

Emotions and Affective Resistance: Gendered Queerness, Latinidad, and Coloniality

by

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THESIS ABSTRACT

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Women, queer folks, and colonized subjects experience forms of oppression on social, political, and deeply personal levels. Given that intersectionality compounds levels of subjugation and creates forms of oppression unique to the subject, gendered, queered, colonized peoples experience a form of oppression specific to their demographic. In the case of Latin America, colonial powers folded Indigenous hierarchal systems into their own hierarchies, creating racism, sexism, and homophobia unique to those who identify as queer Latinas. Due to colonialism's racial legacy, Latinos are vulnerable to racialization in queer spaces. Due to the sexist nature of both Global North and Global South societies, women and feminine people are often subject to sexism and misogyny. In Latin American spaces, including one's home, one is vulnerable to sexism and queerphobia. I coin this multiplicity of marginalizing structures as an experience of "compounding" marginalization and/or oppression. This creates emotional senses of unbelonging, invalidation, and especially, undesirability. I argue romantic relationships and aesthetic experience can undermine negative sentiments and self-conceptions experienced by the queered, racialized person caused by contemporary Latin American colonial structures.

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DEDICATION

Para mi gente Latina, cuir, mujer, en cualquier lugar en el mundo.

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Introduction:

Intersectional analysis has long been utilized as a key approach to questions of race, gender, sexuality, class, and other social-political dispositions. Should we take intersectionality seriously, we then accept that layers of oppression and marginalization create unique experiences for those positioned at said intersections. However, there has yet to be much explicit attention given to added intersections. In other words, should an individual fall under multiple layers of marginalization, studies of these experiences are limited at best. My question then becomes: When such layers become compounded, I argue that the ability for one to belong within any one space or community becomes compromised, resulting in sentiments of unbelonging and rejection.

This project attempts to identify and work toward filling a gap I find within existing literature on race, gender, and queerness, in which little-to-no isolated approach is able to address the nuances of the others, particularly for those who experience a compounding, intersectional experience. In other words, if only race and gender are considered, the nuances of queerness are pushed to the side. If solely queerness is considered, the racialization and sexism that occurs within queer spaces is no longer present. My analysis focuses on queer Latinas, who are racialized, gendered, and queered, thus experiencing (at least) these three forms of marginalization *at the same time*. The history of Spanish/Iberian colonialism acts as a throughline of this study, given the ongoing influence colonialist structures and ideologies have on patriarchy, racialization, and anti-queerness, even within marginalized populations.

Different elements of their imposed identities may come to the forefront through different experiences in different spaces. In addition to calling attention to the lack of attention given to populations who experience these forms of compounding intersectionality, I focus on two key

areas: 1) love, touch, attraction, and desire, and 2) aesthetic experiences. In doing so, my hope is to investigate and validate ways in which a population like that of queer Latinas is always already finding pockets of resistance and experiences that are not overdetermined by identity, and as such, can subvert the sense of unbelonging I articulate.

Concerning the first, I am interested in the experience of love in its capacity to allow oneself to feel desired and accepted in the face of a normative, hierarchal society that positions certain subjects in such a way that they are not meant to be truly desired. Bodies of color and/or racialized bodies do not fit certain beauty standards and are often sexually demonized. Feminine expressions of sexuality have been historically condemned. Queerness is disallowed in many cultures and societies, often prohibited *de jure*. The simultaneous combination of these elements onto a single subject can result in rejection at the level of love and desire. Thus, when one is shown that this is not the case, I claim that a resistive element arises, leaving room for validation despite social condemnation. I utilize the work of Frantz Fanon, Gloria Anzaldúa Mariana Ortega, and various social scientists to develop an account of rejection, dehumanizing fetishization, and moral prohibition of loving certain bodies that are racialized, gendered, and queered. However, to understand the possibilities of love, touch, and desire, I apply the theories of Audre Lorde and bell hooks to this context, developing a broader account of the social and political resistance thereof.

Concerning the second, primarily following the work of Alejandro Vallega, I view the aesthetic dimension as something affective, emotional, pre-cognitive, and open to the possibility of configuring and reconfiguring ideas, self-conceptions, and perhaps most significant to this project, allowing one to view their own experiences in a different light. There are certain cultural and linguistic specificities to the experiences of many queer Latinas that lead me to look toward

key figures of the Latin American artistic canon: author and thinker Octavio Paz and famed singer Isabel “Chavela” Vargas. Looking to figures accepted as part of the literary and musical canon, I believe, creates an opportunity to resonate with one’s home culture, even when that culture may reject them on account of certain aspects of their identity.

While I am interested in the notion of lived experience, I do not utilize a purely phenomenological approach. Rather, I rely on elements of critical phenomenology, historical/structural analysis, aesthetics, social sciences, and philosophy of emotion broadly construed. In doing so, I hope to develop a more interdisciplinary, well-rounded perspective of marginalized experiences that seeks to address a multiplicity of nuances simultaneously – a project I deem necessary to understanding demographics (like that of queer Latinas) that require attention to compounding elements of oppression.

That said, I do not claim to develop a universal account of queer feminine Latine/x experience. My hope, rather, is that through an analysis that addresses the experience of someone who is situated beneath these three forms of structural oppression, more attention is brought to the internal hierarchies of marginalized communities. Certain elements of this work may or may not apply to queer folks of different sexual orientations, gender identities, or racial/ethnic backgrounds, but I do not seek to outline a definite scope of this study. For this reason, language used for this research is a complex matter. Within the community of queer women and feminine people, there are ongoing debates on what words specifically identify us without being excessively exclusionary (e.g. queer women, sapphic people, etc.). I am interested in the way gender and sexuality intersect to create an experience that is both gendered and queered, which leads me to use “queer women” or “queer Latina” both for the sake of simplicity and for the fittingness of my area of study. I will note that in recent years, there have been a rising number

of advocates for using the term “cuir” to describe queer peoples and queerness in the context of Latin America.¹ While I do focus on Latin American culture and people, I am not writing exclusively in the context of Latin America and the Hispanophone Caribbean. At this time, I feel that “queer” is most easily extended to different peoples across different cultural/geographic contexts.

On the other hand, there are ongoing debates amongst people of Latin American heritage and descent on whether *Latino/a/@/x/e* is the most suitable. Mariana Ortega (2025) articulates this controversy well:

Various terms such as Hispanic, Latino, Latino/a, Latina/o, Latin@, Latinx, and Latine are used to designate individuals of Latin American and Caribbean descent in the United States. The latter two labels have been recently introduced to destabilize the binary that informs traditional understandings of gender

... Yet it is a term that has been highly criticized due to what some regard as an imposition of an American academic perspective on discourses regarding identity (13).

Ortega goes on to explain that she chooses to use Latinx given her positionality as an academic in the United States and appreciates the term’s ability to undermine the gendering that so often occurs in the Spanish language. While I understand this choice, I take a different stance. Despite also being a scholar based in the United States, I want to leave my analysis open to be extended beyond borders if/when it is applicable, especially given my strong stake in investigating the cultural remnants of Spanish and Iberian colonialism on Latin America. My choice to use “Latina” stems from the scope of my investigation on women and feminine persons of Latin American descent.

Further, there is disagreement on whether we can or should be encompassed under one broad category across different countries and backgrounds. While I take a strong stance against

¹ For more information, see Pierce et al. in “Cuir/Queer Américas: Translation, Decoloniality, and the Incommensurable” (2021).

homogenizing Latin Americans, I do believe there is some degree of shared culture and experience that developed under mass Iberian colonialism. There are certainly nuances that cannot be fully addressed in this thesis, hence my explicit goal to call attention to and begin an open discussion concerning those of us who live under layers of marginalization – many of which colonial structures and thought either created or greatly contributed to – not simply explained by intersectional theory as it stands.

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Chapter 1 – Lived Experiences of Queer Women of Color

Women, Queerness, and Latinidad

In 1987, Gloria Anzaldúa wrote, “For the lesbian of color, the ultimate rebellion she can make against her native culture is through her sexual behavior” (31). In 2019, over 30 years later, I read this passage as a teenager – a lesbian of color committing the ultimate rebellion against my native culture. Living in overwhelmingly conservative West Texas, I had confronted my race my entire life. I had known I was different from the time my pre-school classmates asked why my grandfather’s skin was so dark, or when my second-grade classmates asked why I spoke Spanish. Of course, that was before I began refusing to speak my language in hopes of blending in with my peers, *asimilar*. As I grew older, I realized more that my race was inescapable. Anytime I entered a space that did not belong to family, friends, or the *barrio*, my race was reflected to me in a distorted image of a poor, unintelligent Mexican thug. White classmates told me their parents did not want them around me. Middle school campus police officers lined me up with every other tan-skinned child for canine searches. My high school coach told me I needed to change the way I presented myself. I was different. I was Other. There was no avoiding my own identity.

I felt at home with my people – spending time with my family, playing with other brown kids whose houses resembled my own, eating at the local “hole in the wall” Mexican restaurants, going to mass at the Catholic church with a Latino congregation. I was not Other there. I did not *have* to have an identity, because no identity was forced upon me. This sentiment, this bliss, this freedom from Otherness lasted until the expression of queerness began. Suddenly, I was no longer at home with my people. No longer was friendship with me only prohibited for white peers. Now, classmates of color faced that same prohibition once their parents got word my

sexuality. Family members told me they wanted to know nothing of my relationships – they would not be condoned. I stopped attending church, feeling so out of place with the constant demonization of queerness. My safe space was gone. I was not only Other; I was alone.

Upon encountering Anzaldúa’s writings, my circumstances, my emotions, and my thoughts had a context and explanation. While I felt alone day-to-day, the self-proclaimed “queer Chicana” had put words to my experience and proven that it was not unique to me. The seemingly niche audience of queer Latinas felt what I felt.

Literary Lacunas

Little consideration has been given to this subject in the philosophical canon writ large. While intersectionality and woman of color feminism certainly provide some insight, philosophy (and academia as a whole) has done little to explicitly address this phenomenon. Statistics prove the existence of such a phenomenon but cannot explain the cause. The Trevor Project² reports that across several studies, LGBTQ+ youth of color are overrepresented amongst LGBTQ+ youth experiencing homelessness in the United States. Out of a study group of 4,877 Latinx youth who identify as LGBTQ+, over 1,300 had faced or were currently facing housing insecurity/homelessness – nearly 1/3. Latinx LGBTQ+ youth were additionally found to be at least 1.24 times more likely to experience homelessness or housing instability than their white counterparts as of 2022. Approximately 27% of all Latinx LGBTQ+ youth experience housing instability, the majority of which cite their gender/sexual identity as a primary factor for facing homelessness (family rejection, runaway, sexual assault, etc.).³ In 2021, the Center of American

² The Trevor Project is a nonprofit dedicated to LGBTQ+ youth in the United States, both for social research and for social, economic, and mental health support.

³ It is worth mentioning that these studies are specifically designed to calculate risks of LGBTQ+ youth facing homelessness or housing insecurity on account of their families refusing to house them due to their sexual orientation. While the degree to which heightened poverty levels amongst Latine populations affect this statistic cannot be measured with complete accuracy, when considering that youth

Progress conducted multiple surveys that ultimately reported Hispanic LGBTQ+ individuals to experience 15% more discrimination than white LGBTQ+ individuals, as well as statistically significant increased rates of mental health issues, lower access to services, and increased bullying and discrimination in school.⁴ While statistically proving that the queer Latine population is more likely to face structural adversity and discrimination, these studies provided by two of the largest research centers for queer populations fail to provide information on any cause beyond the fact that people who are both queer and Latine experience compounded hardship – their struggle is intersectional. Additionally, they fail to measure social/cultural impacts on our experiences, much less specific to women.

