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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA
RIVERSIDE

Palimpsests:
Autotheory as Worldmaking in Feminist Film and Video

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

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Comparative Literature

by

Iliana Cristal Cuellar

June 2026

Dissertation Committee:

Dr. Michelle Bloom, Chairperson
Dr. Alicia Arrizón
Dr. Freya Schiwy
Dr. Ivan Aguirre

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2026

The Dissertation of Iliana Cristal Cuellar is approved:

Committee Chairperson

University of California, Riverside

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Palimpsests:
Autotheory as Worldmaking in Feminist Film and Video

by

Iliana Cristal Cuellar

Doctor of Philosophy, Graduate Program in Comparative Literature
University of California, Riverside, June 2026
Dr. Michelle Bloom, Chairperson

This dissertation examines self-reflexivity and (inter)subjectivity in autobiographical film and video by women directors and artists through the emerging lens of autotheory. Through close readings of works by French directors Laetitia Masson and Agnès Varda, Argentine director Albertina Carri, Guatemalan performance artist Regina José Galindo, and Latinx/Chicana performance artist Xandra Ibarra, I argue for the potential contributions of autotheoretical approaches in film and media studies by revisiting the question of the “I” in key debates on auteurism, spectatorship, and apparatus theory. I investigate how these artists engage in worldmaking projects by subverting formulaic narrative structures and generic expectations. In doing so, they disorient, obfuscate, and reorganize subjectivity, the “I,” and the gaze outlined by early debates in film and media studies.

This dissertation introduces the *palimpsest* as a conceptual framework for analyzing autobiographical and intertextual media created by women and other marginalized subjects. Drawing on the image of the palimpsest—a manuscript effaced

and written over multiple times—the palimpsest describes how meaning in these works is produced through layers of memory, cultural history, embodiment, and spectatorship. The palimpsest includes the text and histories referenced within a work, but also the experiences and interpretations of its viewers. Rather than treating autobiography as the expression of a singular, stable self, the palimpsest understands subjectivity as relational, fragmented, and collectively shaped.

Through close readings of autobiographical films and videos, this dissertation argues that these works use the visual and affective capacities of cinema to create alternative forms of spectatorship grounded in critical engagement rather than passive identification. This dissertation demonstrates how autotheoretical film and video expand existing approaches to autobiography, feminist film theory and criticism by reimagining the relationship between self, image, and spectator.

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Introduction Palimpsestic Relations of the Self

A Primal Scene

My autotheoretical primal scene, my moment of “I read you, I write me” (Brostoff and Cooppan 4), was Adrian Piper’s exhibition, *Adrian Piper: Concepts and Intuitions, 1965-2016*, at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles in 2018. The title of her retrospective hints at her own primal scene: reading Kant. Her series, *Food for the Spirit* (1971), documents an induced psychosis while reading the *Critique of Pure Reason*. I was also reading the *Critique* at the time and doing a lot of yoga. I documented myself doing yoga headstands à la Adrian Piper in my own self-referential archive. I depart from Brostoff and Cooppan’s formula because my primal scene is less of an “I read you, I write me,” but an “I look at you, you look at me, I write you and me, I perform us.” I was obsessed with her obsession with herself as subject in her work and I was struck by how her “I,” her self-portraiture, always implicated you, the viewer and interlocutor. Her “I” was always addressing a “you,” meaning her “I” was always in relation to a “you.” Here is where I truly felt the impact of the power of an address in the visual. Here is where I felt that in looking at the art, it was looking right back at me, addressing me. Her gaze didn’t always feel hostile, and if it did, it pushed me to think about why *I* felt it was hostile, which softened the gaze and made it feel more like an acknowledging look. This is a lesson I carried with me when I decided to study and write about film—in particular, autobiographical films made by women. It was a wild moment of synchronicity since I happened to be taking a seminar with John Kim at the University of California, Riverside titled “What is an ‘I’?” My first paper in graduate school was on the “I” in Adrian Piper’s

work and her exhibition. I wrote about her use of self-reflexivity, subjectivity, and address—problematics that never left me despite the several detours I took while trying to define my research agenda and *the* project, this project. Considering the thematic of this dissertation, *Palimpsests: Autotheory as Worldmaking in Feminist Film and Video*, and its preoccupation with the self and the “I,” this will be a performatively self-reflexive writing endeavor where I will sometimes weave myself and my personal stories within the text. I am committed to the experimental and liberating possibilities of such a writing practice; or, perhaps, I am merely a self-centered navel gazer who fetishizes those who do the same.

Palimpsests considers what autotheory can contribute to the field of film and media studies. Autotheory is an emerging field that has mainly gained traction in literary studies with some explorations in new media.¹ This dissertation builds on this emerging scholarship while offering a new contribution to film theory and criticism through an autotheoretical lens. I will begin with trying to name—attempting a definitional practice where I will provide my working definition of autotheory and how it develops in this dissertation. As a nascent field, autotheory allows myriad possibilities to define and redefine. Brostoff and Cooppan state that “in the formulation ‘Autotheory is X,’ X is an invitation to proliferation, to fill in the blank” (2). I will engage with the working definitions provided by scholars such as Stacey Young, Paul B. Preciado, Maggie Nelson, Vilashini Cooppan, Alex Brostoff, and Lauren Fornier among others. I will contextualize

¹ For more on autotheory and literature, see Brostoff and Fornier; Brostoff and Cooppan; Cavitch; Wiegman; Zwartjes, “Autotheory as Rebellion.” For examples in New Media see D. Young; Fornier; Baxter and Auburn.

autotheory in a larger discourse on life writing and formalize its (dis)engagement with generic bounds, namely those of autobiography and especially those of autofiction with which it is frequently conflated. I will then pose autotheory's possible contributions to film theory and criticism by analyzing where the "I" has already been theorized and situated within film studies and what new formulations autotheory can add to these questions concerning authorship, subjectivity, representation, spectatorship, and identification in film studies. Finally, I will elaborate a "palimpsestic" relationality or how I trace the autotheoretical throughout the chapters offering a vision for thinking about women's cultural productions as they relate to larger questions of their identities as they relate to others.

Autos: Autotheory as Emerging Field and Methodology

This section will discuss what autotheory is and is not, though given its poststructuralist roots—via Maggie Nelson via Roland Barthes—autotheory is always in dialectical relation, it always is what it is not as it is a process of undoing as it redoes. The term "autotheory" was popularized in the U.S. by American author and critic Maggie Nelson in her experimental genre-defying self-reflexive novel, *The Argonauts*. When I tell people I work on autotheory, they often respond, "Oh like *The Argonauts*?" Nelson, herself an academic who received a Ph.D. in English from City University of New York Graduate Center, weaves theoretical formulations with ruminations on pregnancy, parenthood, partnership, and the gender transition of her partner, artist Harry Dodge.

Nelson admits to “stealing” the term from Franco-Spanish philosopher Paul B. Preciado.² Preciado uses the term autotheory or, more precisely, the term in Spanish, *autoteoría*. His use of autotheory is lost in the English translation of his book, *Testo Junkie: Sex, Drugs, and Biopolitics in the Pharmacopornographic Era*, where the term is translated as “self-theory.” As Émile Lévesque-Jalbert contextualizes, Preciado uses the term autotheory to distinguish his writing project from the burgeoning wave of autofiction in France in the 90s and 2000s.³ Preciado writes:

Este libro no es una autoficción. Se trata de un protocolo de intoxicación voluntaria a base de testosterona sintética que concierne el cuerpo y los afectos de B.P. Es un ensayo corporal. Una ficción, es cierto. En todo caso y si fuera necesario llevar las cosas al extremo, una ficción autopolítica o una autoteoría. (Preciado 15)

This book is not a memoir. This book is a testosterone-based, voluntary intoxication protocol, which concerns the body and affects of BP [Beatriz Preciado]. A body-essay. Fiction, actually. If things must be pushed to the extreme, this is a somato-political fiction, a theory of the self, a self-theory. (Benderson 11)

The translator effaces the generic and national context that Preciado is critiquing in his book by translating “autofiction” to “memoir” and “autotheory” to “self-theory.” The English translation completely ditches the much-contested *autos* prefix. Foregoing the *autos* here effaces a lineage of other self-writing that Preciado is directly negotiating—that of autobiography and autofiction (Lévesque-Jalbert 65). To rid the text of the *autos* rids *Testo Junkie* of its theoretical preoccupations that refer to this genealogy of life

² See McCrary.

³ Some examples include Christine Angot, Annie Ernaux, Marie Darrieussecq, Catherine Millet, and Guillaume Dustan. Dustan was a good friend of Preciado’s and a prominent figure in *Testo Junkie*.

writing that is particularly pertinent to Western scholarship and especially important in the French context.⁴ Interestingly, Benderson chooses to translate the *autos* prefix in Preciado's text to bodily equivalents by employing "somato" and "body" in its place. This choice foregrounds how autotheory departs from Western philosophical traditions by reconciling a transcendental self with the material body. In *Reading Autobiography Now*, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson point to the way in which life writing has a long tradition that became especially marked by the Enlightenment and a Cartesian Dualism. They write:

Autobiography, as we have seen, became the term for a particular generic practice that emerged in the Enlightenment and subsequently became a definitive for life writing in the West. In the seventeenth century, René Descartes situated the contemplative, epistemological self in a new house of philosophy. The solitary 'I' of his *Discourse on Method* subordinates body to mind, nature to intellect, and others to a sovereign philosophical self, the cogito. (Smith and Watson 6)

In light of these origins, then, autotheory is an attempt to synthesize the mind-body dualism à la Preciado's body-essay, somato-politic, and autotheory.

Barthes writes, "as soon as I name, I am named: caught in the rivalry of names" (*The Pleasure* 30). The nominal project entrenched in generic conventions is one that haunts life writing, one that is caught in this rivalry of names. Life writing has taken on multiple names and encompasses multiple genres: autobiography, memoir, autofiction, autoethnography, autocritique, autotheory, etc. Autobiography can often be used as an umbrella term with texts being referred to as autobiographical if they include even the slightest hint of semblance with the author's life or circumstances. Philippe Lejeune's

⁴ For more on autofiction in the French context, see Ferreira-Meyers, Darrieussecq, Spear. For more on Preciado's text in relation to French feminism, literary traditions, and critical theory, see Lévesque-Jalbert.

definition of autobiography is foundational for understanding scholarship on life writing. Lejeune writes that, “what defines autobiography for the one who is reading is above all a contract of identity that is sealed by the proper name” (19). What Lejeune refers to as the “autobiographical pact” is relational and binds the reader and the writer; they agree that the story that brings them together is one based on a fact founded in the act of naming. Serge Doubrovsky pushed back against the rigid confines of such an act of naming inscribed by the autobiographical pact and coined “autofiction” in his 1977 *Fils* where, he states, “the language of adventure has been entrusted to the adventure of language in its total freedom” (qtd. in Dix 71). For Doubrovsky, it isn’t so much about fictionalizing one’s life but to write about one’s life as one would fiction and embrace the “adventure of language” that such a type of writing allows.

But what distinguishes the autotheoretical from these two other distinct genres? Before Maggie Nelson and Paul B. Preciado popularized the term, it first appeared in Stacey Young’s 1977 book *Changing the Wor(l)d: Discourse, Politics, and the Feminist Movement*. Young uses the term “autotheory” to describe the work of feminist presses of the 70s and 80s such as that of the Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press and the writings of women of color writer-activists such as Barbara Smith, Gloria Anzaldúa, Cherrie Moraga to name only a few. In her recent 2025 reflection on *Changing the Wor(l)d*, Young writes:

I understood autotheory to consist of a constant working back and forth between the particularities of one’s life, the broader power structures that inexorably shape those particularities, the larger meanings we embrace or contest, and the movements through which we collectively advance change... Autotheory, in my view, was and is very much about investigating one’s identity and lived experience as an individual *situated within and profoundly shaped by broader*

structures of power, both as a way to understand those structures as they shape individual lives, and also, crucially, *to spur others to a similar recasting*. (Autotheories 123)

Considering her views on what constitutes the autotheoretical, it is evident why she chose the term to describe works such as *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*. Moraga and Anzaldúa, the editors of *This Bridge*, described their mission as editors as one in which they “encourage writers to delve even more deeply into their lives, to make some meaning out of it for themselves and their readers” (liii). The now iconic cover image of a woman’s back symbolizes the act of bridging women’s struggles for coalition-building. Young’s autotheoretical is a relational, politicized practice of writing the self to understand how one fits into larger structures of power and influence and how one can relate to others beyond these structures that aim at creating fissures in solidarity movements. Smith and Watson seem to have really drawn from Young’s formulation of the autotheoretical:

Self-proclaimed autotheory narratives engage in three distinct yet related practices: (1) theorizing the condition of the subject in telling one’s story from the standpoint of a particular discipline, such as a philosophy, sociology, history; (2) theorizing the process of autobiographical writing as an aspect of telling one’s story; and (3) theorizing the dynamics that have shaped the life being narrated, including social institutions, structural forms of disadvantage, systems of representation complicit in structural power arrangements, cultural formations, and public policy. Some autotheoretical acts and practices take up all these critiques and strive not to arrive at final formulations but to foreground their dialogical examinations. (20)

In particular, the definition of the third practice resonates the most with the goals of Young in defining the autotheoretical. These genealogies rooted in women of color’s writing and also in the trans/queer writing of Preciado and Nelson have led many to

theorize the autotheoretical through embodiment and identity and how these are intimately intertwined with often oppressive institutions.⁵

Mieke Bal refers to her work as autotheory, though the *autos* here does not refer to the “self” but rather her art objects, her films. She explains her practice as an “analysis-theory dialectic” and further clarifies, “since my own films are the subject of examination, I call it auto-theory.” She stipulates, however, that “these videos document a relationship, but not the one between maker and subject” (Bal 124). She explains that the relationship is between the subjects of the film and, in this particular project, *Nothing Missing* (2006-2010), it is a relationship between a mother and daughter impacted by migration, which her film documents. While Bal describes the filmmaker as the facilitator, she does not directly insert herself into the filmmaking process. Bal’s autotheory is one that presents a critical distance between herself and her films. We see this in her filmmaking technique; she explains, “The maker sets up the shot, switches the camera on, and leaves the room” (Bal 125). Annamarie Jagose and Lee Wallace see this as a critical distance defined by time and space that Bal creates so that she may reflect on the process of documenting. They argue that Bal “introduces a requirement for temporal delay between the moment in which a work is first produced and the moment it becomes available as a theoretical object” (Jagose and Wallace 110). Thus, Bal’s autotheoretical filmmaking isn’t one that embodies the artist à la Chantal Akerman who claims the *autos* of her filmography where her films *are* her, speak for her. There is no critical distance to

⁵ Brostoff and Cooppan’s *Autotheories* contains great examples of these critiques. See especially Grue; Moodie; Goldberg; Zwartjes, “Failure Notes”.

maintain if your films embody you. Bal is the only theorist and filmmaker to use the term autotheory in the context of film. Her use, however, departs from mine in that the autotheoretical filmmaking I discuss in this dissertation is one in which the filmmakers directly and intimately implicate themselves in their films to offer speculative visions of relationality—they are acts of self-world-making. In this case, the *corps*, the material body of the artist, and its corpus, their body of work, are extensions of one another and come to mutually define each other.

At the center of Smith and Watson’s definition of the autotheoretical is theory rather than the *autos* or self. The word theory takes its etymological root from the Greek *theōria* meaning “contemplation” or “speculation,” suggesting that theory is always speculative in nature and intrinsically entails a futurity—it imagines what *could* be. The autotheoretical is not necessarily fictional, as its conflation with autofiction would lead some to believe, but speculative in the way that theory is always speculative. It is always a “what if” or “what can be if we imagine it and speak it?” It is always imagining other worlds and what could be or become if we dare to speculate them and dare to share these speculations with others. The case studies I present in this dissertation aren’t working within the fictional as in the autofictional but offering speculative visions of relationality through stories of the self.

The Cinematic “I”: Autotheory’s Gazes

I am always a bit out of step, a bit behind with what’s *en vogue* in academia, like 1980s punk band Minor Threat’s refrain in “Out of Step:”

I can’t keep up, I can’t keep up, I can’t keep up.

Out of step, with the world!

During my graduate coursework, I would often choose *outdated* subjects for my term papers. In a meeting, a professor told me something along the lines of “no one is talking about that anymore.” So, here I am again, bringing us back to the debates of 50s-80s film criticism and scholarship to talk about highly discussed areas of film studies: auteur theory, spectatorship, and the cinema apparatus. I focus on these areas because here is where I find autotheory might have the most interesting and significant contributions. Central to these debates is the “I,” which is often conflated with the bodily eye, and its cyborg extension, the camera lens. Theorist Kaja Silverman writes in her chapter titled “The Gaze” in *The Threshold of the Visible World*:

It has long been one of the governing assumptions of film theory that the cinema derives in some ultimate sense from the Renaissance, via intervening technologies like the camera obscura, the still camera, and the stereoscope, and that its visual field is defined to a significant degree by the rules and ideology of monocular perspective. Since, within cinema, as within photography, the camera designates the point from which the spectacle is rendered intelligible, the maintenance of the perspectival illusion is assumed to depend upon a smooth meshing of the spectator with that apparatus. (126)

Silverman points to cinema’s historical antecedents like the camera obscura to demonstrate how the modern cinematic camera still relies on this relationship between the camera and the viewer to find the subject or “I” of the visual relationship. Auteurism, the apparatus, and the gaze have become ubiquitous in film studies—you cannot study film without referring to them. They have become inherent features of film study and criticism, allowing for normative usage of these terms. The gaze, for example, always refers back to Laura Mulvey. Foundational film scholar Linda Williams reflected in 2004 that “feminist approaches have been so folded into the basic questioning of the field of

film and media studies...” that “feminism has indeed become a part of the normal functioning of film and media studies” (“Why I Did Not” 1265). Feminist film theory and criticism, once fringe in the discipline, have become central features of film analysis. This dissertation then asks: What can autotheory offer feminist film studies in light of these perhaps rote discussions in the larger field of film and media studies concerning the auteur, the apparatus, and the gaze as it relates to feminist film theory and criticism’s impact in the larger discipline?

Another primal scene for this dissertation is me teaching Agnès Varda’s *Les Glaneurs et la glaneuse* (*The Gleaners and I* 2000) in a discussion section. With my students, I meditated on what is lost in the English translation of the title, *The Gleaners and I*. The English translation substitutes the feminine noun “la glaneuse” or “female gleaner” for the indexical, first-person “I,” although Varda is referring to herself in the third person in the French title. What is lost is not only the female perspective but her identity as a gleaner herself. What can be misinterpreted in the English title is that Varda does not position herself outside of the communities which she films as an omniscient documentarian. In the French, she, too, is a gleaner, a part of *les glaneurs*, and she makes it a point to highlight the feminine. She visually stresses this when she recreates French painter Jules Breton’s *La Glaneuse* (1877) but drops the ears of wheat for the digital camera. She is not a documentarian who will merely film those living in the margins from an “objective,” distanced lens, but rather she shows how she is also a gleaner, a gleaner of images.⁶ Given this context, seemingly superfluous scenes like that

⁶ For more on Varda as a “gleaner of images,” see Rosello; Beugnet and Mulvey; Beugnet.

of her camera lens cover dancing to jazz music are recontextualized since she is, as she refers to herself, a gleaner of images and what might otherwise be a waste of screen time is salvaged to become art. Although the grammar of the “gleaners and I” does presuppose an “us,” it holds a different weight from something like “we, the gleaners” by prioritizing the “I.” My discomfort with the translation here might perhaps lie in the “I” and its authorial weight, which signifies something very specific in cinema—the auteur. While literary studies chose to kill its author, cinema exalted him.⁷ I use the masculine pronoun here because auteurism, started by the *Cahiers du Cinéma* critics such as François Truffaut, André Bazin, Alexandre Astruc and later brought to the Anglophone academies by Andrew Sarris and Peter Wollen.⁸

In “The Birth of a New Avant-Garde: La Caméra Stylo,” *Cahiers* critic Alexandre Astruc argues that the director and the scriptwriter should be one and the same and that the camera serves as the director’s pen. He writes, “in this kind of filmmaking the distinction between author and director loses all meaning” (183). François Truffaut further defined the auteur by placing him in contrast to what he referred to as the “tradition of quality” and to a *metteur-en-scene*, who merely adapts the scriptwriter’s words. While the *metteur-en-scene* could very well be good at directing a film, his films lack what André Bazin refers to as the “personal stamp of the *auteur*.” Borrowing Jacques Rivette’s definition, Bazin defines the auteur as “someone who speaks in the first

⁷ I am, of course, referring to Roland Barthes paradigm defining text “The Death of the Author,” which offered a reader-centered analysis that distances itself from any notion of author’s intent.

⁸ For more on auteur theory and *la politique des auteurs*, see Bazin; Truffaut. For Anglophone reception of auteurism, see Sarris; Wollen; Kael.

person” and further “the *politique des auteurs* consists, in short, of choosing the personal factor in artistic creation as a standard of reference” (255). This continues to be the working definition of the auteur in cinema studies—to speak of an auteur in cinema is to speak about a filmmaker who “speaks in the first person” through their personal style, their stamp, which is easy to identify in all their films. British film theorist, Peter Wollen, succinctly puts it: “owing to the diffuseness of the original theory, two main schools of *auteur* critics grew up: those who insisted on revealing a core of meanings, of thematic motifs, and those who stressed style and *mise-en-scène*” (72). American film critic Andrew Sarris outlined what he distinguished as three premises that define the auteur: technique, style, and meaning. Sarris’ three premises relate to each other but lack a concrete foundation, rather, Sarris founds his auteurism in a *je ne sais quoi* of the filmmaker. He writes: “Over a group of films, a director must exhibit certain recurring characteristics of style which serve as his signature. The way the film looks and moves should have some relationship to the way a director thinks and feels.” Further, he states,

[T]he third and ultimate premise of the *auteur* theory is concerned with interior meaning...Interior meaning is extrapolated from the tension between the director’s personality and his materials...Dare I come out and say what I think it to be is an *élan* of the soul? Lest I seem unduly mystical, let me hasten to add that all I mean by soul is that intangible difference between one personality and another. (69)

Sarris’ auteur theory is grounded in an essentialist idea of the filmmaker and film object rooted in a vague idea of the director’s “personality” that can allegedly be transmitted onto the art object and then interpreted by the critic. Sarris’ auteurism relies on a mysticism founded on the premise that there exists an essentialist quality that the director can harness and then stamp onto a film.

The auteur came to be defined in the 1950s by the same critics who then attempted to enact this *politique* by moving from film criticism to filmmaking in what became known as the French New Wave, which had a reverberating impact on global film cultures.⁹ To return to Varda, (because everything for me always comes back to Varda) who is referred to as the Mother or Grandmother of the New Wave, she did not align herself with the *cinéma d'auteur*.¹⁰ She is a contemporary of the *Cahiers* crowd—her first film *La Pointe Courte* debuted in 1955, three years before Claude Chabrol's *Le Beau serge* in 1958 and four years before François Truffaut's *Les 400 coups* in 1959. Varda often shared that she made her first film without film training or knowledge. She admitted, “I just didn’t see films when I was young. I was stupid and naïve. Maybe I wouldn’t have made films if I had seen lots of others; maybe it would have stopped me. I started totally free and crazy and innocent” (Murray, “Agnès Varda”). Her unconventional filmmaking techniques, such as filming on location, tracking shots, her use of non-professional actors, and her experiments with sound and image continuity (or discontinuity), can perhaps be attributed to the freedom that her ignorance granted her. Despite laying the foundation for this renowned movement, Varda always existed at the margins. In her first encounter with the *Cahiers* group, she shares that she felt she was

⁹ For New Wave's impact on global film cultures, see Neupert; Tweedie; Marie.

¹⁰ While clearly including Varda as part of the French New Wave, Neupert situates Varda, along with Alain Resnais, as part of the Left Bank Group of filmmakers. He separates these two contemporaneous filmmaking groups and movements stating that the Left Bank defined themselves along the lines of “deeper involvement in aesthetic experimentation, connections to documentary practice, overt political themes, and increased interest in other arts beyond cinema” (299). Varda's status as “mother” or “grandmother of the New Wave” begins in the 1950s and 60s with critics identifying her 1955 film, *La Pointe Courte* as the predecessor of the New Wave aesthetic. See Douchet; Sadoul; Levitin.

“there by mistake, feeling small, ignorant, and the only woman among the guys from *Cahiers*” (qtd. in Neupert 63).

Beyond its original usage in France and its importation to the Anglophone academy, there is another way that auteur circulates in cinephilic circles: to signify a respected, highly renowned filmmaker. Varda fits this description well, but does she fit the others? Perhaps, with Rivette’s and by extension Bazin’s definitions as she is “someone who speaks in the first person,” but I would argue that her films lack a personal stamp. Could someone really surmise without any context that the same person who made *Cleo de 5 à 7*, a highly stylized film about a glamorous French singer dying of cancer, made *The Gleaners and I*, a documentary about society’s “rejects?” What gives away that you are watching a Varda film is that she will often physically be in it, but not in the same way as an Alfred Hitchcock cameo. Rather, she is omnipresent in her films: like her voiceover in *Sans toit ni loi* (*Vagabond* 1985), her voice recording in *Documenteur* (1981), and her extremely personal tangents in *Les Glaneurs* and *Visages Villages* (*Faces Places* 2016). Varda rejected the title of auteur.¹¹ Varda states, “maybe what I’m doing is called author-as-witness cinema... I believe that I do auteur cinema, but I don’t really like the word auteur if it’s given too limited a meaning” (Amiel 72). Rather than identify herself with the *politique* of her contemporaries, she created her

¹¹ It is important to note that the word *auteur* in French takes the masculine as the universal with some adding an “e” at the end to feminize the word, although in spoken language this difference is indistinguishable. I mention this to illustrate how the very term forecloses a feminine designation. For a critique that ties auteurism to the continued marginalization of women and Black, Indigenous, People of Color in film, see Shambu, “Time’s Up for the Male Canon” and “Indigenous Cinema and the Limits of Auteurism.”

own, which she termed *cinécriture* or cinematic-writing. Varda defines her writing practice:

Cinécriture, what I always call cine-writing. Which is not a screenplay. Which is not only the narration words. It's choosing the subject, choosing the place, the season, the crew, choosing the shots, the place, the lens, the light. Choosing your attitude towards people, towards actors. Then choosing the editing, the music. Choosing contemporary musicians. Choosing the tune of the mixing. Choosing the publicity material, the press book, the poster. You know, it's a handmade work of film-making—that I really believe. And I call that cine-writing. (Meyer 201)

Given this definition, one could argue it is aligned with Astruc, Bazin, and Truffaut's auteur, so why come up with a different term? Cinécriture immediately calls to mind Hélène Cixous' *écriture féminine*, her conception of an embodied feminine writing practice, in which she is concerned with what women's writing *does* and not with what it *is*. This is what guides Varda's filmmaking practice as well.

Varda's aversion to auteurism lies in its limitations, which perhaps rest in the idea of the creative genius, the singular "I" or author of the work. Varda sees herself as an "author-as-witness" pointing to the collaborative nature of her filmmaking, she cannot create without bearing witness to the creative capabilities of those she films. This is evident in her films where her subjects are active authors themselves that engage in a co-creative filmic space. Varda's collaborators include Jane Birkin in *Jane B. par Agnès V.* (1988); Asco, the Chicano art troupe, in *Mur Murs* (1981); and, of course, JR in *Visages Villages*. Varda's term cinécriture signals the creative process of filmmaking—it is neither the author nor the film itself that is of importance, as in auteur theory, but the method, the practice, creativity itself. I take this long detour into Varda's filmography and filmmaking philosophy because it is a rich source of inspiration for this dissertation.

She demonstrates a break with the “I” of auteurism by shifting focus to filmmaking as a collaborative and creative process, which I designate as autotheoretical in Chapter 2.

Another area in which the “I” figures prominently in film studies concerns the camera apparatus and spectatorship. Astruc’s essay perfectly sets up the foundation for thinking about the cinematic apparatus. He argues that this “new age of cinema,” which he refers to as the age of the *caméra-stylo*, is “gradually becoming a language. By language, I mean a form in which and by which an artist can express his thoughts.” Later he states, “cinema will gradually break free from the tyranny of what is visual, from the image for its own sake... to become a means of writing just as flexible and subtle as written language” (182). Astruc’s language is strikingly similar to that of early theorists of cinema apparatus theory like Jean-Louis Baudry and Christian Metz, just without the Lacanian terms. But, is freeing cinema from the “tyranny of the visual” to bring it to the level of the “written language” not what Christian Metz sees as “an attempt to disengage the cinema-object from the imaginary and to win it for the symbolic”? Metz argues that “in the field of films... the psychoanalytic itinerary is *from the outset a semiological one*...it shifts from attention to the *énoncé* to concern for the *énonciation*” (“The Imaginary Signifier” 14). Then, to shift from the subject of the utterance to the act of uttering, which implicates the subject who is uttering or the “I,” is to ask a question about perspective, discourse, and address.¹² Metz argues that the cinematic apparatus obscures

¹² Benveniste famously posited that “it is through language that man constitutes himself as a subject” (“Subjectivity” 4). Furthermore, it is through the use of the “I” founded in discourse that one posits subjectivity: “It is in the instance of discourse in which *I* designates the speaker that the speaker proclaims himself as the ‘subject’” (226). As a shifter, this “I” changes meaning in the moment in which it is uttered, distinguishing between the subject of enunciation (“you”) and the subject of the enunciated (“I”). See

the subject of enunciation. He writes, “if the traditional film tends to suppress all the marks of the subject of enunciation, this is in order that the viewer may have the impression of being that subject himself...” (“History/discourse” 203). For Metz, the cinema requires a gaze that is empty of subjectivity so that any viewer can access that perspective and make himself the subject and assume the position of the “I.” He agrees with Jean-Louis Baudry stating, “the primary identification in the viewer operates at the level of the camera itself” (230). Baudry, drawing from perspective in art, arrives at this conclusion by quoting Jean Pellerin Viator: “The principal point in perspective should be placed at eye level: this point is called fixed or subject” (“Ideological Effects” 41). The connection between the eye and the camera, as they are united and leveled in the filmmaking process, is what fixes the subject of the camera apparatus according to Baudry. Interestingly, this same center, the principal point, is where Metz identifies the vanishing point in order to rid cinema of subjectivity: “In the traditional cinema, the viewer no longer identifies with anything but seeing...the vanishing point of monocular perspective” (230). By identifying the “I” with the eye, and by extension the camera, Metz is arguing that the viewing subject of cinema is nonexistent and that the primary form of identification allowed is through the disembodied and transcendental God-like gaze that the camera offers.

Benveniste, “Subjectivity in Language,” “The Nature of Pronouns,” and “Relationships of Person in the Verb.”

Lacan takes this distinction further by theorizing the subject of the enunciated and enunciation as a split of the unconscious. He best illustrates this in the paradox he finds in the statement, “I am lying,” in which if the subject uttering the statement “I am lying” is, in fact, lying then, he is actually telling the truth in that utterance and, therefore, not lying. See Lacan, *Book XI* 391.

The idea of the voyeuristic gaze stemming from Metz' assertion that "the seen does not know it is seen" since "in order to know, it would have to be, to a certain extent, a subject," and that this fact "permits the voyeur not to recognize himself as a voyeur" (Metz, "History/discourse" 231) incited strong responses from the burgeoning field of feminist film criticism. Most notable and paradigm-defining was Laura Mulvey's 1975 "Visual Pleasure in Narrative Cinema" where she formulates her concept of the "male gaze." Mulvey formulates the cinematic trigonal gaze: spectator, characters, camera. This triad makes it so that the male perspective is the only form of identification in film since the camera frames the male as subject who, in adopting his perspective, gazes on the woman as object. The spectator's only option for identification, then, is with the male subject. Mary Ann Doane's 1982 article, "Film and the Masquerade: Theorising the Female Spectator," concludes similarly that the only way for women to look in the cinema is through a masochistic overidentification with male subjectivity or a narcissistic desire of the self. In her 1984 article on horror spectatorship, "When the Woman Looks," Linda Williams argues that women should refuse to look at these projections of themselves. Kaja Silverman furthered these critiques by incorporating the other track of the audiovisual medium, that of sound. Silverman argues that not only can women not look but they also aren't allowed to speak: "Within dominant narrative cinema the male subject enjoys not only specular but linguistic authority" ("Dis-embodying the Female Voice" 131).

In *Cinema and Spectatorship*, Judith Mayne reminds us that these conversations concerning subjectivity in cinema, in part, began with Roland Barthes. His students,

Stephen Heath and Thierry Kuntzel, drew from his literary analysis methods to think about the cinema as a signifying system, of a code that communicates and is deciphered. One particular feature of this approach imported to film studies that Mayne highlights is Barthes' distinction between the "readerly" and the "writerly." She writes, "Barthes' analysis defines an approach to the study of textuality that 'reads' in a 'writerly' fashion, attentive not to any single determination but rather how textuality is formed by the interplay of different discourses" (15). Here, I am reminded of Alex Brostoff and Vilashini Coopan's definition of autotheory, which is heavily influenced by their readings of Barthes: "Autotheory is writing that emerges from reading" (4). It is that moment of "I read you, I write me" constituting this discursive flow between the shifty "I" and "you" without propriety of either place, in a sense, foregoing any fixed subjectivity and allowing for fluidity.

Metz theorized subjectivity in film as this empty space that can be occupied by any viewer, but feminist film theorists questioned whether that space could be occupied by anything but a masculine subjectivity. The male gaze was founded on critiques of classical cinema and sprouted at a time when the medium and industry was largely dominated by men. Since 1975, there have been a growing number of women filmmakers who have challenged the male gaze and narrative cinema with some even directly influenced by Mulvey's essay to make film. Since then, scholarship has recognized that women's filmmaking has the capacity to change the dynamics of the gaze and voice.¹³ In

¹³ To provide a few examples, see Friedlander, *Feminine Look*;" Silverman, *Acoustic Mirror* and *Threshold of the Visible World*; Williams, "When Women Look: A Sequel;" Creed, *Return of the Monstrous Feminine*. The latter two texts by Williams and Creed are interesting cases because they both revisit arguments they made in this early wave of feminist film criticism and revise them in light of this influx of films authored

this dissertation, I am not interested in rehashing these questions about whether women can look or speak. I think we have established they can, to the point where this question has been further refracted through issues of race, class, ability, sex, etc.¹⁴ I am interested, instead, in considering the possibilities afforded when we take this seriously; when we harness this capacity to look and listen to each other. I am interested in tracing the resonances and echoes that surface when we allow for this discursive flow to reverberate, refract, repeat. This dissertation examines what happens when we allow for the “I”s and “you”s of address to get a little murky, a little lost, a little opaque.

As I sit and meditate with this plurality of voices, how they influence my own thought, inform the intellectual network upon which my arguments rest, and create my own personal genealogy of knowledge, I think about how all thought is inherently intertextual. My arguments are contextualized in these polyphonic utterances of feminist intellectual traditions. This is what autotheory can offer feminist film theory, a way of thinking about how women’s films—often autobiographical—engage in worldmaking that counter the male gaze by merging voices, speaking beside each other, and allowing an embodiedness that is disembodied—which is to say doesn’t belong to any one body, any singular body—that invites one to participate in playful world traveling to conjure Maria Lugones. Feminist filmmakers create resonances among the plurality of “I”s that can occupy the specular space rather than situating it in a sole genius or an empty

by women. I also want to highlight that Claire Johnston was already considering the subversive potential of women’s filmmaking in 1973 when she wrote “Women’s Cinema as Counter-Cinema.”

¹⁴ See hooks, “The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators;” Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place*; Kaplan.

signifier. It practices Silverman's disembodied female voice by engaging in a polyphonic, polyvocal filmic practice. Resonances like an Echo, like if a woman were allowed to speak and break the Narcissistic abyss of the gaze. I will conclude this section with lyrics from English punk band X-Ray Spex, "some people think little girls should be seen and not heard, but I think, oh bondage, up yours."

Palimpsests: Intertextual Worldmaking in Sexed Work

The palimpsest came to me while working on a paper on Agnès Varda's *Mur Murs* where I read her film as a collaborative piece. I focused on her coverage of the Los Angeles Chicano artists, especially that of the art collective Asco. I traced affinities between Varda's feminism and that of Patssi Valdez, the only woman member of Asco. As I was writing, I found further resonances with Valdez' work on the Virgin Mary in Chicana performance artist Xandra Ibarra's renditions of the Virgin. I concluded:

Although we [women] are relegated to existing within the confines of phallogocentrism, there is a way out and it is through reinscribing the texts and being in conversation with the texts of other women. Varda's filmmaking can be viewed through this palimpsestic (or palimpsestic) relationship to a feminist tradition of cultural productions. Writing embodied subjectivity isn't just about women producing writing or writing about women but a method of resignifying the symbolic. In other words, it is about being relegated to using phallogocentric languages to express a feminine (and feminist) epistemological and metaphysical framework. (Cuellar 35)

The adjective I chose to encapsulate these echoes was "palimpsestic". As I tried to explain in that paper only as a concluding remark, the palimpsest is an intertextual relationship that resonates across women's cultural productions. The palimpsest is part of a larger corpus, situated in the body of the work extended from the body of the artist. This is not to say that there is an inherent feminine essence to the palimpsest. Rather, the

palimpsest attempts to escape identity politics and does not purport to hold a feminine essence. It is instead shaped outwardly in, which is to say that it is socially and/or communally situated and defined. I say socially and/or communally as I want to differentiate between the two. The former is meant to refer to a larger normative society while the latter is inclusive of subcultures that one belongs to and moves in—the way in which one is defined in each of these may often be at odds and contradictory, but both nonetheless inform one's process of becoming and self-making.

The palimpsest is a portmanteau of “palimpsest” and “sext.” The palimpsest refers to a manuscript which has been effaced so that a new document could be written over it. This practice began due to the limited availability of materials like parchment, so that to write new scripts, the older ones needed to be erased. The scraping, however, never fully erased the former document, so its trace remained always beneath the surface and these two disparate texts existed as one. In literary studies, the palimpsest was figuratively adopted by French theorist Gérard Genette to refer to “transtextuality” defined as “the textual transcendence of the text” and as “all that sets the text in a relationship, whether obvious or concealed, with other texts” (*Palimpsests* 1). The palimpsest thus metonymically functions as intertextuality in literary studies. Genette breaks down the five types of transtextuality he has identified. Intertextuality, for Genette, has a rigid definition; it is the literal presence of one text within another such as in quotation, allusion, or plagiarism. The paratext describes what exists outside of the text such as forewords, epigraphs, coda, acknowledgements and—he specifies—even drafts or outlines of texts which he refers to as foretext. Metatextuality is the critical

relationship between texts, a sort of self-reflexivity between texts. Genette offers very little explanation of the metatext; it seems to be the most nebulous of all categories. Architextuality is similarly nebulous with Genette admitting that it is “the most abstract and implicit of all” (4). He explains that the architext is defined by its relation to certain paratext through components like subtitles (e.g., *A Novel, Poems, Confessions, Essays*). In short, it generically situates works to others through genre. Finally, there is the hypertext/hypotext. The hypertext is derived from and transforms the hypotext. Genette offers Virgil’s *Aeneid* and James Joyce’s *Ulysses* as examples of hypertexts of Homer’s *Odyssey*. These are the major ways that texts exist in relationship to each other according to Genette. With Genette’s categories in mind, the palimpsest would be most closely aligned with the architext and metatext—the most vague and abstract categories.

While I draw on the image of the palimpsest for this project which is partially informed by Genette’s work, the palimpsest is more aligned with a Kristeva’s intertextuality, which Genette explicitly abandons (*Palimpsests* 1-2). Julia Kristeva draws on the work of Russian formalist, Mikhail Bakhtin to formulate her idea of intertextual relationships. Founded on dialogism, the intertext isn’t merely a relationship between texts but involves a larger literary structure. She states, “literary structure does not simply exist but is generated in relation to another structure” (“Word, Dialogue” 35-36). This literary structure exists at an “intersection of textual surfaces” where there is a “dialogue among several writings, that of the writer, the addressee (or the character) and the contemporary or earlier cultural context” (36). For Kristeva, any and every text is intertextual, multivalent, polyphonic because of this literary structure. The text is

“mediator” that “link[s] structural models to cultural (historical) environment” and it is “regulator, controlling mutations from diachrony to synchrony” (37). A text, for Kristeva, does not exist in an ahistorical, apolitical, or asocial vacuum but is in constant dialogue with myriad voices. It brings together multiple sign-systems in that it is not only the writer’s but the reader’s structures coming together in the act of reading. Further, Kristeva adds, “Bakhtin considers writing as a reading of the anterior literary corpus and the text as an absorption of and a reply to another text” (39). All texts are intertextually bound through this act of rereading and rewriting. Kristeva’s intertextuality, as Genette acknowledges, allows for far reaching interpretations of textual relations and it also implicates those who produce and consume these cultural productions.

