

THAT'S FIERCE: NONHUMAN PASSAGES IN LATINX-AMERICAN POETRY
AND PERFORMANCE.

A Dissertation

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School

of Cornell University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

By

Lacie Rae Buckwalter Cunningham

May 2017

© 2017 Lacie Rae Buckwalter Cunningham

THAT'S FIERCE: NONHUMAN PASSAGES IN LATINX AMERICAN POETRY
AND PERFORMANCE.

Lacie Rae Buckwalter Cunningham, Ph. D.

Cornell University 2017

This dissertation engages with U.S. Latinx and Latin American texts through critical theories of the nonhuman as a way of reconsidering the boundaries of Man and of how this might reframe our literary pursuits. In my approach, I focus on the connections and disconnections between emergent poetic, Latinx, Latin@American voices, and Hispanic literary production. Specifically, I look at how often marginalized voices represent and rearticulate both the limits of the human form and their relationship to ideas of canon through nonhuman interlocutors.

I suggest that nonhuman figures which transcend the porous perimeters of the human function as figures of passage between ontologies of selves and literary icons. Nonhuman interlocutors and intensities help us to approach reading between the Americas and amongst figures of man in elliptical motions. In my first chapter, “Natalie Diaz, Duende, and Dreamtigers,” I center references to canonical interventions from Federico García Lorca and Jorge Luis Borges as read through nonhuman figures in Diaz’ *When My Brother Was an Aztec*. “Collaging Kingdoms,” my second chapter, focuses on Aracelis Girmay’s passages between ideas of blackness, hispanicity, and human-nonhuman collages of self-portraiture. Works from latinx Appalachian poets Maurice Kilwein Guevara and Ada Limón comprises the third chapter, which troubles how nonhuman landscapes can destabilize readings of

periphery and performances of the nonhuman. Chapter Four, “How to Read in a River Without Water Damage” engages Basia Irland’s frozen performances which deforms the idea of texts through the environments of water, which shape and redirect their readings with poetic interventions from *Milk and Filth* by Carmen Giménez Smith. This final chapter troubles the limits of an approach to reading through nonhuman forms that are neither purely inside language, nor outside of it.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

L. Rae Buckwalter Cunningham (Yinzer, 1988) obtained her Bachelors of Arts in Hispanic Studies, magna cum laude, University of Pittsburgh in 2011 and a Masters of Arts from Cornell University in 2014. Her research interests include Critical Theories of the Nonhuman, Poetry, and Performance, particularly in the area of Contemporary Latinx Studies. She currently splits her time between Durham, North Carolina and the Internet.

For all the sensitive poets

Beware of paper cuts

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This thesis would not have been possible without the thoughtful and rich discussions sustained over the last five years with my mentor and adviser Debra A. Castillo. Without her guidance and generosity this project would have surely been either incomplete, utterly incomprehensible, or excruciating. I thank her for suffering with me on the reader's behalf instead through many meetings, emails, and lengthy discussions. I also would like to thank Edmundo Paz Soldán, whose energy and enthusiasm for engaging with emergent, young writers influenced this work's formation substantially.

I would like to recognize my committee who worked marvelously together as thoughtful panel and in our individual conversations to orient this project: Debra A. Castillo, Edmundo Paz Soldán and Mary Pat Brady. Each of them have inspired my work in different ways, and I am grateful for our exchanges and for their support throughout my time at Cornell.

I indebted to my friends and colleagues from my graduate program. First and foremost, to my cohort; Christina Soto and Geraldine Monterroso. Shortly after arriving at Cornell, some unscrupulous bystander asked me how or why we could be a cohort of “just women” o *puras mujeres*. Although I'm sure the elaborate eye-roll I gave in response at the time sufficed; I will reiterate my thoughts about “us women” here. These women, as a cohort, as a group could not have been more unique. Some say three is company, three is a crowd—for us it has been one or the other, neither, and both. Regardless, this rule will always apply; it is the rule of threes. Otherwise known as the power of three, which as a principle sustains that things that come in

threes are funnier, more satisfying, brilliant, wilder, crazier, and more poignantly lived than other numbers of things. Consider: red, yellow, and green traffic lights, clover leaves, wise men, the laws of motion, rock, paper, scissors, the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, the stars in Orion's belt, the unholy trinity, Tolkien's trilogy, and, lastly, the beginning, middle, and end of all things---for which I owe I debt of gratitude to Geraldine and Christina, just us few women.

I would like to thank Rebecca Davidson for her counsel, patience, and spirited ways.

And my dog, Lula, and her quirks.

Claudia Taylor for her presence and long-distance but long-suffering friendship and whose conversations transplant me daily to my beloved Mexico City.

To my home city, Pittsburgh, and family, always.

To my father who memorized poetry while he climbed smokestacks and welded our world together in wartimes and at home.

To my mother, the smartest person in our family whose love for storytelling and kindness to others never ceases.

To my brother, the uber-sibling. I am very proud and only slightly jealous of you, most of the time.

Not to any of my extended relatives who asked annoying questions about this work and that ruined otherwise perfectly acceptable holiday chit chat.

To my sisters-in-law: Julie and Carolyn; thank you for opting-in to sisterhood and for your continued friendship and support.

Jim.

To my son, Graham, the brightest light in my small universe.

To my daughter, whom I have yet to know and to the mysteries of life that lie ahead.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Biographical Sketch.....	iii
Acknowledgements.....	v
List of Figures.....	ix
INTRODUCTION: MYTHS OF MAN: NONHUMAN FORMS & FIELDS.....	1
ONE: NATALIE DIAZ, DUENDE, & DREAM TIGERS.....	28
TWO: COLLAGING KINGDOMS.....	60
THREE: APPALACHIAN AMERICAS.....	101
FOUR: HYDROLIBROS OR HOW TO READ IN A RIVER WITHOUT WATER DAMAGE.....	138
Concluding Remarks.....	177
Works Cited.....	194

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 2.1.....	67
Figure 2.2, 2.3.....	68
Figure 3.1.....	110
Figure 4.1.....	138
Figure 4.2.....	141
Figure 4.3.....	145
Figure 4.4.....	156
Figure 4.5.....	169

INTRODUCTION

Myths of Man: Nonhuman Forms & Fields

La negra is a beastgirl. From forehead to heel callused. Risen on an island made of shit bricks, an empire. The doctor pulled La Negra from her mother's throat: a swallowed sword, a string of rosary beads. La Negra's father is a dulled sugarcane machete. Crowned in her sundried umbilical cord. La Negra claws and wails, craves only mamajuana (Acevedo 12).

-- Elizabeth Acevedo, "The True-Story of La Negra a Bio-Myth"

This "bio-myth" is taken from Acevedo's collection *Beastgirl & Other Origin Myths*, a chapbook which addresses many of the concerns of this dissertation through its demonstration of overlapping myths, diasporas, and how Latinx poets, like Acevedo, position nonhumans as agents in the crafting of origin stories which span across Latin@American spaces. I open with Acevedo's resounding lyrics to give shape to this project; it occurs to me as appropriate to cite *Beastgirl & Other Origin Myths* as an introduction also functions almost like an origin story. And so mine will depart with the breath of the Caribbean beast-girl, clawing though the page. Not only the beast-girl, but also her myth-making, too, resonates here. One of the premises that this dissertation departs from are the myths of Man, a theory taken from Sylvia Wynter's ruminations on the rigidity of an idealized, limited idea of Man. This "myth" is one that sustains a singular and exclusionary limit of the form of Man. Wynter argues this point in her essay "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom Towards the Human. After Man. Its Overrepresentation: An Argument." She sustains that "The struggle of our new millennium will be one between the ongoing imperative of

securing the well-being of our present ethnoclass (i.e., Western bourgeois) conception of the human. Man, which overrepresents itself as if it were the human itself, and that of securing the well-being, and therefore, the full cognitive and behavioral autonomy of the human species itself/ourselves” (260). Many of the curiosities which first sparked this foray into the lives of human/nonhuman forces in poetry and performance in Latin@American and Latinx Studies, had to do precisely with this weight of representation and questions about how to counter Man’s hegemony through poetics. “This beastgirl,” that Elizabeth Acevedo claims as “la negra”, what blackness is and is not—hinges on the edge of the nonhuman and its inquiry, its myths, which have emerged as some of the most thought-provoking concepts in contemporary literary scholarship. In my dissertation project, I engage with nonhuman figures and forces from both U.S. Latinx and Latin American texts through insights from critical theories from the Environmental Humanities and Global Black Studies.

My line of inquiry traces the fringes or fractal edges of human and nonhuman boundaries, which I see as opportunities to, one, question the nature of these limits and, secondly, to think about other avenues where connections and disconnections emerge in tandem. In my readings, I approach a range of Latinx writers who scrutinize ideas of text and canonical literary figures through a nonhuman poetic turn.

By analyzing works from Latinx poets like Aracelis Girmay, Maurice Kilwein Guevara, Ada Limon, Natalie Diaz, Carmen Jimenez Smith, and performance artist Basia Irland, this dissertation reflects on how iterations of nonhuman presences might work as ciphers that generate meaningful questions about forms of life and livelihoods between spaces and literary traditions. This framework was inspired by an autopoietic approach from Sylvia Wynter a theorist whose work asks how or what kind of counterpoetics might go towards the Human, After Man, the latter being an overrepresented Western bourgeoisie articulation of what it means to be human.

In this project, I strive not to go toward the human, precisely, but around the limits of it. This is where autopoiesis comes into play, autopoietic readings are always already asking questions about the nature of the self through a porous, semi-autonomous frame, which I use to trace how the poems in my dissertation are open to nonhuman interventions and environments. I pursue this openness, not only between species but between spaces as a kind of nonhuman poetic traffic. I was particularly interested in parsing how Sylvia Wynter employs the term autopoiesis, as she adopted it from Chilean biologist Humberto Maturana's usage. Wynter's work has been most commonly read within the field of black studies, however, I see her corpus of texts as strongly informed by her background as a Hispanist. Maturana's autopoietic haunting, is a prime example of this, and Wynter's work crystalizes how questions of the human, Global Black Studies, and Latinx-American Studies might collide. In my close readings of the nonhuman in Latinx poetry and performance, I wanted to test these encounters and edges as well—between human and non, but also between Latin American Studies, Latinx Studies, and Global Black Studies. I suggest that reading in this way offers alternative mappings or routes between texts, disciplines, and ontologies. As Wynter blurs these boundaries between disciplines and selves, so did, in turn, many of the poets and artists I discuss. While mining Latinx texts, I found that many authors used nonhuman intensities as pathways through which to engage with Latin American authors like Lorca, Borges, Puig, Eunice Odio, Marti, the force of duende, etc. and I attempted to map this out in my discussion as a way of questioning how nonhuman creativities might inform how we think about reading Latinx texts and how they meet with or diverge from the Latin American canon. Rather than to claim any one central figure of the nonhuman or human as the crux of my argument, I worked across a range of nonhuman figures and forces in order to speak about a potential strategy for reading alongside or through the nonhuman. I wanted to offer

another lens from which to consider our Interamerican aesthetics, which fashioned more traffic, more possibilities, rather than a reducing these texts to a type. I am hopeful that as I continue to develop this layered project that it has the possibility to contribute to diverse bodies of scholarship.

It is important to acknowledge the ways in which contemporary Latinx and Latin@American writers reframe what it means to rely on prepackaged ideations of the fully-human. I use ‘Latinx’ here and ‘Latin@American’ purposefully to reflect what I think is an important distinction applicable to many young writers, which is a state of liminality often reflected in their work. Latinx refers to writers who may consider themselves (or are read as) U.S. based or centered in an American Studies canon (though perhaps also relegated to the fringes of “minority literature”), while Latin@American authors, though perhaps having spent decades in the United States, may orient their writing more toward the traditions of the Hispanist canon. In my readings, I have found that these distinctions, Latinx or Latin@American, are not hard-lined, and, while analyzing the limits of human/nonhuman forms, I also ask questions about how these writers might be occupying positions at the edge of or even transcend these boundaries or thresholds of canon. My approach to this vacillation and reconsideration of how Latinx and Latin@American literary productions are theorized owes much to José David Saldívar’s illuminating discussions found in *Trans-Americanity Subaltern Modernities, Global Coloniality, and the Cultures of Greater Mexico* (2011), Claudia Milian’s *Latining America: Black-Brown Passages and the Coloring of Latino/a Studies* (2013), and Michael Dowdy’s *Broken Souths: Latina/o Poetic Responses to Neoliberalism and Globalization* (2013). At stake in the works of all the poets and artists whom I will address in the following chapters, are the nuances of the ways in which humans and nonhumans coalesce across a range of geopolitical spaces and inform ideas of reading.

My concerns are primarily how to read the ways in which these writers work through nonhuman intensities as figures of passage to mediate interstitial discourses. I focus on these moments where “the human” has not been enough, which allow the critical reader to look, with the artist, to the edges, the insides and outsides of this form to the limits of life. This is intriguing, given the ways in which these discourses of human and Other have been complexly intermingled and shifted across spaces and disciplines.

I argue that this is crucial as, by in large, critical theories of the nonhuman have oriented themselves from a position that does not necessarily privilege the reverberations of Latin@American diasporas. Thus, a reconsideration of nonhuman figures as guides or ciphers for these spaces might offer up interesting possibilities for reading. Throughout this dissertation, I defer primarily to scholars from Global Black Studies, and Latinx as well as Latin@American Studies. I am, and these frameworks are, however, in conversation with a community of scholarship and metaphysical questions about the limits of life, death, humans, and other-than-human debates. Thus I will review here a brief glossary of some terms I touch on as a sort of field guide. This endeavor is not intended to be an exhaustive or comprehensive explanation of these terms; I am merely paraphrasing where my orientation stems from.

Animality: a problematizes the caesura between humans and nonhuman animals divide and ideas of rational and irrational beings. Discussed widely by philosophers like Kant and Nietzsche.

Anima: Taken from Aristotle’s *De Anima*, proposes variations on ensoulment and underscores the importance of potentiality, perception, and ideas of life across several planes, including the “nutritive life”, which is the condition for partaking in life.

Bare Life: Giorgio Agamben tests the limits of “mere life”, reimagining

concepts like biopower, bios/zoe, sovereign violence, and modern subjectivities. For a different opinion, see *The Beast and the Sovereign*, by Derrida.

Death: Humans die; animals, or those who are poor-in-the-world, perish—Martin Heidegger.

Intensity: The encounter, the spark, a cruelty.

(New) Materialism: An emerging and interdisciplinary way of troubling divides like nature/culture, anthropocentrism, embodiment, and how nonhuman forces resonate across livelihoods and politics.

Potentiality: The presence of an absence; to not do or not be.

As evidenced above, many explorations of critical theories of the nonhuman have been more concentrated on European referents as primary sources of theoretical engagement than, say, other minority fields or perspectives from area studies. Nevertheless, within the field of Hispanic Studies, innovative, critical engagements with the nonhuman seem to be ever emerging, Gabriel Giorgi's work in *Formas comunes: Animalidad, cultura, biopolítica* (2014) was particularly notable and interrogated an impressive range of important canonical questions and foundational texts from the region. Other exceptions to a more Eurocentric focus include Stacy Alaimo's work on *Material Feminisms* and *Bodily Natures*, Michael E. Dowdy's transnational, ecocritical engagements in *Broken Souths*, Eduardo Kohn's anthropological approaches to the entangled worlds of humans and nonhumans in *How Forests Think*, Mel E. Chen's text *Animacies*, which privileges the reading of race and nonhumans, and Alexander Weheliye's studies of black feminist critical theories of the nonhuman in *Habeas Viscus*, which returns to the work of Hortense Spillers and Sylvia Wynter on critical theories of the nonhuman, flesh, and racializing

assemblages. These theoretical voices, in addition to texts from the environmental humanities and fields of critical animal studies, strongly informed the shaping of this dissertation project. Of this chorus, however, I have chosen to frame my work most closely with insights taken from Sylvia Wynter, Alexander Weheliye, genres, and the idea of autopoiesis they discuss as ways to orient my subsequent chapters.

Wynter is Here

Through writers like Sylvia Wynter, we can consider other points of orientation from which to question the nonhuman; specifically, from the intersections of Latin American Studies and the field of Black Feminist Theory. Sylvia Wynter's unique work connects several fields, Caribbean, American and Latin American Studies, Critical Race Theory, to the boundaries of science and neurobiology. Her writing poses tremendous critical questions that range across and between disciplines. Sylvia Wynter's contributions to scholarship are far reaching though they remain widely understudied. In recent years, scholars have just begun to parse her 900-page unpublished manuscript, "Black Metamorphosis," which serves as an outline and precursor to Wynter's theories of the human. Wynter establishes in this text, which she elaborated over the course of a decade in the 1970's, what she cites as the status of "non-norm and nonperson" blackness in the New World, and that this experience serves as the backbone of, or as a foundational concept through which contemporary narratives of the Western world order constitute themselves and their citizens. Wynter argues that it is through the abjection of subjects who are inscribed with an other-than-human status that these orders are sustained. She names this as a counterpoint to the overrepresentation of Man while questioning the ontological bounds of the human. Throughout her many approaches to move beyond Man, Wynter writes about a variety of figures and global events. Some of her most foundational writing centers around the

ideas of Man 1 and Man 2, taken from “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, after Man, Its Overrepresentation-An Argument.” Man 1 was a renaissance figure of man whose exclusionary boundaries were delineated by both the paradigms of theocentric thinking and colonial encounters in the Americas. Man 1 was configured as fully human, in such that he was a rational subject by way of a colonial and supernatural social order. For Wynter, then, the ideology that produced Man 2, was formed in part by precedents from the logic of Man 1. Man 2’s merits are based in a subsequently secularized, biological form that parsed out the “naturally” dysselected, those who were categorized as racially inferior from Westerners, from those “selected” or taxonomized as superior through Darwinian biocentric orders of knowledge. Wynter’s approach to the boundaries of the human, unlike that of a strictly biopolitical framework, is centered through a decolonial or anti-colonial lens. This perspective is foregrounded between the Americas as a space of encounter where the limits of the human are railed against and around by those who were placed outside of its bounds.

In this dissertation, I consider that the way Wynter approaches theories of the human and beyond Man and how this informs how we might read Latinx and Latin@American poetry and performance. Departing from some of Wynter’s questions and conceptual frameworks like Man 1 and Man 2, I ask, not only how to move beyond Man toward the human, but also how to read toward the edges of the human and how this reading might influence ideas of origin stories, myth, and trans-American retellings. Wynter, who is also a novelist and whose critical writings are highly poetic in tone, problematizes some of these ideas in her work, which I will weave throughout my dissertation, paying particular attention to the ways in which these concepts pertain to literary production. There are three elements of Wynter’s work, beyond some of the conceptions of Man that I have already outlined, which

have given particular shape and inspiration to this dissertation project.

Firstly, I was influenced by Wynter in regards to myth and origin stories; Wynter aims to expose how myths and origin stories are constructed in accordance with hegemonic constructions and exclusionary discourses of Man, as in Man 1 and Man 2. In “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, after Man, Its Overrepresentation-An Argument”, Wynter riffs on how to “enable the now globally expanding West to replace the earlier mortal/immortal, natural/supernatural, human/the ancestors, the gods/God distinction as the one on whose basis all human groups had millennially ‘grounded’ their descriptive statement/prescriptive statements of what it is to be human, and to reground its secularizing own on a newly projected human/subhuman distinction instead” (264). In her approach, Wynter is leaning into the limits of the bios/mythoi and offering possibility of approaching alternative origin stories that speak to other modalities of humanness through close readings and creative reinterpretations of canonical texts, like Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks*, for instance. These concepts and unique approaches strongly informed my first and second chapters, in which I approach selections from Natalie Diaz’ and Aracelis Girmay’s poetic texts. Therein, I chart the emergence of alternative origin stories between interspecies and intertextual encounters. Through highlighting techniques like collaging and self-portraiture by way of interspecies referents in their poetry, Girmay and Diaz, transcend exclusively human boundaries and diasporic spaces while probing ideas of canon and genre.

The second influential thread in Wynter’s work also stems from her approach to genres. Wynter writes about “genres” of humanness and how the West, through colonial violence, has forged over-represented, genre-specific, descriptive terms which are impressed into marginalized subjects. Wynter uses the term “genre” as a performative one and troubles its origin root which is conflated with gender. I

approach this play on “genre” and its limits as related not only to shades of other-than/humanness but also of genre in the literary sense of how to read and categorize texts. While I read to the edges of the human as a practice of counterpoetics to the domination of Man, I am also testing the form of the text itself which is reshaped through these experimental readings.

The third thread which runs through Wynter’s writing and informs this dissertation is her shift to the “scientific”—from Aimé Césaire’s “science of the Word” (*Discourse on Colonialism*)—which focuses on “the Word”, mythoi, and nature, bios, together with her invocation of systems like autopoiesis. What Wynter proposes through these discourses is a re-ordering of our systems of knowledge, an argument which I extend to the field of literary studies and Latin American studies.

These themes, among others, can be seen reflected in the trajectories of Wynter’s influence on more contemporary scholarship. As I have noted, much of Wynter’s writing is concerned with the category of the human and Black diasporas, particularly from a Caribbean lens; this has been explored at length in both the collection of essays, *Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human as Praxis* edited by Katherine McKittrick and in Alexander Weheliye’s publication *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human*. Weheliye stipulates that Wynter’s approach “provides alternate genealogies for theorizing the ideological and physiological mechanics of the violently tiered categorization of the human species in western modernity, which stand counter to the universalizing but resolutely Europe-centered visions embodied by bare life and biopolitics” (27). I am interested in tracing these geographies and connecting them with their possible re-readings in a Latinx and Latin@American literary context. Two of Wynter’s chief interlocutors—Walter D. Mignolo and Anibal Quijano—are overtly concerned with Latin American Studies, and it is through considerations of the “coloniality of power”

(Quijano) and “colonial difference” (Mignolo) that Wynter also foregrounds a dismantling of a singular mode of humanness; toward modalities or genres of the human, a useful framework from which to re-examine ideas of genre and canon. Weheliye orients Wynter’s work by way of Global Black Studies, though I seek to trace her work in a different direction, through Latin@American and Latinx Studies. What Weheliye stipulates, however, that Wynter does for the field of Global Black Studies is crucial, and has resonances for other fields of minority literature and area studies:

Wynter’s model ushers us away from thinking race via the conduits of chromatism, which simply reaffirms the putatively biological basis of this category, or the radical particularity of black life and culture, which accepts too easily the unimpeachable reality of the “Man- as- human” episteme. By contrast, the insights reaped from the comparison of different black populations in recent formulations of black diaspora studies tend to reinforce exactly this particularity, thereby consenting to the current governing manifestation of the human as synonymous with western Man. Instead, Wynter constructs a model of black studies that has as its object of knowledge the role of racialization in shaping the modern human and that takes the resultant liminal vantage point as an occasion for the imagination of other forms of being and becoming human (25).

Weheliye discusses the promise of black studies through a reconsideration of the boundaries of the human, centering his discourse decidedly in Sylvia Wynter and the Black feminist theorist, Hortense Spillers, rather than, for example, solely in critical frameworks drawn from biopolitical or bare life models; from Foucault or Agamben’s texts in other words. At the same time, the contributions from these European theorists

indeed, too, offer invaluable insights into the limits of the figure of the human and who has been classified as such or exiled from its limits. My considerations of Wynter seek to position this project from a perspective which considers several frameworks from the disciplines of critical theories of the nonhuman. Rather than consider how Wynter might shape the field of Latin American Studies at large, I probe where the connections and disconnections between literary figures and genres of the human might intersect. In doing so, I trace several waves of emergent poets, reflecting on their use of lyric, nonhuman interlocutors, text, and form.

My engagement with Wynter has to do with, then, looking to the limits of the human as a way to reconsider nonhuman encounters through poetry and performance. This is not a “pressed service” of the animal either as merely or exclusively a metaphorical entity. Rather, I see these forces as working in elliptical motions. I also want to stress that this is also not a “comparative” reading. I’m not comparing marginalized persons to nonhumans. Comparative work with nonhumans and minorities, particularly as it pertains to animals, permeates descriptive and mongrelized depictions in the U.S. Southwest of Mexicans and Mexican-Americans that have been used for segregation purposes (one could recall the signs “No Dogs or Mexicans Allowed” that Cynthia E. Orozco has written so eloquently about, for instance). These close-readings I conduct are not treatments of people as animals or suggesting that human is a category to be overcome. However, it is important to acknowledge that historical and contemporary hegemonic systems have not treated these groups as fully-human and often look past this entirely when gazing beyond the human or in the abyss between human/nonhuman. Wynter’s work points to the edges of the human and enables the reader to reconsider forces outside of “traditionally” acknowledged humanity to pass between kinds of death where this fullness of certain qualities of life wanes or pales under what has been inscribed inside the human.

In my approach, I cite that there is a wake in the discourse of traditional taxonomies of the human, the lyricized nonhuman, which emerges and reflects gaping holes in the discourse of an anthropomorphic universality of being Man, the idea of the idealized, over represented figure Man, taken from a colonial and then biocentric frame. Wynter insightfully points out how others have and are always exceeding the limits of this tightly and rigidly constructed form of personhood.

Autopoietic Turns

One of the ways in which Wynter also approaches ideas of life in Latin America is through her coopting of the somewhat opaque term “autopoiesis” taken from Chilean scientist Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela’s views on perception, the self, cognition, and neurobiology. For Wynter, seeing Man is an autopoietic act, an image replicated by a culture-specific lens, which is reproduced on a neurobiological level. Wynter’s prose, particularly with regards to an autopoietic turn, is dense, and, at times, disorienting, as her turns of phrase, at times, twist into a seemingly impenetrable labyrinth. I am less concerned with some of the more mystifying neurobiological points Wynter pursues. Instead, I will reference here selected arguments about “autopoiesis” to orient my readings, specifically through the ways in which Wynter’s approach to genres of the human is informed on both an autopoietic and diasporic stage. My specific intervention in these concerns is this: I locate autopoiesis between Wynter’s revolutionary reframing of human and race and place it together with the possibility for reading autopoietically in the field of literary studies. To do this, I will give a brief overview of the term, “autopoiesis” in several of its many varied contexts.

Originally, the term emerges chiefly from the book *Autopoiesis and Cognition: The Realization of the Living* (1972) wherein Chilean scientists Humberto Maturana

and Francisco Varela establish a way of viewing life that functions as a kind of feedback loop. It bears mention that what Maturana and Varela were initially postulating is not about autopoiesis as Wynter reads it for race, nor as sociologist Niklas Luhmann did for social systems, neither in a literary sense as it has recently been studied, but rather on the self-reproducing processes of life and cognition. For Maturana and Varela, this meant engaging a nonlinear, circularity of form, structure, and how their interdependent components function in an interconnected ways as part of a holistic structure. This feedback loop that maintains the living system can be influenced by events in the living system's environment. As Varela notes in *Principles of Biological Autonomy*:

An autopoietic system is organized (defined as a unity) as a network of processes of production (transformation and destruction) of components that produces the components that: 1. through their interactions and transformations continuously regenerate and realize the network of processes (relations) that produced them; and 2. constitute it (the machine) as a concrete unity in the space in which they [the components] exist by specifying the topological domain of its realization as such a network (13).

This works through a biological framing of cognition, which parses how cognitive processes function through beings as living systems as well as the origins of humanness. I propose that in addition to their intriguing contributions regarding the roots of humanness, there is another interesting strand to be taken up from Maturana and Varela's approach—which is their approach to a systematic description of organisms as self-producing units in physical spaces or “domains” as sets of relations, interactions, worlds, and identifications. Living systems can be translated into other environments, if they can survive it, however the nature of this internal loop endures.

When speaking about diaspora as a concept, I defer to these concepts as my guiding vision or orientation. While Maturana and Varela tie systems to more strictly machine-like processes, I meditate on the possibilities of an animistic view in my discussion. Maturana's ideas, of cognition, space, and environment also rely on the presence of an observer and how he witnesses and defines livelihoods. This is something which Wynter put particular emphasis on in terms of how to forge humanness and how racial otherness are constructed together with the praxis of living.

Contemporary, interdisciplinary, critical tendencies in reading autopoiesis blur sciences and humanities, nature and culture, and have deployed the term autopoiesis in new directions. It bears mention, before moving on to more contemporary scholarship on the term, that Maturana's autopoiesis also carries with it the shadow of Latin American livelihoods that are disrupted. *Autopoiesis and Cognition: The Realization of the Living* emerges just months before Chile's military coup; later, Maturana stated the following posterior reflections, which are a rather complicated series of views on Pinochet's interventions in the nation:

Permítanme una reflexión sobre lo sucedido en los últimos meses en la historia de Chile. Al mismo tiempo pido disculpas porque la hago como biólogo que no está en condiciones de hacer una evaluación histórico político económica. Yo pienso que lo que ha pasado en relación al plebiscito de 1988, muestra exactamente lo que he dicho sobre el lenguaje como un aperar en coordinaciones de coordinaciones de acciones. En 1973, cuando se produce el golpe militar, la Junta de Gobierno afirma que tiene la intención de generar una democracia. Los que escuchamos no creemos, porque nos parece que las palabras no se ven confirmadas en los actos. Pero el discurso de intención democrática se mantiene. En el proceso se nombra una comisión constitucional que eventualmente escribe un proyecto constitucional que, modificado de una

u otra manera por Pinochet, se aprueba en un plebiscito. Se comienza a hablar de leyes electorales, de leyes de partidos políticos, de procedimientos electorales. Es decir, se genera una trama de conversaciones para la democracia que constituye una red de acciones. Lo que pasa el 5 de octubre de 1988, día del plebiscito presidencial, no refleja seguramente el deseo de Pinochet, pero ocurre. ¡Ocurre porque el gobierno no lo puede detener! Ocurre porque la red de conversaciones, la red de coordinaciones de acciones generada en el proceso de los discursos y debates sobre la democracia y la legalidad democrática, constituyen una trama de acciones que no se pueden evitar, porque no existe el espacio de conversaciones en el que surjan las acciones que lo hagan. ¡No, ésta no es una reflexión superficial a posteriori! Las conversaciones, como un entrelazamiento del emocionar y el “lenguajear” en que vivimos, constituyen y configuran el mundo en que vivimos como un mundo de acciones posibles en la concreción de nuestra transformación corporal al vivir en ellas. Los seres humanos somos lo que conversamos, es así como la cultura y la historia se encarnan en nuestro presente. Es el conversar las conversaciones que constituyen la democracia lo que constituye la democracia. De hecho, nuestra única posibilidad de vivir el mundo que queremos vivir es sumergirnos en las conversaciones que lo constituyen como una práctica social cotidiana en una continua conspiración ontológica que lo trae al presente (*Emociones y lenguaje en educación y política* 64-5).

It is important to recognize how Maturana views the idea of how language, potentiality, and continuous conversations that constitute our ontological condition, which he places after what might be called somewhat of a stylized Pinochet-apologia. Though he excuses himself as a simple biologist, Maturana’s ideas here, like

autopoiesis, have far-reaching implications. In a separate interview compiled in the text *Del ser al hacer: los orígenes de la biología del conocer* with Bernhard Pörksen, Humberto Maturana describes a chilling luncheon with Pinochet which he attended with some 85 other professors and intellectuals during the dictatorship. Maturana notes that, “Cuando llegó mi turno de saludar a Pinochet, me acordé de mi hijo mayor que había dicho que jamás le daría la mano a Pinochet. Y ahí estaba yo apretándole la mano a ese hombre” (206). Maturana was a man of many paradoxes; during this encounter with Pinochet, he gives a slightly subversive toast in which he celebrates Chile, patria, and cultural autonomy. Maturana notes that this pleases the former dictator such that he claps four times enthusiastically and that the toast served as common ground for a return to dignity and civility between the two. At the same time, as Maturana recounts this experience to Pörksen, he states that “por supuesto este hombre es criminal. No cabe duda” and that “sigue alegando su inocencia, y ese es su mayor crimen” but that a neutral dialogue was the only viable path forward nonetheless in such circumstances (209). It is important to recognize both the potential promises and possible problems of Maturana’s views and how geopolitical events and upheavals may have shaped these perceptions. Maturana’s work, nevertheless, reminds the reader of the importance of with mediating uncertainties and surviving, with all its shifting meanings, as ontological practices. My reading of autopoiesis pursues the term as a part of useful framework that explores the complicated, semi-autonomous nature of forms. In this dissertation, I read autopoietically as a way to approach the porosity of human/nonhuman signs in Latinx and Latin@American poetry and performance. On the possibility of reading poetry through an autopoietic lens, poet and essayist Erena Johnson has also noted the importance of underscoring how this “semi-autonomous loop” functions. In “Making Meaning With and Against the Text: An Autopoietic Theory of Reading”, Johnson writes that:

Semi-autonomy does not just describe how the material book moves about in the world, but describes how the poem is open to its environment in every line. While formal qualities seem to delimit the text, give it boundaries – a certain number of pages, block of paragraphs, or certain numbers of lines, titles, codex form – these same qualities ensure the text is open to its outside: all the other editions or copies of that text, all the allusions, quotes, references to other texts, all other texts that have used 14 syllable lines, all texts that seem to deal with similar subject matters. Any animate force which operates in an autopoietic system should be understood as all edges, all interfaces (18).

