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**Queering Disability in Salvador Plascencia's *The People of Paper*: Diaspora,
Mutilated Tongues, and the Lesbian Triangle**

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Diaspora, Mutilated Tongues, and the Lesbian Triangle

by

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Dedication

This report is dedicated to Jacob Cervantes. You may be my younger brother by ten years, but you have molded me into the person I am today—showing me the importance of faith, caregiving, the will to live, family, and love.

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Abstract

Queering Disability in Salvador Plascencia's *The People of Paper*: Diaspora, Mutilated Tongues, and the Lesbian Triangle

by

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2010

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This report is an analysis of Salvador Plascencia's first novel, *The People of Paper*, with relationships to current understandings of lesbian genres from queer theory, the body from disability theory, and race in relation to the characters' migrations/transgressions across physical and figurative boundaries from Mexico to the United States. Key thinkers who have influenced my reading of the novel include Gloria Anzaldúa whose text, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, portrays the intersections of a multiplicity of identities across gender, sexuality, ability, nationhood, race, and ethnicity. The thinking of Chicana lesbian scholar, Catrióna Rueda Esquibel; queer scholar, Alexander Doty; and disability scholars, Rosemarie Garland Thomson and Tobin Siebers, are also integral to the report as I explore the intersections of sexuality, disability, and diaspora of key figures like the "retarded" prophet, Baby Nostradamus, and the women of paper, Merced de Papel and Liz. These figures are explored in relation to each other as well as to the readers, critic, and author as the novel is a metafictional one that lends itself to the blurring of genre boundaries. Further, as I analyze these corporeal intersections, I focus on the lesbian trope of forked tongues as a trope of queer disability as it relates to

the markedly “Other” body of Merced de Papel and the lesbian triangle she forms with Little Merced and Merced as well as to the formation of a queer disability community.

Table of Contents

Queering Disability in Salvador Plascencia's <i>The People of Paper</i> : Diaspora, Mutilated Tongues, and the Lesbian Triangle	1
Notes	35
Works Cited	38
Vita	42

Queering Disability in Salvador Plascencia's *The People of Paper*: Diaspora, Mutilated
Tongues, and the Lesbian Triangle

Homophobia is all about defining queer bodies as wrong, perverse, immoral. Transphobia, about defining trans bodies as unnatural, monstrous, or the product of delusion. Ableism, about defining disabled bodies as broken and tragic. Class warfare, about defining the bodies of workers as expendable. Racism, about defining the bodies of people of color as primitive, exotic, or worthless. Sexism, about defining female bodies as pliable objects. These messages sink beneath our skin.

In the end, I am asking that we pay attention to our bodies—our stolen bodies and our reclaimed bodies. To the wisdom that tells us the causes of the injustice we face lie outside our bodies, and also to the profound relationships our bodies have to that injustice, to the ways our identities are inextricably linked to our bodies.

—Eli Clare, “Stolen Bodies, Reclaimed Bodies: Disability and Queerness”

At the root of the stolen and reclaimed bodies named in the epigraph, at the root of these various phobias about corporeality, and these various –“isms,” are issues of representation and the meanings representation attach to bodies. The work of disability, postcolonial and queer studies scholars deconstructs various forms of representation in relation to “norms” and the ways normativity is involved in power relations. Although the various fields all focus on how corporeal representations are socially constructed, they operate in different realms of academia and rely on various methodological paradigms. In spite of the demarcations, intersectionalities remain between the methodological paradigms that need to be examined in relation to one another—especially when a novel, or the characters in the novel, become loci where various forms of “Otherness” meet. In focusing on the meeting of an ethnic Other, who is also disabled, and the pivotal role that this disabled ethnic Other has in the sexuality of the narrative, I posit that Salvador Plascencia's *The People of Paper* (hereafter POP) provides an instance of a community of “queer disability.” In this community, the immigrant characters are simultaneously read as queer and disabled; however, because their disability is a positive identity and one

that could easily be glossed over until we examine the historical constructions of disability, I analyze disability through queer eyes.

Plascencia's "new Latino voice," or his "terrifically original," "anarchic" novel which is "a novel like no other," a "mischievous mix" (reminiscent of various writers from Jorge Borges to Laurence Sterne¹) brings to the fore many of the phobias and "isms" attached to perceptions of corporeal otherness. We see these conflicts not only in the content of Plascencia's novel, but also in the body of the novel and its structure, as reviewers struggle to classify the novel². In relation to content, however, the list that illustrates corporeal otherness, according to disability scholar Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, includes perceptions of "'monstrosity,' 'mutilation,' 'deformation,' 'crippledness,' or 'physical disability'" (5). The mutilation of tongues in Plascencia's novel is especially prominent; this marker of otherness is not merely a physical one, but also one of queer sexuality (specifically, lesbian), as well as one of ethnicity. In this metafictional work, the mutilations of the tongue become tropes sited at the intersections between disability, sexuality, and ethnicity.

We read this familiar trope of the mutilated tongue elsewhere in lesbian Chicana literature; its image is especially prominent in Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera* as she asserts, "Wild tongues can't be tamed, they can only be cut out" (76). Anzaldúa further asserts that mestizas, who speak two languages, "...speak a patois, a forked tongue" (77). Although POP does not focus on multilingual "linguistic terrorism" the way that Anzaldúa does in her work, it is a novel about Mexican immigrants and Mexican-American characters fighting a war for volition against Saturn, a pseudonym for Sal Plascencia. The characters (Sal Plascencia included) strive for a subjectivity that

refuses white male heteronormativity. One act of resistance against this norm is illustrated through a racialized and queer sexual encounter with a “disabled” woman of paper, Merced de Papel, in which the men who desire her mark themselves with split lips and forked tongues. These forked tongues then speak to their gender duality, and as we will see, the focus on the tongue in POP also points to the potential for a lesbian consumption of the novel.

Anzaldúa’s chapter, “How to Tame a Wild Tongue,” is not the only chapter in her book that focuses on the “abnormality” of duality; in a section titled, “Half and Half,” Anzaldúa writes about the “magic aspect in abnormality and so-called deformity” of queer people who are portrayed as “half and half, *mita’ y mita*” (41). These queer ethnic bodies are read as stigmatized extraordinary bodies, or as socially framed disabled bodies³. Anzaldúa clarifies, “Maimed, mad, and sexually different people were believed to possess supernatural powers by primal cultures’ magico-religious thinking. For them, abnormality was the price a person had to pay for her or his inborn extraordinary gift” (41). The supernatural power of “magico-religious thinking” is clearly present in Plascencia’s novel, especially in the case of Baby Nostradamus, the “retarded baby with dangling legs and a dripping mouth,” (25) who pays the price of his gift by wearing the stigma of disability. This stigma, which attaches the representation of “worthlessness” to his body, almost gets him killed; he is rescued by a spiritual, magical, medicine man, or a *curandero*, only when this *curandero* explains that the baby is actually a supernatural prophet. Little Merced, the daughter of Federico de la Fe and Merced, meets the mother of Baby Nostradamus on a bus from Guadalajara to Tijuana. Little Merced narrates their encounter:

‘He’s meditating. He was born in a meditative state,’ the woman said. ‘At first I thought that he was brain dead; the doctors said that he was as dumb as a turnip.’ She explained that she had nearly killed him. But, as she was buying rat poison for her baby turnip, the curandero behind the counter looked in the baby’s eyes. The curandero told her that the baby was actually a very powerful soothsayer who was meditating. ‘One day he will break his trance and add to the parchment texts of Nostradamus’ (Plascencia 23).

Thus, the meaning attached to Baby Nostradamus’s body is not determined by the infant himself, but by the authority figures responsible for him; his mother, doctor, and the local *curandero* ascribe differing perceptions of his abilities/disabilities, which illustrates how the social construction of disability works. Garland-Thomson explicates the significance of stigma theory in *Extraordinary Bodies*:

Though any human trait can be stigmatized, the dominant group has the authority and means to determine which differences are inferior and to perpetuate those judgments. Thus terms like ‘minority,’ ‘ethnicity,’ and ‘disability’ suggest infusing certain differences with negative value (31).

