

**Several Sides to the Story: Representation and Reading, Movement and Space, and Female
Coalition in Salvador Plascencia's *The People of Paper***

by

Kathryn Houston

B.A., University of Victoria, 2017

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF ARTS

in

THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE AND POSTDOCTORAL STUDIES
(Hispanic Studies)

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

(Vancouver)

September 2020

© Kathryn Houston, 2020

The following individuals certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies for acceptance, a thesis entitled:

“Several Sides to the Story: Representation and Reading, Movement and Space, and Female Coalition in Salvador Plascencia’s *The People of Paper*”

submitted by Kathryn Houston in partial fulfillment of the requirements for

the degree of Master of Arts

in Hispanic Studies

Examining Committee:

Jon Beasley-Murray, Associate Professor, Department of FHIS, UBC

Supervisor

Tamara Mitchell, Assistant Professor, Department of FHIS, UBC

Supervisory Committee Member

Alessandra Santos, Associate Professor, Department of FHIS, UBC

Supervisory Committee Member

Abstract

Salvador Plascencia's novel *The People of Paper* explores many identities and narrative perspectives through its polyvocal narration and varying levels of fiction and reality, where the metafictional narration enlists the reader to question the act of reading and the veracity of fiction. The characters move through many different spaces, making the marginal central. This is reflected both in the narrated space and the space of the page, where topography and movement are reflected within the experimental layout and typography. Finally, I explore these varying perspectives and the materiality of the novel in order to discuss the coalition of female characters and the harnessing of the technology of paper in order to re-shape and question female bodies and identities within Chicana literature and feminisms.

I engage with Roland Barthes' "The Death of the Author" in order to question the act of reading and the distinctions between reality and fiction. I apply Michel Foucault's spatial concept of heterotopia in order to analyze the town of El Monte, a real town, yet here made fictional. Finally, I refer to Donna Haraway's *A Cyborg Manifesto* and Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands*, in order to discuss the coalition or community of female characters and new conceptions of female identity and agency through heteroglossia, or multiple perspectives or narrative voices. I conclude that, in creating a dialogue between its characters, the text seeks to broaden representation within Chicana/o literature through questioning the act of reading, movement and space, and collective female identity.

Lay Summary

At the beginning of 2020, Jeanine Cummins published the novel *American Dirt*, which sparked debates over the misrepresentation of her characters and the lack of representation of Latinx authors in the publishing industry. However, within this debate, these two separate issues became confused, as did the purpose, or the requirements of fiction to reveal truth. In my analysis of Salvador Plascencia's *The People of Paper*, I seek to clarify the role of representation in the fictional text through the concepts of questioning the role of the reader and the difference between reality and realism, both in the representation of the characters and the spaces they inhabit. I also seek to understand the dialogue between the characters, and how, by creating characters that question the narrator, a community of female characters is formed, who elaborate their own sense of solidarity. This thesis seeks to question fiction's role in representing characters, spaces, and female identities.

Preface

This thesis is original, unpublished, independent work by the author, Kathryn Houston.

Table of Contents

Abstract	iii
Lay Summary	iv
Preface	v
Table of Contents	vi
List of Figures	ix
Acknowledgements	x
Chapter 1: Three Sides to Every Story: Representation and <i>American Dirt</i>	1
1.1 <i>American Dirt</i>	1
1.2 Representation	2
1.3 <i>The People of Paper</i>	4
1.4 Chapter Summaries.....	5
1.5 Final Thought	7
Chapter 2: Killing the author and Creating the Reader: Questioning the Act of Reading, Narrative Realism, and Commodification	8
2.1 Plot Summary	9
2.2 Defining Chicana/o Literature and Representation	11
2.2.1 The Death of the Author.....	14
2.3 Literary Context.....	18
2.4 Realism and Magical Realism	21
2.5 Reality and Narration.....	24
2.6 Commodification and Representation	32

Chapter 3: Making the Marginal Central: Movement and Space in *The People of Paper*...37

2.7 Space and Mobility in Chicano Literature.....39

2.8 Narrative / Represented Space.....42

 2.8.1 El Monte42

 2.8.2 Work49

 2.8.3 Home51

 2.8.4 The Border53

 2.8.5 El Derramadero.....55

2.9 Space on the page56

 2.9.1 Table of Contents.....57

 2.9.2 Tagging / Graffiti.....61

 2.9.3 Columns.....63

2.10 Chapter Conclusion66

Chapter 4: The Power of Paper and Female Coalition.....68

3.1 Ambiguities and Tensions71

3.2 Women in Latino/Chicano Writing72

3.3 A Cyborg Manifesto77

3.4 Female experience as coalition.....79

3.5 Paper vs. Meat82

3.6 Origin Story84

3.7 Agency, Anxiety, and Commodification.....89

3.8 Chapter Conclusion94

Chapter 5: Conclusion: Since When Must Fiction Tell the Truth?	95
4.1 Final Words	98
Bibliography	99

List of Figures

Figure 1 EMF Gang Members57

Figure 2 EMF Gang Sign/Part 158

Figure 3 Table of Contents59

Figure 4 The Narrative Fades/ Name Scratched Out.....60

Figure 5 EMF Tag Crossed Out61

Figure 6 Text Blocked Out63

Figure 7 Saturn Pushed Into the Margins64

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I would like to thank my supervisor, Jon Beasley-Murray, for his patience and support throughout this process. I am grateful for all of his guidance and the time he spent leading me in the right direction. I would also like to thank Alessandra Santos and Tamara Mitchell for all of their comments and suggestions, which provided new perspectives that greatly enriched this thesis.

I would like to thank the support of the FHIS department throughout my master's degree, as well as the financial support of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council.

Finally, I would like to thank my family and friends, who have all been incredible listeners.

Chapter 1: Three Sides to Every Story: Representation and *American Dirt*

1.1 *American Dirt*

The outset of 2020 was marked by indignation and opprobrium from many scholars, writers, and readers, within the Chicana/o community and beyond, with the publication of Jeanine Cummins's *American Dirt*. This highly anticipated novel, which received a seven-figure advance and support from influential people like Oprah Winfrey and the prominent Latina writers, Julia Alvarez and Sandra Cisneros, was met with scrutiny and vitriol even before its release. The novel tells the story of a mother and son who flee their Mexican hometown, undertaking the dangerous journey of illegally crossing the US-Mexico border, after the mother, Lydia, befriends a charming man who turns out to be the boss of a ruthless drug cartel. In a scathing review, author Myriam Gurba contested Cummins's representation of Mexico and Mexicans: "Cummins believes she's important, and expert, enough to represent 'faceless' brown people" ("Pendeja, You Ain't Steinbeck"). In an author's note, Cummins addressed her "nonmigrant and non-Mexican" status, noting that some would say that she "had no business writing a book set almost entirely in Mexico, set amongst migrants" (Cummins 382). Yet she justified her decision, claiming that she "wished someone slightly browner than me would write it. But then I thought, *"If you're a person who has the capacity to be a bridge, why not be a bridge?"*" (Cummins 382). Or as Gurba puts it, "By her own admission, she lacked the qualifications to write *Dirt*. And she did it anyways. For a seven-figure sum." Addressing Cummins's comment about "faceless brown people" Gurba retorts, "We not only have faces and names. Some of us have extensive bibliographies" ("Pendeja, You Ain't Steinbeck").

In a critique of representation—regarding how the characters are depicted and the accuracy of their portrayal—from Myriam Gurba’s perspective (amongst many others), the novel was a failure. However, Gurba’s sardonic retort that some “faceless brown people” have extensive bibliographies is not a comment on the representation of Cummins’s characters, but on the writers that Cummins wished would write the story—and already have. The stories of Mexican migrants are documented within Mexican, Chicana/o, and Latina/o writing, as well as by white writers, who have historically written brown and black bodies. What was original about Cummins’s novel was her own representation—where she was given the platform, promotion, and profits for her story to reach many more readers. Yet instead of being celebrated, she was held accountable for her claims that her fictional story could represent the migrant experience.

1.2 Representation

There are three issues of representation at stake here. The first, that Jeanine Cummins did not portray her subject well, and created characters that lacked depth or an understanding of the language, history, and culture they were meant to embody.¹ Second, that these characters, meant to represent or stand in for the Mexican migrant experience, instead perpetuated stereotypes and could not fulfill the task of representing or speaking on behalf of Mexican migrants. Although these first two issues may seem similar, if not the same, part of the concern with the novel was not only the fact that Cummins’s characters were viewed as poorly written or developed, but that her aim was for those characters to stand in for or represent the experiences of Mexican migrants. The third and final issue of representation is a critique of the publishing industry, which excludes

¹ Myriam Gurba explains the stereotypical representation of the novel’s characters and the lack of cultural understanding both the with the use of italicized Spanish words and the novel’s metaphors and references (*Tropics of Meta*).

Latina/o authors in favour of a white woman, who profited from telling a story that is certainly not new and certainly not hers. With the debate surrounding *American Dirt*, there was a conflation of who should be telling these stories with whether or not the story itself was accurate.