Genette’s architext and metatext involve the kind of freedom of reading/writing that Kristeva’s intertextuality allows. The architext, as abstract as it is, refers to the question of genre and categorization. In *The Architext: An Introduction*, Genette affirms “the architext is, then, everywhere—above, beneath, around the text, which spins its web only by hooking it here and there onto that network of architexture. What we call theory of genres” (83). Genette’s architext transcendently, transtextually binds texts through their structure and form and lays down the groundwork for reader expectations by situating itself in these genres or forms. Metatextuality is simply defined as “commentary.” It is a text that critically engages with another text without explicitly citing it (*Palimpsests* 4). Autotheory, in relation to these typologies, both conforms to and disrupts Genette’s transtextualities.

Autotheoretical texts have typically been defined categorized by a melding of autobiography and theory. If we take this simplified definition, we understand that the text we are engaging with follows certain generic conventions. If it is an autobiographical text, it will be a first-person narration by the author about the author featuring real events from their lives. As a theoretical text, it will provide a systematic argument. This is what we should expect from an autotheoretical text based on its architexture. The latter generic quality, theory, is what also provides the aspect of metatextuality. In creating this theoretical system, the writer must also be critically engaged with and commenting on other theoretical texts. The quintessential autotheoretical texts like Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts* and Paul B. Preciado's body of work including *Testo Junkie*, *An Apartment on Uranus*, and *Dysphoria Mundi* are perfect illustrations of architextuality and metatextuality. Both texts include the generic conventions of autobiography and theory in that their self-narratives are intimately interwoven with their critical engagements. For Nelson, it concerns her changing body during pregnancy and her partner Harry Dodge's gender transition, which is woven with a metacritique on language's inability to capture these changes. She evokes Barthes in *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes* and his ruminations on the Theseus paradox, which has us question whether the ship remains the same if we were to remove and replace every single piece of it. Please not that Barthes did mistake Theseus ship for Jason's ship, the Argo, which means that the Theseus ship becomes the Argo in subsequent retellings. In Preciado's text, the question of the changing body is also present, but it is more a question of erotics under capitalism—the intertwining of the pharmaceutical with the pornographic—and his desire to consume

sexed drugs to change his physical body. These texts have at center the question: Is identity stable if the parts keep changing? Is the Argo still the Argo if each single piece of wood is replaced? As a hypertext, Nelson's book adopts Barthes' error and therefore resignifies readings of classical myth—Theseus' ship is now the Argo. In these texts, we see this radical potential for resignifying through the rumination on the personal in the context of larger Western canonical bodies of work.

Autotheory, however, also challenges these transtextualities and engagements with the Western canon. Autotheories challenge generic bounds—they might be autobiographical but not in Lejeune's sense as they constantly challenge the demarcations of "reality" and "fiction." The central architext of autotheories is, in fact, a challenge to the very notion of an architext by always pushing back against generic conventions. Nelson and Preciado are the first to *name* their own work autotheory. The term is first used by Young to examine women of color's writing. Is it mere coincidence that autotheory has appealed to queer, trans, and women of color writers? What is it about this intergeneric, resignifying writing form that draws minoritized subjects to it?

This brings me to the other half of the palimpsest, the sext, which I am borrowing from Hélène Cixous. She begins her acclaimed "The Laugh of the Medusa" with, "I shall speak about women's writing: about *what it will do*" (875). Cixous signals that she isn't going to discuss what women's writing *is*, which would be to attribute an essentialist quality that one could purport to identify in every text. After all, she states: "It is impossible to define a feminine practice of writing, and this is an impossibility that will remain" (883). Rather, she stresses the active quality of the text, the way that it *does*

something. Aligned with Cixous' *sext*, which has "two aims:" 1) "to break up, to destroy," and 2) to foresee the unforeseeable, to project" (875), the palimpsest critiques the logics of the dominant world as it creates, theorizes—which is to say it projects a new possible world. Cixous' *sext* allows us to reconsider the meaning of theory in autotheory. Rather than thinking of it as a systematic argument, we can recall its Greek etymological root *theoria* meaning to look, to contemplate, to spectate, to speculate. Theory, then, is a looking ahead, a speculative practice that imagines and enacts possible futures not only of or about the self but its relational others. The palimpsest provides tangible visions of these potentialities of becoming through past and future readings of canons or traditions. With the palimpsest, I offer language to describe a network of cultural production, but I also wish to draw on the physical imagery of the palimpsest, as a document that holds multiple layers of different stories that ultimately become indecipherable. In this way, we can think of the palimpsest as an autotheoretical tool for thinking about multilayered subjectivities that come with being socially and communally defined beings, and the types of stories and storytelling methods that may surface from these subjectivities.

Bringing these two together—the palimpsest, as it functions in literary theory, and the *sext*, as it functions in feminist traditions—I will construct what I mean by the palimpsest as a network of sexed cultural productions. The palimpsest is a feminist affective trace—it is defined by the feelings it leaves coded in the meanings it projects in the worlds it creates and that may transcend into other adjacent worlds. Sarah Ahmed states that "theory can do more the closer it gets to the skin" (*Living* 10). The palimpsest embodies this skin theory by forming part of this network of affective resonances across

sexed works.¹⁵ Kaja Silverman reading Freud's work suggests an embodied ego: it is "our experiences of self [as] always circumscribed by and derived from the body" (*Threshold* 9). The palimpsest lies at a matrix of sensation—at the "borderlines of corporeal, sensory, and perceptual zones" (Ettinger 41). Artist and psychoanalyst, Bracha L. Ettinger conceived of the matrixial borderspace as a way of thinking beyond-the-phallus—to theorize of feminine creativity outside of the phallogocentric. She proposes the matrixial as:

[A] model for a *shareable dimension of subjectivity* in which elements that discern one another as *non-I*, without knowing each other, co-emerge and co-inhabit a joint space, without fusion and without rejection...A matrixial encounter engenders shared traces, traumas, pictograms, and fantasies as *several* partners conjointly but differently, accompanied and partially created by diffuse matrixial affects; it engenders nonconscious readjustments of their connectivity and reattunements of transsubjectivity. (Ettinger 64)

Ettinger stresses that the matrixial is not in opposition to the phallic, it is not to supplant the phallic, but that they are simultaneous and that one could participate in either or both—like Lugones multiple worlds, multiple selves. The palimpsest is engendered matrixially, it is a "metramorphosis," defined as a "creative principle," (Ettinger 64) and exists in the "space of plurality-and-partiality" which "raises the enigma of the shareability of trauma and phantasy and the possibility of co-response-ability with/for the unknown Other" (Ettinger 89). With palimpsests there exist resonances and echoes of experiences not shared by all but shared by many. It is a moment of recognition and

¹⁵ I am drawing on the connection I have heard Vilashini Cooppan make between this particular quote from Ahmed's text and autotheory as a "skin theory." The palimpsest is, then, palimpsestically related citationally via Cooppan to recent autotheoretical theorization. Cooppan has provided this particular reading of autotheory as "skin theory" through Ahmed's quote in a conference presentation but she is already doing this work in her article in the special issue of *ASAP/Journal* on autotheory. See Cooppan, "Decolonial Love" and "Skin, Kin, Kind."

seeing each other through these resonating traumas or it may also be a challenge to metamorphose, to appreciate the trauma of the other through their work. It is a challenge for the self to metamorphose in order to world-travel and experience the other. It is a recognition, address, and look without aggression and violence—it is not Hegelian, it is not a battle to the death. It is the difference between the gaze and the look for Kaja Silverman. Like the Hegelian experience of the other, “to face the camera/gaze is, then, always to experience a certain ‘horror’ or ‘mortification’ (Silverman, *Threshold* 150). It is the death of the other—to gaze at the other without recognition, without love, without estrangement would be to vanquish it. Silverman continues, “the camera/gaze performs a memorial function, the look is allied to something which is ostensibly related to that function, but it is in fact very different: memory. Whereas photography performs its memorial function by lifting an object out of time and immortalizing it forever in a particular form, memory is all about temporality and change” (*Threshold* 157).¹⁶ The death of the other thus requires a memorializing, a holding still within time not allowing it to fluctuate and continue to grow. On the other hand, to look at the other is to witness its fluctuations, to understand its movements, its ebbs and flows and its faults and participate in its retelling project.

Silverman draws on Walter Benjamin’s concept of the aura, which situates a work of art in its distinct time and place; its “unique existence at the place where it happens to be” (Benjamin 220). This “auratic” quality of the work of art carries this uniqueness and loses it when it is mechanically reproduced. To put it another way, the work of art loses

¹⁶ The difference between memorializing and memory will be revisited in greater detail in Chapter 3.

its unique auratic quality when critical historical distance is put between it and the spectator as they are only experiencing it through its copy. Silverman challenges this traditional reading of Benjamin's aura by shifting focus not to the time and space that defines the work of art but the reception of this work or what she calls the "social 'attitude' toward the work of art, which she surmises that what Benjamin defines as the "'unapproachability of the cult image'...is not so much physical as psychic" (Silverman, *Threshold* 94). This being the case, the mechanical reproduction attempts to close the distance between artwork and image and creates a memorialized reproduction of the aura but fails to engage the psychic dimension of the spectator. Silverman argues, rather that her reading of the aura:

[I]s directed, rather, against the notion that books, paintings, and movies can be politically efficacious only when we are on familiar terms with them, when they have been stripped of their aesthetic 'strangeness' or 'distance' and become epistemologically subordinated. I have come to believe that the opposite is true—that art can help us transcend our ethical limits, limits that inhere precisely in *our* unconsciousness, and that it is via its aesthetic properties that it can do so. It is not by circumventing or subordinating the aesthetic to the political, but rather through the very consistency of the aesthetic itself that we can get to its political potential. (Hüser 7-8)

The quote stresses the aesthetic, but it points to the original meaning of the word as perception by the senses, and not the way it necessarily evolved in Western philosophy as a theory of beauty and art. A Silvermanian reading of the aura thus draws us to the question of affect or how these "aesthetic properties" or the "consistency of the aesthetic," which again is the perceptual or sensual, relate back to the unconscious. With this, the aura, or the associations embedded within the work of art informed by its time

and place, merge with the associations embedded within the spectator to formulate new readings, which may breed a political potential.

Similarly, Ettinger's reflections on the ready-made demonstrate the radical possibilities of lingering affective qualities in works that reference another through the aesthetic. Referring to the art form popularized by artists like Andy Warhol and Marcel Duchamp, Ettinger states:

From the matrixial angle, the *ready-made* borrowing of the other's myths and inanimate objects, and the *originals* stemming from the self, are not on opposite aesthetic poles. They are in the same basket: both suckle on the mythic prediscursive zone in which, however, from the phallic angle, the Other and the inanimate object appear as *my* strangers, and *self* and *not-self* are either the same or the opposite. (89)

I draw on Silverman's reading of the aura and Ettinger's thoughts on the ready-made to demonstrate the way in which the palimpsest harnesses both. The lingering affective qualities of the ready-made are in the palimpsest through recurring thematics, hauntings of trauma that already hold semiotic weight bound to its context—its time and place—while leaving the possibility for resignifying through the relationship between artist, art objects, and spectator. The palimpsest takes a meaning already imbued within those pieces, or even in the sociological concept of “woman,” for example, and reinscribe, or add, additional layers to what was already given.

The palimpsestic centers the aesthetic, as we take it to mean “perceptible,” which is situated in the affective. It relies on the spectator affectively resonating with the work of art and co-constructing with the artist and work of art. As Michael Hardt points out when discussing the “affective turn” in the humanities:

A focus on affects certainly does draw attention to the body and emotions, but it also introduces an important shift. The challenge of the perspective of the affects resides primarily in the syntheses it requires. This is, in the first place, because affects refer equally to the body and the mind; and, in the second, because they involve both reason and the passions... They illuminate, in other words, both our power to affect the world around us and our power to be affected by it, along with the relationship between these two powers. (ix)

This questioning of the division of the mind and body mentioned earlier with the Cartesian formation of subjectivity (*cogito, ergo sum*/ I think therefore I am) is further shattered when considering affect. Hardt reads the affective through Baruch Spinoza's *Ethics* where he pointedly departs from Cartesian thought by situating mind and body as attributes (of which there exist an infinite amount) of substance (God) and its modes (individual things). Mind and body, in the Spinozist sense, are collaborative functions where one does not take precedence over the other and, as Hardt points out, the ability to be affected, in turn, heightens your power to affect. The palimpsest relies on these affective encounters to create "affective alliances" to borrow Laura Podalsky's language.¹⁷ The palimpsest creates affective bridges and allows to "relate to one another without simulacrum" as Luce Irigaray suggests, by which "our resemblance does without semblances: for in our bodies, we are already the same. Touch yourself, touch me, you'll 'see'" (*The Sex* 216).

¹⁷ Podalsky attempts to account for the relationalities that can be forged by and through cinematic experiences that engage the viewer. She writes, "films plug us into emergent subjectivities that vibrate with the pulsations of the globalized present while others help us to instantiate new communitarian sensibilities by establishing 'affective alliances'" (8). She sees this potential by thinking of communities "defined less by their ethnicity and/or transgenerational experiences... than by their particular political (liberal) sympathies, which allow for the transfusion of alternate traditions of feeling" (158).

Chapter Breakdown

The self-reflexive cinematic and artistic practices of these filmmakers and artists demonstrate a cinematic relationality that doesn't involve identification. They demonstrate an ability to co-exist and co-construct beyond the screen, the gaze, the threshold to embrace, instead, an acknowledging, loving look. This dissertation looks at various examples from film and video to formulate an idea of palimpsestic autotheoretical relationality.

In chapter one, "Pas de Deux: Laetitia Masson's Maladaptation of Christine Angot's *Pourquoi le Brésil?*" I consider the relationship between Masson's and Angot's texts as the most explicit and tangible example of the palimpsest. Masson's film adapts Angot's novel, but it doesn't. The title of her film adaptation inserts a "pas" to Angot's title—*pourquoi pas le Brésil*. The *pas* negates the original title transforming it from "why Brazil" to "why not Brazil," which reflects Masson's larger discomfort with adapting the novel into film. What results is a self-reflexive film about her inability to adapt the film and her experiments with the filmic and generic form of adaptation and what I ultimately consider and name a "maladaptation." The film weaves together Masson's and Angot's personal narratives, which leads to Masson's answer to her question: why not Brazil? She states, "Je n'adapte pas. Je ne m'adapte pas" ("I don't adapt. I don't adapt myself"). The task of adapting someone else's real life—a narrative life whose own truth has been contested by the author herself, her critics, and the law—troubles Masson because of its ability to infiltrate her own life. The result is a polyphonic echo between the artists, a cacophonous relationality that, I argue, stems from feminine genealogies.

Chapter two, “The ‘I’ of the Eye: *L’objectif* of Agnès Varda’s Corps/Corpus” examines the filmic self-portraits of trailblazing filmmaker, Agnès Varda. Varda’s work has always playfully featured herself in some form or another. She is sometimes a looming voiceover, in others a singular hand on the screen, or even a character in the narrative. *The Beaches of Agnès* (2008), which she presumed could be her last film (although it wasn’t), was a self-declared self-portrait at eighty-years old and after a sixty-year long career. The film contains scenes specifically for this film, but it is sutured with scenes from her films and interviews. The self-portrait is one of her as an artist and through her films—it shows how her films speak for her and *are* her. It performs how her corps and corpus are one. Varda, who is known for her playfulness, disrupts the idea of the “autobiographical pact” and what I refer to as the “documentary pact” to critical chronological retellings of the self and fidelity lost to time and age. This chapter pays particular attention to her filmmaking practice, which she called cinécriture, as a feminist counterpart to her New Wave contemporaries *cinéma d’auteur* and argues that cinécriture is a palimpsestic autotheoretical practice.

Chapter three, “Queer Reenactments in Albertina Carri’s *Los Rubios*” considers queerness as a fundamental framework for co-constructing the self. Carri attempts to construct a portrait of her disappeared parents, which ultimately becomes a portrait of herself. Roberto Carri and Ana Maria Caruso, young Argentine intellectuals of the *Montonero* movement, were victims of the Argentine “Dirty War.” Carri was only three when her parents were kidnapped by the State, so she has few memories of her parents, which are only constructed and mediated by the memories of others. This chapter

engages with Jack Halberstam's concept of "queer failure," José Esteban Muñoz' ideas of ephemera and futurity, and postpornography to offer another reading of Carri's film beyond the postmemory paradigms offered by Marianne Fischer and adapted by other scholars. I will bring together the two Carris—the child of the disappeared and the film director—to analyze how this film is thematically and aesthetically linked to her larger pornographic oeuvre, offering yet another vision for cinematic relationality via the palimpsest.

The fourth chapter, "Latinas Escaping the Myth of the Eternal Feminine: On Xandra Ibarra and Regina José Galindo" focuses on the performance video art of Chicana artist Ibarra and Guatemalan performance artist Galindo to examine Latinidad's mythic femininities. Employing a hemispheric lens, I will analyze the highly personal use of their body to embody and disrupt myths of Latina femininity. Ibarra's transgressive imagery of the Virgin Mary as a highly sexualized queer masturbator, for example, rejects the Madonna/whore—and specific to Latin America, the Guadalupe/Malinche—dichotomy that Chicana feminist Norma Alarcón argues are the paradigmatic figures of Latina femininity. In Galindo's work, she employs the figure of Pachamama, the Earth mother, to critique patriarchal domination and extractive policies on earth bodies and women's bodies. For Galindo, the exploitation of women's bodies is intimately tied to the exploitative and extractive violence of Earth and its resources. In the colonial/modern gender system, the Earth body like women's bodies are expendable resources. Both Ibarra's and Galindo's performance art engage in palimpsestic autotheoretical forms of relation by incorporating the voices of others, the histories of others like them, who have

been impacted by gendered state violence. Their video art performances are an extension of the queer counter-archival work that Carri begins to do in *Los Rubios* and engage with critical fabulation to conceive of palimpsestual auto-virtualities.

All the texts analyzed in this dissertation are examples of the palimpsestic autotheoretical. These works engage with others through the visual affective registers allowed by cinema and video. What they offer is world-making projects which allow the spectator to playfully world-travel without overidentification, without being lost and subsumed by the apparatus but, instead, by critically engaging with it through their own embodiment, their subject-position.

Chapter 1
Pas de Deux: Laetitia Masson's Maladaptation
of Christine Angot's *Pourquoi le Brésil?*

We are luminous, neither one nor two. I've never known how to count. Up to you.
In their calculations, we make two. Really, two? Doesn't that make your laugh? An odd
sort of two. And yet not one. Especially not one.

Luce Irigaray

Introduction: Adaptation as Palimpsest

French filmmaker Laetitia Masson titles her futile attempt to adapt notorious French author Christine Angot's 2002 novel, *Pourquoi le Brésil, Pourquoi (pas) le Brésil?* The "pas de deux" of my title then holds two meanings: the *pas de deux* translated as "step of two," a dance necessitating two bodies, two beings whose steps are in sync; and the *pas* translated as "not" such as in Masson's title, *Pourquoi (pas) le Brésil*, why *not* Brazil. Therefore, *pas de deux* can also mean not two, but, perhaps, one. Masson's film blends both her and Angot's voices so seamlessly that their intermingling synced steps in their respective mediums of film and literature come together to form a singular-plural voice. This is a representation of what I term a "palimpsest." I draw together the idea of the palimpsest, a manuscript which has been effaced to make way for a new text but which continues to carry the trace of the former text, and the "sext," as employed by Hélène Cixous. The palimpsest then refers to an intertextual relationship among sexed cultural productions and encapsulates the polyvocal, polyphonic, and intersubjective nature of women's individual stories—how they, although personal, hold resonances and offer multilayered visions of relationality. With this in mind, Laetitia Masson's adaptation of Christine Angot's novel is a meditation on the intimate lives of women and their methods of storytelling and how they may be interwoven. In this

chapter, I will provide a reading of the palimpsestic nature of Masson's film by engaging with adaptation studies, which has also theorized adaptations through the palimpsest via Genette. By thinking of what I term maladaptation as a form of palimpsest, I will show the way in which a maladapted work showcases polyphonic relationalities, which is to say how it can hold multiple voices and experiences that resonate and echo each other. I examine how in this film this is tied to maternal lineage and Judaism. An important note to the reader: several doubles are featured in this chapter, there are two Laetitia Massons and two Christine Angots. For the sake of clarity, from here on out I will refer to the director as Masson and the fictionalized version of herself in the film as Laetitia. Similarly, I will refer to the author as Angot and the fictionalized version of herself in her novel and in Masson's film as Christine.

To begin this chapter, it's necessary to briefly revisit some questions and arguments at the center of adaptation studies. First, whenever discussing adaptation, one might need to address the question of fidelity. George Bluestone's 1975 *Novels into Film* is a foundational text in fidelity discourse and adaptation. Bluestone argues that novels and films functionally work on two different sign-systems, or "two ways of seeing," that are fundamentally different, which leads him to arrive at the conclusion that fidelity is impossible. He states that "changes are *inevitable* the moment one abandons the linguistic for the visual medium" (Bluestone 5). Therefore, for Bluestone, the question of fidelity is rather irrelevant because the possibility of remaining faithful to a text is foreclosed due to their very distinct methods of storytelling, to a medium's specificity. In *The Novel and the Cinema*, Geoffrey Wagner stratifies levels of fidelity to account for transposed works,

in which the film is highly faithful to the book, to loose adaptations where the original novel only serves as inspiration and serves as analogy. Dudley Andrew defines adaptation as “appropriation of meaning from a prior text” (97). He offers three modes of relation between literary text and filmic text: borrowing, intersection, and fidelity of transformation. Borrowing is a loose adaptation that maintains a general sense of the original. Intersecting is a stricter incorporation of the text and closer to Wagner’s definition of transposition where the film is just the cinematic version of the novel. Transformation he divides further into two: fidelity to “letter” and fidelity to “spirit.” The former takes directly from the book to construct its script and the latter attempts to capture the tone or style in its transformation of the original (Andrew 98-103). In *Novel to Film*, Brian McFarlane shifts the focus from fidelity to transfer and argues that there are elements of a book that can be transferred, such as the plot as well as other components that are difficult to capture like first-person or omniscient narration.

While these theorists seem to agree that fidelity is a fraught criterion from which to approach film analysis that needs to be further investigated, other theorists wanted to move beyond discussions of fidelity. Robert Stam argues that the question of fidelity is at its core morally loaded and based on hierarchies of high and low art where the film is derivative of the book (58). Stam’s rejection of and disdain for fidelity discourse is one shared by many theorists on adaptation. However, as Thomas Leitch, Deborah Cartmell, and Linda Hutcheon point out, the question of fidelity is a specter of adaptation studies and one that continues to hold prevalence in the quotidian vernacular of larger culture where popular audiences continue to judge films by their fidelity to their source material.

While scholars have largely abandoned fidelity criticism, it is still the case that audiences continue to see a film adaptation as derivative of the book, often decreeing “the book is better.” For the purpose of my analysis of Masson’s adaptation of Angot, fidelity is obviously irrelevant, as is made evident by my calling it a maladaptation. Masson is not concerned with remaining faithful to Angot’s word. Her rejection of fidelity is the driving force of Masson’s film, which acts as a metacritique of filmmaking. Rather, more pertinent to this study is what sprouts from such discourse on fidelity, which is the question of a fundamental relationship between texts. This question is one I tie to the motif I trace throughout this dissertation, the palimpsest.

Fidelity discourse recognizes that there exists a relationship between texts even if one mired in controversy and disagreement. In *Theory of Adaptation*, Linda Hutcheon draws on the palimpsest and Genette’s work to theorize the relationship between adapted texts. She writes, “to deal with adaptations *as adaptations* is to think of them as...inherently ‘palimpsestuous’ works, haunted at all times by their adapted texts” (6). Hutcheon traces the process of repetition to the palimpsestuous nature of the textual relationship through the very fact that there is a repetitive quality to an adaptation, whether it is through the language, themes, imagery transposed from one source to another. She sees this as an intertextuality: “Adaptation is a form of intertextuality: we experience adaptations (*as adaptations*) as palimpsests through our memory of other works that resonate through repetition without variation” (8). Central to Hutcheon’s analysis is not only the relationship between the texts themselves but also the relationships between people and the texts and how they intertextually engage with them.

Here is where I find resonances between Hutcheon's understanding of the palimpsest and intertextuality and my own idea of the palimpsest as a resonant network of sexed cultural productions. The closeness of Masson's title with the source title demonstrate what Hutcheon's sees as the pleasure of adaptation as stemming from its nature as "repetition with variation, from the comfort of ritual combined with the piquancy of surprise" (4). Masson's title only repeats Angot's, taking comfort in the source text's feminine narrative trappings while also disengaging with a direct association with this text through its negation, the *pas*. This adds another layer in which the text is repetitive as it is outwardly and blatantly refusing to engage with the source material while simultaneously commenting on it. It isn't simply a loosely adapted text or an example of infidelity, that is only unfaithful to the original. It draws directly from its source material, Angot's novel, sometimes through direct quotes while transforming it. In doing so, it adds a layer to palimpsest by offering a meditation on the very act of adapting and filmmaking. Masson isn't merely taking Angot's novel and remaining true to the "spirit" of the book by transferring certain elements and remaining loosely related to the source material. Rather, she uses the act of adapting to reflect on her own life, her own creative process—as Angot does in the novel—and the purpose of filmmaking. It moves from the autofictional to the autotheoretical by intertwining the deeply personal, her own life, with broader question of practice and artistic production. In order to do so, she must completely reject the act of adaptation, which means to be maladaptive.

Maladaptation as Palimpsest

Christine Angot's maladaptive behaviors, her repetitive neurotic statements in *Pourquoi le Brésil?* where she repeats statements like "je suis fatiguée" (I am tired) and "je peux plus" (I can't anymore) in a constant rhythm that has the reader feel tired themselves from this repetition, are mirrored in Masson's adaptation in its formal application. For Freud, repetition is an unconscious act which continues to repeat traumatic moments; to put oneself back in these same scenarios is a maladaptive behavior.¹⁸ The film engages in maladaptive behavior as a form of self-sabotage to completely dismantle the question of fidelity that plagues adaptation studies. In the maladaptive text, the question of fidelity is irrelevant because the maladaptive scrambles the coordinates of comprehensibility, rejects the logics of fidelity, and embraces, perhaps condones, the harm done on legibility. While the adaptation, as considered by Hutcheon, is a form of palimpsest, the maladaptation is a palimpsest. The palimpsest has, as a layer, the capacity to connect and mark resonances between sexed cultural productions while rebuking any claim to essentialist qualities. Instead, the palimpsest embraces an illegibility that is inherent to the features of minoritized subjectivity. Masson's film explicitly incorporates Angot's text while embracing the failure to faithfully adapt the novel into a film, citing its deeply personal material as the reason for this foreclosure. She weaves her personal narratives and meditations on her private life and its relation to her artistic practice with that of Angot's.

¹⁸ See Freud.

For context, I will briefly venture into Christine Angot, autofiction, and *Pourquoi le Brésil*. Christine Angot is a controversial figure in France for the salacious focus of her books. Notably, her book *L'inceste*, which details an “incestuous affair” with her father, shocked France upon its release in 1999.¹⁹ In 2013, Angot made headlines when she was ordered to pay damages to a former lover’s ex-girlfriend for using her likeness in an autofictional book, *Les Petits*.²⁰ Christine Angot refuses to acknowledge the relationship between herself and her personal life with those of her characters usually named Christine.²¹ That doesn’t stop many from speculating and equating the stories in her book as reflections of her real life. In this sense, Angot is scrambling the coordinates of the autobiographical pact where the author, the protagonist of the book, and the events detailed can all be accepted as one by denying or at least foregoing a clear connection between author and character despite sharing the same name.

Known as the “queen of autofiction,” Angot fully embraces the limits of the literary genre as first defined by Serge Doubrovsky in his 1977 *Fils* as an “adventure of language in its total freedom” (qtd. in Dix 71). Angot takes advantage of this total freedom of language to ironically diminish the importance of her own biography when

¹⁹ Angot’s books often allude to her father’s abuse and the notoriety she gained for writing about it. She has always maintained a critical distance between her “real” self and her books’ protagonists named Christine, refusing to verify whether the Christine of her books are actually her. She recently released a film in 2024 titled *A Family*, in which this subject is more intimately and forwardly approached. In the film, she interviews family members and her father’s widow, confronting them for ignoring or rejecting the claims of abuse.

²⁰ See Jordan; “French fiction author ordered to pay \$55k for pillaging the private life of lover’s ex-partner in a book.”

²¹ In an interview, Angot details her refusal, see Adler.

reading her books. In her analysis of Angot, Marion Sadoux points to French writer Marie Darrieussecq's explanation of autofiction as an "unserious" genre. Sadoux writes, "autofiction acquires an autonomous status which is free from any convoluted process of verification with external facts and which does clearly indicate a specific—uncertain—mode of reading" (176). Autofiction thus allows Angot to bypass any calls to account for herself in not addressing whether these stories are "true" or not, resulting in the reader feeling an intimacy with Angot while ultimately feeling as if he might not know her at all because of the persistent doubt. *Pourquoi le Brésil* remains faithful to an Angotian autofictional project. The novel follows the story of Christine, who enters into a tumultuous and engulfing affair with journalist Pierre Louis Rozynès. The book borrows several elements from Christine's personal life, like the fact that her book *Quitter la ville* has just been released and the names of her daughter and ex-husband. The title is taken from a letter from her father which is featured in an epigraph and later in the novel: "Pourquoi le Brésil? Peut-être parce que c'est un pays dont toute la richesse est dans l'avenir, comme toi à qui le globe était destiné" ("Why Brazil? Perhaps because it's a country whose riches are yet to come, like you, for whom the globe was destined"; 12). As an epigraph, its tone completely contrasts with the novel, which is exasperated and helpless ("je ne peux plus"). If we were to read it, however, through the lens of the Angotian world constructed by her novels, we are to understand that her relationship with her father influenced everything in her life especially her intimate relationships and her creative endeavors. The fact that her lover shares her father's name adds to the evident

pain and loneliness that Angot harbors as a result of the sexual abuse she suffered by her father.

The novel is also about writer's block. Christine is experiencing many life changing events. She is being critiqued in the press for her recent publications, *L'Inceste* and *Quitter la ville*; she has moved to Paris to be with Pierre; and her father has recently died. Her career has been built on the intimate intertwining of her personal life with her writing. At this moment when she experiences an overwhelming amount of personal strife, she is also experiencing writer's block and, throughout the novel, Christine shares her frustration with being unable to write. It is hard to say what the novel is "about" necessarily as it reads like a variety of personal musings by Christine with very little plot driving the story forward. In fact, the repetitive nature of the prose has the reader feel stuck themselves, mirroring Christine's own situation; therefore, the novel isn't about *anything* really, but instead it does something by instilling that same lack of motion, boredom, and *ennui* into the reader.

Perhaps this is Masson's dilemma, that there isn't anything to adapt from the novel. There is very little movement, and the novel feels stagnant. How could this be adapted? In the film itself, however, Masson points to the highly personal nature of the novel for its inadaptability. She questions how one can adapt the "I" of the novel. In a reenactment, a producer asks Laetitia to adapt the film to which she responds, "c'est impossible parce que dans le livre Christine écrit 'je.'" ("It's impossible because within the novel Christine writes 'I'"). The "je/I," or the intimate and personal quality of the novel, that it tells the story of Christine falling in love with, as Laetitia puts it, a "real

man,” renders the novel unadaptable. She affirms her decision: “Cette histoire n’est pas la mienne. Je vais pas la faire” (“That story is not mine. I will not do it”). For McFarlane, this is precisely what cinema is unable to capture in an adaptation of a novel. He writes, “while cinema may be more agile and flexible in changing the physical point of view from which an event or object is seen, it is much less amenable to the presentation of a consistent psychological viewpoint derived from one character” (McFarlane 16).

McFarlane’s states that the intimate stories told by a narrative “I” in a book reflect a character’s psychological being, which he believes cinema is incapable of truly displaying because it is primarily a visual medium. He offers two modes in which it attempts to do so, through point-of-view shots which mimic a first-person visuality and through voice-over, which allow for the character’s intimate thoughts to be shared outside of the filmic diegesis (McFarlane 15-16). In the case of Masson’s adaptation, she hardly attempts to reconcile the “I,” whether its hers or Angot’s, through an audiovisual cinematic language. She doesn’t include point-of-view shots to mimic a psychological first-person state. Her voice-over similarly rejects the “I” by joining her and Angot’s voices seamlessly into each other at various points. She completely acknowledges the inability to adapt the “I,” and offers a disjointed reflection of her own cinematic practice. Here, the maladaptation, or refusal to engage with the conventions of adaptation, is a form of palimpsest in that it connects Masson’s and Christine/Angot’s artistic philosophies and thus their personal narratives as they relate to their artistic practice, through the very act of refusal and rejection of the norms of the mediums in which they

work. What results is a convoluted, cacophonous, illegible filmic adaptation of Angot's novel.

Masson's film, *Pourquoi (pas)* includes three beginnings. The first features the filmmaker. Masson meeting with a producer in a busy cafe to talk about her next project. It is filmed in a *cinéma vérité* style, she has her back to the camera and the focus is on the producer who critiques and rejects her idea stating that it won't appeal to any distributor or audience. He demands, "à qui ça s'adresse?" ("to whom is this addressed?"). The producer remarks on the illegible quality of the film and the way in which it doesn't neatly fit into a marketable narrative. The second beginning features Masson sitting at her kitchen table in a medium wide shot. She introduces herself, "Je m'appelle Laetitia Masson" ("My name is Laetitia Masson") and includes some biographical data: her birth date and location.



Fig. 1. Film still from Laetitia Masson's *Pourquoi (pas) le Brésil?*

She proceeds to inform the audience of her personal financial predicament and her need to make a movie soon so that she can make some money. She alerts us, "the story begins with a call from the bank," because she is severely in debt. The following scene is a

reenactment of this very scene but features an actress in the place of Masson, Elsa Zylberstein.



Fig. 2. Film still from Laetitia Masson's *Pourquoi (pas) le Brésil?*

The actress repeats the exact monologue from the previous scene but in this repetition, she receives a phone call. Surprisingly, it is not from the bank as we might expect given the statement “the story begins with a call from the bank,” but rather a producer interested in meeting with her to talk about making a movie. The multiple beginnings are layered and connected to one another nonlinearly. The film completely disregards the distinction between fiction and reality by featuring both the real filmmaker and a reenactment of a scene with an actress. The multiple false starts have the viewer question the actual beginning of the film and the fact that the call isn't from the bank, but a producer, which further disorients the idea that this is the beginning of the film. These repetitive scenes are a self-reflexive nod toward Masson's feelings about adaptation and the impossibility of adapting Angot's novel—in line with Hutcheon's assertion that “adaptation is repetition but repetition without replication” (7). Furthermore, they reflect the repetitiveness that defines Angot's novel with Christine constantly uttering statements

like “je peux plus” (“I can’t anymore”) “je suis fatiguée” (“I’m tired”). They abandon filmic expectations of chronological, linear time through this act of repetition that do not serve a concrete function, but rather mirror the repetitive anxious tone in Angot’s novel. Within these false starts, we are introduced to the weaving in and out of time and of Christine and Laetitia’s narratives that we will witness throughout the film. It’s possible that the third scene with Laetitia in the kitchen is what actually precedes the first scene of Masson in the cafe—the call from the producer in this third scene is what leads to the meeting we witness in the first scene. With these nonlinear and unclear beginnings, the viewer is immediately put into a situation where they are to question what is “real” and what is “fiction.”

The film that follows weaves in and out of “adapting” the novel. Masson fictionalizes her attempt at adapting the novel, then performatively adapts the novel, which doesn’t only extrapolate an “essence.” Lourdes Monterrubio Ibanez refers to it as a “parallel work” in which Masson “faced with Angot’s autofictional and metadiscursive writing...fulfills the same task in cinematic creation” (546). Masson, however, isn’t offering an autofictional account of herself by reflecting on the filmmaking process, but in the very process of maladapting Angot’s work, is enacting her filmmaking project, which is to say theorizing the creative act as it relates to her intimate, autobiographical self.

Another salient feature of these beginnings is the question of money. Laetitia is lamenting her financial situation, the fact that she has been out of work for two years has meant that she has gone into astonishing amounts of debt and will be unable to continue

borrowing money from the bank. This necessitates that she find work quickly. The *deus ex machina* phone call from the producer promises to solve her financial woes. In the meeting with the producer, Laetitia turns down the opportunity because, as she states, it is an impossible film to make. When she does so, the producer pulls out a wad of cash for seemingly no reason. He doesn't hand her any money or even offer it to her as incentive to make the film, but the viewer is made acutely aware of it through a close-up shot. Ultimately, Laetitia reconsiders after speaking with Angot, who tells her to propose an ambitious film with a "high budget." A high budget film, however, is unlikely for an independent and little-known filmmaker who is proposing a film with virtually no market as indicated in the opening scene. In yet another scene, as Laetitia considers having an affair so as to experience what Christine felt in the novel, her husband, annoyed by the consuming affair with this adaptation, asks whether she is a filmmaker or a prostitute. This question underscores the way in which women's work is always connected back to their sex and the limited opportunities afforded women historically. Masson's playful statement about being "without an agent and without money" ("pas d'agent et pas d'argent") carries the meaning of not only agent as manager but agent as a free subject with power, further highlighting the limited potential for women, especially in a field like the film industry where they remain marginal.

Continuing with the rumination on women's work, Masson spends most of her creative time at the kitchen table. We are introduced to her there. This is also where Laetitia has a conversation with her husband on her idea for her film, which he fails to understand. Later in the film, in an adapted scene, Christine sits with Pierre and her

daughter, Leonore (played by Angot's real life daughter, Leonore) at the breakfast table. Leonore shares that she must write about what she wants to be when she grows up to which she responds not a writer since she is fed up with her mother's refrain, "je n'arrive pas" ("I can't"). This scene is followed by Masson filming her real-life kitchen—an infant's highchair and a tidy sink—as she remarks that she also can't do it and is experiencing a form of writer's block herself in attempting to adapt this novel. In another scene, Masson continues to think about the difficulties of adapting the film, as she sits at the kitchen table peeling vegetables. This scene is reminiscent of Chantal Akerman's *Jeanne Dielman, 23 quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975), a groundbreaking film about a widow who engages in sex work to support herself and her son. Almost the entirety of the three-hour film takes place in her apartment with long takes of her engaged in domestic work. We watch in real-time as Jeanne prepares coffee, mixes ground beef, and most memorably, peels potatoes, which all take place at her kitchen table. While there isn't narration of any sort to contextualize these scenes of Jeanne, we learn at the end with her shocking act, that she is far from complacent in her situation and those moments at the kitchen table were spent contemplating her limited position in society. These domestic scenes demonstrate how the space of the kitchen table can be a transformative and radical space. Writer and key figure in women of color feminisms and publishing Barbara Smith notes upon creation of the Kitchen Table Press: "We chose our name because the kitchen is the center of the home, the place where women in particular work and communicate with each other" (63). Without a room of one's own, one is left with the communal space of the kitchen table from which to work—transformed from a

domestic space into an intellectually significant and productive space, bridging the private with the public.