Despite the claim to supernatural powers that disabled figures like Baby Nostradamus and “*mita y mitas*” have, Anzaldúa explains that “half and halves” suffer from “...an absolute despot duality that says we are able to be only one or the other. It claims that human nature is limited and cannot evolve into something better. But I, like other queer people, am two in one body, both male and female” (41). As we will see, Merced de Papel, Baby Nostradamus, and the men with the forked tongues are also “two in one body” and function to resist the authority of the dominant group; that is, Merced de Papel

and Baby Nostradamus are both very able and also disabled whereas the men with the forked tongues are both male and female. Anzaldúa's queer duality does not only pertain to ability, gender, and sexuality, but also to *lenguaje*. Her "forked tongue" reads as a lesbian trope that is a focus on the interconnectedness of lesbian Chicana identification and language.

Plascencia himself is part of on-going negotiations surrounding his novel's reception and publishing avenues that illustrate his own conditions of contingency and contradictoriness as a writer who wants to defy the categories of genre and ethnicity, yet cannot escape his position as an immigrant writer⁴. His writing can be read as "forked" as he simultaneously writes an anti-temporal, anti-geographical American novel which also focuses on bringing mythological fame to the small immigrant town of El Monte where he grew up⁵. However, Plascencia infamously declared that he sought to escape the "ghettoizing effect"⁶ of being marketed as a Latino writer and that he was happy to be published by McSweeney's Books, a small independent publisher well-known for distributing experimental works (and not for Latino/a novels). Nevertheless, in these marketing negotiations concerning genre classification and identity politics, Plascencia as author not only represents himself as the Symbolic⁷ but also fights relegation to the periphery; he fights for the "'right' to signify" as an author, or "authorizer⁸," solely concerned with aesthetics. Plascencia's aesthetics and his ethnic identity are intertwined as Michel Foucault makes clear in his essay, "What is an Author?" Foucault writes, "The author function is [...] characteristic of the mode of existence, circulation, and functioning of certain discourses within society" (108). Thus, I study the interviews and reviews surrounding Plascencia's novel and identity as part and parcel of the questions

regarding authorial functions and traditions. Plascencia places himself within “the power of tradition” as he asserts in an interview with Daniel Olivas, author of the literary weblog, “The Elegant Variation,”

I don't really see *The People of Paper* as a deviation from tradition. If anything, I see it as a throwback to the spirit of early books and to the playfulness that existed before industrialized printing presses. If you look at early books they are very varied in their typography and design. It's a shame that technology has actually limited and uniformed our conception of the book instead of expanding the possibilities. But if I have to claim direct literary influences, like Paul Collins once noted, “All odd books can be blamed on *Tristram Shandy*.” And of course there was Vonnegut and Kathy Acker.

Thus, if there is a tradition that Plascencia belongs to, it is the comprehensive tradition of authorship and, more specifically, a tradition of experimentation with writing—writing that plays with genre expectations in the satirical mode of metafiction. Importantly, interviewer Angela Stubbs writes, “When you bend the so-called rules in fiction (sic) it would seem that [the term] experimental comes from wanting to exist outside the norm, the expected. [...] In wanting to do so, the work gets labeled, which often times proves to be a stigma.” I read this stigmatic “othering” of the book as a marker of queer disability. In other words, because the novel itself is queer, I provide a queer reading of its portrayal of disability as an act of disidentification⁹.

The challenge of marketing POP to a particular niche, and the popular response to the novel’s playful form, allows for a queer approach to reading the novel with relationships to lesbian genres. Because POP hearkens back to novelistic traditions of

old—Laurence Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy* in particular—we see how experimental writing, like queer subtexts, have “been in popular culture texts and their audiences all along” (Doty 84). Although I do not intend to assert that all experimental writing is necessarily queer, I want to emphasize the significance of tradition in “terms of cultural engagement” which Bhabha asserts as “produced performatively” (3). My cultural reading of the novel focuses upon a “lesbian triangle” between the main person made of paper, Merced de Papel, and her relations to Little Merced and Merced. Queer scholar Alexander Doty clarifies the role popular culture texts play in queer cultural engagements; he asserts that the ubiquitousness of queer impulses is one that shows how “*queerness* [is] a mass culture reception practice that is shared by all sorts of people in varying degrees of consistency and intensity” (72). Further, these reception practices are not “‘alternative’ readings, wishful or willful misreadings, or ‘reading too much into things’ readings. They result from the recognition and articulation of the complex range of queerness” (Doty 84). Plascencia’s text clearly belongs within the realm of popular culture as it has boomed in popularity, evidenced by its translation into ten different languages (Valentine and Hutchinson).

Hence, the novel has the potential to create a queer response within the erotics of the culture industry and the mass culture reception practices that surround popular texts. POP can be neatly described as a “so-called straight mass culture text [that] encourage[s] ‘deviant’ erotic and/or gendered responses and pleasures in straight viewers” (Doty 85). As a straight reader, my queer response is one that relates to lesbian genres as I focus upon the trio of Merceds as a lesbian community¹⁰. This critical reading is thus an act of disidentification because “*queer readings, queer discourses, and queer positions* [...are]

attempts to account for the existence and expression of a wide range of positions within culture that are *queer* or non-, anti-, or contrastraight” (Doty 73). It is a reading that expresses my queer impulses as a straight-identified, yet queerly positioned Deaf Chicana. Chicana studies scholar, Catrióna Rueda Esquibel, author of *With Her Machete in Her Hand: Reading Chicana Lesbians*, writes that the Chicana lesbians who have appeared in print were created by a range of authors, which include heterosexual Chicanos/as as well as lesbian Chicanas, among others (1). Like Esquibel, I hope to “broaden the scope of Chicana lesbian literary criticism” by reevaluating “the explicit representation of lesbian desire in girlhood [...] and thus to expand Chicana lesbian literature beyond the writings of lesbian-identified authors” (95). Therefore, I analyze POP with a lesbian reading of the erotic and sensual moments.

Although Doty does not explicitly address the differences between gay erotica, and queer, yet lesbian erotica, he does imply that a lesbian reading would be one that focuses “on the pleasures of and between women on the screen and women in the audience” rather than on the ways pleasure is offered to men (81). Because my reading of the sexuality of Merced de Papel focuses on the triangulation of Merceds and the pleasures between them, as well as between Merced de Papel and the women readers of POP, it is a lesbian reading. Moreover, as Doty argues, “basically heterocentrist texts can contain queer elements, and basically heterosexual, straight-identifying people can experience queer moments. And these people should be encouraged to examine and express these moments *as queer*” (72). For this reason, even though this lesbian reading of a novel about heterosexual relationships may be counterintuitive, in my experience, it makes sense of the novel in a pleasurable act of “reading against the grain.”

Moreover, a queer approach to POP opens it up to discussions of lesbian sexuality as well as the racialized disabled body that “straight” readings of the novel would not be able to provide. I am thus interested in reading “bodies in relation¹¹”—centering upon the diaspora of the race of “the people of paper” and other characters who migrate from Mexico to California—as well as the intersections of disability, ethnicity, and sexuality on the body of Merced de Papel. I analyze her corporeality in relation to the text (and thus to the author who creates her) as well as to the readers and critics because Merced de Papel is the focus of POP’s metatextuality¹² and the one whose body is able to split tongues. The Chicana lesbian trope of the mutilated tongues originates from her queerly disabled body, which creates a “queerly disabled” community. In queering disability, I focus on the concatenation of ethnicity, sexuality and ideologies of ability; just as the mutilated tongue can be read as a Chicana lesbian trope, mutilation in general has been a trope of disability¹³. Additionally, rather than focusing on one aspect of corporeality and glossing over the others, a focus on bodies in relation requires us to consider the multiplicity of identities within all bodies. Hence, a reading of the disabled, racialized, and sexualized material body of Merced de Papel is integral to an understanding of the novel’s queer form and to the breaking down of the “fourth wall.”