Johnson's approach to poetry is shaped in part by Ira Livingston's *Between Science and Literature: An Introduction to Autopoetics*, a pioneering work that riffs on autopoiesis mainly through literary and cultural theory, resonating with my own quest to pursue autopoiesis in poetry and critical theories of the nonhuman. I find the ways in which Livingston approaches autopoiesis and the idea of boundaries which are foundational to the term, particularly useful for how I conceive of reading nonhuman forms as places or intensities of passage:

Boundaries do more than produce closure by keeping certain things out and others in; they also allow traffic that they channel and manage. But they do more than allow traffic: they create traffic by producing differentials between sides of boundaries, thus also producing more openness (flow across boundaries where none had been before). Finally, one has to acknowledge that boundaries and the autopoietic systems built around them do more than create traffic: they are traffic (84).

From this, we can understand that boundaries, in an autopoietic lens, and the act of reading poetry is not comprised of discrete limits. In my close-readings of contemporary Latinx and Latin@American poets I test these boundaries, of text and of

nonhumanities. After all, as Livingston notes:

We are fractal creatures, crazed through and through with cleavages. If you look closer at a feature that seems firmly in the interior, you are likely to find the hairline fracture, the edge, that joins it to the outside. To cultivate this way of looking—to learn to see performativity—you really just have to follow through on the mandate to look at nouns and structures until you see them as participles and processes: an edge is an ongoing negotiation rather than a structure; or to take it from the legalistic to the ludic, the party was going on before the guests showed up (83).

Like Livingston's citation of fractal creaturehood, Erena Johnson too approaches environment and animate forces, in an Aristotelian sense; however, her approach to autopoiesis allows us to reconsider the potentialities in poetry—how to read in a semi-autonomous nature, both with and against the possibilities of the poem, noting the manifold passages of its signifiers. I draw their voices together with an example from Johnson's idea of an autopoietic cloud gathering force:

Let us explain the semi-autonomy of a poem again, in a more dynamic model. Imagine an atmospheric cloud consisting of all sorts of different winds moving in different directions. They float around slowly, their different moisture contents and different temperatures mingling and transforming their speeds and directions. That these winds swirl around as undifferentiated potential make the atmospheric cloud a continuum. This cloud is the environment of a poem, the continuum out of which the poem emerges. It is made up of the forces of marketing departments who regulate texts by genre, the publishing houses and chains of distribution, the cultural legacy of the writer's other works, the public events which may have an effect on the subject matter of the poem at its time of reading, the power of interpretations that issue from authoritative

sources, the author's presence within media outlets...the large forces in the world that seem to be any poem's "background". Suddenly, a gust of wind sweeps through the atmospheric cloud. A reader has picked up the poem, and begins to map it with her habitual interpretative strategies. At the very same moment, another gust is sweeping through from a different direction. The poem's formal qualities are travelling at a contrary speed with a contrary temperature. The two winds collide and twist together to form a storm. Some of the slower winds that were drifting about in the atmospheric cloud get pulled into the mix (22-3).

Johnson is pursuing a reading of the poem as an event; however, some of the "winds" she twists into this cloud, which is the environment of the poem, are elements that I also analyze in this dissertation. I seek to trouble the inside / outside nature of nonhuman forms and signs as ways of navigating between Latinx and Latin@American poetry and performance, where these limits lie, and how these texts are packaged. How do they flow in, out, and around canonical boundaries and the borders of the human (as Johnson writes "who regulate texts by genre, the publishing houses and chains of distribution, the cultural legacy of the writer's other work")? A final bridge between Johnson's work, my concerns, and the field of global black studies comes from her reference to Jack Halberstam's "The Wild Beyond: With and for the Undercommons" from *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* edited by Stefano Harney and Fred Moten. Johnson highlights where Halberstam, who is discussing Moten's approach to sound, writes about the autopoietic edge, and how, "When we listen to music, we must refuse the idea that music happens only when the musician enters and picks up an instrument; music is also the anticipation of the performance and the noises of appreciation it generates and the speaking that happens through and around it, making it and loving it, being in

it while listening” (Halberstam 9). Johnson defers to Halberstam as a way to approach autopoietic processes; specifically, toward an autopoietic reading of poetry that “does not only arise and dissolve at the moment of engagement and disengagement – the picking up and putting down of a book”, but one that is rather informed by an amalgamating, semi-autonomous set of relations (Johnson). However, notably, Halberstam’s point of departure is black studies and “the wild” (he writes that “Moten and Harney want to gesture to another place, a wild place that is not simply the leftover space that limits real and regulated zones of polite society; rather, it is a wild place that continuously produces its own unregulated wildness” 7). This is perhaps where autopoiesis and critical nonhuman readings from Black and Latinx studies meet yet again. In this dissertation I read autopoietically between these disciplines, human and nonhuman intensities, and canons, through a variety of techniques.

Autopoiesis is the overarching framework that weaves implicitly throughout my chapters. It is self-referential in a nature, sensitive to its environmental reshapings, and the inside/outside of texts, which are evidenced through my approaches to nonhuman signs that connect canons (chapter one), techniques of self-portraiture and collaging through poetry (chapter two), landscape and environment (chapter three), and how to read both through a text which undoes itself in form and legibility and to disrupt apparent stasis in poetic texts (chapter four).

Poetic Pursuits and Navigations

Just as there are a range of theoretical voices which fade in and out this semi-permeable, semi-autonomous project, so too, a panorama of artists, poets, and writers have been woven into this dissertation. Though it is impossible to privilege or center all of them, they are present. It was very difficult to select just a few poets for this project from the myriad voices and talented writers who are currently forming a

contemporary Latinx and Latin@American renaissance of letters. Many writers and poets shaped this dissertation; inspiration came from prose from Justin Torres, Guadalupe Nettel, Salvador Plascencia, Eduardo C. Corral, Helena Viramontes, to name a few. Though they may not figure in its individual chapters; they shaped its vision. Several poets prominently formed my approach, which I will detail here below.

To write this dissertation, I followed María Meléndez into the landscape poetics of *How Long She'll Last in This World?*; through “Backcountry, Emigrant Gap”, “Good News for Humans”, “Controlled Burn,” and especially the poems, the “Life Study Site: Bodega Natural Reserve”, inspired by the life of Margaret Murie, and “Aullido”, the codeswitching Sierra Madre story of an invincible wolf. Firstly, “Life Study Site: Bodega Natural Reserve” reads as a vision, a quest through landscape:

I have a particular co-pathy
With this particular coastal prairie herd,
Because we've been under the same saffron spell
Of a hill of bush lupine in bloom,
And they've watched me step through
the drifting drapes of fog they've stepped through (68).

And:

The eye seldom sees
what the mind does not anticipate—
shock is a tool to slice revelation
into the mind, into the grass, onto the once-
were dunes: my husband's accidental death
unveiled a world of unknowables

still, as I continue following the trail
of questions that we built together here.
I often forget (hill-blind,
were-dunes-blind,
vision striated by grasses)
the nearness of the pulsing sea. (69).

María Meléndez' speaker, like Wynter, presses the reader's senses, the eye, to work through visions on the edge of the human-nonhuman boundaries. Her poem, "Aullido," asks us to conjure "El alma de un lobo" that "nunca desaparecía de este mundo", which is forged in the memories of mountains that transcend borders and speak to myth, "living wolf, spirit in flesh, / breathe here, / walk here / recall the places / you never left / Glance again in time's long mirror / and recognize yourself" (22). Meléndez' evocation of flesh, myth, and nonhuman boundaries as conduits for self-reflection resonate with my first two chapters, while shifting landscape visions and spaces resound with chapters three and four.

The second collection of poems, which I found particularly influential and would be remiss to exclude from this introduction is Daniel Borzutzky's *The Performance of Becoming Human*. The freshly minted National Book Award Winner (2016) *The Performance of Becoming Human* approaches hazy boundaries not only of nations, going from Chicago, to Lake Michigan, Valparaiso, Chile and back, but of humanity and how we forge or perform it. To orchestrate this performance of becoming human, Borzutzky unflinchingly collages imageries of dictatorship and the disappeared with the swipe of a CVS card, neglected voicemails, the Frito Bandito, "overdevelopment" and its wake of destitution. Borzutzky's hymn to the limits of the human also underscores, and I suggest, might serve as a bridge between what Wynter, Maturana, and Acevedo have framed too. I see Borzutzky's work as drawing together

the autopoietic insides and outsides of the porous human form, between spaces, with this looming burden of how contemporary Latinx and Latin@American poets speak and respond to these limits.

Alongside this “performance,” *The Performance of Becoming Human* also playfully riffs on genre, which is another way, perhaps, of considering the writing process and genre as in genres of humanity—of how and why we write, scratch out, the human/nonhuman and Other. *The Performance of Becoming Human* returns to the core of literature’s capacity to reshape perceptions of life with Borzutzky’s steady hand pressing into the poet and how he packages humanity’s limits for literary consumption. Borzutzky accomplishes this through a technique, which, though, at times reads as playful is ever dauntless in its rigor, that addresses how literary voices approach these limits of human life for artistic production. Consider the titular poem, “The Performance of Becoming Human,” which reads:

On the side of the highway a thousand refugees step off a school bus
and into a sun that can only be described as “blazing.”

The rabbi points to the line the refugees step over and says: “That’s
where the country begins.”

This reminds me of Uncle Antonio. He would have died had his
tortured body not been traded to another country for minerals.

Made that up.

This is a story about diplomatic protections (14).

The flippant tone, the delineation of bodies, minerals, and migrants as boundaries coupled with the resounding, deadpan, “Made that up” establish Borzutzky’s speaker as one who is always penetrating and undermining the boundaries of the poem itself through self-referentiality, an autopoietic value, and one I will later pursue through

ideas of collage and self-portraiture. Borzutzky's dissonant "imagination challenges", which he poetically interjects further this idea:

Imagination challenge #1:

Imagine there is a matzah-ball bandito in your house. You buy lots of matzah balls and mix them with jalapenos and Fritos and light them on fire and then you survive the apocalypse because Fritos can stay lit forever and you don't need to find kindling or any of that other stuff so you finally have time to study Karlito Marx while watching Manchester United's Mexican hero Chicharito Hernandez score a poacher's golazo in the waning seconds of the Carling Cup while eating hallucinogenic mushrooms while watching Eric Estrada on Chips on another screen and listening to a podcast of the Book of Leviticus on your iPod Touch while Skyping with your mom while sexting with your boyfriend who works for the secret police.

Write a sonnet or a villanelle about this experience and do not use any adjectives (22).

Imagination Challenge #2:

It's nighttime. You're decomposing in a cage or a cell. Your father is reading the testimonies of the tortured villagers to you. He is in the middle of a particularly poignant passage about how the military tied up the narrator and made him watch as his children were lit on fire. He has to listen to the screams of his blazing children but he cannot listen to their screams so he himself starts screaming and then the soldiers shove a gag in his mouth so that he will stop screaming, but he doesn't stop screaming even with the gag in

his mouth.

But these are not screams, actually. They are unclassifiable noises that can only be understood as a collaboration between his dying body, the obliterated earth, and the bodies of those already dead.

Write a free-verse poem about the experience. Write it in the second person.

Publish it some place good (23).

Borzutzky drives toward and against the limits of life itself, “the collaboration between his dying body, the obliterated earth, and the bodies of those already dead,” together with the young writer’s mandate to, “Publish it some place good.” Through his imagination challenges, Borzutzky subverts these calls to the writer to nail bare life to the page, to the break of the line, for artistic consumption. These are concerns which have shaped my dissertation; how do the intensities between human and nonhumans in poetry and performance shape ideas of text between the Americas considering the valences of life across many forms. How do we read these signs, and how does this tendency contribute to questions of literary production at large related to ideas of canon and beyond?

These Chapters, Twice A Lunar Day

This dissertation as a collection functions in a constant ebb and flow between literary interventions and theoretical tendencies. Each chapter reflects a different point in this tide. Chapter One—“Natalie Diaz, Duende, and Dreamtigers,” underscores nonhuman energies and centers poetic texts’ approaches to canonical figures, mainly through Federico García Lorca and Jorge Luis Borges and other-than-human interlocutors in Natalie Diaz’ poetic collection: *When My Brother Was an Aztec*. To situate this chapter in this elliptical tide, it is important to note that it is, relative to its

neighboring chapters, nearly devoid of outside theoretical interventions, which functions as an act of centering the text.

“Collaging Kingdoms,” Chapter Two, in comparison, relies heavily on the theories which overtly frame this dissertation. I read poet Aracelis Girmay’s engagement with ideas of blackness, hispanicity, and the apparent bareness or not of life through concepts of collaging and assemblage. This chapter draws heavily from the neighboring field of Global Black Studies and includes readings from Wynter and Weheliye, while also cycling back into close readings from Diaz’ text *When My Brother Was an Aztec* to scrutinize collaging, myth, and self-portraiture alongside the nonhuman.

Chapter Three addresses how poets Maurice Kilwein Guevara and Ada Limón write through shifting landscapes and frame from the American backlands, Appalachia. These pursuits are underpinned by Latinx and Latin@American literary hunts and nonhuman referents.

Chapter Four, “How to Read in a River Without Water Damage” engages with performance artist Basia Irland and how she positions what she calls *Hydrolibros* and *Icebooks*. These *Icebooks* are frozen forms of texts which are dissembled through the force of the bodies of water, which surround them. In this chapter, the reader can visualize how texts are assembled and undone by nonhuman intensities. As a counter-reading and point of conclusion and extension, I offer the poetic text *Milk and Filth* by Carmen Giménez Smith. *Milk and Filth* addresses the ephemeral body-earth performance art of Ana Mendieta, turning performance to text: another edge from which to recut the initial concerns of how Basia Irland’s texts feeds into performance and the culmination of our autopoietic considerations.

CHAPTER 1

NATALIE DIAZ, DUENDE, & DREAM TIGERS

I lied about the whales. Fantastical blue
water-dwellers, big, slow moaners of the coastal.
I never saw them. Not once that whole frozen year.
Sure, I saw the raw white gannets hit the waves
so hard it could have been a showy blow hole.
But I knew it wasn't. Sometimes, you just want
something so hard you have to lie about it,
so you can hold it in your mouth for a minute
how real hunger has a taste. Someone once
told me gannets, those voracious sea birds
of North Atlantic chill, go blind from the height
and speed of their dives. But that, too, is a lie.
Gannets never go blind and they certainly never die (92).

- "Lies About Sea Creatures," Ada Limón in *Bright Dead Things*.

Canonical Crossings, Interspecies Inquiries: An Introduction.

In the opening discussion of *Migrant Imaginaries: Latino Cultural Politics in the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands*, Alicia Schmidt Camacho writes that "this is a book shaped by struggle, by the efforts of migrant people to assert their full humanity in border crossings that confer on them the status of the alien, the illegal, the refuse of nations" (1). Schmidt Camacho foregrounds her accomplished study of transnational movements in the very stakes I wish to explore in my examination of nonhuman forces in Latin@American poetry and performance. However, in a critical swerve away from Schmidt Camacho, this dissertation critiques Latin@American and Latinx

Studies theoretical engagements with how human and nonhuman encounters are deployed in poetry and performance as signs and spaces of regenerative possibilities. Through nonhuman interlocutors, I interrogate ideas of diaspora, canon, text, and performance in a drive away from the juridical idea of “full humanity” by looking toward how humans and nonhuman discourses possess border transcending qualities.

What is particularly interesting to me, are the instances when Latinx and Latin@American poets and writers, instead of opting to diametrically oppose the presence of nonhuman interventions and rhetoric—submerge themselves in strategies of nonhuman discourse to reach beyond the merely comparative, wielding nonhuman figures to question ideas of life itself and also to articulate their positions within hemispheric exchange and certain dominant discourses. These moments where “the human” has not been enough allow the critical reader to acknowledge that, then, if this is so, we must look, with the artist, to the edges, the insides and outsides of this form. These ideas necessitate that readers of contemporary Latin@American literature and performance examine, the edges and porous perimeters, to paraphrase Caribbean theorist Sylvia Wynter, of humanity and away from Man.

I consider these larger social justice foregroundings with regard to diasporic Latin@Americanness while approaching this chapter, “Natalie Diaz: Duende and Dream Tigers”, given, firstly, the nature of the way Diaz positions her work as having a particular preoccupation with US-Mexican Southwest as a place of exchange coupled with her explicit commitments to activism and indigeneity. This chapter, “Natalie Diaz: Duende and Dream Tigers” suggests that reading nonhuman figures in *When My Brother Was an Aztec* offers the critical reader a glimpse into places of

passage not only between humans and nonhumans but between the Hispanist canon and its margins. These ontological places of traffic trouble ideas of crossing, not only in their connections and disconnections between continents and canons, but also to and from the edges of the lives of Others.

This chapter focuses on a close reading of nonhuman forces in the poetry of Natalie Diaz, together with considerations for cultural and political formations other than Man. This reading is viewed through the exchange between certain canonical Hispanic figures and Diaz' border poetry, which I read through the nonhuman signifiers. These nonhuman, border forces, which I will be scrutinizing in my close reading of Diaz' *When My Brother Was an Aztec* are, chiefly: the author's engagement with the concept of "duende"—taken from her larger conversations with Federico García Lorca, a pillar of the Spanish and Western lyrical tradition—and Diaz' connections and disconnections with Jorge Luis Borges and his bestiary forms.

Myths of Man and Other-than-human Origin Stories

Other-than-human forces abound in poet Natalie Diaz' striking 2012 collection, *When My Brother Was an Aztec*. Diaz crafts lyrically complex mythscapes whose backdrops are the landscapes of borderlands' indigenous reservations. Inhabitants of these landscapes include world-making, figures ranging from Eve to Huitzilopochtli, Antigone, a tortilla creation origin-story, to the very last Mojave Barbie. In name alone, within, *When My Brother Was an Aztec* we find the invocation of pre-Columbian deities in a contemporary setting. In the book's title poem, the speaker describes her brother (whose drug addiction serves as a principle thread in this

book) as an Aztec-god “half-man, half-hummingbird” with a “swordlike mouth” (Huitzilopochtli) and his tenuous position between life and death. He “lived in our basement and sacrificed my parents / every morning. It was awful” (1). These nonhuman presences and the tension between life and death (or a lack of the fullness of life) are established from the very inception of the collection and drive its meditations. Consider the nonhuman titled poems, “The Elephants,” “When My Beloved Asks ‘What Would you Do if you woke up and I was a Shark?’”, “Self-Portrait as a Chimera,” “Mariposa Nocturna,” “Formication (sensation of insects or snakes running over the skin)”, “Zoology,” “The Clouds are Buffalo Limping Toward Jesus,” “Reservation Grass,” “The Gospel of Guy No-Horse,” “Abecedarian Requiring Further Examination of Anglikan Seraphym Subjugation of a Wild Indian Rezervation,” and, of course, “A Wild Life Zoo” (the final poem which bookends this collection). Nonhuman referents monopolize the majority of titles and poetic content of this substantial text, comprised of just over 100 pages filled with long and dense lines, which are compressed, lyrical gems.

The title poem, “When My Brother Was an Aztec,” harkens to the reconfiguration of voices of indigeneity; a concept that is built into the foundations of US-Mexico border literature, advocacy, and ideas of crossing. One might pause to consider foundational texts from the Chicana@ movement—the work of poets Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherrie Moraga come to mind—both of whom employ nonhuman imagery together with indigenous mythscapes. The weight of the Chicana@ and Latinx canon in the U.S. informs my approach to reading these terms and Diaz’ work. For instance, I read Natalie Diaz’ use of “Aztec” and the past tense “was”, while

considering the precedent set by another canonical Latinx text, *My Father was a Toltec: and Selected Poems* (1988; 1995) by Ana Castillo. In the preface to her collection of poems, Castillo writes, “Hark! the Toltecs live! Not the distinguished Mexican people who were already myth at the time of the Conquest. But the Toltecs of Chicago” (xvii). Castillo’s father was a Toltec, a member of a gang made up of predominantly Mexican and Mexican American transplants living in Chicago; the poems work between ideas of family, struggle, language and endurance—framed with the complicated shadow of an explicitly displaced, unconsolidated, and redirected indigeneity, much like Natalie Diaz’ *When My Brother Was an Aztec*.

Alongside ideas of indigeneity and traffic, mythical, otherworldly figures emerge. From a Hispanist stance, one which also informs my approach to reading Latinx and Latin@American texts, the importance of the idea of myth, as Roberto González-Echevarría has observed at length in his notable publication *Myth & Archive* (1998), has been fundamental to the emergence of and approach to Latin American narratives.¹ In this chapter I’d like to speak about the presence of myth and the nonhuman not in the most literal manner (though there are countless references to Greek gods and goddesses and nonhumans, which are unavoidable in Diaz’ volume), but rather, what I am driving towards, is to demonstrate how nonhuman forces might shape or redirect our readings of texts that are in flux between Latinx and Latin@ America. The nonhuman forces that shape the poetry in this collection work to reshape places of exchange where cultural histories, schisms, literary masters, and forces of

¹ Markedly distinct from González Echevarría, in my approach, it bears mentioning that I am analyzing poetry in this instance.

life are negotiated. Diaz grapples with myriad ideas of life-forms, and in this way establishes a rearticulation of life, text, hemispheric readings, and Man.²

In this chapter, I'm scrutinizing Diaz' work as part of a larger line of inquiry, which ponders how certain minority writers, whose work has fallen outside the realm of idealized forms of Man, reconfigure nonhuman forces and vibrancies to reflect other livelihoods or points of exchange. How does nonhuman figures travel, specifically between a minority border narrative and canonical Hispanic works and what new considerations might this offer for rethinking exchange between these regions? What does it mean to critically approach nonhuman presences when these forces are wielded and redirected by those, like many indigenous groups with whom Diaz claims solidarity, have figured outside the realm of idealized forms of humanity or myths of man, remaining relatively marginalized?

The particular "Myth of Man" that I'm gesturing to is of "man" as a homogenous *ente*, which, as I have established in my introduction, is one of the most compelling formulations I seek to challenge through the discourses of Caribbean theorist Sylvia Wynter. This myth of Man is one of a tabula rasa consciousness of what it is to be human; the misstep that asserts that access to the fullness of humanity and its rights (citizenship, livelihood) fall outside of race, racial discourse, or colonial hierarchies. Discounting this oversight is one of the most pernicious slips that inhabits contemporary discussions of the critical non- or post- human.³ I'm not suggesting a comparative reading of Man and the nonhuman, or to suggest that the category of

² Sylvia Wynter, in her grappling with the idea of Man, also returns to the idea of origins when speaking of "genres" of Man (190, Walcott).

human is to be somehow overcome by drawing attention to this. Rather, I'm looking here at the ways in which Diaz channels nonhuman forces as ways to rearticulate narratives that cross through canons and which are based from the realm of marginalized spaces. How might these strategies function as moves away from Man and toward other ideas of life from the margins? As Alexander Weheliye comments in *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human*, "...What different modalities of the human come to light if we do not take the liberal humanist figure of Man as the master-subject but focus on how humanity has been imagined and lived by those subjects excluded from this domain?" (8). Poet Natalie Diaz destabilizes a reliance on Man as the central or default figure for depicting life on the reservation; opting in many instances to rely instead on nonhuman presences to portray the struggle between life, death, addiction, family, tradition, poverty, creative consciousness, and erotic love. Diaz combines mythical elements from a variety of disciplines, but lends particular and marked attention to Latin@American cultural referents, and canonical authors who appear as recurring touchstones, and are connected, specifically, through a series of turns and throughout the collection's three, lengthy, sections. Diaz troubles Mojave and Mexican legacies of indigeneity and contemporary lived experiences in relation to the Hispanist canon through nonhuman frames and figures, disquieting the telling of history, lineage, family, and the idea of livelihood. The presence of nonhuman figures offers the reader another crossing over; an alternative route or form to destabilize normative ways of reading multicultural Hispaniety and displacing the "myth" of a homogenous border experience or hemispheric set of relations.

In an interview with the National Book Critics' Circle, Diaz reflected on her cultural identities and the role of myth and truth. Diaz comments on this tension and on her roots, alluding to several elements which comprise the lyrical thrust of her work—family, myth, history, tribe, and identity.

I was raised to hold many truths in my hand, all at the same time, and to never have to drop one in order to have faith the other. This is the beauty of growing up in a multicultural family. Our capacity for identity is large. I am many.

Even though most people use the word 'myth' to speak of our tribal stories, we see them as truth. So, for me, myth has always been the truest truth. The word 'history' on the other hand, we question (González).

Diaz continues, clarifying the use of Spanish and Latin@American referents in her work, as it is derived from a variety of lived experiences, family inheritances, and the importance of language:

My grandparents are from the north of Spain, Asturias and Oviedo. We grew up hearing them speak Spanish, and I ended up playing basketball and living in Spain, where I learned to appreciate the language more. Though my grandparents are Spanish, we have many Mexican relatives. My mother is native, from two tribes, but our language was a dying language, and so not spoken at home. It wasn't until I began to work with my Elders that I began to learn Mojave [...] On a side note, my father says that because he is Spanish and my mother is native, all of his kids are Mexicans. He is joking, of course, but in this area, and especially in the area of language revitalization, we have a very strong tie to the word indigenous, which includes many of the peoples

indigenous to the Americas. We often work together, on both sides of the border, to help protect and save our heritage languages (González).

Diaz possesses what I read here as a less than linear relationship to border latinidad, having triangulated several borders and seemingly crossed none. She is both of the Southwest, identifying as a Native American writer and also Spanish with extended Mexican heritage and a commitment to border politics, language, and culture. Diaz, in this interview and throughout her body of poetic work, troubles an all-consuming or singular formulation of rootedness. In addition, Diaz' work, rather than emphasizing fixed origins of belonging, works more in a relational, rhizomatic sense, which recalls the following line from Édouard Glissant's *Poetics of Relation*, in which "each and every identity is extended through a relationship with the Other" (11). *When My Brother Was an Aztec* as a text has been autopoietically shaped by these interstitial environments and referents. Chican@ theorist and poet, Gloria Anzaldúa has defined this type of borderland edging as a kind of contact zone, which is a larger, multisensory phenomenon. She writes, "The physiological borderlands, the sexual borderlands, the spiritual borderlands are not particular to the Southwest. In fact, the Borderlands (with a capital B) are physically present wherever two or more cultures edges each other [...] where the space between two individuals shrinks with intimacy" (19). It is important to clarify these distinctions when discussing, as I will in the continuation of this chapter, Diaz' readings of Mexican iconography, Spanish lyrical & dramatic forces, and Argentine narrative figures. As Walter Mignolo has noted, "The 'bicultural mind' is the 'mind' inscribed in and produced by colonial conditions, although diverse colonial legacies engender dissimilar 'bicultural minds'" (*Local*

Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking 267). In my reading, Diaz offers an indirect route between sites of exchange amid letters, histories (mythological, colonial, and lettered), which is shaped by nonhuman presences that pass between continents, shifting and exceeding human forms through their exchange and as the chief line of inter-continental and interspecies inquiry.

The Light in Lorca, the Beast in Borges

Natalie Diaz through her inclusion of larger-than-life legendary figures highlights not only sublime symbols from Greek and Aztec traditions, she also weaves in exceptional literary figures from the Latin American and Spanish canon in her negotiations of life on the reservation. Her chief examples from the Hispanic canon, to whom she returns repeatedly, are, Federico Garcia Lorca and Jorge Luis Borges—through the ideas of *duende* and the bestiary respectively.

Through Lorca, the edges of the human are exceeded through the idea of *duende*—an intensity that Diaz both names explicitly in her poems and one that implicitly permeates the collection. Lorca’s theories around the term, which he developed in: *Teoria y juego del duende* (1933) centered around a kind of altered state of creative consciousness which is in flux between life and death. It is a black, mysterious, stirring force that literally roots itself, which possess and fills the artist, shifting his consciousness:

Y Manuel Torre, el hombre de mayor cultura en la sangre que he conocido, dijo, escuchando al propio Falla su Nocturno del Generalife, esta espléndida frase: “Todo lo que tiene sonidos negros tiene duende.” Y no hay verdad más

grande. Estos sonidos negros son el misterio, las raíces que se clavan en el limo que todos conocemos, que todos ignoramos, pero de donde nos llega lo que es sustancial en el arte. Sonidos negros dijo el hombre popular de España y coincidió con Goethe, que hace la definición del duende al hablar de Paganini, diciendo: “Poder misterioso que todos sienten y que ningún filósofo explica.” Así, pues, el duende es un poder y no un obrar, es un luchar y no un pensar (45).

Duende is a creative act that comes up through the artist’s physical body, whose arrival always means a radical change in forms as these human limits are lapsed. These radical changes in form are driven by the conception of duende as an alternative kind of power, an affective and animating force; a vigor, which seizes the artist and his public. The term itself “duende” in translation has multiple interpretations; it can conjure images of the figure of a gnome or goblin-like being, a thorny place that presents obstacles to passage or where it is obstructed, a spirit of disorder. Notably though, from this quote is the fact that Lorca also associated the idea of duende with blackness and the idea of Souths. He writes (restating what the guitarist Manuel Torre claims) that everything that has black sounds in it has duende. Lorca linked duende to Gitana culture and blackness in his native Southern Spain, and notably meditated upon this again during his time in Harlem, New York when encountering blackness in America, although, markedly to an occasionally to a fetishizing degree. Duende, then, is a complex term. It is not only a creative impulse that defies normative ideas of the fullness of creative life by its necessity to approach death, but that, also, just as weighty is duende’s configuration as a racialized, placed,

and transplanted, semi-autonomous term. Duende approaches the fullness of creative life and nearness to death brimming with black sounds and with passage. Duende and blackness' coupling as an embodiment of creativity and its detachment from life, is an important consideration for our larger discussion of marginalized discourses in the Americas, for which blackness (a question central to Weheliye's and Wynter's work, whom I've previously cited) is often excluded. The blurred boundaries between life and death, human and beyond, parceled with critical considerations of race can become passages between worlds and continents, lives and non-lives, creative genius and its bewitched mythos inspirations.

Reading terms like duende, which tie together these ideas, creates conduits and alternative ways of reading exchanges between the cultural histories. Blackness' presence vis-à-vis duende alongside Spanish, indigenous, and border poetry is a kind of diasporic trifecta which encapsulates three of the central driving forces of Hispanic colonial past and present. Duende is a nonhuman force that travels across the Americas (Lorca in Spain, Argentina, and Nueva York) and through Diaz' narration of a Southwest epic tragedy.

These references to duende (beyond normative life between death and eros) gain prominence in the second and third sections of Diaz' collection, and alongside it, emerge references to the other literary giant I mentioned earlier: Jorge Luis Borges, and his bestiary. At continuation, I will discuss, first, the ways in which Diaz encounters Borges, using this understanding of duende and form, together with an acknowledgment of Diaz' penchant for mythmaking, as prefaces with which to

approach a selection of poems. I will move between Lorca, Diaz, and Borges through nonhuman interlocutors as a way of critically engaging *When My Brother Was an Aztec*'s many zones of encounters and environments.

The Beast and The Stone—Blue Tigers and Form.

The second section of Diaz's book centers around the disarming of a family home by way of the speaker's brother's drug addiction and his impending death (real and/or imagined)—the driving theme of this collection. The homestead, Diaz writes, is like a wild zoo, where the beasts are not beasts. They are "our children painted like hyenas," ("Zoology" 88). In this poem, the speaker is driving further towards a beastlike existence, while at the same time approaching a kind of death and darkness, pulsed with the rhythms of duende—a force that I will explore further and that will gain strength as the text builds. First, let's turn to the idea of beasts and bestiary.

In the masterful poem, "How to go to Dinner with a Brother on Drugs," the brother is itching under the weight of his Day of the Dead skeleton suit. These manifested "formications" (which is also the title of a subsequent poem), the need to scratch as if insects were in or under the skin, is a repeated image associated with drug abuse and a trancelike state. After several costume changes, the speaker consoles herself, writing, "Be some kind of happy he didn't appear dressed/as a greed god— headdress of green quetzal feathers, / jaguar loincloth littered with bite-shaped rosettes / because you're not in the mood" (46). The poem alternates between evocations of myth and nonhuman imageries, then moves to reiterate, again, visions of the speaker's family home, as "zoo," a "misery museum", and an "Al-Qaeda yard sale" (47). These images of family dysfunction and addiction are interspersed, again, with references to

larger than life figures (chupacabras, a Minotaur, Merlin) but ultimately, they are pinned down by the idea of nonhuman shape-shifting.

This brother fades from “a Cheshire cat” to “a gang of grins”; his skin transforms into a desert, “a migration of tarantulas moves like a shadow / over his sunken cheeks” (49-50). The instance of this I’d like to focus most closely on is the following passage that moves between this nonhuman shifting and a harkening to Jorge Luis Borges.

He spent his nights in your bathroom
With a turquoise BenzOmatic handheld propane torch,
A Merlin mixing magic then shape-shifting into lions,
And tigers, and bears, Oh fuck, pacing your balcony
Like Borges’ blue tiger, fighting the cavalry in the moon, (48).

