Choloborg: The Disappearance of the Latino Body

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history. ""Parker's art is about the conjuring of these sorts of troubling transformations, about bringing us into contact with an historical presence we are asked to feel rather than simply see. To paraphrase Barthes on photography, she also shows that contiguity is something I add to the work and which is nonetheless already there.

Australian artist Anne Ferran engineers a similar conjuring with her 1998 photographic contact prints of nineteenth-century garments from Sydney's historic Rose Hill estate. Clothing is a physical memory, an imprint, a second skin to the body that once wore it. So these photograms are traces of the body twice over, imprints of imprints. Hovering in a surrounding darkness, the garment-images softly radiate an inner light, the residual elements for a century of absorbed sunshine. Baiting the dead via the magical medium of photography, Ferran transforms history into a sequence, into a direct communion of past and present. ""When I try to reflect on these images the two things I keep coming up with are these: on one hand the obdurate barrier, like a high wall or a range of distant mountains, of short memory/thin skin, and on the other the longing to close the gap, recover the past, cross touch with sight, or lose them in one another, to press up close to things, cloth against paper, skin against skin."

If we were to treat the work of our artists as a kind of collective cultural unconscious, then we might see in these manœuvres some palpable anxiety about contiguity's future. And indeed, it is precisely a capacity for visual contiguity that is now under threat as the photographic image is irrevocably transformed into a continuous flow of electronic data. Where photography is inscribed by the things it represents, it is possible for digital images to have no origin other than their own computer program. These images may still be indices of a sort, but their referents are not the objects they picture but rather electronic flows, differential circuits, and abstracted data banks of information (information that includes, in most cases, the look, if not the epistemological substance, of the photographs). Where a photograph compels by way of ""the condition of being in contact,"" by promising a dynamic temporal depth beneath its calm, static surface, digital images fascinate by overtly abandoning any such claim, as images they are content to be nothing but surface. Psychologically speaking,

Race, gender and capital require a cyborg theory of whole and parts.
—Donna Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto"

In her epochal essay on the effects of technology on subjectivity, "A Cyborg Manifesto," Donna Haraway coyly positions the cyborg as something of a technologically evolved monster and claims that "Monsters have always defined the limits of community in Western imaginations." If this is true, then one might conclude that race was the monster that has defined those early limits of the cyborg community.

Race is one of those parts that has yet to be fully theorized, specifically with regard to Latino bodies. Nevertheless, she later argues that, informed by situated and embodied knowledges, such fragments contain a critical potential. Given the triumvirate of race, gender, and capital, conventional knowledge tells us that Latinos embody physiological difference and are "situated" both economically and culturally, raising the question: are Latino's bodies cyborg bodies? In 1999, the saucy stylings of Ricky Martin made it to the Grammy Awards, while Jennifer Lopez continues to enjoy the admiration of television and movie audiences, suggesting that Latino bodies have never been more visible. They are on the pop charts, in magazines, and on television, yet, according to the cultural critic Mike Davis, Latinos have seen the lowest income growth, with the median household income increasing only $276 between 1980 and 1995, compared to $4,845 for whites and $4,576 for blacks. Likewise, under NAFTA, companies like Hyundai, Sony, Sanyo, and Toyota have redefined the notion of a transnational economy. In Major
Urbanism: Latinx and the US City, Davis writes: "Just as rows of ultra-modern assembly plants now line the south side of the border, so have scrub wood and tar paper shantytowns become an increasingly common sight on the US side of the border." Migrant labor played a central role in California's agricultural prosperity, and if hidden and undervalued, Latino workers may play the same role in the new global economy. Davis goes on to note that Apple, Sun, Adobe, Netscape, and Oracle have all "been fined or sued for racial discrimination or for failure to meet federal diversity deadlines." In a nutshell, new technologies have yet to transcend old race and class relations.

What technologies do Latinos embody anyway? Clearly, our existence as a laboring underclass is anything but new. Even the glitter glamour of Ricky Martin and Jennifer Lopez does little more than reshape this mythic physicality. At www.rickymartin.com, one can register to "get into Ricky's Pants"—a promotional contest offering the grand prize winner a pair of Ricky's red velvet pants. On another site, www.jennifer-lopez.org, one can download over 1,500 photographs and even order Jennifer Lopez wallpaper. The Web is today's hottest marketing tool, claiming nothing less than the liberatory potential of capital for those who choose to spend it.