Merced de Papel is depicted as perfectly “capable” in many aspects; on the other hand, her extraordinary body can be read as a form of disability in relation to historical constructions of “othered” bodies. It is important to expand our understanding of disability as Tobin Siebers argues in *Disability Theory* (11). That is, if we expand the meaning of disability so that nearly the whole population is understood as disabled (and disability is a positive identity,) we can begin to think beyond the restrictive ideology of

ability. As we do so, we collapse ableist ideology. Garland-Thomson writes that a close analysis of the representation of disability shows

...that disability functions as a multivalent trope, though it remains the mark of otherness. Although centering on disabled figures illuminates the processes that sort and rank physical differences into normal and abnormal, at the same time, these investigations suggest the possibility of potentially positive, complicating interpretations [...that...] can uncover the complex ways that disability intersects with other social identities to produce the extraordinary and the ordinary figures who haunt us all (9).

Hence, even though I focus on reading traditionally stigmatized disabled bodies, I do so in order to intervene in the various discursive responses to disabled bodies; this intervention aims to complicate ableist responses to disability with potentially positive, complicating interpretations of disability. For instance, Merced de Papel is “Other” in multiple ways; she is “the last of her race,” she participates only in non-generative sexual acts bordering on masochism, and she is literally made of paper. Her physical condition marks her as Other because she is not of flesh and bones; this construction of her body illustrates how her disability is a “formal condition.” Garland-Thomson explains this condition, “facial disfigurement, scarring, birthmarks, obesity, and visual or hearing impairments corrected with mechanical aids are usually socially disabling, even though they entail almost no physical dysfunction” (14). Thus, Merced de Papel’s otherwise able and heterosexual body functions as a multivalent trope pointing to disability, race, metafictionality, and lesbian sexuality. She is the “extraordinary” haunting figure of POP who warrants a complex analysis.

Plascencia's figuring of Merced de Papel as "formally" disabled intersects with her role in the lesbian triangle as her body becomes a lesbian site of desire for Little Merced and even for the men who desire her (as their split tongues transform their gender identity to that of *mita y mitas*). The book that Merced de Papel writes, *Los Dolores y Amores de La Gente de Papel*, is a narrative that focuses on non-reproductive oral sex; in these eroticized encounters of pleasure and pain, the imagery of scarred tongues in the novel becomes a lesbian trope reminiscent of third-wave feminist sex radicals¹⁴.

Plascencia writes, "Her manuscript began with an explanation of cunnilingus, noting the pleasures of human lips but also the aftermath of those who touched her, describing blood and the bits of paper pulp they would have to floss from their teeth" (162). The scarred tongues of Merced de Papel's lovers and Little Merced's slow citric poisoning (which also ruins her tongue) are traumas tied into negotiations of Chicana lesbian desire, identification, and the ideology of resistance. Along with Anzaldúa's forked and wild tongues, we also have Carmelita Tropicana's emphasis on the tongue in her queer Chicana performance, *I, Carmelita Tropicana. Performing Between Cultures*; Tropicana writes, "Loisada is the place to be. It is multicultural, multinational, mucho multi. And like myself, you've got to be multilingual. I am very good with the tongue" (López-Craig 47). The playful teasing of the tongue here focuses on its multiple uses—it is not only a body part instrumental in sexual play and the erotic consumption of food—but also in the linguistic, cultural, and national play of representations of queer "Chicana-ness."

In brief, within the borderlands of lesbian communities, the negotiations between identification, desire, and subaltern experiences reads as a discourse on negotiating the

boundaries of pleasure and pain. Thus, when Merced de Papel passes away without an official record, or death certificate, we read that

Her history was on the lips of her lovers, the scars that parted their mouths. But that was the history of Merced de Papel the lover, the loved one, the history of the pain of touching her. Merced de Papel was cautious of a legacy left in scar tissue, and for this reason she kept her own account, written on the scraps that she shed. She compiled her own book, which she titled in her native Spanish (Plascencia 198).

Instead of relying on bodily markers of pleasure and pain, Merced de Papel inscribes her own book, which can be read as a disidentification against male dominions as she tears off “scraps where their blood and salt had stained [...] men sometimes hoping that she would let some of the stains remain, if only for the afternoon. But Merced de Papel never allowed history to accumulate” (Plascencia 164). Hence, Merced de Papel’s book presents an answer to a question posed in French feminist theorist, Luce Irigaray’s classic essay, “When Our Lips Speak Together.” In this piece, Irigaray asks how women can “...speak so as to escape from [men’s] compartments, their schemas, their distinctions and oppositions: virginal/deflowered, pure/impure, innocent/experienced...How can we shake off the chain of these terms, free ourselves from their categories, rid ourselves of their names?” (212). Merced de Papel’s answers to these questions lie in her literal paper lips, which speak for her when she inscribes her desires onto the men she enjoys herself with; she also escapes from patriarchal compartments as her metaphorical paper lips, or the pages of her book, speak of her own schemas about sex. Merced de Papel frees her disabled body for pleasure with multiple partners, and refuses the claims the men want to

make on her body—the animalistic markers of their fluids. Her story is one where sexual pleasure and the traumas associated with her “disabled” bodily condition intersect: “. . .it was not just burns that demanded repair. The friction from shoes tattered her toes, and simple things like holding a dinner fork wore away at her fingers” (Plascencia 162). These traumatic memories and her “tutorial on the use of paper sacks and newsprint to repair what had been burned” (Plascencia 162) are retained for posterity through a woman’s written text rather than on her body—which would point to her subjection by man. She thus

peeled away every mark and scribble her lovers left, rarely saving any of the notes, grocery lists, and small reminders that men had written on her: pick up shirts from cleaners; dentist appointment 9:00a.m.; milk, bread, cereal. And once she had to strip the whole of her back where someone had written the name Liz a thousand times over in blue ink (Plascencia 165).

In this passage, we see that Merced de Papel resists the domestication that men strive to mark her with—the list of chores resonant with patriarchy’s demand for female homemakers. Further, Merced de Papel disrupts the narrative structuring of POP as we know that Saturn/Sal Plascencia dedicates his novel to Liz. Plascencia feminizes the materiality of the novel as it becomes the body of Merced de Papel on which he writes Liz’s name a thousand times. In this way, Merced de Papel’s body is objectified as she is conflated with the object, the book, we hold in our hands. Yet, Merced de Papel resists Plascencia’s markers of excess and her objectification as she tears the page out of the novel and off of her back.

During this moment of resistance, Merced de Papel is also conflated with the body of Liz, another woman of paper; Liz is the one who demands that Plascencia begin his novel again—leaving her out of it. Thus, we have a metafictional meeting of bodies in relation as the body of Merced de Papel, or the text of POP, illustrates Plascencia’s love for a woman made of paper, or for his novel. He dedicates his novel to the “real” Liz, “who taught [him] that we are all of paper,” and we are to understand that this dedication is also to his own achievement in “re-creating” Liz (as Liz’s body becomes the body of the novel.) Just as Salvador/Sal Plascencia is a character in the novel, Liz is his ex-lover, a woman of paper, whom he writes the novel for and on. At the point when Saturn is “no longer in control” (Plascencia 103) of the novel, or, as I read it, no longer in control of Liz, he expresses his extreme anger towards Liz/Merced de Papel/the novel: “You sell-out. Vendida. You are worse than the Malinche, worse than Pocahontas. Fucking white boys and making asbestos fall from the attic” (Plascencia 118). In this seemingly autobiographical dialogue structured in columns (as if we are reading a real-time transcription of a phone conversation,) Liz objects to Plascencia’s inaccurate portrayal of their relationship and tells him that he is “leaving things out” (Plascencia 119). At the end of Part Two, (which reads like a memoir,) Liz tells Saturn/Sal to “Start this book over, without me” (Plascencia 138). Plascencia does begin anew with a reprinted title page and a new dedication to his “papa, mama, y hermana” (Plascencia 143), yet, he does not do so without a final word of revenge: “cunt” (Plascencia 139). Importantly, Lee Edelman, in *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, writes that the

...constant movement toward realization cannot be divorced [...] from a will to undo what is thereby instituted, to begin again ex nihilo. For the death drive

marks the excess embedded within the Symbolic through the loss, the Real loss, that the advent of the signifier effects (9).