Specific to the demographic known in psychology and other social studies as “SMW” (sexual minority women), research equally fails to address the racialized aspect of our experiences, with one 2015 study going as far as to state their “question about discriminations [against SMW] related to ‘other factors’ did not allow for specific assessment of racial/ethnic discrimination” (Balsam et al. 388).

Even studies that attempt to exclusively investigate the experiences of queer Latine women admit limitations. A 2019 study that found discrimination to be a significant factor in post-traumatic stress disorder for queer Latinas specifically explained that “there were likely certain aspects of gender-based discrimination that were not captured ... because a measure specific to gender-based discrimination was not used” (Cerezo 289). In contrast to previously

overwhelmingly report their identity being a driver of their housing insecurity, we can reasonably assume that the homelessness/housing insecurity represented by these statistics are, for the most part, on account of the Latinx youth’s sexual orientation, *not* their socioeconomic class.

⁴ The statistics provided by these studies, while certainly representative of an issue, may not be completely accurate given that they relied purely on reporting by individuals included in the study. I am inclined to say that these figures may underestimate discrimination and structural violence experienced by Latine LGBTQ+ individuals, considering that Latinos are historically less likely to self-report adverse experiences.

mentioned research, this study proves discrimination to have a large impact on the queer Latina demographic. However, there is no point of comparison to male or white counterparts, and, once again, no ability to explain a source or cause of this unique form of discrimination. In sum, sociological, psychological, and activism-based research proves that a problem exists: queer Latinx peoples face intersectional oppression and discrimination. The experiences of queer Latina women, despite decades of women of color literature proving gendered intersectionality, are largely unaccounted for. Searching for an explanation, I turn to philosophy and narrative.

Anzaldúa's work continues to provide one of the most well-known and explicit accounts to date (albeit often unrecognized as philosophical/academic work) of the queer Latina experience, attempting to explain what these statistics cannot. In the section of *Borderlands* titled, "Fear of Going Home: Homophobia," she states that the Latina lesbian "goes against two moral prohibitions: sexuality and homosexuality ... We're afraid of being abandoned by the mother, the culture, *la Raza*, for being unacceptable, faulty, damaged," as many of us believe (even if only subconsciously), that we will be rejected by our families, our culture, our home (31). The moral prohibitions Anzaldúa identifies are deeply cultural for many Latinos, the first referring to the demonization of sex and promiscuity for women in Latino communities and households. The second refers to a separate yet related demonization of promiscuity, sexual acts, and homosexuality, both of which are entrenched in religion and history, which I discuss in more detail later.

The safe space I described, the place where we are not faced with the same racial prejudice, is the same space that feeds into fear of rejection and a sort of unbelonging.⁵ I, along

⁵ I feel it necessary to clarify that I do not mean there is no racial prejudice in Latino communities – there are certainly issues of colorism, anti-Blackness, anti-Indigeneity, etc. What I mean to describe is specifically anti-Latino racism typically seen in white and non-Latino communities, specifically in the United States.

with the queer Latino community, were the Other once again – we are queered. As a forerunner of queer Latina philosophy, Anzaldúa makes clear strides towards diagnosing sources of this dilemma, citing religion, patriarchy, and the influence of Western European ideologies of superiority and hierarchy throughout her life's work. However, she did not reach an explicit conclusion regarding the historical causes and evolution of this experience, especially given her untimely death. I will attempt to extend this research by offering a social and historical study through this chapter that extends to contemporary lived experiences.

Race, Queer Women, and Normative Queer Spaces

Lesbians and queer women experiencing sexism from queer men and/or being pushed out of queer spaces is by no means ahistorical. While queer women have been outspoken about misogynistic experiences within the queer community since *at least* 1970s era of gay rights movements, “mainstream” queer culture and research-based conversation took several decades to catch up. As Bonnie J. Morris tells us, 20th century queer movements were often quite limited: “White, male, and Western activists whose groups and theories gained leverage against homophobia did not necessarily represent the range of racial, class, and national identities complicating a broader LGBT agenda. Women were often left out altogether.” Unknown to many and certainly underdiscussed, the acronym “LGBT” was not popularized until the mid-to-late 1990’s, predominately written as “GLBT” prior. While meant to be a sign of increased recognition for women of women in the queer community (and succeeding in many ways), this change was largely in response to the lesbian community’s *service* to gay men during the AIDS epidemic.⁶ In his historical account of LGBTQ movements in the era of AIDS, Marc Stein provides details of this shift:

⁶ From the 1980s-2000s in the United States, the AIDS epidemic predominately affected gay men. Being such a contagious disease and associated with homosexuality, politics and healthcare largely neglected

AIDS [changed] the movement's internal dynamics. While some lesbians criticized the lack of attention paid to their health issues, for example, many lesbians became AIDS activists, caregivers, and educators. Gay sexism remained pervasive and some men did not acknowledge that AIDS affected women, but many gay activists were profoundly moved by strong lesbian responses to the epidemic. In a striking illustration of lesbian compassion and solidarity, Blood Sisters ... encouraged lesbians to donate blood for gay PWAs (People/Person with Aids) after federal officials banned donations from gay men (179).

Experiences, circumstances, and positionality for queer women has since evolved, at least to some degree. In 2015, Vice published an article titled, "The Gay Men Who Hate Women." Less than a year later, Cosmopolitan published an article titled "Why Queer Women Feel Left Out of Gay Bars." Two of the largest publishers of social literature in the United States recognizing an issue amongst an underrepresented population is no easy feat. More recently, some attention has been garnered in research.⁷ In 2018, Sadie E. Hale and Tomás Ojeda publish explicit findings of misogyny and anti-femininity amongst gay men and limitations of previous research: "Scholarly preoccupations with the hierarchy *within* the structures of white gay male masculinities ... often miss its connection with femi-negativity," feeding back into the structure that "render[s] feminine expressions less valuable" (12). Such work can shed some light on the issue outlined in the last section, at least contextualizing the experience of queer women. However, when addressing gender, researchers often fail to contest with the question of race.

A very limited amount of research attempts to discuss intersectional discriminatory treatment amongst gay men. A 2019 study on levels of sexism amongst gay men concludes that

those inflicted with HIV/AIDS. The transgender community was also largely impacted, and the inclusion of "T" to the acronym was popularized around the same time.

⁷ Sociological, psychological, and other scientific studies remain incredibly limited with a large research burden and various other barriers. While research has certainly increased, this project's demographic of interest continues to be largely underrepresented.

“gay men can exhibit sexism and anti-immigration attitudes in recompense for their loss of status in the hegemonic hierarchy. Even if gay men are not as high on the hierarchy as straight men, they attempt to be higher on the hierarchy than women” (Blumell and Rodríguez 223). Even while finding statistical correlation between sexism and xenophobia, race and racism are not explicitly tracked factors. Further, each of these publications face the same limitation as the other listed research: despite proving that the issue exists, they cannot identify a root cause.

It goes without saying that the white male demographic is the dominating population in the United States and, in many cases, internationally. Queer theorist Jasbir Puar offers a theory of “homonormativities” to explain how, despite still facing struggles of homophobia, white gay men have become a sort of “ideal” under a nationalist agenda: “the production of gay, lesbian and queer bodies is crucial to the deployment of nationalism, insofar as these perverse bodies reiterate heterosexuality as the norm but also because certain domesticated homosexual bodies *provide ammunition* to reinforce nationalist projects” (66, italics are my own). When certain queer persons are able to approach normativity, replicate white, heteronormative standards, they benefit from agendas that demonize those who remain beyond normative structures while allowing nationalist, capitalist projects to claim they support queers. In other words, despite still being unaccepted and oppressed, the white gay male, in his ability to represent a “conventional” Euro-centric relationship, is a key factor in the demonization of bodies deemed “perverse” by normative standards.

Should we accept Puar’s analysis, the effects become the demonization of “perverse” Black, Brown, and Indigenous bodies globally. Taking for granted Puar’s line of argument that the white gay male has been constructed as the “good queer,” Jackie Givelber states that: “the bestowment of dignity and social citizenship onto the good queer ... lend[s] itself to the

rhetorical premises supporting Trump’s warmongering presidential agenda” (17). This is a concrete example of the phenomena Puar attempts to delineate. Despite often platforming on anti-LGBTQ rhetoric and writing and supporting legislation harmful to queer folks, Donald Trump continues to have support from some members of the queer community, albeit a minority (approximately 14% of LGBTQ+ voters in 2024). At one 2019 rally, Trump proudly held a rainbow flag with “LGBTs for Trump” written across it that was handed to him by a supporter, sending an ironic pro-queer message, and perhaps even making the move to “bestow dignity” onto queers that fit his agenda. If this were not enough, 5 years later in 2024, Trump’s running mate JD Vance told Joe Rogan it would be unsurprising for he and Trump to win the “normal gay guy” vote. Vance’s choice to identify the “*normal gay guy*,” shockingly close to Puar’s “good gay,” clearly refers to a specific type of gay male he believes their radically conservative platform can appeal to.

In 2025, groups like the Log Cabin Republicans, a gay, conservative political organization, are well-established and growing. Writer Daniel Lefferts reports his journalistic investigation of the New York chapter of the Log Cabin Republicans, attending an event hosted by the organization in the notoriously wealthy Upper West Side neighborhood of Manhattan. They celebrated Trump’s return to the White House, the rollback of DEI programs, and other conservative wins. Several condemn diversity of the LGBTQ+ community, one attendee going as far as to state, “A lot of us don’t want to be lumped into the TQ+ community. I think us being lumped into the rest of the group is what’s causing a lot of hatred toward gay people again.” In this rhetoric, other members of the queer community are dismissed for the sake of this faction of gay men maintaining support. Another attendee told Lefferts, “[They] have been widely accepted by the vast majority of the party.” The “they” he refers to is the demographic able to attend a

party in the Upper West Side and condemn pro-diversity policies. While representative of a small percentage of the queer community, groups like the New York Log Cabin Republicans prove that for the contemporary radical right, there is a “good gay” that does not include women, the lower class, etc.

The fact that President Trump is also infamously known for his Anti-Latino rhetoric and policies specifically attacking the Latino demographic cannot be ignored. In supporting Trump, there is accompanied support for an anti-Latino agenda.

While she does not focus on the Latin American context, Puar’s study of colonial influence through the lens of queerness strengthens the theory that colonial forces have been able to coopt systems of belief and subjugate under the guise of protection and inclusion. She identifies colonialism as the primary cause and driving force of adverse intersectional queer experiences throughout her multitude of writings, stating that “historically speaking, settler colonialism has a long history of articulating its violence through the protection of serviceable figures ... and now the homosexual. Pinkwashing is only one more justification for imperial/racial/national violence” (338).⁸ The construction of an “acceptable” queer figure is, therefore, the continuation of a centuries-long process of creating and recreating racial, colonial, patriarchal power that places the queer Latina in a position such that other disenfranchised communities stand above her to retain a grip on some level of privilege.