On the following page a reference to Borges’ approach to creaturehood is reiterated and mirrored back. Diaz continues, “Look at your brother—he is Borges’ bestiary. / he is a zoo of imaginary beings.” (49). I will first examine the case of the blue tiger in an example from Borges’ work, before moving to this second instance from Diaz, in both of which nonhuman and human forms are transcended and travel between hemispheric referents.

Jorge Luis Borges’ short story “Tigres azules”, from *La memoria de Shakespeare* (1983), opens with a professor of logic’s reflections upon the nature and curious magnetisms of the tiger and his forms.

Una famosa página de Blake hace del tigre un fuego que resplandece y un arquetipo eterno del mal; prefiero aquella sentencia de Chesterton, que lo

define como símbolo de terrible elegancia. No hay palabras, por lo demás, que puedan ser cifra del tigre, forma que desde hace siglos habita la imaginación de los hombres. Siempre me atrajo el tigre. Sé que me demoraba, de niño, ante cierta jaula del zoológico; nada me importaban las otras [...] El curso de mi vida ha sido común, en mis sueños siempre vi tigres, ahora los pueblan de otras formas (45).

The protagonist, Professor Alexander Craigie, not unlike Borges himself, is intrigued by the animal, particularly the tiger, but in the final lines of his reflection, we see that there is a shift in both figure and form.

In “Blue Tigers,” Craigie, the protagonist, travels to a remote village where he has been told of a blue tiger, which is described in deliberately vague terms as a “blue-black” tiger—creating for the reader already a sense of fluctuating chromatic uncertainties and an undefined other quality of darkness. One could consider duende here, perhaps, also, as a way to approach darkness as a malleable, mutable force subject to human perception. The alterability of how darkness is seen or perceived is not rigidly contained in Diaz’ or in Borges’ work at large. Such is the case also, for example, with Borge’s famous work “Funes el memorioso.” In this instance, Funes’ encounters with vaguely constrained dimness function in at least two dimensions; firstly, he lives in darkness and the horse who fatefully throws him is blue-grey, for example: not one or the other, but a creature of greyscales.

Returning to Craigie’s adventures, with these dark ambiguities in mind, to the blue, blue-black tigers, the professor, who is on a quest to see this tiger, after a few nights and several “false alarms,” (sights of possible tracks, shadows, or remnants of

the prey of the blue tiger), begins to perceive that he is being misled by the villagers and proceeds to embark on a night-time excursion to the town's summit, though he is warned against doing so by the local elders. Upon reaching the apex and inspecting the ground closely for tracks, Craigie's eye fixes on a vibrant, dreamlike color:

El suelo era agrietado y arenoso. En una de las grietas, que por cierto no eran profundas y que se ramificaban en otras, reconocí un color. Era, increíblemente, el azul del tigre de mi sueño. Ojalá no lo hubiera visto nunca. Me fijé bien. La grieta estaba llena de piedrecitas, todas iguales, circulares, muy lisas y de pocos centímetros de diámetro. Su regularidad le prestaba algo artificial, como si fueran fichas (46).

The professor collects a few of the stones and returns to his camp where he dreams again of the tiger, only to awake and find that the stones he collected have multiplied and shape-shifted in form. Borges writes, “-¡Son las piedras que engendran! -exclamó-. Ahora son muchas, pero pueden cambiar. Tienen la forma de la luna cuando está llena y ese color azul que sólo es permitido ver en los sueños. Los padres de mis padres no mentían cuando hablaban de su poder” (2). These stones which appear to stand in for “blue tigers” as talismanic objects defy the speaker's sense of knowing the basic principles of things—their being, form, space, and life provoking an extreme degree of anxiety. These are kinds of questions—what is being, how do livelihoods shrink from or yield greater possibilities, what are the boundaries or modalities of the forms of life—that also surface time and again when scrutinizing nonhuman figures, particularly as I have emphasized through transnational readings.

In Borges' short story, the incomprehensibility of these marvels drives

Alexander Craigie to wish, at one point, for madness when pressed against his profound misunderstandings of the forms of the stones and consequently must confront the possible the disorder of the universe. In comparison, Natalie Diaz places the “blue tiger” in a position in her poem where the speaker’s profound frustration with the brother’s erratic state and a desire to restore order lyrically swells. The speaker appears caught between a near-wish for the brother’s death; for the return of seemingly unattainable sense of order to the shape of things. From “Tigres azules”, the reader understands that the return to this rigid understanding comes at great cost. At the end of the short story order (to days and nights and the form of the universe), is restored for the protagonist only when Professor Craigie gives the blue tiger stones to a beggar who bestows this “frightful gift” of order upon him—underscoring that it is perhaps the worst imaginable consequence, to blindly return to the limitations of form and supposed reason. In my reading of Diaz’ “How to Go to Dinner With a Brother on Drugs”, the speaker’s brother’s shifting forms which are expressed in through the nonhuman: lions, tigers, bears, and blue tigers (as tigers and as stones) are strategies which trouble the idea of a nonhuman force and the uncertainties of life and livelihood it carries from outside the form of Man.

I read Diaz’ move to pause and meditate specifically on the blue tiger as a grappling with something Borges also reiterates in the short meditation:

“Dreamtigers,” in a selection taken from *El Hacedor*.

Pasó la infancia, caducaron los tigres y su pasión, pero todavía están en mis sueños. En esa napa sumergida o caótica siguen prevaleciendo y así: Dormido, me distrae un sueño cualquiera y de pronto sé que es un sueño. Suelo pensar

entonces: Éste es un sueño, una pura diversión de mi voluntad, y ya que tengo un ilimitado poder, voy a causar un tigre. ¡Oh, incompetencia! Nunca mis sueños saben engendrar la apetecida fiera. Aparece el tigre, eso sí, pero disecado o endeble, o con impuras variaciones de forma, o de un tamaño inadmisibles, o harto fugaz, o tirando a perro o a pájaro (15).

For Borges, this is the inability to “cause” the tiger to materialize, as for Diaz’ speaker, is perhaps, the expression of an incapacity to will through representation the brother’s livelihood into a modality of being that might be contained or remain fixed. In Craigie’s recurring nightmares about the blue tigers, he sees in the stones in a crevice, falling ever downward, and ponders the biblical creatures of the Behemoth, or Leviathan. These unknowable beings, to Craigie, signify that God is irrational. This thought, of the inability to cease the stone’s shapeshifting, would cause Alexander to awaken trembling, suddenly, and again, there the stones would be, in their box, ready to transform.

Is it that the blue tiger is not actually a tiger; though, also not only a metaphorical animal? He is not blue or black, but something that exceeds the limits of the forms of the stones or tigers as the reader imagines to understand them to be perceived. In this case, then, it is a shapeshifting exercise in the futility of questioning the order of forms—specifically their boundaries and representation.

The tiger is often a nonhuman boundary or “limit” creature for Borges that troubles transformations of meaning and meaninglessness in the act of making. Reading “How to Go to Dinner With a Brother on Drugs” alongside the story “Blue Tigers,” offers a departure from a devotion to a singularity or hierarchy of forms and

breaks from the logic of the caesuras that would otherwise divide the forms of Man (world-making), beast (poor in the world), and stone (without world), instead creating a shape-shifting place of exchange where uncertainties around life (or nearing death as in the poem), are explored. These stepping “stones” between nonhuman worlds and between Borges and Diaz (Latin American fiction and border lyric) continue as the second half of the poem “How to Go to Dinner With a Brother on Drugs” unfolds.

Diaz continues to pursue this exchange on the following page, “Look at your brother—he is Borges’ bestiary. / he is a zoo of imaginary beings.” (49). Known by several names and revised across various editions and in translation, Borges’ bestiary could be: *El libro de los seres imaginarios* (also known as *Manual de zoología fantástica*), *The Book of Imaginary Beings*, one which has manifold myth-presences from the Minotaur who is like a labyrinth and the chimera (both also mentioned by Diaz), to the Hippogriff and the Sphinx. As essayist William H. Gass notes, the short almost catalogue-like nature of the bestiary *Book of Imaginary Beings* summons a range of creatures and their curiosities.

This bouquet which Borges has gathered in his travels for us consists largely of rather harmless animals from stories, myths, and legends, alphabetically arranged here in the texts which first reported them or in descriptions charmingly rebuilt by Borges. Most of these beasts are mechanically made—insufficiently imaginary to be real, insufficiently original to be wonderful or menacing. There are the jumbles, created by collage: centaurs, griffons, hydras, and so on; the mathematical, fashioned by multiplication or division: one-eyed, half-mouthed monsters or those who are many-headed, sixteen-toed, and

triple-tongued; there are those of inflated or deflated size: elves, dwarfs, brownies, leviathans and fastitocalon; and finally those who have no special shape of their own—the proteans—and who counterfeit the forms of others[...]There's no longer a world left for these creatures to inhabit—even our own world has expelled them—so that they seem like pieces from a game we've forgotten how to play. They are objects now of curiosity or amusement, and even the prospect of one's being alive and abroad (Gass).

These eccentricities, for Gass, become like objects whose brief reveries are a call for reflection on “the prospect of one's being alive.” It is of note that the many creatures Borges beckons to, as Diaz does also, are figures from other literary masters and canons, such as C.S. Lewis, Franz Kafka, Edgar Allen Poe, H.G. Wells, and Lewis Carroll.

Here nonhumans are taxonomized as places of exchange between life and literature. I believe that Diaz summons Borges' bestiary to echo similar questions. Throughout *When My Brother Was an Aztec*, Diaz consistently corrals mythological and literary nonhumans into her collection of poems, and though the form of this text is not overtly declared as such, it could be read as a kind of bestiary. In this bestiary or proto-bestiary, the speaker, as in Borges, imagines animals and imaginary animals as nexuses for reconsidering questions of livelihood and passage between literary traditions and spaces.

Black Magic Mariposa and Lorca's Llagas Legacies

As section II builds, following the poem “How to Go to Dinner With a Brother

on Drugs,” Diaz presses further into nonhuman forms and forces and the spaces they traverse. It is in this lyrical iteration that they are drawn closer together into conversation with Lorca and the dark near death force of duende, as seen in the poems that follow, “Mariposa Nocturna” and “Black Magic Brother.”

This brother on drugs now shifts into a “Mariposa Nocturna;” becoming moth. “How light flees you. *mi hermano, mariposa nocturna*” (60). Mariposas have appeared as symbols central to other canonical Latinx literature, and questions of death, survival, and belonging; consider, for example, Helena Viramontes’ spectacular collection, *The Moths & Other Stories*, *The Circuit: Stories from the Life of a Migrant Child* by Francisco Jimenez, or Rigoberto González’ *Butterfly Boy: Memories of a Chicano Mariposa*. Pausing momentarily from contemplating the mariposa itself, however, it is important to note that Diaz’ “Mariposa Nocturna” is framed by an epigraph from Lorca. It reads “Esta luz, este fuego que devora” (60). These lines are taken from Lorca’s sonnet “Llagas de amor” found in the collection *Sonetos del amor oscuro*. “Llagas de amor”, reads like an incantation of duende’s passion, rhythm, darkness, with an acute sense of intimate wounding.

Esta luz, este fuego que devora.

Este paisaje gris que me rodea.

Este dolor por una sola idea.

Esta angustia de cielo, mundo y hora.

Este llanto de sangre que decora

lira sin pulso ya, lubrica tea.

Este peso del mar que me golpea.

Este alacrán que por mi pecho mora.
Son guirnaldas de amor, cama de herido,
donde sin sueño, sueño tu presencia
entre las ruinas de mi pecho hundido.
Y aunque busco la cumbre de prudencia
me da tu corazón valle tendido
con cicuta y pasión de amarga ciencia (30)

Lorca's cast-off lover is consumed by a light, a devouring fire ("Esta luz, este fuego que devora") and surrounded by a melancholic, chiaroscuro grey shadow which envelops all that the speaker see ("Este paisaje gris que me rodea"). Diaz' "Mariposa Nocturna" is a codeswitching play between of light and force. It proclaims, "How the light flees you. Mi hermano, mariposa nocturna" and "...Rats are wild / at work building your shadow armor. Eres una sombra de ratas" and, also. "It is clearly midnight. In the sky a stampede. Elephants / licking this tusks. *Cielo de dientes*" (60). We see codeswitching here through forms of creaturehood, the shadow of a rat, the night moth, darkness cut by wild teeth—between Spanish and English, the nonhuman facilitates this exchange.

It's important to scrutinize instances where animal forms intervene in the poetic shaping of language, knowing that questions of language and the nonhuman are integral to discussions of what it means to be fully human. This linguistic divide between human and other has been problematized by a panorama of theorists who align themselves with critical theories of the nonhuman. This is curious to me as language breaks, places where Spanish and English converge and diverge, run parallel

to scenes of suffering directed through nonhuman images.⁴

This switch is conditioned around both the moth who flees the force of lightness, which we might understand also as a fullness of consciousness or illumination (cogito or anima), and the rats whose collective bodies endure the work of making darkness or shadows and which pulled through the poem by way of Lorca's light-devouring epigraph. "Mariposa Nocturna," ends with the image of trembling, sexed moths, bare feet, and a deathly, duende like scythe.

These depictions of darkness, death, longing, and the nonhuman spill over into the following poem, "Black Magic Brother." Diaz writes, "For the main attraction (drumroll please). He pulls animals / from a hole in his crotch" (62). Here, the erotic undertones continue through the shape of nonhumans; no longer moths "gleaming with sex," but animals construed as emerging from a charlatan showman's flimsy, "magical" apparatus (60, 63). "Black Magic" is also a popular term conflated with deception, darkness, and often fetishized as having to do with forms of Santería and Caribbean syncretism. In the essay "Cante Moro," for instance, poet Nathaniel Mackey links these ideas to Lorca's duende while reflecting on a poem he wrote inspired by John Coltrane ("Ohnedaruth's Day Begun"). Mackey considers that the influence of a force like duende is significant not only from Southern Spanish perspective but also to black American poets, musicians, and to the idea of otherworldly forces and myth in diaspora. Mackey states that:

⁴ Consider, Jacques Derrida's reflections in *The Animal That Therefore I am*, regarding on his "little cat" knowing or responding to her name (9). Or *Zoopoetics: Animals and the Making of Poetry* from Aaron Moe which expands on Derrida's reflections on the presence of animals in literature and language. The particular example Derrida departs from is Kafkian. These are only two examples of a much larger trend in Critical Animal Studies.

This has to do, among other things, with a surge, a runaway dilation, a quantum rush you often hear in Trane's music. the sense that he's driven, possessed—ridden, as it's put here, which recalls the African possession religions in which worshippers are spoken of as horses and the gods, the spirits, are spoken of as horsemen, riders. To be possessed is to be mounted and ridden by a god. You find that imagery in vodoun in Haiti, in candomblé in Brazil, in lucumí or santería in Cuba. Possession means that something beyond your grasp of it grabs you, that something that gets away from you—another sense in which fugitivity comes in-gives you a voice, Like Lorca, who, remember, refers to lucumí, I think of this as related to duende (73).

For Lorca, through Mackey, we can see that magic was linked to darkness, in that it was linked to duende (which is full of darkness), poetry, and performance. He writes: “La virtud mágica del poema consiste en estar siempre enduendado para bautizar con agua oscura a todos los que lo miran” (45). Duende, or a state being “enduendado”, as I’ve underscored, is a force that is difficult to pin down; it is almost a state of spiritual possession with diasporic resonances, which are always linked to an Othered cultural force. It signifies both this idea of incantation and blackness or dark sounds. Lorca’s duende was shaped by his contact with Othered cultures both in Spain, with Moro and Gitano influences, as reflected in his essay *Teoría y juego del duende* and the collection *Romancero gitano* and, in North America, in his contemplative collection of poems, *Poeta en Nueva York* (in which Lorca touches on ideas of blackness in Harlem during the Harlem Renaissance). Thinking back to his meditations on “Cante Moro,” Nathaniel Mackey comments on duende’s influence in American poetry and Lorca’s

view of duende and blackness in the Americas. Mackey cites a talk Lorca gave regarding *Poeta en Nueva York* and black America as a cultural force. Mackey writes:

In his lecture on *Poet in New York* Lorca argued that “the blacks exercise great influence in North America,” and “they are the most delicate, most spiritual element in that world,” The “great sun of the center,” he encourages black people to seek in “The King of Harlem,” to continue seeking, is, among other things, the covert centrality of an otherwise marginalized people, a “sun” which cross-linguistically puns on “soul” (“el gran sol del centro”) (71).

In a similar line of thinking, scholar Jonathan Mayhew has noted in *Apocryphal Lorca: Translation, Parody, Kitsch* how Lorca’s work was, though problematic, significant for a variety of canonical African American writers to varying degrees; from Langston Hughes (who expertly translated *Bodas de sangre* and *Romancero gitano*), Bob Kaufmann (who rewrote Lorca’s lines in emancipatory tones, in a gesture toward African American nationalism), and Leroi Jones’ celebrated “Lines to García Lorca”, among others (35-37). Mayhew questions how Lorca’s work has been reappropriated, and in some cases, “creatively misread” and translated into American literary studies. These considerations also loom in our present discussion of canon, crossing, and Lorca. Lorca’s impulse to work between ideas of margin and center have to do with what I and others have called life itself. Duende presents a complicated reading of this given that it embodies the tension between roots and rootless, it is all that has dark, unexplainable sounds; these are the substance of being “truly alive”. Diaz in her wielding of this seemingly unwieldable form, duende, in “Black Magic Brother” (and beyond to poems like “Dome riddle”, which revisits Borges again also,

“Monday Aubade”, and “Lorca’s Red Dresses”, from her third section) creates a black space where the brother is near-death’s edge, where mortal-wounding becomes a space for contemplating forms of life, margins, and center. “Black Magic Brother” ends with this point in mind: “And for we have been here for years, in velvet chairs the color of wounds, / waiting for something to fall, / maybe the curtain, maybe the crucifix on the wall, / or, maybe the pretty white doves my brother made disappear—” (63). Through channeling Lorca and duende Diaz forges a wound-space and a place of crossing bound up with questions about livelihood across narrative spaces. Lorca writes that duende loves the edge. Duende, works in the edge-space but also as a wound where forms fuse in a way that is beyond what is reducible to a singular expression. Similar semantics have been used to approach the border region, as an open wound, a place of crossing. Duende is a force where “forms fuse.” I am reading Diaz’ work on duende through a specifically nonhuman lens because I am intrigued by the manner in which the moments when nonhuman forms also trouble the idea of life and its borderlands.

A Brother Between Lorca and Borges—Conclusions.

The final three poems of Diaz’ second section are particularly evocative of a closeness to a death which is not quite a death, from which Borges and Lorca meet on the heels of a Tortuga shell. The poems “A brother named Gethsemane” and “No More Cake” are prime examples of this (64-65, 68-70). “A brother named Gethsemane” is a “bug-eyed boy” who listens to border stations’ Mexican heroin melodies—a man who is surrounded by all the world’s fallen black birds. Diaz’ poem

builds to the image of the garden's mortal gatekeeper—"the gate. This is no garden. This is my brother and I need a shovel / to love him" (64-65). Meanwhile, "No More Cake", continues to prolong the duende-death drive with an elaborate funeral ruse, a homage to the brother, whose guests include two mutants who look "almost human" and stray dogs (69).

My brother finally showed up asking why
he hadn't been invited and who baked the cake.
He told me I shouldn't smile, that this whole party was shit
because I'd imagined it all. The worst part he said was
he was still alive. The worst part he said was
he wasn't even dead. I think he's right, but maybe
the worst part is that I'm still imagining the part, maybe
the worst part is that I can still taste the cake (70).

The drive to a kind of death in section two climbs, and is then absorbed into or even interrupted by the third and final section, which is a flight into lyrical Eros—erotic love, which has been foreshadowed by Lorca's "Llagas de amor." Into this section Diaz carries both Lorca, duende, and, briefly again, Borges, alongside her lover.

Diaz' dialogues with Lorca is not unprecedented, as I've demonstrated in this collection, but also appear within her larger corpus of work. In a separate essay, entitled "Federico García Lorca, Valentine," Diaz responds directly to Lorca's erotic poem "Lucía Martínez." Diaz reflects that "Instead of hiding them away, the poem licks the bright teeth of its appetite, bares them at 'thighs like evening' and 'breasts like magnolias.' 'Lucía Martínez' is the air and the sky and the trees and the blooms.

She is everything” (“Federico García Lorca, Valentine”). This connection between Lorca, a lover, and the evening shadows fades in and out of Diaz’ final third section of *When My Brother Was an Aztec*. Consider “Monday Aubade”:

on the delta of shadows
between your shoulder blades—
mysterious wings tethered inside
the pale cage of your body—run through
by Lorca’s horn of moonlight,
strange unicorn loose along the dim streets
separating our skins (83).⁵

The moon here, in “Monday Aubade”, is a figure which ties together several of the themes common to both Lorca and Diaz’ work: death, darkness; as does the erotic “skins”—these are intermeshed with nonhuman images, of other creatures “mysterious wings” and “strange unicorns.” This set of turns between eros, darkness, and creatures, exemplified in the selected stanza from “Monday Aubade” creates a sense of continuity within not only section III of *When My Brother Was an Aztec*, but of the collection as a lyrical body that engages livelihood on many layers.

⁵ Lorca’s “Segundo Aniversario” From *Moon Songs (Selected Verse: Revised Bilingual Edition, 182-183)*.

La luna clava en el mar
un largo cuerno de luz.

Unicornio gris y verde,
estremecido, pero extático.
El cielo flota sobre el aire
como una inmensa flor de loto.

(¡Oh, tú sola paseando
la última estancia de la noche!)

At first glance, this final section may seem to stand apart from the preceding sections, given its apparent departure from an overarching preoccupation with the speaker's brother (though this theme is still present, particularly in the section's poem, "The Elephants," a thoughtful meditation on postwar trauma, the animal, and the machinic tank, 94-95). However, when paying close attention to the artful way Diaz interlinks ideas from Lorca and nonhumans in her poetic ecosystem; one can read section III as the culmination or continuation of these other life-cycles wherein these uncertainties between the forces that drive love and mourning are not as abrupt as a first reading could suggest. This third section provides the reader with another entry into duende, grief and an embrace, as well as an engagement with life and Lorca as the force of passion lingers on the edge of death and "A Wild Life Zoo" (101).

"Dome Riddle" echoes these concerns. "Tonight I am riddled by this thick skull" writes Diaz, in a poem whose penultimate stanzas draw together duende, Borges, and Lorca (79-80). "Dome Riddle," is a list of repeating inaugural "this"-es. Each line begins with "this" followed by a substitution for or displacement of the human self; excluding the first and last stanzas.

this 3 a.m. war bell tolling, tolling, *duende* vision prison, jar of fading stars,
this single scoop vanilla head rush, thunder head, fast ball, lightning rod,
this mad scientist in a white lab helmet, atom bomb mushroom cloud, ghost of
Smoking Mirror,
this hot air balloon, forgetful chandelier, *casa de relámpago*,
this coyote beacon, calcium corral of hot Perlino ponies, night blooming
cereus,

gourd gone rattle, bankrupt factory of tears,
this Halloween crown, hat rack, worry contraption, Rimbaud's drunken boat
afloat
in the wine dark belly of my personal Monstruo,
this coliseum *venatio*: Borges's other tiger licking the empty shell of Lorca's
white
tortuga, (80).

Diaz' use of the rhetorical technique of repetition, anaphora, defers to the tiger reference as a way of doubling back onto not only what the speaker is "riddled by", but also troubles what or whom can be "born by" (or what marks) the speaker. Reading anaphora in a hemispheric lens requires also that the reader consider not only the work that anaphora does of intensifying the sonic and rhythmic elements of the poem, but that anaphora troubles, like an echoing force, ideas of place—of where this sound of "this"-es might begin and end. Anaphora is a technique, which harkens back, troubles origins. Consider how the lines "this coliseum *venatio*: Borges's other tiger licking the empty shell of Lorca's / white / *tortuga*," blur together, in one stanza, both the literary traditions Diaz positions herself between, combining their wakes with those of anaphora through nonhuman referents (80). Here the tiger (some "other tiger" who has emerged from the shapeshifting bounds of the blue tiger) travels through the poetic bestiary space—to find only a remnant of Lorca's white Tortuga. All of this, the reader should take into account, is seen through a late-night hazy darkness, "duende vision prison, jar of fading stars" (80). It is in this space that complicated ideas of exchange, representation, and origin emerge across canons. These nonhuman figures,

transformed throughout the collection of poems and invoked in these instances through duende, create a space of unmarking, as scholar Martha J. Nandorfy has noted. Nandorfy references duende in the light of the apocalypse to illuminate ideas around the limits of life itself; she writes, “Identity melts away in the all-pervasive, panmaterialism that mixes objects related to human existence (‘tabernas,’ ‘nuestro anillo’) with Lorca's apocalyptic bestiary” (255). This “duende vision prison” found in “Monday Aubade” reflects a poetic point of view that riffs on the limits of creativity, “life itself” and how to contain it, are constrained. Martha J. Nandorfy, at continuation in her article “Duende and Apocalypse in Lorca's Theory and Poetics,” argues that Federico García Lorca’s theory of duende can be best understood (above all in *Poet in New York*) through apocalyptic discourse’s “tendency toward a promise of revelation that is after death and that duende surpasses these limits by creating a wound-space of alterity from which an Other is near or in-death” (255). I believe that this insightful analysis of duende through apocalyptic discourse can also be re-examined for our discussion through an additional lens considering also the diasporic. The kinds of questions that Nandorfy notes regarding alterity and the self are ones that border thinkers like Walter Dignolo have posed also about wound spaces, others, and coloniality of being. Taking these ideas of margin and “being” together with duende, as Nandorfy also notes: “The duende, however, can only be invoked for the highest stakes: life itself” (256). In my reading, these stakes are found throughout Diaz’ *When My Brother Was an Aztec*. This is seen through the author’s recurring meditations between kinds of life (human, nonhuman in shifting forms) and death (the speaker’s brother, the deterioration of family life, from myth and conquest), and it is her

manipulating of duende that also facilitates slippages between these Other worlds—further exceeding these forms of life or life itself only. This wound-space is one from which a border Other, who is inscribed away from the fullness of Man, as near or in-death, is channeled through duende and by nonhuman figures as places of passage, manifests itself through the artist. Nandorfy notes, “Since it only appears when the artist approaches the abyss, the duende is an intermediary between the living body and the Other, which can only express its silence through that body” (256). Natalie Diaz’ *When My Brother Was an Aztec* skillfully and consistently navigates the nuances not only of the term duende but of how we read and understand nonhuman figures through bordered bodies and vice-versa. In my next chapter regarding the Latinx poet Aracelis Girmay’s *Kingdom Animalia*—I continue to explore Diaz’ crafting of nonhuman poetics together with Girmay’s claim that “attributes of non-human bodies help me to understand my own history and body, just as much as thinking of non-human elements as bodies, or systems somehow akin to human bodies” (“The Conversation: Aracelis Girmay with Jon Sands” Girmay). Both writers form part of a generation of young poets who position themselves creatively between diasporic Latin@American lexicons and nonhuman referents in intriguing ways, worthy of further examination and consideration for the field.

CHAPTER 2

COLLAGING KINGDOMS

For me, each poem is a discovery and a map of the discovery. With *Kingdom Animalia*, most of the poems started with a series of questions—or a question—about an idea of common descent. How is every thing related to every other thing? How can questions I have of the non-human elements of the earth help me to ask questions of my human body? & vice versa. I think that attributes of non-human bodies help me to understand my own history & body, just as much as thinking of non-human elements as bodies, or systems somehow akin to human bodies.

-Aracelis Girmay, (“The conversation”, John Sands).

Introduction: Defining Duende in a Global Black Context as Departure

I open this chapter with a continuation of my discussion of duende as a nonhuman lyrical force that speaks between and mutably reshapes spaces, with a focus on where Afro-Latinx poetry and critical nonhuman readings meet through an examination of close readings from poet Aracelis Girmay, whose work is situated between these canons.

The field of Global Black Studies offers critical insights into the nonhuman that engage with many of the Latinx readings I have proposed. Alexander Weheliye, a theorist I reference in this chapter, brings to light modalities of reading the human divide through his approach to Sylvia Wynter, a scholar who bridges these canons, and her “genres of humanities.” Wynter’s body of work, in addition to contributing to black feminism at large, as Weheliye has noted, includes many well-established, though lesser examined, interrogations of the human/nonhuman divide—which dialogue with concerns I have raised thus far in Latinx and Latin@ American readings.

I suggest reading them in conversation to further these questions. In a similar vein, the powering force of duende also has an interesting precedent and legacy in African American Poetry. I referenced this tendency in poets from the Black Nationalist generation in my first chapter, but it is one that also resounds in a contemporary sense, notably through writers like Terrance Hayes and Tracy K. Smith.

I consider Tracy K. Smith's work—whose poetic arcs riff on modes of life ranging from both Old Andalusia to ordinary light to her more recent *Life on Mars* with Sci Fi tones reminiscent of Octavia Butler—to be an excellent example of a contemporary poet who bridges these worlds. In her recent work, *Duende*, Smith writes between human, nonhuman, and duende referents as she harkens back to Hispanic letters to tether this collection. I reference her work here, in order to orient the reader toward a lyrical definition of duende that crosses between African American letters into the Latin@American canon and doubles back. In her titular poem “Duende,” Smith captures the velocities of the language, geography, and a dark choreographies of duende, as a force “for what not even language Moves quickly enough to name,” Smith writes:

And not just them. Not just
The ramshackle family, the *tíos*,
Primitos, not just the *bailador*
Whose heels have notched
And hammered time
So the hours flow in place
Like a tin river, marking
Only what once was.
Not just the voices of scraping

Against the river, nor the hands
Nudging them farther, fingers
Like blind birds, palms empty,
Echoing. Not just the women
With sober faces and flowers
In their hair, the ones who dance
As though they're burying
Memory—one last time—
Beneath them.

And I hate to do it here.

To set myself heavily beside them.
Not now that they've proven
The body a myth, a parable
For what not even language
Moves quickly enough to name.
If I call it pain, and try to touch it
With my hands, my own life,
It lies still and the music thins,
A pulse felt for through garments (2).

This dark, ephemeral duende relies on the speaker to remember, to recall, while at the same time necessitating mourning, a closeness to death in order to carve out or mark a space; “Like a tin river, marking / Only what once was” (2). Tracy K. Smith, like we will see in Aracelis Girmay’s work, experiments with how to wield inventions from Spanish lexicons through duende’s mourning. I suggest reading this poem as a working definition that furthers the reader’s understanding of duende and as a bridge from which to consider reading these canons in tandem. Duende, the reader will recall, is “filled with black sounds” that resonate at the forefront of these diasporic

places where blackness might otherwise be prone to erasure. By reading duende in these works, I argue, critical theories of the nonhuman and blackness come to the forefront as loci for interdisciplinary engagement.

The role of the nonhuman/human divide and politics of death, in Global Black Studies, as Alexander Weheliye also notes, is evinced by many canonical theorists, Sylvia Wynter, Hortense Spillers, W.E.B. DuBois, CLR James, and Frantz Fanon, to name a few. Even, to a certain degree, we might consider the concept of necropolitics, as defined by Achille Mbembe, as part of how to frame these questions. Necropolitics recalls that the work or struggle with death is part of the divide between human/nonhuman that is built into understanding subjectivity. “In other words,” Mbembe writes, “the human being truly becomes a subject—that is, separated from the animal—in the struggle and the work through which he or she confronts death (understood as the violence of negativity). It is through this confrontation with death that he or she is cast into the incessant movement of history. Becoming subject therefore supposes upholding the work of death” (14). Mbembe’s view of the emergent subject who struggles in and through maintaining work of death, functions as a fight, in part, to distinguish between full lives and others laboring inside this paradigm; I consider this while reading duende, is also, in part, a piece of the creative anima of death. It might be useful when mapping the many crossings, in Aracelis Girmay’s work, duende, and canon, to also consider the term, Afro-Pessimism. It is a term posited initially by Frank B. Wilderson, though scrutinized further by black feminist theorists Hortense Spillers and Saidiya Hartman among others. It is valuable to contemplate terms like Afro-pessimism when approaching the human/nonhuman

divide in Latin@ American and Afro-Latinx diasporic writings, as this framework theorizes about the exclusion or exile black subject is from the bounds of human relationality. Afro-pessimism pivots on the ontological absences and tensions between blackness' spaces of negativity as defined in opposition to a whitewashed definition of personhood.

Sylvia Wynter's work resounds with many of these points of inquiry. Her approaches to death and these ontological slippages are of consideration for this chapter as Wynter offers readings of figures of the human in relation to literature and canon. Wynter, in her discussion entitled "...But what does 'wonder' do? meanings, canons, too? on literary texts, cultural contexts, and what it's like to be one/not one of us", debates how the meanings of canons, as well as of literary texts are overdetermined by how, culture, the neurological, cognition, and "symbolic life and death and criterion of being (and therefore of what it's like to be one/not one of us) serve to institute the processes of sociogenesis through which we can alone come to experience ourselves as human" (SEHR). Wynter underscores that literary texts produce a problematic "wonder" effect evokes the specific intended responses of their order's "original" subjects.