This bridging of the private and public is at the heart of autofictional work, which attempts to mix autobiography with fictional elements. Throughout the film, Masson continuously remarks on her inability and, more importantly, her unwillingness to adapt the text, mirroring the continuous remarks in Angot's novel on her inability to write. This inability and the many detours and experiments that Masson conducts in the creation of the film including her change of title, signals a maladaptive tendency. What I term a maladaptation signals a morphing that comes with a circular relationship between original and adapted text. It breeds mutational qualities adopted by the filmmaker to create art at odds with the expectation of the industry. Masson refuses the limited creativity that comes with making the film the "normal" way, as the producer urges her to do, which requires she maintain distance from the source material to make an easily digestible and marketable film. Masson's film after all begins with a rejection from a producer who does not find that her work can speak to a general audience. Maladaptation is closer to what Stam means when he states that "art renews itself through creative mistranslation" (62). Masson harnesses this illegibility to ruminate on the highly personal character of filmmaking through her abstract maladaptation of Angot's novel. She also inverts the relationship to source material and adaptation, or original to copy as Masson explains "c'est le livre qui adapte le film et non pas le film qui adapte le livre" ("it's the book that adapts the film and not the film that adapts the book"). This reformulation elucidates not only the intertextual relationship between the adaptations but also the

dialogical. It's not a linear finite line from source material to adaptation but one that continuously goes back and forth between the texts, a shot-reverse shot, if you will. Masson understands that she is unable to remain faithful to the source material and that she must betray it in order to make a film, arriving at the conclusion "je n'adapte pas. Je ne m'adapte pas" ("I don't adapt. I don't adapt myself").

Ultimately, Masson agrees to "adapt" the film and states that for her to remain "faithful" to Angot's book she must put herself in Christine's place by being unfaithful and engaging in extramarital affairs to rediscover the act of falling in love. As Masson, she attends speed-dating nights at a local bar where she lies about her marital status and the fact that she has children. As Laetitia, she attempts to have an affair with her children's pediatrician, sharing a kiss. These reenactments of Masson's life through Zylberstein have the viewer question reality—did these things *really* happen? If so, is Masson's filmic philosophy fundamentally founded on betrayal—both in her personal life and in her craft? Masson engages in maladaptive behaviors through her infidelity to sabotage her life for the sake of her film. It is through this maladaptive behavior that Masson is finally able to arrive and meet Angot where she is despite their continuous protests of, "je n'arrive pas." She cites her failing marriage, her financial troubles, and her utter loneliness as the catalyst for the latter half of the film. Up to this point, Masson has filmed herself in the third-person, using a tripod to film herself from a distance. Masson quoting Angot who, herself, is citing French writer André Breton, states, "l'amour est toujours derrière nous, jamais devant" ("love is always behind us, never before us"). This utterance prompts her to reflect on what is literally behind her; we

arrive at the conclusion that the camera is behind her as she is shot from behind. She remarks that she would prefer not to look before moving into another adaptive scene of Angot's book. The Angot/Breton quote is in response to a scene where Christine reads a letter from her father, thus here there is a connection between Christine's past, impressed forever by the weight of her father's abuse, which cannot be untangled from her present intimate and creative endeavors. This kind of love, a love bound to the patriarchal and phallogocentric, is one without a future. It is, however, when Masson accepts infidelity and the maladaptive as the framework for her creative practice that she picks up the camera and turns it upon itself. While she attempts to hide herself, her private life through fictional reenactments and objective camera angles, Masson realizes her life is inextricably linked to others. In a conversation with Angot, Masson asks how she can show herself while protecting others, to which Angot responds, "c'est impossible." This impossibility marks the entirety of the film, which remarks on the complexity of reflecting and telling one's own story without directly involving others. It is this moment that shows Masson that the only way to make this film is through betrayal and exposure. She grabs the camera and closes the distance between herself and it. She films herself through a mirror and decides it is time to trace her own origins, origins which abandon a patriarchal lineage, bound to the Name-of-the-Father, for a feminine one.²²

²² Lacan's Name-of-the-Father is representative of the Symbolic order, or the domain of language and law. It is also what he refers to as the "sinthome." The Name-of-the-Father and the sinthome is what holds together the imaginary, real, and symbolic of the subject in Lacan's formulations. Julia Kristeva refers to this principle as the Law of the Father. The Name-of-the-Father and the Law of the Father is what brings a subject into language and the symbolic stage, necessitating a separation from the mother and the imaginary stage. Lacan specifically talks about the Name-of-the-Father in regard to psychosis where the foreclosure of the symbolic is what causes this disruption in language found in the psychotic: "The foreclosure of the Name-of-the-Father in the place of the Other—and the failure of the paternal metaphor that I designate as

Deux Pas, Deux Voix, Uni-vision

As the film shows, Angot's book has as a central theme the fear of losing oneself to another, of abandoning one's individuality and freedom. Christine and Pierre's fights focus on their fear of intimacy; they are constantly denying each other access to each other's most intimate thoughts, failing to truly connect outside of the sexual. Following the reading of several letters from her father, Christine asks Pierre, not her father but her lover, if he likes to be in love. Angot writes, "Un après midi, j'avais demandé à Pierre s'il aimait être amoureux et il m'avait répondu non, j'étais d'accord. J'étais déçue. Je n'arrivais pas à écrire" ("One afternoon, I asked Pierre if he liked being in love and he responded no. I agreed. I was disappointed. I couldn't write," 111). The book quickly and without hesitation moves from her father (a source of pain and trauma) to her lover (a romantic repetition of this trauma) to her artistic practice (which seemingly neurotically repeats these traumas). Kristeva writes, "the daughter is rewarded by the symbolic order when she identifies with the father" ("About Chinese Women" 150). In participating in the Symbolic order, that of language, Christine shows the connection to her father, which fundamentally structures not only her personal relationships, but her creative practice as demonstrated by the epigraph. Christine's creativity comes to a halt when she begins to

the defect that gives psychosis its essential condition..." (Lacan, *Écrits* 479). Additionally, Lacan ties the Name-of-the-Father to the sinthome, which is used to signify the interrelation between the Symbolic, Real, and Imaginary: "The Borromean link must, then, be thought of as tetradic. The fourth term, it happens, is the sinthome. It is just as surely the Father, in as much as perversion means nothing other than 'turning to the father,' and that, in short, the Father is a symptom, or if you prefer, a sinthome" (Lacan, *Le Sinthome* 6). Furthermore, Lacan distinguishes between neurosis and psychosis. Although they both relate to the Name-of-the-Father, psychosis is defined by its foreclosure, while neurosis is its repression. In the case of Masson and Angot, I am considering how they harness neurosis (through repetition) and psychosis (through the loss of language) in their rejection of the Name-of-the-Father. See Lacan *Écrits*, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan*, *Le Sinthome*, *On the Names-of-the-Father*; Kristeva, "The True Real" and *Powers of Horror*.

move away from this patriarchal lineage after reading her father's letters; she is unable to write, unable to express herself and abandons language because it is foreclosed to her. In this following section, I will analyze how the film betrays the Name-of-the-Father and reconstructs feminine relationalities through a form of polyvocality, harnessing the psychotic disruption of language, that also engages an underlying theme in the novel and the book, that of Judaism. While Christine and Pierre, the heterosexual couple, are afraid of giving into each other, of losing one's self in the other, the women in the film do not hold the same fear, but instead embrace the possibility of speaking with and through the other. They welcome this form of psychosis. This section thus attempts to answer the question asked at the beginning of the film by the producer, "à qui ça s'adresse?" I respond, *ça s'adresse chez le Feminin* (It is addressed to femininity).

Zylberstein, who plays Laetitia, the fictional Masson, also plays the role of a fictionalized Angot, Christine. Masson employs the same actor who played her fictional self to play Christine Angot and she has the actor Marc Barbé, who plays her fictional husband, to play Pierre, Christine's love interest in the novel. The decision to use the same actors for both the scenes of her fictionalized life reenactments and for the adaptation scenes creates a disorienting effect, making it difficult for the viewer to distinguish between the two women—is this a scene between Masson and her husband or Christine and Pierre? The women's lives and voices begin to merge, creating an intertextual relationship between the fictionalized accounts of their real lived lives. Masson further stresses this playful gesture when she briefly refers to *Madame Bovary*, asking whether she was just an Emma Bovary engaging in extramarital affairs inspired by

a literary longing. Here, I think of Gustave Flaubert's confession, "Madame Bovary, c'est moi" and the personal reflection of the artist in their work of art.²³

The multiple names that I have circulated and have attempted to keep steady throughout this chapter—the Christines, the Angots, the Massons, the Pierres—draw my attention to the proper name. For Kristeva, the proper name is demonstrative and is only given meaning in a particular situation, thus the proper name is tricky because it is at once specific and unspecific. She writes, "the proper name would then designate a referent by a signifier, but it would have no signified" ("The True-Real" 234). While in a particular context, a proper name can have a referent, it fundamentally has no meaning. Rather, she continues:

The fragility of the proper name when it comes to fixing a signified identity is shown first of all in the *multiplication* of the proper names. This explosion of identity ultimately confronts that same unnameable space of need which I have called semiotic and which is also bordered by the demonstrative—the site of the archaic mother. ("The True-Real," 235)

The proper name because of its inability to fix itself to a signified, is devoid of fixed meaning. This results in multiplicities that Kristeva identifies with the pre-symbolic space (primordial mother), which she refers to as the semiotic. This space, which in Lacan's work is the Imaginary, is a space primarily of duplicity and enmeshment with the mother. It is a period marked by ego formation and the mirror stage, the moment in which an infant begins to perceive itself and to understand its separateness from the mother. Kristeva's semiotic also contains aspects of a Lacanian Real, or that which is

²³ While there is no record of Flaubert saying this, it first appears in René Descharmes' *Flaubert: Sa Vie, son Caractère et ses Idées avant 1857*, where he recounts that a friend of a friend who corresponded with Flaubert attributed this quote to him. See Descharmes 103.

unintelligible and incommunicable through language (the Symbolic), and which can be glimpsed in moments of psychosis or in artistic productions that disrupt the logics of the Symbolic.²⁴ The Symbolic is structured by the Name-of-the-Father, a rejection of the incest taboo that requires one step away from the primordial mother in order to enter into society and law, which is to say it structures the dominant phallogocentric world (*Powers* 61). While the proper name for Kristeva is the domain of the archaic mother because of its multiplicities, it isn't foreclosed to the Symbolic. It functions as an entry to the Symbolic by literally bearing the name of the father. For Irigaray, women are "withdrawn into proper names, violated by them" (*This Sex* 205). The proper name bears the mark of the patrilineal as you take on the name of the father at birth and become their "property" thereby stripping your agency as soon as you exit the womb, which is to say separate from the mother, in this violent act of naming.

I think about the proper name because of Kristeva's problematization of the proper name as an onto-metaphysical linguistic problem where the act of naming results in multiplicities and splinters subjectivity. This is illustrated in the film by the doubling of real and filmic character and the treatment of the proper name, which break with the father to return to the mother. Masson resolves that the film about love is actually about

²⁴ Kristeva writes, "In 'artistic' practices the semiotic—the precondition of the symbolic—is revealed as that which also destroys the symbolic, and this revelation allows us to presume something about its functioning...the supposedly characteristic functioning of the pre-Oedipal stages appears only in the complete, post-genital handling of language, which presupposes, as we have seen, a decisive imposition of the phallic. In other words, the subject must be firmly posited by castration so that drive attacks against the thetic will not give way to fantasy or to psychosis but will instead lead to a 'second-degree thetic', i.e., a resumption of the functioning characteristic of the semiotic chora within the signifying device of language. This is precisely what artistic practices, and notable poetic language, demonstrate" ("Revolution in Poetic Language" 103).

origins. She states that the film is about “l’origines des origines” (“the origin of origins”). This question of origin takes us to the familial dilemma in Angot’s novel, which for Christine and for Pierre is heavily tied to their Judaism. As their relationship faces many hardships, Christine reflects on the possible origin of Pierre’s behavior shaped by his family history and generational trauma: “Il était le jouet, consentant, à son âge, de la névrose de sa famille, et je dirais même de son peuple, le peuple juif. Il était la victime de la névrose du peuple juif, et de la névrose de sa famille” (“He was, given his age, a consenting toy of his family’s neurosis, I would even say of his people, the Jewish people. He was the victim of the neurosis of the Jewish people, and of the neurosis of his family”; 149). The chiasmic quality she employs where she inverts the same thought in successive sentences mirror perhaps how this might be at the root of her own neurosis while also reflecting a connection with Judaic literary forms.²⁵

The connection between Judaism, personal identity, love, and the proper name resurface at the end of the film when Masson interviews her real-life pediatrician, which she fictionalized in her film as her lover to parallel Christine’s situation with Pierre. Masson asks him if he could ever be with a *goy*, Yiddish slang for a gentile or non-Jewish person. The pediatrician admits that at his age he needs to consider it and begins to speak on his relationship to his Judaism, drawing particular attention to the function of the proper name in his case. As he states, his name Haïm Cohen makes it impossible to separate himself from his Judaism because at the moment of introducing himself, he

²⁵ For more of the use of chiasmus in Hebrew literature and in the Old Testament, see Ceresko; Radday; Assis.

establishes himself as Jewish and so others will first and foremost see him as Jewish and could project whatever stereotypes they might hold onto him. Though he shares that his Judaism undeniably defines him through the proper name, he does not believe it defines his relationship to others. We understand, however, that the two aren't as easy to separate, which Angot shows in the novel, due to legacies of trauma held by generational lineages that continue to influence intimate relationships through generations. As he explains this to Masson, the camera briefly focuses on a book on Dr. Cohen's bookshelf titled *Les Empires des mères* (*The Empire of Mothers*). The book by François Vigouroux, a psychologist, tells the story of several generations of women and the question of family transmission of trauma. The publisher's website for the book offers the synopsis:

La mère et l'amour maternel sont-ils toujours des sujets tabous ? Peut-on remettre en cause les pieuses images d'amour, de dévouement et de sacrifice qui ont fait de la mère une sainte intouchable ? Cet essai relate l'histoire d'une famille pendant plus d'un siècle, à travers cinq générations, en France et en Allemagne. Il montre comment les mères y développent leur emprise et se transmettent cette domination. Songeant à leur propre géniteur, les mères n'ont de cesse de restaurer le mythe du père dans son imaginaire splendeur et de sacrifier leurs enfants à ce rêve. Ce voyage au cœur d'une famille révèle le cours souterrain des passions qui la font vivre. Tous les personnages de cette histoire sont aux prises avec des fantômes qui parasitent leur vie : leurs ancêtres.

The mother and maternal love, are they still taboo subjects? It is possible to question the pious images of love, devotion, and sacrifice that have made the mother an untouchable saint? This essay tells the story of a family over a century, across five generations in France and in Germany. It shows how these mothers develop their empires and transmit this domination. Reflecting on their own, the mothers do not cease to restore the myth of the fathers to its imaged splendor and sacrifice their children to this dream. This voyage into the heart of a family reveals the subterranean current of passions that give it life. Every character in this story is imprisoned by ghosts who leech their life: their ancestors.

Perfectly framing the conversation between Masson and the pediatrician in this moment, the book has as its subject the question of familial influence on one's personal life and the

way in which it is impossible to escape ancestry. Interestingly, the book focuses on the role of mothers and women. This is not only intriguing because of the role of the proper name analyzed through Kristeva's semiotics and its relation to the archaic mother, but because of Judaism's own law of matrilineal descent. *Halakha* or Jewish law derived from the Torah states that someone is considered Jewish only if they are descended from a Jewish mother.²⁶ The question of Judaism, family, and matrilineal descent is particularly compelling when considering Christine's (and Angot's real-life) genealogy. By taking her father's name, Christine Angot isn't immediately read as Jewish in the way that Dr. Cohen or her mother are due to their proper names. Angot's mother's last name, Schwartz, significantly marked her as a foreigner while growing up in France during its Nazi occupation. Christine's Judaism provides another facet of her creative process that departs from the Name-of-the-Father through this matrilineal connection—it abandons the symbolic realm of language for the incoherent psychosis of artistic production. Her repetition and flows of consciousness result in a fragmented narrative, it breaks with the Symbolic order and gives into the archaic mother, the semiotic for Kristeva, which is defined by its multiplicitous, cacophonous, and artistic potential. Christine/Angot/Masson thus reconstruct the narrative through this maternal lineage, which is to say through women's voices.

²⁶ This is the case for Orthodox and Conservative sects of Judaism. Reform Judaism changed this restriction in 1983. For more on the matrilineal principle, see Fishman; "Reform Rabbis Change Rule on Who is a Jew." While seemingly radical at first glance, I want to highlight that this principle is highly critiqued because it is based on patriarchal restrictions on intermarriage and control over women's bodies. For the sake of this chapter, however, I think it is important to highlight the matrilineal link and Angot's matrilineal Judaic lineage that is then obscured by patriarchal naming traditions of the West.

Luce Irigaray compelled us to think about what we lost when we traded in the matrilineal and opted for the patrilineal. She elaborates her argument through classical Greek mythology and the story of Demeter and Persephone. In this myth, Persephone is kidnapped by Hades and brought to the underworld. Demeter, the goddess of harvest and fertility, is emotionally destroyed by her separation from her daughter and so in falling into a deep depression, she fails to exert her creativity and crops die, the land barren. To remedy the situation, Zeus orders Persephone back to Earth but is only allowed to come back for part of the year. When she is on Earth, the land is lively and fecund. When she must return to the underworld, everything dies again (Hesiod 289-325). The myth of Demeter and Persephone is a means to explain the change of seasons. It also signals the cyclicity of time and regeneration. As Irigaray explains, when reunited with Demeter, Persephone begins her story “at the end...she goes back in time, as must any woman today who is trying to find the traces of her estrangement from her mother” (“The Forgotten Mystery” 107). Persephone is trapped in a cycle where the beginning and end merge, which Irigaray connects back to that primordial separation from the mother required to enter into the Symbolic order. Patriarchy, Irigaray explains, has silenced girls and ruptured the bond between mother and daughter. She argues that in order to pose a serious threat to patriarchy, this bond must be restored:

To re-establish elementary social justice, to save the earth from total subjugation to male values...we must restore this missing pillar of our culture: the mother-daughter relationship and respect for female speech and virginity. This will require changes to symbolic codes, especially language, law, and religion. (“The Forgotten Mystery” 112)

The feminine, founded on the bond between the mother-daughter, has the capacity to restructure the Symbolic and threatens to disrupt and reorient the dominant logic of the Name-of-the-Father. Autofiction and autotheory has been critiqued for its *nombrilisme* or its navel-gaziness. While this critique, and navel-gazing in general, holds a negative connotation by implying that writing about oneself means that one is self-obsessed and unconcerned with others, such an attack fails to recall the importance of the navel as a nourishing connective channel, as a primordial source of relationality, which tied the infant back to the mother in a symbiotic relationship.²⁷

Irigaray stresses the necessity of speech and female autonomy—what she means by “virginity” in the quote above—that is intimately linked to the mother-daughter relationship, as a means to combat patriarchy and the Symbolic order.²⁸ Persephone’s name has us recall the Greek word *phōnē* meaning “voice,” suggesting that this matrilineal link, this return to the mother, may give way to speech and an alternative discourse to phallogocentrism. In essence, here I see the need to think about the interconnectedness of women’s experiences, and how they are shaped by their social circumstances, of course with variances, yet the fact that they are socially read and conceived of as “women,” fundamentally structure their oppression. This

²⁷ This aspect of the navel in navel-gazing was first brought to my attention by a wonderful creative lecture by Micah Perks at a conference on autotheory. See Perks.

²⁸ Irigaray doesn’t employ virginity in the traditional sense of the word. She writes, “purity here does not signify defensive or prudish virginity, as some of our profane contemporaries might take it to mean, nor does it signify an allegiance to patriarchal culture and its definition of virginity as an exchange value between men; it signifies the woman’s fidelity to her identity and female genealogy” (*Je, Tu, Nous* 19) and “virginity must be rediscovered by all women as their own bodily and spiritual possession, which can give them back an individual and collective identity status” (117).

interconnectedness allows us to think of how this matrilineal link, connected to the archaic mother, results in a blending of voices. It allows us to imagine relationality through speech and how the overlapping speaking subjects in the film can disrupt traditional cinematic codes. When we are unable to trace who is speaking, who is the subject of enunciation in any given moment. The viewer is once again disoriented by a cacophony of feminine experience and storytelling begging you to join the chorus. This Echo disrupts the narcissistic gaze. If we recall the myth of Echo, Hera strips Echo of her voice as punishment. Echo is then only capable of repeating the last words spoken to her, but unable to form her own speech (Ovid 3.371-561). Irigaray reminds us that “to play with mimesis is thus, for a woman, to try to recover the place of exploitation by discourse, without allowing herself to be simply reduced to it...If women can play with mimesis, it is because they are capable of bringing new nourishment to its operation” (*Speculum* 76). The repetition, the chorus, the mimetic, and the specular come together to create new forms of relationality that are bound in this mutual recognition and through the possibilities of the interlaced and networked experience of the feminine. I think here, too, of Kristeva’s semiotic *chora*, which she defines as “rupture and articulations” that is “analogous only to vocal or kinetic rhythm,” and which she, following Plato, relates back to the womb and the “nourishing and maternal” (“Revolution” 94).²⁹

Like the demonstrative proper name, the pronoun also only derives meaning through its context, but more importantly and differentially, through discourse. Masson states that the “I” or the *je*, *moi*, and *mienne* is what makes the novel unadaptable. These

²⁹ For a clear explanation of Kristeva’s *chora*, see Moi’s “Introduction” in *The Kristeva Reader* (12-13).

shifty, indexical pronouns are what distinguish the “auto” of autobiography and autofiction by placing the authorial voice in the utterance of “I.” The question fundamental to Masson and the producer is then: Can the “I” be adapted and refracted further?

The nature of the cinematic apparatus facilitates the capacity to integrate multiple voices. Cinema as an audiovisual medium, in addition to projections, can consider multiple voices—that of the filmmaker, the actors, etc. For Mary Ann Doane, “film is not a simple juxtaposition of sensory elements but a discourse, an enunciation” (49). In the film, the constant shifting of the enunciative I’s and you’s allow for multiplicities that facilitate such an enunciative discourse. Irigaray writes “we haven’t been taught, nor allowed, to express multiplicity. To do so is to speak improperly” (*The Sex* 210). Masson’s multiplicity harnesses this improper speech, a maladaptive speech to highlight the connectivity and multilayered experience of femininity that resonates and reverberates. This is what Kaja Silverman regards as the subversive potential of the disembodied female voice in cinema:

To allow her to be heard without being seen would be even more dangerous, since it would disrupt the specular regime upon which mainstream cinema relies, it would put her beyond the control of the male gaze, and release her voice from signifying obligations which that gaze sustains” (“Dis-embodiment of the Female Voice” 135).

Angot’s novel, written in the first person, pushes Masson to insert herself in the film and adapt the film through her own “I.” The decision to have an actress play the fictionalized version of herself likewise mirrors Angot’s decision to blend truth and fiction in her own artistic practice. Marion Sadoux classifies Angot as a “writer who has made it her

mission to explore and expose relentlessly the thin line between reality and fiction” (171). At the heart of cinematic critique lies the question of its ability to depict real life. We can think back to the first cineplex, Plato’s cave, where the shadows on the wall captivate the prisoners’ attention to false signifiers, mere instantiations of the Platonic Ideal and whom the philosopher must free by revealing the truth of the projections.³⁰ Masson harnesses the adulterating medium of film to further the Angotian project of distorting truth, and gives authority to the voice of the unreliable female narrator. By blending their voices and visions into one, the hostility of the gaze inherent to the cinematic apparatus softens. The Hegelian gaze of death gives way to the face-to-face and as Emmanuel Levinas states, “to be in relation with the other face to face—is to be unable to kill” (10). He further emphasizes the dialogical: “How is the vision of the face no longer vision, but hearing and speech” (Levinas 11). For Levinas, the act of looking can transform into a discursive act. The dialogical relationship between the filmmaker Masson, the writer Angot, the character Christine, the character Laetitia, and the actor Zylberstein, who all speak at once, disrupts the singular voice and rather embodies what Jean-Luc Nancy refers to as “being singular plural.” He writes, “The relationship of the individual to the totality...in which the I takes into account what is not itself yet is not dissolved in it, assumes that totality is manifested...as a face in which being *faces* me...Hence, the relationship of the I with the totality is a relationship with human beings whose face I recognize” (Nancy 17). For Nancy, singularity is plural because the self is always

³⁰ Here I am drawing on Jean-Louis Baudry’s analogy between Plato’s cave and the cinematic apparatus. See Baudry, “The Apparatus” and “Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus.”

constructed in relationship to others. The indexical “I” loses its indices, which is to say the *sujet de l’énconciation* and the *sujet de l’énoncé* collapse into one polyphonic “I.”

In her book on women’s authorial voice in contemporary film, Shelley Cobb writes, “to counter the patriarchal tendencies of both literary and film theories of authorship, the metaphor of conversation as applied to women’s adaptations implies collaboration” (13). Masson’s maladaptation of Angot’s novel is a collaborative cacophony of their stories, women’s stories. In a car ride with actor Francis Huster, whom Masson wants to play the part of Christine’s love interest Pierre, Masson films the actor’s reaction to her script. He shares that he hated it and Angot’s novel, not because he’s a man but because he was expecting some truth. He states that actors must act in “je,” in “I” and that Masson’s script doesn’t allow the “I.” The difference between Huster’s “I” and Masson’s is the difference between thinking of the singular and the plural—the I that demands an index versus the I that shifts in a polyphonic ether. In this scene, Masson doesn’t speak a word. She remains silent as Huster monologues his own thoughts on acting and filmmaking, while repeatedly warning her to not make the film and to trash the script. The scene ends when Huster walks into a maternity building, which Masson makes sure to film zooming in on the word maternity.



Figure 3. Film still from Laetitia Masson's *Pourquoi (pas) le Brésil?*

The symbolism of the maternity ward underscores the question: Does Huster's masculinizing "I" preclude the possibility of participating in this polyphony of female voices? Huster lectures Masson in this scene; one can even say he "mansplains" cinema to her. At one point, he tells her that she should be filming the police violence they're currently driving past because that's "real," instead of concerning herself with "bourgeois" stories of suffering from love. Although he is able to physically enter the feminine space of the maternity ward as a father, his paternalistic "I" does not allow him to psychically enter the feminine space and engage palimpsestually with the film or the novel. He refuses to abandon the singularity of the "I" and what it indexes in the Symbolic, which is the masculine authorial voice.

For Silverman, the classic Hollywood model has given enunciative authority to the male voice while the female voice exists only within diegetic interiority. She writes:

The incessant realignment of female characters with diegetic interiority, and male characters with diegetic exteriority, is consequently more than the inversion of an imagined infantile situation in which the child is wrapped up in the sonorous envelope of the mother's voice, and more than a mechanism for aligning the male subject with discursive authority while situating the female voice definitively

inside the fiction. It must also be understood as a defensive reaction against the migratory potential of the voice—as an attempt to restrain it within established boundaries, and so to prevent its uncontrolled circulation. (*Acoustic* 84)

Central to the Hollywood model is the sexed division of voice in the cinema—who gets to speak and who doesn't. Silverman also suggests that this division is necessary because to abandon it would be to embrace multiplicity, or an "uncontrolled circulation" in disembodiment of the voice. Doane points our attention to the fact that sound necessarily implicates space. She writes:

The aural illusion of position constructed by the approximation of sound perspective and by techniques which specialized the voice and endow it with 'presence' guarantees the singularity and stability of a point of audition, thus holding at bay the potential trauma of dispersal, dismemberment, difference. ("The Voice in Cinema" 46)

For Doane, the threat of dismemberment and dispersal, or what I regard as a multiplicity, is also present. To avoid this threat, cinema employs techniques like voice-off, which reconciles the body with the voice by showing that it exists in the diegesis; or voiceover, which grants it authorial voice such as in documentary film. These filmic conventions are completely rejected by Masson who fully embraces multiplicity and the confusion it entails. Masson's voice is featured on multiple levels in the film, in diegetic and extradiegetic enunciations. In the diegesis, her voice enters to frame the story as a sort of chorus which relays to the audience the circumstances which brought this film into fruition. She is also heard in certain scenes speaking to others. For example, she is heard in conversation with her grandmother, Angot, and with the actor Daniel Auteuil; however, she speaks few words and it is the others of the conversation whose speech is centered. Her voice is often featured in voiceover. Sometimes this voiceover is tied to her

body where we see her in moments of inner-reflection, and we are able to reconcile the voice-over with the film body on screen. Other times, she narrates her personal thoughts within glimpses of the adapted material.

These interludes where Zylberstein plays Christine in the adapted film within the film are offered as an intimate look into her creative process rather than as omniscient narrator. In these scenes, Masson isn't a voiceover narrator of the adaptation framing what Christine does in the film; instead, her narration is her reflecting on how she would film this particular part of the novel. She cites lines and reads them aloud and interrupts herself to reflect on the difficulty of expressing such an emotion or scene in Angot's novel on film even as she seemingly does so. These moments illustrate what Barthes regards as the pleasure of the text, the act of what he calls "writing aloud." He explains, "writing aloud is not expressive; it leaves expression to the pheno-text, to the regular code of communication; it belongs to the geno-text, to significance" (*Pleasure of the Text* 66).³¹ These acts of writing aloud for Barthes are sensual, meaning that they correspond to the body and are layered affectively. In these moments of adaptation, Masson's voice is dismembered and her contemplations of the creative process of the film manifest the genotext of the film. She does not function as omniscient narrator to moments in which Zylberstein reenacts Christine but ruminates on the very act of filmmaking. These are moments that demonstrate a dismemberment of the body that incarnates multiplicities mediated by the voice, which are aligned with Kristeva's semiotic *chora* and feared by

³¹ The phenotext and genotext are terms derived from Kristeva. The phenotext, as Barthes suggests, belongs to the symbolic, or structured language; the genotext encompasses the more abstract components of language, which Kristeva attributes to "drive energy," aligning it with the semiotic and corporeal. See Kristeva, "Revolution."

the Symbolic. This is also the case when Zylberstein plays the fictionalized Masson and ventriloquizes her voice—it confronts and rebukes the need to give the female voice a singular body and place in the diegesis and allows for splits and polyvocality.

The “sonorous envelope,” which Silverman takes from Doane and Guy Rosaloto, as representative of the mother’s voice, the voice that begins to shape the infant’s reality before entering the Symbolic, serves as an engulfing and restrictive metaphor. The mother’s voice envelopes the infant’s pre-symbolic sphere and colors their perceptions, meaning it contains the infant by holding it close and enveloping it in herself conjuring a certain claustrophobia. Taking the imagery of the envelope, however, as a receptacle for delivering a message, we can again think about how the matrilineal may help us create new codes, new meanings, new cinematic languages to deliver to audiences. The maternal echo can recodify what may be deemed narcissistic, solipsistic, navel-gazey into new forms of relationality by thinking through generative feminine genealogies.

The film ends with the real Masson at a train station—she has abandoned the project. Here again she is mirroring the end of Angot’s novel; they both find themselves at the train station in Nancy.



Figure 4. Film still from Laetitia Masson's *Pourquoi (pas) le Brésil?*

For Masson, this was an obligatory return to home prompted by the project, which forced her to examine her own origins. Throughout the film, Masson questioned how Angot could be so transparent and vulnerable in her writing. Her inability to comprehend this intimacy that Angot embraced in her novels seemingly blocked Masson's ability to adapt the text. In the final scenes of the film, Masson decides to bare herself by filming real people from her life, including her grandmother and the real pediatrician, to mirror scenes from the novel. After interviewing her grandmother, Masson asserts "elle c'est moi" ("I am her") punctuating the polyvocality of women's storytelling latent in the film—to know Masson is to know her through her grandmother's stories and how they have shaped her life. With these interviews she concludes that she will not continue with the project and states: "Je n'adapte pas. Je ne m'adapte pas." The latter part of her refusal demonstrates that the task of maladapting Angot's novel, which became a highly personal venture in which her own voice was echoed in that of Angot's. To not adapt oneself, to reject the dominant logic is to maladapt and embrace a multiplicitous and cacophonous vision that disturbs the Symbolic order. Masson was not tasked with filming her journey

in adapting Angot's film. This was an artistic choice to maladapt the film, which the producer in the film explicitly discouraged because of his inability to see who this film addresses, which, as it turns out, is herself and those who are comfortable with some world traveling by abandoning the singular "I" and the body which it might index. This highly personal project, where Masson inserts herself and a fictionalized version of herself into her film, is a generative space, a worldmaking project, where Masson theorizes her personal vision of cinema. Her final words in the film, "je ne vie pas les choses pour faire du film. Je fais du film parce que je n'arrive pas à vivre des choses" ("I don't live things in order to make films. I make films because I don't get to live them"), outlines her cinematic vision. And, here we have another chiasmus. This circularity marks the film as it does the book.

For Masson, the ending of the film is a beginning as it relates to her personal origins, a need to go back in time. In the novel's version of the train station, Angot writes:

[L]a gare de Nancy, bizarre, c'était bizarre, en 85 j'avais donné rendez-vous à mon père ici, je reconnaissais bien, je reconnaissais bien cet angle-là, la gare fait un L, je me revoyais en train de sortir de la gare et de revoir mon père après plusieurs années, c'était bizarre de revoir cette gare vingt ans après, avec tout le temps qui a passé depuis, et que rien n'ait changé. C'est ça surtout. (191)

[T]he train station at Nancy, strange, it was strange, in 85 I had planned to meet my father here, I recognized that angle there well, the station shaped like an L, I saw myself again exiting the station and seeing my father again after many years, it was strange to see this station again twenty years later, after all the time that had passed since, and nothing had changed. It's that above all.

The ending of Angot's book comes back to the father as it remarks on how nothing has changed. The father bookends Angot's story. The two past tenses employed, the past

event of being at the station holds another past story, that of meeting her father twenty years prior at that very station. Time is scrambled in this act of retelling as we travel to 85 from the place of 2000 as told from an elusive “present” from which the narrator recounts. These repetitions, while seemingly stagnant, are productive as they have us circle back to return to origins, to the semiotic and to creativity. These cycles represent the interconnectivity of the past and present without linear cohesion, signaling that not only does the past effect the present and future but the present and future will also affect the past. Masson states that it isn’t the film that adapts the book but the book that adapts the film, after all.

The novel, for Masson, is unadaptable because it tells a “real story,” which Masson positions at odds with her filmmaking philosophy. The resulting film is a larger elaboration of this filmic philosophy where she fictionalizes events to create a film because she allegedly cannot adapt her real life. She makes things up, things she hasn’t lived for the film. The fact that she is at a train station motions me to connect Masson’s filmic philosophy, the discussion of circularity, voice, and generic conventions to film history. I think of Auguste and Louis Lumière’s *L’arrivée d’un train en gare de La Ciotat* (1896). Their first film which documents the arrival a train demonstrated their early film ethos, a drive to document everyday life. They called these films *actualités* (news). While Georges Méliès is often credited as the first to introduce narrative to cinema, Alice Guy Blaché, an often sidelined and ignored early filmmaker, was experimenting with film form and narrative at the same time.³² We can then trace a filmic genealogy from Masson

³² For more on Guy Blaché, see McMahan.

to Guy Blaché, the first woman filmmaker, who pioneered experimental cinema, harnessing its fictitious potential.

In retrospect, I find it amusing how much dread and boredom I felt while writing this chapter. I left this chapter until the end, although it is my first chapter; however, it was at one point planned as my last chapter. Perhaps it was because I was nearing the end of the dissertation project, a project that took me several years to complete, and I felt the pressure of completion hinging closer and closer. Perhaps it was because in reading “je peux plus” and “je suis fatiguée” several times in Angot’s text, I couldn’t help but feel the same. On multiple occasions, I found myself yelling: “Moi non plus! Je peux plus!” Christine’s writer’s block became my own. Masson’s inability to successfully rework the text affected my own thought processes and my own capacity to engage with their highly personal works. I, too, couldn’t adapt (to) these texts. Since I felt stuck every time I returned to the text, I put it away and worked on other chapters until I had to come back to it, back to the origin, which was supposed to be the end. I know now that this disruption of linearity, this inability to place this text either at the beginning or the end, my inability to outright write this chapter, a need to step back in and out as I write it, is performatively related to the very subject matter of the chapter. I echo here the circularity of Masson and Angot in my own creative process, no longer as ennui but as renewal.

Chapter 2

The “I” of the Eye: *L’objectif* of Agnès Varda’s Corps/Corpus

Tous les autoportraits sont truqués, les siens et les autres.

All self-portraits are distorted, ours and others.

Agnès Varda³³

Introduction: On Objectivity and Documentary

The word *objectif* has several definitions in French that are helpful for thinking about the role of the camera in documentary filmmaking. One definition is the same as the English, meaning a goal or your final destination in any given project. One objective of this chapter, for example, is to elucidate the way in which Agnès Varda’s filmic philosophy, *cinécriture*, holds the camera as an extension of the director’s self-reflective gaze and how it relates to the (dis)function of remaining objective and relaying facts to its viewers in a self-reflexive documentary film. The latter part of the last sentence calls attention to another definition of *objectif*, that of maintaining a point of view that is free of biases and that remains faithful to the facts. Finally, the third definition of *objectif*, that of the camera lens, calls attention to the extended object involved in mediating audiovisual storytelling from the subject of the film to the cinematographer and director. The camera lens is an apt motif for this study focused on self-reflexivity in film because of its inherent reflexive qualities as it functions as a mirror that allows the filmmaker to capture the images. The transmission of these images is distorted in the refractory process, presented upside down through the lens. It transforms as it travels through the peephole allowing for a rereading that promises to portray the copy in an honest depiction

³³ As quoted in McFadden.

of its original. The objective of this dissertation is to examine these portrayals of the self, follow the detours and distortions, and to reread these depictions to become a co-writer, co-storyteller, co-conspirator in these self-retellings. The lens in this chapter shows the way in which the palimpsestic is mediated by the cinema apparatus, the camera. This chapter explores Agnès Varda's filmic body of work with special attention to her strange, transformative, and playful autobiographical self-portrait, *Les Plages d'Agnès* (*The Beaches of Agnès* 2008). The documentary self-portrait aims to relay the director's life; however, Varda strays from what I refer to in this chapter as the "documentary pact" to demonstrate the way in which the distortions of the camera are equal to the distortions of memory and that to hold the transmission of truth, as the ultimate objective of a documentary is an insincere promise to its viewer. In this way, the lived reality of the filmmaker permeates the filmmaking project, which results in fictionalized truths. The fictionalized selves, the "real" selves and their respective stories create a palimpsest by intertwining the various versions of Varda that are seen through her own eyes but also those of her friends as well as her films, which in turn, implicate her audiences.

In *Documentary Film: A Very Short Introduction*, Patricia Aufderheide defines the "regular documentary" as:

[A] film that features sonorous, 'voice-of-god' narration, an analytical argument rather than a story with characters, head shots of experts leavened with a few people-on-the-street interviews, stock images that illustrate the narrator's point of view (often called b-roll in broadcasting), perhaps a little educational animation and dignified music. (10)

Aufderheide is defining what exists in the public imaginary as the usual trappings of a documentary and what we can expect from a public broadcasting documentary, for

example. The Oxford English Dictionary defines a documentary as “factual, realistic; applied especially to a film or literary work, based on real events or circumstances, and intended primarily for instruction or record purposes.” This second definition mirrors what Phillipe Lejeune outlines in his 1989 study *On Autobiography* as one of the requirements for autobiography and, what he refers to as the “autobiographical pact.” Lejeune posits that the reader should expect factual accounts of the subject who must also be the writer. He states, “In order for there to be autobiography (and personal literature in general), the author, the narrator, and the protagonist must be identical” (5). Drawing on this parallel, I would like to argue that when watching a documentary, a viewer enters a “documentary pact,” to borrow Lejeune’s language.³⁴ When watching a documentary, a viewer can expect to watch a film that relays factual information based on real events. These overlapping goals would make the documentary format an apt genre for an autobiographical film. The call for fidelity to truth and facts may remind us of the second definition of objectivity in my introductory paragraph.