In his critique of the text, Frederick Luis Aldama quotes Colson Whitehead saying, “You can write about anything and everything, including that which is not proximate to your experience, ‘Just don’t fuck it up’” (“Brownface Minstrelsy”). Aldama suggests, however, that Cummins does indeed “fuck it up,” and points to writers who better portray Chicana/o and Latina/o themes, such as Gurba, Luis Alberto Urrea, Yuri Herrera, and Juan Pablo Villalobos. Many of these authors were also cited by Cummins, despite her hopes that someone “browner” than her would write this story. All over the media and within mainstream news, *American Dirt* and its public contempt proved that, despite its promotional success, the novel seemed out of touch with today’s political climate, and that fiction, in terms of representation, appeared to have something to prove.

This debate also begs the question of whether or not there is a need for more accuracy when a story portrays marginalized characters. Fiction, by definition, is synonymous with imitation, invention, or deceit—so when did it become fiction’s job to tell the truth? Cummins says she was encouraged to write the novel because someone told her that “we need as many voices as we can get telling this story” (382). Part of the problem was that instead of representing a particular story, Cummins’s novel claimed to represent “the” migrant experience. Despite her claims to Latina heritage, through her Puerto Rican grandmother, and her understanding of the migrant experience through her husband—an undocumented immigrant himself—her desire for her own knowledge to speak for others was problematic in its homogenization of a diverse population (Cummins 380-381). As Leylha Ahuile asserted, “It is clear that the gatekeepers in publishing do not reflect, nor do they appreciate, the complexities of Latinos. Latinos are not a homogenous group; they are as

vastly different as the general population, but with the added intricacy of acculturation” (Ahuile). Cummins, and the industry that bolstered her promotion and success, made the mistake of playing into identity politics, and treating a single fictional experience as a representation of the experience of many—a truly impossible task. Maybe, the question should not be what fiction can do for the reader, but what the reader can do for fiction.

1.3 *The People of Paper*

Salvador Plascencia’s *The People of Paper* (2005) tells many stories, still very relevant today. The novel is primarily written in columns, like the columns of a newspaper, and covers many themes of illegal migration ever-present in mainstream media. A prominent theme that emerges within the text is on paper and the undocumented workers who either have papers, or who do not. This may be a salient topic in today’s political climate; however, my interests lie with the theme of representation. The metafictional text depicts characters at war with their omniscient narrator, where varying perspectives are explored, stereotypes are aggrandized, and women are shamed for their sexuality. Nevertheless, the multiplicity of perspectives allows for a conversation between the characters and their narrator, depicting many different experiences, perspectives, and opinions. Although there may be two sides to every story—in *The People of Paper*, there are three: the author-character, the author’s characters, and the reader. The novel makes the marginal central, the invisible visible, and the transparent opaque—rendered literal formally, through the text’s experimental layout and typography. Unlike Cummins’s *American Dirt*, Plascencia’s novel does not strive for authenticity or pretend to tell a true story. Instead, its metafictional style engages the reader to distrust what they are reading, constantly reminding us that what we are reading is fiction, a product of someone else’s imagination. Plascencia wants us to be the questioning reader, placing

the onus on the reader, rather than the writer. I look at the ways in which the text plays with levels of reality and fiction, as well as truth and lies—which in many cases, are one in the same. I address the problem with reading fiction as reality, expecting what is not real, to reveal social, political, and cultural truths.

This thesis analyzes *The People of Paper* with the aim of furthering a discussion surrounding representation. I will contextualize the themes of the act of reading, movement and space, and the representation of female bodies by first contextualizing *The People of Paper* within the genre of Chicana/o fiction, with examples from other Chicana/o authors. I compare Plascencia's novel to these other texts in order to understand the ways in which this experimental novel both follows and defies the conventions of the genre of Chicana/o fiction—and the ways in which these other Chicana/o narratives individually contribute to a larger mosaic or collection of Chicana/o narratives and identities.

1.4 Chapter Summaries

The first chapter of this thesis advances a theory of representation and questions the act of reading. I engage with Roland Barthes's "The Death of the Author" to analyze how the autofictional elements of the novel defy certain conventions of testimonial narratives, where realism is often mistaken for reality. I examine how the novel engages in debates surrounding representation through its dialogue between the characters and the narrator, as well as the censorship and self-censorship of their thoughts, deciding whose story should and should not be told. Furthermore, I discuss the commodification of their stories and the perpetuation of certain stereotypes to such a degree that these stereotypes break them down or are rendered absurd. I examine how the text uses

Magical Realism in order to transform these stereotypes into magical or fantastical elements within the narrative, and how the text uses metafiction to create various levels of reality.

The second chapter examines the representation of movement and space, and the ways in which the novel makes the marginal or liminal spaces, central. I analyze the narrative space, as well as the space of the page, and the ways in which space both shapes and is shaped by the characters's identities and social roles. Similar to my analysis in Chapter one, where I apply Barthes's the "Death of the Author," I examine the central narrative space of *El Monte*, employing Michel Foucault's definition of heterotopias in order to understand the fictional version of the town and the ways in which the town is shaped to fit the characters' needs. Again, there is a distinction between reality and fiction—where the town of *El Monte* remains a fictional version, not a representation of the real Los Angeles suburb. I examine the ways in which the experimental layout and typography of the physical pages of the novel reflect the movement within the narrative.

In the final Chapter, I analyze the treatment and representation of women's bodies and the ways in which they are transformed. I seek to determine the power of paper and the significance of a female body made entirely from paper, where the female characters are given the agency to reclaim the narrative surrounding their bodies. The female body is depicted as a tool or technology, in order to depict female social realities, as conceived by a male author. Unlike the male characters who remain stuck in their sadness, the female characters overcome their situations and the scrutiny they face in order to be free of Saturn's narrative. However, this freedom and power comes in contrast to Saturn's depictions of them, where they face scorn and shame for their sexuality and for their decisions to choose their own path. Using Donna Haraway's "A Cyborg Manifesto" and Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands*, I seek to understand the coalition of female characters created in

the text, and how their polyvocal narration and the dichotomous depiction of their bodies and identities is indicative of a broader female and Chicana experience.

1.5 Final Thought

My analysis of *The People of Paper* seeks to understand the debates and perspectives surrounding the representation of the act of reading, or how the reader interprets the various levels of reality and fiction; movement and space, concerning both the topography and the typography within and on the pages of the text; and finally, the coalition of female experience and the power of female narratives surrounding the discussion of female social realities. Ultimately, I hope to contribute to a broader discussion surrounding representation and the importance of multiple voices and judicious readers in Chicana/o fiction.

Chapter 2: Killing the author and Creating the Reader: Questioning the Act of Reading, Narrative Realism, and Commodification

The People of Paper spins a complex web of “reality” and fiction, author and character, magic and realism, and myth and stereotype. Representation—both the way in which the characters are presented or included in the story and the ways in which the reader interprets these interpretations—is a theme throughout *The People of Paper*. Specifically, what is in question is who is allowed to tell whose story: the novel’s characters engage in a war against their narrator, who turns out (like the novel’s author) to be named Salvador Plascencia. Through a revolving shift in narration, where a polyvocal cast of characters narrates their struggle against omniscient narration, the novel’s characters rebel against Saturn in order to put an end to their constant feeling of being watched. The novel proves that there is always two (or more) sides to the story—narrating multiple perspectives of the same events, within various levels of reality and fiction. Some of these characters are presented as fictional, and others as “real,” or within the author-character, Plascencia’s own world. Yet, despite their status as fictional characters, they address the fact that they do not want their stories to be told. The novel amplifies or exaggerates the theme of representation by not only giving the characters a voice—in first and third-person narration—but also by giving them the opportunity to alter the narrator’s information and to contradict his veracity. We are constantly made aware that this is a fictional text and that the characters’ agency is dependent upon their creator. Yet, the novel explores the theme of representation by allowing its characters to speak “for themselves” and to offer their opinions of how they are being presented by the narrator—asking the reader to question the act of reading and any assumption about cultural truths within fiction. Moreover, through the use of magical realism, Plascencia “mythologizes”

certain stereotypes, making them larger than life, while also drawing attention to the social issues often explored in realist novels.

This chapter identifies the varying forms of representation within *The People of Paper*, from recognition and inclusion, depiction and portrayal, to questioning the assumptions of fiction and reading, and the commodification of these stories. I identify certain features of Chicana/o and Latina/o realist novels, in order to examine the ways in which *The People of Paper* uses metafiction and magical realism in order to question the “reality” of realism and the assumptions of reading. I argue that the metafictional meta-narratives in *The People of Paper* implore the reader to question the nature of fiction as fact, realism as reality, and the creation as a mere reflection of its creator.

2.1 Plot Summary

The People of Paper centers around the story of Federico de la Fe and his daughter Little Merced as they cross the border from Las Tortugas, Mexico, to the Los Angeles suburb of El Monte. Although the novel was published in 2005, and the story may sound like a familiar headline, the novel’s prologue describes an order of Franciscan monks, leaving behind the factory where an “origami surgeon,” Antonio, creates the first person to be made entirely of paper. As a nod to magic realism, the novel takes place in a world familiar to readers, offering exact distances between towns and recognizable locations, however, the inclusion of Franciscan monks, as well as, for instance, mechanical tortoises and a Baby Nostradamus, make the novel difficult to place in time and in “reality.”

The People of Paper tells many stories, making clear with its metafictional narration, that this story not only diverges from a more common realist Chicana/o first-person narration, but also the concept of realism and testimony as a representation of real life. It features characters that

clearly take part in a story that we as readers are participating in, rather than witnessing. Thus, the readers are also drawn into the narrative.