I suggest that Aracelis Girmay is a poet who can be read as intervening in this discourses and between Global Black Studies, Latinx, and Latin@ American Studies because of the kinds of conversations her work generates with Latineity, Blackness, diaspora, and the nonhuman. Girmay pursues writings of selves—without relying solely on human figures—through techniques of collaging, piece-hood, and other-than-human portraitures; the poet grapples with how to understand the work that

remnant lives undertake alongside mourning. Wynter's theoretical work together with lyrical insights from comparative readings with Natalie Diaz inform this chapter's approach to Girmay's techniques. Aracelis Girmay's confrontation with displacement in *Kingdom Animalia*, the primary text I will focus on, is preoccupied with mourning and surviving, which she connects through nonhuman forces, that I read as overtly belonging to and marked by the animal kingdom and secondarily, by way of duende, as a strategy for survival. As poet Tracy K. Smith notes in "Survival in Two Worlds at Once: Federico Garcia Lorca and Duende":

It is then that the duende beckons, promising to impart "something newly created, like a miracle," then it winks inscrutably and begins its game of feint and dodge, lunge and parry, goad and shirk; turning its back, nearly disappearing altogether, then materializing again with a bear-hug that drops you to the ground and knocks your wind out. You'll get your miracle, but only if you can decipher the music of the battle, only if you're willing to take risk after risk. Only, in other words, if you survive the effort. For a poet, this kind of survival is tantamount to walking, word by word, onto a ledge of your own making. You must use the tools you brought with you, but in decidedly different and dangerous ways. There are two worlds that exist together, and there is one that pushes against the other, that claims the other doesn't, or need not, exist. The duende stirs as a way of saying: you will only stay whole by moving—day after day, note after note, poem after poem—from one world to the next (Smith).

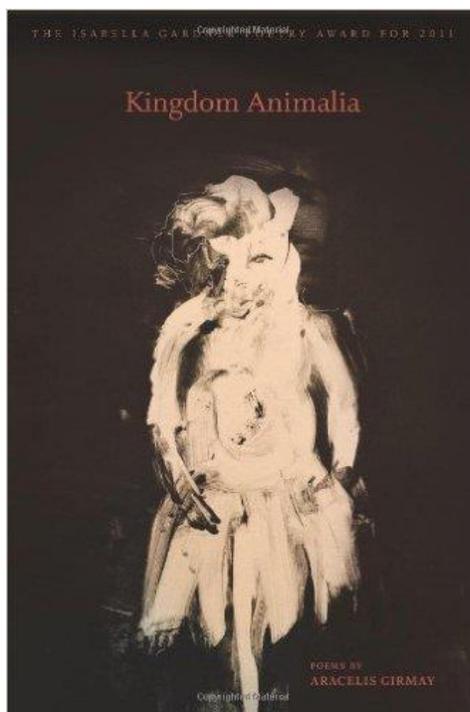
Duende maintains itself through the artist and between the edges of two (or more)

semi-autonomous worlds. These interstitial, autopoietic flows push against and permeate one another—as antagonistic forces of discovery, or, as Aracelis Girmay wrote in the epigraph, as “maps of discovery”, that begin by a poetic questioning of nonhuman elements. I foreground this chapter in Tracy K. Smith’s poetic definitions of duende, and in the field of Global Black Studies’ literature and criticism, as a way to open up an engagement with the rich kingdoms carved out by Aracelis Girmay’s poetry. I, thus, further my questions about how to engage ideas of canon and nonhuman interlocutors between Americas.

Aracelis on the Cover; Collaging, Bare Life, and Assemblage.

Aracelis Girmay sets the tone for her collection of poems, *Kingdom Animalia*, with striking cover art from her collaboration with political artists and activists Carla Repice and Sandy Knight.⁶ Centered on a black backdrop there are beige fluid traces which form the outline of an animal-humanoid through uneven brush-strokes. It is an indeterminate something or someone who gazes back at the reader. The being is a mixture of features—what appear to be disproportionately long arms, a tuft of hair styled like a pompadour, an ears and nose reminiscent of a panther, while the lower quadrant of the body is comprised of undefined streaks.

⁶ Girmay, it warrants mention, in addition to her poetry collections *Teeth* and *Kingdom Animalia*, authored the collage-based picture book *Changing, Changing*—a meditation on moments of life transformation, and the collage series “New poems, collages, & an essay” in *Black Renaissance Noire* 14.2 (2015).



(Figure 2.1 Cover art: Carla Repice, 2011)

The raw image chosen for this cover is exemplary of the transformation and other-than-human collaboration—what Girmay, above, cites as “the work of bringing two things together from different minds, moments, sources—and bringing them into conversation” that haunts *Kingdom Animalia* (“How do you go about finding the heart?: Aracelis Girmay on Poetry, Discovery, and Grief,”). I open my discussion of Girmay’s poetry at large with this image because it models her approach to disquieting ideas of life and loss—the forms they take, where they begin and end, while pointing to the slippages between human and nonhuman lives in *Kingdom Animalia*.

This exchange is also a crucial consideration in approaching critical theories of the nonhuman through the field of Global Black Studies. Alexander Weheliye frames

his critical work, *Habeas Viscus*, in a similar artistic move, electing to display a piece from Kenyan visual artist, Wangechi Mutu:



(Figure 2.2 (Left) Cover art: Wangechi Mutu, Untitled, 2002. Collage, ink on paper).

(Figure 2.3 (Right) Collage 5 from A-Legba Poetics: Aracelis Girmay, 2015. *Black Renaissance Noire* Volume 14.2).

The vanguard of Mutu’s piece centers on techniques of layering and collaging (like Girmay’s) skins—harkening to the crucial term “viscus.” Collage is a way of critically approaching corporeal traffic, the merging of animal bodies, organisms, and their enmeshment. As an aesthetic technique, collage explores modes of sampling and of assemblages, which resonate with both the critical and creative concerns I have foregrounded. If there is a negative relation between the absence of bodies of color and the realm of the exclusively human, collage, remixes this exile or absence with layered presences. Considering the artistic practice of collage will be important, at

continuation in a later section, in order to examine a poetic approach to self-portraiture, which I locate between Girmay and Diaz' works and to address the idea of human-nonhuman piecehood. Scrutinizing collage, for the present, however, as in Weheliye's and Girmay's covers, approaches a packaging of their respective works, which sets the stage for how to read, anticipate, consume, or assemble life itself.

As part of his larger approach to racializing assemblages, Weheliye criticizes how readings of race are conducted in prevalent academic approaches to the human, nonhuman, and life itself, mainly those popularized by Giorgio Agamben, bare life, and Michel Foucault's biopolitics. This criticism has been made by several theorists, including Ewa Płonowska Ziarek who notes in "Bare Life on Strike: Notes on the Biopolitics of Race and Gender" the following:

As we have seen, bare life cannot be regarded in complete isolation from all cultural and political characteristics. If bare life emerges as the remnant of a destroyed form of life, then, according to Agamben's own emphasis on its inclusive exclusion in the political, its formulation has to refer, in a negative way, to the racial, sexual, ethnic, and class differences that used to characterize its form of life. In other words, bare life has to be defined as the remnant of a specific form of life that it is not yet or is no longer. Furthermore, bare life cannot always be considered as the exclusive referent of the sovereign decision, but it has to be reconceptualized as a more complex, contested terrain in which new forms of domination, dependence, and emancipatory struggles can emerge (103).

Weheliye focuses, instead of on the sheer bareness of bare life, on racializing

assemblages, which underscores that race might be understood as functioning as an assemblage of forces. He highlights how nonwhite subjects have been marked as less than human and moves to center the idea of “habeas viscus”—to have the flesh—as a suggestive counterpoint to bare life (32). For Weheliye, flesh is not an “abject zone of exclusion that culminates in death but an alternate instantiation of humanity”; it is through an abjection of blackness that the white, occidental male is set apart as properly human (43). Habeas viscus, though focusing on enfleshment, underscores both ideas of potentiality and genres of humanity that are in conversation with both duende and critical theories of the nonhuman.

Reading poets whose works emphasize the role of the nonhuman in Latinx, Latin@American, and Black diasporas complicates this notion further. Theorist Gabriel Giorgi has offered insightful interpretations of the roles of biopolitics, bare life, among other critical theories of the nonhuman in Latin America and its literary production. Giorgi, in rethinking Latin American narratives continues to trouble the spaces of bios/zoe, tracing both civilizing impulses effect on displaced lives (“vidas a proteger y vidas a abandonar”) and positions “lo animal” as a political sign, which can be read in a way as to both destabilize these dichotomies and to suggest possible continuities. Giorgi offers unique interpretations of subjects in classic texts such as Manuel Puig’s *El beso de la mujer araña*, João Guimarães Rosa’s “Meu tio o iauaretê”, Roberto Bolaño’s *2666*, and Clarice Lispector’s *A paixão segundo G.H.*, to name a few. Giorgi reconsiders how nonhuman forms can reshape readings of canonical narrative and national spaces. This last point informs my readings in this dissertation most strongly. However, my focus also relies, not only in this point of

canonical reiteration, but together with Alexander Weheliye's move or swerve from a strictly biopolitical framework in the traditional sense of the term. Weheliye turns to black feminist thought, by way of Hortense Spillers and Sylvia Wynter, underscoring "the existence of alternative modes of life alongside the violence, subjection, exploitation, and racialization that define the modern human" (1-2). In reading Girmay's technique of collaging, loss, and the nonhuman, it is important to recognize the critical responses that both the fields of both Global Black and Latin American Studies offer in the face of—one, the collaging overflow of life bios/zoe as well as the lyrical bareness of mourning—both of which are driving forces found in *Kingdom Animalia*. Aracelis Girmay and Weheliye, through these liminal places, follow after Sylvia Wynter's focus on genres of humanity and the not-quite-human.

Wynter's Genres, Collaging Girmay's Poetic Portraits

Girmay's poetics offer the reader a reconsideration of how Global Black Studies and Latinx poetry are in larger conversation through critical theories of the nonhuman. One way to consider how or why how we reflect on canonical concerns—which is a question I have asked and will continue to ask throughout this dissertation—is by framing in these discussions is through the idea of genres. In a play on the word "género," In an interview with Greg Thomas Sylvia Wynter states that for black feminism there is a struggle that has to do with, primarily, "the destruction of the genre; with the displacement of the genre of the human of Man" (Thomas). Wynter foregrounds the importance of genre as both a gendered term and one that crosses multiple genres, through a pursuit of the "traditionally" not fully human. It is through

this lens that I engage with diasporic readings of the nonhuman. Wynter, discussed at length by Weheliye, is also connected to the Latin@American theory through her turn to science and philosophy by way of Chilean scientist Humberto Maturana's theory of autopoiesis and interrogations of colonial frameworks from Walter D. Mignolo and Anibal Quijano. Walter D. Mignolo one of Wynter's interlocutors, comments on these somewhat perplexing moves, specifically regarding autopoiesis, in his chapter "Sylvia Wynter, What Does It Mean to Be Human" found in the collection, *Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human as Praxis* (2014) stating that:

Wynter refuses to embrace the entity of the Human independently of the epistemic categories and concepts that created it by suggesting instead that our conceptualizations of the Human are produced within an autopoietic system. The problem of the Human—enunciations that are concocted and circulated by those who most convincingly (and powerfully) imagine the "right" or "noble" or "moral" characteristics of Human and project their own image into the sphere of Universal Humanness. The Human is therefore the product of a particular epistemology, yet it appears to be (and is accepted as) a naturally independent entity existing in the world (108).

Wynter works to expose both the self-replicating machine of the Human and the conditions under which those who do not fit into this epistemological frame (of Human) are exorcized from it. Sylvia Wynter, who is deeply engaged with black and Caribbean traditions, offers the reader a thought-provoking vantage point from which to consider Latinx and Latin@American poetry through the figure of the nonhuman. As Mignolo notes, "What she proposes is a shattering of the imperial concept of

Humanity based on the ideal of White Man, and to re-conceptualize it not by providing a new definition or image but by starting with the question: What does it mean to be human” (122). Aracelis Girmay, too, asks this question, while bringing in the nonhuman in a connective way to further her inquiry about self, place, and mourning. Sylvia Wynter’s writings, over the past thirty years, follow a trajectory that speaks to this concept; as Mignolo notes again, “Wynter follows this by thinking through that which we have inherited from imperial Europe, the possibilities and limitations can be recognized as connective and interhuman” (122). Thus, while Wynter draws from genres of the human through a scrutiny of science and self-replication, Girmay explores modalities of humanity by way of nonhuman interlocutors and through a poetry of collaging and self-portraiture as an approach to the order of the other-than-human.

Kingdom Animalia: Elegiac Introductions and Forays into Diasporic Selves.

Aracelis Girmay, a fiercely brave and wildly talented poet, positions herself as an artist who works between nonhumans and global spaces. Girmay writes in Spanish and English from Southern California, with her roots in Puerto Rico, Eritrea, and African America. Similarly, her poetic figures, in her books *Kingdom Animalia*, *The Black Maria*, and *Teeth*, travel between these spaces and beyond (Jamaica, Mississippi, New Orleans, Turkey, to refugees trapped amid international waters to name a few)—exploring temporal and existential questions through nonhuman frames (*Kingdom Animalia*, 115). Aracelis Girmay’s approach troubles, as Ruth Irupe Sanabria blurbs, “the human geography of time and origin” (*Kingdom Animalia*).

The poems found in *Kingdom Animalia* are, at a glance, overwhelmingly, other-than-human, and, also, overtly elegiac. Consider, for instance, the case of “This Morning the Small Bird Brought a Message from The Other Side” wherein Girmay writes, “I want to know what to do with the dead things we carry” or “Elegy” and again in “On Living,” when she asks, “What to do with this knowledge that our living is not guaranteed?” (70, 17, 30). There is a manifested mourning that links human and animal forms in the title poem, which concludes, “When dirt’s the only animal who will sleep with you / & touch you with / its mouth” (“Kingdom Animalia” 15). However, more than just the ostensible presence of human animal imagery, these are questions about the fullness of life itself guided by a nearness to death and the nonhuman.

I turn to the second half of the poem “Elegy” to expand upon this point.

All above us is the touching
of strangers & parrots,
some of them human,
some of them not human.

Listen to me. I am telling you
a true thing. This is the only kingdom.
The kingdom of touching;
the touches of the disappearing, things (17).

This fleeting kingdom, between human and not (“some of them human, / some of

them not”), life and a contact with death, could be read as an iteration of *duende*, a concept I explored at length in Chapter One, on Natalie Diaz’s *When My Brother Was an Aztec*. I read *duende*, to briefly revisit my discussion, as a nonhuman force through which one can consider other-than-human ideas of passage and livelihood. *Duende* also implies a creative impulse or force that is conflated with blackness and in close quarters with a type of death. I see all of these elements as also present in Girmay’s *Kingdom Animalia*. In this way, Diaz and Girmay are part of a generation of young poets who position themselves between diasporic Latin@American lexicons and nonhuman referents that are in dialogue with *duende*. This trend in Latinx and Latin@American poetry grapples with life itself, modalities of non/humanness, and transplanted or supplanted spaces through its poetic exchange.

There are two salient threads running concurrently between Girmay’s and Diaz’ texts that lie beyond the human; one is the spaces of human/nonhuman mourning and spaces of dis/possession (or negation) through *duende* and the other is the role of nonhuman in self-portraiture and scenes of the self.

Girmay’s *Kingdom Animalia* opens with two epigraphs from Charles Darwin’s *The Origin of Species*. Girmay, from this outset, then, is concerned with troubling the concept of how life comes into full being and evolves and ideas of descent and inheritance. Between these two epigraphical brackets the author provides the reader with a structural map of the book’s contents divided into headings: “i. a book of dirt, ii. a book of beautiful monsters, iii. a book of graves & birds, iv. a book of erased cities, v. a fable, vi. the book of one small thing” (x). The first four sections contain many more poems, between 10-14, compared with the final two, both comprised of

just one lengthier poem each. *Kingdom Animalia* is just 111 pages in length and departs from a titular poem, in a similar style to Natalie Diaz' collection (*When My Brother Was an Aztec*). Additionally, Girmay's poems when listed outright are also dominated by their reflections on other forms of life and environment—consider “Kingdom Animalia,” “On Living,” “Swans, as the Light Was Changing,” “A Blooming Tree,” “Running Home I Saw the Planets,” “Praise Song for the Donkey,” and “La Boda del Mar y Arena,” to name a few; though the content of the entire collection, beyond a first glance, preoccupies itself with a turn between nonhuman life and mourning.

A particularly fascinating approach to nonhuman life, in which both Diaz and Girmay engage, are their poetic scenes of the self as “becoming” nonhuman. To recall, Natalie Diaz devotes two poems to this: “When My Beloved Asks ‘What Would You Do if You Woke Up and I was a Shark?’” and, more literally, “Self-Portrait as a Chimera.” Aracelis Girmay's focus on self as reflected in the other than human manifests in series of meditations on self-portraits (in this respect like Diaz' chimera). These include: “Self-Portrait as the Snake's Skin,” “Self-Portrait as the Pirate's Gold”, “Self-Portrait as the Snail,” Self-Portrait as the Airplane,” (“Portrait of the Woman as a Skein”), which are found in “section iii. a book of graves and birds.”

Self-Portraiture as an integral part of the Hispanic Studies canon, recalls some of the most recognizable figures in the field of visual arts who have engaged in this technique through a variety of lived-environments from renaissance to contemporary periods: Frida Kahlo, Nahum Zenil, Francisco de Goya, Diego Velázquez, Pablo Picasso, Ana Mendieta, to name a few. Art critic Laura Cumming, who has worked

extensively on Spanish courtesan painter in her book *The Vanishing Velázquez* (2016), addresses the nuances of self-portraiture and representation in her earlier book, *A Face to the World: On Self-Portraits* (2009). Cumming comments on the process of reading self-portraits, a genre which the critic deems is a reflection on life itself and the burden of how to portray the subject of the self to the world. The artist must turn the subject inside out to successfully project once again, the self, a practice which pantomimes the stakes of livelihood:

This is self-portraiture's special look of looking, a trait so fundamental as to be almost its distinguishing feature. Even quite small children can tell self-portraits from portraits because of those eyes. The look is intent, actively seeking you out of the crowd; the nearest analogy may be with life itself: paintings behaving like people (25).

Thinking through self-portraiture in this way can also be a productive strategy from which approach the complex task of writing the self. Poetry, after all, in a similar sense as self-portraiture, relies on an economy of language to generate a striking image both in the sense of its position on the page and of imagery as a rhetorical practice that invokes an affective response.

What is curious about self-portraiture in both of the works I am examine from Girmay (in this chapter) and Diaz (from Chapter One), is that typically self-portraits are not considered as plural scenes of selfhood. It is assumed to be the artist, herself, alone. However, in the case of a nonhuman self-portraiture, through the trajectory I've been establishing, the reader can now imagine that there is another being implicated in a cooperative (or even antagonistic) act of depicting a self or selves. It is a shape-

shifting act that pulls at the porous perimeters of the human form and offers a mode of reading that reconsiders the self-portrait as a purely solitary or speciesist pursuit. This is another point where Walter Mignolo's and Sylvia Wynter's interpretations of autopoiesis might be reconsidered, not, in its more literal scientific connotations, but, rather, in such a way as to approach autopoiesis as a technique for reading lyrical self-portraits that seek to trouble the idea of an objective of singular (or non-hybrid) human form.

...Maturana's insights, in particular his work on autopoiesis, which uncovers the interconnectedness of "seeing" the world and "knowing" the world: specifically, he shows that what is seen with the eyes does not represent the world outside the living organism; rather, it is the living organism that fabricates an image of the world through the internal / neurological processing of information. Thus, Maturana made the connection between the ways in which human beings construct their world and their criteria of truth and objectivity and noticed how their / our nervous system processes and responds to information. It is across both neurobiological cognition and decolonial practices that Sylvia Wynter's work and her intellectual disobedience emerge. Wynter suggests that if we accept that epistemology gives us the principles and rules of knowing through which the Human and Humanity are understood, we are trapped in a knowledge system that fails to notice that the stories of what it means to be Human—specifically origin stories that explain who / what we are—are, in fact, narratively constructed (Mignolo, 108).

By suggesting an autopoietic reading of Girmay and Diaz' nonhuman self-portraits,

I propose that the reader engages with how to retell transgressions genres of other-than-humanities. Consider, as a point of further “autorretrato” comparison, the case of another interlocutor, contemporary Mexican poet Kenia Cano. Both a poet and painter, like Girmay she also works with collage and across disciplines. Cano explores these themes of nonhuman self-portraiture in her *Autorretrato con animales (Antología poética, 2012)*. This collection of Cano’s poetic body of work as filtered through its most recurrent lens, the animal form. This anthology of self-portraits “with” animals culminates in a turn to look not only at the animal, but “with” in the sense of “through” the animal:

Finalmente esos animales son el píncl y la materia que Cano utiliza para realizar su propio retrato. La idea de pintar con el lenguaje es constante. Su misma escritura es otra forma de dibujarse y representarse. Siempre queda un margen de distorsión cuando se interpreta el mundo a través del arte. Pero ese tambaleo es lo que ordena y significa nuestra realidad. El espejo tiembla y nos devuelve un reflejo alterado (“Signos de la poesía animal en la obra de Kenia Cano,” Valdés de la Campa).

Thinking about Cano’s work in this way, calls for the consideration of moments of self-portraiture and nonhuman intervention—as Valdés de la Campa notes, as material for refracting ideas of art and world. These intuitions are at play, in my reading, between Girmay and Diaz (and through another border with Cano). I would like to look back, then, to Natalie Diaz’ “Self-Portrait as a Chimera.” This poem, in keeping with the thrust of the collection, drifts between contemporary and Spanish colonial mythscapes:

The last wild horse leaping off a cliff at Dana Point. A hurtling God carved from red clay. Wings of wind. Two satellite eyes spiraling like coals from a long-cold fire. Dreaming of Cortés, his dirty-beard and the burns it left when we kissed. Yet we kissed for years and my savage hair wove around him like braids of smoke (77).

This poem is an exercise, not only in retelling intimate histories, but in the slippages among human, nonhuman, and declarative modes of selfhood. This recalls again Wynter's notion that readers acknowledge and parse together the stories of what it means to be Human—specifically origin stories. "Self-Portrait as a Chimera" begins with a declarative statement about being: "I am what I have done--" (77). This opening line, along with "We do. We do. We do and do and do," and the final line, "I am. I am and am and am. What have I done?" stand alone, line-broken, jutting out from the body of the poem, which is comprised of heavy condensed stanzas (77-8). In the architecture of "Self-Portrait as a Chimera" there is a tension between this chimera-self, who appears to speak out from under the weight of these condensed retellings, but whose language, cyclical and simple, who grapples trying to assert its own place in the world. Diaz writes "I am what I have done," "We do", and "What have I done?" in a poem that explicitly inscribes the speaker as chimera—an interspecies mythological monster and an illusory hope or wish that is impossible to achieve (77). I am, in other words, the beast inside me also, I am what I or we do, and these things that we do or have done are also not considered human. The speaker overtly no longer calls herself human, neither is she recognized as such by the poem's other chorus of voices, "These dark rosettes name me Jaguar," Diaz writes (78). The

human perhaps then becomes the real “chimerical” thing, in its double meaning wherein it is the most illusory being. The self-declarative speech act of “I am,” implicit in self-portraiture and repeated in Diaz’ poem while coupled with the performative “do”, recalls how Caribbean theorist Sylvia Wynter signed her open letter to her colleagues, “No Humans Involved.”

Sylvia Wynter: Critical Nonhuman Crossings

Wynter signs the letter, “No Humans Involved”:

I am,

Sincerely yours, (43).

Written in a way that is both declarative and poetic, Wynter ends her letter on being or not being considered human or beholden to Man. Wynter penned this letter in 1992 regarding the law enforcement agency term “NHI.” She writes that this acronym is routinely used by police in Los Angeles to classify their encounters with young black men in their urban precincts. In these encounters, the authorities, given the code NHI sputtered over a dispatch, could act then with unfettered violence and impunity. It was “a green light to deal with its members in any way that they pleased”, Wynter writes (42). Throughout her letter, as is echoed in much of her work, Wynter grapples with ontological taxonomies, hierarchies, and organizations of knowledge and selves. The prevalence of the designation “NHI,” as a term which exemplifies an inhumane policing of blackness, demonstrates clearly how the bounds of human have been strategically deformed before the law. Both Wynter’s statements, here in her letter, and Weheliye, in *Habeas Viscus* function as counter discourses to these politics, as

they diverge from equating humanity and legal personhood, with the juridical, like human rights and habeas corpus. Aracelis Girmay experiments with these lines and creativity in the shadow of terms like “NHI” in her collection, *The Black Maria*, wherein dedicates a poem to twenty-four-year-old Jonathan Ferrell, killed by police officers. “I will be mistaken, I thought, for another / animal, one it is legal to kill” (60). Wynter’s self-declarative signature, which I argue functions like a kind of self-portrait, underscores both the exclusion of non-white bodies from the designation “human”, while channeling the potentiality of response to this formulation. Katherine McKittick has made other observations about the theorist’s other signatures, which differ from this particular letter, however, writing that:

Many letters Wynter has posted to me, and others, over the years have closed with the words “yours in the intellectual struggle” and have inspired a world that imagines change. But the struggle to make change is difficult within our present system of knowledge; the struggle can, and has, reproduced practices that profit from marginalization and thus posit that emancipation involves reaching for the referent we of Man. Thus, “yours in the intellectual struggle” bears witness to the practice of sharing words and letters while also drawing attention to the possibilities that storytelling and wording bring (22-3).

I interpret how Katherine McKittick reads Wynter’s closing signature— “yours in the intellectual struggle”—as harkening to Chilean social and biological scientists Maturana and Varela and their concept of “the realization of the living.” Wynter, through Maturana and Varela, examined the possibility that:

...Our present analytic categories—race, class, gender, sexuality, margins and

centers, insides and outsides—tell a partial story, wherein humanness continues to be understood in hierarchical terms. The realization of the living, then, is a relational act and practice that identifies the contemporary underclass as colonized- nonwhite- black- poor- incarcerated- jobless peoples who are not simply marked by social categories but are instead identifiably condemned due to their dysselected human status. At the same time, as noted earlier, “the realization of the living” must be imagined as inviting being human as praxis into our purview, which envisions the human as verb, as alterable, as relational, and necessarily dislodges the naturalization of dysselection. Wynter and the essayists here do not use categories of disenfranchisement as a starting points; rather, they focus on the ways in which such categories work themselves out in relation to the human, being human, human being, and codes that govern humanness (22-3).

While McKittrick highlights “yours” as the part of a relational act of both a conceptual and lived struggle, the author is careful not to suggest that the frame of marginalization is the only way to rethink human or nonhuman forms. Wynter was intrigued by Maturana and Varela’s approach to “autopoiesis”, which stems from theories of self-making and environment. I read the tension between “I am”, “No Humans Involved,” “Yours in the intellectual struggle,” and “Self-Portrait as a Chimera” as shifting how we might consider placing or regenerating the loci of human and nonhuman involvement, from which the evasive human form is re-thought. Still, what grounds these pieces; the “I am” in its repetitive echo underscores that questions of “being” and how we assert or disarticulate it.

Poetry & Portraits of Self in Critical Motion

In Diaz' poem "Self-Portrait as a Chimera", "I am, I am..." is followed by "What I have done"—emphasizing "doing", the potentialities in and not merely the bareness of, as a praxis of a chimerical condition--notably the collected works engaging Wynter are entitled *Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human as Praxis*. For Diaz, it's not the Cartesian logic of humanity (the idea that a kind of reason that legitimates being) from which she departs, but rather, a doing of, a performance of being. "Self-Portrait as a Chimera" fleshes out what this being and doing might entail, drifting between an indigenous temple's destruction in which the speaker appears complicit:

A sweeping gesture to the thorn of mast jutting from my mother's spine—
spine a series of narrow steps leading to the temple of her neck where the
things we worship demand we hurl her heart from that height, still warm, still
humming with the holy music of an organ—

We do. We do. We do and do and do (77).

The speaker's voice not only drifts between creature and human, past and present, but also singular and plural. This underscores the idea of "chimera" as an amalgamation and the nonhuman as a complicated contact zone, where inheritances, human and other meet and act.

Aracelis Girmay's "Self-Portrait as The Snail," takes similar turns between being, doing, and a carrying of the past as present. Also beginning with the declarative—"I am the snail," Girmay writes, "Thirty-one. For years, I am the snail / trailing my thought behind me: a red horse, or carpet. Royal. / The things, I've marked

and been marked by, / blood falling behind me like a stranger's tail." (52). This marking becomes a place of navigating, mourning and nurturing; "Resourceful Gretel, who, in eating all the bread, / lets her blood down to the mark the way back home! / Like this: / I carry my meat over the earth's lion mouth / & slowly feed my bodies to the dirt" (52). This blood orients the speaker toward an idea of home which will not be realized in its materiality, but rather with every step the marked speaker (who I read as a diasporic subject) turns the body into a nonhuman offering. Girmay captures a complicated portrait, both a deep sense of loss and a legacy ("this though trailing behind me"), as well as freedom as the disembodied tail that trails her and meat that falls away to feed the dirt. Girmay's "Portrait of Woman as Skein," from the same section is framed by a short epigraph from Erin Molitor that reads, "I lost my hands." After this, Girmay places an asterisk and continues with her poetic intervention, "Tell me what, on earth, / would make you want to leave your hands / or want to, at the wash sink? / in the lemon grove? / on the way home from standing, baffled, / in the grocery / I have seen you walk into traffic like a bird / with something else on your mind" (54). The body and mind of this woman with missing hands is like an unraveling skein whose animalized threads, like the snail, leave a trail that drifts and transforms between beings. "Sometimes you leave yourself all over," the speaker states. She is becoming the ephemeral traces of this unraveling that are stray hairs left in a bus station; her body shape-shifts into a "broken barn," "the street & trees," life as "long-glorious hyphen," "a colander, sometimes / losing things", "in winter, is a dress the snow erases," her heart, "a jar of cats" (54-56). There is a porousness to the woman who freefalls through these forms as she is shifting, or living within, the long-

glorious animalesque hyphen. There is a rootless and rooted tension in her ambiguity of being, which harkens to a displaced status. This is redirected through a reading of transformative creaturehood—what Wynter, too, highlights through her underscoring of ontological negation (No/Humans Involved). The speaker in Girmay’s “Portrait of a Woman as Skein” affirms the speaker’s disconnections (not only her lost hands and sifting through nonhuman forms) overtly, stating that, all the songs she knows are from a different country, and “the fruits in your father’s poems / do not grow here” (55). This position between these disrupted referential roots and troubled forms culminates at the close of the poem:

Last night, the dream of you standing
in the doorway like a lighthouse
calling for your hands to come back
home, & from a great distance, them
running toward you, two
children or two dogs. What scared you then,
you also called beautiful—
the way their breath flew out of them like clouds,
the way they reached the dark yard panting & stood
deciding between the body & the woods (56).

This calling for hands to come from a faraway, darkened, “home” summons two figures, who are either breathless children or dogs. This uncertainty of forms calls for the speaker to face the abyss between “the body & the woods”—though it would

seem they are not so sharply divided, but rather shifting or constantly turning into each other's environmental limits. As if this was a decision that could be made—woods or body, children or dogs—and at the same time all are potentially permitted. The transformative and fragmentary processes at work in this portrait and the previous snail portrait are fulfilled through nonhuman interlocutors. Reflecting on how these moves refract poetic form and human modalities, “On the Shape of a Sentence,” Girmay asks, “What does the shapeshifting of the line tell us about the girl in question?” (54). Shapeshifting harkens back to the art of autopoietic self-portraiture, though Girmay is careful to consider all contributors to the picture being crafted:

My great grandfather's foot like a catfish in the basin—that image and metaphor-making, to me, is not just about carrying over or transformation, but about the memory and context that our images come with. In the house, we've got many worlds—the murky river and the basin. The catfish brings its history and knowledge of rivers and murk and maybe capture, and my great grandfather's foot brings its history and knowledge of work shoes and work and damage and age. These associations touch and inform each other. I am interested in the overlap (historical and emotional) that the image insinuates without explicitly summarizing or translating. A fleck of dream or memory, a few things side by side, a charged atmosphere between them (Fischer, "The Poetesses: An Interview with Lisa Russ Spaar, Aracelis Girmay, and Daisy Fried").⁷

⁷ This catfish reference is taken from the poem “Abuelo, Mi Muerto,” found in *Kingdom Animalia* (19-20).

This marking and being marked by intermingled histories also speaks to notes from Diaz' work on the chimera about a breed of animal-complicity in being and its forms or deformations. To continue exploring this, I turn to two last poems from Aracelis Girmay's "iii. a book of graves & birds," "Self Portrait as the Snake" and the latter "Self Portrait as the Snake's Skin."