The Colonial Hetero-Patriarchy and its History

These socio-political efforts, from colonialism to modern radical conservatism, exemplify structural, systematic efforts at cementing a hierarchy within the queer community. However, I

⁸ By “pinkwashing,” Puar refers to creating messages targeted towards the LGBTQ+ community that do not actually address queer inclusion and/or equality, or that support other forms of exclusion and/or exploitation.

argue that to make these efforts, there must be some pre-existing hierarchy, something that precedes the introduction of these normative structures, of which harmful political projects work, co-opting historical hierarchies within marginalized populations for their own ulterior motives. For the purposes of this project, these hierarchies are entrenched even deeper than the “white vs. colored” issue of the LGBTQ+ community and its “allies” described by Puar and Giveler. While the figure of the white gay male proves the inherent valuing of masculinity and traditional Western values that exclude queer women and people of color, this cannot necessarily address the intersectional experience unique to queer Latinas, much less the specific history. To provide an account of the historicity of hierarchies specific to the Latina demographic, including harms often overlooked – and at times carried out by – Latino men, I look to María Lugones and Rita Laura Segato.

In “Coloniality and Gender,” Lugones argues that her attention to the intersection of race, gender, and sexuality allows her to “understand the indifference that men who have been racialized as inferior exhibit to the systematic violences inflicted on women of color” (35). This reads eerily similar to the description given to gay men previously. There is a repeated phenomenon of patriarchal hierarchy accepted and often endorsed by marginalized men, whether that be queerness or raced-ness. Lugones credits what she coins as the modern colonial gender system as the cause. Through this system, an attempted combination of women of color feminism and Aníbal Quijano’s coloniality of power, Lugones traces Latin American sexism and homophobia to Spanish (and Western European broadly) racial-colonialism. Subjugating both men and women, colonized men become the “inversion” of white men, raced, but still granted the status of “man.” Colonized women, however, are not the inversion of white women. Rather,

they are placed in a different category, their subjugation being compounded by racism, colonialism, and a manifestation of sexism that targets them in a specific manner.

There is certainly truth to this argument, given the colonial state's persecution of "deviant" sexuality and racial characterization of women of color in the Americas in stark contrast to white women. In terms of sexuality, Lugones argues that "historically, the characterization of white European women as fragile and sexually passive opposed them to non-white, colonized women, including women slaves, who were characterized along a gamut of sexual aggression and perversion" (53).

If we take this to be true, Puar's analysis becomes even more accurate – the white gay male figure, the "good gay," is placed in contrast to the sexually aggressive, perverted colonized woman, only exacerbated by queerness. When considered alongside the white female figure, passive and weak, it follows that the white queer woman experience *must* be incredibly different than the colonized queer woman, the queer Latina. While the white woman's queerness may dampen her image as fragile and pure, the Latina's queerness doubles down on "sexual aggression and perversion," compounding that image. Perhaps Lugones' words most accurately illustrate this new figure with layered perversion:

They were understood as animals in the deep sense of "without gender," sexually marked as female, but without the characteristics of femininity. Women racialized as inferior were turned from animals into various modified versions of "women" as it fit the processes of Eurocentered global capitalism (52). While Lugones is not explicitly referencing racialized queer women, I believe this to be an example of a "modified version" of women, marginalized in a new way under multiple layers of oppression. As if the colonized woman of color is not sufficiently disenfranchised, the layer of queerness tacked onto her identity is a different figure than both straight Latina *and* white queer counterparts, effectively isolating the queer Latina from the broader communities she belongs to.

Complicating this historical account further, Segato believes Lugones to neglect hierarchal structures from the pre-colonial era, thus failing to completely capture the insidious and deeply complex nature of both colonialism and gendered hierarchies. While Lugones is correct in citing matriarchal societies and support for two-spirit people as evidence of Spanish colonial forces introducing hierarchies of gender and sexuality, these cases of acceptance are not to be assumed as the norm of pre-Columbian societies. Some of the most prominent Indigenous civilizations show historical evidence of gender and sexuality norms that, while typically not enforced in the violent and criminalizing manner practiced by Spaniards, established forms of hierarchy and negative ideologies. While homosexual acts and rituals were present, sects of Mayan society have historical evidence of pejorative language relating to homosexuality. For example, translations of the Chilam Balam texts appear to contain homophobic slurs used as insults against the Itza. For centuries, many historians argued that the pre-colonial Mexica seem to have held negative social views of homosexuals, evident in translations of the *Florentine Codex*. While broadly disproven as purposeful mistranslation by religious Spanish scholars of the colonial era, more recent translators who condemn these malicious mistranslations still find evidence that the ancient Mexica had certain sexual norms, violations of which could be punished (Kimball 15-17).⁹ Many other societies exhibit similar historical phenomena. Today, we witness the multifaceted nature of the intersection of Latinidad, gender, and sexuality. For Segato, this is explained as follows:

The order before colonial intrusion – becomes a fragmentary fold in the social fabric that manages to preserve some features of the world that preceded the colonial intervention ... The hierarchies already contained within [it] – basically hierarchies of caste, of status, and of gender defined as a type of status – were exacerbated and rendered perverse and much more authoritarian (56).

⁹ For more detail on the nuances of translating Mexica and other pre-colonial Latin American societies' texts, see Héctor Domínguez-Ruvalcaba's *Translating the Queer: Body Politics and Transnational Conversations*.

Because a racial, colonialist system carried out this incorporation of hierarchies of gender and sexuality, the intersection of race, gender, and sexuality in Latin American populations is a result of European colonialism's devious ability to absorb pre-existing structures into a system that not only maintains Western thought and power but reinforces it – a process Segato describes as an “aggravation and intensification of the hierarchies that were part of these communities before colonial intrusion” (Ibid). This only supports the belief that layers of hierarchy are part of a larger oppressive methodology aimed against those with compounded marginalized identities. In other words, such an evolution of identity and oppression occurred with the goal of creating the exact circumstances presented by the research included thus far: a disenfranchised population will reify the very hierarchy that marginalizes them so as to remain “above” a different, “lesser” group.

Emotion and Unbelonging

I have insinuated up to this point that, through the layering of multiple marginalized identities, the queer Latina is severed from other communities. In the home, the native culture and community, queerness is unacceptable, and gender is a strict concept. In queer spaces, gender and race become the issue. Amongst women, queerness and race are now the problem. A lonely existence ensues. What is one to do to maintain human connection, community, acceptance? Rejection is assumed to be inevitable. Anzaldúa's apt response to this dilemma is as follows: “To avoid rejection, some of us conform to the values of the culture, push the unacceptable parts into the shadows. Which leaves only one fear – that we will be found out and that the Shadow-Beast will break out of its cage” (31). This rejection is a constant fear, our true nature likened to a beast. A shame.

Similar notions of rejection and loneliness have unsurprisingly been put forward by a number of thinkers grappling with the weight of racial-colonialism. Nearly three-quarters of a century ago, Frantz Fanon provided a chilling account of sentiments I believe to be representative of the strong desire to simply belong as experienced by someone like the queer Latina.¹⁰ Despite considering vastly different contexts, facing completely different manifestations of Western colonial oppression, something feels strikingly familiar about the statement, “I wanted quite simply to be a man among men ... I wanted to be a man, and nothing but a man” (67). I propose that this base argument can be expanded. Someone belonging to a minoritized population may find themselves stating, “I want to be X, and nothing but X” – a person that does not have to carry the weight of their subjugation and can simply be seen as a person, for who they are and who they conceive themselves to be.

Note where Fanon states, “a man among men.” A person among people. A sort of fittingness with society. I can imagine these sentiments are and will be shared by the queer Latina facing rejection and discrimination in every listed space – the home, their culture, the queer world, and so on – and plagued with questions like “Why can I not just be human?” and “Why can I not just exist?”

Such feelings weigh much harder on your shoulders in spaces in which *no* part of you belongs. Much attention has been given to Othered spaces, but describing the intensity of layers of oppression in dominate spaces would require a project all its own. For now, Fanon’s words provide some explanation: “The white world, the only decent one, was preventing me from participating” (69). Similarly, I argue to expand this notion. The white world rejects you. The

¹⁰ There are possible limitations to extending Fanon to this analysis, the most obvious being that he was a straight man. More implicitly, many readers of Fanon identify what could be interpreted as unfair discussion of women in his work (notably Chapter 5 of *Black Skin, White Masks*). For the purposes of this paper, I focus on the sentiments of discomfort and rejection he describes, not unaware of the implications of his writing.

white world can encompass the straight world, the male world, and even the “conventional” queer world. While even your own marginalized community rejects you, the heterosexual, white, male world is not even a thought. Even when you succeed in hiding your Shadow-Beast, the fear of rejection is asphyxiating: “Look, I’ll agree to everything,” says Fanon, “on condition I go unnoticed!” - reminiscent of Anzaldúa’s description of suppression to avoid rejection.

Fanon proceeds to explain something akin to rejection by one’s own: “I turn away from these prophets of doom and cling to my brothers, Negroes like myself. To my horror, they reject me” (70). Fanon describes turning to who he believes to be his own, his people. I believe this to be adjacent to the queer Latina turning to her culture, her home spaces. To our horror, they reject us, be it on account of our gender, our queerness, our *forma de vivir*. Now, there is no “one’s own.” Like Fanon, we belong to a minoritized race and/or ethnicity and are rejected even there. As I stated previously, the safe space is gone. This fact is felt through the mind and body. Fanon describes his identity as “dense and undeniable,” something that “torments” him, “pursues” him, makes him “uneasy,” and “exasperates” him (Ibid). Is this not the description of a beast, a Shadow-Beast? While Anzaldúa contextualizes the queer Latina experience, Fanon conveys the deepest emotions of the subject who suffers under colonialism. Both are filled with inescapability.

Sara Ahmed attempts to create a more clear-cut, unambiguous illustration of the emotional experience of the intersectional queer individual, first addressing one’s ability (or lack thereof) to confront, address, or escape: “No matter how ‘out’ you may be, how (un)comfortably queer you may feel, those moments of interpellation get repeated over time, and can be experienced as a bodily injury: moments which position queer subjects as failed in their failure to live up” (147). In this way, confronting the beast of your prescribed identity does not save you

from harm. What builds up to this eventual injury is likened to a constant discomfort – what Ahmed compares to sitting in a piece of furniture that has been molded to another’s body shape, perhaps parallel to Fanon’s explained uneasiness. Discomfort is unavoidable existing in a heteronormative world. So long as heteronormativity is present, the queer will inherently not belong – at least, not completely. However, as Ahmed argues, that does not mean comfort is accessible in all queer spaces, particularly those that may reproduce certain norms and ideals (e.g. white spaces) (151). Particularly and especially for someone like the queer Latina, a white, male-centric queer space still maintains certain racial and gender-based normativity to which she does not belong.

Ahmed’s conclusion, then, is that queerness is not a matter of freedom *from* any and all normativity but embracing discomfort and its potential to continue rupturing normative structures, as queerness has always done. One experiences the discomfort Ahmed illustrates *because* they interrupt the smooth functioning of the normative structure. The piece of furniture that was molded to another’s body now must hold the body of another, their shape indenting the outline of the body the furniture held before.

I am inclined to say this can be extended to many other facets of Otherness. If there is concern with inescapability for the queer Latina identity, attempting to escape is futile. While Fanon may not describe the exact manifestation of discomfort I identify, he and Anzaldúa both delineate this inescapability. For Fanon, one cannot escape their Blackness, nor can they retreat into it. For Anzaldúa, one cannot outrun their Shadow-Beast. Loneliness, rejection, oppression, and above all, discomfort are guarantees, but the disruption caused by accepting as opposed to running works against the very normative structures that cause these sentiments. If existing in one’s identity is a matter of embracing, accepting, and/or coping with discomfort, the queer

Latina has more than enough discomfort to address in this way. How this is possible in practice will be addressed in the remaining chapters.