Central to this story is Federico de la Fe, who upon arriving in Los Angeles, looks for a job in a dress factory but finds that “they wanted people who carried laminated cards with the stamp of a bald eagle” (Plascencia 33). Although the novel depicts Merced de Papel, the first woman made entirely from paper, there is also the distinction of those who “have papers” and those who are undocumented or *sin papeles*. However, ultimately, all of the characters are created on the pages of the text and are all made of paper—a fact that the narrator and characters remind the reader of throughout the text, drawing attention to the fact that these are fictional characters, and all people of paper. Defying the conventions of a realist Chicana/o narrative, many of the characters lack interiority; as a whole, they represent various levels of fiction and reality.

The impetus to the novel’s primary narrative, a war against omniscient narration, begins when Federico de la Fe is left by his wife, Merced, after years of his wetting the bed. Years later, de la Fe stops wetting the bed, and finally learns the cure for his sadness. However, he increasingly feels as though he is being watched, and that his life is being controlled. He decides to take his daughter, little Merced, to Los Angeles, and the pair end up in the town of El Monte, where Federico joins the local gang, El Monte Flores or EMF, and becomes a carnation picker. With the help of other EMF members, specifically Froggy and subcomandante Sandra, de la Fe begins a war against Saturn—eventually discovered to be named Salvador Plascencia—the presence in the sky that has been watching him and controlling his narrative. Ultimately, this war, and the large number of characters who participate in it, serves to question both the negative and positive (but mostly negative) aspects of representation. The metafictional self-reflection serves to question how the characters are represented and the various interpretations of these representations.

Before discovering Saturn, de la Fe already has a fear of being watched: “He sensed that he was being constantly watched from above; at times eyes stared down at him from three different angles” (26). Upon his arrival in Tijuana, before he crosses the border, this appears to be the fear of being monitored as an illegal migrant, with “three different angles,” which sounds more like a camera lens or a searchlight than the presence of an omniscient narrator. However, as the novel progresses and de la Fe begins to wage a war against the force within the sky, initially only known as Saturn, it becomes clear that his war against this force goes beyond the feeling of being watched or surveyed as an illegal migrant. Rather, his conflict is against being represented. These “three different angles” could in fact be the three different perspectives—the author, the character, and the reader—that are watching or witnessing his narrative. As Plascencia loses access to the thoughts of de la Fe and the rest of the EMF members, through various techniques from lining their homes with the lead from the shells of mechanical tortoises, smoking him out, to Little Merced learning to shield her thoughts from him, Saturn must shift the narrative towards his own life. Saturn’s narrative becomes complicated by his own life and his own past, where characters from his “real life,” where he is known as “Sal,” enter the narrative to comment on how they are being represented. Ultimately, the polyvocal narration serves to question the theme of representation and the commodification of their stories.

2.2 Defining Chicana/o Literature and Representation

Any literature “represents” something, from describing a certain image to standing in for or assuming a role. There is often an assumed political or social aspect to representation or an element of social inclusion, especially when representing a marginalized community. The desire to represent one’s own experience that is relatable to others in your community, or to create common

ground is in many ways important in building a collective experience. Literature is often seen to document or represent the context in which it was produced, and although *The People of Paper* is far from a realist novel, it certainly reflects many important elements of social reality. Yet, in many ways, it does so by instructing the reader to question the representation of its characters and narrated perspectives. In the text, there is certainly an interrogation of the act of reading and the forms of narrative representations that are meant to be read as “reality” and “truth”. In order to characterize the connections between Chicana/o literature and representation, I will first define the term Chicano. As Marc Simon Rodriguez’s explains:

Chicano has had wide application in the scholarship on Mexican Americans in the United States. In some early texts written during the movement Chicano was used to encompass all Mexican-ancestry people in the United States regardless of citizenship. In most cases, however, Chicano was used to identify those who participated in the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s and also as a term to replace the hyphenated ‘Mexican-American’ identity. For many activists, Chicano was applied to those people of Mexican ancestry born in the United States (Mexican Americans) even if individuals rejected the term... In this sense, Chicanos were neither Mexicans nor white Americans, but rather represented a self-fashioned US minority group with its own history and culture (Rodriguez 2-3).

Although the Chicana/o movement and the social, political, literary, and media representations of said movement are complex, for the purpose of this analysis, I will define Chicanas/os as people of Mexican ancestry or heritage in the United States, acknowledging Chicana/o culture as more than a mere blending of Mexican and American culture, but as its own culture. Although *The People of Paper* does feature predominantly Mexican migrant characters and characters with Mexican ancestry living in the United States, not every character in the text is Chicana/o. However,

the novel centers around a predominantly Chicana/o suburb of Los Angeles where the main characters establish a community amongst other Chicana/o and migrant characters, as well as a Chicana/o narrator, who grapples with his own identity—both through self-representation and the ways in which his characters contest these views.

Certainly, *The People of Paper* develops many social, political, and cultural aspects of its Chicana/o community of characters, yet the text also draws on many stereotypes and contradicts the author's trustworthiness—eliciting the reader to question these political, social, and cultural aspects as truth. This leads me to further definitions of both representation and Chicana/o narrative. Ramón Saldívar describes the act of reading and the ways that it has shaped former definitions of Chicana/o narrative: “The truth of the real world that Chicanos experience has thus been made to inhabit literature. Readers and critics have assumed that to know this cultural truth, one simply has to read the literature of that experience...Contemporary Chicano narrative calls this assumption about the transparency of reading into question” (Saldívar 5). Therefore, Saldívar sees the definition of Chicano narrative as intrinsic to the discussion of the act of reading, where the reader must question what they are reading, instead of conflating “realism” with “truth”. Representation is not just the depiction or portrayal of characters, but also the forms of narration, which should not always be taken at face value. Teresa L Ebert describes these forms of representation as “immediate” and “mediate” readings:

“Immediate readings,” in terms of the theories I am discussing here, are representational and assume that the means of communication (whether speech, writing, painting, or television) is neutral and presents a direct (immediate) record of the ideas, objects, emotions, and actions it conveys. “Mediate readings,” what I call signficatory readings, on the other hand, are fully aware that the materiality of signs intervenes in communication,

disrupting (mediating) the seemingly natural continuum between reality and its articulation. (Ebert 896)

The People of Paper narrates both “immediate” and “mediate” readings, first merely by narrating events, describing characters, and depicting the movements and social interactions—many of which describe social or cultural details. Where the text provides “mediate” readings is when the narrator is disrupted or, rather, interrupted by characters who speak for themselves. Other aspects of “mediate” readings occur in some of the moments where social or cultural elements are depicted—where Plascencia plays with certain stereotypes or alters reality—where the materiality or artifice of the narrative is expressed. Ebert sees literary theory as an important space for the discussion of representation because “literary criticism in recent years has become one of the main arenas in which the conflict over reading is battled out” (Ebert 894). Ebert contextualizes representation within literary theory because of the interdisciplinary nature of the study, which draws from “developments in philosophy (Derrida), history (Foucault), psychoanalysis (Lacan), feminism, neo-Marxism, and semiotics” (Ebert 894). Therefore, through the connection between literary theory’s discussion of the act of reading and Chicana/o narrative’s line of inquiry into the “assumption about the transparency of reading,” how does *The People of Paper* represent its characters, through both “immediate” and “mediate” readings?

2.2.1 *The Death of the Author*

Drawing on Roland Barthes’ “The Death of the Author” for my reading of Plascencia’s text may seem ironic, as the *The People of Paper* features the author as one of its characters. However, Barthes’ theory removes the author from the analysis of the text, explaining that, “As soon as a fact is *narrated* no longer with a view to acting directly on reality but intransitively, that is to say,

finally outside of any function other than that of the very practice of the symbol itself, this disconnection occurs, the voice loses its origin, the author enters into his own death, writing begins” (Barthes 142). Therefore, and even taking into consideration the metafictional author-character of Salvador Plascencia, in applying Barthes’ theory, this Plascencia is nothing more than a character. As with any other character, Barthes sees the problematic nature of making comparisons to the author or conflating the story with the author’s own true experience. Although Barthes’ analysis is a comparison of the realist novel with the modern or surrealist novel, his analysis of how to read still applies to a metafictional novel. Possibly even more so, as the authorial interventions in a metafictional text are not necessarily indicative of the author’s own thoughts, but more a narrative strategy to remind the reader of the artifice of fiction.

Ebert, too, discusses the “notion of the author as a construct of the reader” and how this “seems to dislodge the author as the traditional authority governing the meaning of the text and as the guarantor” (Ebert 898). Although Plascencia writes himself as a tyrannical character, distinguished by his sadness, short stature, and the acerbic comments he makes towards his former love interests, Cameroon and Liz, this is not the real author of the text, but a created author-character. The discerning reader must keep in mind that all of these perspectives are written and given to the characters by the author. When Cameroon or Liz defend themselves against “Sal,” this could also be read as the actions of a self-conscious author, attempting to mediate the criticism he would receive for expressing such resentment towards these female characters. Barthes makes the argument about Baudelaire, that “The image of literature to be found in ordinary culture is tyrannically centered on the author, his person, his life, his tastes, his passions, while criticism still consists for the most part in saying that Baudelaire’s work is the failure of Baudelaire the man” (Barthes 143). Effectively, that criticism is mistaken in including the author’s personal character

in its interpretation of the text, and that there should be no conflation of the narrator and the author himself. The views or beliefs expressed within the text are not necessarily those of its author. Beyond *The People of Paper*, this certainly also exists within self-representational or autofictional texts, where without the warnings and reminders of the text's fictionality, readers may be inclined to read the narrative as revealing elements of cultural or social truth.