The snake, moves "through the grandmother yard...without speech" (58). This is a "silver snake slinking," the predominance of whose "s" consonance dominates the first seven stanzas, for example, "the both of us, & the centipedes," "Inside the child-skin are 6 men from Adis Ogdo", and also the poem's title "Self-Portrait as the Snake" (59). This formal technique incorporates nonhuman elements departing from a sonic level, a strategy which diminishes at the poem's continuation, as the snake's skin slips away. The poem drifts temporally as well to achieve this, between a familiar, unnamed childhood home—where a trauma occurs and a remnant is produced ("& I wanted to run away. Now, / the garden is a skin I wear. Somewhere / in the box of this old house, my child-skin hangs quietly between the coats, / shed: a parachute or bag full of red & teeth") and spatially to Jalisco where sad accordionists sing and men from Adis Ogdo drink boon (59-60). The most striking moment of transformation, however, manifests itself in the final stanza:

I am older now, but not old. I am looking back
to when I was a girl; now my body's a flash
of poison on the floor. The weather of the house,
it shapes the body's light. This is what
a girl has in common with the lightning (60).

These intensive moments of transformation, (a girl's body / lightning), gesture toward a vision of life that relies on intensities, on life as forces which meet and shape each other, that transport us temporally and transform our readings. This recalls similar concepts I have framed through ideas like duende and autopoiesis. However, reading these intensities, harkens back to nonhuman forms, the remnant snake skin, for instance, and this is the other direction of the poem's lyrical thrust.

The nonhuman form that has been both marked and exceeded is taken up in another direction in the subsequent poem, "Self-Portrait as the Snake's Skin." Noted as an "elegy for a rooster," tones of mourning intermingle with notes from a lover's body. "This morning I sneak out of your bed, / & am the red skin of the snake who leaves / the thick meat of your muscle," writes Girmay (66). The slipping off of skins is a shift between human and nonhuman in this a gender-bending, erotic poem, which is foregrounded by a closeness to a metaphorical death of those others—of taxidermied furs from "the women you wore," of "you're breathing like a farm / in the other room / & the lintel between us / is a guillotine," and "I'll miss you, deer, but I choose my head", coupled with the final image of eels freed in a dark, December sea (66-7).

This "Self-Portrait as a Snake's Skin" is the act of self-portrayal that is located from a position of animal, remnant mourning, of a nearness and distance from a dark or impassioned impulse. To recall and paraphrase Federico García Lorca, all the arts are capable of duende, but where it naturally creates most space, as in music, dance and spoken poetry, is in the *living* flesh is needed to interpret them, since they have

forms that are born and die, perpetually, and raise their contours above a precise present.

Bridging Duendes and Remnant Potentialities in Collage, Portraiture, and Piecehood

Duende is found in the wake, in the remnant near death (through the wind that blows over an empty archway), it forges landscapes and ignored, accents—in poets who, like Diaz and Girmay, for whom these elements are central:

El duende... ¿Dónde está el duende? Por el arco vacío entra un aire mental que sopla con insistencia sobre las cabezas de los muertos, en busca de nuevos paisajes y acentos ignorados: un aire con olor de saliva de niño, de hierba machacada y velo de medusa que anuncia el constante bautizo de las cosas recién creadas (45, *Teoría duende*).

Duende as a force of intensity, of potentialities, is pursued throughout the second thread of conversation I want to highlight between Girmay and Diaz’ work, which is the possibility of reading elegiac approaches to the perimeters of human and nonhuman bodies in these texts as moments of duende. Turning to the books’ framings; I default first to Natalie Diaz’ epigraph, “No hay mal que dure cien años ni cuerpo que lo resista” (x). From the outset of *When My Brother Was an Aztec*, Diaz positions the body (a body, human and otherwise) against the antagonistic force of darkness, which folds in on itself. This aphorism positions Diaz’ work within a framework of “dichos comunes”, underscoring her engagement with Hispanic cultural referents and linguistics even from the epigraph. Aracelis Girmay, in an interview

entitled “How do you go about finding the heart,” part of a webseries from The Poetry and Literature Center at the Library of Congress, discusses how the epigraph works as a ghostly remnant and force of creation, which betrays the hand of human intervention and construction:

[...] But I am also interested in the fact of the epigraph as excerpt. It is a piece of something larger and is decidedly framed by the writer—the epigraph being the chosen piece brought, with effort, into the poem—its larger context somewhat absent but ghosting the page. In this way, the epigraph makes obvious the fact of the poem as created, organized, man-made, constructed. I can see the materials with which the poem is made. These materials are borrowed from, stolen from, given by other people and places. And its piece-hood points to all the other choices that could have been made. Creation as an interesting manipulation of resources. In this way the epigraph can point to loss or absence. The very “piece-hood” of it nods to the large histories any utterance walks with. I am interested in the way the poem looks or acts like a collage when there’s an epigraph. The work of bringing two things together from different minds, moments, sources—and bringing them into conversation. Re-contextualization! I love that the epigraph and poem, in juxtaposition, offer new ways of seeing relationships between things. How cousin and family all things are. Which is beautiful sometimes and terrifying sometimes (Acevedo).

I read these elements of “piecehood” and fusions of forms, collagings as Girmay calls them, as particularly interesting when approaching the epigraphs the author chose to

frame *Kingdom Animalia*. When Girmay cites the “very ‘piece-hood’ of it nods to the large histories any utterance walks with,” is another rumination on how the diasporic speaker is marked by and marks the poem through a complexly rhizomatic, root-troubled system of knowledges imbued with loss or absence. I consider here also, how Wynter reads C.L.R James through the concept of the “pieza” system of slavery in Brazil. Piezas, pieces, were units of measuring laboring bodies that commodified black bodies that arrived through the Latin@American diasporic slave route. Walter Mignolo comments on this conceptual framework, citing its colonial precedents:

The “pieza,” then, can be seen as the anchor, the reference point for a sensibility that emerged in the sixteenth century alongside the conquest of the Caribbean islands, Anáhuac and Tawantinsuyu; it is a measure, furthermore, that did not exist before conquest and that set in motion what today we call “capitalism.” This specific sensibility was the facility through which the ruling class, the merchant class, and conquistadores could build an institution and a legitimating discourse that made certain human lives were dispensable vis- à- vis differential categories of value—from the symbolic of blood (the monarchic moment) to the symbolic of skin color (the secular moment whose foundation was established in the Spanish colonies in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries). The metaphoric and methodological uses of “pieza” trouble Marxist- oriented analyses that suggest that slavery and racism play a secondary role in the constitution of capitalism. (109).

Wynter’s pursuit of “delinking” through this pieza methodology suggests a layered approach to a decolonial human and nonhuman divide. Girmay remakes the idea of

piece-hood through her poetic collaging techniques and its interplay with depictions of the self. This meeting of self-portraiture and self-making caresses both the pieza layering of humanities and the hybrid autopoietic, feedback loop linking Wynter with Maturana and Varela. However, Girmay has both gone past and followed after what Wynter called “going beyond Man and towards the human” and moved in the direction of, instead, beyond Man, towards a blurring of human and nonhuman boundaries in her approach to these questions.

Implicated in these queries lie curiosities about the making of the self and how this is coded. Wynter, in “Towards the Sociogenic Principle: Fanon, The Puzzle of Conscious Experience, of Identity and What It’s Like to be Black,” begins with a discussion of bats, then pursues Fanon’s “redefinition of the human being and identity, in hybridly ontogenetic and sociogenetic terms” (35). These terms require a consideration of a creative force that conjures, once again, death and its rooted cultural connotations, “the sociogenic replicator code of symbolic life / death that each culture autoinstitutes itself as a genre-specific autopoietic field” (43). I suggest that this symbolic life and death divide, can be read as awakening duende as creative force, passion, and grief but also as cooperative or known roots; recalling that Lorca writes that “Estos sonidos negros son el misterio, las raíces que se clavan en el limo que todos conocemos, que todos ignoramos, pero de donde nos llega lo que es sustancial en el arte” (45). Girmay envisions these dark, creative roots too, “I imagined the roots of trees & flowers taking root in the mouths of the dead, / & the dead whispering into all the ears of all the roots / bil’ee, bil’a, eat, eat, grow, grow, grow,” not as singular spaces of origin but as generative places (70). This tension with root and origin is

further provoked as Girmay creates in her epigraphs a collage of Darwinian proportions, choosing to cite two refrains from *The Origins of Species*. The first epigraph, alone on the page (“ghosting” as Aracelis Girmay calls it) troubles forms, creative life, death, and nonhumanities:

Thus, from the war of nature, from the famine and death, the most exalted object which we are capable of conceiving, namely, the production of the higher animals, directly follows. There is a grandeur in this view of life, with its several powers, having being originally breathed into few forms or into one and that, whilst this planet has gone cycling according to the fixed law of gravity, from so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been, and are being, evolved (x).

From death, famine, then, or “the war of nature,” comes a force that animates a shifting series of forms, reducible and irreducible (“into few or one”) to generate all sorts of possibilities for life. Girmay follows from this first epigraph with her table of contents, then returns to another blank page where the next epigraph, also from *The Origins of Species*, intervenes and is redirected. Girmay continues her reflections on form defaulting to a conversation between human and animal anatomical frames: “The framework of bones being the same in the hand of a man, wing of a bat, fin of a porpoise, and leg of the horse, the same number of vertebrae forming the neck of the giraffe and of the elephant, and innumerable other such facts, at once explain themselves on the theory of descent...” (x). Human and nonhuman form works between ideas of “descent”, which the reader might consider alongside concepts of shared, lived or living inheritances, but also of the way in which an evolution of forms

involves an excess which necessitates a nullification of a death, of some piece of a form, and a creative or generative force of deviance that carries this negation with it—these are the modalities of life that are the framework of this elegiac collection. Nandi Comer, another notable young poet whose work focuses on Latin America, and African Diaspora, comments on this aspect insightfully in her review of *Kingdom Animalia*:

In her second collection, *Kingdom Animalia*, Aracelis Girmay asks, "I want to know what to do / with the dead things we carry." The kingdom in the title refers to the taxonomic classification of organisms, originally designed to divide all natural objects into animal, vegetable, and mineral. It's how scientists sort the living from the nonliving; single-celled organisms from multi-celled; plants from humans. But in this collection Girmay asks us, what about the departed? What about the souls who leave us physically, but whose memories accompany us ages after their deaths? Throughout *Kingdom Animalia*, the poet challenges us to reconsider the interconnections between family, nature, and the spirit world (172-3).

Moving from epigraph to the titular poem, "Kingdom Animalia" and "Elegy", to poems like "On Living", "Abuelo, Mi Muerto," "Dear Minnie, Dear Ms.", and "Zewdit" the forces of human and nonhuman closeness to death are propelled through "section i. a book of dirt," a duende-like energy sustained throughout the collection. The poem "Zewdit", in particular, helps me to reflect on how a force I *might* call duende intervenes as a way of concluding this discussion.

Zewdit, Diaspora, and Concluding Deaths

I read “Zewdit,” as a poetic variation and elaboration of the mysterious death of the Empress of Ethiopia, Zewditu (1876-1930), and as an allegory for the black diaspora as conflated with death. Duende is all that has black sounds, and occupies the edge, a wound-space of death that travels through the artist. It is important to suggest this possibility, as practitioners of Global Black Studies in the academy (Wynter, McKittrick, Weheliye) continue to grapple with the commutable properties bestowed on and around black livelihood and the edges of humanness. “Zewdit”, writes Girmay, is what everyone says when looking at “the old photograph of the birdish / & beautiful child,” the speaker observes, commenting that this analogue fragment is all that is left of “Zewdit”, a possible, unknown ancestor (25). Zewdit, in comparison with duende, is framed by nonhuman echoes: “Small, like the skeleton / of the sparrow, my father’s voice / saying she was gone” (25). Duende is a voice which comes up through the speaker’s feet like a possession. The poem “Zewdit” is about both a possession and a dispossession—like Lorca's discussion of duende, it's a conversation with the dead, an expression of intimacy with death and with the dead, with remnants of a displaced speaker’s memory.

The speaker continues, citing that “Zewdit,” the ancestor or the utterance, was not a force that could be localized. She is not in her family’s houses nor “on a train or at the hotel / in Frankfurt, on a layover, she was not one of the women there / who looked up from folding the hot blankets / & mopping the floor to kiss my cheeks & kiss / my cheeks when I said Yes! Adis Ogdo” (25). Adis Ogdo (also mentioned in

“Self-portrait as the Snake”) displaces the speaker and appears as a conduit for understanding who, what or where Zewdit is not—the negative space of Zewdit, linking Zewdit’s nearness to death and loss: “Because she was not one of them who took me / for tea & accompanied me to the airport the next day / when I said the name of my grandfather’s town//though we were thousands of miles away, because / there are no new letters marked with international stamps now” (25-26). “Zewdit” continues, linking these negative spaces where death and displacement find receptive nonhuman interlocutors:

I believe that she was here once, & has gone—Everything
is the absence of her: if she stands, this morning with the deer
outside
the window of this house I borrow, if she stands with the deer
right now, this cold & April morning, all I see are deer.
If she laughs with the laughter of crows & other birds
In the morning, all I hear are crows & other birds.

This world, uninterrupted by her body & her skin, as if,
like in the story of cats, she has brought the great bird of the day
to my door,
the day, large & great, in her invisible mouth. As if
this world without her face is only the sentence, She has gone.
(26).

This passage from “Zewdit” reiterates some both of Nandi Comer’s and my own ongoing questions about how to read the nonhuman forces present in these works. How is it that we read the poet’s challenges for the reader to reconsider the connections and disconnections between nonhuman depictions of the self, as in self-portraiture, or in the case of Zewdit, remnant retellings, and spaces of exchange? Can theories from the dis/possessive force of duende be read here also? Zewdit is the absence filled by the nonhuman deer, the crow’s laugh, full of living creation yet also of a void, the being in the world which is, in the end, only its own negation. These are the only stakes that can invoke the duende—life itself.

Poems like “Zewdit,” which draw together Global Black histories and cultures, and trouble rootedness are concerns continued throughout the arc of Aracelis Girmay’s work—together with the mourning of nonhuman/human remnants. Girmay’s recent work *The Black Maria* (2016) pursues framings of the self against African diasporic histories, contemporary plights of the migrant, and black death and white supremacy in America. The collection is underpinned by Girmay’s retelling of the Eritrean refugee crisis, found in Part I “elegy”, which pits migrants against an unrelenting sea—a recurring theme in her work. The importance of water as a place of passage for both language and mourning is also apparent. In “luam/asa-luam”, “the afterworld sea,” Girmay sets a scene of children gathering water from a river and singing.

when we were going to fetch river from the river,
it was filled with water sounds
one girl tells me “mai” was her sister’s name,
the word for “flower.” she has been saving

this one for a special trade. I understand
& am quiet awhile, respecting, then give
her my word “mai,” for “water,”
& another girl tells me “mai” is “mother”
in her language, & another says it meant,
to her, “what belongs to me,” then
“belonging,” suddenly, is a strange word,
or a way of feeling, like “to be longing for,”
& you, brother, are the only one,
the only one I think of to finish that thought,
to be longing for
mai brother, my brother

I underscore the importance of water here, as it dialogues with Girmay’s tendency to use nonhuman interlocutors as a way to facilitate underlying themes, but also, since I will explore the role of water further in my fourth chapter “How to Read in a River Without Water Damage.” The second half of *The Black Maria*, titled “the black maria,” explores blackness in the United States. This title could be read in several ways. “Black” and “Maria” might refer to a plurality of “mar” or seas through which blackness is read or by the coupling of blackness with the commonly used name Spanish name, “María.” Girmay wields language carefully in both her pacing and poetic constructions to create a diasporic dialogue, which invokes both a mournful and regenerative tone, personal and political. The two sections are in conversation but not comparative. Girmay anticipates this in her first section by continuing much of the

trajectory from her earlier work (examined through *Kingdom Animalia*) writing that, “I, The Living. / Which is / my portrait? / The right hand / bleeding the page / for its marrowmarks / or the silence my left hand / inherits?” (22). I close with these passages to reiterate how the trajectory of Aracelis Girmay’s corpus of work draws on several lenses and vacillates between criticisms and canons. These include influences from African American letters and Black Feminist critical theories of the nonhuman, which I have read as in conversation with and between Latin@ American referents. In my next chapter I will continue to explore nonhuman poetic dialogues interstitially. Specifically, I look to the rather unlikely example of Appalachia, the United States’ backland territory of to examine how these relationships are implicated in the production of human and nonhuman spaces and the production of texts therefrom.

CHAPTER 3
APPALACHIAN AMERICAS

Back Country Immigrant Gap
I though we fell asleep
austere and isolated—
two frogs calling across Rock Lake.

By morning, deer prints
new-pressed
in the black ground between our tents---
more lives move beside us
than we know

- María Meléndez, “Back Country Immigrant Gap”

Latinx Appalachia: Scars, Scaffolding, Space.

Latinxs are changing the cultural and racial landscape of Appalachia, reflecting different emergent realities of a region, of American backlands, unfolding with increasing diasporic presences. Appalachia, at the same time, is a space where the physical importance of land cannot be understated. Livelihoods, largely of the white majority therein, have depended on a tenuous relationship with land, from aggressive mining tactics and to heated debates over natural gas. At stake when cutting through these landscapes at the same time are the slippages between what are acceptable lives and for whom, ideas which connect various themes I’ve been exploring throughout my dissertation, and in this chapter I will draw in Latinx voices from and through this peripheral space.

Notably, migration and immigration in the area has spiked in the last decade. Census reporting from “The Appalachian region in 2010: A census data overview

chartbook” estimates that the population has “doubled between 2000 and 2010, with more than 300 Appalachian counties experiencing an increase in Hispanic population that matched or exceeded the national average” (Pollard 19). Projects like "Las voces de los Apalaches", a multimedia resource produced by the University of Kentucky's Appalachian Center, grapples with how to approach this Latin@American chorus. I read this Appalachia not through a lens of Latin@American migration as assimilation, but, rather, of how this space, which is projected as homogenously poor, white, rural becomes a place for reconsidering layers of livelihoods and Latinx literary production vis-à-vis the scaffolding of landscape.

The Latinx Appalachian poetics I approach illustrate how the artists move in and through Appalachia as a poetic space that is in tension with what is bare/full, human/nonhuman, urban/rural, local/global, Latinx/Latin@American letters. In this chapter, I look at how writing the nonhuman together with the concept of diasporas are at play in Latinx ecopoetic crossings in Appalachia and through Latin@America and productions of space. I ask these questions by employing the technique of close reading while keeping in mind insights from Chapter Two regarding Sylvia Wynter’s work, specifically her arguments about autopoiesis and environment. Wynter, from her readings of Maturana Varela’s autopoiesis, suggests a reconsideration of how systems of knowledge and environment are semi-autonomous. Through an autopoietic lens, I consider that Appalachia is not, then, a void or barbarous zone, strip mined of culture, with strict boundaries, but rather a complicated region where the nature/culture divide can be creatively troubled through poetry. I approach these crossings between Appalachian landscape, nonhuman and canon, through Latinx poets Maurice Kilwein

Guevara and Ada Limón.

In his approach, canonical American Appalachian poet Charles Wright notes how the use of landscape shapes how to give form to these and other concepts in the region. He writes the following in *Scar Tissue*, “Landscape was never a subject matter, it was a technique, / A method for measure, a scaffold for structuring” (“The Minor Art of Self-defense”). Wright declares at the start of “Scar Tissue II” that, “Time, for us, is a straight line, on which we hang our narratives. / For landscape, however, it all is a circling / From season to season, the snake’s tail in the snake’s mouth, no line for a story line” (*Kenyon Review*). Likewise, Latinx writers Maurice Kilwein Guevara and Ada Limón engage with poetry and landscape—traveling between Appalachia and Latin@America through this “all circling”, autopoietic, nonhuman saturated medium, disrupting linear notions of how literary production might move between these two spaces.

The first poet I discuss, Maurice Kilwein Guevara, writes in his book of poems, *Poema*, that Appalachian Pittsburgh is “America II,” (his native Colombia is “America I”). And amidst these spaces he interjects the canonical voices of Federico García Lorca, Gabriel García Márquez, Joan Brossa, Santiago Calatrava, Gertrude Stein, and Eunice Odio, among others, together with nonhuman referents. These canonical touchstones, which permeate the collection, are part of the way in which Kilwein Guevara negotiates myriad landscapes between the Americas. In a similar thread as Charles Wright, for Kilwein Guevara landscape and nonhuman forces provide a “scaffolding,” a structure: however, the avant-garde nature of *Poema* also pokes holes in or exposes breaks in crossings between canons and diasporas.

Contemporary Latinx writers who work across these lines, particularly through less commonly crossed spaces like the routes through Appalachia to Latin@America, must contend with the multiplicities of marginalization of their writing. This takes on several valences for writers like Guevara; there is the position of the Latinx poet as a “minority writer” in a U.S. canon, as a Latinx writer in a Latin American context, and, then, doubly, again, in an already marginalized periphery between the rural and industrial spaces of Appalachia. Appalachia has been inscribed in United States’ consciousness as a space of, specifically, white poverty, a place pressed to the margins of intellectual currency, to be written about, at a healthy distance, and not from. Edwin Black cites this region as a place of “unfit” Americans, and that this notion gained force in public imaginaries during early to mid-twentieth century. “In the 1930s,” writes Black in *War Against the Weak: Eugenics and America's Campaign to Create a Master Race*, “the Brush Mountain hill folk, like many of the clans scattered throughout the isolated Appalachian slopes, lived in abject poverty. With little education, often without running water or indoor plumbing, and possessing few amenities, they seemed beyond the reach of social progress...They were easily considered alien. Quite simply, polite Virginia society considered them white trash”

(4). Appalachia harkens towards a politics of whiteness and “trash” as a configuration of discarded excess of raced white bodies, which are perpetually pushed to the south—to be passed on. Appalachia—the uncultivated and undercultured “barbarie” or “sertões” of North America—is at the same time, regardless of the actual geography of Appalachia which extends through the Northern rustbelt, “south” and an “unfit” place, a space driven by an impulse with erasure toward a certain kind of whiteness

that is rarely named. In this disavowal, white Appalachia also becomes doubled as a space of anti-blackness and anti-brownness by omission. Affrilachian poets like Frank X. Walker, the editor of *Pluck!*, *The Journal of Affrilachian Arts and Culture*, have, of course, debunked this myth of Appalachia as a place that is solely white and devoid of artistic production. Rather than fall into the dichotomy of speaking of spaces as white/black and juxtaposing only Affrilachian poets with Appalachia as an overdetermined white space, I discuss what has been paid comparatively less attention, which are Latinx and Latin@American contributions to the region, while considering diasporic dialogues.

Maurice Kilwein Guevara's work engages with the nonhuman ecologies between his native Colombia and adoptive Appalachian Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, in a manner that allows the reader to look to how the artist channels overlapping rural and industrial ideas of life. Guevara's work lies in the periphery of the routes between what have become imagined as cosmopolitan Latinx hubs for literary production like-- Miami, New York City, Los Angeles, Buenos Aires., Mexico City, among others. Through engaging these "sparse" spaces, both Ada Limón and Maurice Kilwein Guevara trouble the suggestion that theorist Michael Dowdy proposes in *Broken Souths*: that "North American readers/viewers, including Latinos, readily consume packaged ('crenulated borders') images of Latinos and Latin America. These 'borders' are purely for show, easily torn apart" (130). I argue that another way to "tear them apart" is through a reconsideration of how nonhuman landscapes and interlocutors cross or transgress literary spaces. I draw these critical viewpoints into conversation with Appalachian-Latinx poets Ada Limón and Maurice Kilwein Guevara.

Packaging, Crossing. Grounding, Text.

As a foray into these critical contours, first I consider what is at stake in reading human/nonhuman encounters with landscape and space in these works. In her seminal work, *Extinct Lands, Temporal Geographies: Chicana Literature and the Urgency of Space*, Mary Pat Brady discusses, to paraphrase it briefly, how identities, subject formations, and figures are mired in or tied to the re/productions of certain spaces and selves. One of the most poignant examples of this is in the narrativization of scenes of border transgression in Chican@ literature. Brady writes, “Crossing scenes in Chicana/o literature often explore the desire to double-cross the border—to trick the extensive machinery of containment, of discipline, and of exploitation that has historically made the border a proving ground not simply for citizenship but for humanness as well” (68). These stakes for “humanness” surge through this discourse as the border superimposes tensions between human and nonhuman referents onto migrant bodies, as I’ve discussed previously in this project and will continue to parse through Stacy Alaimo’s *Bodily Natures* in a later chapter. Michael Dowdy, in *Broken Souths*, again, touches on Brady’s work in his discussion of the both space and nature, as between canons. In the framing of his project, Dowdy clarifies the nuance of his approach:

Whereas the narrative forms Brady examines are more direct “guides” to place, my focus on poetry reinforces her emphasis on “the relevance of aesthetics” to theories of space while also stressing figurative, metaphoric, metonymic, and image driven mappings of space. Viewing Latino poets as

guides to places in Latin America ultimately maps emergent relations between Latino and Latin American literatures. (12)

Dowdy's insights defy a North by South, diametrically opposed, or purely comparative idea of how to read Latinx poetry. His approach to a "metaphoric, metonymic, and image driven" mapping owes much to Brady's earlier work. This method resonates with my strategic, lyrical readings of nonhuman signs as kinds of guideposts that shape and reshape how to engage with texts between Americas.

Michael Dowdy also underscores the importance of acknowledging revolutionary productions of space and place through ecological processes at several turns in *Broken Souths*; these readings gain strength in the chapters entitled "Hemispheric Otherwise in the Shadow of '1968': Martín Espada's Zapatista Poems" and "'Andando entre dos mundos': Maurice Kilwein Guevara's and Marcos McPeck Villatoro's Appalachian Latino Poetics."

Dowdy and Brady meet, and, subsequently Dowdy draws in ecological processes together with a critique of neoliberalism; a tactic, which influences my own readings. A salient example of this approach can be found in the early pages of the text where Dowdy notes that "conceptualizing the revolutionary production of space and place through ecological processes" challenges the conditions of capitalist spatial formation, something which Brady argues of Chicana literature (6). It is important to note that neoliberal and capitalist critiques alongside imaginaries of space are at the crux of Dowdy's arguments, something which I will not beleaguer in my own approach. It is a point where our close readings, both otherwise heavily invested in space, ecological actors, and Latinx by Latin@ American literary production, diverge.

In his approach, Dowdy notes, the production of space is a route shaped by multiple spheres, human and nonhuman, and between Americas, something that resonates with how Maurice Kilwein Guevara and Ada Limón draw in local and global geographies into their poems, while pressing into symbols of nature and culture from both urban and rural life. These distinctive approaches are novel, as they are often divided sets of terms, which are read as mutually exclusive. Noting the false dichotomies between the “wild” and the city, nature and culture, is important when reading how “backwardness” in spaces like Appalachia is disrupted. One must bear in mind the precedent set, as many theorists have noted, by both by capitalist and conquest impulses to attempt to “civilize” or commodify and to parse nature as not only backward but as either pristine or vacuous, pastoral or savage. Likewise, I read that there is a concurrent impulse particularly, to package and simplify Latinx diasporas and their presence in the Latin@American canon as exotic or as merely derivative reiterations of or elaborations on established icons or movements from the Hispanist tradition.⁸

This tendency, in Latinx literature, to be marketed in an “exotic” manner, is partially derived from the concept that Latinx literature is often imagined as belonging only in or to certain regions. However, when relegated only to these centers, these spaces may then become commodified peripheries and are often packaged against sweeping North-South Latin American qualifiers. I want to focus on the tensions between locations and migrations. Kilwein Guevara’s western Pennsylvanian and

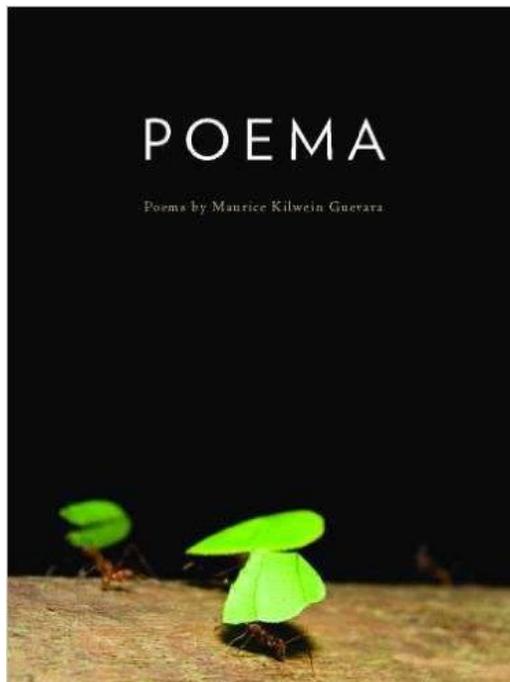
⁸ In my pedagogical experience, this takes shape in the way of a persistent classroom debate wherein each text is somehow part of Magical Realism. These arguments, however, mirror the approach that many high-profile book reviewers and publishing houses employ in their parroting of this rhetoric.

Latin@American poetics is a codex that invokes overlapping audiences through rural-urban ecologies, the invocation of blue collar labor, rustbelt aesthetics, and Latin@American surrealists, to name a few. Maurice Kilwein Guevara and Ada Limón explore how the space of Appalachian and Latinx livelihoods converge and diverge, often by using nonhuman landscapes to “develop an Appalachian Latino poetics by drawing from and transforming Latino, Latin American, and Appalachian traditions and practices” (Dowdy 123-4).

In my first two chapters, I’ve discussed how to read nonhuman interventions alongside Latinx and Hispanist canonical concepts and symbols—for example, Borges’ blue tigers, techniques of self-portraiture, collage, black feminist theories of the nonhuman, and the powering force of duende. Duende is conflated with somewhere south, imbued with blackness on the edge between creativity, nonhuman creation, and death. Duende is an affective force, like a flow, an animism channeled between these spaces and livelihoods. I’ve moved between nonhuman poetry and gestured toward performance and duende as part of a “doing.” In my discussion, I’ve looked towards artists who channel themselves between nations and inheritances, troubling the idea of a singularly rooted diaspora and minority literature in Latin@America while highlighting a group of writers for whom alternative geographies or routes, mediated by nonhuman forces, are integral to their artistic practice. The presences of Lorca’s duende, Borges’ bestiary (and blue tiger) in Natalie Diaz’ *When My Brother Was An Aztec*, or Aracelis Girmay’s transatlantic poetics and interspecies art, as poetry, portraiture, and collage in *Kingdom Animalia*, trouble how “minority” writers repackage canonical figures and forces, how these works travel,

and, subsequently, are re-parceled together into specific genres of humanity. In my work, I look at how nonhuman referents do much of the work of reconsidering the anthropocentric idea of “branding” this poetry—branding in the sense of the forging of mark or ownership, of a product, of an animal, and branding as in labeling for a consumer audience.

This “branding” becomes particularly important to bear in mind when considering how Maurice Kilwein Guevara’s *Poema*, was received by Latinx literati and critics. Poet, theorist, and essayist Francisco Aragón--who has worked assiduously in compiling the voices of contemporary Latinx poets in canonical and experimental translation--argues, in *The Latin American Review of Books* that *Poema* establishes the Colombian-born Maurice Kilwein Guevara as “the most ‘Latin American’ of Latino poets in the US.”



(Figure 3.1 McDonald, Leigh 2009. "Leaf Cutter Ants")

Aragón cites *Poema*'s canonical loci in his approach to this claim. Referencing the book's cover art, Aragón riffs on the canonical possibilities on the horizon of Guevara's work, "FEDERICO GARCÍA LORCA titled his first book *Libro de poemas*. Luis Buñuel frequently filmed insects. To see POEMA, therefore, in plain white against stark black, hovering above leaf cutter ants hefting their green cargo — as book cover's go — evoked and telegraphed what one might find in Maurice Kilwein Guevara's latest volume of poems" ("A Most Latin American Latino"). Francisco Aragón continues, noting the following:

The range of artists and eras Guevara engages is admirably ample, and the sensibility throughout—its engagement with what I'll call more avant-garde techniques in that they resist facile narrative, and the allusions to various events in the history of the region— places the collection, in my view, within a tradition that is arguably as Latin American as it is American. Put another way, *Poema* establishes the Colombian-born Guevara as the most "Latin American" of Latino poets in the United States, if not simply one of our most cosmopolitan poets, period.

Aragón's choice of terms is intriguing. When placing Maurice Kilwein Guevara's volume of poems, he approaches the text by both by the quality of its literary breadth and depth, and settles on the qualifier of "cosmopolitan" as a virtue. I find this point particularly interesting given the precedents of the term "cosmopolitan" in Latin America literary theory, and, also, doubly relevant considering how Aragón harkens to avant-garde style in the same breath. He places Maurice Kilwein Guevara's work in a continuum with the kinds of terms which echo an imaginary derived from *modernismo*

in Latin America, which served a response to regional backwardness—and which, in turn, is the language that has been used to talk about Appalachia. Aragón also claims Kilwein Guevara as “ours” (“...if not simply one of our most cosmopolitan poets, period”), though it is unclear which signifier to attach to this “our”: Latinx, Latin American, or otherwise.