The whole of POP points to the advent of “the Real loss” as the novel can only create “signifier effects” and refer to a desire to begin again *ex nihilo*; although this movement occurs as we read a “re-write” of the novel in Part Three, we see that the “re-write” is actually a continuation of Saturn’s previous observations of El Monte as it is subtitled: “Part Three: The Sky is Falling” and begins with Chapter Fifteen. Throughout the novel, the processes involved in the act of reading and the act of writing are called to the fore as we are taught to think about the implications of the signifier—how such acts of reading and writing are part of the prying Panoptical, or Symbolic, (i.e. Saturn). Saturn’s simultaneous role as the oppressive Panoptical and as the author who creates these scenarios to begin with, points to the multiple layers of this metafictional work as we read the diverse ways in which the characters relate to power or have power, and are reminded of how reading and writing may be acts of colonization and cultural appropriation.

Further, because Liz is conflated with the body of the novel and the body of Merced de Papel, it is impossible to leave her out completely; in this “re-write,” Saturn watches Liz and wonders what it would be like “to wake in her bed and taste her paper lips and write love letters complete with graphs and charts on her paper skin as she slept, so she would wake and say, ‘You wrote all this for me?’” (Plascencia 245). Here we see the conflation of the body of the novel (everything Plascencia writes is dedicated to her) with the paper skin of Liz. As Liz is conflated with Merced de Papel as well as the novel proper, this conflation is another moment of lesbian joining. The separate characters of Liz and Merced de Papel are implicitly joined as one and the same body of the novel.

This erotic joining of bodies shows how the “sexuality of narrative” threatens the structure of narrative; Judith Roof, author of *Come as You Are: Sexuality and Narrative*, explains, “Eroticism comes from a dynamic produced by a concatenation of edges, gaps, loss, and desire, but is structurally unfixed except as it coexists with and is produced and enjoyed despite cultural imperative” (xxiii). The concatenation of Plascencia’s columns, tallies, charts, ink blots and scratch-outs coexists with the production and enjoyment of multiple forms of sexuality, which resist the cultural imperative of white ableist heterosexuality. Moreover, as Siebers asserts, disabled people lead in innovative ideas relating to sexual citizenship and sex surrogates, who further illustrate how erotica may be produced and enjoyed despite cultural imperatives for a constrained range of sex acts. From his discussions of the elevator to the silicone dildo, Siebers provides evidence of the transforming landscape of human experience derived from disability experience; his essential discussion of a “sexual culture” as a heuristic in contrast to the ableist idea of a “sex life” (137) points to innovative ways for understanding the sexual and erotic bodies of all people. In POP, Merced de Papel, whose disability is “formal,” has an explicit and graphic sex life, which grants her a sexual (read: human) citizenship. The permanently infantile Baby Nostradamus, on the other hand, is consistently portrayed as the asexual disabled boy who can never be a man or gain sexual citizenship. Only once we queer his disability and examine his body in relations to others, the constant contact his body has with others (from being strapped to his mother’s back to being strapped to the *curandero*, Apolonio’s back) may we set up the possibility that he experiences queer sexual desires or at least some physical pleasure from bodily contact. The lack of focus on his growth

and development¹⁵, however, shows how Plascencia's portrayal of Baby Nostradamus is complicit with ableist ideas about disabled sexuality.

On the other hand, the "able" men with "whole" tongues, who then make love to Merced de Papel, *choose* the pain and the splitting that comes with the act of pleasuring Merced de Papel; they go down on her in order to mark themselves with open wounds which signal their resistance against the "first world." Choosing disability, or masquerading it, becomes an act of disidentification. These men desire Merced de Papel for the memories of their Mexican motherland, which she evokes¹⁶. The men read her as Other in two ways; she is a "disabled" woman of paper and a signifier of Mexico. Merced de Papel is simultaneously an individual, or a subject, but she also paradoxically occupies the position that women have traditionally held under nationalist thinking and becomes an object, or a symbol in the eyes of the men. Because she's made of paper, as symbolic paper—paper symbolic of the motherland—she is valuable paper; she becomes a document representative of Mexico. Thus, she's both representative of a desire for the Mexican motherland and for documentation. As Merced de Papel's lovers taste her sex, they suffer deep paper cuts on their lips and tongues, which they wear with a mixture of melancholy and pride even into old age. These men create fluid gender boundaries and a queer disability with the Chicana lesbian trope of Anzaldúa's forked tongue as they walked into the Los Angeles streets, encountering others with the same distinctive paper-thin scars. They introduced themselves, casually licking their lips to reveal the depth and age of their cuts, at times flicking cleft tongues as quick as lizards. But this was an unspoken fraternity (Plascencia 165).

Their ironically “lesbian” fraternity is not spoken of as they do not name the one who split their lips and tongues, yet her history is permanently written on their bodies. Thus, although Merced de Papel rips off the inscriptions men make on her body and deny their claims to her symbolically Mexican body/state and their claims to documentation, or to acknowledgment by the state, the men create their own community—one that is acknowledged among themselves as a claim to their Mexican status. This community is also a “disabled lesbian” community; the split lips that Merced de Papel carves into her lovers conjure the folds of the labia, and the blood that pours from their mouths suggest the bleeding vagina—creating a queer androgyny in the men who desire her. Their fraternity is one of duality (as Anzaldúa describes the duality of *mita y mitas*,) which shows how Merced de Papel creates a community of “queer disability” as the androgynous men take pride in their markers of difference and their scars provide a way to bond and to reveal their solidarity in their identities.

To see the moments of lesbian sexual citizenship in the trio of Merceds, we must trace the inseparable pairing of narrative and sexuality, focusing on “the middle of narratives” where the “coming together” of narrative fails, and we “find the lesbian” (Roof xxxiv). The coming together of narrative fails in POP as there are gaps between the columns and scratched out words that we must read through and around; this failure, however, also allows us to fill in the blanks, blots, and scratch-outs with our imagination, or queer fantasies. When we examine the bodily relations of the trio of Merceds in POP, Merced, who is most often in the margins of the text (in that she does not have a textual passage to voice her subjectivity until the end of the novel), is nevertheless at the forefront of Little Merced’s consciousness. Thus, in the most highly charged moment of

lesbian erotica between Little Merced and Merced de Papel (on the bus ride from Tijuana), Merced appears to function as a buffer within the triangle in order to explain away the moment of lesbian desire as rather one of a desire/longing for the mother—a familial/maternal desire. I, however, read through this maternal “cover” to the lesbian pleasure beneath.

In Merced de Papel’s first narrative column, she describes Little Merced as “a young girl—who was made entirely of meat and wore flowered underwear—[...] ‘You remind me of my mother though I haven’t seen her in years,’ she said, and laughed. She went on to christen me ‘Merced de Papel’” (25). The narrative columns of Little Merced and Merced de Papel are side by side—reaching and connecting across the page as they simultaneously travel northwest to Tijuana from Guadalajara. On this bus that has Los Angeles as its final destination, Little Merced recognizes the sadness in the woman of paper, and in a moment of erotic desire, asks to connect physically through touch. Textually, we can see the desire for touch printed on the page as their columns are placed in physical proximity. Little Merced puts her hand on Merced de Papel’s arm and says, “It was warm and I could feel the blood climbing up the veins, into her fingers, and then racing back into her heart” (Plascencia 25). This singular moment creates an instant connection between the two characters. Reading the paratext of the columns placed side by side, it is interesting to note that although Merced de Papel observes the flowered print of Little Merced’s underwear, she leaves out the goodbye kiss that they share—another moment of lesbian desire and identification. The intimacy that Merced de Papel does mention is limited to a hug and a whispering of secrets as they separate, yet, the

omniscient Saturn, who has voyeuristically observed this intimacy between women narrates,

At the front of the aisle, a woman made of paper *insisted* on giving Little Merced a hug *and a kiss* before they stepped out of the bus. Federico de la Fe at first *resisted the woman's affections toward his daughter*, holding Little Merced by the shoulders. He released her only after *she whispered* to him that *she knew the woman* and then opened her arms to embrace her new paper friend (emphasis mine Plascencia 24).