Objectivity is already a contested term in scholarship on documentary filmmaking prior to Varda’s interventions. In his foundational 1991 study on the subject, *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary*, Bill Nichols breaks down three possible claims to objectivity in documentary film:

Objectivity has at least three meanings that bear on the discussion of documentary representation: (1) An objective view of the world is distinct from perception and sensibility of characters or social actors. The objective view is a third-person view rather than a first-person one. It corresponds to something like a normal or commonsensical but also omniscient perspective. (2) An objective view is free of personal bias, self-interest, or self-seeking representations. Whether first or third

³⁴ Mónica Jato also employs the phrase “documentary pact” in her article on testimony in film. See Jato.

person, it conveys disinterestedness. (3) An objective view leaves audience members free to make their own determination about the validity of an argument and to take up their own position in regard to it. Objectivity means letting the viewer decide on the basis of a fair representation of facts. (196)

For Nichols, the documentary pact entails objectivity, which means that a story is told from a detached, omniscient, third-person point of view that allows for agency in the viewer so that they may form an opinion based on the facts that have been presented. Nichols, nevertheless, problematizes this claim to objectivity from the beginning of his study by alluding to Plato's "Allegory of the Cave" from his *Republic* to demonstrate the way in which cinema, even documentary cinema, cannot escape the accusations of illusion. He argues, "It is an *impression* of authenticity based on the reality of representation more than the representation of reality" (author's emphasis, 185). Early film theorist Jean-Louis Baudry identifies this as the very quality of the cinema mechanism, the apparatus, which he directly draws back to Plato stating, "Plato constructs an apparatus very much like sound cinema" ("The Apparatus," 110). Documentary film, although often attempting to relay facts and truths, inherently cannot be free from bias because, after all, as Aufderheide states, it presents an analytical argument and like all films, is highly edited and stylized. Therefore, film by any means is a simulacrum.

Varda's oeuvre scrambles the coordinates of all three claims of objectivity outlined by Nichols. Many Varda scholars and critics have noted Varda's playfulness in her filmmaking and a constant melding of truth with fiction.³⁵ In her 1981 film,

³⁵ For more on Varda and play, see Conway; DeRoo; Rosello; Neupert; Flitterman-Lewis.

Documenteur, for example, Varda weaves autobiographical elements into her fictional film about a French woman played by Sabine Mamou who is living in Los Angeles with her son, played by Agnès Varda's own son, Mathieu Demy, after separating from her husband. These circumstances mirrored Varda's own at the time of her separation to filmmaker, Jacques Demy, so if one is familiar with Varda's biographical details, one sees the similarities. The title is wordplay, which melds the French words *documentaire* (documentary) and *menteur* (liar), demonstrating Varda's affinity for melding truth with fabrications and poking fun at the documentary pact. Varda inserts herself in other ways as well. The protagonist, Emilie, records a voiceover intro to a film in the absence of her filmmaker boss who was supposed to do it. When the recording is played back, it's Varda's own voice in the intro to her 1981 documentary *Mur Murs* that we hear instead. We may also consider her 1985 fiction film, *Sans toit ni loi (Vagabond)*, where Varda inserts her documentarian voice. The beginning of the film starts with an objective narrator voiceover that introduces us to the protagonist, Mona, mirroring the conventions of a documentary. Varda herself has stated that she intended on making a documentary about a woman she had met but, ultimately, decided on making a narrative film.³⁶ On this tendency to insert herself in her films, Varda states, "J'ajoute parfois des commentaires parce que j'ai envie de rester dans le film et avec des spectateurs" ("Sometimes I insert commentary because I'd like to stay within the film and with the spectators," *Varda par Agnès*). Varda sees herself as part of the film itself and as part of its audience. In this

³⁶ See *Varda par Agnès*.

sense, she embodies but removes the tension of all three parts of the cinematic gaze: that of the director, the actor, and the spectator per Laura Mulvey's formulation.

Laura Mulvey outlines this tension in her groundbreaking essay, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," through her now ubiquitous notion of the "male gaze." For Mulvey, the cinematic gaze is constructed by the gaze of the director onto the actors, the actors onto each other, and finally the (male) spectators onto the screen. The desire evoked and pleasure derived from the "male gaze" is twofold: 1) the fetishistic desire for the objectified female body on screen and, 2) the projection of one's ambitions onto the screen subject, the male lead. In embodying all three parts of this gaze, however, Varda refuses to construct a certain reading of this film, rather, in copying herself over and over again through yet another mise-en-abyme, but this time through her directorial, performing, and spectating gazes, she offers myriad readings by dissolving her authorial voice and instead sitting with the spectator as yet another observer to co-construct a reading of a film.

Abandoning the Authorial Voice to Playfully Perform the Self

Les Plages d'Agnès (2008) is Agnès Varda's first expressly autobiographical self-portrait. We have caught glimpses and details of her life before such as in *Les Glaneurs et la glaneuse* (*The Gleaners and I* 2001) where she films her aging body and identifies herself as a "gleaner of images." *Jane B. par Agnès V.* (1988) is a portrait of Jane Birkin, the iconic British actress, as much as it is a portrait of Agnès V., the director. In *Lions, Love... Lies* (1969) Varda comically directs the American independent filmmaker Shirley Clark in playing a version of herself. Later, we would also get glimpses of Varda in

Visages Villages (Faces Places 2017) as she toured the French countryside with French photographer JR. *Varda par Agnès* (2019), whose title has us recall the aforementioned Jane Birkin portrait, is her final posthumously released self-portrait in which she weaves together personal stories from her life with clips from her films and lectures on her filmmaking philosophy. With this gesture, Varda is offering an Akermanian reading of her life, in which to have an accurate account of her life one must merely watch her films.³⁷ Thus, autobiographical accounts of Akerman and Varda, I argue, are intimately and inextricably linked with their filmmaking practices forming palimpsestic references in their oeuvres.

In *Les Plages d'Agnes*, Varda shares her hesitance in making an autobiographical film evident by her sharing very few anecdotes about her upbringing or youth, which she deems irrelevant to an understanding of her. She states,

Tout le monde dit que l'enfance est fondatrice de la structure, je ne sais pas quoi. J'ai pas beaucoup de rapports à mon enfance. C'est pas une référence pour les choses auxquelles je pense, c'est pas une inspiration, enfin je ne sais pas.

Everyone says that childhood is foundational, I don't know what. I don't have much of a connection to my childhood. It's not a reference for the things I think about. It's not an inspiration. Well, I don't know.

The final words illustrate her doubt in recounting her story, which becomes a recurring theme, stating, “le début de ce que je sais plus ou moins de moi” (“The beginning of that which I know more or less about myself”). The “more or less” signals that she isn't very confident in the veracity of these events from her past and that she maintains room for doubt. This makes sense since most of our stories from infancy are retellings by adults as

³⁷ See Akerman.

our ability to remember at such a young age is very limited. The stories and memories we hold of our infancy are relayed to us and reconstructed by others.³⁸ The subject of age, memory, and storytelling is a consistent theme in *Les Plages* and one I will return to later in the chapter. What we can glean from this meditation, however, is the beginning of Varda formulating a way of seeing the world through the eyes of others and her conceptualizing the way we are shaped by others.

In abandoning the form of autobiography and documentary, Varda is abandoning the archive. She is abandoning any claims to objectivity and instead favoring subjectivity. The question of objectivity and subjectivity is one that Varda has applied to time and the way that time is marked in film. Notably, in discussing her 1962 film, *Cléo de 5 à 7*, she differentiates between “objective time” and “subjective time.” Varda stated that she wanted to make the film so that it follows the exact time between Cléo’s exam to determine whether she is ill to the confirmation and acceptance of her fate at the end. She states, “J’ai voulu justement combiner dans le film le temps objectif des pendules qu’on voit partout et puis le temps subjectif, comment Cléo l’éprouve pendant le temps du film” (“I wanted to combine in the film, the objective time of clocks, which we see everywhere and also subjective time, how Cléo experiences it during the film”; *Varda par Agnès*). The film, however, is only ninety minutes long meaning we are missing thirty minutes of

³⁸ Robin Fivush demonstrates how our perceptions of ourselves and memories are shaped by those around us through narrative. She writes, “Substantial research has confirmed that the ways in which parents and children reminisce about the past influences children’s developing autobiographical memories, as well as their sense of self, their theory of mind, and their emotional regulation” (22).

her life.³⁹ If we keep in mind the distinction between objective and subjective time that Varda offers, however, it's easy to see how those 30 minutes can easily get lost in the mundane and quotidian of film time, in subjective time rather than objective time.

Sandy Flitterman-Lewis takes the differentiation between the subjective and objective even further by delving into Varda's ruminations on subject versus object and the way in which women in films factor into this dichotomy, namely that of seeing and being seen. Varda argues that the film transforms Cléo from an object that is looked at to a subject that does the looking. She states, "She goes out into the street...She looks at others. From the object of the look, she becomes the subject who looks" (*Varda par Agnès*) Flitterman-Lewis argues that according to this, "it is only when Cléo refuses to see herself as the world sees her that she is truly capable of self-knowledge" (229). There is a tension here, however, as Varda also posits the opposite, that portraits of ourselves necessitate the stories of others in order to be constructed. The tension can be resolved if we consider Argentine philosopher Maria Lugones' concept of "world-traveling" outlined in *Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes: Theorizing Coalition Against Multiple Oppressions*. Lugones writes, "I think that there many worlds, not autonomous, but intertwined semantically and materially, with a logic that is sufficiently self-coherent and sufficiently in contradiction with others to constitute an alternative construction of the social" (38). Lugones' project is attempting to theorize coalition building among differently oppressed peoples. In her philosophy, there exist contradictory worlds, ones

³⁹ For more on how other scholars have theorized these missing thirty minutes, see Neupert, Flitterman-Lewis.

that correspond to an oppressive gaze and others where one is allowed to exist freely and liberated while recognized as such. In order to see these connections, Lugones argues that one must be willing to “travel” to the other world and see the other through the gaze of that world where one is a valued community member and not portrayed through the stereotypes present in one’s own world or that of the larger cisheteropatriarchal world. Thus, in one world, the patriarchal world where an infantilized Cléo is an object to be looked at, she cannot ascertain any knowledge of herself from the gaze of others. Once she leaves this world and all its accoutrements (e.g., her wig, her baby doll clothing, and her maid), and enters a new world, where women may pose nude for sculptors and the fascination on the street isn’t on the beautiful woman but the frog-eating man, then Cléo can find self-knowledge through others, namely, the soldier, Antoine, who is able to see the “real” her named Florence without the disguise of her celebrity.

If knowledge of oneself is partially formulated through the gaze of the others, the role of the camera is central in framing the narrative that is projected for others to read. The camera plays an important role in Varda’s cinécriture. Her novel uses of the camera are other ways for her to reveal to the viewers the thin veil between reality and fiction and the trouble of faithful depictions in retelling the autobiographical. In speaking about her first camera, she uses the French word *chambre* (room) to refer to the viewfinder, which she shares is how they referred to them “back then” when one had to insert their head under a veil in order to take a photograph. The word *chambre* here conjures up the image and the words of Virginia Woolf and her symbolic “room of one’s own,” as a space marking female creativity and expression. The camera for Varda is that room, that

chambre of feminine creativity. It might also be useful to consider the camera's role in enunciation. The camera is able to offer us many different perspectives and points of view. It can dictate how close or distant we may be to the film subject. Varda uses the camera as first-person/subject of enunciation, second-person/subject of enunciated, third-person/hypothetical being thereby obscuring a singular authorial voice.

Les Plages begins on a beach, an immensely important landscape evident by the title of the film, where Varda and her crew are setting up a mirror art installation. Mirrors of varying shapes and sizes are scattered across the beach. Varda is uncomfortable with the self-referential subject matter of her film. She states that she is more intrigued by filming others, so she focuses on introducing her crew to us by using the mirrors, an act that she refers to as "spoken credits." The mirrors are a playful nod to the self-reflexive aspect of the project, but by using the mirrors to film others rather than herself, she is revealing the way in which portraits of ourselves are, in fact, shaped by the points of views of others, which are reflected back onto us and of which we can reflect back onto them.



Figure 5. Film still from Agnès Varda's *Les Plages d'Agnès*

This is the first mise-en-abyme presented to the viewer, a recurring stylistic choice.

Through this act of filming others, Varda immediately frees us from the bind of thinking of the self-portrait and autobiography through a limiting narcissistic lens, in which we are primarily concerned with telling our own story. Rather, she points us towards the ways in which our story involves those of the communities around us as well as the many landscapes and objects which have shaped us. It is as Varda states in this opening, “Si on ouvrait les gens, on trouverait des paysages” (If we were to open people, we would find landscapes”).

Interesting to note, is that there are two cameras in this scene and throughout the film, one wielded by Varda which captures her point of view, and the other by her cinematographer. The latter situates her as one of the characters in the film and as the focus of study, while the former reminds us that we are, in part, to consume this world

from her point of view. Recalling the first definition of objectivity by Nichols, the objective camera is one that attempts to seek truth in the subject and retains a third-person omniscient point of view to maintain the distance necessary to refrain from bias. In this scene of *Les Plages*, in addition to the many introductions of the others involved in the making of the film who often remain off camera and behind the scenes, we get two distinct points of view intertwined. By having the cinematographer film her, Varda presents the detached and distant unbiased third-person point of view, but it is quickly intercut with images from Varda's own camera capturing her body in reflections in the first-person point of view. Playing with the conventions of documentary and autobiography, Varda simultaneously presents the viewers with the subjectivity necessary of autobiography according to Lejeune but quickly disrupts the objectivity necessary of documentary according to Nichols. The shift between cameras and, thus, points of view, positions Varda as filmmaker but also performer.

In *Les Glaneurs et la glaneuse*, she ruminates on the technological advances of the digital camera, which will allow her to now enter spaces that would otherwise be inaccessible. It also allows her to conduct intimate interviews with her film subjects who are less intimidated by a smaller camera and lack of a formal crew. The digital camera also gave her the ability to freely travel and film. In contrast to her 1975 *Daguerréotypes*, where she was bound to a cord inserted through her mailbox slot confining her to a one block radius from her home, her use of the camera in other films allow her to move around freely to capture similar intimate stories. This intimacy also translates to what she wishes to share with others. The camera allows her to share her own bodily experiences

with her viewers. In her *Visage Villages*, she playfully uses the camera to capture her failing eyesight and offer us a very literal point-of-view shot. In this scene, Varda wears glasses like the ones on an autorefractor at an optometrist's office. The camera captures a blurry group of people holding letters on amphitheater steps simulating an eye exam. Unsatisfied, she asks them to bounce the letters up and down and states, "Now I'm happy. That's what I see." It is as if the viewer is also at an eye exam, and we get an intimate glimpse at Varda's waning eyesight. Despite losing one of the greatest assets in her artmaking, she finds comfort in still being able to portray what she wishes precisely because it is an imperfect image. The autobiographical, for Varda, doesn't merely communicate to the viewer the circumstances of her life but brings them into the intimate play of it as a character, as participant and as contributor. Varda's playful cinécriture allows her to turn a self-portrait into a triptych, a triptych of the filmmaker, camera, and spectator. She states, "si on veut cadrer des spectateurs, il faut regarder dans le camera" ("If you want to frame the spectators, you need to look into the camera" *Varda par Agnès*). Varda is reversing the order of the apparatus by refracting the image, turning the lens of the camera from the actor to the spectator. Truth doesn't lie in its representation of the film subject but on the framing of the audiences. This inversion allows for the film to read the audience in addition to being read by the audience, which creates a co-constructive narrative space.

The camera's significance in documentary filmmaking can be traced to the Soviet filmmaker, Dziga Vertov, whose "kino-eye" revolutionized not only the use of the camera but the conceptualization of its role in filmmaking. Vertov states, "kino-eye is

understood as ‘that which the eye doesn’t see’/ as the microscope and telescope of time/as the negative of time...all methods and means that might serve to reveal and show the truth.” Though this appeal to truth is largely shaped by the kino-eye, the truth isn’t taken at face value by Vertov. He states, “not kino-eye for its own sake, but truth through the means and possibilities of the film-eye, i.e., *kinopravda* (“film truth”))” and thus the filmmaker has the ability of “making falsehoods into truth” (41). Vertov is embracing the capacity of film to create truths, which some have called illusory, but others might refer to as fabulatory. The glimpse through Varda’s camera to see her blurry bouncy vision as it is through her real eyes to portray it to us is a kind of “film truth.” She is not capturing the outside world as it is but shows the multiplicities in how we can view and experience the world as individuals and the way in which the camera can facilitate such an exchange by giving us an intimate reenactment of a truth.

This playful scene in *Visages Villages* illustrates the way in which the camera is also a double; it is a double of the human eye. Perhaps not completely in contrast to Vertov’s assertion of “film truths,” the camera and, by extension, cinema, is often seen as a tool of illusion. Sarah Kofman in *Camera Obscura: Of Ideology*, likens it, again, to “Plato’s cave,” but further adds: “Camera obscura: this was also, in certain monasteries, the place where monks disciplined themselves, a dark place where sexual prohibitions were transgressed, and where everything that was meant to be hidden took place. It is the very symbol of *the veil*” (my emphasis; 14). For Kofman, the camera obscura is an apt symbol for the way in which ideology is illusory. She states, “ideology represents real relationships veiled, under cover” (Kofman 14). Vision, and the sensual in general, of

which the cinema engages to varying degrees, has often been linked to the illusory. Plato regarded these objects in space, which we perceive through our senses, as illusory, as mere instantiations of their essences that transcend the physical, existing only in the Platonic heaven of Forms (Plato 113-21). Descartes also rejected the sensual; beginning his meditations by doubting all that he feels, smells, and sees as reality. He finds a way out of this doubt through the simple axiom, “I think therefore I am” (Descartes 18).

This “I” that helps Descartes find a way to reconcile his doubts, however, is one that French linguist Émile Benveniste complicates. Benveniste posits that pronouns only derive meaning in the discursive moment meaning the moment in which they are uttered: “I signifies ‘the person who is uttering the present instance of the discourse containing *I* ... *I* can only be identified in the instance of discourse that contains it and by that alone.” Meanwhile “you” is derived by “introducing the situation of ‘address’ ... the individual spoken to in the present instance of discourse containing the linguistic instance of *you*” (“The Nature of Pronouns” 218). Benveniste refers to these discursive characters as the subject of enunciated (*énoncé*) and subject of enunciation (*énonciation*), respectively. Roman Jakobson, following Benveniste, also accounts for the indexical nature of these pronouns in “Shifters, Verbal Categories, and the Russian Verb.” He uses the linguistic term “shifters” to designate the words whose significance changes or shifts according to the context in which they are uttered. Proper nouns pose another problem, however; are they shifters, words that change given a context? They seem to mark something more concrete than pronouns. In *Naming and Necessity*, Saul Kripke regards proper nouns as “rigid designators” or words whose meaning isn’t necessarily dictated by a context

making them slightly less shifty than a pronoun. Varda's affinity with the plurality of her selves is highlighted by the use of the proper noun, which has a rigid meaning in every context in which it is used. In abandoning the shifty "I" and employing the proper noun, Varda is not tied to the authorial weight of the "I," but, instead, entertains the way in which these many versions of herself presented on screen all refer to a different "Agnès" throughout time, which is not presented linearly in the film. It jumps from her childhood and adolescence to her present old age. These multiplicitous bodies, these many Agnèses, all circle back to the one, the Varda. Although I am not a linguist nor particularly well-versed in semiology, references to these theorists mark the connections made by a former me and an intellectual web of past selves that I'm tracing in my writing. I weave the tapestry of my knowledge production for you in this act of thinking and writing.

Varda departs from Lejeune's "autobiographical pact" by weaving the stories of others who, like mirrors, are able to reflect back aspects of her life that she has forgotten or cannot continue to hold in her memory. She forfeits her authorial voice, something not very *auteur* of her, to give voice to others. She does this by turning the camera away from her and, rather, turning it towards her friends, family, and past collaborators. While this may sound to align with the conventions of "regular documentary" where "experts" are interviewed on the subject as defined at the beginning of this chapter, Varda's interviewees and Varda herself do not regard these interviews as expressing any facts or truths. In fact, these interviews often focus on the limitations of truth by calling attention to their old age and imperfect memory. When interviewing an old friend, Linou, who is in her 80s as well, Varda asks her if she recalls the fishing they did so many years ago.

Linou responds, “Je me souviens oui, mais vaguement, voyez, parce que là vous savez, j’ai 82 ans. La mémoire, elle me fait un peu défaut” (“I remember, yes, but vaguely. See, because as you know, I’m 82 years old and my memory fails me”), to which Varda responds with sarcasm in her voice, “Joli façon de dire” (“Nice way to put it”). What the English translation fails to capture is the complexity in meaning. The French word *défait* can have many negative meanings like fail, fault, lack, and defect, but as a synonym to the word *manquer*, it also means “to miss.” Memory, for Linou, is something that is failing and lacking but also something that she misses and that misses her. Varda’s facetious response further underscores the complexity and difficulty embedded within memory and her own difficult relationship with it, which Linou hints is something that Varda would also be intimately aware of as they’re both in their *troisième* age or third age.

Aging is central to Varda’s self-portrait in *Les Plages*. Varda begins the film with a short monologue: “Je joue le rôle d’une petite vielle, rondouillarde et bavarde, qui raconte sa vie” (“I am playing the role of a little old lady, pleasantly plump and chatty who tells the story of her life”). This sentence perfectly sums up the important interplay between performativity, play, and aging in Varda’s self-portrait. Dominique Bluher credits Varda with creating a new cinematic genre that weaves together autobiographical narrative and what Bluher calls “performative self-portraits.” Varda abandons any fidelity to genre and truths through a serious yet playful engagement with performativity. Performance studies scholar Diana Taylor makes a key distinction between an official memory held by institutions such as libraries or official government records, which she

refers to as the “archive,” and that of cultural memory transmitted by “embodied memory” or performance, which she calls the “repertoire.” For Taylor, performance is an “act of transfer” which transmits cultural knowledge. The archive is rigid, resists change and is deemed “official” by an institutional power. The repertoire shifts and grows with the culture that ascribes it value through “embodied memory” and “acts of transfer.”⁴⁰ By “playing the role of a little old lady,” Varda situates this film in the repertoire of cultural memory by playfully performing the act of remembering. As she performs her monologue, Varda walks backwards to mimic the rewinding motion of time. The act of walking backward enacts the rewinding of the film itself, which is to say it rewinds time as she performs the act of memory. She calls into question her authorial position as a “recounter,” to playfully draw on the French word *raconter* (to tell, recount), which stresses not the storyteller nor narrator but the act of storytelling.

In “playing the role of the plump talkative old lady,” Varda is also playing on the stereotypes associated with such depictions of oldness. On one hand, it recalls the old body that causes “instant repulsion” due to its confrontation with “decrepitude, ugliness, and ill-health” (40) that Simone de Beauvoir speaks of in *The Coming of Age*. Yet, the plump and talkative nature of her old body doesn’t conjure Julia Kristeva’s abject body of the corpse that reminds us of our inevitable death because this old body is alive and lively.⁴¹ Varda ruminates on her aging body throughout her oeuvre. In *Les Glaneurs*, she

⁴⁰ I will engage in a more in-depth discussion on Taylor’s work in Chapter 3, but for more on the archive and the repertoire, see Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire*.

⁴¹ “The Corpse, seen without God and Outside of science, is the utmost of abjection. It is death injecting life” (Kristeva, *Powers* 4).

films her aging hands and she remarks that these are the body's signs that death is near: "Et mes mains qui me dissent que c'est bientôt la fin" ("And my hands that tell me that the end is near," *Les Glaneurs*). However, in this same meditation, Varda states "Ce n'est pas: Ô rage, Ô désespoir, Ô vieillesse ennemie. Ce serait peut-être même vieillesse amie" ("It's not oh rage, oh despair, oh old age my enemy. It might even be old age my friend"). Varda, well-versed in theater due to her time with the Théâtre National Populaire, is quoting the famous monologue of Don Diège in Pierre Corneille's *Le Cid*. In the play, Don Diège is lamenting his body which has given over to age. He views his aging body as a betraying force, which leaves him unable to defend himself and, ultimately, ashamed of his weakness. In citing this monologue and putting forth a revision in which oldness becomes friend and not enemy, Varda isn't only abandoning any portrayals of old age as weakness but is also going against a heavily masculinized and patriarchal conception of the body and its role in the world. Rather, the lively old lady we see on screen that is plump and talkative moves us away from the figure of the corpse and the feeble old former valiant warrior of Diège into a more creative and feminist portrait of aging bodies.

The question of age and time that concerns the past, present, and future also points to the normative ways in which we relegate these moments in time as territories belonging to a specific period of our life. The future belongs to the youth.⁴² Children have very little to remember since they are closer in time to their inception, they can only look forward in time, into the future. Meanwhile, the past belongs to the elderly. They are

⁴² Here I am thinking with queer theorist Lee Edelman who makes this bold claim in *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* when he refers to the future as "kid stuff."

closer to death and thus have a very limited future ahead of them, so they are relegated to living in their past. Of this Varda states, “Essayez de se revoir enfant c’est courir à contre sens. S’imaginez être vieille c’est amusant. Comme une sale blague” (“Trying to see yourself as a child is like running backwards. Imagining yourself as old is amusing. Like a dirty joke”; *Les plages*) In this case, Varda reverses this normative timeline. Childhood belongs to the past, it is counter to time, it is a running backward. Aging isn’t associated with melancholy but reveals the immaturity of reveling in a dirty joke. Although she is an old lady recalling her past, leaving this film to her grandchildren as she is unsure how close death truly is, her self-portrait ends with a creative call. This creativity is what Simone de Beauvoir details as the way to escape the melancholy that comes with old age through what she refers to as one’s “projects.” She elaborates, “our projects aim at goals that lie beyond our death” (Beauvoir, *Coming of Age* 379). Varda’s long oeuvre is in line with Beauvoir’s philosophy in that she never stopped creating. Varda states of herself, “la vieille cinéaste se transformerait en jeune plasticienne” (“The old filmmaker is transformed into a young visual artist”; *Les plages*), indicating that her career has only expanded and that creativity within her continues to grow and the old becomes young with each new creative endeavor. She made this clear by continuing to work up until her death with the release of her last film in 2019, the same year of her death at 91.

Memory for Varda is something tied explicitly to age. In the beginning, the inability to recall something unclearly, something “more or less” accurate, is due to her youth. Later, as we can see through the example of Linou, is it a question of old age. In *Les cent et une nuits de Simon Cinéma* (1995), Varda tells the story of Monsieur Cinema

whose memory is failing. Varda's inspiration is this inability to remember faithfully. She states,

I have a bad memory, so I thought, what if you're very old, and even though you love film, you just pick this image and that image, and you mix up names and the titles of films...Because of that bad memory, which leads to very subjective emotion, I thought we should work on that, on a man who's so old he grabs this and that. (Anderson 180)

The film's plot revolves around trying to recreate the history of cinema, but the issue is that Monsieur Cinema cannot remember it accurately, so he mixes things up and confuses actors and films. For Varda, the cinematic archive is fragmented and incomprehensible because of her ideas around subjective versus objective time and their close ties to aging. Varda's playful and performative acts of walking backwards occur during moments when she attempts to recall something from the past. Film scholar Kate Ince writes, "The bodily mime of the process of remembering is Varda's personal contribution to the multiple 'living' installations that feature in her film" (608). This commitment to an embodied representation of memory is one way Varda illustrates her relationship to time and her (in)ability to recall the past as she ages. For Varda, time isn't objective and the ability to faithfully recall the past gives way to futile attempts at piecing together fragments of memory into a loyal image.

Varda laments on the impossibility of faithfully recalling and the fragmentation of memories when thinking of her late friend and founder of *Le Théâtre National Populaire* (TNP), Jean Vilar, "L'idée de fragmentation qui correspond vraiment à quelque chose de la mémoire. Est-ce qu'on peut reconstituer ce personnage ce personne de Jean Vilar si exceptionnel?" ("The idea of fragmentation which corresponds really to memory. Can

one reconstitute the exceptional character, the person that was Jean Vilar?"; *Les Plages*)

The question is rhetorical because for Varda the answer is no, one cannot reconstitute a faithful image of such an intimate part of one's life. Andrée, Varda's friend and Jean Vilar's widow, is also losing her memory. Those closest to Vilar cannot recount their memories of him making it impossible to give a "factual" account of such a great person according to Varda since we have established that to paint a portrait of someone is to assemble the stories and images gathered by those around them. Her use of the word "personnage," which translates to "character" such as in one in a novel, brings us back to fiction and the performative. The great persona or character of Vilar and his time as a theater actor means that there is Jean Vilar, the intimate person known to Varda and Andrée, and a Vilar embodied by his many stage personas. Here, again, we can recall that Varda herself is playing a "role" and is a "personnage" in the public imaginary.

For J.L. Austin, performatives are special utterances in language because they do not hold truth value but, instead, can only be understood through felicity. A performative, such as a promise, wishes, or bet, is not judged by whether it is true or false but rather whether the action is performed or not. For example, the performative statement, "I promise to pay you the money I owe you tomorrow" isn't a statement which can be held to the same standard as "Socrates is a man" in which we seek truth value. We judge the former statement based on its felicity: were you paid or not? Was the action performed or not? Were you pleased by the outcome of said action?

Constantine Nakassis stresses, however, another layer to the performative by taking the act of performance literally. He writes, "following Austin...when a stage actor

says, as part of a play, ‘I hereby promise to pay you tomorrow,’ the actor isn’t promising—he is playing at promising” (68). In Nakassis’ formulation, the performative loses its performativity when it is literally put into an act of performance. In this case, we cannot take the performative utterance at face value because its promise, made in the fictional world in which it is uttered, is empty when taken out of that context. Varda the “personnage,” the fictional character of *Les Plages* playing the role of the plump old lady, is the one promising a sincere account of her life. Therefore, following Nakassis, she is only playing at promising to provide a sincere account. In doing so, she is framing herself as an unreliable narrator precisely because of her inability to remember due to her age. For Varda, this isn’t a negative, she refuses to see old age as unproductive, but it is another form of exercising her creative capacity. Her inability to remember has given her creative license to tell new stories.

Delphine Bénézet in her important study on Varda, *The Cinema of Agnès Varda*, positions her as a wanderer, a sort of flaneuse. She writes, “My interpretation of the cineaste passeur views the filmmaker as a mediator not only between the filmed subjects and the spectator, but also between a specific space and time and the moment of the screening” (Bénézet 5). Varda as mediator of space and time locates this film in her old age, which is the constant reference point even though it is a film attempting to trace her past. Her looking back is always one that marks her present time through the act of filmmaking. This marks the self-referential and self-citational aspect of her work and of *Les Plages* in particular. To tell the story of her life is to tell the story of her work by allowing the films speak for themselves and for her.

María Lugones definition of playfulness is helpful for thinking through Varda's own: "the playful attitude involves openness to surprise, openness to being a fool, openness to self-construction or reconstruction and to construction of reconstruction of the 'worlds' we inhabit playfully" (123). For Lugones, a "playful attitude" is important for "world-traveling" and for theorizing coalition building. Here, however, it is helpful for thinking through the ways in which Varda uses her playfulness to form an affective relationship to her viewers. For Lugones, "in attempting to take a hold of oneself and of one's relation to others in a particular 'world,' one may study, examine, and come to understand oneself" (123). As stated earlier in the chapter, Varda is concerned with worldmaking, demonstrating, and reinscribing new meanings through her filmmaking. She is using her work to signify, to create new worlds of relation. Varda playfully constructs and creates affective bridges so that her viewer may cross over and engage with her cinematic worlds. These worlds are intimately linked to herself and facilitate a co-creation of herself along with her viewers. She is "playing the role" but how do we, as viewers, relate to this performance and how do the many images of herself that she presents contradict the "role" that she plays, giving us authority to co-construct alongside her.

Cinécriture as Autotheoretical Methodology

Les Plages can be read neither as a faithful autobiography nor as autofiction, but, rather through the autotheoretical. Her filmmaking practice is one that reflects and studies, but also creates and theorizes. Alex Brostoff and Lauren Fornier define autotheory as "fusing self-representation with philosophy and critical theory, autotheory

moves between ‘theory’ and ‘practice,’ between ‘living,’ ‘thinking,’ and ‘making’” (490). They also move away from the “I” of the sole creator. They write, “In contrast to an ‘auto’ that may appear to imply a narcissistic and solipsistic insularity ... the ‘auto’ of autotheory not only occasions critique but situates subjectivity as inextricable from sociality” (Brostoff and Fornier 494). As previously mentioned, Varda immediately moves us away from the narcissistic “I” by filming and introducing others in her own autobiography as a way to explain what moves her to create. By filming others, she is not only demonstrating the way in which her community shapes her but also the way in which her artistic practice is one bound to the communal.

Varda’s practice of *cinécriture*, or cinematic writing, is an autotheoretical practice. Her portmanteau of *cinéma* and *écriture* (writing) calls to mind Hélène Cixous’ *écriture féminine* in “The Laugh of the Medusa,” in which she calls for a form of embodied writing that is expressly feminine and feminist and challenges phallogocentrism. Cixous exclaims, “who, surprised and horrified by the fantastic tumult of her drives ... hasn’t accused herself of being a monster?” (876). Donna Haraway calls our attention to the fact that the words monster and demonstrate share the Latin root, *monstrare*. She reminds us, “Monsters signify” (Haraway, *A Cyborg Manifesto* 117). Women’s writing and cultural productions not only show, make evident, and warn against the limitations of phallogocentrism, a logos which has at its center the phallus, the masculine, but they also (re)signify in that they engage in worldmaking. Like Lugones’ concepts of “worlds,” Nelson Goodman sought to define “ways of worldmaking” in his 1973 book of the same name. He was focused on the sign systems

which construct the world around us and significantly influence how we read literary and visual worlds as ways of worldmaking.⁴³ Goodman writes, “worldmaking as we know it always starts from worlds already on hand; the making is a remaking” (6). In line with Goodman, Varda’s worldmaking, her cinécriture, takes the preexisting phallogocentric world and reorders, omits, adds, reframes, and resignifies it.

Varda details the meticulous nature of her filmmaking practice:

A well written film is also well filmed, the actors are well chosen, so are the locations. The cutting, the movement, the points-of-view, the rhythm of filming and editing have been felt and considered in the way a writer chooses the depth of meaning of sentences, the types of words, number of adverbs, paragraphs, asides, chapters which advance the story of break it flows, etc. In writing it’s called style. In the cinema style is cinécriture. (Smith 14)

The elaborate methods of her cinécriture, her worldmaking, do not allow a film to default to larger dominant filmic structures. It is important to note that Varda refused to give final cut privileges away, which kept her from working in Hollywood. Varda was careful about every aspect of her filmmaking including who she chose as collaborators and refused to give in to the demands of the studios, who patronized her for her petite stature and for being a woman.⁴⁴

Although both Varda and the French New Wave filmmakers call upon the literary to define their filmmaking, Varda’s filmmaking practice departs from that of auteur cinema as proposed by her contemporaries. While they both appeal to literature, either through the act of writing or through the role of the author, Varda privileges the creative

⁴³ See Berka for more on the reception of Goodman’s “ways of worldmaking.”

⁴⁴ See Varda *Les Plages*.

practice while the *Cahiers du Cinéma* crowd privileges the author and his oeuvre. François Truffaut was known to quote the French novelist Jean Giraudoux and his assertion that “there are no plays, only their authors.”⁴⁵ Varda finds discomfort in this definition of the author as central to the art, which keeps her from identifying with the New Wave’s auteurist inclinations. She admits, “I believe that I do *auteur* cinema, but I don’t really like the word *auteur* if it’s given too limited a meaning. In any case, I always insert myself in my films, not out of narcissism but out of the desire to be honest in my approach” (Amiel 72). While recognizing there are similarities in their approach and that of her peers, the term *auteur* doesn’t really give Varda the language needed to describe her approach. Varda is often referred to as either the “grandmother” or “godmother” of the French New Wave. This gesture recognizes her important and foundational contributions to the French New Wave and their guiding principles and aesthetics. Varda, for example, is the first to employ low budget filming on location and tracking shots in her 1955 *La Pointe Courte*, before those techniques were popularized by Truffaut and Jean-Luc Godard. This matronly designation can also act as an exclusionary measure by not including her as a member but, instead, a precursor even though they are contemporaries working at the same period in time. Cybelle MacFadden reads *Les Plages* as “an attempt to remedy her [Varda’s] marginalization and periphery status in the New Wave” (39). Other scholars have emphasized Varda’s role in the Left Bank Group rather than the Cahiers New Wave. Geneviève Sellier’s groundbreaking feminist reading of the New Wave, *Masculine Singular: The French New Wave*, claims that the Left Bank Group

⁴⁵ For more on Truffaut on auteur cinema see, “François Truffaut interview 1960.”

was the feminist counterpart to the *Cahiers* critics citing Marguerite Duras and Agnès Varda's contributions as demonstrative of this. These two contemporaneous film movements, however, are not clearly demarcated.

Richard Neupert explains in *A History of the French New Wave Cinema* that “definitions of this active cluster of young directors [Left Bank] often concentrate on their differences from the *Cahiers* critics-turned-filmmakers and stress their deeper involvement in aesthetic experimentations, their connections to documentary practice, overt political themes, and increased interest in other arts beyond cinema” (299). Neupert sees the Left Bank as more concerned with the formal elements of cinema, its political potential, and its place in art history. Considering this, Varda's work has more in common with the Left Bank and its aesthetics and politics. Some critics and scholars suggest that Varda was excluded from conversations on the New Wave based on gender, though Varda never seemed to believe that was the case.⁴⁶ In an interview with Françoise Aude and Jean-Pierre Jeancolas, she talked about her exclusion from the French film canon but didn't see it as purely due to gender discrimination (117). As Neupert begins to suggest, this division between the French New Wave can be traced to the fact that many of the directors we group in the New Wave were *Cahiers* film critics. Varda felt uncomfortable and a great distance from the *Cahiers* group because of her lack of film knowledge. She shares meeting the *Cahiers* boys club for the first time:

Chabrol, Truffaut, Rohmer (who had a different name then), Brial, Doniol-Valcroze, and Godard were there that evening. They quoted thousands of films and suggested all sorts of things to Resnais, they all talked fast, chatted brightly,

⁴⁶ See McFadden; Rosenbaum.

and sat everywhere including on the bed. I seemed to be there by mistake, feeling small, ignorant and the only woman among the guys from *Cahiers* (Smith 6-7).

Here, we can see gender resurface, even if Varda does deny this claim. But more importantly it is clear she felt alienated because of her lack of film knowledge. Varda wasn't motivated to make films because of a crisis she saw in a stagnant French film industry, that she knew almost nothing about, as Truffaut and the others were but, instead, was guided for a love of the image, art, and writing as is suggested by her background in photography and her future in installation art. Varda's definition of film authorship, *cinécriture*, demonstrates Varda's commitment to the meticulous creative practice of composing a film, while the Cahiers critics were drawn to its Latin root *augere* or the originator, founder, or creator when speaking of their auteur cinema. The former, *cinécriture*, centers the creative practice, the process of making worlds for its viewers to engage with, while the latter, auteur cinema, holds authorship and the role of creator in greater esteem.

In *Les Plages*, Varda recognizes her role in the New Wave as a part of herself and worldmaking. In one scene, she fills the screen with an image composed of tiny boxes featuring pictures of filmmakers associated with the French New Wave. In this image, we see the murkiness of a distinction between the New Wave and Left Bank filmmakers since she includes Alain Resnais and Jacques Demy, associated with the Left Bank, in her grouping of the New Wave directors. In a pastiche of René Magritte's portrait of the Surrealist artists, *Je ne vois pas la [femme] cachée dans la forêt* (1929), she centers a larger picture of her young self in the middle of the other portraits, giving herself due credit with founding the aesthetic and technique for the movement.



Figure 6. Film still from Agnès Varda's *Les Plages d'Agnès*

Left Bank filmmaker Chris Marker's voiceover, however, asks "et toi, La Varda?" (And you, The Varda?). We can read this question as a hostile one, as a "where do you fit in this canon, or do you?" Or we can read it as one that presses her to define herself in regard to this canon. The fact that she doesn't answer the question and leaves it open points to her unwillingness to engage this demand to define herself.

Varda recognizes that she is doing something entirely different than the *Cahiers* directors. By creating her own term, *cinécriture*, to describe her filmmaking practice instead of considering herself an auteur, she is intentionally distancing herself from the New Wave. She was doing her own thing and, in the manner of Cixous, separates her filmmaking practice from that of the phallogocentrism of the *Cahiers du Cinema* boys club by practicing embodied filmmaking. Philosopher Rosi Braidotti states that "the body or embodiment of the subject is to be understood as neither a biological nor a sociological category, but rather as a point of overlapping between the physical, the symbolic, and the

sociological” (25). The embodiment of a subject for Braidotti doesn’t only mean the body itself but also implicates the way in which one’s physical body is read by others and how it is positioned among these preexisting categories such as those of male, female, man, woman, masculine, or feminine, etc. Varda states, “I thought of all my films as a woman, because I didn’t want to be a ‘false man’ making films. I was trying to make films about what I knew” (Levitin 55).