Across these spaces, Aragón himself has curated a unique approach to the Hispanic canon. He has a long history of working with canonical re-routings and interpretations. His collection, *Glow of Our Sweat* (2010), includes poems, evocative essays, and creative translations of Lorca and Rubén Darío, Walt Whitman and Rainer Maria Rilke. Curiously, Aragón translated, though his preferred term is “elaborated”, sections of Francisco X. Alarcón’s experimental verse project (which also harkens to Lorca) in *From the Other Side of Night/Del otro lado de la noche* and his more “traditional” translations appear in *Federico García Lorca’s Selected Verse: A Bilingual Edition* (1996). It also bears mention he is committed to emerging Latinx poets and compiled a collection entitled *The Wind Shifts: New Latino Poetry*, likely referencing an ecologically-driven poem by Wallace Stevens.⁹ Given these precedents, Aragón’s evaluation of Kilwein Guevara’s *Poema*, for whom, like many contemporary Latinx poets, relatively limited scholarship exists, is not a casual one that ought to be passed over as a compulsory or cursory book review. And, moreover, the way in which Aragón draws together *Poema*, inter-american poetics, and the canon, is

⁹ “The Wind Shifts”, by Wallace Stevens: “This is how the wind shifts: / Like the thoughts of an old human, / Who still thinks eagerly/And despairingly. / The wind shifts like this:/Like a human without illusions, /Who still feels irrational things within her. / The wind shifts like this:/Like humans approaching proudly, / Like humans approaching angrily. / This is how the wind shifts: / Like a human, heavy and heavy, / Who does not care” (*Wallace Stevens : Collected Poetry and Prose* 68).

something that requires mulling over.

Michael Dowdy, while recognizing the variety of ways in which Latinx poets approach language and canon—if and how to translate, which languages and figures to conserve—insists that it has to do with “branding.” In *Broken Souths*, he compares this to how Francisco Aragón introduces his bilingual collection, *Puerta del Sol*. In describing Aragón’s “personal decision” to include his own Spanish “versions” of his original English-language poems, he notes that “Aragón prefers the term ‘elaboration’ to ‘translation’ and disavows ‘faithful[ness] to the English’” (xii– xv). This tension between languages and poetic codings has to do with how Latin@ American and Latinx signifiers are read, an important consideration when approaching Latinx poets who redirect them. Dowdy writes that: “There ‘Borges’ is a cipher for a nonpolitical Latin American vanguard and ‘Neruda’ for political poetry...Borges ‘codes’ as ‘postmodern,’ ‘apolitical,’ and ‘intellectual.’ As overflowing rather than empty signifiers, these Latin American icons are marketing keywords arbitrating Latino literary value. This is not to deny their influence on Latino poetry but to insist that literary and economic languages are deeply enmeshed and often convoluted” (145). Although Dowdy is ostensibly concerned with the ways in which Latinx literature has been commodified by neoliberal ideas of “market” and “value” and have been forced through, consequentially, a very narrow set of Latin American terms (many times, ill-fitting ones), it is important to recognize this as the dominant set of relations in order to see how artists, like Diaz, Girmay, Limón and Kilwein Guevara (among others) approach these questions.

These ideas of periphery, canon, human and other help examine how the poet

connects to and from Latin@American canonical figures through nonhuman landscapes in the outlying region of Appalachia. Through a poetics of nonhuman relations Maurice Kilwein Guevara in *Poema* and Ada Limón's *Bright Dead Things* expand alternative geographies through artistic practice. I conclude with thoughts on how these inventive texts expand the geographical and aesthetic parameters of Latin@American studies.

Autor, retratos, Appalachia, Epigraphical Mappings: Toward *Poema* and Poetics

Kilwein Guevara's interamerican poetic approach, as noted by Dowdy, "enigmatically reworks Colombian and Appalachian images in northern Appalachia," towards, "an Appalachian Latino poetics by drawing from and transforming Latino, Latin American, and Appalachian traditions and practices" (123-124). Kilwein Guevara's "reworking" of these traditions begins, from the very outset of his work in *Poema*, as discussed in Aragón's book review by way of the text's cover art. Aesthetically this jacket is a black void scattered with one prominent leaf-cutter ant and several of his cohorts in soft focus, and one floating word "POEMA", a nod to Catalán poet and artist Joan Brossa. The poems within, like their packaging, harken to canonical artists, traveling together through the nonhuman realm while navigating landscapes that are somewhat nebulous, whose focus is blurred by the motion of the poet-traverser. Turning the initial pages, the reader is struck by book's dedication, a line from singer Álvaro Carrillo's *Sabor a mí*: "Soy tan pobre ¿Qué otra cosa puedo dar?" (i). Further setting the stage is Maurice Kilwein Guevara's epigraph to Section I. Here the ecological scene for *Poema* begins with a citation from French Surrealist

artist Claude Cahun.

Kilwein Guevara's chosen epigraph maps out a hazy evocation of sexualized bodies against and away from landscape imagery as a reflection of a perturbed pastoral life. It reads: "A man believes he has photographed the hair of the woman he loves, mingled with bits of straw as she sleeps in a field. But in the developed snapshot there appear a thousand divergent arms, shining fists, weapons; we see that it's the photo of a riot" (2). The epigraph disrupts an intimate pastoral moment, transforming its double-take into a landscape fraught with bodies and strife. The fusion of body and earth enacted as a marking of defiance, a riot, is echoed throughout *Poema*, particularly in "Poema Andino," for Paul Celan: "Above the highlands / moon the color of paper ash. / Faint stream of blood / in the fields, apron of wind, horsemint: a human arm, brown and veined, is rising now / up through the circuitry of maize" (72). This deference to Paul Celan, himself a both a poet and forced labor camp survivor, recalls the edges of bare life and beyond. To better understand these shifting bodies, however, it is helpful to situate epigraph's author Claude Cahun. Claude Cahun was an artist, poet, theatrical practitioner, and was active in both political and intellectual life in avant-garde Paris.

Of note for our continuing discussion on the technique of autorretrato, collage, and feminist theories of the nonhuman, is the fact that Cahun is most widely recognized for her photographic staged self-images, which blurred subjects and often obscured gender. As Gen Doy notes in *Claude Cahun: A Sensual Politics of Photography* (2007) on one of the artist's most iconic works, "*Aveux non Avenus* both displays Cahun and conceals her at the same time, through words and pictorial

collages, as autobiographical elements are mixed with poetic fantasy. Indeed, this is what many of her photographs do – simultaneously display and hide the self” (22). The reader may recall that both Natalie Diaz and Aracelis Girmay, discussed in chapters one and two of this dissertation, also employed collaging to layer human and nonhuman bodies, creating uncertainty about the limits of species and bodily binaries. Maurice Kilwein Guevara’s choice to cite Cahun’s looking across a landscape of emergent bodies, sets the tone for the book and the spaces it carves out. The significance of epigraph choice as a precursor or formula for how to read Kilwein Guevara’s work at large is indebted to Dowdy’s insights. Dowdy comments on the use of epigraph in his reflections on *Postmortem* (1994), a collection steeped in nonhuman exchanges with the recurring figure of “the Young Beast” and *Autobiography of So-and-so: Poems in Prose* (2001). He sees the epigraph as a thread linking these works and questions how epigraphs can alter how we might orient Latinx texts in diaspora:

The epigraphs to *Postmortem* and *Autobiography of So-and-so* critique this dynamic by broadening and constricting, respectively, conventional expectations about Latino writing. If one were to read Kilwein Guevara’s collections chronologically, Cruz’s proclamation, “We’re all immigrants to this reality,” would constitute the initial encounter with his poetics. This piece of paratext questions what constitutes “reality” by stressing metaphysics over the essentialized dimension of Latino experience, immigration, which the quote transforms into a universal human experience. (132)

Postmortem is foregrounded as a human experience that is exclusively understood through the terms of the immigrant figure. Meanwhile, in his discussion of

Autobiography, Dowdy stresses the disruption of an “autorretrato” through this “broken mirror”:

The epigraph to *Autobiography* comes from Gabriel García Márquez: “I returned to this forgotten village, trying to put the broken mirror of memory back together from so many scattered shards.” Why would Kilwein Guevara allude to the most famous Colombian and iconic master of magic realism to introduce the “autobiography” of an anonymous (“So-and-so”) Colombian immigrant to Appalachia? Homage is part of the story but insufficiently explanatory. Whereas García Márquez is a key cipher, like the drug mule, of external perceptions of Colombia, and thus serves Kilwein Guevara as a primary figure in his “territory of images,” a Borgesian thread ultimately connects the two epigraphs. The archetypes of Borges’s metaphysical poetics, such as the mirror, indicate how Kilwein Guevara imagines metaphysical “breaks” in Latino subjectivity. Like Verdecchia’s compass, “the broken mirror” is internalized in the Latino subject. Both create faulty memories, bad directions, and distorted reflections, but unlike the compass that spins subjectivity on a North-South axis, the mirror fragments and multiplies subjectivity to create a dispersed interior geography (132-3).

Michael Dowdy analyzes the role of canonical figures as coded references that Guevara redirects, gesturing to “breaks” in the self and constructions of Latineity. He writes that “because ‘the broken mirror’ requires new ways of seeing and multiple places and positions from which to see, Kilwein Guevara proposes, tests, and models ways of seeing outside the narrow confines of stereotype, convention, and expectation.

This process begins with a self-- reflexive examination of his constructed Colombian-- Appalachian Latino self. ‘Self-Portrait,’ the first poem of *Autobiography*, participates in the practice of the literary autorretrato (self-portrait) common in Latin American writing” (133). I emphasize this precedent of the autorretrato both as a technique in Maurice Kilwein Guevara’s writing—as well as in Aracelis Girmay’s and Natalie Diaz’ approaches, and Ana Mendieta’s body-earth-art who I will discuss in my final chapter—and as a staple of the Latin@American literary canon, with precedents in poems by Rosario Castellanos, Pablo Neruda, Nicanor Parra, and Roberto Bolaño, among others.

In my approach to *Poema*, the technique of autorretrato, moves slightly; this “broken mirror” becomes a faulty lens through which the landscape shifts, betrays, and informs the artist. Epigraphs work as formal interventions to guide the reader through Guevara’s vast and interstitial themes. The environment of the text is reproduced through boundaries demarcated, in part, by the epigraphs, while the body of the text, the poems themselves and their interspecies signs—deform and conform to these systems. This, in turn, signals to the reader, how he or she might begin to package such a text, while unpacking traditional conceptions of Latinx poetics.

In the case of *Poema*, the text is structured in such a way that it provides epigraphical preambles to each of its respective four sections. Each epigraph travels. The second epigraph comes from the Pittsburgh’s formidable native daughter, novelist Gertrude Stein, on the learning of history, and the third epigraph is from “60 Minutes” reporter Bob Simon, who paints an exotic scene of a “bunch of very little people sitting around and cooking a very little elephant” (45). The fourth and final epigraph is

a citation from Haniel Long. Long and Guevara are kindred spirits, as he too, was committed to poetry and prose his fascination with colonial historical retellings through his *Interlinear to Cabeza De Vaca; His Relation of the Journey from Florida to the Pacific, 1528-1536* (1936), and *Malinche* (1939) and to the political poetics and industrial life of *The Pittsburgh Memoranda* (1935), among others. *Poema*'s section IV preamble from Haniel Long is the other edge of Claude Cahun's horizon. It reads: "The sky is a vast inverted bowl of blue; about the circling rim the furnaces are emptying into it like yellow rivers" (67). The lines both effortlessly transition to the subsequent poem "At Sunrise, Oaxaca" and serve to readdress the ambiguous landscape opened by Cahun's vivid epigraph.

Through recognizing the collection's formal divisions, I pull on the work's thematic threads, beginning with Section I, which are then exposed throughout the text at various turns. I pursue these ties to investigate how nonhuman, landscape, lyric, and canon function in *Poema* and how these knots complicate how to read spaces of Latineity and nonhuman interventions in Appalachian landscapes.

Bodies of Text, Interspecies Metaphors, Interstitial Poemas

Cycling back to the initial epigraph from Cahun, I will move from analyzing the formal organization of *Poema*, toward its lyrical content through the inaugural poem, "Lyric". Kilwein Guevara writes "Lyric –or, the poet dreams. I snore.", with a full stop, as if the sleeping state had finitude, was an end or a death. "Greedy for the horizon and its multiplication in rain, / I'm digging up the brow of the rust-veined stone, / Howlers in the high trees telling us to move on," (3). Following the monkey's

proddings, Kilwein Guevara sets a verdant Central American scene and invokes, through the panoramas of this paisaje, the enigmatic poet Eunice Odio as muse: “The white breath of a jet opens the sky. / I want you to open me, Eunice Odio.” This canonical invocation, framed again in terms of hard, punctuated stops, and by the lush ecology of Costa Rica situates *Poema* in a landscape of “Green line of leaf cutter ants, / Thread of time-scented molecules, / Poetry is spit and fungus growing underground.”

(3). Guevara’s call to the poet Eunice Odio is a curious choice. Odio is an enigmatic figure in Latin American literature; as *La Nación* journalist José Ricardo Chávez remarks, “La cronología de Eunice es un laberinto de dudas y certezas que solo la investigación paciente puede ir resolviendo. Hay que andar con mucho cuidado en este terreno, pues todavía, pese a lo hecho, se camina en zona pantanosa” (Chávez). Odio, a Mexico City transplant born in Costa Rica, is known for works like *Los elementos terrestres*, and “Este es el bosque”. She draws a variety of forces and conceptual animisms into her work—she remarked on this, expressing that, “En ‘El Tránsito de fuego’ inventé una palabra: Pluránimo. Si un poeta no es la suma de todas las ánimas, va mal” (90). Pluránimo has to do with a plurality of powering forces wielded by or through the poet as a requirement for artistic praxis; the poet then, functions as a semi-autonomous ente, writing through this plural force. The poet must remain porous, open to the moves and countermoves of this “ánimo”; if not, the poem cannot march forward or survive.

In *Poema*, Maurice Kilwein Guevara drifts between Appalachian and Latin@American landscapes which take shape through nonhuman figures and animisms. I believe these are foregrounded in part by the summoning of Eunice Odio,

invoking, in the process, life across its forms through the poet for whom there is no outside from poem and the “pluránimo.”

Poema's many canon-driven, nonhuman, plural-animas begin to take shape, from this inaugural poem, spilling onto the next page's poem “Against Metaphor”, which is dedicated to Santiago Calatrava (5). On the nature of metaphor and the nonhuman, John Berger suggests in *About Looking*, that historically, the first metaphor was animal because human animals compare themselves to other animals to establish and order similarities and distinctions between our lives and as species (9). This primal comparison is at the headwaters of all future points of assessment, which gives flight to the nature of metaphor at large. In critical theories of the nonhuman, the concept of metaphor is hotly debated. Current debates in critical theories of the nonhuman often pursue questions regarding how to interpret interspecies encounters, rather than reading nonhumans as metaphorical signs or allegories for exclusively human or anthropomorphized anxieties. I argue that this approach, and Kilwein Guevara's, are working against metaphor as points of erasure. “Against Metaphor” reads: “Chair is not minesweeper / Chives not Tympani / Tortoise-shell in heat not the Port of Milwaukee Quitting Time / I am not the grandson of Carlos Guevara Moreno//Frame not Bolivia with Lavender Mountains” (5). This poem reflects on how to define without reducing, and it frames the subsequent piece, “The other word for thesaurus”: “Is treasure. Or Tesoro”, a reference to Sebastián de Covarrubias' foundational text *Tesoro de la lengua castellana o española*. The poem “Against Metaphor”, however, is dense with canonical “nots,” thwarting the idea of a fixed definition and establishing his mappings between Appalachia and Latin@America

through negation. Kilwein Guevara continues: “Dark Moth on the Kitchen Windowsill not Syllable of Julia de Burgos. / Walt Whitman not Espirit d’ Escalier” (5). This dark moth and Julia de Burgos are “nots”, though later in “Pets”, Kilwein Guevara will re-knot, meaning to tie back in de Burgos through the naming of ants, providing another “who” for Julia de Burgos (“On my cotton sheets Julio de Burgos and Manuel Puig are scaling the eastern / face of the cordillera”, 48). The tension between stipulating who or what is metaphor against the backbone of *Tesoro de la lengua castellana o española*, is an important point of departure when considering Appalachian and diasporic places as spaces of inquiry, creative production, but also of thwarted translations.

By denying metaphor as a strategy primarily for affirmation, Guevara primes his world as more than one of only comparative places for absorption or transcription of preexisting narratives or symbols. The moth, rather than functioning merely as an allegorical animal, emerges as the central figure for interrogation many times in *Poema* (“Poema with orange, black-edged wings”, “Then, poema asks”, “West of Eliza Furnace”, “Cage”), and in the section in “Joan Brossa as the Emerald Moth Discharging Energy”:

This is the strophe starring Joan Brossa
as the panicked emerald moth,
Joan Brossa en España, ensnared,
Joan Brossa being eaten by a wet strawberry,
Joan Brossa writing POEMA on a clear lightbulb,
Joan Brossa swimming the butterfly,

Joan Brossa a shape of color balancing
on a blush orchid in tierra caliente,
Joan Brossa at twilight staring up at Gederme,
Joan Brossa's statue with mountainous feet and legs,
genitalia and twisting torso transparent liquid glass
with buzzing filament.

What wakes you
just as you begin to dream of Heidegger
in a clouded field of summer chives? (10-1).

Joan Brossa's mountainous feet and legs stand before the moth, which is "not" an utterance, not a syllable of the formidable Puerto Rican poet Julia de Burgos; it is moving through another interlocutor. The moth struggles alongside the artist Brossa, who shifts into the silhouette of both the form of a butterfly and into the buzzing glass bulb. This material, then, becomes the canvas for Brossa's piece "Poema", a striking avant-garde image. This energy continues in the poem that follows, "Two Poets This Morning and Me in My Red Boxer Shorts", featuring Elizabeth Bishop, Bernadette Mayer, a headless hare, and the question: "Could it hear the micro-sonic frenzy of diaphanous wings?" that flits through the collection (12). Nonhuman interlocutors steadily accompany Kilwein Guevara's lyrics, while divergent landscapes come in and out of focus—a tactic sustained throughout *Poema*.

Landscapes and Escenas Trans-Americanas in Focus

Consider the ecologies traversed between the following string of neighboring poems, “In the City of Havana, El Porvenir”, “Bright Pittsburgh Morning”, and “I’ll never eat another rarebit as long as I live”. These selected poems exemplify how Maurice Kilwein Guevara pushes through landscapes, symbols, and temporalities in *Poema* as a collection. This pursuit underpins the breaks between Latinx and Appalachian aesthetics and points the reader toward complex lyrical portraits of livelihoods between these spaces. Kilwein Guevara’s poems point to the delicate balance between blue-collar industrial aesthetics, disenfranchisement and nonhuman interventions in spaces of remnant development, while also conserving canonical interlocutors between these spaces as anchors.

For, “In the City of Havana, El Porvenir”, Kilwein Guevara summons a recurring figure, which he calls “poema,” a movement of light, a frenzy of wings, a nonhuman blur. For the author the poem, “poema”, is a moth flitting over rural rivers and Caribbean oceans, refracting the light of space and the mourning of a collective historical darkness. “In the City of Havana, El Porvenir”, Kilwein Guevara describes a frigid snow storm descending on Havana: “They say the icy winds actually started two weeks earlier, blowing from the / cracked nostrils and bleeding mouth of a roan horse, supine and abandoned / on the frozen plains of Kansas, the breath (visible from satellites) tinged / a sky-blue and tunneling in horizontal columns as it drilled toward the / Caribbean” (15). Kilwein Guevara’s speaker moves through this image of a frozen landscape in a swirling north-south reading, a gust began from the Midwestern plains which travels and links geopolitical spaces. This future, “el porvenir”, details a radical climate event, which buries the entire island of Cuba:

so—the same Doña Marisol cannot believe how cold the air is, how
pinned
to the clothesline her sheets and homemade dresses and underpants are
starched with the thinnest coating of ice, how the cloudy sky is
suddenly puffs
of light falling on her and melting, how within minutes the rood
overlooking
the sluggish sea is covered in snow, how the little swirls of blowing
white are
filling even her clay flowerpots... (15).

The next morning snow engulfs the island, and the poem ends with image of a bundled statue of José Martí, that emerges through the snow, another touchstone which harkens to canonical modernista poetics laced through landscape. The speaker states that “No one knows at what point someone decides to cover in a woolen blanket / the statue of José Martí holding that little boy made of metal and pointing” (16). The importance of environment, landscape, and depictions of water as a tour de force, particularly in relations with the American north, is not casual, and serve to frame the rescued José Martí’s legacy.

Martí’s writing often transcended spaces between the Americas through literary experimentation. In a foundational work, Julio Ramos turns to poet José Martí, focusing on his tenure in New York as a journalist and proto-anthropologist, depicted in *Escenas norteamericanas* to discuss disparate modernities across the Americas in *Divergent Modernities: Culture and Politics in Nineteenth-Century Latin America*

(2001). Ramos explores how this sense of uneven development might shape the American Latin Americanist literary panoramas that “speak from the periphery” (212). The backland spaces which dominate *Poema*, specifically in this storm which drives North-South through the poem “In the City of Havana, El Porvenir” function, like much of Martí’s work, in contrast to a compulsory idea of literature as synonymous with a modernizing project, whose steady lexicon would be otherwise rooted in coloniality and Man’s hegemony.

José David Saldívar who elaborated the term “Trans-americanity”, specifically emphasizes the poet’s resistance of letrado intellectualism and “the commodification and racialization of U.S. mass culture” in what he calls “the Martí differential” (*Trans-Americanity* 66). Curiously enough, for his poem, “In the City of Havana, El Porvenir”, Maurice Kilwein Guevara chooses a ‘middle American’ rural space and a roan horse as points of origin; he does not frame a picturesque, imposing landscape embedded with unrelenting energy, like Juan Antonio Pérez Bonalde’s “Niágara.” Rather, he departs from what would be an otherwise banal animal death in Kansas, which he explodes into larger than life force. This plain cracked breath is seen from satellites and drills toward the Caribbean, he writes, carving a covered landscape through its wake.

From this frozen Cuban landscape, from which only the figure of José Martí appears to emerge unscathed, burns into a “Bright Pittsburgh Morning”, the next poem in the collection. Guevara writes:

This must happen just right after I die; At sunrise

I bend over my grandparents’ empty house in Hazelwood

and pull it out the soft cindered earth by the Mon River
Copper tubing and electric lines hang down like hairs
The house is the size of a matchbox. I sprinkle bits
Of broken pallets, seeded grass, fingernails, and tamarack
Needles in the open door of the porch. I scratch a Blue Tip
And blow vowels of fire through the living room,
The tunneled hallway. Flames run up the wooden stairs.
I put my ear beside the hot kitchen window
To hear the crackling voices of cupboards and walls.
I flip the welder's mask:
Sun off the rectangular glass, a rose glints before the white torch (17).

Kilwein Guevara inscribes Pittsburgh as a space immediately preceding an imagined death, underscoring the fragility of life, which at the crux of *Poema*, in this, Section I's, penultimate poem. Before his demise, the speaker enters an empty family home, where soft riverbanks are buried with copper, and imbued with blue collar labor, with the snap of the welder's mask. These moments in "Bright Pittsburgh Morning" as processes, function as bridges toward an aesthetic of work and land that echo from Martí's invocation and are reiterated again in "Rata's Preamble" and "Native Mussels", two neighboring poems from *Poema*'s third section. Before continuing to analyze these poems, I would like to underscore how, by drawing together labor and rural spaces, through the canonical figure of Martí, Kilwein Guevara again re-establishes *Poema* as a rigorous collection which questions how to read between Latin@American literary interventions, poetry, and the nonhuman. For Martí, these

industrial referents would have been the Brooklyn Bridge or Perhaps “Coney Island”, according to both Ramos and Saldivar, but what Kilwein Guevara does is redirect these routes, this canonical echo, through Appalachia, a roan, a welder’s mask.

“For the Poet Who Told Me Rats Aren’t Noble Enough Creatures For a Poem”:

Part II

“Rata’s Preamble” continues this labored thread and functions as a family portrait depicted through the lives of a “cache of thirteen baby rats born underground in a field of onions, near Sogamosa” (59). The speaker obscures both time and language through his lines. This timeliness is accomplished through a seriality of “before’s”. He writes, “Before we lived in the apartment,” “before I learned to shave to make myself hairless once again”, “before Cementos Boyaca became one of the largest construction firms in the Americas”, “before the stolen jackhammer” to name a few (59). This rhetorical strategy uses recollection to establish place through work, to shift memory and life from Colombian fields to Pittsburgh ditches, through a rat’s literary preface. Michael Dowdy reflects on how these spaces are connected through the speaker’s hemispheric navigation of work:

The prose poem “Rata’s Preamble”, moreover, follows a rat-narrator as he goes “to work at a desk in Bogotá and later in a ditch in Pittsburgh.” The rat’s class-conscious expression of deprivation—“Ours would be a history of chronic needs”—links urban spaces and spheres of work (“desk” and “ditch”) from south to north through a collective voice of dispossession (132-3).

These interstitial spaces, however, are not only linked through spheres of work, but

also through how working bodies can be read through the nonhuman landscapes. In his reading of on “Rata’s Preamble”, Dowdy privileges several spheres; I sustain that the poem makes a countermove and reveals the flows between “industrial” and “natural” spaces, which are often read as divorced from one another. “Native Mussels,” furthers this line of inquiry as it bleeds histories, work, and landscapes. The poem drifts into Western Pennsylvania where rural and industrial aesthetics, where the trades and the bucolic bleed into each other.

In “Native Mussels,” pollution from factory “development” is filtered through nonhuman forms. The poem reads: “Under the Allegheny / kidney failure from mills and farms / the water is cool / and glaucous / and the water column moves / in the Clarion / mine acids and heavy metals//tiny moons of oxygen / rolling to / the river mussels” (60). Certain members of the bivalves, like mussels, serve as natural filtration systems that may ameliorate river toxicity and contamination. Mussels intervene as a counterpoint to the worker’s kidney failure. They sieve heavy metals from once working mills, through the Allegheny river’s ecosystem; mussels breathe, giving life into the landscape, as the human fallout from industrial development, for land and livelihood is underscored. Kilwein Guevara then returns again to mussels, moth, and a play on the word in “Cage,” through syntax which he locates “with the nesting swallows” (64).

The speaker draws together text, language, and nonhuman on the polluted Allegheny banks: “Of mosquitos, gnats, bluish moths by the bank. / I drag a day’s net of mussels and books over the shoals / to niche under my bridge. I suck in the cool / Slime of bivalves, I savor the ligaments that tie / Vowels to living bone...” (64). These

nuanced turns through mundane nonhuman interventions in space and language emerge through every crack in *Poema*, the same “cosmopolitan” collection which privileges literary authorities from Whitman to Puig.

Pepenador: Poetic Hunter, Gatherer

One way to repackage many of these considerations, nonhuman, labor, literary, canon, back or wasted lands, is to look to how Maurice Kilwein Guevara’s nonhuman lyrical encounters with the literary canon, often function much like his foraging, poetic “Pepenador de palabras”. This “pepenador,” or gatherer, can be found foraging for literary remnants: “Landscape: landfill from a couple of hills away with papers flying and ink / beaked gulls, I’m a scavenger rooting about, picker of words, new father” (56). This pepenador’s labor, like the sifting mussels, the storm that wraps Martí, the moth that flits into glass and poem, recuperates and fragments canonical figures between spaces of Appalachia and the Americas:

priapism: once I dream of Remedios Varo in a hammock between trees and a stream: wake up: that slope is where they slide and dump the near-dead fish without permission after closing time: you fall there, you go under for good: the sun at noon chomps at your neck: once I opened a yellow garbage bag stamped with the insignia of the National Library, cut the corded muslin: finger-tagged, it was the desiccated arm of Cervantes clutching a rusted sword: strata and skin: who knew the next day from a fruit crate I’d hear her infant cry: wrap song to my back: bring her home to the sound of boiling water: constant wing-flap of tarpaper: Lucero (57).

For *Poema*, interspecies lyrical interventions work as emissaries through an unkempt canon, through shifting landscapes. Consider, “Poema with orange, black-edged wings”:

Outside a cabin
In Indiana
Pennsylvania,
I open delicately
the envelope
made of wax paper
and tilt it
toward my pointing finger
the one I once slipped into the wound
at the side of his body
The Monach’s
at first
thin as a slit
then pulsing south
verse,
verse,
verse, (57).

The verse, like Appalachian landscape, is opened through a wound-space, a scar-tissue, and functions in a lexicon of pulsing souths, facilitated by the foraging pepenador and his treasured canonical scrap-pieces.

To conclude this foraging endeavor, I close my considerations of *Poema* with selections from “I’ll never eat another rarebit as long as I live,” a piece which emphasizes the necessity of reading the limits form of the human from the inside to its permeable outsides. Herein, a decaying body becomes the Appalachian landscape. The speaker’s bones vanish, the femur, the ribs, the cervical vertebrae, cheekbones, even the small bones of the ear are mentioned, until eventually, abandoned by his caretaker. The body, no longer able to sustain the human form, fails, “Shadowy claw, teeth, backhoe: / Oh yes, then the calvarium came unhinged” (19). This process of decomposition is foregrounded by and in a wake and a landscape. The poem opens: “Where was the small bone under the round mole on my right hand? / When I touched the cranberry bruise, I remembered me at her wake. / Later, as I drove on, the silhouette of her corpse became the / Appalachians (18). This concept of becoming the Appalachians through the body’s deterioration into this landscape, works as a bridge from which to consider a second text as a point of extension, Ada Limón’s *Bright Dead Things*.

Bright, Dead, Rewildings: Conclusion & Extension

Ada Limón, poet and essayist, writes *Bright Dead Things* transplanting the speaker, a young writer living in New York, to Kentucky. The language of Limón’s text reads as deeply personal and her themes of family life and loss, at times, recalls elements from Girmay and Diaz’ work. However, Matthew Zapruder cites that Limón’s technique does “far more than merely reflect the world: she continually transforms it, thereby revealing herself as an everyday symbolist and high level

duende enabler” (Zapruder). Though thematically and spatially this collection resonates with much of *Poema*, the tone of *Bright Dead Things* is decidedly more lived-in; she crafts colloquial language to an impressive, acute degree. In addition, rather than approaching the Latinx canon in the style in which Maurice Kilwein Guevara references a menagerie of established literary icons, Ada Limón taps into the plight of the emergent writer. In “The Last Move”, the speaker waxes on her life as a Brooklyn novelist, lamenting while swatting the omnipresent Appalachian insects, unlike “In Brooklyn, by the deli, where everything was clean and contained” (5). She continues, “I took to my hands and knees. I was thinking about the novel / I was writing. The great heavy chest of live animals / I had been dragging around for years; what’s life” (6). In *Bright Dead Things*, this affective bestiary is opened and these questions, foregrounded in both the work of the novel and how to endure the weighty cages we carry are contemplated.

The collection mediates the journey of a speaker, who, with some visceral reluctance, (“This is Kentucky, not New York, and I am not important”) writes through Kentucky’s landscapes as she is “rewilded.” In the poem “The Rewilding”, which recalls notes from Kilwein Guevara’s “Rarebit”, the speaker stands over a grave, recalling Daniel Boone’s brother’s epitaph “Killed by Indians”, the wound of history, and the shifting of bodies into land:

Only me and the white bones of an animal’s hand

revealed in the silt.

There remains the mystery of how the pupil devours

so much bastard beauty. Abandoned property.

This land and I are rewilding.

A bird I don't know, but follow with my still living eye.

The day before me undresses in the wet Southern heat:

flower mouth,

pollen burn,

wing sweat.

I don't want to be only the landscape: the bone's buried (8).

“Rewilding”, is a process of conservation and restoration, which seeks to protect or repair natural areas that have been fragmented; not unlike like Kilwein Guevara’s reformative muskels. A second point that *Bright Dead Things* emphasizes, in this poem, “Rewilding” and throughout the collection, are the intimacies between death and land. Limón writes, echoing Claude Cahun, “Look out at the meadow, you can almost see them, generations dissolved in the bluegrass and hay.” (“During the Impossible Age of Everyone” 4). This tension between body and land is in conversation with survival and morning. In “What Remains Grows Ravenous,” the reader is taken through the poignant retelling of a step-mother’s “home death”, whose grief resounds and erupts throughout *Bright Dead Things*. In a subsequent poem, “After You Toss Around the Ashes”, the speaker asks: “What should we do with her ashes? Water or dirt. Water or dirt.”, adding “It wasn’t until later, when / I moved in with him and stood outside on our patchy imperfect / lawn, that I remembered what had been circling in me: I am beau- / tiful. I am full of love. I am dying” (39).

This grief, whose poignancy might remind the reader of Natalie Diaz’ tender

approach to the limits of death and family life, transforms through a variety of nonhuman forms: “Witness the wet dead snake, / its long hexagonal pattern weaved / around its body like a code for creation,” writes Limón. “Let us begin with the snake: the fact / of death, the poverty of place, of skin / and surface” (47). In “Torn”, Limón writes insightfully about a snake who is sin and sinner, mother and father, a split being in life and death with phantom movements, “forcefully denying the split of its being, / longing for life back as a whole, wanting.” The speaker then concludes that the snake moves across “the boundaries of death to touch itself once more, to praise both divided sides equally, as if it was easy” (47). This crystallizes much of the both collections struggles toward and in retreat from life and death’s fragile boundaries, which are mediated through Appalachia. Ada Limón’s lyrics encapsulate not only how to consider productions of death and fragile lives through nonhuman referents in Appalachian landscapes, but of productions of space.