Federico is left out of the triangle of intimacy between the Merceds as well as Little Merced's duplicitous mastication of limes (which is an act of identification with his wife, Merced) as he sleeps in the back of the bus. It is Little Merced who acts out her erotic desires through her consumption of limes and her naming of Merced de Papel after herself and her mother; these desires and identifications hint at eroticism with descriptions of flowered underwear, warm touches, racing blood climbing to the heart, affectionate kisses, hugs, and a knowing embrace. Tellingly, we read the interconnected points of the triangle of Merceds in a chapter solely devoted to them; in "Chapter Twenty-Two," both Merced de Papel and Little Merced die, and we read Merced's first narrative passages. However, Little Merced's death (from citric poisoning, which ruins her tongue) is brief. As soon as Merced de Papel's paper body dissolves, Little Merced is resurrected by a *curandero*. Thus, the novel suggests that as Merced de Papel's spirit leaves her body, it enters Little Merced's body, and, in giving her life once again, lives on; their traumas as *los atravesados*¹⁷ are connected.

Bus Number 8 thus becomes a site that ventures to cross not only geographical and sexual borders, but also the demarcations of various corporealities as this mobile site (in which Merced de Papel and Little Merced first meet and express their identifications and desires) is also when Little Merced informs Merced de Papel of the prophet she has just met, Baby Nostradamus. The novel's first depiction of the "meditating" Baby Nostradamus comes from Little Merced who describes him as "a slobbering baby who moved only his lower lip" (Plascencia 23). As soon as she looks into his eyes for a glimpse of her future, or of her "mother's black hair," (Plascencia 23) her column ends. Adjacent to Little Merced's column is Baby Nostradamus' first narrative column and all we see is a large black rectangle suggesting that there is nothing in his head except a vast void, or that so much is there—that there is too much print to fit in a little column—that the words overlap until the ink spreads and covers the print that demands white spaces and gaps for readability¹⁸. Rather than a black void, Little Merced most likely sees her mother's black hair and thus learns of the supernatural gifts within seemingly disabled bodies; we can deduce that Little Merced receives a glimpse of his power as Little Merced whispers, "A baby Nostradamus is at the back of the bus," yet all Merced de Papel sees (without looking into his eyes) is "a proud mother holding a retarded baby" (Plascencia 25).

Little Merced, however, experiences a positive perception of physical difference. Rather than seeing difference as stigma, when she later meets a person who might be read as disabled, she thinks of abilities instead; hence, she narrates that she meets a "tall Oaxacan Indian who had one eye lost in meditation like the Baby Nostradamus" (Plascencia 29). This Oaxacan is part of a tribe of Glue Sniffers who sniff glue as a way

to deal with their poverty, hunger, and sadness (Plascencia 29). These sad Glue Sniffers who meet Federico de la Fe, (who deals with his depression at losing his wife to a white man by burning himself) afterwards become the Burn Collectors¹⁹. In relation to disability studies, their depression becomes a marker of cultural solidarity—they identify as a group and collect their burns as part of their identity. Disability scholars Sharon L. Synder and David T. Mitchell explain in *Cultural Locations of Disability*,

In cultural model applications, this divided understanding of impairment is encompassed by the larger, politicized term *disability*. The dual operation of the term is why many cultural model scholars understand ‘disability’ to function both as referent for a process of social exposé and as a productive locus for identification (10).

As an example of the work of social exposé in POP, the defiant Maricella, who proudly identifies as a Burn Collector, resists the social pressures that would stigmatize her as deficient, or as somehow impaired. Little Merced also participates in resistance as she sees beauty in Maricela’s burn scars, which remind her of stars. Little Merced narrates,

Maricela did not cover her stars or burn in secret; she was defiant of Tacho and all those who said that Burn Collectors should be anonymous and their scars hidden. Maricela was brash and public and she did not mind if people wanted to touch the constellations that adorned her body (Plascencia 59).

Thus, even as Garland-Thomson illustrates the historical construction of disability surrounding “Highly structured conventions of [...] exoticized ‘freaks’ from people who have what we now call ‘physical disabilities,’ as well as from other people whose bodies could be made to visually signify absolute alienness” (17), we also read how Merced de

Papel, the men with the split tongues, and the Burn Collectors resist functioning “as icons upon which people discharge their anxieties, convictions, and fantasies” (Garland-Thomson 56). Furthering the blurring of fictional and “real” boundaries, and of abilities/disabilities, the fictional characters in POP migrate across real national borders from Mexico to California; their navigations across borders point to what Anzaldúa describes as the Chicana/o “open wound.”

The queerly “disabled” Merced de Papel navigates the Chicana/o “*herida abierta* where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds” (Anzaldúa 25) differently than most because instead of bleeding, as a woman of paper, Merced de Papel can only dissolve into pulp. Because of her “formal” condition of disability, the question of crossing borders with documentation is irrelevant to her in the same way that a piece of paper can fly across the border. Merced de Papel thus has a queer position as both object and subject. She is not only objectified as a document and a symbol, but also in the sense that she materializes as the novel we hold in our hands. However, as we hold her in our hands and read about her, we read of her subjectivity as she claims her own identity, defies objectification, and writes her own text. Thus, her status within the novel calls into question the distinctions between subject and object and the criteria by which each is defined in terms of the state, in terms of gender (as feminists strive to defy sexual objectification) and in terms of phallic logocentrism (because it’s men who attempt to define her with their inscriptions). However, her portrayal as a semi-Malinche figure (and as the Third World, or the motherland) means that she inflicts open wounds on men—both white and Mexican. Her power in grating against the men she encounters in “the first world” is clear as her ex-lovers send her “bitter and indignant gifts” such as “a set of

photographs of fifty different men with scars across their lips entitled ‘Pictorial of a Paper Whore’” (168). The inflicted blood from Merced de Papel’s “open wound” as *atravesada* first appears in “The Prologue,” which ends with a *Frankenstein*-like scene in which Merced de Papel’s creator, Antonio, passes out on the floor from exhaustion,

flakes of paper stuck to the sweat of his face and arms, unable to hear the sound of expanding paper as she rose. His hands were bloody, pooling the ink of his body on the floor, staining his pants. She stepped over her creator, spreading his blood across the polished floor, and then walked out of the factory (Plascencia 15).

Thus, the opening of the novel traces Merced de Papel’s migration from the bleeding wounds of her Mexican creator; his wounds signify his “maternal” birthing of Merced de Papel and point to the significance of hands as feminine carriers of being. Antonio’s hands bleed after the birth of Merced de Papel and later we see how Little Merced’s hands consist of intricate folds and ruts as the labia of a woman’s genitals. Her hands are pregnant with her future. The journey from Guadalajara across the border to California is thus a crossing of national borders as well as gendered and sexual borders, or a journey of *los atravesados*.

As the trio of Merceds negotiates their psychological traumas as *atravesadas* and their feelings of loneliness and desertion against their feelings of desire and identification, the naming of the three Merceds suggests a lesbian community. Within this lesbian community, Little Merced has an all-consuming desire for limes which is a fatal identification with the mother who left her. Hence, “the excess embedded within the Symbolic” (Edelman 9) brings to mind the impossible excess of Merced’s and Little Merced’s limes. Edelman refers to Suzanne Barnard “The Tongues of Angels: Feminine

Structure and Other Jouissance,” who writes that in distinguishing between the subject of desire and the subject of the drive,

The subject of the drive also is ‘born’ in relation to a loss, this loss is a real rather than a symbolic one. As such, it functions not in a mode of absence but in a mode of an impossible excess haunting reality, an irrepressible reminder that the subject cannot separate itself from. In other words, while desire is born of and sustained by a constitutive *lack*, drive emerges in relation to a constitutive *surplus* (10).

In this way, we can clearly see how Little Merced’s desire for limes is born of and sustained by the loss of her mother. The loss of Merced also leads to an excess of sadness in Federico de la Fe. Moreover, the loss of Liz haunts Saturn/Sal and is projected upon his novel and the depiction of his characters. These various losses lead to excesses of sadness, which foster the death drive and the creation of war.