Varda was making films about women through a woman’s point of view, elucidating what performance scholar Richard Schechner refers to as a “point of contact,” or points of relation for thinking and creating in unison, signaling a kinship among other women and attempting to communicate through these resignifications. Through her *cinécriture*, Varda isn’t merely engaging in storytelling but in collaborative worldmaking by calling on her body and the way it is positioned in the world and how others, mainly other women, relate to this physicality and its sociological and symbolic weight. Her performative, embodied filmmaking practice is one distinguished from the phallogocentrism of her time, namely that of auteur cinema, that finds pluralities in the filmmaking practice. Varda’s exclusion from the canon is due to being a woman, but not in a reductive sexist way, though I’m sure that was present as well. Varda being a woman necessitated a different form of storytelling that was inextricable from her sexed body. Here I am thinking about her film *Daguerreotypes*, which documents the quotidian life of her neighbors and shops in her neighborhood on Rue Daguerre. She recounts that she made this film by slipping the camera wires through her mailbox, since she was unable to travel very far from her home because she had a toddler. The fact that she was a mother,

which necessitated her to remain close to home to take care of her child, prevented her from going out in the world to make films, so she found a creative solution by making a film close to home. This is a clear example of how Varda's womanhood, her embodied sociological and symbolic positioning in the world, directly influenced her filmmaking practice, her cinécriture. Her experiences as a woman also influenced what types of stories she told and how she told them, creating a palimpsest with other stories of pregnancy, motherhood, femininity, and artistry.

In his short story "Borges and I," Argentine poet Jorge Luis Borges details the estrangement of the private self with the celebrity of the artist self. In this confrontation with himself, Borges points to his Other as an uncanny force which attempts to consume him. He is working within mythic representations of doppelgangers, as evil beings who strive to annihilate you and lead you to death.⁴⁷ He writes, "I am destined to perish, definitively, and only some instant of myself can survive in him. Little by little, I am giving over everything to him" (324). Varda ponders this same estrangement of the self in her work. For instance, she is "playing the role of the talkative old lady," the Varda that exists in the public imagination who walks around wearing potato suits or holding a cardboard cutout of herself. She, like Borges, estranges her name in the title of the work to frame this multiplicity. She titles her autobiographical final portrait, *Varda par Agnès* signaling that there exists Varda, the grand artist, and Agnès, the ordinary woman. Unlike Borges' "Borges and I," however, there isn't an indexical "I" of address, but rather the use of proper nouns, her name. This specificity is also seen through the use of corporal

⁴⁷ For more on the doppelganger as a literary motif see Masao; Rogers; Tymms.

instantiations of herself through the bodies of actresses that play younger versions of herself as seen in *Les Plages* or Shirley Clark in *Lions, Love*. The feminist retelling of oneself cannot be so estranged so as to become a disembodied “I” like in Borges’ story but remains rooted in and to the body. She states, “for me, ‘being a woman’ is first of all having the body of a woman. A body not cut up into more or less exciting parts, a body not limited to so-called erogenous zones” (Amiel 74). The body is central to Varda’s work but in a non-essentializing way. Although Varda states that womanhood is absolutely tied to the body one inhabits, she makes a point to not simply reduce woman’s body to mere parts. While this might at first glance seem akin to Trans-Exclusive Radical Feminist arguments for womanhood, which seek to exclude trans women from their definition of woman precisely because they were not born with a “female” body, it is important to note that Varda specifies that the woman’s body is not limited to their “erogenous zones.” By erogenous zones, one can assume that Varda is referring to genitalia and breasts. Here, it is helpful to remember Braidotti’s definition, which intertwined the corporeal with the sociological and symbolic. For Varda, the body of a woman central to being a woman can be seen as Braidotti defines it:

A feminist emphasis on embodiment goes hand in hand with a radical rejection of essentialism. In feminist theory, one *speaks as* a woman, although the subject ‘woman’ is not a monolithic essence...but rather the site of multiple, complex, and potentially contradictory sets of experiences, determined by the overlapping variables such as class, race, age, lifestyle, and sexual preference. (25)

The body that Varda presents us with challenges the male gaze but also allows for multiple ways of being women that aren’t reduced to “erogenous zones” or essentializing conceptions of womanhood, a theme that she frequently challenges in her cinema. For

example, she shows us the experience of a poor woman in *Sans toi ni loi*, a Black woman in *Black Panthers* (1968), and an aging woman in *Les Plages, Les Glaneurs et la glaneuse*, *Varda par Agnès*, and *Visages Villages*.

These multiplicities in experience and the corporal body are ones that are continually challenged and resignified in *Les Plages*. Varda estranges the corporeal body by employing doubles of herself. In her film, she directs actresses in playing younger versions of herself while they share the same frame so that the two Vardas exist in the same plane. The first example takes place in the beginning of the film. She recreates a photograph of her and her siblings playing on a beach. She has child actors play her and her siblings. An old, present-day Varda lays on the sand and shares the black and white photo from her childhood; we then transition to the young actors running on the beach wearing the same swimsuits as Varda and her siblings in the picture. Rather than exist apart from this scene and allow it to play out as a reenactment of her childhood, Varda remains in the frame and begins to play with the children, helping them build sandcastles. In this scene, she shares that her childhood wasn't formative in any way. This moment is shared only through the memory that she experiences upon seeing the photograph; however, it holds no significance for recounting her life. There is no story that accompanies the photograph or the memory but is merely a moment captured by the camera that she has decided to bring back to life through reenactment. In remaining in the frame, Varda is simultaneously maintaining closeness and distance. She is physically close to her younger self played by an actress, but her feelings are distant, and she has her audience share that distance by continuing to exist in the same frame as her actress.

The second Varda the audience encounters is her as a young adult, a budding artist and art history student at the prestigious École du Louvre. A young actress playing Varda sits alongside the Seine while writing in a notebook. According to the mythology of the film, the older Varda has just sailed in on a boat from her childhood village, and the setting for her first film, *La Pointe Courte*, Sète, a small seaside village in the south of France. She floats along the Seine while staring at this younger version of herself. She stares lovingly at her young self, played by Anne-Laure Manceau, who dons Varda's signature burgundy bowl cut. In this scene, Varda narrates an ambiguously fictional moment in her life. We watch the young Varda in a confrontation with a "hippie" over her art books. As this scenario unfolds, Varda narrates the premise of her 1971 film, *Nausicaa*. In this scene, Varda is not only (possibly) reenacting a moment in her own life but a moment in her own life as it has already been portrayed in one of her films. Here, we have several instances of doubles, that of Varda and her doppelganger and of the two films, which continue to elude the viewer, not giving a definitive answer as to whether this is a true event or not. Is it a reenactment of real life or of the film?

The third instance involves the young adult Varda as she writes the screenplay to her first film, *La Pointe Courte*. In this scene, she sits at a table writing in the alleyway of her Rue Daguerre home, which by this point we have become well-acquainted with. Unlike the other two instances, this young Varda is translucent, merely a phantom of a former self. The shot cuts to a reverse shot of her hands writing in the notebook, but these hands are wrinkled and liver spotted; these are the hands of the older Varda. The two Varda's are united as one at the precise moment when Varda becomes a filmmaker, when

she writes her first screenplay. Her past self becomes blurry like her memory of this former self. Perhaps this explains why the earlier scene on the Seine isn't quite as straightforward as well. Is this a scene that happened in real life, or has she also believed her own stories resulting from fictionalized selves as told in her previous films? The merging of the young Varda with the older Varda demonstrates the way in which this creation of herself is informed by her past and future selves and has culminated in the act of filmmaking and in another body of hers, her filmic body, her *corps* and corpus.

In these three instances outlined above, Varda exists in the same frame or scene as the actresses playing her. The use of the doppelganger in these instances isn't meant to illustrate a tension within the self as it had for Borges. It isn't meant to play out an internal struggle or show the existence of an alter ego that Varda employs. By including both Vardas in the same plane and same frame, she is splintering the mimetic illusion of portraying oneself on film. She isn't promising faithful reenactments of her past for us to project ourselves onto; we aren't meant to feel a tenderness for a young Varda as she states this wasn't formative or important for her own development. Rather, she is inviting us to engage in these constructions of her life and reconcile, for ourselves, what we can glean from these images. This doubling act blurs the line between reality. Where we hold the two Vardas: Varda, the master director, and Varda as she portrays herself on film.

Self-Citationality as Palimpsest

In *Varda par Agnès*, Varda focuses on her filmmaking philosophy. Like in *Les Plages*, Varda refuses to give us a chronological telling of her life, and instead focuses on giving us an account of her films. While many traditional autobiographical films focus on

the intimate details of the person, for Varda, these intimate details pertain to her work and not necessarily her autobiography. By doing this, Varda is appealing to the body of her work and engaging in a practice of self-citatoriality. She draws from own oeuvre to tell her story and uses her filmography as database. Additionally, through this practice of citation and intertextuality, Varda is building a web of knowledge that engages with her self-expository practice. Of citatoriality, Nakassis writes, “citations weave together different events into one complex act. The citation reanimates other events of discourse, presenting them in a context alien to their original utterance...Citations are interdiscursive acts that are reflexive about that very fact (56). Nakassis illustrates how reflexivity is inherent to citatoriality if the citation is aware of its place in this interdiscursive act. Citations also present us with yet another mimetic effect; it reproduces the same event in a different context. In *Les Plages*, Varda (re)presents us with short clips from her filmography at various points to explain a certain period in her life and how it shaped her filmmaking in that moment. Rather than simply tell us the story of her life in the context of this period, she uses her films to denote that very moment in time. She is not simply recalling the moment but replaying it for us through her films. In this way, she illustrates that her film body is her own body, herself.

Varda’s filmic corpus is also intertwined with that of French artists, filmmakers, and writers. She traces a genealogy of her formation as a thinker and creator. Citations in *Les Plages* include the monologue from *El Cid*, Gentile Bellini’s *The Miracle of the Cross at the Bridge of San Lorenzo* (1500), and four of René Magritte’s pieces, *Le faux miroir* (1935), *Les amants* (1928), and *Je ne vois pas la (femme) cachée dans la forêt*

(1929). What is important to note is that all these citations are of works by men. In *Living a Feminist Life*, Sara Ahmed calls upon a feminist “citational practice,” which she refers to as creating “feminist memory.” She refuses to cite “white men,” by which she means those who structure and defend institutions which continue to marginalize anyone who is non-white, able-bodied, cisgender, heterosexual, etc. In Varda’s case, she is explicitly citing “white men,” but is it possible that these citations can still “make communities” via cultural productions in the way that Ahmed envisions where she states that the genealogies of knowledges she is invested in tracing “is a way of thinking about how books make communities” (17).

Although these citations are of white men who uphold oppressive white cisheteropatriarchal institutions, Varda reconstructs the meaning and context of her citations. Citations are replicas of the thing in a different time and place. Nakassis notes that “any citational act depends on inscribing a difference, or gap, between the very acts that are made iconic with each other” (56). In Varda’s citations, she implicates herself in the citational act rewriting and reinscribing the meaning of the original thereby turning them into sexts. Her citation of Bellini, for example, has her small young body in front of crowd of men which art historian Felton Gibbons has identified as the self-portraits of Bellini and other notable contemporaries of the Italian Renaissance (57). By standing in front of these “great men,” Varda isn’t necessarily situating herself in the same canon or attempting to include herself, but rather changing the meaning of the very painting. By changing the time, place, and gender, she is playing a joke on the idea of canonicity. She further does this through her use of the camera. She doesn’t paint herself into it or over it

but uses new technology situating the photograph in the present and the future. The contrast of gender also relies on the playful nature of this performative gesture. Varda isn't comparing herself to these men but rather shows how she exists outside of this canon because of her gender but also due to her creative vision. Varda shows that she is comically out of place not only in time and gender but in methodology. This is what Judith Butler regards as philosopher Luce Irigaray's "radical citational practice." Butler writes,

No wonder then that the feminine appears for Irigaray only in *catachresis*, that is, in those figures that function improperly, as an improper transfer of sense, the use of a proper name to describe that which does not properly belong to it, and that return to haunt and coopt the very language from which the feminine is excluded (*Bodies That Matter* 37).

In citing Bellini's painting, Varda is coopting its language to resignify the meaning and context behind it, so that after one views Varda's version, one cannot help but think of Varda and her petite profile when looking at the original. In citing these male artists, Varda is reinscribing the canon with a feminist and feminine language through unapologetic displays of the female body.

In an interview, Hélène Cixous draws a parallel between the creative process and pregnancy: "I think that the terms and metaphors of pregnancy, etc., are completely applicable in this case [her writing process]" (*Hors Cadre* Interview" 30). The use of the female body here is a metaphor for the creative practice that women must birth according to Cixous. The image of a body within a body that the idea of pregnancy evokes is reminiscent of Varda's love of mise-en-abymes. In particular, she is a big fan of using the Droste effect. One example is the famous scene from *Cléo de 5 à 7* where Cléo

descends the stairs to a room with two parallel mirrors. The result is an infinite amount of Cléos staring at herself admiringly. In the final scene of *Les Plages*, Varda employs this technique. She sits in her courtyard holding a picture frame with a photograph of her in the exact position she is currently sitting in, then there's a photo of that photo and then another and another.



Figure 7. Film still from Agnès Varda's *Les Plages d'Agnès*

Her voiceover remarks, "Je me souviens pendant que je vie" (I remember while I live"). The frame is a metaphor for her craft, that of framing a scene and capturing it and is in a sense a reenactment of cinema itself. This entire act of attempting to recount her life and packaging it in a film was only one frame of many. Varda's statement is in the present, she remembers as she lives, but her life is encapsulated by these multiple frames and fragments that make up her life that have been captured in this film. She has already noted that memory is faulty, and that old age and time in itself strips away the mind's ability to remember faithfully. If her films do embody her and are a continuation of her lived life, something that is evidenced by the posthumous release of her final film, then

living remains in her films and her films are an extension of her corporal, embodied self. On this final scene of her film, Varda shares, “making this film is a way of living on, living and remembering” (Warwick 194).

Varda’s use of the documentary genre for her self-portrait has its viewers assume that we must enter the “documentary pact” in which we are promised a film that relays only facts with full certainty. As an 80-year-old woman, however, Varda understands that this is an insincere promise to her viewers because memory is unreliable, her memory is unreliable. She can only offer fragments of truths which are further refracted between multiple mirrors, multiple eyes, multiple cameras and distorted by every reflection. What she grants us instead is the opportunity to co-create, to *cinécrit* the film along with her. In doing so, the viewer makes up yet another layer of this mise-en-abyme of relationality.

Her worldmaking endeavor is only possible through her autotheoretical practice of *cinécriture*, which results in her self-citational palimpsest. Her stress on the process of filmmaking considers her audience and their respective role in the viewing and decoding of the film. The palimpsest presupposes points of relation, “points of transfer” through different axes of relation whether that be between creator and audience, performers and director, or between directors, artists, etc. In creating these new worlds, Varda is reinscribing the world as we experience it and distorting its current organization to offer new possibilities and new readings of women, aging women in particular. Her citational practice demonstrates a feminist citational practice by providing new embodied readings of these texts, transforming them into sexts. Magritte’s “femme cachée” is no longer the

passive object at the center to be looked at, but rather the center of the movement and its creator.

It is important to call attention to the title of the title of her film, *Les Glaneurs and la glaneuse*. She makes a point to identify the woman gleaner (*la glaneuse*) central to the film. In an oft-cited scene, Varda embodies French painter Jules Breton's *La Glaneuse* (1877). She drops the wheat to replace it with her camera. The camera is the tool she cleverly and playfully uses in order to disrupt normative narrative self-portraiture. She does so with her cinécriture, a feminine and feminist autotheoretical practice defined against the masculinist auteur theory of her contemporaries. Her embodied and palimpsestic filmmaking practice disrupts normative narrative self-portraiture through her corps and her corpus, which are intimately intertwined. In doing so, Varda is redefining what it means to create, influence, and change culture and is offering new forms of filmic relationality.

Chapter 3

Queer Reen(act)ments in Albertina Carri's *Los Rubios*

The queer art of failure turns on the impossible, the improbable, the unlikely, and the unremarkable. It quietly loses and in losing it imagines other goals for life, for love, for art, and for being.

Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*

Introduction: Portrait of the Young Director as Her Parents

In 1977 Ana Maria Caruso and Roberto Carri, two prominent Argentine intellectuals involved with the *montoneros* movement—a far left *guerilla* movement—were systematically disappeared by the military *junta* during the so-called Dirty War (1974-1982).⁴⁸ Their daughter Albertina Carri was only three years old when they disappeared and hardly remembers them or the circumstances surrounding their disappearance. In response to the loss of her, Carri attempts to trace the events surrounding their disappearance in her genre-defying documentary-like film, *Los rubios* (*The Blonds* 2003). A log line might read: Director Albertina Carri searches to uncover the truth about her parents who were disappeared during the Argentine Dirty War. This log line would obscure the detours and critiques, explicit and hidden, that make up the film. My analysis of the film abandons this log line, as I argue that it isn't a quest for truth (it is abundantly clear that Carri doubts that there is *a* truth to uncover as interviews

⁴⁸ The Argentine Dirty War marks the time between 1976-1983 when Argentina was under a military dictatorship. This coup was in response to the political legacy of President Juan Perón and his successors. Perón is one of the most important political figures of political Argentine history. During the war, political dissidents such as Peronistas and Montoneros (those allied with Juan Peron's populist ideology), and *descamisados* and *cabecita negras* ("shirtless" and "little black heads," terms used to describe the working class and non-white in Argentina) were kidnapped, tortured, and killed by the military junta. An overwhelming amount of these political prisoners were murdered and their bodies dumped into mass graves without the possibility of ever reuniting the bodies with their families. Approximately ten to thirty thousand people were "disappeared" during this time. For a more detailed history of the Argentine dictatorship and the "Dirty War," see *Nunca Más*; Brennan.

and official documents are rife with contradictions). Furthermore, it is likely she will never know what exactly happened to her parents as their bodies will probably never be recovered. As discussed in chapter one, truth isn't something one can necessarily lay claim to and it is even more so the case when any appeal to truth through official archives have been destroyed by the State itself as is the case in Argentina. The film reenacts this futile attempt at remembering because, as scholar Joanna Page states, "*Los rubios* makes no attempt to recreate the experience of loss for the viewer precisely because it is inaccessible to Albertina" (34). Carri notes in the film that she is unsure whether her memories are truly hers or constructions that she's pieced together from multiple accounts by her sisters and other relatives. Rather, the film is an exploration into the self and the quest of a young woman to define herself despite her past and legacy, or the political future she is ultimately left to inherit from her parents and their generation. A search into the self and seeking to identify oneself despite how one is interpellated is, after all, fundamental to queerness. In this chapter, I will demonstrate how Carri's *Los rubios* is part of a queer archive that she constructs through her autobiographical filmmaking practice, a form of palimpsest.

For Teresa de Lauretis, a queer text is a work that "not only works against narrativity, the generic pressure of all narrative toward closure and the fulfillment of meaning, but also pointedly disrupts the referentiality of language and the referentiality of images" (244). Carri's film is a queer text in the way that de Lauretis defines it through its failure to document and its refusal to provide the spectator any pleasure in fulfilling the narrative. The film purports to be about her parents but it is really about herself and

the “evidence” that is provided in the film such as photographs and testimonies are never contextualized or given much attention. The images present in this case, never fully line up with the language presented, puzzling the viewer and forbidding them any closure in the narrative. Carri herself cannot access closure so why should the spectator? De Lauretis pushes the queer text further by adding that what differentiates the queer text from an art-film, which may also disrupt referentiality, is that it “carries the inscription of sexuality as something more than sex” (244). In her reading of Djuna Barne’s *Nightwood* she states that sex in the novel “is sexuality as enigma without solution and trauma without resolution” (245). While there isn’t any sex in *Los rubios*, there exists the realm of the sexual and traumatic without resolution in her personal narrative of loss that is bound to a larger national narrative of historical amnesia.

Michele Aaron argues that New Queer Cinema has several defining characteristics where it “give[s] voice to the marginalized” and,

[T]he films are unapologetic about their characters’ faults ... the films defy the sanctity of the past ... the films frequently defy cinematic convention in terms of form, content, and genre ... NQC also incorporates a defiance of the sanctity of mainstream cinema history ... the films in many ways defy death (4).

Los rubios satisfies all of the requirements outlined by Aaron. Carri’s film is situated in failure, it stems from failure, it seeks to disrupt cinematic conventions by presenting us with an imperfect daughter who is unable to mourn correctly and who would prefer to tell outlandish stories of her parent’s disappearance where, in these retellings and (queer) reenactments, her parents defy death and are abducted by aliens, perhaps one day to be found and returned from their long space travels.

Rosalind Galt proposes a reading of Argentine queer cinema through the lens of default by drawing a parallel between the rise of queer cinema in Argentina coinciding with the failing economy. For Galt, to default on debt is to fail and to refuse to cosign on oppressive vertical structures of power. Like De Lauretis, Galt identifies queer cinema in its refusal to abide by narrativity: “Default cinema derails meaning, linearity, identity ... What is queer about [these films] is their refusal to make sense, their jamming of the gears of social productivity” (66). In addition to Carri’s refusal to engage with narrativity and exposition, she refuses to make a documentary that may be used by the state to advance the narrative it wishes to portray about its past and heroic martyrs, washing away its own role in the disappearances.

In alignment with the above theorists, the queerness of Carri’s *Los rubios* is found first and foremost in her departure from traditional documentary form.⁴⁹ In her “documentary,” Carri queers all these norms. Carri abandons an objective point of view and mixes fiction with reality. She pays little attention to the talking head interview form, rather the camera shifts attention as the voices are speaking, which creates alternative disembodied, queer associations to truth. She hires an actress to play Albertina (the daughter of the disappeared) while Carri (the director) remains present in the film. They often appear in the same frame, either discussing the film or showing Carri directing the actress during a reenactment. Instead of an educational animation, she incorporates fictionalised reenactments using Playmobil toys. Carri uses a transgressive playful performative cinema to communicate the trauma the loss of her parents has left her. In

⁴⁹ See Aufderheide; Nichols.

chapter one, I discussed the difficulties of memory due to age (young and old) and the way in which Agnès Varda uses play to reconstruct a narrative of herself through her *cinécriture*. In this chapter, Carri also uses play but, in this case, to engage with the trauma of the loss of her parents. The inappropriate use of play to discuss a serious topic is part of the irreverent humor Carri engages, which has resulted in much critique from critics and scholars.⁵⁰ This use of play and irreverent humor is a queer affect that Carri uses to ultimately engage with the queer parts of herself—these queer parts are evident in her affiliations or (disaffiliations), the structure of the film, her personal life, and her lesbian pornographic filmography. In this chapter, I provide a queer reading of *Los rubios* by drawing on Jack Halberstam’s notions of “queer failure” and “suspect memorializations;” queer understandings of the archive by José Esteban Muñoz, Heather Love, and Anne Cvetkovich; and explorations into the film’s engagement with camp. I will show the way in which the two Carris, the child of the disappeared and the lesbian pornographer, come together as one. I will demonstrate how this film, which seemingly isn’t very queer, provides an ephemeral archive of a queer *nuevo testimonio* grounded in the failure of documentation that offers layers to the palimpsestic relationship between Carri’s films.

Methodology: Disappearing the “Bad Script”

Diana Taylor’s foundational *The Archive and the Repertoire* (2003) includes an overview of Argentine grassroots organizing that occurred during and after the Dirty War (1983), namely that of the Mothers and Grandmothers of Plaza Mayo and HIJOS (Hijos e

⁵⁰ I will discuss some of these critiques later in the chapter but see also Kohan; Sarlo.

Hijas por la Identidad contra el Olvido y el Silencio/Sons and Daughters Against Forgetting and Silencing). She argues that these movements “developed along clear generational lines around the disappeared: grandmothers (*las Abuelas*), mothers (*las Madres*), and children of the disappeared, exiled, and political prisoners (H.I.J.O.S.)” (Taylor, *The Archive* 168). This generational link forms the basis of what she terms “DNA of performance” defined as the “representational practice of linking the scientific and performatic” (Taylor, *The Archive* 171). The biological traces that exist with official DNA testing belongs to the realm of the archive while the performances of resistance key to both groups are held by the repertoire. Taylor’s stresses the way the performances of the Mothers and HIJOS serve to *remind* and make *visible* (the latter is a word that Taylor repeats on several occasion in her chapter) the trauma that the disappearances impressed on their families and Argentina.⁵¹ Taylor shares, “I felt a haunting,” while present at one of the HIJOS performances called *escraches* (*The Archive* 162). The haunting here is the specter of the traumatic past that is present in these moments of attempting to remember. They are also hauntological in that they offer traces of the past which entail futures, something I will return to later in this chapter.⁵² It is interesting here to point out the

⁵¹ The performances by these distinct, yet interrelated, groups are quite different. The Mothers would gather at Plaza Mayo everyday holding up signs and walking around the square demanding the return of their children. The HIJOS performed *escraches* where they would gather at the homes of former military members or former military sites to create disturbances, which sometimes went from political protest to block party. What is interesting about both of these forms of protest is the way in which the family unit, usually belonging to the private sphere, needed to exit the home and occupy the streets. For more on Mothers, HIJOS and *escraches* see Taylor, *Disappearing Acts* and *The Archive*; Sosa, *Queering Acts*.

⁵² Derrida suggests hauntology as a method to understand being and the dialectic of “to be” in postmodernity whereby the past is neither dead nor alive but a specter that continues to influence. Hauntology for Derrida is the space of conjuring between “neither living nor dead, present nor absent: it spectralizes. It does not belong to ontology, to the discourse on the Being of beings, or to the essence of life

etymological relationship between specter and spectator as derived from the Latin “spectare” or “to look.” The hauntological dictatorial past in these performatic cases is also a looking agent engaged with the shaping of the resonances left by these performances. It has left the heteropatriarchal remnants of the dictatorship now with the victims who have organised themselves around the nuclear family, however, there still exists potential to counter the gaze of the dictatorial spectre by queering spectrality, in other words, to look with a queer gaze.

This DNA of performance, however, is completely at odds with what Albertina Carri is concerned with in her controversial fictionalized documentary, *Los rubios* as it is impossible to trace back to any biology for Carri. Her parent’s DNA does not exist in forensic archives because their bodies were never recovered. Carri is uninterested the visibility of any possible “truths” that a DNA of performance purports to possess and perform. Albertina Carri like the members of HIJOS, is a child of the disappeared. Her parents were disappeared in 1977, tortured, and murdered at “El Sheraton,” which now serves as a police station. Unlike the HIJOS, whose escraches are meant to render what is intentionally hidden by the State visible, Carri obscures anything which may serve as evidence. Testimonies are always in the background and constantly contradicted, photographs of her parents remain hidden, and her own memories are only relayed by an actress, Analía Couceyro, playing her.

or death” (63). The specter is there, and it is up to those left to confront the way in which it continues to shape our history.

The genealogy of political activism that Taylor posits is one rooted in the heterosexual nuclear family structure. She states, “The aging Abuelas and Madres have spawned the next generation of activists” (*The Archive* 182). The fecund language Taylor employs, such as in the use of the word “spawned,” foregrounds the reproductive capacity imperative of women. Gabriella Nouzeilles furthers this argument and writes:

HIJOS’s political agenda echoes the goals put forward by the Mothers and Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo, that is, a claim for justice based on biological identity and family ties, for the conservation of memory, and against the silencing and covering up of a criminal past (265).

Both Taylor and Nouzeilles point to a clear genealogy of political organizing that is directly shaped by the patriarchal ideas furthered by the dictatorship that are rooted in biology and the family unit. The dictatorship positioned itself as the proud patriarch, with Argentina feminized as the submissive and conquered wife (*patria*/motherland), and the Argentine people its children. Cecilia Sosa argues, “this surplus of kinship titles also responds to the military discourse, which evoked the idea of a ‘big family’ as the basic cell of the nation” (*Queering Acts* 13-14). Sosa suggests that the organizing by the HIJOS and Mothers rooted itself in the family unit due to the dictatorship’s mythologizing of the “good” family unit in Argentina.

In *Disappearing Acts: Spectacles of Gender and Nationalism in Argentina’s “Dirty War,”* Taylor argues that the rhetoric of Eva “Evita” Perón further emphasized the central importance of motherhood in Argentina. The nationally beloved and revered wife of Juan Perón stressed the importance of the mother’s role in the home and bypassed her own childlessness by positioning herself as the mother of Argentina and its people (Taylor, *Disappearing Acts* 47). Taylor argues that the Mothers utilized the elevated

position of the mother in the Argentine imaginary to further their political efforts; however, she highlights the limitations of adapting such a position. For Taylor, the Mothers positioned themselves as puppets who ventriloquized their disappeared children but who never spoke for themselves and their rights as women in the nation. She writes,

[T]he Madres were unable to maximize their political options in order to modify the environment that had proved so damaging not only to their children, but to women in general [...] the role did not allow for their politicization. Rather, the maternal role once again relegated the women to the subordinate position of mediators in an old drama between fathers and sons (Taylor, *Disappearing Acts* 205).

The Mothers defied patriarchal expectations by bringing their private mourning and suffering to the public sphere by protesting at the Plaza Mayo and by “shift[ing] the site of their enactment from the private sphere, where it could be construed as essentialist, to the public, where it became a bid for political recognition (Taylor, *Disappearing Acts* 194). They nonetheless do so through their heteronormative reproductive role and following the “bad script” of reductive ideas for women put forth by the narrative that the state espoused as Taylor suggests.

It is this “bad script” that Carri intends on disrupting. The nuclear family is a fraught institution for queer people. Queer people are often rejected by their families and forced to disappear from their homes.⁵³ It may be an unachievable structure for people in relationships which aren’t capable of sexual reproduction. In the case of these organizing

⁵³ The Trevor Project’s 2021 report shows that 28% of LGBTQ youth have reported being homeless at some point in their lives with youth of color and trans girls being overly-represented in these numbers, see “Homelessness and Housing Instability Among LGBTQ Youth.” While Argentina is seen as the most LGBTQ-friendly country in Latin America after being the first to legalize gay marriage and the first to allow non-binary gender recognition on legal documents, the recent fatal hate-crimes against a group of lesbians shows that homophobia is still quite present in the country, see Rios 2024.

spaces, one needed to have been a son, daughter, mother, or father in order to be accounted for by the Mothers and the HIJOS.⁵⁴ Carri's decision to disassociate herself from such genealogies of organizing such as that of the Mothers and HIJOS, which centers around the nuclear family, demonstrates her queer affect as methodology. Taylor problematizes the role of the "mother" as it is utilized by the Mothers de Plaza Mayo and questions the limitations that such an identification imposes on the possibility for other political acts and by asking, "what happens to other Argentine women who want to speak and act for themselves rather than for or through their children?" (*Disappearing Acts* 204). It is precisely this space outside of motherhood and the nuclear family that Carri acts from; although in her case, it isn't for the lack of children but lack of parents, which automatically positions her outside of the nuclear family. In the film, we see this when she shares a story of her sadness and discomfort when her classmates asked why she lived with her uncle and aunt and not her parents—a fact that already marked her as odd and queer because of her inability to conform to the nuclear family form after her parents' disappearance.

Carri's film archival methodology is more in line with what José Esteban Muñoz refers to as a "queer act" rooted in "ephemera" rather than Taylor's DNA of performance, which defers to blood ties, heritage, and lineage. In this case, there is no scientific archive since Carri's parent's bodies were never recovered. In the film, Carri films two

⁵⁴ The Mothers and HIJOS recognize that it isn't exclusive to biological kinship, it is this very appeal to DNA and biology that grounds Taylor's analysis and that makes their testimony and work so effective to spectators. Cecilia Sosa also argues that both Mothers and HIJOS shifted their language to make them more inclusive of others beyond biological ties to the disappeared.

subsequent scenes of DNA testing. The first scene features Couceyro, the actress playing Albertina, getting blood drawn and, in the following scene, Carri herself has blood drawn. Couceyro's blood won't yield any results but neither will Carri's because there aren't any records in the archive with which to compare her sample. Rather, her parents' bodies and her memory of them are ephemeral. In "Ephemera as Evidence: Introductory Notes to Queer Acts," Muñoz argues that queer acts "access a hidden queer history" that is "outside the dominant public sphere's visible historical narratives" (6). In the case of Carri, the dictatorship rendered these stories queer by keeping them hidden and away from the public. While the Mothers and HIJOS strive to make things *visible*, Carri enacts through her documentary a "queer act" of the hidden and unretrievable. Carri demonstrates the inability to appeal to a dominant archive by displaying photographs of her youth without context, and those featuring her parents keep them absent and out of frame.



Fig. 8. Film still from Albertina Carri's *Los rubios*



Fig. 9. Film still from Albertina Carri's *Los rubios*

Carri never really gives a portrait of her parents either through words or images—if they are presented, they are presented without introduction and abstractly. This mirrors Carri's own identification with the stories of her parents as they are as abstract to her as they are to us. Rather than give us a photograph or story with which we could project ourselves and our own stories onto to empathize with her, we are given empty signifiers. Carri does not allow us to project ourselves into this narrative and instead gives us the ambiguity that she must live with as this is how her parents exist for her. Carri disavows giving us a portrait as to how she fits into these dominant narratives of organizing in Argentina through the nuclear family form and instead engages with a queer ephemeral archive that mirrors her own forgetting acts that accept unknowing as epistemology and methodology. This is to say that by rejecting dominant forms of remembering and memorialising, she is engaged in a self-making process that seriously considers the creative potential of ignorance.

It is important to note here some biographical facts about Albertina Carri. She is openly queer and married to Marta Dillon, a journalist and another a child of the

disappeared. Together, they decided to have a child with their friend Alejandro Ros, an openly gay man. Ros, however, is more than a sperm donor; he considers himself a proper father and member of the family unit.⁵⁵ The three form an odd, queer trio in offering an alternative familial configuration. Carri and Dillon have both experienced the lack of parents in their life and have decided to reconstruct ideas of parenthood resulting in a new form of queer family. For Dillon, being queer isn't exclusively sexual. In Pablo Potkin's article, "Albertina Carri y Marta Dillon: retrato de una nueva familia" (Albertina Carri and Marta Dillon: Portrait of a new family), Dillon shares:

Ser lesbiana no es exclusivamente lo que haces en la cama, sino que también es una postura política ... Y sin duda, todo sexo es político. Esas expresiones de cómo uno prefiere vivir son públicas, no privadas.

Being lesbian isn't exclusively about what you do in bed, but also a political gesture ... without a doubt, all sex is political, those expressions of how one prefers to live are public, not private. ("Albertina Carri y Marta Dillon")

Dillon points not only to the fact that her sexual orientation isn't only about who she is attracted to but that it is inherently political. The latter part of Dillon's quote stipulates that all sex is political meaning that heterosexuality isn't immune to this politicization and that to declare oneself heterosexual is also to take a political stance. Taylor argues that heterosexuality politically structured the dictatorship in the way it redirected the homosocial and homoerotic sentiments present in military units from a love of other men to a love of the motherland. She argues, "the armed forces obsessively conjured up the symbolic Woman to keep their homosocial society from becoming a homosexual one.

⁵⁵ For more on the trio, see Plotkin.

The military men came together in the heterosexual language of ‘love’ of the *Patria*” (Taylor, *Disappearing Acts* 69). In her own life, Carri rejects the “bad script” of motherhood and, by extension womanhood, by restructuring ideas of parenthood in rejecting the heterosexual contract and living her life as a lesbian and part of a coparenting queer trio.

Beyond her personal life, Carri’s filmography reflects her deep commitments to queerness and lesbian desire evidenced through *Barbie también puede eSTAR triste* (*Barbie Can Also Be Sad* 2002), a stop motion pornographic movie using Barbie dolls, and her most recent *Los hijas del fuego* (*Daughters of Fire* 2018), a pornographic lesbian road movie to name only a few examples. The mix of her autobiography and her filmography lead me in considering the possibility of reading *Los rubios* as another queer act that constructs part of a palimpsestic queer testimonio, or ephemeral archive.

Scholarship on Albertina Carri’s work hasn’t engaged with the queerness in *Los rubios* and seems to be divided into two camps: those interested in *Los rubios* as it relates to memory and trauma and those interested in the lesbian pornographic works.⁵⁶ *Los rubios* inspired myriad critical interpretations and analyses. Much of the scholarship around this film centers around trauma studies, memory and postmemory studies.⁵⁷ Some scholarship has gone a bit further in considering the transgressive playful nature of the

⁵⁶ Cecilia Sosa’s *Queering Acts of Mourning in the Aftermath of Argentina’s Dictatorship: The Performances of Blood* is the only work that takes seriously queerness in *Los rubios* by focusing on queer kin relationships in the film.

⁵⁷ On trauma, see Clancy; Sanz. On memory and postmemory, see Breckenbridge; Garibatto and Gomez; Lazarro; Page.

film and the dark humor it elicits.⁵⁸ Carri as a filmmaker remains obscure, gaining little acclaim for her filmmaking and even with the grand success and interest in her documentary, it still did not make it to larger film festivals (Sanz 123). The second camp of scholarship is more interested in her pornographic lesbian films and with her work through the lens of pornography and postpornography studies.⁵⁹ My interest in this chapter then lies in reconciling these two readings of Carri's work, these two Carris, in providing a queer pornographic reading of her documentary on familial trauma. In doing so, I will engage with questions of failure, archive, and futurity, concepts that have been instrumental in the shaping of queer theory, to show the way in which Carri's film is engaging in a queer world-making project that counters hegemonic, heterosexist responses to the Dirty War. In this case, the palimpsest is seen through the resonances found and traced in her disparate bodies of work, which I reconcile and read together as forming a queer archive of queer filmmaking acts.

Las Dos Carris: Queer Reen(act)ments of Failure

Several scholars have observed the failure in Carri's documentary. Nouzeilles states, "what we end up with is a self-referential documentary about a 'failed documentary'" (269). Michael Lazzara comments, "in contrast to other films about the children of the disappeared, *Los rubios* pushes documentary's *failure to document* to its outer limits" (154). It appears that if one remains true to the purported purpose of the documentary—to document what happened to her parents—one can be discontent with

⁵⁸ See Blejmar; Nouzeilles.

⁵⁹ See Soriano; Mullaly. All references listed concern the pornographic and post-pornographic in Carri.

the many detours in the film. Rather, the viewer must give into losing their way to remain with the film, to bask in its failure. Failure is central to the queer experience as it is defined by its perceived failure to conform to heteronormative standards of gender and sexuality. Judith Butler would argue that all gender performances—queer and hetero/trans and cis—are failures.⁶⁰ This failure at being straight, however, opens up new avenues of being and becoming. For pioneering queer theorist Jack Halberstam, “failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world” (*The Queer Art* 3). Carri fails to find out what happened to her parents, fails to be dutiful daughter, fails to conform to documentary standards and because of this failure she is able to craft new ways of exploring the self and, in the process, find new forms of relating to others. Through this failure, she finds new ways of documenting the experience of being a family member of the disappeared, that doesn’t rely on reverence, memorializing, or an official history, but crafts an alternative queer ephemeral archive through her body of work.

Part of the criticism leveled against *Los rubios* is that it turns what could be a faithful memorial to her parents into a frivolous, unserious, and narcissistic film. This is, in fact, why the Instituto Nacional de Cine y Artes Audiovisuales (National Institute for Film and Visual Arts, INCAA) denies the film monetary support. The film decides to include this scene of failure by reenacting the reading of the rejection letter. The scene in

⁶⁰ In *Gender Trouble*, Butler explains that all gender is drag as both cis and trans people strive to embody a certain ideal of “natural sex.” Butler writes, “In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself” (137). Considering this, then we can arrive at the conclusion that this ideal is unattainable, therefore we all fail at gender.

which the crew reflects on the rejection is critical to the understanding of the film as Carri makes it abundantly clear that she is not interested in creating a film which venerates her parents and their generation. First, Analía Couceyro playing Carri reads the letter from INCAA in a dramatization. In this scene, Albertina is alone in her office reading the letter. In the following scene, we shift to Carri, Couceyro and the rest of the crew discussing the rejection. Here, she is not alone but with her film family. A crew member reads the letter aloud:

[El Proyecto] pide ser revisado con mayor rigor documental ... Requiere una búsqueda mas exigente de testimonios propios que se concretarian con la participación de los compañeros de militancia de sus padres, con sus afirmaciones y discrepancias. Roberto Carri y Ana María Caruso fueron dos intelectuales comprometidos en los setenta, cuyo destino trágico merece que este trabajo se realice.