Perhaps one of the best, concluding examples of this comes from “Tattoo Theory,” where Ada Limón layers Latinx, code-switching into Appalachian re-mappings as an act of marked repossession. In her own terms, in the poem “Tattoo Theory” the speaker references “My own personal map of America”:

My own personal map of America on the back of the airplane seat
where the cartoon plane tells you where you’ve been and where
you’re going is, for some reason, in Spanish. So it reads *Montes*
Apalaches. And I like the way it sounds. But the shape of Nebra-
ska is still the same despite the translation; it looks like a sad ani-
mal with his head hangdog low. Just countable days ago, we drove

through that sad dog place and the boys wanted tattoos of the state's outline. *Nebraska! Nebraska Forever! Yeah!* I love the keeping of it, the wanting to keep it, but maybe not on my body. What if I love another state more? What if I love the Montes Apalaches? What if I stop remembering? What if here's where I want to keep it? Here's my permanent puncture, here's my unstoppable ink (87).

The speaker playfully engages translation and landscape (“as a sad animal”) as a way of orienting and marking both the body. Limon’s playful lament over whether or not to tattoo the state, to work through the landscape with a scarring that ends on the note of an “unstoppable ink.” I interpret this to be a transformative reading of the legacy of the written lyric that reflects a turn toward forms, which, juxtaposed with earlier poems that underscored the breaking of livelihoods, reflect a sense of undashed permanence. Throughout *Bright Dead Things*, Ada Limón’s poems shift through space, the act of writing, and nonhuman forms; unlike *Poema*, *Bright Dead Things* has a relentless velocity that blisters into a phoenix-like ascent, or rather, acceptance that life and its remnant must eventually burn. The collection electrifies landscape with intimate possibilities, through a relentless pacing, which serves, in many ways, as a counterbalance to *Poema*. Both works offer perspectives into a Latinx Appalachian poetics that focuses on nonhuman interlocutors as a way of contemplating how these spaces are written through and reproduced beyond the limits of human forms.

CHAPTER 4

HYDROLIBROS OR HOW TO READ IN A RIVER WITHOUT WATER DAMAGE

My currency's spent, death's ironic
Scraping of walls, skin on resistant skin.
We should link our arms around all bodies
Of water because they are all our waters.

- "Susannah's Nocturne," Carmen Giménez Smith

the shadow on your pale cheek is darkened like the blue lake of night.
All you can do is eye the slow gilded stars, the black lake of sky,
memory above the forty-foot trees through a broken branch. The moon
waltzes with the veil of night clouds and finally water gushes and the
tree's roots drink the last waters, the first waters, holy waters brought
down from sky, and you still may think of Moses and mist like you did
when you were twelve, and may still imagine god's waters crashing
down on the heads of your enemies, yet pity the drowned horses.

- "Pity the Drowned Horses," Sheryl Luna.

water flows over me,
light flows out of me

-*Pink Reef*, Robert Fernandez

Rereading, Reseeding: Basia Irland's Riparian Texts

This chapter explores how the artist Basia Irland pursues ideas of performance, poetry, and human-nonhuman boundaries through innovative approaches to bodies—as in both bodies of water and through bodies of texts. Much of Irland's artistic practice is shaped through and by the forms of literary texts as eco-sculptures, which figure between geopolitical spaces. Regarding Latin@American spaces Irland's work

traverses the U.S.-Mexico border, Haiti and the Dominican Republic, as well as several coastal regions of Brazil. I suggest that the way in which the artist plays on form and sews ecological content into her art offers the viewer an alternative insight into the ideas of reading, language, and canon through nonhuman forms. Thus far in this dissertation I have considered viewing Latinx poetic nonhuman encounters as guides to reading in Latin@America, which offer the reader other routes between Latinx and Latin@American literatures. In this chapter, I turn to Basia Irland's experimentation with forms of literary texts to further these questions. In my inquiry, I draw together voices that blur the genres of poetry, performance, and critical theory—chiefly through insights from Stacy Alaimo, Carmen Giménez Smith, and Ana Mendieta.

Irland approaches the boundaries of text and material in a variety of ways that provide alternative trajectories for how to reconsider reading nonhuman forces and forms. One of the most striking examples of this practice is her performance series, *Ice Books: Ice Receding/Books Reseeding*, wherein the artist uses local river water, which she mixes with native seeds.



Figure 4.1 Tome I: Mountain Maple, Columbine Flower, Blue Spruce. Boulder, CO. Basia Irland, 2007.

She freezes and carves this combination into the form of a book, orienting the seeds in such a way as to situate them to follow after the arrangement of a legible text, which is presented on an inviting though fleeting open page. The resulting sculptural image alone is striking, imposingly beautiful though in its execution, it also carries with it a “practical”, conservation-oriented performance element which subsequently unfolds. These frozen forms are then placed into the same river from which their materials were collected; the texts are undone, melt, and release their seeds. There is a performance of a mutual imprinting (on or of) what Irland cites as “ecological languages” or “riparian texts”. Riparian here means the bank of the river, the place of contact between edges, where the text falls away from the literary form and is “reseeded.” The invocations of form and text as shifting content through a progressive performance and the idea of an ecological poetic language are important considerations to bear in mind while reading this chapter.

This concept of “riparian texts” is fitting, as the idea of a riparian place—where land and river brush against each other—involves an idea of exchange between nonhuman bodies. Basia Irland complicates this place of nonhuman exchange into a transcorporeal one, by way to human intervention through the form of the material text. This shifting of nonhuman forms is also symbolic of a human and nonhuman collaborative performance. As her collaborator, David Williams, notes Irland seems to “celebrate giving over ‘authorship’ to elements and natural processes, or at least a desire to collaborate with them” (*Water Library* 8).

I find that considering how Irland probes ideas about the porous nature of form—forms of life and of literature in need of re-seeding, might be a productive way

to pursue some of the questions that pulse through the lifeblood of this dissertation. That is, I focus on questions about nonhuman forms, how they shift in diasporic spaces, and are articulated alongside canonical Latin@American literary figures.

Irland seems to suggest a curious rewriting or reordering of forms that I would like to pursue in this chapter. Amanda Boetzkes in *The Ethics of Earth Art* considers Basia Irland's work as part of a larger reconsideration of earth-art and text, and that while

...the textualization of art is one of the most significant shifts from modernism to postmodernism, at the same time, earth art enacted a deconstructive interplay between natural forces and the material text. It is therefore important to clarify that earth art redirected the textual drive of conceptual art and its legacies, bringing language and representation to its limits through the expansive force of elementals. The textualization of art must therefore be understood not as a merely discursive turn, by which art can be read and its meaning affixed by the shifting contexts in which it is read, but rather as a strategy to cultivate receptivity, so that the artwork precludes any such "reading" and instead unlimits the senses. Basia Irland's *Hydrolibros* series speaks directly to this alternate trajectory (193-4).

I approach "how to read in a river" through critical theoretical approaches to the nonhuman but also through a poetic lens.

In my analysis, I offer a hybrid form of engagement with theoretical and poetic responses to this technique, using the idea of how riparian texts are assembled and undone as some points of orientation for opening this discussion. Specifically, from a theoretical stance, my approach in this chapter will be to look at nonhuman questions

through a material approach. I reference theorist Stacy Alaimo's work to accomplish this, in conversation with Irland's approach to performance while revisiting questions posed in prior chapters. The second thread of my mediation on these questions of form and languages is derived from a poetic approach, which echoes my prior chapters. I address Carmen Gimenez Smith's collection of poems, *Milk and Filth*, which maneuvers between ideas of text, environment, performance, and nonhuman forms through performance Artist Ana Mendieta as a stepping stone to draw these ideas together.

Reading Raw Materials

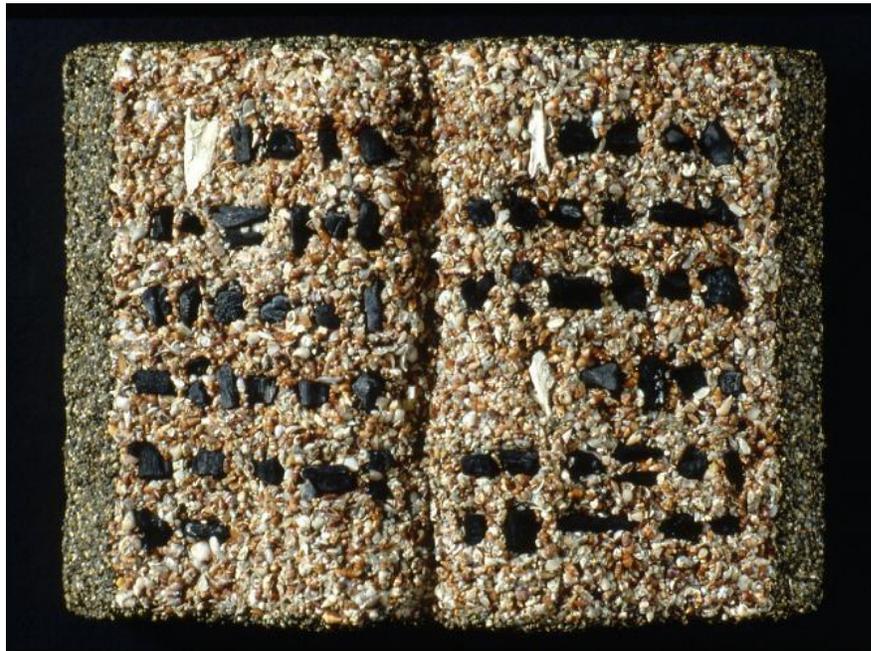


Figure 4.2 "Lamentation Poem for the Crocodiles of Lago Enriquillo" Wood, shell, sand, charcoal, crocodile cranium bone, Basia Irland, 1992.

Questions of source materials are at the forefront of Basia Irland's work. The

artist first began blurring the boundaries of text and water in 1985. Her early work, *Hydrolibros*, involved collecting organic materials, wood, stones, sand, as testaments to the specific ecological crises faced in specific sites. Unlike the *Ice Books*, cited in my introductory example and to which I return later, this series, referred to as *Hydrolibros*, is fixed through Irland's manipulation of materials. The artist uses a careful approach to conservation, which marks *Hydrolibros* as artifacts or pieces of an ecopoetic archive.

These *Hydrolibros*, unlike the *Ice Books*, follow a more traditional literary form, like a non-circulating reference book, that the reader could return again and again. Irland calls this process a way of documenting poetic justice for the site. In her ecopoetic approach, Irland also riffs on concepts like the library and the encyclopedia, as sources of ecological knowledge and material. In an interview with her collaborator David Williams, he notes that Irland, seems to imagine her work as “a kind of a library-in-process, a living transforming archive within which the gaps in maps are inviting and active. You create kind of an international ecological language as text” – a Borgesian approach of life and library, transforming the idea of a living diasporic canon, through nonhuman readings (*Water Library* 26).

One salient project from Irland's *Hydrolibros* archive that exemplifies this quality is the subset entitled “River Books.” Derived from an excavation of discarded library books dumped in a gorge in New Mexico, these texts, which Irland calls ‘grotty relics,’ were then collected, preserved with beeswax and wire, and imprinted with seeds. Irland was careful to conserve, not only their material forms, but also, a

margin of their original legibility alongside the aggregated organic materials.¹⁰ These pieces become, through this process, artifacts that challenge or even enrich how we might conceive of the task of reading with or alongside the nonhuman. Basia Irland repurposes the rejected or ‘ruined’ book, designations which, too, have plagued marginalized works of literature, through curated nonhuman materials. The artist uses salt, tortoise shells, salmon bones, for example, to preserve life in these texts. Irland’s tactics, her sowing of seeds/materials are similar, as I’ve stated, to those used in *Ice Books: Ice Receding/Books Reseeding*; however, in the latter there is an emphasis on an ephemeral form that by necessity travels or shifts place, making the reading into a diasporic exercise that is difficult to pin down. As Boetzkes notes:

Likewise, with her two series *Hydrolibros and Receding/Reseeding*, the American artist Basia Irland sets water in tension with written text, staging the erosion of books, as though to enact the ruination of history. This undoing of text as it is impacted, marked, and dissolved by water clearly shows how contemporary earth art repositions text as a receptive surface (36).

Through Irland’s work, it can be seen that nonhuman forms shift, and are not, by necessity, “at odds” with either the velocity of the fleeting *Ice Books* or the imposing encyclopedic weight of the preserved *Hydrolibros*. Irland’s manipulations of textual

¹⁰ “River Books began when Irland discovered that a library had dumped part of its collection in a gorge near Taos, and the books had been lying in the open air for years on the banks of the Río Grande. There were rabbit turds on them, grass growing up through the pages, and people had been using them for target practice. Most were completely rotten. These grotty objects attracted her as part of a generative cyclical transformation. The books, which were once trees, lived in a library in paper form, and then moved outside again, dumped into a huge pile, as if their words were returning back into the earth. Irland took them into the studio, dried them out, halted the process of deterioration and further decay by covering them in layers of beeswax. Through the amber translucency of the beeswax, some of the words are still legible.”

bodies can be read as moving between margins and centers, riparian banks and transatlantic currents, they follow after canonical forms while reshaping rejected texts. As contributor Lucille Cline has noted of Irland's exercises, "Her sculpted books possess a language of their own, a lyrical and ecological poetry that speaks volumes about the mysteries of nature and the inextricable links between humans and the environment" (*Water Library* 40). One example from this series, which underscores these points, is Irland's "Lamentation Poem for the Crocodiles of Lago Enriquillo". Belonging to the Hydrolibro's series—Ireland's "Lamentation Poem" shifts forms, genres, and borders:

While an artist-in-residence in the Dominican Republic, I was invited to visit Lago Enriquillo, an inland saline habitat and natural breeding place for saltwater crocodiles. The Lake is located near the Haitian border, is no longer protected, and a once-thriving reptile population has been nearly killed off by poachers for eggs, skin, and meat. In the Installation at Altos de Chavón, fragments of crocodile cranium bone, found at the site are placed on piles of salt. A carved wooden book is coated with small shells from the lake and charcoal from the campfires of crocodile hunters. Beginning each 'paragraph' is a segment of reptilian bone, sharp relics of an endangered species (45-6).

"Lamentation Poem for the Crocodiles of Lago Enriquillo", is an endangered nonhuman poetic memorial, which traces the demise of the Dominican/Haitian saltwater crocodile from hunter to remnant. Irland's "poem" forms part of an installation that includes, alongside the paragraphs of seeded text; ghostly illuminated sculptural silhouettes of crocodile bones:



Figure 4.3 "Lamentation Poem for the Crocodiles of Lago Enriquillo" Altos de Chavon, Dominican Republic. 1993. / Lamentation Poem installation.

This “poem” shifts from the form of a paginated text to illuminated forms of the crocodile remnants themselves—pieces of the nonhuman form that alter the experience of reading the poem. At continuation in this chapter, I trouble the connections and disconnections between human and nonhuman forms—and what--- this could mean for the task of reading toward how to read a kind of aesthetics of Latinx poetry and performance through critical nonhuman interventions.

Alaimo’s Transcorporeal Acts: Locating Irland’s Bodies Between Poetry, Performance, and *Thinking with Water*.

In previous chapters, I have discussed how shape-shifting nonhuman forms can be read as strategies for rethinking the nature of space and landscapes of diaspora and places of exchange in conversation with canonical figures. Now, in this final chapter, I

turn to the form of the text focusing on in its material assemblages alongside theories from poetry and performance, to ask how to speak to these concerns when the text itself becomes a porous nonhuman sculpture. How does this challenge the idea of reading critical theories of the nonhuman in Latinx and Latin@American studies?

To set the stage for this pursuit, it is important to address the idea of materials in literature and the environment. *In Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self*, Stacy Alaimo provides a critical feminist frame—one that troubles the ideas of environmental justice, material, and the porousness of bodies—through which we might consider Basia Irland’s work and further this conversation. Alaimo’s argument is based, in part, upon what she refers to as “trans-corporeality”. It is the porous meetings of bodies, where there is a questioning of or destabilizing between strict dichotomies of what lies inside and outside “nature,” Alaimo writes:

Indeed, thinking across bodies may catalyze the recognition that the environment, which is too often imagined as inert, empty space or as a resource for human use, is, in fact, a world of fleshy beings with their own needs, claims, and actions. By emphasizing the movement across bodies, trans-corporeality reveals the interchanges and interconnections between various bodily natures. But by underscoring that trans indicates movement across different sites, trans-corporeality also opens up a mobile space that acknowledges the often unpredictable and unwanted actions of human bodies, nonhuman creatures, ecological systems, chemical agents, and other actors (2).

This way of reading trans-corporeality is in conversation with the how I’ve attempted

to show ideas of canon and diaspora and to consider nonhuman points of encounter and desencuentro.

Alaimo's arguments are most relevant to this chapter and to the evolution of this dissertation, in the author's turn toward Latinx studies and the nonhuman through her discussion of literature and environment in Chapter three, "Invisible Matters: The Sciences of Environmental Justice." This section explores materialisms linking to "environmental justice science, literature, and activism" through a variety of literary texts (61). Alaimo includes a close reading of the heavy chemicals in Ana Castillo's *So Far From God*. She writes: "Several works of contemporary U.S. literature depict the invisible risks that travel across bodies and landscapes. Ana Castillo's novel *So Far From God* dramatizes the onto-epistemological ruptures that occur people must contend with the invisible dangers of risk society" (72).¹¹ Alaimo defers to Ana Castillo, who also wrote *My Father Was a Toltec*, which the reader will recall, might bring us back to Mojave writer Natalie Diaz and *When My Brother Was an Aztec*. Alaimo also places emphasis on the self, toxicity, and landscapes through death—another doubling back to Diaz' lyrical interventions, as well as Girmay's and Guevara's poetry. Through the "onto-epistemological ruptures" Alaimo reads are ones that I have also been pursuing. Alaimo engages with what it means to be human—and with the porousness of bodies that are intricately intermeshed with nonhuman realms

¹¹ Kamala Platt has also discussed this text, pollution, and the idea of Environmental Racism—that working in contaminated environments disproportionately puts people of color, particularly working in farm and factory settings, at risk-- in her research, "Ecocritical Chicana Literature Ana Castillo's "Virtual Realism". It should be noted that Helena Viramontes' novels *Under the Feet of Jesus*, which gives insight into the use of harmful pesticides, and *Their Dogs Came With Them*, a contagion novel, are also excellent examples though which the reader might look toward understanding an aesthetics of eco-critical Latinx novel.

and physical landscapes that transcend geopolitical borders. *So Far From God*, which includes a variety of nonhuman interventions—including the skewing of animal-human language—underscores a “landscape of trans-corporeality, where people and place are substantially interconnected” (68). Alaimo’s analysis of *So Far from God* focuses on the character, Fe’s death, a result of prolonged exposure to toxic chemicals, these chemicals are poured down the drain, flowing into the community water supply. This death departs from the novel’s narrative structure and the trope of resurrection, probing questions about reading the limits of life, nonhuman material, and place. By tracing human-nonhuman-material engagement, Stacy Alaimo asks questions about the nature of the “self” that she sees problematized or complicated by the way bodies are in flux through a transcorporeal lens. Basia Irland’s work dialogues with these concerns and of how the use of the material water and the remnant materials left in or around its wakes might redirect close readings of poetry and performance. Consider, for instance, how to read “The Book of Drought”:

The books created by artist Basia Irland seem like the remnants of ancient oceanic cultures, communiques from long-forgotten denizens of the planet’s murky depths. Her hefty carved wooden books—inscribed with salt crystals, estuary sand, seashells, lichen, seaweed, salmon bones, and fragments of earth and its waters—could have been used by alchemists trying to transform nature’s elements into gold, or by magicians invoking the powers of the wilderness. Her sculpted books possess a language of their own, a lyrical and ecological poetry that speaks volumes about the mysteries of Nature and the inextricable links between humans and the environment (*Water Library* 30).

Both Alaimo and Irland bring to fore those materials in literature that have lived, inextricable though often indiscernible consequences; indeed, as Alaimo states, “one of the central problematics of trans-corporeality is contending with dangerous, often imperceptible material agencies” (146). In her recent works, *Exposed: Environmental Politics and Pleasures in Posthuman Times* and *Composing Blue Ecologies: Science, Aesthetics, and the Creatures of the Abyss* Alaimo extends this discussion to, first, these human-environmental costs through the Anthropocene, what is proposed to be human’s lasting impact on the environment that is correlated with large-scale species extinction and alteration (compared, for example, to the Holocene epoch), and, secondly, in *Composing Blue Ecologies: Science, Aesthetics, and the Creatures of the Abyss*, she speaks about art, theory, and literature regarding deep sea creatures, marine life, and the blue humanities through a posthumanist political framework. Alaimo’s work regarding water can also be found in several other collections, including her chapter entitled “Jellyfish Science, Jellyfish Aesthetics: Posthuman Reconfigurations of the Sensible” from the anthology *Thinking with Water*. I consider this collection, especially, as a type of bridge between Irland, Alaimo, and this dissertation. In book’s foregrounding, “Introduction: Toward a Hydrological Turn,” the organizers of *Thinking with Water* open this anthology with a pursuit of the act of reading through water.

The act of reading this page is enabled by a confluence of literacy, focused intent, and opportunity – but underlying this privileged and human practice is a necessary balance of waters. If a sense of well-being accompanies this act, it rests on a frequently assumed, but always precarious, equilibrium. As the

reader draws in breath, the relative humidity of the air is neither too wet nor scorchingly dry. And while these words (this page or this screen) are dry enough to be legible, the reader is neither distracted by thirst or dehydration, nor by an urgent need to pee. In all likelihood, both reader and book are sheltered from the extremes of inclement weather. An environmental and somatic balance of waters, this quiet background condition of healthy hydration and safety, is easy to forget. In fact, it may need to be forgotten to sustain the focus necessary to reading, to writing, and to thinking. And, yet, our intent with this book is to bring water forward for conscious and careful consideration, and to explore the possibilities and limits of thinking with water (Chen, MacLeod, and Neimanis 3).

Thinking with Water is largely contextualized in Canada and has a focus on indigenous perspectives and on decolonizing how to think with water. This collection, which includes poetry and visual art, in addition to academic essays, also underscores, alternative ways of “story-ing” and mapping waters, which “can give voice to inclusive and evolving vocabularies of watery place, thereby transforming collective ways of thinking” (8). Drawing together ideas of reading, mapping, and language, through water as a transformative lens speaks to many of the ideas of this dissertation and especially Irland’s work through her border-transcending, hydrological texts. Stacy Alaimo’s contribution to *Thinking with Water* takes the form of a nonhuman interlocutor, the shape-shifting jellyfish. “Interestingly,” writes Alaimo, “as scientists have struggled to capture, collect, distinguish, and categorize these fluid forms of life, others have transported them from biology to art, rendering them distinct aesthetic

objects” (142). At the same time, Alaimo considers Jacques Rancière’s reflections on politics and the visible to consider how depictions of jellyfish, gelatinous, seemingly undefined, and faceless creatures, nearly indistinguishable from their material bodies of water around them, might alter aesthetic knowledges when framed by artists and photographers. Capturing a portrait of the seemingly translucent “jellies”, proves to be a challenging task with striking, transcendent results that Alaimo charts across several artistic works. Some of her most striking insights, however, come from her remarks on environment, form, and wonder.

Existing in the depths yet seemingly without their own “depth” of secreted interiority, gelata, ever so gently, question the humanist desire for solid demarcations. With their apparent yet unfathomable “lack” of an inside, jellies may entice us into posthumanist states of wonder that extend through manifold modes of being (154).

It is noteworthy that Alaimo, in this instance, is drawing on the theories of critical theorist of the nonhuman Jakob von Uexküll in her approach, though these concepts are reminiscent, also, of Sylvia Wynter’s work on autopoietic systems. Thinking through water and together with these portraits of jellyfish, both of which disrupt conventional modes of knowing, inform readings of Irland, toward an aesthetics and poetics of water’s nonhuman interlocutors and a reconsideration of performance or how “the aesthetic qualities of jellies themselves perform as living art” (152). On poetics, As Chen, MacLeod, and Neimanis note, “The co-constitution of water as a substance and water as poetics is particularly critical. How do waters, as subjects of continuous sensory encounters – from bathing to street-cleaning to puddle-hopping to

drinking – shape the emergence of language and ideas?” (10). Basia Irland’s hydrocentric texts shape, through form and content, with the material of water—muddied with seeds and materials—these poetics. As performances, they transform not only how to read these languages, but also how to place them. From a humanist perspective, being placed is often linked with a rooted, landed locations. *Thinking with Water*, though, argues that “Water can evoke an uncanny space-time in many human myths – a place of others, or an other place. Our spatial and temporal relations to water may seem unintelligible, unruly, and vague, but they are also full of disturbing potential. By drawing upon the reservoir of unknowability carried within all waters, we may situate ourselves in ways that challenge land-based preconceptions of fixity” (8). Artist and *Thinking with Water* collaborator, Sarah T. Renshaw, might serve as a final bridge between Basia Irland, Alaimo, and this hydrological turn. The statement for her work, “Frozen Refractions: Text and Image Projections on Ice” (2010) reads:

Suspended in the air an image is formed in light – water holds it in place, frozen. On one side photographs are projected onto and through the ice tablet. On the other side is text from *Matter and Memory* by Henri Bergson. Images capture something in time. Projecting photographs onto ice gives them a transience that photography generally denies. The melting ice is a metaphor for memory. The images are viewed through the ice and are distorted in the material. Time affects the image as the ice thins and transforms back into a liquid state. Cross-pollination occurs when sensory impressions of the past intermingle with sensory perceptions of the present (128).

Here is where I also locate, again, Irland’s work, between Alaimo’s aesthetic “gelata”

conversations with *Thinking with Water*, to Renshaw and beyond. Renshaw's works, which are comprised of projected images and texts onto ice, reach beyond the genre of photography. I read Irland's riparian texts as transcorporeal pieces that also function beyond the role of static texts and argue that they could be read between poetry and performance—as regenerative texts in form and content.

This is another way of negotiating shifting relationships of human/nonhuman in the Anthropocene that are transcorporeal in nature. In order to further illustrate this point, I consider the comparable example of Francis Francis Alÿs' piece, *Paradox of Praxis I (Sometimes Making Something Leads to Nothing)*. Alÿs confounds onlooker's perceptions of, undoing and remaking, while pushing a melting block of ice through Mexico City for several hours until it is reduced to a puddle. Both performances include the labor of crafting, shifting, and reducing the frozen forms, which implicate a public.¹² Reading performances with similar nonhuman interventions highlights the importance of considering performance alongside ideas of text and remnant. Unlike Alÿs or Renshaw, Basia Irland preserves the physical structures and patterned shapes of the line on the page, though the content is abstracted from the reader or "audience." This strategy, however, shifts, when disarmed by the river, becoming, then, a "riparian text." How then might we approach these contents which are already altered by the transformation of nonhuman material forms?

The questions I've raised about Latinx use of nonhuman interlocutors, thus far

¹² The use of nonhuman materials is also a precedent established for Irland and Alÿs—whose 1990-1992 performance, *The Collectors*, included "magnetised 'dogs' which he walked around the city so that metallic detritus stuck to their surfaces" (Tate Museum, "Francis Alÿs. A Story of Deception: room guide, Mexico City").

in this dissertation, have functioned in relation to some rather fixed figures from the Latin American canon; however, this has proved to be an act with many moving parts. However, in this fourth and final chapter, I ask that the reader consider the shifting of the *Ice Books*, for example, their fleeting performative nature and divergent velocities, alongside how to read a renaissance of Latinx and Latin@ American Studies, which has moving local/global as well as human/nonhuman parts and the autopoietic challenge to the inside/outside of poetic texts.

Irland gathers waters, a gesture which serves as an allegory for the gathering of diasporic narrative streams and her work highlights the way in which artists can be ecological actors, entangled with the work of species (in this case seeds) dissemination. Her staged, organic eco-sculptures are undone as they are “read” through the water—a twist in which poetry, performance, and the environment meet. I understand reading, in this way, as an enactment of undoing and remaking. In a traditional sense, the task of reading entails both parsing and reconciling the letters on the page into words, lines, stanza breaks—as in the poetry we have examined. The ebb and flow of this process then pushes the reader toward a classificatory impulse, a notion of what literary tradition or genre this piece might belong to in order to localize it within what is more largely known about what has been read—something like the form of a canon. However, with Irland’s work, the “reading” is further complicated by the inability to localize either the physical ‘text’ in the case of the *Ice Books*’ unrelenting velocity and nature of their organic materials, or the obscured and conserved legibility of the *Hydrolibros*. The performatic elements in this staging of books is what makes a reading like this able to be theorized. While the previous poets

I have examined are drawn together a more symbolic level—writing through nonhuman figures as literary ciphers to read diaspora, inheritance, relationship to canonical figures—Ireland’s work, speaks to both poetry and a material performance or manifestation of these impulses. The artist provokes curiosities about how to reconsider ideas of texts, transcorporeal materials, and performances of form through hydrologically, transcorporeally decentered poetics.

Performance and Passage in Ice

To further reflect on Ireland’s transcorporeal poetic and performatic visions—wrought with local flows with human and nonhuman actors, the artist/scientist, the local/global concerns, I return to the question of the *Ice Books* with which I opened this chapter. I read *Ice Receding/Books Reseeding* as poetic performance pieces—participatory in nature, ephemeral with shades of spontaneous improvisation and a commitment to watershed restoration. *Ice Receding/Books Reseeding* begins staged like this, centered with the idea of a text for release:

Each “book launch” is an energized gathering of community participants, many of whom have not physically been to their river before the event. The project provides a hands-on educational experience by encouraging interaction with the river and demonstrating how specific native riparian seeds can help restore a watershed. Seed packets are gifted to the participants so they can continue the planting process (Postel).

Through Ireland’s work nonhuman materials, forms, and text, meet as an engaging eco-poetic performance, and another question emerges from this “book launch.” How

do you read an *Ice Book*?



Figure 4.4 “Students Reading Ice Book.” Tome I: Mountain Maple, Columbine Flower, Blue Spruce.

Boulder, CO. Basia Irland, 2007.

Pictured above are students who are participants in this performance, who can be seen scrutinizing the organic text. Irland, clarifies that “Closed books have seed patterns on the covers, while open books have rows of seeds forming sentences and paragraphs. These seeds are released as the ice melts in the current. Where the seeds choose to plant themselves is serendipitous, replicating the way seeds get planted in nature” (24). In instances like this, Irland returns to challenge how humans can reproduce natural nonhuman processes, through reading and performance. How do participants approach the text versus the river whose reading will ultimately mean a dismantling or undoing of the body of the text and how to codify language itself? For human participants, nonhuman language is coded through seeds whose presentation mimics and approaches legibility, only to undo itself. Irland, through this unreadable performance artfully engages with a creative variation on the basic poetic tensions between form and content, signifier and signified.

Boetzkes in *The Ethics of Earth Art*, remarks on the nature of this reseeded that recession can be “read” beyond the “terms of the literal melting of an ice book as it dissolves into the river, but more strongly, the performance posits the ephemeral text as a recessive position in relation to the river” (194). The text’s positionality harkens to an undoing of several limits between human and nonhuman ways of reading and knowing, Boetzkes argues that:

Irland locates the book at the liminal zone between the limits of human knowledge and the limitlessness of the elemental. The mingling of water to make the ice book corresponds to a disassembly of the anthropocentrism of local boundaries and interweaves the participants in the elemental medium of water. The newfound ecological orientation bypasses human solipsism and is the catalyst for the restorative offering to the river, an act encapsulated by the slow undoing of the book as the water washes over it. That is, the offering works because it anticipates the river’s excess of the human frameworks that the book signifies (the realm of language, history, and social and subjective formations). The recession of the book thereby corresponds to the heightened receptivity of the participants (209).

I read these interventions as transgressive, hybrid pieces of both poetry and as performances. I want to distinguish that my use performance is informed by Alaimo’s use of the transcorporeal, but also by Alexander Weheliye’s deployment of the concept of the assemblage. Assemblages, particularly in this transcorporeal, hydrocentric frame, de-exceptionalize and decenter the binary of human/nonhuman bodies; thus, following this logic, menageries of matter can function across bodies—

bodies of water, of text, and so on, but also actors.

Theorists like Jasbir Puar and Karen Barad have scrutinized how ideas of performativity function considering these assemblages. Karen Barad's theory of performative metaphysics articulates that matter is not a thing but a doing. Barad, in "Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter" that:

A performative understanding of discursive practices challenges the representationalist belief in the power of words to represent preexisting things. Performativity, properly construed, is not an invitation to turn everything (including material bodies) into words; on the contrary, performativity is precisely a contestation of the excessive power granted to language to determine what is real. Hence, in ironic contrast to the monism that takes language to be the stuff of reality, performativity is actually a contestation of the unexamined habits of mind that grant language and other forms of representation more power in determining our ontologies than they deserve (802).