There is also a more literal interpretation of the “death” of the author in the novel, with the construction of Merced de Papel, and the death of her creator. The book's prologue describes a creation story of the first person made of paper, who ultimately takes on a life of her own, as she leaves her creator “bloody, pooling the ink of his body on the floor” (15). This resonates with Barthes theory, because Merced de Papel—a meta-representation of the novel itself, made out of the material that the reader is holding—goes on to define her own narrative, beyond the life and purview of her creator. As her creator's blood is described as “ink,” and she is made of paper, she is the creation that has separated from her creator, or the story from its author. Merced de Papel takes on a life of her own such that Antonio can no longer shape her narrative or form, nor people's perception of her. She also begins to write her own novel—a story within a story—adding another layer of metafiction. On the other hand, the character of Rita Hayworth—a real life star of Hollywood golden age cinema—is fictionalized within the text, yet instead of shaping her own narrative, her life and backstory have been fictionalized by the narrator. Like the author-character of Plascencia, within the fictional text, there is a “death” of the real Hollywood actress, replaced by a fictional character. Additionally, there are other moments within the narrative where characters or creations are portrayed as gaining a measure of autonomy over their creators—EMF over Saturn/Plascencia, and Liz and Cami over “Sal” or the “real life” Plascencia, Little Merced and the Baby Nostradamus, who learn to shield their thoughts from Plascencia, or the mechanical

tortoises, whose creator must track them down and dismantle them—his creations having become an invasive species, making it difficult for their creator to control them. Like the mechanical tortoises, Saturn loses control over his own characters.

Thus, taking into account the various forms of representation and the importance of the act of reading, in representing Chicana/o culture, is Plascencia speaking on behalf of others, describing them in a specific way or even perceiving them in a certain way? Or, by representing, is Plascencia generalizing and so creating or perpetuating stereotypes? In representing Chicana/o culture, do Plascencia's characters stand in for certain tropes or stereotypes? In the novel, Plascencia takes on the role of both representing and being represented. However, following both Barthes', Saldívar's and Ebert's logic, to name only a few who distill this theory, this is a representation, both of his characters and of himself, that the reader cannot trust as "real" or true to the author's experience. Although the stylistic decisions in both the narrative and layout of the text are drawn from Plascencia, the author's, literary influences, and the story and its characters are based on his life and the "aesthetic of cholo culture" that he grew up with, these elements do not make the narrative "real" or "true" (Benavidez). It may seem to go against Barthes theory of "The Death of the Author" to mention Plascencia's biographical details, however, even in his depiction of his hometown, there is little "reality," as he perpetuates and also mythologizes certain stereotypes. Without the author as the only person in charge of the character's representation, the discerning reader will ensure that the story continues to take shape beyond the narrative. What is being represented, and the debate that the characters engage in regarding not wanting their stories to be told, will inevitably, in some form, continue beyond the pages of this novel. In representing the perspectives of many Chicana/o characters, *The People of Paper* may not represent "true" or "real" experiences, yet it still contributes to the representation of Chicana/o culture, the need for readers

to question the act of reading, and also participates in debates surrounding representation and commodification.

2.3 Literary Context

The People of Paper may complicate “reality” with its metafictional² narration and the inclusion of Plascencia as an author-character, yet, in many ways metafiction highlights the artifice of fiction, while realism blurs these lines. The literary background and context of Chicana/o literature establishes a link between personal experience and representation, where realism is often the preferred genre. In order to discuss representation in *The People of Paper* and the current state of representation in Chicana/o and Latina/o³ literature, some historical background of the traditional Latina/o narratives that the novel draws from must be understood—as I argue that *The People of Paper* fosters discussion surrounding both representation and self-identification in Chicana/o narrative. In this reclamation of cultural or ancestral roots, testimony, memoir, and autofiction have been the preferred method of storytelling in many well-known and acclaimed Chicana/o and Latina/o novels.⁴ Texts such as *How The García Girls Lost Their Accents* (1991) by Julia Alvarez or *Down These Mean Streets* (1967), by Piri Thomas, narrate, respectively, the Dominican and the Nuyorican experiences, separate both racially and historically from those of the Chicana/o

² “Fiction in which the author self-consciously alludes to the artificiality or literariness of a work by parodying or departing from novelistic conventions (esp. naturalism) and narrative techniques; a fictional work in this genre or style” (“Metafiction”).

³ Several of the examples mentioned below are not Mexican-American or Chicana/o, but depictions of migrants or descendants from other Hispanic countries in the United States. Although my focus is on Chicana/o literature, literary examples from a broader Latina/o context served to categorize the testimonial or autofictional narrative.

⁴ Also see for instance *Pocho* (1959), by Jose Antonio Villareal; *Y No Se Lo Trago La Tierra* (1971), by Tomas Rivera; *Bless Me, Ultima* (1972), by Rodolfo Anaya; *Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo* (1972) and *The Revolt of the Cockroach People* (1973), by Oscar Zeta Acosta; *The House on Mango Street* (1984), by Sandra Cisneros; *Borderlands* (1987), by Gloria Anzaldúa; *Always Running: La Vida Loca: Gang Days in L.A.* (1993), by Luis J. Rodriguez; *Under the Feet of Jesus* (1995), by Helena Maria Viramontes; *East Side Dreams* (1999), by Art Rodriguez; *Boy Kings of Texas: A Memoir* (2012), by Domingo Martinez.

movement. Although both of these texts are based on personal experience, they, like the other testimonial Latina/o texts, tie into a larger historical framework of the creation and distinction of a collective culture and history through the compilation of individual and personal experiences.

In *Down These Mean Streets*, from the very first page the narrator, Piri, cries out for recognition: “I wanna tell ya I’m here—you bunch of mother-jumpers—I’m here, and I want recognition, whatever that mudder-fuckin means” (Thomas ix). Here, recognition appears to become synonymous with representation. In this case, the author writes the text as a memoir, using his own name, and represents the experience that his narrative self is seeking. Not only does he want to be recognized for his talent, life, voice, writing, etc., he also wants to represent his experience—one that is relatable to many others within and beyond his own community. But whereas Thomas cries out for representation, *The People of Paper* fights against it.

These novels, as instances of Latina/o literature, do not merely document a historical context, but also a social movement, language and particular style. The use of slang and “Spanglish” are especially important, because these texts act as a glossary of Latina/o terms. In fact, Luis J. Rodriguez’s *Always Running: La Vida Loca: Gang Days in L.A.*, Rodriguez includes a glossary of the Chicana/o terms used throughout the text. Furthermore, there is an emphasis on style in terms of speech, dress and overall comportment. In *Always Running*, for example, the narrator explains various aspects of East L.A gang culture during the 1980s:

We didn’t call ourselves gangs. We called ourselves clubs or *clicas*. In the back lot of the local elementary school, about a year after Tino’s death, five of us gathered in the grass and created a club—“Thee Impersonations,” the “Thee” being an old English usage that other clubs would adopt because it made everything sound classier, nobler, *badder*. It was something to belong to—something that was ours. (Rodriguez 41)

Here, the italicized text is not necessarily used to distinguish between English and Spanish words, but instead to highlight terms and style that are particular to the narrator's own experience. He visually sets the scene, describing the "cholo attire: the baggy starched pants and suspenders over white T-shirts, the flannel shirts clipped only from the top button, the bandannas and small brim hats" (Rodriguez 44). Beyond being a glossary of Chicana/o terms, specific to the narrator's personal experience, the novel as a whole could be seen as a handbook for how to achieve what the novel deems a "cholo" experience. The text documents how to dress, how to speak, how to act, how to fight, and the "style" you must exude. It relays both collective and personal experience. In the novel's new introduction, published seventeen years after the novel's original publication, Rodriguez emphasizes the book's prevalence in libraries and classrooms, and how sharing the novel, written based his son's experiences, has influenced many youths who are on a similar path towards drugs and gang violence. These testimonial texts act as historical documents or recordings of culture—and like the criticism surrounding Chicana/o literature, they revolve around personal experience and self-representation. As much as *Always Running: La Vida Loca* seeks to document and explain this culture in an almost ethnographic documentation, the text also aims to educate readers about the consequences and repercussions of gang life and drug addiction. Although these are personal or testimonial experiences, they are often read as both a how-to guide and a warning.

These autofictional and testimonial texts, many of which intend to educate the reader, or share collective experiences, imply that these experiences are real. Nevertheless, these are, at most, fictionalized truths. However, drawing from Saldívar's definition of Chicana/o narrative, where critics and readers once assumed that literature expressed these cultural truths, Contemporary Chicana/o narrative instead calls into question these assumptions, or the "transparency of reading" (Saldívar 5). In fact, although *The People of Paper* does include elements of autofiction—

including Salvador Plascencia or Sal as a character—the use of metafiction and multiple narrative voices engages the reader to question the “reality” portrayed within the text. Additionally, *The People of Paper*, like *Always Running* or *Down These Mean Streets*, explores the issues of addiction and gang affiliations, yet, the text uses magical realism in order to explore social aspects of these issues, instead of their “realities”.