[The project] needs to be reviewed with greater documentary rigor ... It requires a more demanding search of original testimonies with the participation of their parents' fellow militant colleagues, with their agreement or not. Roberto Carri and Ana María Caruso were two intellectuals compromised in the sixties whose tragic destinies merit for this work to be made.

The letter asks Carri to take her documentary seriously since the subject of the documentary, her parents and their disappearance, merit a serious memorialization. She retorts at the letter but to her crew, "that is not my movie." INCAA demands that films that attempt to tell the story of the Dirty War take on the severity of a text like *Nunca Mas* (*Never Again* 1986), a government report by the Comisión Nacional sobre la desaparición de personas (National Commission on the Disappearance of Persons). This text documents the investigation into the disappeared during the Dirty War. Carri carries this report with her while filming and mentions hiding her copy while they visited "El Sheraton." It is clear that this text is a vital reference point when treating the subject of

the disappeared and that Carri has it in mind. Films such as Luis Puenzo's *La historia oficial* (*The Official Story* 1985), Gastón Biraben's *Cautiva* (*Captive* 2003), Israel Adrián Caetano's *Crónica de una fuga* (*Chronicle of an Escape* 2006) dramatized the seriousness put forth by the slogan of *nunca más* and demanded by INCAA. The two latter films received funding from INCAA, further illustrating the way in which their serious and melodramatic tone was monetarily rewarded. Carri, however, isn't interested in finding, detailing, or reifying an "official story." She was wary of creating heroic figures for the State. Halberstam refers to such wariness as "suspect memorialization" where "memorialization has a tendency to tidy up disorderly histories (of slavery, the Holocaust, wars, etc.)" (*The Queer Art* 15). This memorialization tends to work in favor of the State so that they can renounce all accountability for past actions. Although the slogan of *nunca mas* advocates for the nation to never forget, it puts forth an official narrative, which people must venerate and not critique. Drawing on Foucault, Halberstam writes, "memory is itself a disciplinary mechanism that Foucault calls 'a ritual of power'; it selects for what is important (the histories of triumph), it reads a continuous narrative into one full of ruptures and contradictions, and it sets precedents for other memorializations" (*The Queer Art* 15). This is precisely what Argentina's official story has done. The histories of the martyrs and heroes of the Dirty War become a memorializing narrative that attempts to obscure and hide the ways in which the State continues to be oppressive and violent. Poignantly evident by the fact that El Sheraton is now a police station. By not subscribing to this formula, Carri fails at being a dutiful daughter and aptly memorializing her parents. Carri rejects the "bad script" of this

narrative of veneration put forth by the “official story,” which has relegated her to exist only as a child of the disappeared and tasked her with carrying on her parent’s political legacy. As Carri states of the project: “This [her decision to reject a solemn tone] was not understood by any fund or producer that read my project. History, for them, lies in my parents’ ‘disappearance’ and not in my constitution as a person starting from an absence” (“Director’s Statement”). Carri is seeking to distance herself from a heritage that lies with her parents and their past and instead seeks alternative forms of defining herself that are grounded in a filmmaking practice of forgetting and unknowing.

Carri ultimately found a producer who understood her project, Barry Ellsworth, who co-founded Apparatus Productions with Christine Vachon, James Schamus, and Todd Haynes. Ellsworth also worked on Todd Hayne’s cult-classic *Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story* (1987), which dramatizes the tragic life of Karen Carpenter using Barbie dolls.⁶¹ It is of little surprise then that such a producer would understand Carri and her own affinity for play and dolls. In *Los rubios*, Carri uses Playmobil toys and stop-motion animation to dramatize her memories and create speculative visions of the events of the past. These are other irreverent displays of memory. For critic Martín Kohan, the use of the Playmobil characters is a form of escapism and refusal to engage the political in her narrative. He writes, “Lo que iba ser o pudo ser causa política, ahora pertenece al más allá” (“What was going to be or could have been a political cause, now pertains to the out there/beyond”; “La apariencia celebrada” 29). In the particular scene that Kohan is

⁶¹ Here we can recall Carri’s own experiments with Barbie dolls in *Barbie*, and an overall affinity for animation and play in her oeuvre, especially in *Los rubios* with the use of Playmobil toys.

critiquing, Carri uses Playmobil figures to create an alternate history of the moment of her parent's disappearance: two Playmobil toys, a man and a woman who represent her parents, sit in a minivan when they are suddenly abducted by a flying saucer that disappears into the night's sky. For Joanna Page, these stop-motion scenes "provide an alternative perspective on the film's theme of loss and trauma, as viewed through the eyes of a child" (30). Play is associated with childhood and because Carri's parents were disappeared when she was only three years old, this reenactment can surely be framed as an interpretation of child's play about a painful memory. Of the use of the Playmobil toys, Jordana Blejmar writes, "playful memories like Carri's ultimately remind us that the main purpose of memory and transmission is not to reproduce the past as it was via playbacks but to transform it so it can speak to the future" (56). In this reading, these reenactments create avenues for engaging with the future. They transform from reenactments of the past, histories that are tied to state violence and suspect memorialization to potential speculative histories that allow for Carri to think of herself anew, outside of the child of the disappeared. Álvaro Martín Sanz agrees with this sentiment and states:

los dioramas de los Playmobil [funcionan] como herramienta de reconstrucción del pasado ... Carri parece reemplazar su propia fantasía por una indagación del escenario en el que la acción construida con los juguetes tuvo lugar.

the Playmobil dioramas [function] like tools for the reconstruction of the past ... Carri appears to replace her own fantasy with the investigation of the scenario where the action constructed with the toys took place. (133)

For Sanz, the act of play does belong to the past but the act of reconstructing the past via fantasy enacts an alternative history, and therefore an alternative future.

The use of toys signals the fact that Carri was very young when her parents were disappeared and couldn't quite yet comprehend why they were no longer around. Rather than dramatize what happened in reality, an account she gathers from a neighbor who was present on the day and who provided her details of her parent's disappearance, Carri reconstructs memory using play and make-believe refusing to treat the scene with severity because she doesn't have access to that feeling and memory. In the film, Couceyro playing Carri shares:

Alguien intentó explicarme algo de unos señores buenos y unos señores malos; algo de los peronistas, los descamisados, los obreros, los montoneros. No entendí nada de todo lo que me dijeron. Ni una sola palabra.

Someone tried to explain to me something about good guys and bad guys; About the peronists, the *descamisados*, the workers, the *montoneros*. I understood nothing of what they told me. Not a single word.

Carri's child self couldn't understand the complex political situation that led to her parent's disappearance. She did not know, and she could not remember. She only knew that they were gone, and that there was now a lack. Halberstam sees this place of unknowing and forgetting as a productive space where "forgetting becomes a way of resisting the heroic and grand logics of recall and unleashes new forms of memory that relate more to spectrality than to hard evidence, to lost genealogies than to inheritance, to erasure than to inscription" (*The Queer Art* 15). Given the many contradictory statements that this neighbor had already given in addition to the fact that she essentially turned Carri's parents in, Carri could not trust this retelling. Carri instead re-enacts for the viewer how she made it make sense for herself with play and how these playful moments become opportunities for self-making rooted in unknowing. Kohan argues that this

reenactment belongs to the realm of science fiction and with the “más allá” or “out there.” For a young Carri, her parent’s disappearance was an anomaly belonging with to the beyond where the Argentine political turmoil of the 1970s is an unidentified, alien object. Anthropologist David Graeber argues in his 2015 *Utopia of Rules*, “games allow us our only real experience of a situation where all this ambiguity is swept away” (191). In this case, the uncertainty of the circumstances of her parents’ disappearance, the unknowing of what “really” happened is swept away through child’s play.

Central to Carri’s exploration isn’t uncovering a clear narrative of her parent’s disappearance but how she can find herself in this absence created by their loss. She, again, turns to stop-motion animation to explore this question of selfhood. Couceyro playing Carri starts by quoting French scholar Régine Robin. Born to Polish Jewish parents in 1930s France, Robin also survived an oppressive government, the Nazi occupation of France. Albertina monologues, “Dice Régine Robin de que la necesidad de construir la propia identidad se desata cuando está amenazada. Cuando no es posible la unicidad” (“Regine Robin says that the necessity to construct one’s own identity is undone when it is threatened. When singularity is not possible”). She continues by reflecting on her own situation, “construirse sí mismo sin aquella figura que fue la que dio comienzo a la propia existencia se convierte una obsesión” (“To construct oneself without that figure that brought you into existence becomes an obsession”). As this monologue is recited, a Playmobil figure stands in front of a house and alternates between a variety of hats and hair colors, alternating between several identities.



Fig. 10. Film still from Albertina Carri's *Los rubios*

Halberstam states that “an animated self allows for deconstruction of ideas of a timeless and natural humanity” (*The Queer Art* 46). Carri’s monologue points to the fact that the idea that one should or can define themselves in relation to their family isn’t as timeless and natural as made out to be. Her use of an animated self then aids in this the visual deconstruction of this idea. This was something that became prematurely clear for her before she could begin to understand or articulate what this meant for her. The Playmobil’s constant change of hats and hair demonstrate the ability for identity to endlessly shift. Carri’s search for defining herself when trauma has already forced her to deconstruct ideas of a natural inheritance is seen through this playful act. Artist Philip Core states that “camp is first of all a second childhood” and that “camp is a lie that tells the truth” (81). Carri’s use of play, toys, and humour demonstrate a camp sensibility by allowing her to enact a second childhood that tell lies that reveal truths—about herself and her feelings of loss and trauma rather than the circumstances of her parent’s disappearance, which she cannot access.

In addition to her use of play, another failure of the film is its refusal to conform to normative documentary practices. It fuses fiction with reality which is most present in her decision to double herself in the film. In chapter one, I discussed how Agnès Varda broke with the documentary pact by weaving truth with fiction. Here, too, Carri fails to abide by the documentary pact. At the beginning of the film, Carri and her crew visit her former neighborhood and the site where her parents were kidnapped. While there, a curious neighbor steps out to speak with the camera crew and recognizes Carri, which leads her to ask Carri her name. In this exchange, the neighbor denies recognizing Carri but begins to talk about Carri's childhood self to Carri in the third person. Rather than refer to Carri in the second person and address her directly, the neighbor continually refers to an "Albertina" that she once knew but that may or may not exist since she also disappeared after her parents were kidnapped. This creates a distance between the two women and perhaps it is a way for the neighbor to distance herself from any guilt she may hold regarding the disappearance of Carri's parents by remaining a bystander (she denies being at home on that day). Perhaps she holds guilt for being hostile to their presence in the neighborhood, a feeling that another neighbor expressed, stating that the Carris disturbed the peace that the neighbors kept in the neighborhood by not getting involved with politics. I would like to think that this interaction gave Carri the idea to cast an actress to play her so that she too can refer to herself in the third person and maintain a critical distance as Sanz suggests (129).

The decision to include two Albertinas in the film is controversial to some critics of the film. For Argentine cultural and literary critic Beatriz Sarlo, the doubles result in erasure. She states:

En un film sobre la identidad, donde la directora elige representarse doblemente, por sí misma y a través de una actriz que dice su nombre y dice que representará a la directora, los testigos permanecen en el anonimato ... La operación de doble afirmación de la identidad de Albertina Carri contrasta con el severo despojamiento del nombre de otros. Identidad por sustracción.

In a film about identity, where the director chooses to represent herself twice, by herself and by an actress who states her name and says that she will represent the director, the witnesses remain in anonymity ... The operation of double affirmation of the identity of Albertina Carri contrasts with the severe stripping of the name of others. Identity by omission. (149-50)

According to this criticism, Carri's decision to include herself twice in the film creates a narcissistic dialogue with herself and leaves the rest of those who could speak, namely her parents' comrades, in the background. In affirming herself, she denies others the same privilege and leaves them in obscurity. Sarlo argues that Carri refuses to engage with others, including her own parents: "Carri no busca las 'razones' de sus padres, ni mucho menos la traducción de esas 'razones' por los testigos de a quién recurre, busca a sus padres en la abstracción" ("Carri doesn't search for her parents' 'reasons,' nor the translation of those 'reasons' by the witnesses whom she turns to, she seeks her parents in abstraction"; 148). Sarlo fails to recognize the way in which Carri does intentionally form bonds with others through these interviews albeit not always positive or affirming bonds. For one, her title is directly related to an interview she conducted. In this interview, a former neighbor tells Carri that the only thing she remembers about the Carri family is that they were blond. Carri continues the dialogue created by this interview by

incorporating this false testimony in the visual language of her film at the end when she and her crew wear blond wigs. In this case, Carri is directly incorporating the voices of others through the film's themes, questions, and motifs. There are also the kinships that she forms with her generation exemplified by her bonds with her likewise disillusioned crew. Cecilia Sosa describes these as queer kinship bonds that are created with the larger population who were affected by the disappearances but that don't have direct ties to any of the disappeared. She argues that the film "envision[s] a nonheteronormative and horizontal community, which mocks fathers and leaders, opening the door to irregular relations of love, empathy, and care—unexpected ties formed around trauma" (Sosa, "Queering Acts" 79). Carri does not abstract or deny the testimony of others but engages them through a queer visual field by incorporating parts of these testimonies into her filmic language, by donning blond wigs or speaking about herself in the third person.

Kohan agrees with Sarlo's diagnosis of narcissism that she attributes to Carri's choice to double herself. Kohan sees it as a form of distancing herself from the gravity of such a project and thereby depoliticizing it and turning it onto itself. Kohan states,

Tiene que haber dos Carri en la película, para que una pueda mirar a la otra; y tiene que haber una película sobre la película, dentro de la película, para que los espectadores podamos verla mirar

There has to be two Carris in the movie, so one can watch the other; and there has to be a movie about the movie within the movie, so that the spectators can watch her watching. ("La apariencia celebrada" 27)

In Kohan's assessment, there is a narcissistic doubling of the filmmaker which results in distancing the spectator, the filmmaker, and the subject matter. I agree that there is a distance created between the director and the subject matter, as Breckenbridge also

argued by stating that Couceyro is a stand in for Carri, playing the role of the daughter of the disappeared (19). I disagree with the accusations of narcissism. By doubling and interviewing herself through Couceyro, Carri is playfully demonstrating the way in which the authenticity of all interviews in documentaries can be called into question. It allows for a new way of identifying with the viewer that doesn't simply rely on pathos. In an emotionally heavy and nostalgic scene, and which Kohan refers to as "el segmento más emotivo de toda la película" ("the most emotional segment of the entire movie"; "La apariencia celebrada" 27), Carri has Couceyro recite a monologue of things she hates including the blowing out of birthday candles. She states that every year she would wish for the same thing, the return of her parents. Carri interjects on several occasions to direct Couceyro and has her start the scene over with the notes she just gave. When she is pleased with the result, Carri smiles and states "Buenísimo. Corte" ("Amazing. Cut"). It is true that here we see Carri divorced from the emotional weight of her supposed own memories, which might lead one to not sympathize with her at all. How could such an emotionally rich scene based on the director's own life and tragic memories make her smile with pleasure in this moment? This scene isn't meant to create a connection with the viewer and the subject of the film—you are not supposed to feel close to Albertina. What Carri does instead is highlight the performativity of recall and memory and shows the way in which all interviewees are performers and that all interviews are performed. For example, Carri comments when interviewing her parent's comrades, "los amigos de mis padres estructuran todo de manera tal que parezca un análisis político" ("My parent's friends structure everything so that it seems like a political analysis"). In making the film,

Carri notices the way in which the people she is interviewing give testimonies to suit the personas they occupy in the public imaginary to embody what a revolutionary from the sixties should say and do. The interviews with her neighbors also result in this sort of performance. When interviewing her former neighbor who seemed to be relieved by and complicit in her parent's disappearance, the neighbor shares that she, herself, never engaged in any activities that could bring her trouble. She tells the story from the point of view of an innocent bystander to draw a distance between herself and the dissidents of that time, like Carri's parents. In another interview, a different neighbor postures not knowing Carri even though it is clear that she recognized Carri. During the interview, the neighbor breaks the fourth wall to ask what they intend to do with this film and her image to which the crew responds that it is only for a class project. In this scene, there are several roles played by all involved which blocks the possibility to arrive at any truth for anyone participating in this conversation. The camera results in people behaving in ways that might detract from their truth-telling, but it isn't a result of Carri doubling herself as Sarlo suggests, instead, by the interviewees creating doubles of themselves through their performative testimonies.

Carri not only abandons her training as a filmmaker by refusing to adhere to the documentary rigor that INCAA demands of her, but she also strays from the heritage of documentary cinema specific to Argentina, in particular that of Third Cinema to construct a queer affect rooted in failure. Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino's *La hora de los hornos* (*The Hour of the Furnaces* 1968) is a foundational film of Third Cinema, which vowed an explicitly revolutionary cinema intended to incite the masses to political action.

Solanas and Getino's manifesto, "Towards a Third Cinema" argues that a revolutionary cinema is only possible by "making films that the System cannot assimilate" and by "making films that directly and explicitly set out to fight the System" ("Towards a Third Cinema"). Solanas and Getino's manifesto stratifies different types of cinema beginning with Hollywood cinema as "first cinema," European auteur cinema as "second cinema," and liberation cinema as "third cinema." In their view, both first and second cinemas aesthetically fail to address the two points necessary to create a revolutionary cinema even if second cinema did attempt to find a way out of the studio system to make films. What truly differentiates third cinema from the others is its commitment to incite and build a collective consciousness using film. This relates to the other meaning of the word "third" as a nod to the collectivities of Third World peoples that came to fruition in the 1960s with the rise of global liberation movements. For Solanas and Getino, it was a cinema where the "spectator made way for the actor." *La hora de los hornos* and other third cinema productions were shown clandestinely by the collective Grupo Cine Liberación (Liberation Film Group) in order to abide by their first requirement but also to avoid political persecution from the state. The people who were part of the group were of the same generation as Carri's parents and it is quite likely that the couple would be participants of such meetings. Lita Stantic, a member of the GCL and now a prominent film producer credited with concretizing New Argentine Cinema, was after all intimately acquainted with the Carris (Burucúa 36). Stantic's partner Pablo Szir, a filmmaker and fellow Grupo Cine member, knew the work of Roberto Carri and was even imprisoned in

the same facility as Carri's parents, El Sheraton.⁶² Whether or not there is a direct link, it is clear that Carri's film is in direct dialogue with such films and revolutionary ideologies.

If she is rejecting the heritage of her parents, she is by extension rejecting that of the entire generation and its cinematic practices. In the film, Carri details an outing to a frame shop with a friend where several photos of a slaughterhouse were displayed. In the presence of these photos, Carri remarks feeling silly taking such a frivolous photo (an empty dining table from an aerial point-of-view) to be framed but she admits, "No me gustan las vacas muertas, me gustan las arquitecturas bonitas" ("I don't like dead cows, I prefer beautiful architecture"). Perhaps this is an allusion to *La hora de los hornos*, where in a rather long montage sequence, cows are killed and processed at a slaughterhouse while images of fashion and consumer magazines are interspersed between. A title card reads, "CADA DIA EXPORTAMOS MAS PARA RECIBIR LO MISMO" (Every day we export more to receive the same) which alludes to the control that Global North countries have over the cattle industry in Argentina. The repeated image of a dead cow's eye parallels that of the famous scene toward the middle of *La hora* of a dead Che Guevara whose gaze captures the viewers' for several minutes while the voice over reminds us, "En su rebelión, el latinoamericano recupera su existencia" ("In his rebellion, the Latin American recovers his existence"). While the deathly gaze of the cow suggests a complicity which one must disavow, the second gaze of Che Guevara is meant to incite

⁶² Stantic reveals this fact in an interview, see Haden. Carrie also mentions this information and details her personal relationship to Stantic in her archival footage film, *Cuarteros* (2017).

action so as to not lead ourselves to the slaughterhouse but rather seek liberation like Che, “¡hasta la victoria siempre!” (“until victory, always!”). Carri’s admission that she doesn’t like dead cows over pretty architecture rejects Solanas and Getino’s political call. Here is important to note that Getino was instrumental in the shaping of the Argentine film industry following the dictatorship and served as president of INCAA from 1989-1990. In the rejection scene, Carri suggests that “they” need “this” film. Her cinematographer, Catalina Fernández, asks the clarifying question “Como institución o como generación?” (“As an institution or as a generation?”) and Carri affirms “como generación.” Getino’s participation in INCAA shaped the demands of the institution to further the goals of his and Carri’s parents’ generation even if he wasn’t leading the institute at the time of the rejection. As she continues to reject this heritage, her film will not defer to dead cows but will instead speak to her own aesthetics and, in doing so, construct her own queer archive.

Richard Dryer defines camp as “a question of how you respond to things rather than qualities actually inherent in those things” (113). Something isn’t camp, it does camp. Carri’s irreverent response to the seriousness that is demanded of her results in a camp sensibility through her use of play. She refuses to acknowledge the valid forms of truth put forth by states and institutions, and instead provides the viewer with her own versions and parodies. In “Notes on Camp” Susan Sontag states, “the whole point of camp is to dethrone the serious. Camp is playful, anti-serious. More precisely, Camp involves a *new, more complex relation* ‘the serious.’ (62, my emphasis). By rejecting the serious aesthetic employed by Third Cinema and INCAA, Carri is providing new forms

of engaging with the serious subject of the Dirty War and her parent's disappearance that scrambles with expectations for mourning and memorializing and offer new, complex relationalities that go beyond the cisheteropatriarchal family model. Carri detours from tried-and-true paths of telling the story of a child of the disappeared in order to conceive of queer forms of self-making. Carri's use of toys and play exemplify what Dryer has in mind when he states: "Camp can make us see that what art and the media give us are not the Truth or Reality but fabrications, particular ways of talking about the world, particular understandings and feelings of the way life is" (115). In the case of Carri, her camp sensibility reveals the way that these memorializing projects sponsored for and by the nation continue to obscure the harsh realities that the families of the disappeared are forced to confront.

Nuevo Testimonio: On Carri's Queer Archive

To talk about camp in cinema without mentioning John Waters would be criminal. Janis Breckenbridge begins her analysis in "Performing Memory and Identity: Albertina Carri's *Los rubios*" with a discussion of the movie poster in Carri's office.



Fig. 11. Film still from Albertina Carri's *Los rubios*

Breckenbridge argues that “the tribute to *Cecil B. Demented* stands as a silent witness to the director’s playful but adamant refusal to adhere to the expected norms of documentary cinema” (12). I thank her for drawing my attention to the poster and tracing the affinities with Carri and John Waters, a bastion of independent cinema and “outlaw cinema” (the core theme of *Cecil B.*), to propose the way in which Carri’s ethos is in line with that of Waters’. What I find is missing from her analysis, however, is the recognition that Waters’ cinema isn’t just against the establishment of the Hollywood apparatus but that it is adamantly queer. John Waters cinema isn’t only independent, but it is necessarily *queer* independent cinema demonstrated by his collaborations with drag queen Divine and the many quips in his films including Rodney’s statement in *Cecil B. Demented*, “I’m straight and I fucking hate it!” and my personal favorite from Aunt Ida played by Edith Massey in *Female Trouble* (1974), “the world of the heterosexual is a sick and boring life.” I follow Breckenbridge in stating that the visual allusion to John Waters is a nod to the alignment of *Los rubios* with independent, outlaw cinema but add that it is one that is also explicitly queer. The poster shows that Carri’s rejection of Third Cinema aesthetics and politics is due to her affinity with a queer affect that is derived from a queer archive. By engaging with the scholarship on Carri’s overtly queer pornographic films, I aim to trace the queer heritage of these films through a queer affect already present in *Los rubios* that has not been previously examined.

In her very thorough analyses of Carri’s oeuvre, Michèle Soriano does not include *Los rubios* as part of the archival material that needs to be assessed to understand Carri’s pornographic work. She admits in her article “Screening Sex: Agencia y Pornografía en

las obras de Albertina Carri” (Screening Sex: Agency and Pornography in the Work of Albertina Carri) that in order to better understand Carri’s use of cinema as a tool to critique heterosexism in her later pornographic work, one must return to her earlier works. She writes:

El cuestionamiento del núcleo familiar heteronormativo en *No quiero volver a casa* (2000) y en *Barbie también puede estar triste* (2001) indica un posicionamiento crítico que necesita elaborar sus propias herramientas cinematográficas.

The questioning of the heteronormative nuclear family in *No quiero volver a casa* y *Barbie también puede estar triste* indicates a critical positioning that needs to elaborate its own cinematographic tools. (Soriano, “Screening Sex” 85)

For Soriano, this critical positioning is present in the two early works by Carri but leaves out *Los rubios* which was only released a year after *Barbie*. This critique of the heteronormative nuclear family in which Carri harnesses the cinematographic tools to create a critical positioning also exists in her groundbreaking *Los rubios*—her most critically acclaimed film, which effectively brought her success and recognition. As discussed earlier in this chapter, Carri’s refusal to engage with the identity politics of groups such as the Madres and HIJOS is a rejection of the normative family values that had been established by the state and further cemented by the dictatorship. The rejection of the heteronormative nuclear family is more explicit in the works cited by Soriano and her other films such as *Las hijas del fuego* and her most recent *¡Caigan las rosas blancas!* (*White Roses Fall!* 2025) but it was already present in *Los rubios* in a more covert sense. It is this through this new queer testimonio, with reverence to a queer archive, that we are able to bring together the two Carris—the lesbian pornographer and

the daughter of the disappeared—and therefore read her filmography as a dialogic one that is propelled by the same queer affect.

What is present in pornography like in trauma is a highly invisible and private character. Pornography is something seldom watched or discussed in public, which might often also be the case for traumatic experiences, which are too difficult to discuss with others. By ignoring evidence and narrativity, Carri is elaborating a new relationship between memory and the communicable closer to what Marisol Salanova has in mind when discussing the postpornographic. She writes:

El posporno un movimiento artístico que propone el disfrute de representaciones alternativas del cuerpo elaborando un imaginario en el que tengan cabida las sexualidades periféricas y disidentes que la heteronormatividad ... marginaban.

Postporn is an artistic movement that proposes the pleasure of alternative representations of the body, elaborating an imaginary in which peripheral and dissident sexualities that heteronormativity marginalized have a place. (36)

It might be strange to think of *Los rubios*—which features zero sex—through the postpornographic. If we consider Salanova's definition here, where postporn offers alternative ways of considering queerness through the body and its representations, then we can see how thinking of the film through the postpornographic offers a new way of conceptualizing joy in the face of the silent and invisible trauma present in the film. It is queer in its representation and therefore critiqued by those who have power over the representations of trauma such as INCAA.

The elements that define postpornography and queer pornography according to these scholars can be seen in Carri's *Los rubios* and not just her pornographic work. Soriano defines queer pornography as:

Praxis, experimentación, contra-aprendizaje colectivo, herramienta carnal de domesticación, descubrimiento del cuerpo como archive del goce y del espanto.

Praxis, experimentation, collective counter-learning, carnal tools of domestication, discovery of the body as an archive of pleasure and shock.
("Screening Sex" 108)

Los rubios is centered around experiments on how to mourn, how to create kinships, and it provides tools for thinking outside of the nuclear family and engages with an archive of pleasure and shock. Through the pleasure of her filmmaking, Carri moves us through the sensual and affective moments of mourning and its shocking manifestations. By shifting her trauma, silence, and shame, into play, joy, and camp, Carri is articulating new ways of mourning where other forms have failed her. In her discussion on Carri's pornographic found-footage short film *Pets* (2015), Soriano turns to what she terms the "contra-archivo" (counter-archive). She writes,

contra-archivos ... Aparecen deshilachados, vislumbrados y asumidos, en las tensiones y contradicciones que las multiplicidades invocadas engendran ... contra-archivos cuestionan lo visible, lo que se ve, lo que se muestra, lo que se entiende, y su complicidad con las matrices de dominación.

counter-archives ... appear frayed, perceived and assumed, in the tensions and contradictions that the invoked multiplicities engender ... counter-archives question the visible, what is seen, what is shown, what is understood, and its complicity with the matrices of domination. ("Contra-archivos del sexo" 18)

The counter-archives contain multiplicities and not a single official story. They allow for affective layers made up of different, contradictory, contested, complex accounts that are always in dialogue with the official one as it probes it and unveils its veneer of truth. *Los rubios* is in dialogue with such counter-archives and what I think of here as the queer archives in that it exists counter and outside of the matrices of domination, which in this case is the nuclear family and the documentary pact. The queer

affect and critique that scholars have identified in her pornographic work already existed in earlier work such as *Los rubios*. Following de Lauretis' prerequisites for a queer text, we can see how the film does not allow for narrative clarity but extends beyond the avant-garde art film into the queer by questioning the hegemonic structures of compulsory heterosexuality. Carri's queerness has influenced not only her pornographic work but her processes of self-making that we see in *Los rubios*. By reading her two bodies of work together, I would like to bridge the gap in scholarship on Carri that takes her pornographic work and *Los rubios* as disparate filmmaking endeavors. Rather, they are extensions of the same queer sensibility.

Los rubios is not concerned with arriving at "truth" but rather is interested in "following the traces, glimmers, residues, and specks" of memory. Muñoz elaborates:

I'm calling 'ephemera' [a] modality of anti-rigor and anti-evidence that, far from filtering materiality out of cultural studies, reformulates and expands our understanding of materiality. Ephemera ... is linked to alternate modes of textuality and narrativity like memory and performance: it is all of those things that remain after a performance, a kind of evidence of what has transpired but certainly not the thing itself. ("Ephemera" 10)

One could argue that testimonio, which Carri does not engage with sufficiently according to INCAA, could be part of this ephemeral archive. Yet, there is something that the testimonies provided by her parent's comrades lack for Carri to seriously consider it as evidence for her documentary. The testimonies provided pertain to a certain memory, which privileges the heteronormative family structure. For Muñoz, "ephemera is always about specificity and resisting dominant systems of aesthetic and institutional classification" ("Ephemera" 10). The testimonies provided have been coopted by the state, evidenced by INCAA's rejection letter, which states that the inclusion of more

testimonies by her parents' comrades would align with the documentary rigor necessary to obtain these state funds. These testimonies adhere to dominant systems of aesthetics and institutional classification. John Beverley reminds us that "*testimonio* in Spanish carries the connotation of an act of truth telling in a religious or legal sense – *dar testimonio* [give testimony] means to testify, to bear truthful witness" (3). Testimonio bears witness by providing a narrative and loses its ephemeral quality when it is integrated by the state. Carri's testimonio, a nuevo testimonio, is one of ignorance that revolves around the residual feelings of loss and that attempts to address this queer understanding of self through a queer ephemeral archive.

The *testimonio* has and continues to play an important role in the Latin American canon. Testimonio studies credits Cuban author Miguel Barnet with creating the genre with *Biografía de un cimarrón* (*Autobiography of a Runaway Slave* 1966) detailing the life of Esteban Montejo. Barnet cemented testimonio as a literary genre with his essay "La novela testimonio: Socio-literatura ("The Testimonial Novel: Social Literature" 1969). The use of "novela" or novel in his title is interesting when thinking about the genre's propensity for fabulation. It suggests that testimonio may contain elements of untruth and that the recorder and editor of the testimony has some authorial privilege in the way the story is formulated. This is evident in the case of one of the most famous testimonios *I, Rigoberta Menchú* which tells the story of the genocide of indigenous Maya peoples in Guatemala during its civil war. The testimony has been contested by David Stoll who claims that Menchú fabricated some elements of the testimony.⁶³

⁶³ See Stoll; Stanford; Rohter; Forster.

Menchú, however, begins her testimony with the reminder that “it’s not only my life, it’s also the testimony of my people” (1). Menchú’s statement elaborates what Beverley sees as the main difference between testimonio and autobiography. They both offer a first-person narrative account but “the testimonial narrator focuses upon how he or she suffers with others through terrible conditions and events” (160). Beverley states that in testimony, “the testimonial narrator focuses upon how he or she suffers with others through terrible conditions and events” (160). In this case, who is Carri’s community that she suffers along with? This is precisely the problematic that the film is attempting to uncover. She has trouble identifying with the normative ways of mourning by organizing through the heterosexual nuclear family, so who, then, makes up her community? Carri queers the testimonio’s relationship to the communal and intertextual with her appeal to and creation of a queer archive. This archive is constructed through her own filmography and those that it cites, such as Waters, and reflects a palimpsestic relationship by drawing on queer acts, which is to say by drawing on the sexed and sensual resonances, glimmers, residues, and echoes that exist through queer affinities and affective traces.

Galt suggests that “affect becomes a central category of queer experience” (66). The pornographic is important to recall again due to the genre’s connection to affective registers as suggested by pioneering film scholar Linda Williams. pornography belongs to what she refers to as “gross body genres” along with melodrama and horror.⁶⁴ Failing to identify with any generic conventions, Carri turns to humor. Freya Schiwy’s examination

⁶⁴ See Williams, “Film Bodies.” Pornography, she argues, belongs to what she calls “gross body genres” along with melodrama and horror.

of the use of humor in indigenous contexts might be helpful for analyzing the use of humor in Carri's work and especially in *Los rubios*. Freya Schiwy argues that the subversive quality of humor in indigenous productions stems precisely from the deconstruction of a "stable and transcendental" indigenous identity that is looked at with gravity, seriousness, and as unfunny. By adopting humor in their videos, Schiwy argues that indigenous artists are "challeng[ing] any purist notion of indigenous identity, unsettling dominant and external and sometimes internal representations" (170). Carri likewise uses irreverent humor to challenge the gravity that is expected from a child of the disappeared thereby destabilizing this very serious and unfunny mode of existence. Sosa's study of HIJOS provides another depiction of the way in which humor was used by children of the disappeared. In her case study, dark humor could only be wielded by those who had been directly affected; she shares, "I had the feeling that they were protecting something private, only verbalised within the slang of the group; a guilty pleasure that only those with pedigree could share" (*Queering Acts* 42). For HIJOS, dark humor only existed as a means of group identification and creating community within the group if one shared "pedigree," a term used to describe those who had been directly related to someone who was disappeared. Outsiders, in this case, were not invited to laugh with them.

In contrast, the use of laughter, according to Schiwy, can provide what she terms an "open invitation" where "inviting laughter invites participation in community" (190) that extends beyond the pre-established group to create community with outsiders who empathize with their struggle. Carri's use of humor invites others to laugh at the

absurdity of her circumstances with her. The inside jokes are created with the viewer. This is best illustrated in the final scene, the namesake of the film, if we recall the false testimony given by the neighbor who insisted with absolute certainty that the family was blond. We have seen in the film that Albertina Carri is not blond, and this is further supported by childhood photographs of her and testimony from her aunt which all point to the fact that Carri and her family were, in fact, brunette. As the film suggests and Nouzeilles argues, Carri's blondness is attributed to their foreignness in the working-class neighborhood. *Cabecitas negras* (little black heads) is a derogatory term used to describe the provincial working-class of Argentina that was also racialized and described as dark-haired and dark-skinned.⁶⁵ The Carri family's middle-class urban status disrupted the working-class neighborhood, which resulted in the neighbors reimagining the Carris as blond *porteños*, a term used to describe the urban dwellers from Buenos Aires. In a playful gesture, Carri and her entire crew decide to end of the film by wearing blond wigs and walking out into the sunset. The scene is full of humor and joy. In adopting the false testimony, Carri is accepting the failure of finding truth under such hopeless circumstances and opts for an imaginative, speculative vision.

In *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History*, Heather Love writes, "the effort to recapture the past is doomed from the start. To reconstruct the past, we build on ruins; to bring it to life, we chase after the fugitive dead" (21). Carri recognizes the impossibility to capture the past and reconstruct it and therefore embraces failure in her documentary. Rather than attempting to find the "truth" of her parent's

⁶⁵ See Milanesio for a more detailed sociopolitical historical account of *cabecitas negras* and *porteños*.

disappearance and piece together a portrait of them through fragments derived from letters, photographs, and interviews, Carri ruminates on the profound loss and lack of identity that their absence has left on her life. She rejects the restructuring of memory that a slogan like *nunca mas* promises to draw attention to the lingering melancholia Argentina's dictatorial past has left on its people, demonstrating moments of what Love terms "feeling backward." When INCAA demands that Carri provide heroic images of her parents that memorialize them and offer them as martyrs to the state, her documentary depiction opts instead for a "politics forged in the image of the exile, of refusal, even of failure" (Love 71), with which their absence has left her.

For Ann Cvetkovich, a queer archive is formulated as an "archive of feelings" which she defines as "an exploration of cultural texts as repositories of feelings and emotions, which are encoded not only in the content of the texts themselves but in the practices that surround their production and reception" (7). *Los rubios* is a film about "feeling bad" and functions as a repository for Carri's emotions. It is not a memorialising document of her parent's disappearance but shifts perspective to the weight of their disappearance on her emotional being. Cvetkovich finds resonances in what she calls the "queerness of emotional life," across queerness and trauma remarking that a queer sensibility, which finds itself not adhering to traditional documentary forms, can be used to document or comment on larger cultural traumas. The critical reception of Carri's film by audiences and critics illustrates the incomprehensibility of her trauma and their perceived queer manifestations through play and make-believe. Carri's memory is murky because she was so young when her parent's disappeared and everyone around her wants

to present themselves and her parents as grand heroes of the movement but she holds resentment for their commitment to political action, which resulted in their deaths and absence from her life. Carri's film perfectly illustrates what Cvetkovich has in mind when she states that "the importance of fantasy as a way of creating history from absences, so evident in queer documentary and other cultural genres, demands creative and alternative archives" (271). All that exists in this queer *nuevo testimonio* are the traces and glimpses of the feelings associated with such a loss that can only be articulated queerly by disrupting the narrative, misaligning image and language, denying reverence to the past, and in adopting humour, play, and camp, by demonstrating the creative potential of failure and ephemera as foundational for queer self-making.

***Los rubios* as Queer Palimpsest**

In his field-defining book, *Cruising Utopia*, José Esteban Muñoz argues that queerness is always a potentiality and that it doesn't exist in the here and now, the toxic and oppressive present but rather that "queerness is always on the horizon" (11). *Los rubios*' final scene has Carri and her blond family walk away into the distance, into the horizon. This last scene is reminiscent of the ending of Patricio Guzman's important Third Cinema film, *La Batalla de Chile* (1975-1979) where the film shifts from a worker giving a speech in a factory to the camera looking into the horizon filled with revolutionary possibility for the proletariat as the voiceover instructs "nos vamos caminando compañero" ("let's get going comrade"). I find translating the phrase's sentiment rather difficult as the statement exists both in the present and future tense where "vamos" instigates a futurity, but the phrase implies a present action; ultimately, it

reads as a potentiality. The sense of walking in the phrase also places it in space and, as the image which accompanies suggests, a walk towards the horizon of a possible revolutionary future. What separates the *Los rubios* from *Batalla*, however, is the presence of the crew. In *Batalla*, we are left with an empty signifier, a disembodied voice off camera, with which anyone, any worker can identify, and that is male as suggested by the masculine voice and the use of “compañero.” While there is a horizon and a potentiality in *Batalla*, there are limits to this vision in regard to gender and sexuality.

There are actually two endings to *Los rubios*: one that is filmed by Carri herself with her video camera with only Analía Couceyro in frame walking towards the horizon wearing a blond wig, and a final version where the entire crew joins Couceyro also wearing blond wigs. In the first version, Couceyro walks into the horizon and for a moment she glances back at the camera before continuing. Muñoz suggests that a “backward glance ... enacts a future vision” (*Cruising Utopia* 4). A glance into the past of Carri’s family disappearance and the false testimonies provided by neighbor gave way to a potentiality for a new story where this queer family, Carri’s blond crew, is conceived. The performative gesture of constructing multiple endings, enacting new identities, and providing alternate realities is a queer world making project, a palimpsest. The process of autobiographical retellings, with its fictionalized components and its loose ends, disrupt the way in which Carri has been positioned in the world as a child of the disappeared to seek a new queer visibility, a new queer world which is expressly an autotheoretical project and draws not only from her own accounts but others’ retellings, true or false.