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Chapter 2 – Rejection, Subversion, and Validation through Love and Desire

I return to Anzaldúa's words: "For the lesbian of color, the ultimate rebellion she can make against her native culture is through her sexual behavior" (31). Not by rejecting the church, not by disrespecting her elders, not by committing a crime against the law. No. These things are all encompassed by – collapsed onto – her sexual behavior. Not even her identity as a homosexual is the ultimate crime. Rather, her behavior, the way she engages her sexuality in touch, in love, and in gaze – this is the ultimate rebellion.

The problem for queer Latinas is not a simple one. It is true that her behavior rejects the sexual morality that necessitates "man and wife," sex to be a nonexistent subject outside of the marital bed, and demonization of feminine desire. In terms of patriarchy, she goes one step further: she rejects men. The myth of the need for a man falls flat – the greatest fear for a patriarchal society. As Anzaldúa further explains, "The culture and the Church insist that women are subservient to males. If a woman rebels, she is a *mujer mala*. If a woman doesn't renounce herself in favor of the male, she is selfish. If a woman remains a *virgen* until she marries, she is a good woman" (28). Engaging in queer behavior rejects both of these commandments stemming from the home culture.

When race and queerness intersect in this way, the queer Latina is not only rejecting certain norms but is *being rejected* as a being worthy of love, acceptance, and recognition. The last chapter discussed many ways in which the dominating white male-centric society ostracizes queer women of color. I argue that when considering desire, touch, and love, this ostracization, rejection, and oppression manifests powerfully, leading to a sentiment of undesirability. This undesirability, this rejection by normative structures, can easily become internalized, believing oneself to be undeserving of love and attraction. While the ultimate rebellion for the queer Latina

is her own sexual behavior, perhaps, then, an ultimate disruption of white society, colonial structures, patriarchy, is not one's own identity, but by engaging in a queer Latina's sexuality – choosing to desire the queered, raced, and gendered body in a society that deems all of those things undesirable. When these decisions are taken on, when the queer Latina rejects norms through romantic and sexual relations, when another chooses to reject patriarchal and racialized norms to reciprocate, a subversive space of validation is opened.

This chapter serves as an exploration of the notion and affect of undesirability for someone like the queer Latina and how this can be undermined through experiences of love and touch. I seek to trace how this undesirability manifests, first from the internalization of oppressive gazes, to attempts at coping, and finally, to the possibility of validation through love and the erotic.

Internalizing Rejection: Colonial Gazes, Hypersexual Normativity, and Undesirability

I have made the claim that rejection is all too common of a notion, sensation, and experience for queer Latinas. To take this a step further, I argue this often results in internalization, believing oneself not only to be rejected, but to be deserving of that rejection. Because of what you feel, what you are – mentally, emotionally, and corporeally, the queered, the gendered, and the raced – you do not deserve to be loved and desired.

The previous chapter explained many structural and social causes, including racism, sexism, and homophobia, intricately layered through the history of colonialism. In terms of the embodiment of these structures in beauty, desire, and affect, I look to what Mariana Ortega coins as the “colonial eye.” For Ortega, the colonial eye “is a powerful eye, so much so that its unwieldy, unrelenting ways and distorted imaginaries seep into the very bodies of color that it aims to wound” (30). When she employs the phrase “distorted imaginaries,” these are the mental

images, the aesthetic norms, the oppressive streams of thought that impact how we conceive of the material. I believe Ortega to be referring to the ways in which normative structures conceive of the colonized body – something other, something less than, something undesirable, something that ought not be wanted. In the words of Alejandro Vallega, “Power affects imaginaries and inserts itself in the imaginaries” (34). While both of these notions are defined in relatively broad terms, I argue there are two reasons we can understand the colonial gaze and the images it creates for the specific context of queer Latinas: 1) colonialist structures have and continue to influence cultural and socio-political conditions along lines of race, gender, and queerness, and 2) I do not take the colonial gaze or normative conceptions of images to operate in the same manner for all persons at all times. Especially considering the complex positionality of queer Latinas, elements of race, gender, and sexuality manifest in different ways depending on space, surroundings, and the dominate culture at play, as I deeply explored in Chapter 1. That said, different applications or manifestations of the colonial gaze could be said to affect oneself in different capacities at different times. For the purposes of this piece, I will use the colonial eye and the colonial gaze to describe the combined forces of patriarchy, racial-colonialism, and homophobia that intertwine to create a compounding gaze upon certain bodies and expressions of sexuality like that of the queer Latina.

This gaze does not just penetrate images and self-conceptions but actively shapes them in such a way that they precede you. Before your body is ever present in a space or to someone, a certain image is already there. Ortega, quoting Helen Ngo, provides insight on the construction of certain bodies that are always already there: “‘The figures of ‘Latino men as uneducated laborers,’ Asian women as ‘exotic’ and others are ‘coded’ onto differently racialized bodies ... The analysis of racialized perception shows us [that] these things are not simply themselves, but

are already shaped by, and participate in, discursive practices” (30-31). Your body is not simply your body, but already shaped by and participating in these normative practices.

Dissecting how this phenomena functions in the case of the queer Latina is not a straightforward task. On the one hand, there is the hyper-sexualization of Latinos writ large. From myths of the “Latin lover” and “Cuban pool boy” to the “sexy Latina maid” and “spicy Latina,” sexualized tropes have permeated the conception of Latin Americans for on end. Specific to women, Lugones traces this back to the era of colonization: “The characterization of white European women as fragile and sexually passive opposed them to non-white, colonized women, including women slaves, who were characterized along a gamut of sexual aggression and perversion, and as strong enough to do any sort of labor” (53).

This does not just exist on the level of social-historical theory. Studying films like *Frida* (2002), and *American Beauty* (2002), Hannah Lipman explains that “Hispanic women in Hollywood cinema have been represented by the false notion that they are hypersexual and have perfectly curvaceous bodies. The male gaze within these films has perpetuated this illusion” (27). Through sociological investigation of Brown and Black women in the sex work industry, Siobhan Brooks concludes, “Dark-skinned Latina women gained less returns for their erotic services, were affected by negative racial stereotypes of them as hypersexual or aggressive, and thus were racially marginalized in their employment” (78). The construction of these stereotypes deserves more attention than what I can provide here, but I take for granted that they exist and impact both external perceptions and internal perceptions of Latina women, as part of the colonial gaze.

Queerness once again adds a compounding layer to this oppressive and obstructing gaze. In a study of lesbian stereotypes and hypersexuality in media, social psychologists Arienne

Annati and Laura R. Ramsey attempt to interpret the sexist and fetishizing imaginaries of queer women: “Both heterosexual and gay men identify that ‘beautiful blondes’ are the stereotypical lesbians, with the pervasiveness of the hot lesbian subtype heightening the invisibility of masculine-presenting women who are referred to by male participants as ‘butch ugly’” (315-316). There already seems to be a certain underlying racial element here with the identification of “beautiful blondes” and conventional femininity, but there is no specific attention given to how race is at play in this construction of the image of a queer woman. I believe we can infer that, at the very least, an intersection of oppression manifests when one is both Latina and queer, creating a “doubled” gaze of hypersexuality, assumed access to a body, sexual aggression, and other distorted imaginaries that feed back into the colonial gaze.

When this construction of the body and the sexuality is considered, the colonial gaze disenfranchises and dehumanizes the queer Latina. She now belongs to a race that is not meant for love, but for objectifying sexual desire. Her gender is conceived as not belonging to the class of “woman,” but a sub-human of sorts, only capable of sex and aggression. As Olivia J. Taylor argues, “All societal indicators, (such as language, politics, art, and so on), point to the notion that the Latina is a person who can be put in a box and belittled on the basis of sexuality” (31). Her queerness serves as another layer in reasoning of degradation, adding to this hypersexualization that crowds out one’s personhood. Perhaps this contributes to an explanation of why Anzaldúa identifies sexual behavior as an “ultimate rejection” for queer women of color: her behavior not only rejects certain expectations but maximizes the sin of immoral sex – oversexualized, able to be fetishized by the colonial gaze, and living in a body made out to be sexually accessible.

Despite being concerned with racialized men, Fanon illustrates the experience of the colonial subject becoming hyper-sexualized: “[When] we let ourselves be carried away by the movement of images, no longer do we see the black man; we see a penis: the black man has been occulted. He has been turned into a penis. He *is* a penis” (117). This is a distorted imaginary, a manifestation of the colonial gaze re- or de-ontologizing. There is a loss of humanity, a portrayal of something else, some sexual Other. He points to the possibility of colonial ideals constructing a sexualized, dehumanized figure. Imagine, then, what occurs when the male gaze compounds this racialization onto someone who is both woman and queer. Added layers of hyper-sexualization appear, and added prohibitions against desiring this othered body appear alongside them. No longer is she a person, but a sexual object disallowed personhood and rejected from her home.

It may seem contradictory, then, to discuss the normative framing of hyper-sexualization with undesirability. Hypersexuality is paradoxical in this way: one is both made out to be nothing more than an object of sexuality, but not the sort of object anyone ought to *actually* desire. Fanon explains this paradox in terms of the Black man: “It’s a handsome race ... but they must be brutes. I couldn’t bear to have their big hands touch my shoulders ... Knowing that in certain cases we should read between the lines, we should conclude that this fragile little woman basically sees her frail shoulders being pummeled by the powerful black man” (115-116). The over-sexualization creates an object of terror. Certain normative rules are at play that instill a sort of prohibition and fear of the constructed sexual object. Consider again the demonization of sexual behavior previously mentioned. Recall Lugones’ description of the colonized woman as a perverted, sexually aggressive being. When a body or figure is framed as hypersexual, this

sexuality is then framed as immoral. Objectify, sexualize from a distance, but do not actually touch, do not actually love, do not actually desire.

The moral prohibition of feminine sexuality only further entrenches this idea that someone like the queer Latina is immoral, a thing that ought to be condemned. Hypersexuality is a sin, feminine sexuality is a sin, and queer sexuality is a sin. This combines to develop many rules and regulations about bodies – what should be wanted, what should be seen, what should be touched – particularly within the context of Latin American culture. Ortega explains her own experience seeing the photograph of a naked Laura Aguilar:¹¹ “There are so many rules about not displaying one’s nakedness in Latinx culture ... Her nakedness also made me feel uncomfortable – I was taught well by normative imaginaries and did not expect to see a naked large body, especially that of a Latina” (40). When discussing this text with Miguel Gualdrón Ramírez, he points out that in some circumstances, nudity (regardless of race) is unsurprising – watching a cologne commercial on television, seeing a pack of underwear in a department store, etc. This nudity does not break those rules. Those are images meant to be sexualized. If a Latina is seen in these ways, she is fitting in her box, being viewed and sexualized from a distance. The shock Ortega describes is context dependent. She is a queer Latina witnessing a naked Latina woman in a space where nudity was not meant to be.

While this example is in context of viewing photography, I feel the fundamental reaction is quite applicable. When the Latina body is sexualized from a distance, from *Frida* (2002), to Cristina Aguilera on the 2012 advertisement of Gucci Guilty, to the sexual tropes reinforced by these images being deployed against sex workers, this is expected. The Latina is reified as a

¹¹ Laura Aguilar (1959-2018) was a Mexican-American photographer known for many series, including “Clothed/Unclothed,” here referenced by Mariana Ortega. The series juxtaposed pictures of the same models being clothed and completely naked next to one another, including Aguilar.

sexual object to illicit no sense of shock but judged as immoral. Yet, when Ortega witnesses the body of another Latina in a more personal sense – completely nude, not overly sexualized – she becomes uneasy, torn between looking away or continuing to look at the photograph (40). The image of Aguilar’s body is experiencing rejection. She has an undesirable body. We consider looking away. This witnessing of nudity was never meant to be personal. She was never meant to be seen in this manner. When Latina nudity is not on display for the colonial gaze, fitting the role it assigned her, we feel as though it ought not be seen. Even for Ortega (and myself for that matter) as a queer Latina, there is an initial response to reject this body that is familiar to us – that of a nude Latina.

