmental injustices that further needs to be considered in racialized and gendered contexts. In that sense, migrant aesthetics that I have discussed through the speculative fictions by Latinx and Asian American writers are one of the many marginalized points of view that need to be integrated to make radical possibilities come into being. Thus, I end by advocating for a migrant worldview cutting across Asian and Latinx America of past, present, and future that asks us to move beyond state-imposed national identities and geopolitical borders in plotting for just and sustainable futures in the Anthropocene.

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