Los rubios challenges us to engage with what Muñoz refers to as “queer visibility” where we “may need to squint, to strain our vision and force it to see otherwise, beyond the limited vista of the here and now” (*Cruising Utopia* 22). The trappings of a queer futurity are present in her film concerning familial trauma and loss as much as they are in her lesbian pornographic visions. If we squint and strain our eyes to face toward the horizon toward which the “family” walks, we could see these queer possibilities for relationality. By wearing “family” drag and dressing up as the upper-middle class, blond family of the neighbor’s recollection, Carri’s is showing the artifice of the nuclear family construction which has bound the narratives constructed by children of the disappeared. Carri enacts family drag to show the impossibility of capturing a faithful portrait of her parents. She demonstrates the way in which the heteronormative nuclear family of Argentina’s imagination is itself a tool by the state to repeat its stories of *nunca más*. Lazarra argues that “walking towards the future in blond wigs reads as a symbolic gesture of Carri’s assumption of loss, an admission that identities are constructed, flawed, imperfect masks that we wear” (156). Carri’s doubles show the way in which truth is unavailable and that “testimonies” are also performances so how can one purport to tell an “official story.”

In this chapter I have shown the way in which Albertina Carri’s film on familial trauma and loss doesn’t belong to heteronormative conceptions of loss and trauma but that it’s expressly queer in form and methodology. This queer affect in her film is a form of autotheoretical worldmaking in that Carri harnesses the autobiographical in order to conceive of new forms of relating and to express a new possible, potential world where

she can exist outside of this prescribed identity of “daughter of the disappeared.” Her decision to abandon the nuclear family structure and cast another person to “play” her role of daughter in the film is part of queer world-making project which seeks to construct new ways of relating to others who were affected by the Dirty War whether through biological ties or not. Her decision to abandon inheritance—that of her family’s status in Argentine history and that of cultural cinematic history—demonstrates a decision to investigate and create new reservoirs of evidence that belong to the queer archive of feeling. Through these palimpsests derived from queer ephemeral archives, we are given new ways of mourning and new ways of giving testimony to loss, absence, and identity. Carri’s documentary is a failure if we remain bound to documentary rigor and seriousness, but this failure creates new potentialities and relationalities.

Chapter 4

Latinas Escaping the Myth of the Eternal Feminine: Xandra Ibarra and Regina José Galindo

Introduction: Send Laughing Bloody Nudes?

In this chapter, I will return to a familiar primal scene: me in a museum. In the summer of 2019, I found myself at the Tate Modern following a rough breakup from a whirlwind romance. I was in London to meet this person's family and friends; but now, broken up, we had free time, and so we went to the museum before my train back to Paris. We split up and I roamed the floors until I found myself facing a performance by Regina José Galindo. She questioned: *Quién puede borrar las huellas?* Who can erase the traces/footprints/marks/tracks/impressions/etc.? In this performance, Galindo walks from the Corte de Constitucionalidad to the Palacio Nacional de Guatemala—from the court to the palace. Before each step, Galindo dips her feet into a basin filled with human blood to leave a trace, a footprint of her route. In doing so, she draws a bloody connection between the constitutional court to the presidential palace to viscerally highlight legacies of violence imposed on the Guatemalan people by their government and its leaders. Galindo's performance is realized in protest of the 2003 presidential elections in which Efraín Ríos Montt was the nominee for the Republican Front of Guatemala.⁶⁶ Ríos Montt served as a military officer during the Guatemalan Civil War and as dictator from 1982 to 1983, during which he orchestrated a genocide against the Maya peoples. He was tried and found guilty of crimes against humanity in 2013.⁶⁷ In Galindo's performance ten

⁶⁶ The artist details this fact on her website, see Galindo "Quien puede borrar las huellas?"

⁶⁷ For a brief overview on Efraín Ríos Montt see, "Obituary: Guatemala's Efraín Ríos Montt."

years before this verdict, Galindo walks in protest because Ríos Montt is running for president despite his past crimes. Her walk from the court to the palace attempts to render clearly the disconnect of a justice system and political system, which allow for a war criminal to run for president, by leaving a bloody trace that cannot be ignored. She poses the question, “who can erase the traces?” to spectator(s)—past and present—witnesses to a history riddled with amnesia. If the courts, politicians, and official records want the Guatemalan people to forget—try to strategically and systematically make them forget—Galindo would not allow it.

I had just taken a graduate seminar with Professor Jennifer Doyle on Black Performance; it was my introduction to performance as a genre, methodology, field of study. I carried these lessons with me to a seminar on Latin American art with Professor Aleca Le Blanc where, for my final project, I focused on Regina José Galindo. I focused on the ephemeral versus the archival, the performative versus the constative. When presenting part of this research in seminar, I recall being asked: how can this be ephemeral if we are able to preserve it on video? True, I watched it on video in a museum, I was not physically present for the performance in 2003. I don’t recall how I answered this question, probably not well as it was my first year of graduate school, but I can think a few answers now. I was drawing specifically on José Esteban Muñoz’ argument for queer acts and ephemera as counter-archive that he poses in “Ephemera as Evidence,” which has obviously significantly shaped my work. In this, he asks: what “counts” as “proof”? (Muñoz, “Ephemera” 6). The ephemeral, for Muñoz, isn’t merely something that will soon vanish, but something that can shift and persist even as it faces

state-sponsored systematic erasure. Can Galindo's ephemeral performance, captured on video, count as proof?

Her bloody footprints will eventually be washed away and erased in the way that the State washes away and sanitizes its violent historical pasts. Her performance and its affective registers imprinted in my memory, however, cannot be erased. They remain superimposed on my body through the memory of her wet feet, my wet feet, my eyes on the screen focused on her body moving in space in Guatemala City while my body stands still and fixed in space in London. I feel all of this still. She/her/I/my—the referential indexicals were also a preoccupation of mine at that time and clearly still. Roland Barthes ruminates:

Can we even imagine the freedom and, so to speak, the erotic fluidity of a collectivity which would speak only in pronouns and shifters, each person never saying anything but *I, tomorrow, over there*, without referring to anything legal whatsoever, and in which the *vagueness of difference*... would be language's most precious value. (Roland Barthes 166)

The utopic quality of the shifter that Barthes imagines here is what Galindo performs with her body. My feet, her feet, our feet. Relationality can be found in the shifter where she and I have the capacity to shift in my act of spectating and her act of performing; and she is able to channel the wrath of the indigenous women raped and killed by the regime through those bloody steps. How could I feel the warm blood on my feet, which were actually on her feet and the anger of every footstep? It is the very shiftiness of such characters, the "I," that allows such pathways for relationality—our capacity to slip between these *our's*, *we's*, and *I's*.

Amber Jamilla Musser notes that “to invoke blood as a BIPOC [Black, Indigenous, Person of Color] artist is also to summon a collective racialised identity” (“Tainted Blood” 175). She argues, “blood in these contexts is never just about an individual body or containment, but it is wrapped up in the idea of belonging to a larger community and, more, their specific trials and tribulations” (176). Blood, for BIPOC, implies a genealogy, it traces lineages and draws connections to other racialized bodies; Here, we can recall the U.S. “one-drop” rule, in which only a sliver of Black ancestry is enough to qualify someone as Black and therefore subject to Jim Crow laws, the systematic racial segregation and disenfranchisement of Black and African Americans following the emancipation of slaves and the abolition of slavery in the U.S. Furthermore, these bloody histories might be cloaked in violence made only too clear in the use of blood. Blood capacity to demonstrate all this makes clear that the performative is necessary for the queer ephemeral counter-archive that Muñoz theorized. The constative is not enough because the fact is that Ríos Montt committed heinous war crimes and genocide. The statement, “Efraín Ríos Montt was dictator of Guatemala who executed plans for the killing of Mayan peoples” is not enough *to do* anything evidenced by his nomination for presidency only a decade after the end of the civil war. Rather, the performative queer act is necessary. The bloody footprints on the concrete affectively *do* something by reenacting a bloody scene that draws attention to the state apparatus and forces you to feel the traces of that violence. It is as Musser states, “blood alters perspective” (182). Musser’s use of perspective takes on two meanings—the way in which the blood can literally alter perspective in art but how the blood amplifies the

depth of engagement demanded by the art to its audience. Blood demands relationality. It is tied to histories of violence, but it can also be used to create new epistemological pathways, to allow us to see beyond these histories. Galindo traces the steps between the court to the palace in blood rendering clear the histories of violence imposed by the State, but as they are retraced, they also create new meanings. This is to say that Galindo's bloody footprints highlight the violence but also reimagine new pathways, which may give you, the spectator, the capacity to follow her trace and not the State's.

In Professor Doyle's seminar, we watched a video recording of Xandra Ibarra's 2016 performance of *Nude Laughing* at the Los Angeles museum The Broad. Ibarra, fully nude except for a breast plate, walks around the Jeff Koons reflective sculptures and Roy Lichtenstein Pop Art, while dragging pantyhose repurposed as a sack filled with what she terms "white lady accoutrements" and maniacally laughs herself to exhaustion.⁶⁸ The performance parodies John Currin's *Laughing Nude* (1998) by taking the white womanhood depicted in the painting to transpose it onto a brown body and reperform madness on a racialized body. Drawing from feminist mad studies, theorist Leticia Alvarado argues that "Ibarra places her object play in relation to the medicalized emergency of affective excess read as madness or *locura* that happens in tandem with designation of less-than-human against the propriety of white womanhood" ("To have and to Hoard" 530).⁶⁹ Alvarado is referring to the hoarding of objects displayed in Ibarra's work and seen in *Nude Laughing* demonstrated by the objects (i.e. blonde wig,

⁶⁸ See the artist's description of the performance: Ibarra, "Nude Laughing."

⁶⁹ For more on feminist mad studies, see Mollow "Mad Feminism." For more on *locura*, see La Fountain-Stokes, *Translocas*.

ballet shoes, pearls, furs) that the artist hauls along with her as extensions of this madness. The fact that the performance ends when Ibarra stuffs herself into the stocking with these other objects demonstrates the way in which brown bodies themselves become accoutrements of white femininity. The female brown body becomes another object for white femininity that functions as a foil from which to contrast and base a white respectable femininity. The subversion of Currin's title is notable. Ibarra takes the adjective of Currin's title and transforms it into a verb—from the constative to the performative. The “laughing” of the title no longer solely describes the nude, the nude transforms into an agent capable of laughing. Ibarra's *Nude Laughing* reclaims the agency of the subject of Currin's *Laughing Nude* in multiple ways. One notable way is the dynamic movement of the feminine body through and across space that is denied to the subject of the static painting. This movement across space, in turn, demands visual engagement. Spectators watch Ibarra move through space and have to physically follow her. The most powerful reclamation of agency, as noted in her title, is the capacity to laugh so that even when Ibarra is lost from the visual field, her laughter echoes throughout the space and her presence through her voice resonates while her body disappears, and she forecloses the possibility of remaining only an object to be looked at, escaping the confines of Currin's nude.

For Iván A. Ramos, Ibarra's body of work takes “the links between relationality and racial and gendered abjection as a potent thematic and formal preoccupation” (77). In his article titled “Breaking Down, Breaking Together: Xandra Ibarra's *Nude Laughing* and the Violence of the Encounter,” Ramos details three iterations of this performance

and the way in which the audience responded to the piece each time. He specifically focuses on the last performance of *Nude Laughing* held in 2019 in Mexico City at ExTeresa Arte Actual, which she performed in front of other performance artists and theorists of performance. Ramos details how a space and audience such as this, which one would expect to be a receptive and engaged crowd, turned out to be violent. Ramos describes a moment in which pioneering performance artist Richard Schechner and Chicano performance artist Guillermo Gómez-Peña began to laugh with Ibarra. He notes, however, that rather than seeming to join her in laughter, their faux laughter overtook Ibarra's in the space. Later, Ramos hears Mexican artist José Antonio Cordero comment that it was "typical Chicana performance" (Ramos 70). As if this dismissive comment wasn't enough, the man with whom Cordero was speaking, Mexican actor Daniel Giménez Cacho, would go on to grab Ibarra's wrist, refusing to let go. Cordero's comment and Giménez Cacho's act demonstrate the complexity in which Ibarra's body is received and perceived in this space. While Ibarra's performance comments on the limitations imposed by white femininity on brown bodies, the reactions of brown men to the piece highlight the limitations of brown relationality on the grounds of gender. Further, Cordero's comment specifies "Chicana," leading one to also consider the national divides and dismissal of diasporic identities both in their home nations and in their nations of ancestral origin. This experience leads Ramos to his argument that laughter elicits two responses: relationality or alienation. He writes, "Part of what draws me to *Nude Laughing* is the ambivalence that it produces in its audiences. We are confronted with Ibarra's laughter as it challenges us to choose between becoming open to

her body or distancing ourselves from it” (82). Laughter challenges us to decide whether we are laughing with or at, which in turn, has the capacity to create closeness or distance. In her study on indigenous activist video, Freya Schiwy amplifies this stance on laughter and relationality:

As studies of ethnic, racist, and sexist joking have shown, who laughs at whom and who must laugh on whose terms reveals the inequalities of social power. Changing the conditions of laughing indeed alters not simply what can be heard but the entire structure and conditions of visibility and subjectification. (177)

Schiwy’s reflection on laughter here can help us think through Ibarra’s use of laughter in her performance and audience response to it. Schiwy points to the transformative potential of laughter to subvert the power relations, to ask “who’s laughing now?” And, perhaps, are you laughing with or against me? Ramos notes the infectiousness that can come with Ibarra’s performance that might provoke you to laugh. This type of laughter and engagement with the work stands in contrast to Schechner’s and Gómez-Peña’s interruptive and consuming faked laughter. By not allowing Ibarra’s laughter to infect them and instead opting to amplify their own voices above hers, they are precluding Ibarra from reshaping the conditions of visibility and subjectification of her brown body. Ramos suggests that the contagious quality of laughter is what allows for relationality in that one can lose themselves in the laughter and that this loss of self might be what would allow us to go “beyond a community of ‘laughers’” to a “bodily mass of strangers among each other” (82). Like the shiftiness of proper nouns, laughter also has the capacity to shift and blend into each other so as to erase any individual capacity to laugh, to form a cacophonous laughing chorus that distorts the boundaries of visibility.

Throughout this dissertation, I have reflected on the capacity to be with “in” and “out” of the self, which is to say how in being with “in” oneself, one is also shaping how to be with “out” oneself thereby creating pathways of relationality through the personal and self-reflexive. I have considered how the texts presented offer visions on how one, in ruminating on one’s self, can offer possibilities for relationality and how what may seem like a singular story can open up parallel stories, echoes, and resonances. In this chapter, I will focus on the video art of Regina José Galindo and Xandra Ibarra and the ways in which they confront, rework, and resignify Latina feminine mythologies. Although they will not be the focus of this chapter, I began with the above pieces because they were my first exposure to these artist’s work, because I believe they are representative of the larger thematics of their oeuvres, and because scholarship on these artists often focus on these performances. In the rest of the chapter, however, I will be focusing on their video art. This is due to the dissertations focus on film and media but also because of its concern on the possibilities for relationality and embodiment through the digital and/or virtual. The performances described above were meant for live audiences and were performed with that in mind and thus are more capable of expressing themes of embodiment and relationality when a material body and an audience are present. My question regarding the digital/virtual surfaces when we think about the critical distance that might be created by the video medium. Both artists, known for their uses of their bodies as medium, produced video art as well; so, what does it mean to adapt the body and the performative to the screen. In doing so, the audience becomes implicated and is provoked to react

differently given a private space. How, then, does the change in medium offer new or different visions for relationality?

Video as Palimpsest: Latine Counter-archival Fabulations

The question of medium prompts engagement with Marshall McLuhan's reverberating intervention in media studies with his statement, "the medium is the message." For McLuhan, the way in which we decide to communicate something has the capacity to alter human relations. He writes,

[T]he medium is the message. This is merely to say that the personal and social consequences of any medium—that is, of any extension of ourselves—result from the new scale that is introduced into our affairs by each extension of ourselves, or by any new technology (7).

McLuhan argues that regardless of the content of the message, the medium itself facilitates or mediates a form of receptivity between creator and receptor. When considering the work of Ibarra and Galindo, we must consider how this change in medium, from live performance to video, shifts its capacity to engage the spectator. Further, how do these new relationalities mediated by video art contribute to my understanding of the palimpsestic. In this section, I will trace key scholarship on video art and think of its capacity to function as a palimpsest as a form of counter-archival fabulation.

Narcissism remains a concern of mine, a specter of this dissertation. My own Socratic *daimon* repeatedly pokes at me when I think of the central claim of this dissertation: How intimate and personal stories can exceed their generic bounds to invoke intertextual readings of other selves. Can relationality exist when considering, writing, and filming the self? While the Greek root of *autos* as a prefix has developed to mean the

“self” or “same,” in its ancient usage it was a pronoun that could also mean “he/she/it.” In *autos*, we have Barthes’ shifter utopia, and in autotheory, we have the capacity for relationality by theorizing the multiplicity of selves. Claims of narcissism plague video art critique. Both artist Martha Rosler and art historian and critic Rosalind Krauss position video art as a narcissistic medium. Rosler, in “Video: Shedding the Utopian Moment,” details one of the early “streams” of video art as an “effort meant to develop a new poetry from this everyday ‘language’ of television, to insert aesthetic pleasure into a mass form and to provide the utopic glimpse afforded by ‘liberated’ sensibilities” (32). This attempt, according to Rosler, is an individualistic one that pushes it into the domain of narcissism:

That the first of these streams rested on the sensibilities and positioning of the individual meant, of course, that the possibilities for the use of video as a theater of the self, as a narcissistic and self-referential medium, constantly presented themselves. (32)

For Rosler, the video medium was first and foremost developed as a “theater of the self.” The technology allowed for one to broadcast one’s intimate self to a larger audience. In “Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism,” Rosalind Krauss analyzes the defining structure of video art through Vito Acconci’s abstract video *Centers* (1971). In this piece, Acconci positions himself in front of the video camera while pointing directly at it, which is then displayed on a television. Krauss defines Acconci’s piece as a “sustained tautology: a line of sight that begins at Acconci’s plan of vision and ends at the eyes of his projected double,” and continues, “in that image of self-regard is configured a narcissism so endemic to the works of video that I find myself wanting to generalize it as *the* condition of the entire genre” (Krauss 50). For Krauss, the narcissism is literal and inherent to the

technology's ability to simultaneously record and project its subject, which results in a doubling. She elaborates,

[T]he mirror-reflection of absolute feedback is a process of bracketing out the object... a video's real medium is a psychological situation, the very terms of which are to withdraw attention from an external object—an Other—and invest it in the Self... And that is the specific condition of narcissism (Krauss 57).

The narcissism that defines video art for Krauss is not only its doubling of the subject of the art as object, but also its capacity to mediate a psychological state between artist and spectator, in which the spectator projects themselves onto the figure of the artist. In her description of the video, Krauss mistakes Acconci's pointing to the camera for the "television monitor," which only vindicates her thesis of narcissism as she imagines herself as the pointing artist because, according to her, given her position, she would be pointing at a television screen. Her reading, however, demonstrates that given her own subject-position in the space of this artwork, she maintains a subjective and unique perspective. If she were to truly psychologically inhabit the place of the artist, she would imagine a camera recorder and not a television monitor. Therefore, in this latter reading, Krauss' experience of Acconci's video is a doubling but one that maintains a differential perspective that doesn't completely engulf the spectator with the artist.

Christine Tamblyn, in "Significant Others: Social Documentary as Personal Portraiture in Women's Video of the 1980s," suggests that editing can function as an escape from the narcissism that Krauss attributes to video art. She writes, "The temporal concurrence of the artist and the medium that produces a claustrophobically collapsed present in Krauss' model of narcissistic video dissolves in the temporal displacements of

the editing process” (Tamblyn 408). Krauss’ claim of narcissism rested largely on the fact that video instantaneously produces an image or feedback as it captures the image.

Tamblyn claims that the editing process distorts this visual tautology by creating space between image capture and feedback. Tamblyn also demonstrates how the 1980s second-wave feminism dictum, “the personal is political,” eludes claims of narcissism by bringing the private into the public. She writes,

In the performance video that was influenced by these consciousness-raising methods, autobiographical themes, including the exorcism of constraining female stereotypes in confessional monologues or the expansion of self-potential through projective role-playing predominated. (Tamblyn 406)

The use of the autobiographical was wielded by feminist video art practitioners to bring the personal to larger publics. We can see the legacy of 1980s feminist performance video art lineages in Ibarra’s work, which I will discuss in the following section. Finally, Tamblyn suggests that the private character of the video is subversive: “Since video is used to broadcast public information within the private environment of the home, it serves as an appropriate medium for investigating the imbrications of the personal and the political in our increasingly regulated society” (417). This might be one of the key differences between film and video. While we are currently in the age of streaming and increasingly watching more films at home than at the cinema, this is a fairly new phenomenon. Film watching has historically functioned as a communal experience and it is a highly regulated industry. The costs to make a film are high and require funders. Once the film is made, it requires distributors before it can make it to the cinema for us to

watch. In contrast, video has a greater capacity to freely circulate.⁷⁰ Often times artists will upload their work online for all to access, which makes it much more accessible to watch privately at home. The interventions of the artists examined in this chapter and their video art provide yet another layer from which to approach the fundamental question of this dissertation regarding a narcissistic tendency to reflect on the self. Through their full display of themselves and their bodies, these artists give way to thinking about a rich intertwined and intertextual understanding of the self through/with/by others.

To this dissertation, this chapter will also add a discussion on hemispheric Latine/x identity as I engage with the racialized and sexed mythologies that are presented in the work of Ibarra and Galindo in their reworkings, resignifications of feminine icons of Latinidad.⁷¹ The term Latinidad carries heavy semantic weight.⁷² In “Latinidad/es,” Frances R. Aparicio, defines Latinidad and notes its limitations:

Latinidad has been claimed as a hemispheric framework for the study of the Americas, as well as critiqued and rejected as a label that homogenizes

⁷⁰ For more about video art and the museum, see Rosler.

⁷¹ In Spanish, the masculine “latino” is typically used as the gender-neutral term. Latinx and Latine surfaced as gender inclusive terms. The use of “Latinx” has been widely debated; see Sicharrón-del Rio and Aja; Guerra and Orbea; R. Rodriguez; and Morales. Latinx has been critiqued as a U.S.-centric term and for its difficult pronunciation for Spanish-speakers. In contrast, Latine began circulating in Hispanophone countries in Latin America and is now circulating in the U.S. I employ Latinx to use the term that is most widely circulated in the U.S. anglophone academy and to keep the tension present in the early debates for the use of this term. I use Latine to recognize the term that sprouted from feminist and queer movements from Latin America and the work it is doing to decentralize the gendered structure of the language by taking the neuter. For example, the word “ustedes” (plural “you”) is not gendered in Spanish but “ellos/ellas” (them) is, so in the Latine configuration, one would use “elles” for the plural. Latinx did not evolve to transform the language in such a way.

⁷² For more on the critiques and limitations of Latinidad see Darder and Torres; Flores.

the rich heterogeneity of our communities and inadequately, if at all, recognize the inclusion of Afro-Latinas/os and mixed race Latina/os. (113)

This same definition and critique continue to circulate in Latinx/o studies. In a 2025 issue of *Latino Studies*, editor-in-chief Marta Caminero-Santangelo arrives at a similar definition and analysis of Latinidad in “Latinidad, again?”:

Understood broadly as a term referring to a panethnic and constructed group identity, the label inevitably continues to pose more questions than it ever answers and to potentially elide—if used without scrutiny—the many fraught dynamics involved with claiming or performing Latina/x/o identities. (1)

Latinidad presupposes a community and relationality; the idea of a community is inherent to conceptualizing Latinidad. These quotes from Aparicio and Caminero-Santangelo, however, demonstrate how this isn’t necessarily the case with Latinidad and that there are contentions and factions of what it even means to be Latino, which suggests fissures within the community. Ironically, the term Latino and Latinidad, meant to articulate a hemispheric community, also have the capacity to block relational possibilities. In this chapter, I will demonstrate how the work of Galindo and Ibarra are themselves engaged with this bind imposed by Latinidad in their reworking of iconic figures of Latinidad. Their feminist critiques using Latine/x iconography demonstrate the scope and the boundaries of a panethnic, hemispheric identity while projecting a liberatory and relational possibility.

Ibarra and Galdino’s respective uses of Latine/x iconography engage with what Saidiya Hartman has termed “critical fabulation.” The video format allows Ibarra and Galindo to transpose their performance aura into digital formats. As the discussion above on media scholarship on video art suggests, video has an ambiguous and ambivalent

place when it comes to questions on documentation and ephemera. While it is able to capture images in “real time” and offer those images instantaneously, it may have difficulties with preservation. Even now with “cloud” technologies, one runs the risk of losing a video to the digital ether since it has no material copy. I have faced many hopeless attempts at finding a document by typing what I thought was a “keyword” in the search bar, without finding even a tiny trace of the document; in its place are dozens of documents with little to no connection to my keyword. Technologies that promised eternal preservation face the same difficulties as losing a notebook on the subway. For these reasons, video exists squarely within the ephemeral. In thinking about this choice of medium, one can think of how video is in line with a counter-archival fabulatory practice. As I discussed the counter-archive in my previous chapter when examining the work of Albertina Carri, I will expand on the ideas developed there in this chapter by drawing on fabulation.

In her formidable essay, “Venus in Two Acts,” Saidiya Hartman coins the term “critical fabulation.” This term encapsulates the difficulty minoritized subjects face when their only historical records are either missing or entrenched in violence thereby making it difficult to recount their own stories. In this essay, Hartman attempts to tell the stories of two unnamed Black girls on a slave ship whom she calls Venus. As she tells this fictionalized story, she ruminates on how a story can only be drawn from preexisting archives, which in this case are a slave ship record and tomb stones. She also questions how she can avoid enacting any more violence on these Venus by imagining and providing a romanticized historical counter-narrative. A critical fabulation for Hartman is

not only a critique of the dominant narrative proposed by the archive but also a critique of how “the loss of stories sharpens the hunger for them. So it is tempting to fill in the gaps and to provide closure where there is none” (8). The dilemma faced by Hartman parallels hunger for images and “positive” representations to counter racist and reductive conceptions of a culture. Yet, to compose such stories, one needs to engage with these dark histories. Hartman defines critical fabulation as a mode in which narrative is distorted and contested:

By playing with and rearranging the basic elements of the story, by re-presenting the sequence of events in divergent stories from contested points of view, I have attempted to jeopardize the status of the event, to displace the received or authorized account, and to imagine what might have happened or might have been said or might have been done. By throwing into crisis ‘what happened when’ and by exploiting the ‘transparency of sources’ as fictions of history (11).

Hartman’s critical fabulation distorts axes of power that dictate what is true and what is false by arguing that history itself tells its own fictions and positions them as truths. She continues:

By flattening the levels of narrative discourse and confusing narrator and speakers, I hoped to illuminate the contested character of history, narrative, event, and fact, to topple the hierarchy of discourse, and to engulf the authorized speech in the clash of voices. The outcomes of this method is a recombinant narrative, which ‘loops the strands’ of incommensurate accounts and which weaves present, past, and future. (12)

Critical fabulation thus has two aims: 1) to contest propriety of official histories which means to distort narrative, and 2) imagine new possible stories by inverting authority, giving voice to the voiceless in these official historical narratives, that tell not only the atrocities of the past, the concerns of the present, but also the hopes of a future.

Hartman's imagery of the looping and weaving of critical fabulation calls to mind Donna

Haraway's definition of speculative fabulation. She writes:

I think SF [speculative fabulation] ...First, promiscuously plucking out fibers in clothed and dense events and practices, I try to follow the threads where they lead in order to track them and find their tangles and patterns crucial for staying with the trouble in real and particular places and times. SF is a method of tracing, of following a thread in the dark, in a dangerous true tale of adventure, where who lives and who dies and how might become clearer for the cultivating of multispecies justice. Second, the string figure is not the tracking, but rather the actual thing, the pattern and assembly that solicits response, the thing that is not oneself but with which one must go on. Third, string figuring is passing on and receiving, making and unmaking, picking up threads and dropping them. SF is practice and process; it is becoming-with each other in surprising relays. (Haraway, "Introduction" 3)

Haraway's formulation of SF echoes Hartman's critical fabulation. The undoing of the thread of histories and the constant making, unmaking, and remaking with that very thread, to loop and weave them in new configurations is a radical practice of relationality.

In this chapter, I will demonstrate the way in which Galindo and Ibarra use the video medium to reconstruct Latina iconographies that provide new readings and new relationalities of and for Latina femininity and erotics. In particular, they rework dominant images of the Virgin Mary and the precolonial figure of an Earth Mother. Through religious syncretism, these figures became one and the same. In the case of Mexico and its diaspora, the Aztec earth goddess Coatlicue is embedded in the figure of the Guadalupe.⁷³ In South America, Pachamama, a cosmic mother goddess, was also incorporated into region-specific Christianity, but has also come to function as metonym for Earth itself, sometimes used synonymously with Mother Nature akin to the usage of

⁷³ For more on the history of the Guadalupe and her religious syncretism, see Poole.

the Greek Gaia. This chapter will engage with these limiting legacies of identity registers provided to Latina subjectivities through the subversive video art of Galindo and Ibarra who both engage with a version of these cosmologies. However, rather than falling into the trap of romanticization that Hartman cautions against, Ibarra and Galindo radically resignify these figures forming new queer mythologies.

As countless scholars have established, video art's origin has ties to the rise of broadcast television.⁷⁴ Television as the larger technological mechanism of which video is part dominates mass culture, dictates acceptable representations of others, and propagates these images and ideologies. In "Brain, Brow, and Booty: Latina Iconicity in the U.S. Popular Culture," Isabel Molina Guzmán and Angharad N. Valdivia point to U.S. media as largely responsible for constructing and circulating stereotypical, hypersexualized images of Latinas through icons like Jennifer Lopez, Selma Hayek, and Frida Kahlo. The media forms a particular image of Latina femininity that is particularly interested in their bodies as exotic and desirable. Artists like Martha Rosler harnessed the video to critique the structures of the mass media apparatus through feminist works like *Semiotics of the Kitchen* (1975). Rosler noted that early users of video saw its potential to serve as a conduit for parody or its capacity to turn it on itself as a method of critique, which she refers to as "the utopian moment" (31). Galindo and Ibarra's video work have as a lineage feminist video art, but rather than simply parodying iconic images of Latina femininity that circulate in popular culture, I argue that they fabulate alternate relationalities to such icons and stereotypes.

⁷⁴ See Rush; Meigh-Andrews; Antin; Shamberg; Rosler.

Ni Santos, Ni Putas: Ibarra's Guadalupe/Malinche Complex

Chicana artist Xandra Ibarra's video performance *Spictacle III: La Virgensota Jota* (2015), was first performed and developed in 2006 when Ibarra would perform these caricatures of Latinidad at burlesque shows under her alias La Chica Boom. It is the third installment of her *Spictacles* (2002-2015), a portmanteau of the racial epithet for Mexican-Americans, "spic," and "spectacles." Guy Debord notes that "the spectacle is not a collection of images; rather, it is a social relationship between people that is mediated by images" (12). These "spictacles" precisely drew from the social relations of Chicano identity mediated by the imagery of Mexican and Mexican-American nationalist icons such as the luchador, a *tortillera* (which holds the double meaning of a tortilla maker and lesbian in Mexican Spanish), and of course, the figure of the Virgen de Guadalupe. The Virgen de Guadalupe is a distinct Mexican icon. The myth states that she first appeared to Juan Diego who was one of the first indigenous people to be baptized Catholic upon arrival of the missionaries (Poole 27-28). The Guadalupe is a result of religious syncretism—where the figure of the Aztec earth mother Tonatzin Coatlicue became integrated into the figure of the Catholic Virgin Mary. In Mexico and its diaspora, the veneration of the Guadalupe gives way to *Marianismo*, which takes the qualities of the Holy Virgin—chastity, modesty, purity, self-sacrifice—as the standard for Latina femininity (Stevens 94-95). In opposition to the Guadalupe exists the Malinche. Malintzin, who was Christianized Marina and more popularly known as La Malinche, was the Nahuatl woman that acted as interpreter for Spanish colonizer, Hernán Cortés. In birthing his son, Malinche also became the figurative mother of the mestizo race, a race

created by the mixing of indigenous with European blood. Due to her (exaggerated) role in the defeat and conquest of the Aztec empire, Malinche became a figure of betrayal and promiscuity, who acclaimed Mexican writer Octavio Paz referred to as “la Chingada” or “the fucked one” (95). The Guadalupe/Malinche here are Latina instantiations of what is more widely known as the Madonna/whore complex. Guadalupe/Malinche have taken on very distinct lives in Mexican and Mexican American cultural productions. The Guadalupe has served as inspiration for numerous works of art and the Malinche has been reclaimed as a feminist icon.⁷⁵ Yet, these two figures have always remained in opposition to each other. They become, for Latinas, a figurative double-bind, a call to either identify with dominant ideology and syncretize with ideals of respectable femininity (Guadalupe) or completely reject them and counteridentify (Malinche). *The Virgensota Jota* of the piece, which the artist roughly translates to “Big Ol’ Homo Virgin,” bypasses the oppressive bind imposed on Mexican and Mexican-American femininity by bringing together the figures of Guadalupe (Madonna) and the Malinche (whore) embodying what I call a palimpsest, this intertextual relationship that resonates across sexed cultural productions

The video features Ibarra dressed in quintessential Virgen de Guadalupe garb: a bright emerald green robe, a red dress, and a gleaming golden crown that resembles the golden halo typical of a Guadalupe depiction. The Guadalupe reveals herself as a distinctly Mexican national icon in mirroring the colors of the Mexican flag. Ibarra enters the frame walking away from the camera so all we see is her robe. When she turns

⁷⁵ For in depth discussions of these afterlives in art, see Alarcón and Arrizón, *Queering Mestizaje*.

around, Ibarra reveals an aesthetic that clashes with the religious iconography of the Virgin in a close-up frame of her face. Rather than reveal an angelic, serene passivity that accompanies most renditions of the Virgin whose downward averted gaze projects a chaste modesty, Ibarra wears an aggressive grimace replete with a full face of dark make-up whose deeply mahogany lips accentuate the harshness of the sneer. Ibarra's make-up aligns with a *chola* aesthetic, another distinct Latina femininity. The chola functions as an alternative to traditional forms of Latina femininity with roots in 1990s urban Latino gang culture. The chola aesthetic is defined by dark eyeliner, dark-lined lips, sharp and thin eyebrows, and baggy clothing. Associated with gang culture, cholas offered an oppositional, tough alternative identity that existed outside of the confines of traditional Latina femininity.⁷⁶ An operatic "Ave Maria" plays over what sounds like a signal interference into a prayer-type broadcast while Ibarra loudly and irreverently smacks her gum in her mouth, whose lips snarl and remain bare-teethed for the entirety of the performance. This performance of Latinadad falls in line with what sociologist Michelle Gomez Parra defines as the "ghetto girl," "chola," or "Hot Cheeto girl." She writes, "the figure of the 'Hot Cheeto Girl' typically referred to a racialized image of a low-income teenage girl who ate Hot Cheeto chips for breakfast and wore a significant amount of makeup, tight, and revealing clothing, 'excessive' hairstyles, long acrylic nails, hoop earrings, and a gold nameplate necklace" (1-2). In employing this chola aesthetic, Ibarra is imbuing the traditionally chaste image of the Guadalupe of the Catholic faith with the

⁷⁶ For other media representations of cholas, see Guadalupe Rosales' Instagram living-archive, *Veteranas and Rucas*; and Allison Ander's *Mi Vida Loca* (1993) which featured real cholas from the Echo Park neighborhood in Los Angeles.

subversive trappings of the chola bypassing the bind of Latina femininity imposed by the Guadalupe/Malinche complex by making the Guadalupe and the Malinche one and the same.

In her discussion of Chicana artists Yolanda M. Lopez and Ester Hernandez' reworkings of the Guadalupe, Alicia Arrizón argues that resignifications and appropriations of the Guadalupe in Chicana art display an "attitude of resistance...indicative of the political unconscious that transgresses traditional values" (*Queering Mestizaje* 71). For Arrizón, these subversive re-presentations of the Guadalupe figure transcend Western epistemological and metaphysical bounds by giving space to "split subjectivities" that encompass Chicana identity. This drive in Chicana art to "reproduce mimetic altered bodies," according to Arrizón, allows for "the performative [to emerge] in the manipulation of the surface of the iconographic image and in the surface of the altered body" (Arrizón 70-71). For Arrizón, this results in a "new body language" that "contrast[s] the passive eloquence of the traditional mestizaje icon" (71). Following Arrizón's argument, Ibarra's performative act of embodying the Guadalupe doesn't merely reproduce the iconography and its ideology but transforms it to create new relational corporealities that resignify and communicate something else, something radical.

Xandra Ibarra's art hails from a feminist genealogy of Latina art and performance. We can trace affinities between Ibarra and other Chicana artists like Yolanda Lopez' *Guadalupes* (1978), Ester Hernandez' *La Ofrenda* (1988), Judith Baca's *Las Tres Marías* (1976) as well as more transgressive works like Nao Bustamante's *Indigurrito* (1992) and

America the Beautiful (2002). We also have Cuban American Carmelita Tropicana and Mexican performer Astrid Hadad's bodies of work, as well as Patti Valdez of Asco.⁷⁷ Some artists rework the Guadalupe within a respectable and venerating framework. In Lopez' *Guadalupes Triptych*, the Guadalupe takes on the form of respectable women: a hardworking seamstress, a young girl who runs optimistically towards the future, and an elder who imbues the next generation with motherly care and wisdom. These depictions are given equal status to the sanctity of the Virgin Mary and aim to validate Latina femininity through respectable depictions. Other artists disengage entirely from such deifying images of Latinidad, rather, they desecrate these easily consumable depictions that exist within the bounds of estimable Latino identity.

In the next shot of the performance, Ibarra creates a diamond shape with her hands and places it over her lower abdomen recalling the messianic mythology of the virginal womb that carries God's offspring. She brings this diamond shape up to her face framing her mouth where she inserts her tongue and moves it in a manner that resembles the act of cunnilingus, then brings her hands into a prayer position.

⁷⁷ For more on Carmelita Tropicana see, Arrizón *Latina Performance*; Muñoz, *Sense of Brown*. For more on Astrid Hadad see, Arrizón, *Latina Performance*; Taylor and Constantino. For more on Asco see, Chavoya and Gonzales; Gamboa.



Fig. 12. Still from Xandra Ibarra's *Spictacle III: La Virgensota Jota*



Fig. 13. Still from Xandra Ibarra's *Spictacle III: La Virgensota Jota*

She sticks two fingers into her mouth before doing the sign of the cross followed by a gesture in which she sticks those same fingers into an orifice. The mixing of the holy and the lewd in these gestures continue the symbiosis of the Guadalupe/Malinche of her performance. Furthermore, her acts aren't just vulgar but blatantly queer. In "Tradidutora, Traditora: A Paradigmatic Figure of Chicana Feminism," Alarcón reminds us that

Malinche's designation as *la lengua* (the tongue) is due to her role as translator, which gave her linguistic agency albeit limited by her illiteracy. Although she is allowed to literally speak (here we can recall the problematic famously posed by Gayatri Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak?"), she must only do so within the confines of colonial patriarchal language.⁷⁸ Rather, I would like to focus on another point that Alarcón makes but that she, however, does not connect back to the tongue. In her discussion on the work of Cherrie Moraga—a writer known for her enormous contributions to Chicana literature and for her role in the monumental text *This Bridge Called My Back* (1981)—Alarcón states, "not only is the lesbian in the Chicano imagination *una Malinchista*, but vice versa" (81). The term *malinchista* is derived from Malinche and used to refer to "traitors of the race." In this case, lesbianism betrays the race by not conforming to traditional heterosexual gender roles and for evading a reproductive commitment to continue the race. By situating the tongue as explicitly queer and not just through its locutionary capacity, Ibarra is further disidentifying Malinche, to borrow José Esteban Muñoz' terminology.