Queerness further complicates this moral dilemma. Religious laws instruct us to not look upon bodies with lust – much less bodies of the same sex. Instead, we ought to respond with rejection. Even in a society in which queerness has become somewhat more normalized, the queer Latina body still experiences this rejection. In “Respectable Queerness,” Yuvraj Joshi argues that only the “respectable” queer can be palatable, received by normative society: “Respectability is constituted by performative acts that align with one’s behaviors with social norms that are gendered, white, middle-class, and heterosexual ... Respectability is achieved by the repetitive performance of social norms based on the behaviors society deems respectable” (419). I think of Puar’s “good gays,” and interpret all this as performing for and in accordance with the colonial gaze. Joshi continues, “There is a disjunct, however, between what a person *does* and who that person *is*, or between performance and the self, since the self is irreducible to a social category” (Ibid.). The self is never just the social category; the queer Latina is never just the sexualized or rejected being she is made out to be. If she wishes to be accepted, she must

reject the self to perform in accordance with the colonial gaze. As Anzaldúa puts it, she runs from her Shadow-Beast.

This does not just occur under the direct colonial gaze. Remember that rejection of men, expressing feminine desire, and engaging in “immoral,” unconventional sexual acts is prohibited in the home culture. In her groundbreaking book, “all about love,” bell hooks boldly claims, “Many of us are not ready to accept and embrace our true selves, particularly when living with integrity alienates us from our familiar worlds” (187). In all spaces, in all worlds, even the “familiar” ones, the queer Latina is unacceptable and undesirable, inhibiting many from embodying those parts of themselves that are queered, gendered, and raced.

There is constant pull from these two sides of the same structure – the colonial gaze as it manifests from the dominate culture and the home culture. There is simultaneous reduction to a sexual object and rejection, the need to go against the self for the sake of acceptance. All reinforces the idea that our true self – the true nature of our minds, bodies, and desire – undesirable. We are unwanted and unable to be loved as we are – an internalization of the colonial gaze.

Coping with Rejection and the Search for White Validation

The colonial eye is strong in its insidious ability to cause internalization, “seep into bodies,” as Ortega states. When the person of color embodies its gaze, its white standard of beauty, culture, etc., is it that surprising to resent oneself, the body they were born in, their desire for a certain love? When you are constantly rejected, viewed as morally unacceptable, socially wrong, interpersonally unattained, are we truly able to envision a different result? More so, it should not come as a shock that many search for this a way out of this resentment, this internalized dissent, this self-rejection through gaining the love of another person. bell hooks

discusses this turn to relationships: “To return to love, to get the love we always wanted but never had, to have the love we want but are not prepared to give, we seek romantic relationships. We believe that these relationships, more than any other, will rescue and redeem us” (169). Romantic love, attraction, and desire seem to be a direct way to combat the lack of love and acceptance experienced and internalized, particularly the lack of acceptance from white society, home culture, and patriarchal spaces – the colonial gaze. Recognition, desire, and love from that which constructs the colonial eye is not *always* sought after but is certainly not an uncommon sentiment.

Fanon vulnerably explains his own struggle with this internal resentment and desire for love and acceptance from dominate structures:

Out of the blackest part of my soul ... surges up this desire to be suddenly *white*. I want to be recognized not as *Black*, but as *White* ... Who better than the white woman to bring this about? By loving me, she proves to me that I am worthy of white love. I am loved like a white man. I am a white man. Her love opens the illustrious path that leads to total fulfillment. I espouse white culture, white beauty, white whiteness. Between these white breasts that my wandering hands fondle, white civilization and worthiness become mine” (29).

I note the emphasis on love and touch.¹² Of all things, once Fanon has denounced his Blackness, acknowledged his desire to step into the white sphere, a white body, white status, *he seeks love and touch*. This is a manifestation of the colonial eye and its internal effects: “In a racist society, a Black body is always seen as having a threatening nature or as inferior. This alleged essence in turn is one that a racialized body may internalize, thus becoming thoroughly affected” (Ortega 47). His Blackness has not been accepted, valued, loved, desired, touched – at least that is what he has been made to believe. The colonial gaze has been internalized. Again, the sentiments that

¹² There is room to critique the way Fanon articulates these sentiments and much debate on Fanon’s discussion of women and gender. For the purposes of this paper, I find the way he articulates experience of love and desire to be useful, specifically to problematize his desire for whiteness through love and touch.

lead to this sort of experience can become increasingly compounded with the addition of imposed gendering, queering, and intersectional racialization. Fanon (and others like him) tries, then, to be bell hooks would explain this as attempting to construct a different self to gain love: “So many seekers after love are taught in childhood to feel unworthy, that nobody could love them as they really are, and they construct a false self” (169). For Fanon, receiving white love meant he is now this false self, “a white man,” a man who can experience the love and desire he so greatly craves.

This is, of course, different than the search for love that can be taken on by the queer Latina, but resonates to a degree. There are common themes of the desire for a certain social status, contesting with demonizing hyper-sexualization, and conceiving oneself as undesirable. Alia Al-Saji argues, “There is no flesh that has not been touched, reconfigured, through colonial duration. For the colonized, the very sensibility of flesh registers the weight of this duration – a memory immanently woven into its texture” (209). While I do not necessarily agree with this generalization, I propose that this colonial memory is projected onto the flesh in the same way it is imbedded within imaginaries. The body, touch, sensation, affect, are all shaped by “colonial wounds.” Ortega looks away from the raced, gendered Latina body. It is not what she is supposed to look at. The colonial eye does not want to see it, in a similar manner to which it does not want to see Fanon’s Blackness. It wants something else, something white, something acceptable. The body we live in is not desired, not wanted, not loveable, so the colonial eye drives us to search for something that is. Perhaps that is whiteness, perhaps that is heterosexuality, perhaps that is a “good gay,” a “respectable queer” that we believe will help us garner the love and human touch we seek.

Having already failed to denounce my queerness, I once was in a relationship with a white woman. Not just any white woman – she lived in the suburbs, was blonde, conventionally feminine, and considered quite attractive in our hometown. While I did not have the words at the time, I saw her as a “respectable queer,” fitting each category Joshi outlines. She held the whiteness, the femininity, and the socio-economic status that I lacked. While I was attracted to much more than this about her, I felt a sense of accomplishment when we started seeing each other.

With her, I attended a party at the country club. People who had never seemed willing to speak to me suddenly spoke as if we were long friends. I felt that when I walked with her, I could walk freely without so many daunting gazes and second looks. I had been accepted by the white suburban society that had rejected me for as long as I could remember. After we broke up, she became engaged to a white man. At that moment, I despised the color of my skin, my sex that made our relationship a queer one, and every trope of queers and Latinas that made her friends and family disapprove. In my young mind that had not yet worked to heal from the aches and bruises caused by the “weight of colonial duration,” she had taken away my chance at acceptance, my chance to become the “respectable queer,” and most of all, my chance to feel wanted by the colonial gaze in favor of what the colonial eye wanted. In Fanon’s words, “My body was returned to me spread-eagled, disjointed, redone, draped in mourning” (80). All I saw was all that I would never be, and all I could feel was the fittingness of a colonial gaze that I could never provide. The colonial eye had found a leg of power in me. As Vallega states, “the power is that I imagined myself as the colonized” (personal communication, 2025). Be it the colonized race, the colonized woman, or the queer unfitting in a society shaped by colonialism, rejection, unwantedness, and undesirability had seeped into my own self-conception.

In telling this story, I share similar concerns to Fanon:

I wonder whether I won't look as though I'm stating that not only do I despise women of my own race, but drawn by the desire for white flesh that has been off limits to us Blacks since the white man rules the world, I am unconsciously endeavoring to take my revenge on the European female for everything her ancestors have inflicted on my people throughout the centuries (51).

Of course, this is not the case. This was never the case. The concern was never that I scorned other women of color, that I resented the white body, or anything of that nature. Nor is it the case that there is no possibility for meaningful interracial love. I did not scorn the person I loved. No – what I scorned was myself. I believe Fanon and I may have had this in common. My body was categorized differently by the colonial eye than Fanon's Black masculinized body, but the outcome was the same: the colonial gaze had been internalized. So long I had been taught that my body, my race, my queerness was not wanted. I had rejected myself to gain white love. If I was able to receive white love, "respectable queer" love, then I, myself must deserve to be loved as much as my white heterosexual counterparts. Everyone would be proven wrong. The white society that rejected me on account of my race would have to let me enter their spaces. The homophobic masculinity that hyper-sexualized me would have to act with respect. I could tell my home culture, "¿Ves? No soy *mujer mala*." It was nothing more than a coping mechanism in my search for validation. Like Fanon proceeds to explain, "The moment the black man accepts the split imposed by the Europeans, there is no longer any respite; and 'from that moment on, isn't it understandable that he will try to elevate himself to the white man's level? To elevate himself into the range of colors to which he has attributed a kind of hierarchy?'" (59). Multiple "splits" had been imposed on me up to that point – brown versus white, female versus male, queer versus heterosexual – none of which are accepted by dominate society. After so much rejection, I wanted my raced, sexed, and queered body to be validated. While I do not claim this is how the internalized colonial gaze manifests for every colonized subject, I conclude that this

desire to elevate oneself to a higher position on the social hierarchy is certainly a plausible outcome, including for queer Latinas.

Sidestepping the Colonial Gaze: Validation through Love, Desire, and the Erotic

Contesting and critiquing his own desire for whiteness, white love, white flesh, Fanon states, “The sexual myth—the obsession with white flesh—conveyed by alienated minds must no longer be an obstacle to understanding the question. In no way must my color be felt as a stain” (59). He blatantly refuses the idea of being damned to feel his race in a painful, burdensome manner, like a stain of black ink ruining one’s favorite white shirt. In order to reject this notion, then, there must be a way in which the body oppressed and rejected by the colonial gaze can escape this deep craving for whiteness. There is a possibility of resistance, refusal, even in the midst of Fanon’s relatively pessimistic outlook.

Fanon is specifically concerned with sexuality here. There is something about touch, desire, and the erotic that stands out. From the perspective of a queer Latina, I argue this is also the case. I began this chapter with Anzaldúa’s claim that for the queer Latina, there is no greater rebellion than her sexual activity – a striking parallel concerned with desire and sexual behavior. While I maintain the belief that feminine queer activity is rejected, penalized, and results in many of the sociological/psychological issues outlined in Chapter 1, I believe it offers a potential space to disrupt this rejection, this colonial gaze. If the queer Latina is shown that, in actuality, this behavior, this body, this way of being, is wanted, desired, and loved, that experience directly opposes the colonial structures that demonize her race, sex, and sexuality, shielding the colonial eye. This is a dimension of what I refer to as the erotic. Does this mean intimacy, love, and desire is a “make or break” matter? Can the erotic sphere be that which deeply oppresses us, assisting the colonial eye in digging its sclera into our psyches, *and* be the key to healing the

wounds caused by the colonial gaze (or even avoiding them to begin with)? Not necessarily, but I offer a different hypothesis.