Therefore, Merced, although textually marginal, is the traumatic catalyst who completes the triangle between the three Merceds and forges connections between them. Just as Merced loves limes, Little Merced loves limes even though her father interdicts her “lesbian” consumption of limes. Further, just as Merced leaves her husband, Federico de la Fe, for her white Protestant lover, and Liz leaves Sal for her white lover, Merced de Papel writes a page in her book about her “own affinity for white lovers” (Plascencia 200). Thus, the adult Merceds problematize their lesbian community and affinity with one another by becoming Malinche, or Malintzin, figures. As Norma Alarcón explains in “Chicana’s Feminist Literature: A Re-vision through Malintzin/or Malintzin: Putting Flesh Back on the Object,” the problem of the sexualized Malintzin is that she has become a commodified object in which her “vagina [is] the supreme site of evil” (183).

The demeaning myth of Malintzin is perpetuated not only by males, but also by mothers burdened with self-hatred because “All we see is hatred of women” (Alarcón 183). Alarcón illustrates how the mother is a source of pain because of her perceived impotence; the daughter who needs her mother experiences love as “an ambivalence rooted in [her] sense of abandonment by her mother and her apparently enormous and irrational need” (183). This critique of love and mother-daughter relationships speaks to the dynamics of the three Merceds with relations to traditional Chicana figuring in which Little Merced (the Virgin) misses her mother, Merced (the murderous mother), and thus desires the touch of the woman of paper whom she names after her mother (Merced de Papel as a Malintzin figure). Plascencia, however, complicates the portrayal of the Merceds so that they may exhibit a multiplicity of Chicana roles as the roles attributed to the three Merceds are expressed, denied, and/or subverted in more than one of the Merceds. In any case, these traditional roles of “Chicana-ness” are all subverted as the three Merceds create the lesbian center of the novel not strictly via sensual lesbian content, but also via its structure and its use of tropes with relationships to lesbian genres.

Along with the disabled and Chicana lesbian trope of the forked tongues, the excess of limes in POP becomes a lesbian trope as Ann Cvetkovich, in *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures*, writes of how “The memory of trauma is embedded not just in narrative but in material artifacts, which can range from photographs to objects whose relation to trauma might seem arbitrary but for the fact that they are invested with emotional, and even sentimental value” (7-8). Little Merced’s limes may seem arbitrary, but as her mother also loved limes, it is the only way Little Merced can remember her. She remembers her not only through fading mental images,

but also through synesthesia. She tastes the memory of her mother through the consumption of limes just as she holds her mother in her hand when Baby Nostradamus' mother reads Little Merced's palm:

As she traced my lifeline, the blister on the tip of her index finger ruptured, and the fluid channeled into the ruts of my hand. The outer lines of my palm became tributaries feeding into the main river. I lifted my hand toward my face and saw that I was holding the river of Las Tortugas. As I looked closer I saw our old adobe house and the orchard that lined the river, the trees heavy with limes. [...] Downstream, at the cliff of my hand, there was a couple taking a bath. I could not recognize the man, but he was pale, his beard trimmed, his hair unkempt and curly. At first, I could see only the woman's back. She stood in the water, her hair still dry, but as she turned [...] I saw that it was my mother. I closed my fingers, collapsing the trees into twigs and the river and banks into a clump of mud, and threw it into the street (61).

The phallic index finger of Baby Nostradamus' mother releases bodily fluid that brings life to the sensual image of Las Tortugas' flowing river travelling across Little Merced's hand, which takes in the release from the phallic finger and becomes pregnant with Little Merced's luscious lime trees—heavy with their load. In this scene, the bodies in contact include two women who are connected through Baby Nostradamus as Little Merced again stares into his eyes. The ruts of Little Merced's hand become the folds of the labia, and the site of pleasure, the cliff, or clit, is where her mother resides. This moment of touch between the prophet's mother and Little Merced is thus a magically queer moment of gender blurring as the mother's finger carries phallic power and the pregnant lime trees

carry the symbol of Little Merced's lesbian desires. Little Merced gains a voyeuristic look into her mother's life even as she is supposed to be getting a reading of her own lifeline and of her own future—thus suggesting that Little Merced's intense identification with her mother means that she will turn into her mother. Little Merced, (thanks to the visionary power of Baby Nostradamus) is able to reject this racialized heterosexual portrayal of her mother with a white man—closing her hand in a fist against it in a moment of refusal—of disposal and disidentification against what she sees as an ableist, white heterosexual patriarchy²⁰. Instead of identification with the white heterosexual norm, the repeated focus on Little Merced's desire for limes and the pleasure that she derives from sucking on the fleshy pulp of the limes as well as the trickling of juice down her tongue and throat, evoke a girlhood lesbian desire²¹ for eating out the juices of a woman's body.

Baby Nostradamus, on the other hand, appears to lack subjectivity and power. He is consistently named a “Baby” even after he grows up and is able to walk himself—carrying the curandero, Apolonio, instead of being carried. However, his apparent lack of power shows how he is actually the most effective “trickster” figure who queers disability as he fights the oppressive force of Saturn. Postcolonial moments of resistance and claims to subjectivity are inherently bodily modes of resistance. Chela Sandoval's work in *Methodology of the Oppressed* points to how the “theory and method of consciousness-in-opposition” with a “differential, and postmodern paradigm [...] makes clear the vital connections that exist between feminist theory in general and other theoretical and practical modes concerned with issues of social hierarchy, marginality, and dissident globalization” (54-55). One such theory includes disability theory, which

also functions as a differential consciousness that moves across ideologies and recognizes the call for equal-rights, the revolutionary depictions of uniqueness, the assertion of supremacy, as well as the beckoning for separation or relocation to a utopian landscape (Sandoval 55-56). For instance, Synder and Mitchell allude to Bhabha's *Locations of Culture* with their text, *Cultural Locations of Disability* because they feel

indebted to Bhabha and other theorists of social power relations. Yet [they] also seek to identify alternative 'spaces' that disabled people occupy as uniquely marginalized populations. [Their] resignification of Bhabha's compelling title is purposeful in that the accommodation of disability rights efforts often requires a transformation of political discourse itself" (205-206).

Sandoval further explains that the method and theory encompassed within differential consciousness is a dialectical and performative mode of resistance (58, 61) used as a "technology of power" in the hands of the apt "trickster who practices subjectivity as masquerade" in guided and "diasporic migration[s]" in order to ensure "egalitarian social relations" (61). Merced de Papel, Little Merced, and Baby Nostradamus are "disabled"²² trickster figures who wield power in their masquerades of subjectivity as they migrate across borders; they function as illuminators of the paternal power struggles of Federico de la Fe, Saturn/Sal, and all the male characters. Siebers describes "masquerading," or "voluntary disclosure and exaggerated self-presentation" (107) as a strategy for emphasizing civil rights. "The masquerade," he writes, "represents an alternative method of managing social stigma through disguise, one relying not on the imitation of a dominant social role but on the assumption of an identity marked as stigmatized, marginal, or inferior" (Siebers 103). Masquerading disability is thus an act of

disidentification²³. I argue, therefore, that in POP, the disabled “trickster” figures are the most effective at resistance. For example, Plascencia writes,

The Baby Nostradamus had the power to undercut Saturn by prematurely disclosing information and sabotaging the whole of the novel. Ending everything here by simply listing the character facts: announcing who would win the war, revealing whether Merced would return to Federico de la Fe or whether Liz’s diaspora would eventually bring her back to Saturn (167).

Baby Nostradamus even becomes Little Merced’s instructor; he teaches her how to resist the omniscient powers of Saturn through the device of disability on masquerade.

Baby Nostradamus, like Merced de Papel, blurs the boundaries between “the real” and fiction as both disrupt the structure of the fictional novel in metafictional moments. As a “disabled” soothsayer and teacher, Baby Nostradamus is especially powerful as he sees not only the future, but also the past and present of the characters within the novel, as well as of the readers who consume the novel:

He knew the different grips of the readers, how some cradled the open covers while others set the book on a table, licking their fingers before turning each page, saliva soaking into the margins. And there were those readers who, when alone, opened the book and licked the edge of the pages, imagining that they too were going down on Merced de Papel, their blood gathering and channeling in the furrows of the spine. And they, these readers who were intimate with paper, went out into the world licking their lips, showcasing their scars and sore tongues, adding to the loves of Merced de Papel (Plascencia 166).