Capitalism makes use of the Latino/a body, but what is the particular appearance of this body? Ricky and Jennifer are currently sporting buffed bodies and blonde highlights, and why not? But what of the workers in Tijuana's factories? Do they tend to look a little different, highlights or not? Latinos can range from tan, to rosy or mixed blood, to blonde with blue eyes. Even before the contemporary development of genetic engineering, the dynamics of colonization, migration, politics, capital, economics, love, and war had already reshaped the Latino/a body. Dr. Harold P. Freeman, in a recent article in the New York Times, was quoted as saying: "If you ask what percentage of your genes is reflected in your external appearance, the basis by which we talk about race, the answer seems to be in the range of 20 percent." In the same article, the author, Natalie Angier, reminds readers that race encompasses both genetics and culture.1

As if all this gene mixing wasn't confusing enough, according to the U.S. Bureau of the Census, "Hispanic" refers to people whose origins are Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, South or Central American, or other Hispanic/Latino. At last count, the Latino population in this country was estimated at 31.7 million, or 11.7 percent of the total population.2 On the 2000 Census, Latinos were asked to indicate their origin in a question on "Hispanic origin," not in the question on race, because in the federal statistical system ethnic origin is considered to be a separate concept from race. The Census went on to explain that Hispanics might be of any number of racial groups, and as of October 1999, the Office of Management and Budget announced the revised standards for federal data on race and ethnicity. The official categories for race are now: American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian, Black or African American, Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, White, and "some other race." In addition, two ethnicity categories were established: Hispanic origin and Not of Hispanic origin.3 Because the Census identified Latinos as Caucasian for most of the twentieth century, these recent changes may allow new statistics to emerge as researchers can now do more than simply track Spanish surnames.

4. Ibid., 10.
5. Ibid., 102.
7. Quoting Dr. Sonia S. Anand, Assistant Professor of Medicine, McMaster University, Ontario. Angier writes: "Thinking about ethnicity is a way to bring together questions of a person's biology, lifestyle, diet, rather than just focusing on race. Ethnicity is about phenotype and genotype, and, if you define the terms of your study, it allows you to look at differences between groups in a valid way.
Latinos believe the US City. Davis writes: "Just as rows of ultra-modern assembly plants now line the south side of the border, so have scrap wood and car paper shantytowns become an increasingly common sight on the US side of the border." Migrant labor played a central role in California's agricultural prosperity, and if hidden and undervalued, Latino's workers may play the same role in the new global economy. Davis goes on to note that Apple, Sun, Adobe, Netscape, and Oracle have all "been fined or sued for racial discrimination or for failure to meet federal diversity deadlines." In a nutshell, new technologies have yet to transcend old race and class relations.

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If one goal of Haraway’s “Cyborg Manifesto” was to propose a world without gender, then perhaps in acknowledging the possibility of a wide range of genetic combinations among the descendants of America’s other indigenous peoples (south of the U.S. border) the OMB is trying to create a world without race. If this is so, then the Census Bureau has created 33 million Latino/a cyborgs whose racial complexities may, on the one hand, break down the barrier of race, and on the other, erase historical notions of race, statistically identifying millions of dark-skinned, straight-haired, sharp-featured, Maya and other indigenous descendants as “some other race.”

The terms Hispanic, Chicano, Latino, and Cholo speak to the contested history of this chimeraic body.

11. The term cholo is mostly used in the western states, as an extension of youth culture. It is not intended to replace the term Latino, but simply to suggest a global/local context.


Ken Gonzales-Day is an artist and writer living in Los Angeles. Recent exhibitions of his work include América Foto/arie at the Museo de las Artes in Guadalajara, Mexico; Beyond Boundaries: Contemporary Photography in California, at the Ansel Adams Center for Photography in San Francisco; and Made in California 1900-2000, at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Solo exhibitions include Suzanne Vielmetter, Los Angeles Projects, and Deep River, Los Angeles.