2.4 Realism and Magical Realism

The People of Paper plays with genres, borrowing perhaps most obviously from Magic Realism. Magic Realism has been portrayed as a Latin American genre, yet the term, coined by the German art critic Franz Roh, was used in literature long before its definitions in Latin American literature with Alejo Carpentier’s *Lo real maravilloso* (1949) or Gabriel García Márquez’s worldwide success with *Cien años de soledad* (1967). Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris note that “Magical realism is often regarded as a regional trend, restricted to the Latin American writers who popularized it as a literary form,” despite their objective to dispel these limitations (Parkinson Zamora, Faris). Nevertheless, despite any perceived limitations of the genre, Plascencia uses Magical Realism in order to tackle many of the social issues investigated in other realist Chicana/o novels, in that magical realist texts, according to Parkinson Zamora, “share (and extend) the tradition of narrative realism: they, too, aim to present a credible version of experienced reality” (Parkinson Zamora 500). Plascencia’s credibility is certainly at question within the novel—where among many refutations, Cameroon compiles a 64-page list of the lies that Saturn has told, affirming that “he is not telling the whole story” (135). These lies, or even the magical or larger than life depictions are still representative of social realities, to the “mediate” or discerning reader.

Nevertheless, the novel's status as a magical realist text has also been contested, specifically by Cristina Rodriguez, who has criticized reviewers for quickly relegating *The People of Paper* "the category of magic realism" (Rodriguez 484). Rodriguez also contradicts Ramón Saldívar, and other reviewers in their criticism of the text as "Chicano social protest" and Patrick Cooney for miscategorising "Plascencia's project as part of a 'Latin American tradition,'" in confuting of the text as magical realist (Rodriguez 486-486). Rodriguez instead sees the importance in a more localized study of the "neighborhood geography," where the work of Latino authors dealing with the immigrant experience should "ground transmigrancy in concrete locations" (Rodriguez 482). Nevertheless, as shown by Parkinson Zamora and Faris, magical realism is more than a regional trend, and Plascencia's "Chicano social protest" comes in the form of playing with stereotypes. Although the text still addresses social issues of gang affiliations and addiction, the social protest appears in the form of questioning the act of reading, protesting the narrator of a fictional text as revealing social or cultural truths. Plascencia's narrative not only fits with Ramón Saldívar's definition of Contemporary Chicana/o narrative in that it questions the act of reading and the assumption that the narrative should accurately portray reality, but also, with Contemporary forms of Magical Realism, which also incorporate metafiction.⁵ Parkinson Zamora proposes that "contemporary magical realism, in flaunting its departures from narrative realism, is self-reflexive and metafictional, even as I recognize that not all self-reflexive fiction is magical realist" (Parkinson Zamora 501).

5 "Fiction in which the author self-consciously alludes to the artificiality or literariness of a work by parodying or departing from novelistic conventions (esp. naturalism) and narrative techniques; a fictional work in this genre or style" ("Metafiction").

Therefore, unlike realist Chicana/o and Latina/o narratives that explain or establish Latina/o culture—revealing how to talk, how to dress, how to act—*The People of Paper* cannot be read as a handbook. The text experiments with the poetics of the story telling, where “real life” issues are shrouded in metaphor or magic. *Always Running: Gang Days in LA: La Vida Loca*—a text that Plascencia mentions in an interview with BOMB magazine—deals with issues of addiction, including an addiction to sniffing glue. Plascencia plays with these stereotypes by, as he puts it, “making them mythic” (Benavidez). For example, in *The People of Paper* de la Fe and Little Merced encounter “tribes of glue sniffers,” both exaggerating stereotypes and taking them from realism to magic realism. In Plascencia’s words:

I play on the stereotypical conception of gangsters, of Chicano youth—or Latinos in general—being in gangs, but in this book it’s a sort of parody. I’m using common media representations, but I take them to an absurd level, maybe confirming the stereotype, but also making it mythic. I was consciously re-enacting what a Chicano is thought to be. I also wanted to challenge our conception of the Chicano-Latino novel. (Benavidez)

The notion of a “mythic” metaphor implies that certain themes, often stereotypes, are made to be larger than life—which in certain cases they are. A “tribe” of glue sniffers is a larger than life way to describe the social issue of glue sniffing. However, on the other hand, other things that seem everyday or commonplace also pose a serious threat—Little Merced goes into a coma from “citric poisoning” from her addiction to limes, and another character, Cameroon, dies from her addiction to bee stings. The novel does not instruct or warn against any of the issues that it may represent and does not attempt to be believable.

Although a realist narrative could take place in a fictional world, *The People of Paper* does the opposite. Drawing on the tradition of magical realism, the novel takes place in Plascencia’s

hometown of El Montes Flores, an actual suburb of Los Angeles, but it defies the conventions of realism by including magical or invented elements: origami surgeons, resurrections, Curanderos⁶, a papier maché sky, and many other elements, certainly not present in the “real” El Monte. This myth-making or “mythification,” to borrow from Roberto González Echevarría, instead of representing a social reality as it appears to the author, represents social realities for the reader to question. Where most stereotypes are seen as taboo, certainly within the representation of any minority groups, Plascencia instead exaggerates the images, calling attention to them. Although González Echevarría’s concept of “mythification” stems from the idea of the archive, which he notes with the documentation of the generations of the Buendía family in *Cien años de soledad*, *The People of Paper* creates its own kinds of archives (González Echevarría 173). The metafictional and magical real image of Merced de Papel and her origin story creates a sort of archive, while also literally embodying the stereotype she illustrates—despite being made of paper, she is still *sin papeles*. As she is made from paper, this reminds the reader of her fictionality, as well as her “magical” presence in the real world. Merced de Papel’s origin story is part of her “mythification,” which harkens back to the discussion of those with papers or *sin papeles*. Instead of representing the truth, *The People of Paper* makes these themes absurd or larger than life and creates a space for the reader to discern and investigate the truth.

2.5 Reality and Narration

The People of Paper plays with the idea of reality and realism, with various levels of reality within the fiction. There is the narrator Saturn—also named Salvador Plascencia—as well as “Sal,” the

⁶ Latin American and Latino traditional folk healer.

“real life” Salvador Plascencia, who begins to tell his own story, as well as the story of his past girlfriends, Liz and Cameroon. These apparently autofictional moments are complicated by the fact that both Liz and Cameroon speak “for themselves” at times, criticizing and commenting on Plascencia’s representations of them. Although Plascencia is also a character in the novel, and the characters are able to speak for themselves—this may not be reflective of the author’s own life or bibliography, yet, ultimately, all of these characters are given a voice by the author. Cameroon, for instance, reads a copy of *The People of Paper* in a bookstore, where she learns that her character in Plascencia’s book has died of an overdose and been thrown in the ocean to be eaten by fish (224). Here, the “real” Cameroon, reads about her fictional self, in Plascencia’s “real world.” Cameroon/Cami appears in the novel as two separate characters, first as Plascencia’s representation of her, and then as her “real” self, where she comments and criticizes Plascencia’s representation of her. These varying levels of fiction and “reality,” as well as prolepsis in time, where Cameroon is reading the finished novel, allow characters to comment on the novel itself, which both Liz and Cameroon read throughout the narrative. However, the play with time and reality is all still fiction—Cameroon could not possibly have read the novel before its completion, nor could she really speak for herself. Although the novel may try to portray an element of reality, the text does so through many different metafictional narrative strategies.

Although realism can be shocking to the reader when we are made to believe that something is “true,” here there is no expectation of believability. Despite the “I” or first-person narrator where “the rhetoric of an external narrator can also be used to present a story about others as true,” the narrator’s characters contradict him and point out the lies that he tells (Bal, Boheemen 14). Even though the magical elements in the story are seen as normal, or garner no reactions from the characters, fitting with the novel’s influence of magical realism, the metafictional narration

and metaleptic⁷ interruptions—where we cross into different worlds or levels of fiction and reality—serve to remind the reader that, despite its varying levels of fiction and “reality”, that the novel is entirely fictitious. This serves to highlight the issues with a story being represented as true, even through the use of language. For example, *Always Running* is used in schools to teach students of the dangers of gang violence and drug abuse. Although the story is presented as a true story, the language used in its narration likely alters aspects of this reality. A “real life” story or even a memoir—even if the events are factual or true—can still be represented, through the use of language in a way that reshapes reality. The lack of “reality” within the realism makes the story no less didactic or representational of a common experience, yet still, language certainly has an effect on the ways in which the reader views or interprets the narrative.

Plascencia plays with these stereotypes represented in the media and also Latina/o literature itself, through the use of these “mythic” metaphors as well as through the layout on the page, which in some chapters resemble the columns of a newspaper. However, unlike the impartial and impersonal writing of a newspaper, each column focalizes on or presents the perspective of a different character, sometimes narrating the same event or place through different perspectives. Plascencia becomes a “character bound narrator” in the form of Saturn/Salvador Plascencia (Bal, Boheemen 14). Although Saturn at times lacks omniscience during his war against de la Fe, readers are instead granted access to the author-character’s perspective.