In this passage, Baby Nostradamus sets up the possibility for a lesbian consumption of the novel as readers are portrayed as desiring cunnilingus with the female novel. This type of intimate desire to be with Merced de Papel/the novel is a queer one (regardless of the readers' genders or sexual orientations) in which scarred tongues are a marker of queer disability as well as non-reproductive fraternity and pride²⁴. It is also the most vivid moment of the novel as a meta-fictional text. Merced de Papel's body is manifested in the pages of POP as readers and critics alike are reminded of their role in "the commodification of sadness" and receive a glimpse of the workings of omniscient powers like that of the prophet, Baby Nostradamus, or technically, of the author, Saturn/Sal Plascencia. In this moment, readers and critics are invited to glimpse the secret desires of their unseen reading community. The boundaries between fiction and reality are blurred because the characters with the forked tongues become the readers themselves. This reminder that we may all become disabled at any moment provokes the millionaires who fund Saturn's "war," or provide him with a grant to write; they require a constant disclaimer of their culpability. At one point, the "Legal Council for the Ralph and Elisa Landin Foundation" assert,

The Foundation and its endowment are not liable for any loss or damage, whether it be incidental, direct, punitive, exemplary, or special, resulting from *The People of Paper*, the war on omniscient narration (a.k.a. the war against the commodification of sadness), or any involvement with this book. This is inclusive of all paper cuts, whether incurred on fingers or tongues (Plascencia 218).

The fictional foundation speaks to the author's relationship with his novel and the novel's relationship to the readers as the organization seeks to avoid responsibility for the possible expansion of the queer disability community.

Disability criticism further enlightens the work done on the body by queer, feminist, postcolonial, critical race, gender, and sexuality studies which have "taught us to think the body as a site of excess and surplus, to theorize the extreme body, the mutilated body, [and] the body in pleasure and pain" (Breckenridge and Vogler 350). The split tongues, Little Merced's eroded tongue and gums, and the scarred, burned skin of the characters in Plascencia's novel are all forms of the mutilated/extreme body. Merced de Papel and Baby Nostradamus are also examples of "extreme bodies." Importantly, all forms of mutilation that take place in the novel are simultaneously sites of pleasure and pain, which points to their use as tropes of eroticized disability. The masqueraded queer disability culture is tied to the immigrants' specific cultural location on the borderlands of Mexico and California; thus, such an analysis queries "...the body-related universalisms of Western thought [...] in order to call into view the personhood of disability" (Breckenridge and Vogler 351). POP calls into view the value of personhood so that we may examine the concept of "well-being" as the novel illustrates the capabilities rather than the limitations of the maimed and disabled. Plascencia queers his novel so that we enter another world where a "retarded" Baby Nostradamus becomes a capable prophet and teacher and where scars, burns, and extraordinary bodies do not limit the lives of the characters, but rather enable them to live the way they want to live. Thus, we may overlook the idea that characters can be read as impaired and thus socially constructed as disabled, until contradictions come to the fore—especially with Baby Nostradamus—

whose portrayal in the novel shows how ideas about disability/capability are a matter of perception.

With the questioning of disability's construction, the war between Federico de la Fe and Saturn could be read as one in the pursuit of well-being²⁵. This reading of the war is possible because disability has a "multitude of heterogenous axes of difference. There is no single figure of disability" (Breckenridge and Vogler 352). Siebers makes this multitude evident as his discussion of disability includes the nuances of hybrid identities, ambivalences, power, agency, and resistance (which Mark Sherry's "(Post)colonising Disability" attributes only to scholars of postcolonial studies). As Plascencia is part of the broad and powerful tradition of authorship and signification, he has a role in social articulations of difference as he writes of characters that cross borders, which illustrates the contradictoriness inherent in the cultural hybridities of "minority" culture²⁶. These hybridities include not only the meeting of subaltern minority cultures separated by geographical borders but also those permeable borders of sexuality and disability. Hybrid identities are tied to issues of embodiment, which disability scholars focus on as they explore not only the social constructions of identity, but also the biological. Thus, I applaud Sherry for recognizing, however briefly, that disability scholars also have something to teach postcolonial studies—"that biology can expose social inequalities and oppression, rather than simply legitimate them" (19). By queering disability in POP, I do not seek to perpetuate or legitimate ableism, but to expose how disabled bodies may be linked to positive identities and to bring these important discussions of corporeality to literary analysis. Disability had long been ignored in the social world until disability activists claimed a space for recognition of ableist injustice; the works of disability

scholars and critical readings of representations of disability in literature further demonstrate how disability is a fluid social construction.

Plascencia's novel allows for a queer reading not only of sexuality but also of ability as he variously ascribes and takes away power from those his pseudonym is warring with. When it comes to the question of who holds power in relationships of love and between "bodies in relation," we see a call for an acceptance of love's loss and the trauma of irresolvable melancholy as the ultimate form of disidentification. Hence, Edelman's closing sentence to "The Future is Kid Stuff," is especially apt as he writes of the need for queers to accept their negative figuring as an act of rebellion: "And so what is queerest about us, queerest within us, and queerest despite us is this willingness to insist intransitively—to insist that the future stop here" (31). This insistence for non-generativity calls to mind the closing of POP in which Plascencia writes, "There would be no sequel to the sadness" (245). Hence, the novel ends not only with a call to accept one's queer figuring, but also with an invitation to end the melancholy (or pity) surrounding those with disabilities. Instead of expecting a continuation to this "sadness," we are invited to do away with ableist ideology.

Notes

¹ See reviews on the paperback version. (Quotations from blurbs by Curledup.com, Aimee Bender, *Time Out New York*, T.C. Boyle, and *Publishers Weekly*, respectively.)

² The form of the novel is inseparable from its content; the use of columns in contrast to full pages, the use of ink blots, scratched-out lines, and the dots/tally marks in the table of contents that mark each chapter must be examined on a metafictional level; these signifiers often relate to the plotting of war, as well as to which voices may have subjectivity, resist control, and exact revenge. (I work with the paperback edition from Harcourt Publishers, but the hardcover from McSweeney's also features die-cuts.)

³ See Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's "Theorizing Disability" in her book, *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature*, for an explanation of how Erving Goffman's stigma theory "...resituates the 'problem' of disability from the body of the disabled person to the social framing of that body" (32).

⁴ See Homi Bhabha's work on "the power of tradition" in *The Location of Culture*. Bhabha asserts that this power is one that simultaneously determines "the 'right' to signify from the periphery of authorized power and privilege" and one that reinscribes "the conditions of contingency and contradictoriness that attend upon the lives of those who are 'in the minority'" (3).

⁵ See "The Bard Fiction Prize" for the committee's description of the novel: "The categories of magic realism, postmodernism, or urban fabulism, while applicable, are utterly inadequate to describe this metafictional marvel, which takes us from Vatican City to Hollywood to Guadalajara and yet transcends time and place."

See also Mark Ehrman's interview, "Elegy for El Monte: In which Magical Realism Kisses the Eastside" for Plascencia's quote, "It's a book about L.A."

⁶ See "Elegy for El Monte" in which Plascencia says, "The Latino imprints never called when it was going around. McSweeney's called. But I'm very happy because now the book doesn't get reviewed as a "Latino imprint" book, but as a book. As a writer, I align myself with aesthetics, not ethnicity."

⁷ The character, Saturn, we learn is Salvador Plascencia, but prior to this awareness, we read Saturn as the Symbolic "Law of the Father" with his omniscient panoptic power.

⁸ When we consider the etymology of the word, "authorized," and its derivation from the Latin, "auctor," or author, we can see how Bhabha's discussion on the power of tradition illustrates Plascencia's position as an "authorizer" who acts as signifier. This position is a tenuous one as it is the cause of war in his novel as well as a political topic of contention for the author, readers, publishers, and distributors of his novel.