The weight of Ireland's *Ice Books* might be measured, in part by the heft of this play between material text and hydro-art; their obscured legibility serves as a place where nonhuman materials are a conduit through which we might reconsider the limits of how matter, representation, and ontologies coalesce.

Small Deaths of Seas and Spoils

Swirling through Irland's work, is then, a two-sided question, which begs how to contest the limits of language, representation, and ontological flows—but, then also, to reconsider the act of reading and performance, considering some of the larger questions of this dissertation, on canon, life, and nonhuman ciphers.

To what genre in do these texts in Irland's vast *Water Library* do these texts belong? Is it possible to assign one, or only one, given that reseeding *Ice Books* escape traditional norms of legibility and that their forms distort and exceed traditionally conceived limits of text and ideas of reading? I question what a turn through ecopoetics to ecoperformance might mean for reading the nonhuman in Latinx Studies. I propose that there is a connection between reading ecopoetry and ecoperformance and that reading the two in a critical conversation is an illuminating pursuit that further problematizes the limits of language, life, and representation. This continues the thread of transcorporeal questions of the nonhuman. In my interrogation of nonhuman forms in prior chapters, I have defaulted to written Latinx poetry as a critical vantage point from which to approach these concepts. In this section of my final chapter, I turn to the poet Carmen Giménez Smith and back to the fixed chapbook. I look to the collection *Milk and Filth* to mediate these questions.

Carmen Giménez Smith deftly and provocatively explores the spaces between ecopoetics and performance, transcorporeal and material exchanges. Through a lyrical conversation with interspecies interlocutors, *Milk and Filth's* poems approach performance and the shifting of human and nonhuman forms through the female body. Specifically, the poet looks through Ana Mendieta's corpus of work, and in this gesture, Giménez offers a unique pathway from which to consider ecopoetics and

performance. Unlike previous chapters, I will not use the technique of close reading to scrutinize Giménez Smith's work at large, but, rather, I will focus on two resounding elements of the work. As Giménez Smith writes, after all, "The best enemy against antagonism is more howl and less whisper" (28). Thus, I focus two howling moments from the text, by which I mean outstanding instances wherein the nonhuman voices rises up from the void and through the text.

The first is the way in which Giménez Smith's re-writes the canonical American poet Adrienne Rich and Cuban-American artist Ana Mendieta through nonhuman materials, both of which may deepen and inform how to frame Irland's work. Giménez Smith opens her section entitled "II Small Deaths" through a submerged, canonical re-creation with "Diving into the Spoil", an iteration of Adrienne Rich's "Diving into the Wreck". I will cite here from Rich's original poem for context, as it also conflates reading with wreck, oceanic death with muse.

I came to explore the wreck.

The words are purposes.

The words are maps.

I came to see the damage that was done

and the treasures that prevail.

I stroke the beam of my lamp

slowly along the flank

of something more permanent

than fish or weed

the thing I came for:

the wreck and not the story of the wreck
the thing itself and not the myth (24).

Words are maps and purposes, reading myth through the wreck—the material object (“the thing itself and not the myth”)—means reading through the slow, sinking, pull of the ocean, which lends the poem its force. This slippage recalls both the transitory legibility of Irland’s *Ice Books*, wherein the “thing itself”, the shifting riparian text, is fleeting, dispensing with it the “story” or “myth” that cannot be grasped that shift into another retelling—and the myth in the face of its remnant, also seen in “Lamentation Poem for the Crocodiles of Lago Enriquillo.” The direction of “Diving in the Wreck” is inevitably down; however, the lyrical flow switches upward in Giménez Smith’s “Diving into the Spoil”. This buoyant tension is one that builds beginning from Section “I Gender Fables.” The poetic pull, anticipates the “dive”, through the conditional stripping of humanity that Giménez Smith stipulates. The speaker is “a feral undergrowth that marks me as a burial site”, who, drawn into the ontological undercurrent, will “downgrade into human” (14). This undertow is turned over, however, through “Diving into the Spoil” (1, 15), but will be cycled through again in Giménez Smith’s lyrical pursuit of Ana Mendieta’s interment “siluetas,” in “Section III: Becoming.”

“Small Deaths,” as a section and, especially, “Diving into the Spoil”, is about the friction of living, about finding one’s way through not only the pristine blues and greens of Rich’s wreck (which leads to the speaker’s demise in the original poem), but of wreck *and* spoil—noting spoil in the double sense of the word, as both diving into

both ruin and treasure. Giménez Smith is leaning on a canonical retelling of a utopian scene, she continues:

We find idiom
to tell our daughter
how every woman's
heart swims with searching.
Who begat the hives?
She asks.
We slipped out of the water,
and the hives were gone.
Fish heart: water is bitter
on its account.
A fish hung round our neck. (26)

This “miniscule” death is a stolen one, to be worn and a dark reminder of survival through the water, wherein a series of deaths and myths are buried—the speaker emerges with a new retelling through a talismanic recuerdo. This idea resounds with some of what I have discussed with Borges’ blue tigers and duende in the first chapter of this dissertation. Here, however, the nonhuman shape-shifting figure is the symbolic “fish hung round our neck” rather than a handful of stones. What Giménez taps into through this poem is a reenactment of Rich’s work, a return to a dark myth and the material “thing itself.” I argue that this extends or shapeshifts into the possibility for eperformance.

I read the way in which “Diving into the Spoil” shifts, as a multidirectional and

transcorporeal move which recalls a duende-like poetic interventions. In this dissertation project, I have considered duende alongside poetic texts such as *When My Brother Was an Aztec*, *Kingdom Animalia*, *Poema*, *The Black Maria*, and *Bright Dead Things* among others. Giménez Smith and, as I argue Basia Irland, through a transcorporeal approach, exercise to the implication of bodies; human, nonhuman, and text, shift forms in intriguing ways that problematize the limits of the human form, its myths, and textual expressions. Irland writes, "each of us is a walking ocean, sloshing down the hallway with damp saline innards held together by a paper-thin epidermis" (x). Here, lyrical interventions caress another side of an imminent possibility of death in the Anthropocene where life is fragile though not bare, and instead possesses many readings and potentialities.

Performance, Prescience, Pueblo Runs

Basia Irland and Carmen Giménez Smith are drawn together again where nonhuman ecopoetics and performance meet in *Milk and Filth*, through the figure or phantasm of Ana Mendieta—the second resounding voice in the collection. I suggest reading this trinity of artists in dialogue as a point from which to consider a working conceptual framework for how to read in a river and through ecological remnants. Irland, Giménez Smith and Ana Mendieta form a proto-archive at the headwaters of these kinds of knowledges. Turning back to *Milk and Filth* to evidence this claim, preliminary traces of exiled, Cuban-American performance artist Ana Mendieta appears in “Small Deaths” then emerges more fully in Section III.

The initial stage is set for Ana Mendieta when Giménez Smith writes in the

poem “Autobiography”, a rigorous transcorporeal list:

22. I wanted to make bloody holes in the earth with my body like Ana Mendieta, but with poems.

64. Ana Mendieta does bloody and visceral and elemental things. She took

her body and put it everywhere. She took her sex and put it everywhere. She bruised the earth with slits.

65. Ana Mendieta: *the empire at the end of decadence*.

66. Because her art is ephemeral, it gets recorded. Even the body, ephemeral

67. Prescience

68. To make something more of our traces. To garland the trees with clots of me.

69. *But here, covered by earth whose prisoner I am, I feel death palpating underneath the earth.*

Several elements stand out when Giménez Smith’s poetic lines bleed into performance through her invocations of Ana Mendieta. One, is the way in which death-bodies-and earth are conflated and regenerated as nonhuman praxis (“68. To make something more of our traces. To garland the trees with clots of me”) and the other, is the idea of pacing, of the ephemerality of both “nature” and performance. Both are particularly productive considerations for reading Basia Irland’s work, which pulls between prototexts bodies, materials, and performance.

The third section of *Milk and Filth* furthers this discussion at continuation in

Section III “Becoming.” “Becoming” is comprised of a haunting eight-part poem called “A Devil Inside Me: After Ana Mendieta.” In part four of this poem, Giménez Smith explores the deluged female form:

Water encloses
The body’s vestige
in a conspiracy
of sticks, or the body
schemes with verdure
and mud ambrosia,
in a tree trunk,
that baptismal consecration.
Art history banished
the body and its sopping glut in
customary expulsion.
The body pushes back.
She is found *embedded*, heart *exuded*
in the wind, the study, in stone
outcroppings, in land, marvel (60).

Ana Mendieta and Giménez Smith are overtly concerned with bringing an alternative reading to woman-nature, beyond the clichés of “mother nature” or that a woman’s nature might be contained in purely domestic realm¹³. As Boetzke’s notes, Mendieta’s

¹³ See also: *Undomesticated Ground: Recasting Nature as Feminist Space* (2000) from Stacy Alaimo’s earlier work.

works, “foreground the nonhuman by focusing on transcorporeality, or movement across kinds of bodies in nature. Yet because a silueta is sculpted out of inert matter such as ice, flowers, stones, or sand, it closes off the possibility of identifying with it, of entering into it or replacing it with ourselves and experiencing the land intimately. By filling the human form with nonhuman materiality, Mendieta insists on the unimaginable situation of human body and non-human landscape literally occupying the same space” and that Mendieta “shows that the body is replete with elementals but that sensation occurs in the delineation of a membrane that separates the body out from them” (*The Ethics of Earth Art* 166-7)

Reading this movement through critical feminisms of the nonhuman is accomplished through poetry’s critical, lyrical approaching of performance. I suggest that this transcorporeal drive, as it is present in Irland and Mendieta’s works (read doubly through Giménez Smith), is at the same time “trans-generic”, troubling both the reading of nonhuman materials as well as their genres and how they are contained or exceed the page. These are useful considerations to dialogue with when considering Basia Irland’s manipulations of water and the boundaries of body, text, and genre.

For Irland the transcorporeal bodies of texts are both workable materials (present) and remnant forms (a play on absence and descent)—a step further into the transcorporeal poetics of the nonhuman. Through the performance *Gathering of Waters: Rio Grande, Source to Sea*, Irland pursues how to “connect” the 1,875-mile long body of the river, from Southern Colorado, to the border between Texas and Mexico, and pouring into the Gulf of Mexico at Boca Chica. This performance went through several iterations, over the course of a multi-year span. Irland began this

performance at the source of the river in Colorado, where she asked a range of contributors to collect of river-water and to record impressions of their experiences in a logbook. Irland also documented this project using video recordings to chart how the canteens and logbooks traveled down the river's path from diverse participant to participant.

Essentially, Irland remaps social relations as ecological ties, a concept that becomes evident in the "river repository," the artist's archive of the project. The repository, an art object in its own right, holds a variety of objects that form a record of the performance. Along with the logbook and the canteen that traveled down the river, Irland included a video documentary, samples of flora from the riverbanks, sticks that were chewed by beavers, small canteens made from river clay that were given as gifts to the participants, vials of water from each section of the river where a transaction took place, and a variety of charts, including a wooden atlas covered in salt and inlaid with a tracing of the river in turquoise and a foldout map that chronicles the scientific data of the river's precarious condition, showing, for example, the area where the river has dried up and the places where biologists have discovered that fish eggs will not hatch due to impossible spawning conditions. The repository thereby weaves the river into a tangible record of a new socioecological arrangement. (Boetzkes 54-5).

The canteens were moved by canoe, on foot, sent via mail, but also in some rather inventive performance formats. For example, there was "Pueblo Run", a track and field style performance where water-filled, sculpted "batons" were passed between

participants during two full days of coordinated running events. The participants collected water samples and transplanted them. This was done as a reconciliatory act, as the water's natural paths had been disrupted by human consumption patterns and drought; "this water will gradually move down the entire basin of the Rio Grande and Rio Bravo Del Norte, as it is named in Mexico, until one day it will be poured into the Gulf, at the mouth of the river, finally completing a journey through human assistance that it can no longer complete naturally" (*Water Library* 79). *Gathering of Waters* becomes an act of retelling, remarking, and archiving where human-nonhuman meet to "fill in", to preform, the river's ecological narrative flows, which have been disrupted by human devastation, divisive political borders, and in some cases, extreme drought. In 2000, two years after an early *Gathering of Waters* voyage, Irland returned to Boca Chica with her collaborator, Jerry Freeman, and wrote the following anecdotal addendum:

We were both interested in witnessing the river unable to flow into the Gulf. Because of the continuous cycles of drought, this is not the first time the river cannot flow to the sea, but it is the first time in our lifetime. What a strange feeling it is, driving along the beach and arriving at the side where I once swam to the Mexican side of the river. Now it is sand. The river stops about forty yards short of the ocean. There are several posts stuck into the ground representing where the border is located. Jerry and I walk over to the markers and chat for a while with three men from the Mexican side who are here for the same reason we are. The five of us draw a line in the dry earth demarcating the imaginary space between our two countries. Almost

Immediately the border guards arrive and ask us to step back (*Water Library* 77).

In this almost novelistic scene, Basia Irland narrates a vivid space of transgression where, again, human and nonhuman meet to bear witness, to retell where a river ran short. Though subsequently policed, the scene recalls what Carmen Giménez Smith wrote about when citing the flows of the missing “Torrent of impulse, / torrent of unlikeliness” bereft in an “aesthetic mortuary”, after Ana Mendieta (*Milk and Filth* 57).



Figure 4.5 Book of Drought II, Basia Irland New Mexico (1998).

I consider these two voices and moments together to speak about the idea of remnants and of drought as relating to literary currents, as droughts are often forces that reveal buried remnants or forms. Notably, the pacing of how to read in a drought differs

from the erudite *Hydrolibros* or the passing *Ice Books*; a drought is, rather, a unique phenomenon in that it is a slow onset absence or emergence.

While for Basia Irland, a return to the nonhuman performance space shifts the velocities of these kinds of questions, Giménez Smith references an “aesthetic mortuary” as a call to Ana Mendieta’s focus on remnants, particularly through her celebrated *Siluetas* series. It is debated in many critical circles, including the field of Art History (which Giménez Smith wrote, “banished the body and its sopping gut”), as to how to understand ideas of permanence and pacing of Mendieta’s work. Many of Ana Mendieta’s *Siluetas* style performances are well documented through more enduring forms of media like photographs and film. However, the shifting of the and physical impermanence of the performance itself through nature lends to a more fleeting discussion of form. On this controversy, Susan Best notes in “The Serial Spaces of Ana Mendieta”, “In other words, we can say with absolute certainty when looking at the siluetas: this one will have melted, that one will have been washed away, that one will have been eroded. In short, we know, as Mendieta puts it, that the sites are eventually reclaimed by the earth” (74). I argue that this tension—between how forms shift in nonhuman landscapes together with the looming imposition of how to preserve, read, or order them can also extend to help the reader engage Basia Irland’s exploration of transcorporeal textual bodies.

Yemanya

To conclude this discussion, I examine a figure pursued in installations by both Irland and Mendieta, the Cuban Santería sea orixa: “Yemanya” (also spelled:

Yemanjá). In both installations, the artists reflect to the viewer/reader a trans-corporeal, material interchanges between human bodies, geopolitical spaces, and nonhuman forms. Questions arise about diaspora, as much of Ana Mendieta's work is strongly informed by her childhood exile from Cuba to the United States. Mendieta stated, "My exploration through my art of the relationship between myself and nature has been a clear result of my having being torn from my homeland during my adolescence. The making of my silueta in nature keeps (makes) the transition between my homeland and my new home" (Merewether 144). Her "Silueta de Yemanya" (1975) emerged from a voyage to the outskirts of Iowa City where she mounted an old wooden raft, covered in red fabric, surrounding her silueta with white flowers. In this return to the source or flowing back through water, Best notes in *Visualizing Feeling : Affect and the Feminine Avant-garde*, "Water also serves as an agent of dissolution in the film *Silueta de Yemanya* (Flower Person) 1975, which traces the path of a floral silhouette carried along and eventually broken up by a strong river current" (95).

The disrupted nature of "Silueta de Yemanya" through water as the agent of dissolution, recalls the tensions mentioned in Irland's *Source to Sea*, though here the relationship is inverted; the disruption overflows rather than dries up, the national boundaries blur not becoming dusty chasms. In the anthology *Corpus Delecti: Performance Art of the Americas*, compiled by artist Coco Fusco, Charles Merewether argues in his chapter, "From Inscription to Dissolution Expenditure in Ana Mendieta's Work," that this set of relations, (wherein I would add that there is a focus on a return to nonhuman source material's "presence") articulates a "negative dialectics of exile" (95). The importance of this iteration of exile, is that through Yemanya, a complicated

vision of Latin@American displacement emerges alongside an “unstable signification of the body”, which is “is achieved precisely because of the instability of the elementals, which wash over, grow through, or otherwise disrupt the silueta” (68 Boetzkes). As Boetzkes recalls:

Mendieta locates the sensorial dimension of the performance at the body’s limits, demonstrating the overflow of elemental force. In this way the imprinting of the body, a distinct act of withdrawal, enables an excess of sensation. The siluetas do not simply reveal the earth’s “otherness,” then; rather, they are preoccupied with the limits of perception and the mobilization of the body as that limit (68).

In a complementary thread, Irland’s foray into the Yemanja myth, through “Poem for Yemanja”, also depends on both water as an agent of dissolution and diaspora. This poem, Irland states, “was created after researching the Afro-Brazilian deity of the ocean along the coast of Brazil. Collecting waters from around the world for this piece has led to a novel-in-progress about an International Library of Waters” (“Artist Statement,” Basia Irland). “Poema for Yemanja”, distorts the traditional form of the text and is forged from a disruption of the idea of “source”, gathering myriad coastal flows to accumulate an expression of Afro-Latinx inheritance, that is transient and that is foregrounded in the textual nonhuman. This speaks to the noted, “negative dialectics of exile.” Jane Blocker, author of *Where Is Ana Mendieta? Identity, Performativity, and Exile*, pursues.

Mendieta's work evinces a similar stubbornness insofar as it insists on its own foreignness while simultaneously succumbing to environmental forces that will

reintegrate it with the surrounding landscape. In these terms, her works seem literally caught in between. In addition to their thematic investment in exile, nation, and earth, Mendieta's earthworks also maintain a methodological investment in these issues. Her works are identities asserted in opposition to the land at the same time as their very structure is dedicated to dissolution and reassimilation with it (81).

Blocker frames her analysis of Mendieta with references to Freud, Said, and Kristeva.

But just as succinctly, Carmen Giménez Smith lyrically captures this nuance,

“Immersed in these new reclamations, / she strips the land of its nationalist / fripperies for scrap metal” (61). This poem becomes a critical insight, which offers another way of reading Mendieta’s unique approach to landscape. Likewise, Irland’s experimental “Poem for Yemanjá” may be read through these insights from Giménez Smith and Mendieta. “In Poem for Yemanjá a new geography is created”, writes Irland (*Water Library* 209).

Irland began this “poem” by gathering water in small vials and glass bottles, inspired by an Afro-Brazilian orixa ceremony. She then exhibited them in the Hudson River Museum where they were intended to become part of the museum’s permanent collection. However, Irland had a change of heart, a nagging impulse to deconstruct her archive. She requested they be returned to her studio. The sculptures-poems were removed from storage and shipped in a large wooden crate to Irland for deconstruction. What could this mean for the “vast water library” she had spent decades curating? She notes that this deconstruction was actually an evolution of the poem, of the textual performance that resounds with the “traces” left by Ana Mendieta

as she shifted nonhuman and human forms. “By creating a template replicating the contour and scale of her own body, Mendieta was able to remove herself as the object of the work, and work directly on a form that could be used alternatively as a surface of its inscription, transformed, or be destroyed leaving only a residue or trace” (*Corpus Delecti* 145).

In conclusion, the way that Mendieta, Gimenez Smith, and Irland use form in tension with content, I argue, is an interesting manner through which to approach reading, while considering the traces of the human body to the nonhuman environment. Returning to Irland’s disarmed library, she insisted that she would not send each poem back to its original waters, rather she would have participants perform a boiling of the water and then release it into a local stream. They were poems in a kind of unarticulated exile, and this plan was met with some opposition.

Kristen Buick an art historian friend, was trying to dissuade me from changing the piece, she argued, ‘it is a reliquary for stories, tales about water that need to be remembered.’ It is this comment that helped to spark another component of the final phase of the *Poem*. The empty receptacles that had once held water would now hold stories about the return of the water, written on piece of paper and put in the bottles. The sculptures will then be reassembled with the bottles of words, and returned to the museum (*Water Library* 213).

Irland dismantles her own approach, explaining that the real stories, however, cannot be contained within the form of the sculptures, but rather remain with the water’s life cycle. The artist becomes something of a rogue archivist, filling, deconstructing, emptying and returning through her poem. This concept of reading and archive

depends also on an understanding of human and nonhuman collaboration which resists the boundaries of traditional categories of both practices. Through Carmen Giménez Smith, Ana Mendieta is read; though the line breaks give only traces of the artist who is channeled through the landscapes of the lyric. This practice of reading, both in fluidity and drought, aids in understanding the poetic shape-shifting read through Ireland. Water serves as an agent of dissolution and fragmentary consolidation, bridging together ideas of ecopoetics and performance.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

To read through the nonhuman as an intensity, as a sign of passage between canons, bodies, landscapes, materials, is a task that involves recognizing, continually, our ontological slippages and examining our literary tendencies toward reading. I believe that in doing so, the reader drives away from systems that hierarchize traditional beliefs about the limits of the human and opens up dialogues about Latinx and Latin@American writing at the same time.

Through an autopoietic lens, we can read poetry and performance as ways of troubling these impasses and limits by way of imaginative readings of literary discourses. Instead of thinking of the human as a category to be overcome or taxonomized, or of the idea of a canon as, exclusively, an imposing force of authoritative texts from which to market or rank Latinx and Latin@American literary production, we can read nonhuman intensities in poetry and performance as semi-autonomous strategies to look to the edges of these monoliths in tandem.

The poets and performance artists in this dissertation drive to and away from full and bare life, from literary giants, and myths of Man. This approach shifts these categorizations, and this project generates, by design, more questions than it answers with forceful finitude.

This is because, I believe, that strictly prescriptive answers of how to read in these spaces and through these entes, would reestablish the limits which I am attempting to unfold, to transect these boundaries through movement, through

interstitial, interspecies, and intertextual approaches. I ask too many questions not to antagonize, but because I am trying to offer the reader a lens through which to read or to unread—not to lend a finitude to these forms nor to reinscribe them.

This project emphasizes thinking across several geographies: ecological ones, diasporic routes, as well as theoretical realms, and in this way, there is a constant movement or traffic in my analysis that runs concurrent to my questions of how to think of nonhuman forms and intensities as passage between Americas. These passages are also reflected in the texts I have chosen and the ways in which contemporary Latinx and Latin@American writers position their speakers and referents in relation to life across many planes.

REFERENCES

- Acevedo, Elizabeth. *Beastgirl & Other Origin Myths*. Portland: YesYes Books, 2016. Print.
- Alaimo, Stacy. *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010.
- . "Jellyfish Science, Jellyfish Aesthetics: Posthuman Reconfigurations of the Sensible". Chen, Cecilia, MacLeod, Janine, and Neimanis, Astrida, eds. *Thinking with Water*. Montreal, CA: MQUP, 2013. ProQuest ebrary.
- Aracelis Girmay." Poetry Foundation. Poetry Foundation, n.d. Web. 09 Sept. 2015.
- Aragón, Francisco. "A Most Latin American Latino." Rev. of Poema. Latin American Review of Books 2016: n. pag. Web.
- . The Wind Shifts: New Latino Poetry. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2007.
- Barad, Karen: "Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter", in: *Signs. Journal of Women and Society*, 2003, No. 3, pp. 801–832.
- Best, Susan. "The Serial Spaces of Ana Mendieta." *Art History* 30.1 (2007): 57-82. Web.
- Boetzkes, Amanda. *The Ethics of Earth Art*. Minneapolis, US: Univ Of Minnesota Press, 2010. ProQuest ebrary. Web. 18 November 2016.
- Borges, Jorge Luis. *El Hacedor*. Madrid, etc.: Alianza Editorial, etc, 1972.
- . *La Memoria De Shakespeare*: Alianza Editorial. España: Alianza Editorial, 1999. Print.

- Blocker, Jane, and Ana Mendieta. *Where Is Ana Mendieta? : Identity, Performativity, and Exile*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1999.
- Boetzkes, Amanda. *The Ethics of Earth Art*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010.
- Borzutzky, Daniel. *The Performance of Becoming Human*. First edition. Brooklyn, NY: Brooklyn Arts Press, 2016.
- Brady, Mary Pat. *Extinct Lands, Temporal Geographies: Chicana Literature and the Urgency of Space*. Durham: Duke UP, 2002. Print.
- Chen, Cecilia, MacLeod, Janine, and Neimanis, Astrida, eds. *Thinking with Water*. Montreal, CA: MQUP, 2013. ProQuest ebrary. Web.
- Chaves, José Ricardo. "El Laberinto De Eunice Odio." *La Nación*. N.p., 07 Apr. 2013. Web. 22 Aug. 2016.
- Comer, Nandi. "Kingdom Animalia." *Indiana Review* 34.2 (2012): 172-3. *ProQuest*. Web. 9 Sep. 2015.
- Cummings, Laura. "Face to Face with Your Own Maker." *Laura Cummings Book A Face to the World*. N.p., 4 July 2009. Web.
- Diaz, Natalie. "Federico García Lorca, Valentine - The Los Angeles Review of Books." *The Los Angeles Review of Books*. N.p., 13 Feb. 2013. Web. 25 Sept. 2015.
- . *When My Brother Was an Aztec*. Port Townsend, WA: Copper Canyon, 2012. Print.
- Dowdy, Michael. *Broken Souths: Latina/o Poetic Responses to Neoliberalism and Globalization*. U of Arizona, 2013. Print.

- Fischer, B.K. "The Poetesses An Interview with Lisa Russ Spaar, Aracelis Girmay, and Daisy Fried." *The Poetesses*. Boston Review, 29 May 2013. Web. 13 Oct. 2015.
- García Lorca, Federico. *Romancero Gitano*. New York, NY: Penguin, 1996. Print.
- . *Sonetos Del Amor Oscuro ; Poemas De Amor Y Erotismo; Inéditos De Madurez*. Barcelona: Ediciones Altera, 1995. Print.
- . *Poeta En Nueva York*. Madrid: Cátedra, 1987.
- Gass, William, H. "Imaginary Borges." *The New York Review of Books*. N.p., Nov.-Dec. 1969. Web. 24 Sept. 2014.
- Giménez Smith, Carmen. *Milk & Filth*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2013.
- Glissant, Édouard, and Betsy Wing. *Poetics of Relation*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997.
- González, Rigoberto. "Small Press Spotlight: Natalie Diaz." *National Book Critics Circle*, 12 Sept. 2012. Web. 24 Sept. 2015.
- Guevara, Maurice Kilwein. *Poema*. Tucson: U of Arizona, 2009. Print. Camino Del Sol.
- Halberstam, Jack. "The Wild Beyond: With and for the Undercommons." *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study*. By Stefano Harney and Fred Moten. New York: Minor Compositions, 2013. 1-12. Print.
- Irland, Basia. *Water Library*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2007.
- Johnson, Erena. "Making Meaning with and against the Text: An Autopoietic Theory of Reading." Academia.edu.

- Limón, Ada. *Bright Dead Things: Poems*. Milkweed Editions, 2015. Print.
- Livingston, Ira. *Between Science and Literature: An Introduction to Autopoetics*.
Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006.
- Long, Haniel. *Pittsburgh Memoranda*. Santa Fe: Writers' Editions, 1935. Print.
- . *Interlinear to Cabeza De Vaca; His Relation of the Journey from Florida to the
Pacific, 1528-1536*. Santa Fe, NM: Writers' Editions, 1936. Print.
- Mackey, Nathaniel. "Cante Moro." *Disembodied Poetics: Annals of the Jack Kerouac
School*. By Anne Waldman and Andrew Schelling. Albuquerque: U of New
Mexico, 1994. 71-90. Print.
- . *Paracritical Hinge: Essays, Talks, Notes, Interviews*. Madison: University of
Wisconsin Press, 2005.
- Maturana, Humberto R., and Francisco J Varela. *Autopoiesis and Cognition: The
Realization of the Living*. Dordrecht, Holland: D. Reidel Pub. Co., 1980.
- . *Emociones Y Lenguaje En Educación Y Política*. Santiago: Hachette, 1990.
- Mayhew, Jonathan. *Apocryphal Lorca: Translation, Parody, Kitsch*. Chicago:
University of Chicago Press, 2009.
- Mbembé, J. & Meintjes, L. "Necropolitics." *Public Culture*, vol. 15 no. 1, 2003, pp.
11-40. Project MUSE, muse.jhu.edu/article/39984.
- McKittrick, Katherine. *Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human As Praxis*. Durham: Duke
University Press, 2015.
- McDonald, Leigh 2009. "Leaf Cutter Ants" Digital image. [iStockphoto.com/Eric
Delmar](http://iStockphoto.com/Eric-Delmar). The University of Arizona Press, Tuscon.
- Meléndez, María. *How Long She'll Last In This World*. Tucson: University of Arizona

Press, 2006.

Merewether, Charles. "From Inscription to Dissolution Expenditure in Ana Mendieta's Work," Fusco, Coco. Ed. *Corpus Delecti: Performance Art of the Americas*.

London: Routledge, 2000.

Mignolo, Walter D. *Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern*

Knowledges, and Border Thinking. Princeton: Princeton University Press,

2000.

---. "Sylvia Wynter, What Does It Mean to Be Human." *Sylvia Wynter on Being*

Human as Praxis. Duke UP, 2015. Print.

Maurer., Christopher. *In Search of Duende*. New York: New Directions, 2010.

Nandorfy, Martha. *The Poetics of Apocalypse: Federico García Lorca's Poet In New*

York. Lewisburg [Pa.]: Bucknell University Press, 2003.

Odio, Eunice, and Juan Liscano. *Antología: Rescate de un gran poeta*. Caracas: Monte

Avila Editores, 1975. Print.

Orozco, Cynthia. *No Mexicans, Women, Or Dogs Allowed: The Rise of the Mexican*

American Civil Rights Movement. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009.

Pérez-Torres, Rafael. *Movements in Chicano Poetry: Against Myths, against Margins*.

Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995. Print.

Pollard, Kevin. "The Appalachian Region in 2010: A Census Data Overview."

Prepared for the Appalachian Regional Commission Under Contract #CO-

16506-09 (2011): Web.

Pörksen, Bernhard. *Del Ser Al Hacer: Los Orígenes De La Biología Del Conocer*.

Santiago: Comunicaciones Noreste, 2004. Print.

- Postel, Sandra. "Ecological Artist Basia Irland and Her "Ice Books" Engage Communities and Restore Rivers." *National Geographic* 09 Jan. 2014, Water Currents ed., Freshwater Initiative.
- Puar, Jasbir. "I Would Rather Be a Cyborg than a Goddess' Intersectionality, Assemblage, and Affective Politics." *EIPCP*. Europäisches Institut Für Progressive Kulturpolitik, 2011.
- Ramos, Julio. *Divergent Modernities: Culture and Politics In 19th Century Latin America*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2001.
- Saldívar, José David. *Trans-americanity: Subaltern Modernities, Global Coloniality, and the Cultures of Greater Mexico*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2012.
- Sands, John. "The Conversation: Aracelis Girmay with Jon Sands." *Union Station Magazine*. N.p., n.d. Web. 3 Aug. 2015.
- Schmidt Camacho, Alicia R. *Migrant Imaginaries: Latino Cultural Politics In the U.s.-Mexico Borderlands*. New York: New York University Press, 2008.
- Smith, Tracy K. *Duende: Poems*. Saint Paul, Minn.: Graywolf Press, 2007.
- Stevens, Wallace. *Collected Poetry and Prose*. New York: Library of America, 1997.
- Thomas, Greg. "proud fleshInter/Views: Sylvia Wynter." *ProudFlesh: New Afrikan Journal of Culture, Politics, and Consciousness* (2006).
- Weheliye, Alexander G. *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2014.
- Wright, Charles. *Scar Tissue*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2006.
- . "Scar Tissue II." *The Kenyon Review*, vol. 27, no. 2, 2005, p. 79+. Academic OneFile, Accessed 29 Oct. 2016.

Wynter, Sylvia. "No Humans Involved: An Open Letter to My Collegues." Forum

N.H.I 1.1 (1994): Web.

---. SEHR, volume 4, issue 1: Bridging the Gap. 8 April 1995

---. "Towards the Sociogenic Principle: Fanon, The Puzzle of Conscious Experience, of "Identity" and What It's Like to Be "Black,"," National Identities and Socio-Political Changes in Latin America. Print

---. "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, its Overrepresentation—An Argument," CR: The New Centennial Review 3, no. 3 (2003).

Valdés De La Campa, Davo. "Signos De La Poesía Animal En La Obra De Kenia Cano." La Estanteria. N.p., 24 June 2014. Web. 05 Oct. 2015.

Ziarek, E. P. "Bare Life on Strike: Notes on the Biopolitics of Race and Gender." South Atlantic Quarterly 107.1 (2008): 89-105. Web.