I use erotic in a similar manner to Black lesbian feminist scholar, Audre Lorde. Studying Lorde, the AFyL Women Collective offers a concrete definition of the erotic: “Eroticism is the source of the enjoyment of life itself ... Eroticism highlights our ability to enjoy, to connect with ourselves from enjoyment and not from shame, impotence, or contempt, as we have been taught” (65). The erotic, in resisting structures that teach so many of us to feel shame for what we enjoy, has the potential to be disruptive. Lorde defines this disruptive capacity as follows:

The erotic is a resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling. In order to perpetuate itself, every oppression must corrupt or distort those various sources of power within the culture of the oppressed that can provide energy for change. For women, this has meant a suppression of the erotic as a considered source of power and information within our lives. We have been taught to suspect this resource, vilified, abused, and devalued within western society (53).

Her statement that oppression “corrupts and distorts” forms of power like that of the erotic is a direct parallel to the colonial gaze manifesting in love and desire as I have theorized it.

Internalizing the gaze is suppressing the erotic. The erotic is innate and carries potential. For Lorde, the erotic can range from appreciating the sensation of something smooth and soft between our fingers like margarine to being pressed against the body of the person we love. I am here most concerned with the latter – experiencing the sensual, affective, and electric potentials of touch, desire, and love, and how this opposes the colonial gaze.

There may be some concern that arguing to embrace the erotic risks feeding back into the stereotype of hypersexuality. I agree with Lorde when she states that “pornography is a direct denial of the power of the erotic, for it represents the suppression of true feeling. Pornography emphasizes sensation without feeling” (54). When the queer Latina is hypersexualized, it is

assumed she is nothing more than a sexual object. An object, that is, without feeling – animate only in the ability to be gazed upon and provide pleasure. The pornographic and the hypersexual only frame someone like the queer Latina as existing for others. The erotic, however, calls us to act for ourselves, acknowledge our sensations, appreciate our sentiments, and be intentional with our desires.

This is not an easy call to answer. We have been taught that in many ways, we exist for others. The idea that our raced bodies are “less than” puts us in comparison to another body. For the external normative structure, we are insufficient. The sexist notion that women are meant to serve men can be pervasive and difficult to break. The command to not be queer, engage in queer actions, or display our nakedness in the “wrong way” is an external command to avoid being rejected and condemned by others. That rejection and condemnation is frightening and painful. Answering this call means taking on a risk. For these reasons, I want to emphasize that I am by no means granting a moral “ought” to the erotic, nor outlining rules on how the erotic should or should not be approached and experienced. Rather, I want to unpack what occurs when we are able to engage the erotic in this way.

Still, that is no simple task. People, particularly women, are trained to reject this erotic desire. bell hooks describes such a circumstance: “I talked with a woman friend who stated that she had always been extremely fearful of sexual encounters, even when she knew someone well and desired them. Her fear was rooted in a shame she felt about the body, sentiments she had learned in childhood” (173). There are multiple layers to the foundation of this sense. Women, particularly those of Latino culture, are morally prohibited from seeking pleasure and gratification. Racialized Latinos are taught that their bodies are something to be ashamed of.

Queers are taught that the way in which they seek desire itself is unnatural and immoral. The colonial eye casts its judgmental gaze when the queer Latina searches for, embraces the erotic.

Searching for the erotic in and of itself can be demanding. If we want to reap the true value the erotic can provide, we must put ourselves forward. Our raced, sexed, and queered body must become vulnerable to a degree. By vulnerable, I do not mean we necessarily need to display ourselves to another or share the depths of our emotions. This vulnerability can come by contesting with our own bodies, acknowledging the way an oppressive, normative society has constructed us, and look for what is beyond that. In order to do so, we must release the desire I described through Fanon. For if we are shown validation and acceptance through a desire to achieve whiteness, that self-rejecting desire is reinforced. This may not feel natural to us. After all, “we all know that the usual approach is to meet someone we like and put our best self forward, or even at times a false self, one we believe will be more appealing to the person we want to attract” (hooks 184). It is not the false self, the self we wished we were, that the erotic can validate. That self is validated by the colonial gaze. Perhaps Anzaldúa provides a framework:

My body is sexed; I can’t avoid that reality... My body is raced; I can’t escape that reality, can’t control how other people perceive me, can’t de-race, e-race my body, or the reality of its raced-ness. U.S. society is gendered and racialized; it expects certain behavior from women, certain bearings from men, certain comportment from queer mujeres, certain demeanor from queer hombres, certain conduct from disabled, and so on. If you’re a person of color, those expectations take on more pronounced nuances due to the traumas of racism and colonization ... These identity categories—categories based primarily on history, biology, nationality – are important aspects of personal and collective identity; however, they don’t contain our entirety, and we can’t base our whole identidad on them (65).

This is a vulnerable moment in which Anzaldúa willingly looks at herself and acknowledges all that society tells her she is, all she is cursed to be by the colonial gaze, but realizes she has something beyond that. Her body, her being, her sex, her race, and her queerness are all parts of her, but she has a *self* – as does every queer Latina. The self is the conglomeration

of all those aspects of identity denigrated by the colonial gaze, but include all that is not, all desires, all experiences, all imaginaries, all feelings of uneasiness, and all sentiments that validate what has been deemed undesirable and unacceptable. This is the self that can be validated through the erotic.

To complicate matters further, if the erotic can be so many things, what is it? How will I know when I have found it? I remind us of Lorde's words: "The considered phrase, 'It feels right to me,' acknowledges the strength of the erotic into a true knowledge, for what that means is the first and most powerful guiding light toward any understanding" (56). The erotic does not need to be some specific thing we identify and pursue. The erotic is what feels right to this *self* I just described.

When I say, "what feels right," I am of course referring to what touch, what love, what desire feels right. Women are forbidden from feeling, queers feel wrong, and raced bodies are not meant to be truly felt. Getting in touch with what feels right, then, could be the "ultimate rebellion" Anzaldúa describes – not just to a queer Latina's native culture, but to the structures that attempted to inhibit the erotic for her.

Given these structures, however, discovering "what feels right" may or may not occur in a straightforward, easily legible manner. What feels right at one point may or may not at another. Further, what feels right to each queer Latina may vary, but we can reasonably assume a few commonalities: touch and love that is considered homosexual or queer, the acknowledgement of the otherized elements of her identity without fear of rejection or stereotyping and being desired as she is (rather than as a false self). The erotic space is then opened when the queer Latina experiences romance, shares a desiring glance, or senses the erotic touch of another. The wants, needs, and desires she has been ridiculed and chastised for, that she internalized onto herself,

believing that she was incapable of being wanted in that way, are suddenly not only accepted, but reciprocated. She is shown that these sentiments are not wrong and will not always trigger punitive repercussions. The gaze of the colonial eye is now blurry. I understand this as a reason Lorde believes that the erotic “[provides] the power which comes from sharing deeply any pursuit with another person. The sharing of joy, whether physical, emotional, psychic, or intellectual, forms a bridge between the sharers ... and lessens the threat of their difference” (56). The share of pursuit is key. There is a practical element to pursuit. Becoming open to pursuit, actively pursuing, and discovering outcomes are all steps in a larger process of what feeds into this erotic, this dimension of “what feels right.”

However, the erotic does not need to be pressured to achieve all of this. While I theorize that the erotic can disrupt socio-political oppression and marginalization, I do not argue the erotic needs to be viewed as solely political or pressured to energize politics, which I often interpret Lorde as arguing. Rather, I believe the erotic is something we *allow to occur*. As the queer Latina confronts that which she is, accepts that which she is not, and engages in the erotic, there is at least momentary relief from the colonial gaze. She is not doing for others, nor is she required to rebel against them. She can exist in a space in which her race, sex, and queerness does not define or inhibit the love and touch she craves. To use Al-Saji’s terminology, her sensations are no longer (only) wounded by colonialism. According to Ahmed, a sort of “reshaping” occurs: “When bodies touch and give pleasure to bodies that have been barred from contact, then those bodies are reshaped ... creating the possibility of social forms that are not constrained by the form of the heterosexual couple” (165). This has the potential to continue working against the colonial gaze, severing the sclera of the colonial eye. “When one knows a

true love, the transformative force of that love lasts even when we no longer have the company of the person with whom we experienced profound mutual care and growth” (hooks 187).

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Chapter 3 – Aesthetic Experience and Validation: Exploring Latin American Art and Gendered Queerness

Images affirm and give occasion for the articulation of one's distinct senses of being ... giving rise to new determinations of identities and senses of being beyond already established systems of conceptual knowledge.

Alejandro A. Vallega

There is a longstanding tradition within Latin American culture and history of utilizing art, literature, and a variety of other mediums for self-conceptualization, contesting with one's social-political marginalization, and investigating the situatedness of Latin America on a global scale. Latin America is accepted as the birthplace of magical realism, a genre dedicated to *expressing* one's own emotion as opposed to invoking emotion in another, extending back to pre-colonial eras (Leal 1995, Castle 2022). Baroque painting was not only popularized in Latin America but adopted and characterized to illustrate uniquely Latin American imagery, motifs, and historical events (Scott 2019).ⁱ

In the last two centuries, themes of expression and liberation have steadily grown in popularity. In contemporary times, Latin American artistic media concerning experience, emotion, and societal positionality remains prominent. Within the academy, the field of Latin American decolonial and liberatory aesthetics has been established over the last several decades by thinkers such as Walter Mignolo, Enrique Dussel, and Alejandro A. Vallega, while anti-colonial scholars globally contribute to a larger conversation of identity and liberation through aesthetics. This has set a precedent for thinking of resistance, self-conceptualization, and moving beyond colonial gazes through various forms of artistic media and personal aesthetic experiences.

In the same nature of this overall project, I find a lacuna at the intersection of Latinidad and queerness. While many of those touched by coloniality have found reprieve in aesthetics, subjects who are both queered and colonized have been able to achieve the same in their respective experiences. By thinking through the capacities of resistive aesthetics and analyzing a variety of arts stemming from Latin America, I will here attempt to outline the nature and potentials of this process for the queer Latina demographic. Ultimately, I argue that aesthetics give rise to another form of validation through the ability to move beyond colonialist norms and configurations of identity.

Reviewing Latin American Aesthetics

When I use the term “aesthetics,” I do not mean this in the strict traditionalist sense of Aristotelian catharsis or pathos, nor Kantian theory of taste. Even Tolstoy’s (1995) expanded definition of art not as “good” or “bad,” but as communicating emotion through external signs does not quite encompass the extensive manner in which how aesthetics has been conceived in the field of Latin American aesthetics (38). Rather, the aesthetic is a sort of dimension of sense and affect that shapes understanding, thus impacting social and political life. According to Vallega (2021), the aesthetic dimension is imperative, as “the ground of concept, logic, institutions, and ideologies ... bears and occurs with prerational elements, such as affectivity, emotion, memorial” (149). Thus, “the very possibility of a politics as well as ethics of liberation will depend on keeping attuned to that sensibility” (Ibid).

What I have illustrated up to this point is largely concerned with sense and affect – unbelonging, unwantedness, shame, fear, but also love, desire, and self-realization. It is for these reasons I am interested in the aesthetic for the sake of this project. I believe the current state of Latin American critical aesthetics is well-positioned to account for these phenomenon (albeit not

yet addressing the nuances that arise when queerness is considered). These experiences, conditions, and sentiments do not always occur at structural or systematic levels. There are laws, histories, and systems in place that certainly impact the social-political status and experiences of someone like the queer Latina, but something like the colonial gaze cannot be put into such terms. Vallega (2021) clearly accounts for this in his own work when he states, “the need for liberation and a decolonial turn remains no longer at the conceptual, logical, historic-dialectical, or institutional level. The oppressed, excluded, exiled, and colonized experience their situation and its perpetuation also at preconceptual levels” (152). While I somewhat contest the claim that that liberation does not remain at the institutional level (considering contemporary politics particularly for queer people of color), I highlight that for the purposes of Latin American liberatory aesthetics, marginalization and oppression occur within the emotional, affective, and sensible.