Instead of being represented or narrated as though they stood in for “real” figures, the characters communicate their fears of being misrepresented, or even being represented in the first

⁷ “The rhetorical figure consisting in the metonymical substitution of one word for another which is itself a metonym; (more generally) any metaphorical usage resulting from a series or succession of figurative substitutions” (“Metalepsis”).

place. The lack of narrative detail, interiority, or personality of each character—especially those represented as Saturn’s characters— points to the fact that they are just that, characters. We understand their emotions from their actions narrated by Saturn, yet the reader gains little access to their internal thoughts or dialogue. Although many of the characters speak in the first-person, their emotions are mainly narrated using diegesis, depicting their actions of self-harm or their war strategies, and rarely mimetically, where the reader is told, through dialogue, how the character feels. They remain somewhat one-dimensional, as people of paper literally are. Although de la Fe is presented as a war commander and a strong presence amongst the EMF members, in private, and through the perspective of Little Merced, we see his sadness and his self-harm. In order to escape from his sadness, de la Fe lights small fires on his skin using kerosene and matches, which helps with his sadness at having been left by his wife Merced, as well as cures him of his bed wetting—the reason she left in the first place. Plascencia himself is also represented in contrasting ways, as both a god-like presence with the grandeur of the planet Saturn, and as a broken-hearted man: “Saturn was a giant, a titan among planets, but he was also a little man who stepped on a stool to open the top kitchen cupboards... But that was all war commanders are: little men with broken hearts” (238). Saturn, who controls the entire narrative, still cannot escape the scrutiny and polyvocality of his own creation.

Unlike a testimonial or autofictional novel, the same moment is sometimes narrated from three different perspectives. In these multifocal moments, it is almost always Saturn and Little Merced who narrate the events, alongside a rotating cast of other characters. Yet, despite this, there are shifts in the narrative, where characters defy this lack of narrative interiority, or their status as paper people. Liz and Cameroon, not paper people, but characters from Sal’s “real” life, take over the narrative, expressing their internal thoughts. These are the moments where sadness, anger, and

the vexations over Saturn commodifying their stories and controlling their narratives are truly expressed. After Liz's first appearance in the narrative, Plascencia alters the novel's original dedication, "And for Liz ~~who taught me that we are all of paper~~" to "For Liz who fucked everything" (122). Liz and eventually Cameroon become more than just paper people, beginning to speak for themselves, defying Saturn's narrative, and expressing the ways in which the commodification of their stories has affected them. However, despite these levels of narrative reality, the text is still fiction, and the author has given these characters narrative agency.

Little Merced's narrative differs from the other characters, in that she is able to achieve agency and control over her story. Or rather, that her character is represented or portrayed as having agency. Unlike Liz and Cameroon, who share their side of the story, Little Merced blocks her thoughts and her actions from the narrator, gradually and eventually achieving the narrative anonymity that her father fights for. This is unlike the EMF members, who ultimately fail to shield their thoughts from Saturn: after a brief period of success, lining their homes with the lead from the shells of mechanical tortoises, they all eventually suffer from lead poisoning. Little Merced, on the other hand, learns how to block her thoughts from Saturn with the help of the Baby Nostradamus, whom she first meets in Tijuana, on her journey to Los Angeles. The Baby Nostradamus, diagnosed by doctors as "brain-dead" and "dumb as a turnip," is described to Little Merced by his mother and a Curandero as "a very powerful soothsayer who was meditating" (23). Initially, the narrative columns for the Baby Nostradamus are blacked-out, presumably because he is a baby with no thoughts or perspective. However, Little Merced comes to learn that the Baby Nostradamus is in fact all-seeing and omniscient, and even knows the ending of the story, revealing the final sentence before the end the novel. When he is adopted by Apolonio the Curandero, the Baby Nostradamus "took her [Little Merced] under his wing, instructing her through telepathic

lessons” (159). Little Merced learns how to shield her thoughts such that, like the Baby Nostradamus, her narrative columns are blacked out, initially with small circles, and eventually completely. It is Little Merced’s belief in the Baby Nostradamus and her perception of him, not as brain dead but as omniscient, that separates her from the other characters. Even Saturn, who is blocked from the Baby’s thoughts, “simply assumed that the mental capacity of the Baby Nostradamus had shriveled to black” (160). Unlike the other characters, Little Merced is more open minded, and less prone to internalizing stereotypes that have been imposed upon them. Instead of engaging in de la Fe’s war and his gang affiliations, Little Merced escapes by, like the discerning reader, not believing what is presented to her, and envisioning alternative possibilities to the narrative.

There are also characters who do not see the harm in Saturn, or in having their stories told. Smiley, for instance, asks, “How did Federico de la Fe know it was Saturn who had taken his wife away? Was Saturn really so ominous and threatening? Could he not be protecting us?” (95). Metafictionally reflecting on his own position within the novel, Smiley peels back part of the blue sky, “exposing a layer of the papier-mâché,” to discover Plascencia, the man who has been telling their story (103). In terms of representation, Smiley is the only character who wants his story to be told. Smiley decides to remove himself from the battle against Saturn, allowing Saturn to tell his story. In fact, Smiley likes the idea of someone watching over him, and does not want to “look up at the sky and think that nothing is up there” (87). Before witnessing the real Saturn—a man he finds to be both non-threatening and facing the universal feeling of sadness—he describes him in God-like terms. He is comforted by an omniscient presence watching over him. Unlike the other characters, who seclude themselves in their lead-lined homes, Smiley sits freely in his, welcoming Saturn’s inclusion of him in the story and his representation within the narrative.

Acknowledging the three perspectives of creator, character, and reader, Smiley, upon seeing Saturn, or Plascencia says “It should have been the moment when the creator acknowledges both the necessity of my existence and the reader’s role as witness” (103). Not only is this textbook metafiction, where the novel acknowledges its own artifice, but also, Smiley acknowledges the reader’s perspective in the creation of the text.

The novel tells the stories of many different characters, but there are particular similarities between Plascencia and de la Fe. Here, in de la Fe’s war, perhaps the author-character of de la Fe is merely forcing the narrative onto the author-character of Plascencia—forcing Plascencia to tell his own story. Instead of creating or hiding behind the character of de la Fe—a man with obvious parallels to Saturn/Plascencia—de la Fe is perhaps in a battle against the narrator for him to tell his own story, instead of hiding behind the character that he has created. However, as Liz, “Sal’s” ex-girlfriend, reminds him, even in telling his own story he is also commodifying those of others: “In a neat pile of paper you have offered up not only your hometown, EMF, and Federico de la Fe, but also me, your grandparents and generations beyond them, your patria, your friends, even Cami. You have sold everything, save yourself” (138). Through the reader’s participation and the discrediting of Plascencia’s narration, another “death of the author” occurs. Liz reminds him that the novel is no longer his: by telling and commodifying their story in a novel, “it is no longer between just you and me” (137). The story belongs to the reader, tasking them with deciphering the meaning within the story, determining how the text will be critically received and represented.

Here, it is not Plascencia himself commenting on his writing, but rather his “real life” girlfriend Liz. Liz first appears in the novel’s dedication, and apparently participates in the writing process—intervening in the storytelling as it is being written, but also including herself as a character alongside EMF members, blending “real life” and fiction and affecting the very form of

the book. For *The People of Paper* starts over in the second half. After Plascencia is confronted by Liz, about his commodification of her, along with the other characters, Plascencia begins the novel again, cutting Liz out of the dedication. Despite being its creator, Plascencia tells us that he does not have control over his own story—reminding us that there is an author, and that it is not him, or at least, not this fictional version of him.

Even with *The People of Paper's* narrative scope, which represents the perspectives of many different characters, there is still a limitation to language, and parts of the text that the author leaves unsaid, or rather, unknowable to the reader. Ironically, although the novel's theme of war and rebellion against the narrator serves as an allegory for writer's block, the more Plascencia writes, the less "blocked" he becomes. The novel itself is a struggle or fight against this writer's block, but it also calls into question what should and also what can be represented. The characters—both the people and the "blocks" of text—create literal blocks, where portions of the text are blocked out or covered in shapes that obscure the text. This plays with the notion of agency, giving the characters control over the narrative. There is also the question of whose stories should be told, and how much should be shared. Little Merced is the only character who is taught how to shield her thoughts from Saturn, where the thoughts of a young girl are obscured. The blocking within the text not only provides agency for the characters, but also points to what cannot be said or should not be written. Instead of leaving out the details, *The People of Paper* participates in this debate by specifically giving little Merced agency over her own voice and her own story.

Mitchum Huehls also notes the limitations of language, calling *The People of Paper* a "Post-Theory Theory Novel," arguing that "theory's most basic demand, that thought think itself—a reflexive, critical self-conscious underpinning the project of theory as a whole—emerges in literature as a requirement that texts implicate themselves in the limits of their own language"

(Huehls 285). *The People of Paper* is aware of the limitations of its own language—where the author crosses out and scribbles out his own writing. The text also performs this knowledge of its own limitations through blacked out portions of text. We are not only made aware of what cannot be said and represented in the novel but also participating in debates of what can or should not be represented. It is not that the author does not have the language to explain Little Merced’s thoughts, but rather that he should not tell her story. Rather than giving Little Merced the narrative voice to defend herself—like Liz or Cameroon—the author instead gives her the ability to hide her thoughts entirely.