Drawing on French theorists Louis Althusser and Michel Pêcheux and their formulations of subject formation, Muñoz seeks out an alternative mode of identification within dominant ideology. He writes, "disidentifications is the third mode of dealing with dominant ideology, one that neither opts to assimilate within such a structure nor strictly opposes it; rather, disidentification is a strategy that works on and against dominant

⁷⁸ Spivak's foundational essay posits that the subaltern, or the marginalized in society, cannot fully speak without their speech being coopted by dominant ideology, structures, and institutions. See Spivak.

ideology” (Muñoz, *Disidentifications* 11). Muñoz configures this third mode as adding to Pêcheux’s only two modes—identification and counter-identification. Identification means a complete buy in to the dominant form of subjectivity in dominant ideology while counteridentification means a complete disavowal and rebellion against the discursive and symbolic constraints of the given dominant subjectivity. In order to escape this dialectic in which identification and counteridentification both rely on the same dominant ideology for its validation (i.e., counteridentification necessitates the dominant ideology for its very meaning), Muñoz offers disidentification as a form that simultaneously works within the logics of dominant ideology as it dismantles it. He states:

Disidentification is about recycling and rethinking encoded meaning. The process of disidentification assembles and reconstructs the encoded message of a cultural text in a fashion that both exposes the encoded message’s universalizing and exclusionary machinations and recircuits its workings to account for, include, and empower minority identities and identifications. (*Disidentifications* 31)

Ibarra illustrates this disidentifactory impulse by queering the figure of the Guadalupe. She simultaneously has the viewer recall the dominant religious encoded meaning of the virgin (diamond hands over womb) and recycles it into a queer one (diamond hands over mouth). The inversion of her hands to make this movement has us recall the archaic theory of sexual inversion where same-sex desire was tied to gender identity and gay and lesbian people were seen as inverting traditional heterosexual gender roles and sexual desire.⁷⁹ In disidentifying the Guadalupe, Ibarra isn’t merely inverting the logics of Marianismo, which would be to reject the iconography of the Virgin entirely and adopt

⁷⁹ See Ellis.

the Malinche as feminist icon, a form of counter-identification. Instead, she is simultaneously embodying the complexities of these distinct Latina femininities to break down the logic of the Guadalupe/Malinche complex. The diamond shape as physical representative of a dominant, oppressive logic retains its shape as it moves upward, it remains flat and two-dimensional even as it moves through space signaling that it is not enough to invert. It is not until Ibarra penetrates this logic with her queer tongue, bringing it into a three-dimensional space, that it can be dismantled, reconceived, and brought into a new plane of existence. Ibarra superimposes the imagery of the Immaculate Conception of Virgin Mary with the lasciviousness of the Malinche to offer a palimpsestic vision of Latina femininities.

Ibarra continues to play with the mythology of the virgin in the next frame when from this queer encounter (the fingering gesture), she births a Hitachi wand. She then performs a striptease; she removes her robe and dress to reveal a sparkly red lingerie set. She wraps the green robe around herself and drapes it around her arm. In her right arm she holds up the Hitachi wand and transforms the Virgen de Guadalupe into the Statue of Liberty. This moment indexes the particularity of Chicana identity, of being ingrained within Mexican cultural identity while simultaneously also having larger U.S. culture as a primary point of reference. The Statue of Liberty furthermore positions Ibarra within dominant immigrant narrativization. It's important to note that when Ibarra sheds her clothing is also the moment that she transforms into an American icon, symbolizing the value of utmost importance to American subjectivity: freedom. Read uncritically, embodying the U.S. icon affords her the sexual freedom to do as she wishes with her

body, something that we know for certain in 2026 is an American feminist myth founded in U.S. exceptionalism.⁸⁰ If read as a disidentification, however, we can arrive at the latter critique, in which Ibarra illustrates the limitations imposed on women's bodies, brown women's bodies in both contexts—the Mexican and the American.

Ibarra's palimpsestic *La Virgensota Jota* is mediated by the power of the erotic. For black lesbian feminist Audre Lorde, the erotic is a feminine power that has been foreclosed by dominant heteropatriarchal society:

There are many kinds of power, used and unused, acknowledged or otherwise. The erotic is a resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling. In order to perpetuate itself, every oppression must corrupt or distort those various sources of power within the culture of the oppressed that can provide energy for change. For women, this has meant a suppression of the erotic as a considered source of power and information within our lives. (88)

Drawing on its Greek root *eros*, Lorde situates the erotic as a creative, passionate life force and differentiates it from the purely sexual way in which it functions colloquially. She also sees it as another form of relationality. Rather than sharing the feelings of another with and through them, Lorde sees a heteropatriarchal world as “looking away” from expressions of the erotic. Ibarra moves the Hitachi wand along her body until she arrives at her clitoris. From here, we watch Ibarra comedically use it to bring herself to climax. She exaggerates the gyrating motions of her body and expressions on her face. She writhes as she moves it away from her body then closer but she does not look away. If the spectator remains with her gaze, then we experience the power of the erotic with

⁸⁰ Made exceptionally clear under a Trump presidency, the rise of Christian nationalism, and the 2022 reversal of *Roe v. Wade*, which granted the constitutional right to abortion in the U.S.

her—a simultaneous working with and against the image of chaste and/or promiscuous femininity afforded to Latina femininity.

The reason for this foreclosure of the erotic in heteropatriarchal society lies in its disgust with queer bodies (within which I include cis-women's bodies) and their expressions of sexuality. In her discussion of Ibarra's collaborative piece with performance artist Amber Hawk Swanson, *Untitled Fucking* (2013), Juana María Rodríguez states, "so often sex serves as the dirty surface to which all manner of projected images, narratives, stereotypes, and fantasies stubbornly adhere. Politics, and feminism in particular, becomes precisely what we *don't* want to talk about when we are in the throes of sex" (10). In *La Virgensota Jota*, Ibarra uses the power of the erotic to offer another reading of the pornographic nature of her acts, in which she inherently implicates the political, feminist, and racialized through the display of her body as Guadalupe/Malinche. What may surface is a feeling of disgust in a viewer. The stickiness of the sexual surface that Rodríguez puts forth calls to mind Sara Ahmed's conception of the "stickiness" of emotions that form affective qualities that adhere to and circulate between objects that she formulates in *The Cultural Politics of Emotions*. Ahmed writes, "emotions are not 'in' either the individual or the social, but produce the very surfaces and boundaries that allow the individual and the social to be delineated as if they are objects" (10). Ahmed is pushing back against dominant notions in the Western philosophical tradition and in psychology that emotions are contained within an individual—they are property that belong to certain individuals. Rather, emotions aren't themselves a "thing" that one possesses, but they modify the objects that circulate in the

world and influence how they are read and act or are acted upon. A defining characteristic of emotions, for Ahmed, is their affective stickiness and their ability to enact relationalities between objects:

[S]tickiness involves a form of relationality, or a “withness,” in which the elements that are “with” get bound together. One can stick by a friend. One can get stuck in traffic. Some forms of stickiness are about holding things together. Some are about blockages or stopping things moving. When a sign or object becomes sticky it can function to “block” the movement (of other things or signs) and it can function to bind (other things or signs) together. (91)

The stickiness of emotions, according to Ahmed, can serve to either bring people together for coalition building or to further increase distance to marginalized others. She states, “they [emotions] involve (re)actions or relations of ‘towardness’ or ‘awayness’ in relation to such objects” (8). *La Virgensota Jota* registers this push-pull dynamic in her figuration of la Guadalupe as a palimpsest. On one hand, in utilizing the reverent image of the Guadalupe, she is creating “awayness” with a certain faction of Latinidad that continues to reproduce figures of the Guadalupe within what respectability politics deems acceptable forms of Latina femininity. On the other, she is simultaneously also drawing on Malinchista legacies of promiscuous betrayal that can create “towardness” with other abject feminist portrayals.

The latter type of stickiness, that of blockages and traffic, that Ahmed offers might provide negative associations in most readers. As someone who has lived in Los Angeles my entire life, a place known for its dense traffic, and commuted 120 miles roundtrip to-and-from Riverside for several years while completing the Ph.D., I instinctively shrug my shoulders and roll my neck at the thought of this association, so I

can release the tension I hold from grasping a steering wheel for several hours a day. Yet, this is where Christina A. León finds a liberatory relational potential. She writes, “being stuck: a state in which an opaque, withdrawn figure is held in an impasse wherein the future is uncertain but the mere persistence of aesthetics implies the potential for dwelling in that very impasse” (371). The change in tense from the present “to stick” to the past “stuck” places this affective stickiness in the past and not in a possible, future utopic reception of Latinidad. These tropes do, after all, exist in the past, the histories of Latino figurations. Stuckness for León also acts as a pause, a respite, which she argues, “are seldom proffered to minoritarian artists whose work is often expected to shuttle us forward into an agential political future or into new revelations based on didactic and revisionist political critique of the past” (382). While the Guadalupe and Malinche have been leveraged as symbols of Latinidad to form counter-identificatory and critical versions of Latina femininity against hegemonic anglo-femininities, as argued by Alarcón and Arrizón, Ibarra’s Guadalupe doesn’t employ such a critique but, instead, reaches for the third mode, the disidentificatory. León terms this disidentificatory strategy “opaque aesthetics,” which she defines as,

[A]n aesthetic strategy that formally deploys opacity to impede the viewer’s ability to know her or see her as evidence of racialized sexuality. Such distances forces the reader to get stuck with Ibarra’s work, tarrying with its opacity and abstraction, rather than gliding over nuance and flattening the work as reducible to sociopolitical content. (372)

An opaque aesthetics is fundamentally opposed to the critique leveled against Ibarra’s work by Cordero, mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, that it is “typical Chicana performance,” in that it cannot be easily deduced or reduced. Interestingly, the

description of the Mexico City performance of *Nude Laughing* by Ramos and recounted at the beginning of this chapter physically demonstrates the stickiness of Ibarra's work as it triggered spectators to want to quite literally and forcefully stick to her and block her affective movement in the space. Her body in that physical space added a literal stickiness, but what happens when you take this performance out of the physical realm, where these types of literal adhesions are possible, and instead, into the virtual?

The static noise background that Ibarra chose for *La Virgensota Jota* very obviously positions it in the historical lineage of video art from television offered by scholars and adopted by artists. While watching something, static manifests when there is a disruption to a signal or an inability to connect to a broadcast network. It disrupts the relationship between transmitter and receiver promised by the circuit of mass media. The static noise background then demonstrates that Ibarra doesn't mean to simply mediate but modulate. Modulation in electronics and communications is the process by which a waveform is changed and encoded with meaning to fit a particular receiver.⁸¹ The waveform presented in *La Virgensota Jota* contains myriad meanings encoded by larger Mexican and American cultures that are modulated for particular receiving audiences depending on their subject-positions. The opacity figured by the static screen precludes the possibility of seeing a clear image of Latinidad where camp aesthetics might fail and where laughing-with might turn into laughing-at. The static background is a form of opacity. Opacity for theorist Judith Butler is an inherent ethical dilemma to subjectivity

⁸¹ This is my layman understanding of modulation. For a more comprehensive and technical explanation, see Stark.

due to its inability to know and therefore recount itself. In *Giving an Account of Oneself*, Butler provides a narrative for the act of narrativization, in which the act of telling one's own story through first-person narration is marked by failure at the moment of its utterance. They write:

The one story that the "I" cannot tell is the story of its own emergence as an "I" who not only speaks but comes to give an account of itself. In this sense, a story is being told, but the "I" who tells the story, who may well appear within the story as the first-person narrator, constitutes a point of opacity and interrupts a sequence, induces a break or eruption of the non-narrativizable in the midst of the story. So the story of myself that I tell, foregrounding the "I" who I am and inserting it into the relevant sequences of something called my life, fails to give an account of myself at the moment that I am introduced. (65-67)

Butler's account of giving an account of oneself shows the limitations one encounters in trying to provide a narrative of one's self—an inability to account for an "I" of the narrative because it is necessarily relational and co-constructed. For Butler, the performativity of the "I" corresponds to the relational subject, the one who is receiving this story. The account one gives has their positionality in mind and constructs this self in relation to that subject. They continue:

If I am trying to give an account of myself, it is always to someone, to one whom I presume to receive my words in some way, although I do not and cannot know always in what way. In fact, the one who is positioned as the receiver may not be receiving at all, may be engaged in something that cannot under any circumstances be called "receiving," doing nothing more for me than establishing a certain site, a position, a structural place where the relation to a possible reception is articulated... The form this relation to a possible reception can take are many: no one can hear this; this one will surely understand this; I will be refused here, misunderstood there, judged, dismissed, accepted, or embraced. (67)

Butler suggests that when we are accounting for oneself, we are only ever doing so for an other, someone else who is listening and perhaps demanding this account. They

underscore that this modular wave of communication can always be intercepted and distorted resulting in misunderstandings and judgements. The static background of Ibarra's video punctuates this opacity elaborated by Butler and the way in which the "point of opacity...interrupts a sequence, induces a break or eruption of the non-narrativizable in the midst of the story" (Butler 67). It is interrupting the consumption of easily digestible images of Latinidad reproduced by mass media and confronting neoliberal questions of Latino representation in media. It disrupts a linear progression of these historical narratives of Latina femininity represented in the Guadalupe/Malinche. If giving an account of oneself, of Latinidad, which is demanded of minoritized artists as León argues, and if that message is open to refutations, misunderstandings, judgements, and dismissals, why not fabulate alternatives?

The disidentificatory narrative that Ibarra provides in *La Virgensota Jota* is a co-fabulatory one shaped by all of these receptions. While a live performance might result in too much stickiness, translating her work into video provides a critical distance, a recognition of each other's opacity and the inability to fully *see* each other thereby offering a different mode from which to consider relationality. The textures of Ibarra's opaqueness stick through every modulation varied, carried, and received through these networks—toward or away or a bit of both. León points to the etymological relationship between "to stick," "to embroider," and "stigma" and argues, "stuckness is fixed by being embroidered into a larger social weave, a stigmatized emplacement of texture and position" (382). Here, I am reminded of Haraway's speculative fabulation and its call to weave and unweave this social tapestry in a practice of "making and unmaking, picking

up the threads and dropping them” (“Introduction” 3). Ibarra plucks the threads of Guadalupe’s garb but doesn’t reveal any prescriptive political agency demanded of “typical Chicana art,” rather she gives room to multiplicities, variances that are modulated and co-fabulated through video. The stickiness that Ibarra’s Guadalupe offers propels us into the future, into new possibilities for Latina femininities while it is simultaneously obligated and cannot help but remain stuck to the past, to preconceived associations and renditions of the Guadalupe. Here is where we can see the different affective layers of palimpsestic relationalities that use the deeply personal to offer new theoretical, which is to say speculative, visions for becoming Latina.

Galindo’s Earth Mother Counter-mythologies

In an interview on *¿Quien puede borrar las huellas?*, Regina José Galindo posits two points of interest to this chapter: 1) “Guatemala is a country without memory,” and 2) “To present it on video is simply to show a document. In this case, whoever sees this document can come to know the history behind it” (“Interview: Regina José Galindo”). These statements form the basis of a standard way of considering documentary—to archive and share with a public this historical information, such as one that has been forgotten like in the case of Guatemala. Despite this claim that her video is a ‘document’ that shares characteristics with a traditional documentary, Galindo’s work does not follow the familiar formula.⁸² Simply viewing the video does not recount the history of Guatemala in a traditional sense. Galindo is not narrating the historical violence of

⁸² For detailed discussion on traditional documentary forms as it pertains to the thematics of this dissertation, see Chapter 2 of this dissertation.

Guatemala in *Huellas*, but rather embodying it and performing this embodiment. The power of this video performance lies in its affective capabilities, its stickiness. By implicating her body and creating visual resonances with an Earth body, Galindo is creating affective threads between a sociopolitical concept of woman (and their bodies) and the extractive violence of the Global North onto Global South earth bodies in Latin America.⁸³ I will consider the limitations of reading her performances as woman-as-Earth to find the cofabulatory, disidentificatory alternatives offered in Galindo's critical works and the depth of these resignifications through video.

Several scholars have commented on Galindo's rhetorical use of her own body as a form of sociopolitical performative critique.⁸⁴ There is no doubt that Galindo's corpus is explicitly corporeal and that she imposes her body on the viewer, which Candice Amich argues "collapse[s] the distance between testifier and witness" (92) and "deflects punishment onto her audiences" (93). Amich's argument runs counter to that of Emilia Barbosa, who argues that Galindo's performances are meant to elicit sympathy and attention (Barbosa 66). Barbosa states that Galindo "uses her body as a metaphor for the experiences of women" (64), and that "metonymically, Galindo's voice stands for the body of evidence of feminicide in Guatemala" (66). Barbosa places heavy symbolic weight on Galindo's body. Her use of "metaphor" and "metonym" implies a subjectivity that collapses into one—the spectator collapses into the performer, Galindo, as she herself already embodies the oppressed Other, women—which can be sociopolitically

⁸³ For a detailed analysis on extractivism in Latin America including the connection between capitalist extraction of natural resources and gendered violence, see Svampa.

⁸⁴ See Amich; Barbosa; Parilla-Rodríguez; Pérez-Ratton; Jiménez.

problematic. Mark Eccles, however, figures a multiplicity in Galindo's work by stating, "the figure of Galindo draws up on the sociopolitical within, while she simultaneously unfurls herself—inside a specific zone—that is simultaneously singular and plural," where the plural is defined by, "the implied presence of both Galindo as herself, Galindo as artist/technician, the interlocutors (observers/justice), and of course, the other(s) (victims/perpetrators)" (12). Whereas Barbosa offers a utopic reading of Galindo's work in which Galindo can mediate and transfer the emotional pain and violent histories experienced by another to observers, Eccles maintains that the singular performance holds polyvalent potentialities without fully collapsing on itself. While I myself admit to feeling the anger and the wetness of the blood while watching Galindo's performance at the beginning of this chapter, I remained in my particularity and did not experience it as Galindo just as she did not experience the pain of the indigenous women that she is indexing in *Huellas*. The way in which these affects transmit from victim to performer/artist to observer are all marked by the particularity of their subject-positions.

Galindo's body isn't always citing other human bodies like in the case of *Huellas* or (279) *Golpes* (2005), a sound performance where Galindo hits herself while behind a wall for every woman that has been assassinated in Guatemala within a week. In other performances, Galindo is citing the earth body. Here, I am using citation to think about intertextuality and citationality as always having another text as a reference while still maintaining its own objectives and voice. In this case, Galindo's body and her corporeal performances remain intertextually bound to other bodies—her body is always having you recall other bodies as you read/experience her performance. In *Piedra* (2013), for

example, Galindo paints her entire body black and lies on the floor with her knees tucked to her forehead in a child's pose. In this piece, Galindo embodies a rock, an earth body. She lies on the floor in this balled-up position for several moments, when suddenly several people walk up to her body and urinate on her (whether they were all invited to do so is unclear). In a poem accompanying documentation of the performance, Ibarra writes:

Soy una piedra
en mi
la historia del mundo.
I am a rock
in me
the history of the world.⁸⁵

This performance is a critique of the coal mining industry in Brazil where it was performed (Nyong'o 106). In *Looting* (2010), Galindo ties present-day extractivism in Latin America by wealthy Global North countries to colonial histories of extraction. For this performance, Galindo receives eight golden fillings in Guatemala, which she subsequently has removed in Germany. She then displays these fillings as art objects at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt in Berlin. In these performances, her work critiques the violence enacted on earth. Galindo using her feminized brown body draws a clear line between extractive violence in Latin America, its ties to colonialism, and the gender-based violence that results from these extractive economies. Rita Segato argues that rape

⁸⁵ See the artist's website, see Galindo, *Piedra*.

is “an extension of the question of territorial sovereignty, since, as a territory, women, and more precisely, sexual access to them, is a patrimony, a good for which men compete with each other” (qtd. in Andía 715). The implication of Galindo’s body in her work underscores not just the violence that women face in Latin America (or globally) but also its landscapes, its earth body.

In discussing Ibarra, I drew on the mythologies of the Virgen de Guadalupe/Malinche to discuss the Mexican American/Chicana femininity critiqued in Ibarra’s work. In Galindo’s work, I find echoes of another feminine mythology in the figure of Pachamama. Pachamama is a precolonial goddess of Andean cosmology. She has come to represent the figure of mother earth and coopted to represent Earth itself much like the Greek goddess Gaia functions colloquially. María García Robalino argues that “Pachamama is often favored in use over its presumed synonym—*mother earth*—due to its Andean roots and the market value that derives from its exotification” (732). Part of Pachamama’s appeal is its close links to indigeneity, which make her desirable and marketable for those who wish to be spiritually closer to earth and who associate indigeneity with this prehistoric chthonic ideal. Robalino argues, “global New Age movements soon recognized in Pachamama an ideal earth mother figure of pure indigenous origin that could counter the corrupted West they categorically opposed (735). This mythology grants people access to a romanticized past of unity with the earth that is represented by a historicizing vision of indigenous populations displacing them from the present to the past. Peruvian sociologist and political theorist Aníbal Quijano designates this as the advent of modernity:

[T]he Europeans generated a new temporal perspective of history and relocated the colonized population, along with their respective histories and cultures, in the past of a historical trajectory whose culmination was Europe. (541)

For Néstor García Canclini, “glorification of the ‘indigenous past’ elides the very present predicament of impoverished native communities relegated both to the ‘past’ and to the economic margins” (22). Relegating a people to the past and coopting their mythologies for your own spiritual practice is also a form of extractivism. Galindo does not use or name the figure of Pachamama in her work, but I am drawing on this iconography because of Pachamama’s importance to indigenous bodies and the earth bodies which are both subjects of Galindo’s work.

Much like the Virgen de Guadalupe, who has roots in Aztec mythology through the figure of Coatlicue, another earth mother, Pachamama was also syncretized into Catholicism. Like the Virgen, she was associated with fertility. Miriam Tola relays that “throughout the period of European colonization, this Andean being was associated with the Virgin and turned into a nurturing mother” (27). Yet, as Robalino points out, thinking of Pachamama as an earth mother and as a goddess of fertility is limiting her actual role in Andean cosmology. She suggests that this reading is a fundamental miscommunication between what the word “mama” meant in Quechua versus Spanish (Robalino 742). In her reading, Robalino suggests that a better translation of Pachamama would be “land-that-awaits-cultivation” as the counterpart to the masculine figure Pachacamac, who is “land-already-cultivated.” Robalino suggests that this reading provides a fuller, less reductive account of Pachamama beyond mother-earth and fertility. She writes:

Pachamama as land-that-awaits-cultivation refers to a limited space and moment in time; it makes room for other landscape beings and for the emergence of the

new world-eras in the Andean cosmos. The translation of Pachamama as ‘mother earth,’ on the other hand, lacks a temporal character and implies a totalization of space and time that is at odds with most indigenous Andean accounts of Pacha. (746)

The temporal character in Andean thought is diametrically opposed to the linear time of European colonization that Quijano relays. There is no telos that marks the European a messianic figure of modernity in Andean time; rather, Andean time is “closer to a spiral than to a straight line: life shares a unifying thread, where the overlapping folds of the past, present, and future determine its pattern” (Robalino 739). This type of circular potentiality traced in Andean cosmology, I trace in Galindo’s work which holds the complexities of the past, present, and future as it lies with the tension of a futurity.

Galindo’s *La tierra que se traga a las mujeres* (*The earth that swallows women* 2020) is a piece that shares thematic resonances with her other works and that draws a direct line between the female body and the feminized earth body. This video performance was realized in 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic, in which Zoom was a primary form of communication and knowledge-building.⁸⁶ Unlike most of her performances, the audience for this one was intentionally virtual due to the circumstances, which required everyone to shelter at home and keep 6 feet (or 2 meter) distance from each other. Six feet in the context of this performance conjures not only the

⁸⁶ COVID-19, a strain of SARS (severe acute respiratory syndrome) was declared a pandemic on March 11, 2020 by the World Health Organization. This resulted in most operations going online because of the high transmissibility and mortality rates of the virus. Most institutions were closed indefinitely, and shelter-in-place directives were enforced. This resulted in school and work operations to be moved to video conferencing platforms, the most popular of which was Zoom. It also became a primary form of communication among friends, families, and community organizations. For more on the COVID-19 pandemic and timeline, see “CDC Museum COVID-19 Timeline.”

social-distancing guidelines of COVID but also the depth of a grave. The video performance is a triptych with three Zoom boxes, each featuring a different perspective.



Fig. 14. Still from Regina José Galindo's *La tierra que se traga a las mujeres*

On the top right corner box, there is a close-up shot of Galindo's body as it gets covered in dirt. On the top left corner, there is low angle shot of the sunny but cloudy sky and a tree being blown in the wind. At the bottom of the screen, there is a medium wide shot of Galindo lying motionless in a dug up shallow grave and only the bottom half of another person in frame. How are we to read the framing of these shots? I suggest that one is the point-of-view of the gravedigger as they focus on singular body parts becoming covered with dirt; another is Galindo or the victim looking up at the sky; and the third is of the spectator/bystander/justice who watches a woman being buried alive unable or unwilling to intervene. Part of this framing, however, doesn't neatly fit with the positions of the subjects in frame: the body in the grave isn't looking up and the dirt seems to be coming from a different direction according to the bottom box. These disjunctions—between image and possible point-of-views—suggest an inability to pinpoint any specific

positionalities. Perhaps, it is not Galindo in this moment on a live Zoom feed being buried. The video performance invites you to think about the atemporality of violence and the way in which at any given moment, anywhere, there is a woman being buried in a shallow grave.

The association between earth and women is usually one of kin, as embodied by the figure of Pachamama; women and the earth are generative beings that have the fecund capacity to bring beings into this world. Tola, drawing on the work of Maria Lugones, argues that this association can be reductive as it maintains a hierarchical binary between the masculine and feminine imposed by colonization, which is seen in *chachawarmi*.⁸⁷ She writes, “Pachamama depends on its inscriptions in a ‘colonial gender system’ that turns the vitality of the earth into a motherly figure” (Tola 36). Galindo’s *La tierra*, however, disrupts this normative reading of Pachamama as life-giver by associating the mother earth with the necropolitical, or life-taker.⁸⁸ The earth is no longer the site of birth and animacy but of death. Galindo’s Pachamama doesn’t make things appear, but, instead, disappear. The performance, Galindo shares, is dedicated to her friend Ana Moon who, she says, has been waiting for her sister Silvia Regina to return. It is a reflection on the problem of feminicide in Latin America, a theme she covers throughout her oeuvre. In subverting the role of the earth in *La tierra*, Galindo is demonstrating the complexities

⁸⁷ Translates to “man-woman” and is a gendered structure drawing on Pachamama that configures contemporary Andean society. See Robalino 748 for more on *chachawarmi* in the Andean context.

⁸⁸ Necropolitics is the organization of life and world institutions through death or through colonialism, slavery, war, occupation, etc. These structures of power essentially function to systematically kill undesirable others, usually of the Global South, to produce the means of so-called living of the Global North. See, Mbembe.

of Latin American femininity. It isn't always fertile, pregnant, animated, but can sometimes be wielded against women, against any complacencies that we might have with normative forms of femininity that are tightly bound with Western femininity, capitalism, neo-imperialism and extractivism. In her use of the earth figure, Galindo is asking you to hold these two diverging realities at once.

Following Robalino's argument of thinking Pachamama beyond mother earth and, instead, as land-that-awaits-cultivation, I would like to consider the potential networks that such a reading of Latina femininity would provide vis-à-vis video performance. Clare Carolin argues that "the internet remains a key vehicle for the dissemination of Galindo's work and it's impossible to imagine her practice or trajectory without the existence of a technology" (212). Carolin argues that the internet is important for circulating the work of minoritized subjects who may have little access to funds or art world connections. She points to Galindo's subject-position as an artist from the Global South whose country, Guatemala, has few funds and opportunities for artists as a consequence of its civil war that lasted from 1960 to 1996 and during which many of country's intellectuals were killed or forced into exile (Carolin 216-17). The internet provides Galindo a way to reach a larger global audience and these networks function as a form of land-that-awaits-cultivation and animation (*pacha*) via Galindo's presence which doesn't follow a neat linear time but instead weaves together the past, present, and future of Latina femininity in her work. The shift of her work from live performance to the digital doesn't preclude an affective register as is suggested by the latter's etymology. The tactile potentiality that can travel through these affective networks facilitated by

technology remain intact. The fact that *La tierra* was performed over Zoom during a time when we could not be near or touch each other is only further evidence of this. *La tierra* holds the complexities of not only viewing earth as fertile, as that from which things are born, but also that where things return after death. This reading disorients Pachamama mythology as fertile mother earth. If read through its Andean roots, however, there is the potential to reanimate the dead and provide a fabulatory, speculative account. Tavia Nyong'o writes in *Afro-Fabulations: The Queer Drama of Black Life* that "we speculate because we were objects of speculation: bought and sold, killed and quartered, collateralized and securitized, used, impregnated, aborted, discarded. Bodies that were speculated in became speculative bodies" (101). While the "we" in Nyong'o's text refers specifically to black bodies, and I would like to honor the very specific position from which he writes, the colonial and imperial histories he cites are ones that significantly shaped the Americas as a whole, which Nyong'o acknowledges as well (104). Galindo's *La Tierra* draws a clear connection between brown female bodies and earth bodies to point to extractivist violence that circulate among the two and challenges a normative reading of the cult of femininity through the figure of Pachamama. By demonstrating the tension that exists between earth as life-giver and life-taker, Galindo deromanticizes mother-earth, which allows for more expansive readings of femininity and its connection to the earth.

Palimpsestic Auto-Virtualities

Thinking is inherently palimpsestic—it traces the conceptual synapses of thought processes where you gain insight into someone's academic training, their intellectual

curiosities, and their personal tastes. When I first thought about bringing these artists together, I did so instinctively. I felt resonances in their work without any clear reason. Their work diverges in more ways than not. Galindo's work is more gravely political and physically straining on the body while Ibarra works with camp sensibilities, irony, and humor. Yet, I *felt* the connection. I have defined the palimpsest as a network of feminine and feminist cultural productions, as a site of affective resonance that cite explicitly or implicitly other works with similar thematics, problematics, and theoretical preoccupations. In the case of Galindo and Ibarra, this is through a shared sensibility of remediating Latina femininities and iconographies outside of those prescribed by Latinidad—by working through a third mode that exists in what Muñoz refers to as the “brown commons,” which he posits in his posthumously published *The Sense of Brown*. He thinks of the brown commons as:

How these things [people, places, feelings, etc.] are brown, or what makes them brown, is partially the way in which they suffer and strive together but also the commonality of their ability to flourish under duress. They are brown in part because they have been devalued by the world outside their commons...But they are also brown insofar as they smolder with a life and persistence. (2)

Like with disidentification, through the brown commons, Muñoz is working through the liminal and seeking possibilities that exist in between binaries. He wonders what is possible when we consider both things at once; when we take the complexities of being in-between, thinking in-between as methodology in order to disorient binary logics. This is what Galindo and Ibarra do in their restructuring of these Latina myths of the eternal feminine in their video performances.

My (brown) feeling was vindicated while I was immersing myself in the work of these artists and, in consuming their oeuvres at the same time, I created more solid visual connections between their work. *La Sombra (The Shadow)* is a 2017 video performance by Galindo in which she runs away from a Leopard, a German military tank. The video features different angles, but she continues to helplessly run without respite. Her surroundings amplify the feelings of futility as she runs in a cleared-out terrain with nothing but dirt and trees around her. The performance is in response to Germany's unrecognized role as major exporter of arms to Guatemala thus in its role in the continued suppression of violence faced by the country and its inhabitants.⁸⁹ In *La Corrida (The Runner or The Run* 2012, 2018) Ibarra superimposes a video of a Mexico/U.S. border patrol station with a video of her running in the desert. Here, too, we have the futility of escape. Visually and thematically, these two videos are strikingly similar: both artists run endlessly trying to escape militarized state violence. That both performances are intended to be exhibited in a loop further heightens the feeling of containment and inescapability of present state violence and its historical predecessors. Lauren Berlant argues that a "film loop always enacts a desire to be in a temporality that is impossible to destroy as long as the technology can hold the world up" (35). The film loop in these works by Galindo and Ibarra mark both the legacies of state-sponsored oppression and violence but also a persistence in that through the loop, their brown bodies never stop running to escape these violent historical and present horrors. Their persistence in the face of necropolitical mechanisms which wish to make them disappear is a way of performing

⁸⁹ For artist's description, see "Regina José Galindo: La Sombra (The Shadow)."

“for and against the camera” and engaging the camera’s “mythmaking function” (Nyong’o 3-4). It gives them the capacity to produce new myths, new forms of relationality while remaining stuck to the past, being able to sit and think with and through the past as they imagine new horizons.

Leticia Alvarado argues that “Latino abject performances reveal abjection not as a resource for empowerment fueled by desire for normative inclusion but as a resource geared toward an ungraspable alternative social organization, a not-yet-here illuminated by the aesthetic” (*Abject Performances* 11). With this in mind, I would like to consider the virtual as another abject form of relationality posed by the video performances of Galindo and Ibarra. The virtual exists between the animation of the corporeal body and the in-animacy of the virtual body—while your physical body may age and die, its virtual duplicate that exists through photographs, videos, social media profiles will not, defying the rules of nature and law. In *Virtual Intimacies*, Shaka McGlotten sees the virtual as a “capacity of desire to not follow the general rules of socially sanctioned form (coupled, straight, monogamous, ‘real’) or particular teleology” and its “testament to the scope of tendencies intimacies are capable of” (60). McGlotten also names the way in which “the virtual operates as a promise of immanence, the indwelling force of things waiting, pressing, ready to act. As an immanent power, the virtual is often deferred, sometimes materialized, but always charged with the *capacity* to help us feel like we belong (1). For Alvarado the abject illuminates the “not-yet-here” or potentiality of Latino subjectivities and relationalities; likewise, for McGlotten, the virtual attempts to foreground a similar potency. For Nyong’o these relationalities, abject in nature, figure themselves through a

“*fabulationality*—in which another world is not only possible, it is *virtually* present” (my emphasis, 18). The fabulatory nature of the works of Galindo and Ibarra in which they offer alternative readings and embodiments of Latinidad’s iconic figures of Latina femininity work with the given-present significations of these figures as they reconfigure them into a virtual-potential-present.

By implicating themselves in their work, they are placing themselves within these mythologized versions of Latina. They offer intimate visions into how they are positioned in the world by a dominant Western white gaze—spicy, exotic, fertile, disposable, etc. These intimate self-portraits, through citing Latino icons, are an example of the exaggerative performative self-portraits that art historian and critic Amelia Jones theorizes as having the capacity to “foreground the ‘I’ as other to itself, the artistic subject as ‘taking place’ in the future through interpretive acts that bring her or him back to life via memory and desire” (950). Their virtual relationalities enact what Jones calls a “technology of embodiment” whereby their images virtually reproduce memories and futurities of other Others. In *Sensual Excess: Queer Femininity and Brown Jouissance*, Amber Musser defines brown jouissance as the moments when “Thing, Other, and object converge to form selfhood” (13). It is concerned with “pleasure, abjection, and embracing alterity” that can “reveal modes of pleasure that can attach to experiencing the body as body, to opacity of self and Other, and toward producing the self as plural rather than singular” (88-89). We can see the abject here, again, in the collapsing the subject and object. The opaque condition of this brownness, what Musser refers to as “murkiness of the flesh,” create palimpsestual auto-virtualities, in which relationality is possible

through the mediated video performances of Galindo and Ibarra who provide fabulatory, and disidentifactory virtual-potential-present visions of Latina femininity.

My own relationship to this work is personal as a Latina. This is where autotheory is also about agency, a way to give back authorial voice to minoritized subjects and allow them to think about and theorize themselves, something that has been largely discouraged since researchers have to maintain an “objective,” distant lens towards their object of study. But everything is personal—we all have personal reasons for wanting to investigate something, perhaps because we like it or maybe because we hate it. Although these works are highly personal, and again, they reclaim authorial voice, they don’t give into explaining themselves to an unfamiliar reader, they don’t make themselves legible. As you add more and more layers to the palimpsest, it becomes more and more opaque, thereby retaining its “right to opacity” to borrow Edouard Glissant’s term by which he means a “right to difference” or the right to not conform to imposed Western standards. This creates a relationality that challenges one to move beyond identity politics. You don’t have to belong to the same communities as the artist to find resonances, for it to speak to you, that just happens to be my situation. The palimpsest does invite you to bring your own readings, your own intertextual network to add to its layers—whether these are positive or negative, they nonetheless stick.

Coda A Primal Scene

I wouldn't refer to myself as a very spiritual person, but I think this dissertation was written in the stars. I grew up watching the Puerto Rican astrologer Walter Mercado on television. Every evening, he would appear for only a few moments on *Primer Impacto*, a sensationalist news program produced by Univision, a Spanish-language television network that catered to diasporic Latino audiences in the United States. The women in my family would listen attentively, eagerly waiting for their sign to be mentioned. If you spoke when Walter Mercado was speaking, you would be promptly shushed. I remember my mom would work while watching television. She was a seamstress so she would be sewing or stitching something while watching the news. (Here, I think of Haraway's strings and threads once again). If she had recruited me to help, I would be removing dozens of dressmaker pins from a pattern piece for a dress. We would listen to the news for our different signs—my mom is an Aquarius, I am a Sagittarius, and my sister is a Scorpio. Make of that information what you will.

I am not a very spiritual person but these moments with my mother and sister introduced me to astrology. We would gasp. We would look at each other. We would agree or disagree. "You know that kind of makes sense for this week because..." While I don't live my life according to astrology, I do like to take a peek sometimes at what it can offer. According to my astrological chart—the organization of celestial bodies at the moment of your birth—I have five of eleven important placements in my first house. According to one of the most influential astrologers today, Chani Nicholas, "if you have planets in your 1st house, each of them will form part of your character and sense of self"

(“The 12 Houses in Astrology”). The 1st house is the house of personal identity and the self. If this is the case, then my astrological chart points to me being very, very self-centered. So, yes, I think this dissertation about the self, about the “I,” was written in the stars.

What this anecdote also shows is how my earliest experiences of watching television was a form of relationality. I was watching with my mother and sister, but in a sense, I was also watching along with a larger diasporic Latine community. In watching, we were listening so that we could hear about ourselves, what Walter Mercado had to say about *me* and *my sign*. Perhaps you were also listening for another person’s sign—a husband, a relative back in the homeland. What is certain is that Walter Mercado, through the audiovisual medium, connected the diaspora. He was a conduit for the stars and planets (perhaps) and a form relationality for Spanish-speaking households across the Americas. His personality is a palimpsest.

It is also important to note that Walter Mercado was very gender-ambiguous and flamboyant in dress and presentation. His luscious blond hair was always voluminously coiffed, he wore bedazzled, brightly colored robes and lots of jewelry. Despite his feminine appearance, he was invited into the conservative, Catholic homes of Latinos every night. Latinx studies scholar Lawrence La Fontain-Stokes refers to Mercado as a *transloca* (“Transloca(l) Poetics” 311). La Fontain-Stokes brings together the plethora of associations of trans (e.g., transformation, transgender, transnational) and the Spanish word *loca* (crazy, mad, queer) to theorize marginal queer identity in a transcultural diasporic context. He writes that he conceived of the transloca to “make sense (or

nonsense) and to organize (or *disorganize*) the rather different multiplying iterations of Puerto Rican drag, transgender, and *loca* experience and performance” (*Translocas* 15). The multiple contradictions in his statement perform the very kind of madness that defines the *transloca*, while also demonstrating the contradictory condition of diasporic experience—of being *ni de aquí, ni de allá* (neither from here nor there).

For La Fontain-Stokes, diasporic identity is key to understanding the *transloca*; he writes:

[T]ranslocality can be defined as the interlinked experiences of persons in diverse geographic locations, whether in the country of origin or in the diaspora... Translocality entails a multiplicity of knowledges, family, and other personal connections. (*Translocas* 16)

The condition of diaspora creates a disjointed sense of self—a self that is tied to the homeland and a self that can only be defined by its assimilation to its new country of residence. Perhaps this is where I first encountered the splintering of the self, which I was never able to reconcile, but have been more than happy to allow to fragment further.

This dissertation is an intimate look into how I think, how I see, how I feel. In reading it, I hope you were able to see and feel *with* and *through* me. Silverman believed in the possibility of a productive look which can “confer the active gift of love upon bodies which have long been accustomed to neglect and disdain” (*Threshold* 227). I leave you with the loving image of Mercado who, at the end of his segment, would look directly at the camera, create circles with his fingers around his heart, then blow a kiss with both of his hands. He’d sign off, “con mucho, mucho amor.”

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