In further defense of the aesthetic, I find the work uniquely situated to address the everyday, seemingly mundane experiences, many of which I have described up to this point, that are resistive and disruptive against oppressive normative structures. As I’ve argued in Chapters 1 and 2, interruption of social and political marginalization occurs for my demographic of interest at affective, embodied, and emotional levels, and this possibility ought not be foreclosed. In his book, *Andean Aesthetics and Anticolonial Resistance* (2021), Omar Rivera goes as far as to state that reducing political resistance to purely action “is a mode of oppression. It denies the possibility of resisting or, more precisely, the possibility of finding themselves already resisting in their everyday, in their concrete inhabitations of the institutions that exclude them, in their range of affectivity, in their sorrow” (12). Although Rivera writes in the context of the Indigenous peoples of the Andes, I believe there is definite overlap with the way I frame

experiences from the intersection of gender, queerness, and Latinidad, particularly in terms of affectivity and sorrow. While I by no means discount political action, I stated in Chapter 1 that discomfort, unbelonging, even fear can rupture normative structures without necessarily attempting tangible political resistance.

That is not to say that focus on the aesthetic crowds out political action. Rather, I argue that this realm of the aesthetic (at least partially) constructs and contributes to resistance at all levels, especially for a population as vulnerable as queer Latinas often are. Precarious subjects find resistance, validation, and self-conceptualization within the aesthetic.

This is possible for individuals and communities alike, as the aesthetic “[bears] meaning always in individual as well as communal horizons. We are speaking of meanings that increase the sense of being of individual and community” (Vallega 2024). For those like the queer Latina for which marginalization is layered, multifaceted, and specifically results in being excluded from communities in and out of the home culture, attention to personal and communal concerns is of utmost importance. The aesthetic dimension can contribute to a sense of seeing oneself not only as a self, but as a part of something larger.

A question commonly posed against aesthetics concerns efficacy and accessibility. In other words, if one is marginalized, when, how, and why would they consider the aesthetic dimension? Miguel Gualdrón Ramírez (2022) articulates this concern in the following way: “‘Despite all its suffering and injustice, is the world still beautiful?’ What the question seems to presuppose is a perception that perhaps not many have, and that, in fact, seems to be the privilege of very few capable of experiencing the world as something beautiful” (163). Looking toward Glissant’s theory of totality through poetics and the aesthetic, Gualdrón proposes that “beauty is located at the encounter between differences (171). Despite, or rather, in light of differences, the

aesthetic dimension is always already present. For much of Latin American aesthetics, we find not an aesthetics that is rooted in esoteric or elitist notions of perception or art appreciation. Rather, the aesthetic is situated in the everyday as not merely a mode of resistance, but a mode of always already resisting. The willingness to engage (consciously or unconsciously) in the aesthetic as a marginalized person is the resistance of what Gualdrón (2022) describes as the desire of Western globalization to set a uniform standard of logic that would disallow, condemn, and attempt to eliminate such differences (174).

Emotion and the Opportunity of Aesthetics

Latin American aesthetics provides a framework through which resistance and self-conceptualization can occur. However, the consideration of gender and queerness is much less contended with within the canon. Gender has by no means been entirely ignored or excluded. For instance, Vallega (2024) provides a reading of María Lugones to consider what has been “destroyed and disallowed,” arguing that she is able to bring to light modalities, epistemologies, cosmologies, etc. that contribute toward thinking with images, affect, and memory (36-37).ⁱⁱ This reading certainly lends itself to an aesthetic analysis that includes a gendered lens. Gloria Anzaldúa has been interpreted through aesthetics innumerable times since the publishing of *Borderlands*. She herself says in her last major work, *Luz en lo Oscuro* (2015) that “art, reading, and writing are image-making practices that shape and transform what we are able to imagine and perceive” (44). The work of Mariana Ortega has undoubtedly established a feminist presence in aesthetics rooted in Latin American thought and experience in the 21st century, as outlined in Chapter 2. Nevertheless, racialized, gendered, and queered imaginaries remain as present as ever, particularly for those experiencing a multiplicity of layers of oppression like queer Latinas. Thus,

an analysis with multiplicity is necessary to articulate aesthetic resistance that disrupts harmful, normative images and imaginaries that prove sticky.

Alia Al-Saji (2019) outlines this “stickiness,” identifying how often images can actually reinforce otherizing images:

It is not so much the foregrounding or backgrounding of racial stereotypes that is at stake, nor the composition of images, but the ways in which racism already saturates the temporal horizons of images, even when it is not ostensibly present ... In other words, a racial imaginary already structures the encounter with the canvas or screen in a given society or epoch; but since this imaginary is acquired and temporally dynamic, the artistic and cinematic reproduction and circulation of racialized stereotypes both borrow from this imaginary and intensify its affective power and embodied effects, amplifying rather than interrupting its hold (477).

Though she focuses on race (and later, the intersection of race and gender), I believe a similar line of thought can be stated for queer Latinas. As we explored in the previous chapter, imaginaries, the colonial eye, seeps into my mind and the minds of others, thus configuring how a subject is viewed and understood. For Al-Saji, certain aesthetic experiences reimagine these sticky images, giving rise to the disruption I am interested in. In her own experience with works of art, Al-Saji explains that “the affective pang – of sadness, anger, despair – comes at the end, with the question: ‘I have forgotten was there a past?’” (486). This question creates a certain tension that allows the subject in question to have a moment to “feel the indeterminacy of the past, giving [her], as a racialized Iraqi viewer, time to breathe” (Ibid). In other words, the subject is in this moment not overdetermined by centuries-old colonial imaginaries. I specifically want to note the attention to what are typically viewed as “negative” emotions – sadness, anger, and despair here provide something for Al-Saji. I have attempted to show throughout this project that these dark emotions can be quite familiar for queer Latinas. Abandonment from the home, rejection from Western culture, and un-fittingness with marginalized communities that are either “one or the other” can easily breed so-called negative sentiments we so often try to suppress;

normative culture argues they should be suppressed. Mariana Alessandri (2023) understands this well when she calls the Western world, the same world that creates and recreates structures of marginalization for the queered, gendered, and racialized, “a world that worships light” (8). For many of us, “on top of ‘scary,’ ‘ugly,’ ‘ignorant,’ and ‘sinful,’ doctors have painted our moods as illnesses, diseases, disorders, pathologies, infirmities, ailments, and maladies” (9).

Overall, we believe our own (de)faults and defects (perhaps are queerness, our raced-ness, and our gender) caused us to feel this way. Yet the aesthetic, in its ability to open space and interrupt the historical colonial imaginary, can allow for the fear, sadness, undesirability, rejection, discomfort, unwantedness, sorrow, and mourning to open new capacities. Perhaps this is what led Rivera to discuss sorrow and an affective range.ⁱⁱⁱ It is certainly what lead me to apply aesthetics to contest with experiences that can arise being both queer and Latina. The Latin American aesthetic canon provides the tools for acknowledging pre-conceptual oppression, disruption, and resistance of the everyday, the mundane, and the artistic. Alia Al-Saji shows us that through an aesthetic analysis that attends to layers of marginalization, these same aspects shine through, even – or especially – when contesting with negative sentiments. This is what I attempt to illustrate for queer Latinas.

Addressing Histories

In exemplifying the aesthetic, I find it critical to look to prominent arts in Latin American history. I have questioned why this feels to be the case, considering rejection from the home and culture is so common, and has been historically. I then consider once again Vallega’s idea that images can shape *new* determinations and senses of identity and being, going far beyond normative epistemes and imaginaries (207). Images and imaginaries are memorial, but available for reimagining, re-membling, and reconceptualizing oneself, one’s emotions, and one’s

experience. Susana Torruella Leval (1992) provides insight on this exact process, this sort of recontextualization for Latin American historical arts:

By reconsidering their Latin American past, [the artist] recontextualizes it, conveys it on their own terms. The conscious act of memory embodied in [art] redeems the past from the indifference, marginalization, or distortion it has suffered from the dominant European and North American cultures. Looking to the past is not a matter of nostalgia or of dutiful veneration of dead traditions. The cultural traditions of the past – social, political, spiritual, popular, and aesthetic – are felt to be a vital, elucidative component of the present (69).

Note that this practice is not limited to any one demographic, any “type” of Latin American. That does not mean any one history is universal. Rather, for each person of Latin American descent, there is a history that, although a collective one, can be personally contextualized and recontextualized, breaking away from normative structures and oppressive systems through the aesthetic.

Emotional and Affective Aesthetic Experiences:

1. Octavio Paz

In the spirit of looking toward history, I begin with a case study of a historical literary work. Mexican writer and diplomat, Octavio Paz, is considered a legendary figure within Mexican and Latin American literary history writ large. Though he is especially known for his writings concerning Mexican history and culture, I look to Paz for his articulation of dark emotions and the nuance and complexities of personal and interpersonal matters. Paz does not necessarily address questions of gender, sexuality, or anything of the sort explicitly, but that does not prevent his work from contributing to an affect, a validation, a sense of “seen-ness,” a pre-conceptual experience that can shape the imaginary beyond the normative and dominant for a gendered, queered, Latin American demographic. His words can speak to our experience, our

history, and sense of being. For the sake of precision, I will primarily focus on the piece: “Arte e identidad” (1995).

In “Arte e identidad,” Paz illustrates such complexities regarding community and belonging with a certain ambiguity. He writes:

El sentimiento de pertenecer a ésta o aquella realidad colectiva es anterior al nombre y a la idea: primero *somos* de una familia, después sabemos el nombre de esa familia y, más tarde, llegamos a tener una idea más o menos vaga, de lo que es y significa la familia. Lo mismo sucede con el sentimiento de la separación y soledad. Al crecer, descubrimos nuevos nombres y realidades ... Todos los nombres de esas distintas comunidades aluden, oscuramente, al sentimiento original; todos ellos son extensiones, prolongaciones, o reflejos del instante del comienzo. Familia, clan, tribu, o nación son metáforas del nombre del primer día. ¿Cuál es ese nombre? Nadie lo sabe. Quizá es una realidad sin nombre. El silencio cubre la realidad original, el instante en que abrimos los ojos en un mundo ajeno. Al nacer perdimos el nombre de nuestra verdadera patria. Los nombres que decimos con ansia de posesión y participación – *mi* familia, *mi* patria – recubren un hueco sin nombre y que se confunde con nuestro nacimiento (526).

Here, we see Paz complicate the notion of belonging, of claiming any one community, regardless of how big or small, impersonal or intimate. He discusses separation and solitude. It seems paradoxical to put the idea of “familia” in the same category as “separación y soledad,” unless you have felt the simultaneous separation and loneliness with family – the same as what I say occurs for the queer Latina. Yet for Paz, this is not some unheard of, unfamiliar phenomenon. For Paz, the first time we open our eyes on the day of our birth, we are seeing a world that does not belong to us. What we are familiar with claiming, *our* family, *our* homeland, is mere confusion – a chase for something long lost. Realizing this is not portrayed as negative or positive, but a sign of growth.