2.6 Commodification and Representation

Federico de la Fe refers to his war against Saturn as a “war for volition and against the commodification of sadness... It is a war against the fate that has been decided for us” (Plascencia 53). Like Cameroon, who finds out about her own death by reading the novel, Plascencia’s characters do not want their fate decided for them, or their story told at all: “Right now, as I say this, we are part of Saturn’s story. Saturn owns it. We are being listened to and watched, our lives sold as entertainment. But if we fight we might be able to gain control, to shield ourselves and live our lives for ourselves” (53). Like his characters, the narrator often describes the characters as having control over him, self-consciously placing blame on the creation as opposed to its creator: “It was never Saturn’s intention to destroy any of them, if only they had not rebelled and just lived their lives without looking up” (46) Although the members of EMF are all illegal migrants, and a fear of being watched or monitored reflects their precarious status as migrants, it also relates to a fear of being misrepresented.

The idea that Plascencia is not in control of the story also relates to how the book is being (fictionally) funded—through the Ralph and Elisa Landin foundation. The trusting millionaires, encouraged by their lawyers, had Saturn express that “The completion of this book was supported in part by a grant from the Ralph and Elisa Landin Foundation. They are not responsible for the views expressed herein” (114). Despite their monetary support, Ralph and Elisa Landin did not want to be held accountable for Plascencia’s views—another aspect of fiction and reality. They—the very fictional, yet represented as real donors—did not want the fiction to represent their reality or their own perspectives. In fact, the story taught them “to be cautious of paper—to be mindful of its fragile construction and sharp edges, but mostly to be cautious of what is written on it” (219).

Another element of commodification and representation, is the lack of representation of Latinx authors in the publishing industry, in favor of white authors. Although Plascencia makes no overt references to a lack of representation in the publishing industry, the novel expresses negative views towards the white men who have taken Plascencia and de la Fe’s love interests. Plascencia, the fictional author-character, describes Liz and Merced’s new partners as colonial threats, since they are both white men who have replaced Plascencia and de la Fe: “They colonize everything: The Americas, our stories, our novels, our memories.” (117). Merced’s new partner, Jonathan Smith—reminiscent of the British colonizer—is described as “endowed with refined European manners and an extraordinary knack for serendipity” (202). Yet he is also described as clumsy and incapable of completing the most “basic ranch chores,” which Merced finds endearing. Unlike de la Fe, she loves him despite his lack of skill. In fact, “Merced de Papel was happier with him than she has ever been with Federico de la Fe,” and when asked why she was with a Protestant, she responded “They don’t wet their beds” (200). While she is able to forgive Jonathan Smith’s many ineptitudes, she cannot do the same for de la Fe. The language associated with the “colonial”

power of both Merced and Liz's new partners may seem as though the narrator is criticizing the inferiority or invisibility he feels alongside white men, but the author-character of Plascencia is instead portrayed simply as a sad and bitter man. The men that have replaced Plascencia and de la Fe are not depicted as having stolen anything from them, rather Merced and Liz made the choice to leave them. Again, the fictional text, deceitful by design, and furthered through the narrator's lies, is difficult to trust. This could certainly be read as a critique of underrepresentation of Mexican or Chicana/o characters, where white men are held to a much lower standard. Yet, as the other side of the story is narrated—where we see Liz attacked for her choices by Plascencia and women who choose to leave their husbands for love and freedom—the text engages with multiple perspectives.

In a broader conversation about representation—both about the portrayal of characters but also the representation of the text's authors—many Latinx authors, as proven with the publication of *American Dirt* and Jeanine Cummins' seven-figure advance—are often underrepresented in the international market. Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Farris comment that their anthology “considers magical realism an international commodity,” despite the prevalence of Latin Americanists “in developing the critical concept” (Zamora, Farris 2). The concept of magical realism as an international commodity is part of a broader debate surrounding representation, where magical realism could be seen as a limiting factor—constraining the author to a regional genre—and also excluding Latina/o authors from the publishing industry and the book market. In a conversation about representation, where I have questioned the depiction of the text's characters and the participation of the reader, the representation of the author outside of the fictional space of the novel, should also be taken into account.

Within the current debate over not only who should be telling these stories, but how their identity shapes the validity or authenticity of the story, is Barthes' “The Death of the Author” out

of touch? In a similar argument to Barthes, Foucault asks, “How can one reduce the great peril, the great danger with which fiction threatens our world?” answering his own questions with the answer: “one can reduce it with the author” (Foucault, ‘What is an Author’ 158). Here, the author is both amplified and reduced. Plascencia is a prominent author-character in the text and appears in various forms, yet he is also diminished by other author characters, who point out his lies and diminish his character. If “the author is therefore the ideological figure by which one marks the manner in which we fear the proliferation of meaning,” then by making the author untrustworthy and unbelievable, this leads to debates over the proliferation of the text’s meaning (Foucault, ‘What is an Author’ 159). If the author does not believe his own story, then what meaning (if any) will proliferate? Or rather, will the novel, as I am proposing, instead foster debates surrounding issues of representation?

If a non-Latina author like Jeanine Cummins should not have told this story, should Plascencia have told the stories of women and children, voicing their thoughts and perspectives? Is this a reflection of Cummins’ character? Or her personal biography, where she lacked the background or ancestry to tell this story? Perhaps another non-Latina/o author could have told the story better, represented their subject better, and instead of focusing on Cummins’ biographical details, the conversation should have stayed more on the question: did she represent, depict, and include her characters well, and, within the market, why was her story the one to be promoted and compensated?

Plascencia does perpetuate stereotypes, voyeuristically depict female bodies and shame them for their sexuality, yet there is always a tension to the narration, and a contradiction. Plascencia, the author is not saying this, but rather, a fictional narrator. The novel does not claim to represent or depict either reality or experience, and instead, tries to complicate it. As the author,

Plascencia does not have control over the market, yet here, Plascencia's text helps to create a more discerning reader—one who questions these texts and the notions they both perpetuate. This is what the text does, and not what the author does—it may be his creation, but as Liz points out, his stories no longer belong to him. When we as reader do not impose Plascencia's biographical details onto the reading of the text, but further, we do not read the character or narrator of Plascencia as the real Plascencia, then, according to Barthes, “the voice loses its origin, the author enters into his own death, writing begins” (Barthes 142).

2.7 Chapter Conclusion

In killing the author—or rather the idea of Plascencia as more than a character—the text involves the reader in both the creation and the discussion of the narrative. The reader mediates the levels of reality and fiction, as the characters reach out to contradict the narrator, revealing multiple sides, or perspectives, to the story. As the novel mythologizes stereotypes, commodifies and misrepresents its characters, and addresses its own artifice and lies, *The People of Paper* questions the act of reading and the confusion of fiction as truth.

Chapter 3: Making the Marginal Central: Movement and Space in *The People of Paper*

Space in *The People of Paper* spans a great distance: topographically, from Las Tortugas in Mexico to El Monte in Southern California, or from upstate New York to Morocco; and vertically, from the earth to Saturn. Characters move between monasteries, wrestling stadiums, lead-lined rooms, houses, buses, hotels, and casinos, in search of places where they might belong or where they may take root. As with the narration of its many polyvocal characters, the text also envisions these characters in many spaces, both in and on the pages of the text. They have many reasons for moving; freedom, fame, love, heartbreak, decay, or privacy. The narrative unfolds primarily in the space of El Monte Flores, a town that adopts its rootless inhabitants; where they take control of the space, first as gang members and agricultural workers, and later in their fight against Saturn, their omniscient narrator. The characters transform their space, or themselves, in order to find a space where they belong, however they ultimately remain rootless.

The many migrant characters often struggle to find spaces where they belong, yet those who arrive in the heterotopia of El Monte, the central space of the narrative, shape that space to fit their needs—El Monte goes from a town of flower pickers and gang members, to de la Fe's war zone. The layout of the narrative occasionally resembles a newspaper and some characters are even made of newspaper—specifically Merced de Papel, who heals her wounds with newsprint, and other scraps of paper. Merced de Papel speaks to the idea of changing the narrative within these spaces. Just as she is writing her own novel and constantly changing her own story—adding more and more paper scraps to her body—the text itself also reshapes the traditional narrative surrounding migrant, border, and Chicana/o spaces. This is true both within the characters' motivations to migrate, and the battles they fight for privacy and invisibility within such spaces.

Instead of roots, history, and tradition, the text uproots the characters, the narrative, and even the places themselves, in order to make them more mobile and to depict the transformation of these spaces. This also happens with the physical pages of the text, which show an experimentation with different uses of space on the page and typography, reflecting the movement within the narrative. As characters wage a war against Saturn, the presence in the sky that has been watching them, three vertical columns of text are used to narrate their disparate perspectives. For the other characters, many not involved in the war against Saturn, the text moves horizontally occupying the margins of the physical text. As Chicana/o literature brings what is marginal—characters, settings, language—and makes it central, so does the physical text.