⁹ See José Esteban Muñoz's work, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* for his definition of the work of disidentification as involving negotiations of desire, identification, and the ideology of resistance (15).

See also: Josh Kun's interview, "The Full El Monte" in *Los Angeles Magazine*. Sept 2005 in which Plascencia's interview takes place in the "Culture" section of the magazine and Kun begins the article with Plascencia's family history: "The Plascencias didn't arrive from the east. In the early 1980s, they arrived, like so many others who now call El Monte home, from the south, from the state of Jalisco in the center of Mexico. [...] Now Plascencia is 28 and the author of one of the most talked-about literary debuts in years, *The People of Paper*, a wildly experimental novel that turns El Monte into a city of otherworldly Latino myth. Published by indie favorite McSweeney's—a noncommercial press not known for signing Latino writers—*The People of Paper* confounds all the genres it evokes: the immigrant epic, the suburban melodrama, the breakup novel. If *The People of Paper* becomes the great hope of the Latino novel, it's precisely because it tries so hard not to be" (78).

¹⁰ This "trio" or "triangle" should be understood as including Merced de Papel, Little Merced, and Merced.

¹¹ See John Alba Cutler's "Prosthesis, Surrogation, and Relation in Arturo Islas's *The Rain God*." In considering Merced de Papel's pivotal role, I emulate Cutler's method of exploring the intersections between disability, race, and sexuality in his reading of Islas's novel. Cutler brings the focus of disability to the fore through an examination of bodies in relation (which includes not only the familial relations in the novel, but also the bodies of the author, readers, and critics) (7). This type of reading is important because

“the discourses of ethnicity, sexuality, and disability all confront similar questions of how to reconcile the materiality of bodies with their social construction” (Cutler 8).

¹² See Plascencia’s interview with George Ducker in *Hobart* in which he explains his first conception of the novel: “The first image was a woman made of paper, and it was tied up with the actual material of the book—literally she’s made out of paper, metaphorically she’s made out of paper—and what do we then do with this woman that’s made out of paper?”

¹³ I would like to note here that even as we are cognizant of the similarities between various “minorities”—the sexual “other” and the disabled “other”—the intersections of disability and sexuality have important distinctions in how they are constructed and in the ways those within each group claim their identities. For example, see Robert McRuer in *Crip Theory* as he writes, “Able-bodiedness, even more than heterosexuality, still largely masquerades as a nonidentity, as the natural order of things” (1).

¹⁴ See Carol Siegel’s “Female Heterosexual Sadism” for her discussion on “Third Wave Sadomasochism:” “While numerous sex radical texts from feminism’s third wave seek to reclaim female masochism from patriarchal narratives of it as a natural response to male superiority and articulate it in terms of Foucauldian *askesis*—that is, as a self-fashioning physical discipline—majoritist feminists continue female masochism’s pathologization as a manifestation of trauma-induced false consciousness” (65).

¹⁵ The only mention we receive of Baby Nostradamus no longer being an infant is easily overlooked because he is still named “Baby:” “The Baby Nostradamus was still strapped to [Apolonio’s] back, but he had grown and when he stretched his prophetic feet—leaving prints of the future—it was the Baby Nostradamus who carried Apolonio. His steps were clumsy and he often fell, pinning Apolonio beneath him, falls that banged the Baby Nostradamus’s head so hard that they hurt the future, shuffling chronologies” (Plascencia 244). The “grown” Baby Nostradamus is thus portrayed here as a toddler who is still learning how to walk.

¹⁶ Ramon Barreto is only one of the many lovers of Merced de Papel, but he is also the only one with a recurring narrative passage who explains the desire Merced de Papel evokes: “Ramon Barreto wanted to love Merced de Papel from the first day he saw her [...] As always, with those estranged from their patrias, it is a woman who reminds them of the maize fields and songbirds. In Merced de Papel, Ramon Barreto could see the handiwork of the old origami surgeon who made flying swans and leaping monkeys [...] For Ramon Barreto, Merced de Papel was a way to return home without leaving the comforts of central air conditioning and reclining living-room chairs” (Plascencia 75).

¹⁷ Anzaldúa defines *los atravesados* as: “those who cross over, pass over, or go through the confines of the ‘normal’” (25) within a negotiated borderlands.

¹⁸ Later we see that these ink blots are powerful forms of resistance. For example, at Baby Nostradamus’ baptism, Apolonio helps the Cardinal “press the hands and feet of the Baby Nostradamus into the black sponge [...] and step onto the certificate [...] the right foot of ink revealed things I had never even dreamed of. Intricate maps and timelines of the world, fortunes we were never intended to see. I lifted the parchment before the Cardinal would notice the topography of the footprint and with my fingers smudged the future into an *ink blur*” (emphasis mine Plascencia 177). The blurring of ink thus signifies the claim to privacy against hierarchical powers.

¹⁹ A Glue Sniffer narrates: “The transition from rubber cement to fire began under the lead shell of a man who was taking refuge from an ominous force and had discovered a different cure for sadness. His name was Federico de la Fe” (Plascencia 29).

²⁰ Here, I do not wish to occlude Merced’s agency when she acts upon her own desire to leave her husband and daughter for Jonathan Smith. I wish to read Merced’s assertion of her agency and her portrayal as a Malinche figure in the same way that Chicana feminists like Alarcón have reread that moment, not as one of betrayal, but as one of agency as Chicana feminists demythify “the mythic aspects of disavowal, and the historical ambiance of Malintzin” (187). Following Alarcón’s argument we see how Merced, like Malinche, has desires of her own; however, in leaving Federico de la Fe for Jonathan Smith, or one patriarchal arrangement for another, she is essentially trapped and without choice because “to choose among extant patriarchies is not a choice at all” (187).

²¹ Esquibel’s work in the chapter, “Memories of Girlhood: Chicana Lesbian Fictions,” illustrates the pivotal role of girlhood desires: “In my research on Chicana literature, I found a series of stories in which girlhood

provides a space, however restrictive, for lesbian desire. In the socially sanctioned system of *comadrazgo*, young Chicanas are encouraged to form lifelong female friendships, and it is the intimacy of these relationships that often provides the context for lesbian desire” (91).

²² See Tobin Sieber’s *Disability Theory*. In suggesting that the architecture of our social environment reflects the norms of social space, which are not critiqued until different bodies cannot fit in the designed space, (124) Siebers shows how children, old people, and obese people may be considered disabled by the social environment. In addition, see Plascencia’s portrayal of how Merced de Papel does not fit into her environment as she has no need for running water or stoves: “She rested her burnt and waterlogged arm on the kitchen table and [...] called the gas company to request a stoppage of service. They asked if she was moving, but instead of explaining that she had no need for stoves and hot water she said she was going on a long trip” (Plascencia 162).

²³ See for example: “Saturn had never been able to penetrate the black of the Baby Nostradamus. Every time he attempted to pierce the protective layer, only further and deeper darkness was revealed. Saturn, like many others, simply assumed that the mental capacity of the Baby Nostradamus had shriveled to black” (Plascencia 160).

²⁴ This “disabling” and queerly “irresistible” non-reproductive desire for Merced de Papel (who may split our tongues) may be read as an act of disidentification against the ableist conception of a “sex life” in preference for a “sexual culture” as Siebers explains that “Sex is the action by which most people believe that ability is reproduced, by which humanity supposedly asserts its future, and ability remains the category by which sexual reproduction as such is evaluated” (139-140). By desiring non-reproductive sex, we deny the desire for posterity; this desire is definitively queer as Lee Edelman posits in *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* that queerness is “the side of those *not* ‘fighting for the children,’ the side outside the consensus by which all politics confirms the absolute value of reproductive futurism” (3).

²⁵ See Carol A. Breckenridge and Candace Vogler, authors of “The Critical Limits of Embodiment: Reflections on Disability Criticism,” for their definition of well-being as “happiness and desire fulfillment on the one hand and liberty and entitlement on the other” (351).

²⁶ See Bhabha for his explanation of how the terms of cultural engagement are created by “social articulations of difference” that are sites of “complex, on-going negotiation that seek to authorize cultural hybridities that emerge in moments of historical transformation” (3).

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