Paz is not identifying any one demographic that undergoes this experience. Quite the contrary, he speaks in very general terms. But in one’s own contextualization and recontextualization of Paz’s words, in sitting with the ambiguity he describes, I stumble upon

what Ahmed (2004) would call a “queer feeling.” Ahmed tells us that compulsory heterosexuality and patriarchy are wrapped up in that which “binds families together” (147). Feeling as though you disrupt this, as though this does not fit you, is a queer feeling. No wonder, then, Paz’s words feel so familiar. Day to day, many queer Latinas feel different, unfitting, rejected within families, communities, perhaps even entire homelands. There is a certain imaginary of what family and community is, looks like, feels like and *should be*. Paz disrupts that, rejecting the notion that family, home, “clan, tribu, o nación” are something we have and are born into. Anzaldúa (1987) describes her own experience with familial separation: “I’m not sure where I found the strength to leave the source, the mother, disengage from my family, *mi tierra, mi gente*, and all that picture stood for” (16). She states that separation from what she once thought of as “hers” was necessary to break away from the identity, perhaps the imaginary, that was imposed on her – the heterosexuality, femininity, Latinidad, class, and so on.

This can trigger a variety of affective responses. Perhaps one feels the lonely separation Paz describes. Perhaps one is overjoyed that someone from a history we view as our own is speaking to something we feel. Perhaps a mix of both or neither. No matter the affect or range of affect, through Paz’s writing, a space is opened to contend with our own unbelonging. For some, this may be all the more validating considering the source: a Mexican man, a Nobel Prize winner, an author and politician revered in his time, is contesting the imaginary that makes us feel *out of place*. Coming from a culture that is so heavily invested in ideas of family, community, and national pride, this is a radical claim. In this way, our imaginary can be shaped and reshaped. We are not overdetermined by the imaginary we have held up to this point about belonging to a family, or what Paz describes as “tener una idea más o menos vaga, de lo que es y significa la familia.” That is all it ever was – an idea, an imaginary.

We are no longer alone in our sentiments of lacking a family, a home, or community. Under Paz's framing, we had a skewed perception to begin with. There is no guaranteed belonging, no "true" belonging, and no complete belonging, as Paz tells us, "El doble sentimiento de participación/separación aparece en todas las sociedades y en todos los tiempos" (Ibid). At points, we may feel more or less like we are a part of a community, a family. Perhaps this is our own natal home, a home country, a queer community gathering, a space surrounded by other Latinos and/or people of color, or a shared space with friends. In a way, Paz relieves the pressure to belong, making it acceptable to experience a queer feeling.

That is not to say that any-and-all notions of family or community ought to be rejected. Rather, therein lies an opportunity to question what we believe family to be and why. This question posed by reading the works of Octavio Paz resists the normative notions of family (a term often riddled in heterosexual and patriarchal norms) and interrupts the colonial imaginary. A moment as seemingly mundane as reading a selection from a book is a moment of resistance. A new (or at least reconstructed) image of family and community arises.

2. Chavela Vargas

Music undoubtedly creates an encompassing aesthetic experience, surrounding oneself in the voice of another, lyrics like poetry entering the mind through melody and vocalization, instrumentalism creating an atmosphere of happiness, catharsis, or depth. Often acknowledged for her ability to create atmospheres of pure intensity and vulnerability is musical legend Isabel "Chavela" Vargas. As a lesbian, Vargas resisted normative notions of femininity and sexuality throughout most of her life *and* in her music, described by critic Paula Mejía (2017) to "showcase the astonishing range of desolation and heartbreak only she is able to reach." In doing so, her music continues to create experiences that rupture dominant imaginaries, affectivities,

and senses of being, including for many who share her demographic – queer Latinas. To explore the specificities of this influence on queer Latinas, I will analyze two of Vargas’ prominent tracks, “La Llorona” (1994) and “Sombras” (1961).

Mexican folksong “La Llorona,” along with its wrenching lyrics, was popularized in the 1940s with origins believed to go back much further. In other words, its presence in the Latin American canon is longstanding and familiar to many. Yet, if considering Vargas’ rendition, the classic song may take on a new characterization for queer Latinas. A lesbian woman who grew up in 1920s Costa Rica singing lyrics that address love for a woman complete with sighs, shouts, sad chuckles, and audible shakiness is uncommon at best.

The lyrics seem to embody the prohibition, inhibition, and rejection Vargas openly struggled with in her lifetime: “Ay de mí, llorona / Llorona, tú eres mi chunca / Me quitarán de quererte, llorona / Pero de olvidarte, nunca.”^{iv} I cannot speak for Vargas, nor her sentiments that coincided with the lyrics. However, through the aesthetic experience of hearing these words, they can certainly *become* concerned with prohibition, inhibition, rejection, pain, sorrow, heartbreak. Hearing her voice rattle through a speaker, knowing that Vargas may have felt what some of us currently feel, resonating with the claim that we will be stopped from loving someone as the sound of a lone guitar resonates in the room, goes against the imaginary that we are alone, that our pain is invalid.

There could be a certain darkness in this experience, but that does not disallow pleasure. Psychologists and neuroscientists are no strangers to this fact, connecting what we would colloquially describe as “sad music” to dopamine release. As Sachs, Damasio, and Habibi (2015) explain, “sadness evoked by music is found pleasurable: (1) when it is perceived as non-threatening; (2) when it is aesthetically pleasing; and (3) when it produces psychological benefits

dsuch as mood regulation, and empathic feelings, caused, for example, by recollection of and reflection on past events” (1). As one is enveloped in Vargas’ voice, we can find solace in our own self-contextualized empathy. Many of us have likely experienced the love and mourning she describes, forbidden by a colonial society that projects gender, queerness, and racialization onto us. Perhaps this could also be described as a queer feeling – mourning a prohibited love that we will be torn from. Whether we find darkness, pleasure, or both, her sorrow – our shared sorrow – this is a moment of already resisting. While Vargas may have struggled in her lifetime, and while we may struggle in ours, someone else has been there, felt this, and speaks to our experiences.

An equally intense, perhaps dark, but nonetheless beautiful, validating, experience emerges from Vargas’ 1961 song, “Sombras.” As Vargas presumably describes anticipating a breakup, she boldly and melodically vocalizes the words, “Cuando tú te hayas ido / Me envolverán las sombras / Cuando tú te hayas ido / Con mi dolor a solas / Evocare el idilio / De las felices horas.” There is a sense of preparation for abandonment, already expecting to be swallowed by shadows, feeling alone with pain. Yet in this moment of hearing this song, the listener is not alone. Knowing that one is queered, raced, and gendered, can cause this fear of abandonment, anticipation of rejection and of being left alone. Let us reconsider Anzaldúa’s words: “Fear of going home. And of not being taken in. We’re afraid of being abandoned by the mother, the culture, *la Raza*, for being unacceptable, faulty, damaged. Most of us unconsciously believe that if we reveal this unacceptable aspect of the self our mother/culture/race will totally reject us” (20). This may or may not be something felt by Vargas as she oscillates between belting and softly singing such lyrics. My point is this: expecting rejection and the pain that coincides is likely familiar to queer Latinas.

One can think of rejection from family, rejection from *su patria*, rejection from the dominant culture, rejection from love interests, rejection from subcultures and communities, the list can go on. Vargas speaks to this, giving the experience a musical life, constructing an equally alluring and mournful aesthetic. As Vargas describes being enveloped by shadows, a queer Latina listener is enveloped in a tune descriptive of what we ourselves may experience. The imaginary that constructs this as purely ugly, negative occurrence becomes fractured. Vargas creates beauty here. Vargas allows for an affective range for a population meant to be trapped in melancholy and isolation, but even this state of melancholia can be resistive. We are not meant to feel seen in our sorrow or share our sentiments with another, much less find something beautiful in this existence. As I discussed through Gualdrón, there is an attempt by dominant society to eliminate these lives, identities, and experiences. Vargas and her listeners can revel in them.

Impacts of the Aesthetic on Images and the Imaginary

I began this section with Alejandro Vallega's (2024) claim that images open a space – be it temporal, emotional, psychological, affective - for “new determinations of identities and senses of being beyond already established systems of conceptual knowledge” (207). What I intend to show here is how, through an analysis of Paz and Vargas, we can come to understand how the aesthetic contributes to the reshaping of these images.

Knowing that these works can be impactful for queer Latinas, we can begin to understand how they interact with and influence these images and imaginaries we have of ourselves and the world around us. I have discussed in detail how Paz contests the image of the family – a deeply colonial image. While conceptions of “family” exist across cultures and societies worldwide, Haley McEwen (2017) explains through anti-colonial thought how Western colonial structures have weaponized the image of the nuclear family throughout history and contemporarily:

Pro-family' discourses advocating for the nuclear family model to be protected in national and international policy as the only legally recognised form of family are becoming increasingly influential within international policy debates and imaginaries ... As decolonial scholars (Smith, 2006; Lugones, 2007; Quijano, 2007; Mignolo, 2011) reveal, there is scope to decolonise the family, given that this Christian and bourgeois kinship model was an instrumental axis through which colonial power was implemented institutionalised. The control of sexuality and gender that this model enabled was reinforced by European control of knowledge (Quijano, 2007; Grosfoguel, 2013) (738-51).

Note McEwen's mention of imaginaries. McEwen, through scholars like Lugones, Quijano, and Mignolo, concludes that the Western imaginary is one that reinforces an image of the family along lines of gender and sexuality. Paz's writing in and of itself contests this, but the personal imaginary of queer Latinas may be ruptured. We contend with the fact that many (if not all) of us do not fit this imaginary, but that does not necessarily shift our image or grant us a different imaginary. The moment in which we read Paz, this image can shift. We are not bound by the same imaginary.

The same could be said for Vargas. Vargas, a lesbian, boldly engages in an aesthetic resistance against normative conceptions of gender and sexuality. The colonality of knowledge attempts to prohibit and destroy these Other/Othered modes of being. In allowing herself to express love, mourning, and sorrow as the Other against colonial notions of relationality, this very mode of being is pushed to the forefront. In hearing Vargas, mourning with her, breathing with her, shouting with her, and sighing with her, we begin to embody an imaginary where this mode of being, this emotional and affective life, is allowed. Existing within the dominant imaginary that Vargas' yearning and anguish – *our* yearning and anguish – is nonexistent, perverse, and primitive, the music goes unrestrained. In this moment, we need not be bound by the colonial image imposed on us. The image that causes our queer feelings – the image of femininity, maternity, heterosexuality, and whiteness that we can never embody – is, at least for a moment, sidestepped.

In these moments, we catch a glimpse of being beyond the dominant imaginary of how being is “supposed to look.” It is here that we contextualize, recontextualize, negotiate, and contest what it is to be and what image we hold of the world and ourselves. Queer Latinas exist in prohibited bodies not meant to “fit” anywhere. Certain traits and demeanors are expected based on sexing, racializing, and queering; a certain imaginary is imposed. This imposition can only occur when that imaginary is upheld. When it is fractured or disrupted, when we find ourselves always already resisting through acts as common as enjoying a poem or humming along to a song, that imposition fails, even if only for a moment.

ⁱ While there is a plethora of examples (many of which listed in Scott 2019), one of the most well-known pieces exemplary of uniquely Latin American imagery in Baroque art is Juan Correa’s famous Mural de Montezuma y Hernán Cortés.

ⁱⁱ See Lugones, “Toward a Decolonial Feminism” (2010).

ⁱⁱⁱ See previous citation.

^{iv} “Chunca” is a feminine term of endearment, most common in Central Mexico stemming from the Zapotec language.

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