The locations within the text and the movement between these spaces, reflect a shifting narrative of migration and stereotypical locations of Chicana/o power and labour. El Monte is both gang turf and farmland, but it is taken over by a war against omniscience and for privacy. In these settings, gang members and farmers enact new roles which alter their environment as well as their movement within that city, community, or country. In *The People of Paper*, the border itself is barely present within the narrative, and instead, marginal spaces become central. Elements of environmental degradation, addiction, gang violence, and other social commentary come in the form of the text's more magical realist aspects, pointing to real-life issues within these communities. The novel's treatment of space and the causes or motivations for movement—although they are fictionalized and represented “magically” or metaphorically—contributes to the rhetoric and social commentary of Chicana/o literature on space, movement, and migration.

In the context of Chicana/o literature, there are historical, mystical, familial and gang-related claims to space. These spaces are often stereotyped (sometimes within the columns of daily newsprint of the popular press) and although Plascencia highlights some of these stereotypes—

characters working as both agricultural workers and gang members—he also seeks to change the narrative to which they give rise. I will explore these spaces, and the movement and stasis between them, through the concept of being rooted to or uprooted from a space. In *The People of Paper* space becomes a theme in the narrative and on the physical page. Characters move and become stuck, just as readers progress and become stuck as they make their way through the text. While the novel explores spaces that are common in traditional Chicano literature, ultimately the characters in *The People of Paper* lack ties or a sense of rootedness to space.

2.7 Space and Mobility in Chicano Literature

I have already noted examples of testimonial or autofictional Chicana/o narratives and the ways in which the *The People of Paper* defies these conventions, or even amplifies them, creating a conversation between its characters. In terms of space, although the physical text is experimental, there are many Chicana/o texts that explore similar spaces, from gang turf, neighborhood and community identity, or ancestral ties to land. Although the space of the page may be experimental, the narrated spaces represent environments commonly explored in other Chicana/o narratives. Even so, Chicana/o characters are also depicted outside of these Borderlands spaces. Plascencia's snowy home in upstate New York or Rita Hayworth's New York City penthouse or Los Angeles mansion differ from the community of El Monte. In *The People of Paper*, these spaces become the peripheries or the marginal spaces, whereas El Monte becomes the central space.

In Luis J. Rodriguez's *Always Running*, your gang (*clica*) and your *barrio*—the place you are from—both define and limit you. Your space is what you want to fight for, and what you *must* fight for. In many cases, there is no reason for these fights, beyond showing pride for your *barrio* and for the space where you belong. Although *The People of Paper* does depict gang affiliations,

and a fictional version of the EMF gang—a real life gang with long-term ties to the space of El Monte—the war in the novel is a fight against omniscient narration, not other gangs.

The protagonist of Sandra Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street* narrates a desire for her own house or her own space. One that resembles what she thinks a house should look like. Although the house on Mango Street does not resemble the house she thinks she desires or visualized having, the community that she finds on Mango Street offers her a space where she belongs. This goes beyond the traditional idea of the “American Dream,” in that instead of entering the American cultural melting pot, the characters continue to identify with their Chicano cultural heritage and discover a sense of identity and belonging within their own community. Similarly, de la Fe and Little Merced find a community within El Monte, however, they only become rooted to the space in their war against Saturn. Their stasis is sometimes quite literal, as when they are stuck within the lead lined walls of their home. However, unlike Mango Street, the fictionalized El Monte lacks the history of generations of families in which their story might be embedded.

In other cases, even those with ancestral ties to the land still easily find themselves uprooted. In the first chapter of Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands* she writes about the border region on the American side, and an aunt telling her nephew “*no corran*, don't run. They'll think you're *del otro lado*, or from the other side. Despite being a fifth generation American, the boy did not speak English, and did not carry his birth certificate to work in the fields—they thought he was “*sin papeles*,” or without paper (Anzaldúa 4). In the in-between space that is the border, many lack rootedness to the space, having ties to both sides of the land.

However, unlike these other narratives, where space is tied to tradition, pride and belonging, in *The People of Paper* there is a lack of a sense of place or rootedness. Like the

emphasis on paper and the characters' lack of dimension or emotion, they also lack a sense of place or belonging.

There is a sense of both visibility and invisibility in these novels; in these marginal or liminal spaces, characters move unnoticed and unobstructed. In *The People of Paper*, Federico de la Fe and Little Merced simply walk over the “white chalk line” of the US-Mexico border, crossing from one country to another (31). However, within the space of El Monte, they become rooted both through agricultural ties, as de la Fe finds work as a carnation picker, and through gang ties. However, unlike the other EMF members, who “had ‘EMF’ tattooed on the side of their necks,” de la Fe is less rooted to El Monte, than those physically tied to the space through the tattoos on their bodies, which match the graffiti tags covering the streets of the town (53). However, the reason that de la Fe and Little Merced end up in El Monte, is because de la Fe is unable to find work in a dress factory, because he does not have “papers” or “a laminated card with the stamp of a bald eagle” (Plascencia 33). El Monte was not their intended destination or their “American Dream”, yet it is a place where they find acceptance and refuge, like many of the other migrant characters in the text. Although it is a marginal or liminal space, it becomes the central space of the narrative. Here, the margins have been altered and the text itself often appears, quite literally, off-center. The battle for space—both blank space and textual space— occurs both in and on the pages of the text, where ultimately the marginal becomes central, and the newsprint columns of the text begin to shape a new narrative surrounding migration and space.

2.8 Narrative / Represented Space

2.8.1 *El Monte*

El Monte, although a marginal space in the grander context of Hollywood and Los Angeles, becomes the central space within the narrative. Within that space, the characters also take on a central role, controlling the land both in terms of power and labour. In El Monte, Plascencia continues to emphasize and subvert stereotypes. For instance, portraying the EMF members as agricultural workers touches on two stereotypes in one: they are both farmers and gang members. They embody the stereotypical migrant occupations that are seemingly in contrast to one another—one of power and the other of labour. However, in terms of space, EMF holds not only its gang related turf, but also the agricultural land as well. In fact, the space where the *brincas*, or gang initiations, take place is in the fields that they also work: “Not all of El Monte was flowerbeds. Some sembrarrios of carnations had been replaced by strawberry fields, but no street names or gangs had grown from them. It was in these weeded and watered meadows that EMF’s initiation fights took place. Membership into EMF started with a *brinca*—six men against one for a minute” (36). Gangs are even described in agricultural terms, as when the narrator tells us that no gangs had “grown” from these fields. The ties that EMF establishes to the space of El Monte are established in the fields, where the *brincas* take place. Yet, the rootedness and connection to the land is lacking—instead of planting flowers, they are picking them. Unlike other Chicano texts where connections to the land are mythical, through familial ties to the land or through ancestral connections to Aztlán, the mythical homeland of the Aztecs, here the connection, much like the “paper people” characters, remains one dimensional.

Characters find refuge or belonging in El Monte, yet the town becomes a sort of marginal or liminal space. In this case, the marginal is brought to the center, yet still, the space also evolves with the people who come to inhabit it. Instead of adapting to fit the space, El Monte adapts to the characters—not only in the language and Mexican culture that they have brought with them, but also into the battlefield that de la Fe requires to fight his war against Saturn. El Monte is depicted as a place that has adopted its township, with “no hospitals, no wet nurses or delivery beds, no native daughters or sons,” and as it could not bear its own people, it becomes a place without deep roots or history. It is a space of contrasts and contradictions, named “after the hills it did not have” (33). Just like the gangs, which did not grow from the fields, neither do the townspeople—there being no ancestry or tradition associated with the town. It becomes a town ravaged by war despite the fact that no battles ever occur, and their enemy remains (almost) entirely invisible. These contradictions make the space of El Monte both real and fictional, like the various “levels” of fiction in the text. El Monte, a real suburb of Los Angeles and the hometown of Salvador Plascencia, both Saturn and the author, becomes a space that takes on the characteristics of its inhabitants. El Monte is both central and liminal. The space adopts people who do not find belonging elsewhere, yet they do not become fully rooted to the space.

Characters move within the space of El Monte not only topographically, but also vertically, or skyward. When Smiley breaks through the papier mâché sky and sees the “real” Saturn—Salvador Plascencia—he finds him at home, somewhere snowy and far away from El Monte. Saturn’s proximity to his characters is based both on the events in his personal life and on the efforts of EMF to block him out. Though he is the creator of this fictional El Monte, he only exists within the vertical space. Saturn begins to lose the war as his personal life is pushed onto the novel’s pages, where he is unable to control the characters that he has created. The more this

happens, the further Saturn retreats, “unhinging from its orbit and slowly moving deeper into the solar system, away from the roofs of El Monte, eventually becoming the farthest planet from the sun, its glowing rings dulling to rust and cumulus clouds cloaking its atmosphere” (96). As El Monte is central to the narrative, the further away Saturn becomes, the less control he has over the characters. El Monte is Saturn’s hometown and the place where he first met his ex-girlfriend Liz, to whom the novel is (initially) dedicated. But de la Fe and the rest of EMF claim this place for themselves, creating a space where they are free to live their lives without being watched. The characters push Saturn away by coming out of the margins and flooding him with their thoughts. Characters define the centrality of their space by coming out of the margins and pushing Saturn away.

El Monte is often defined by its proximity or distance to places elsewhere, which is often related to status. Characters find refuge in El Monte and make the journey of “one thousand four hundred forty-eight miles north of Las Tortugas and an even fifteen hundred miles from the city of Guadalajara” (34). However, the novel also defines the 15-mile distance from Rita Hayworth’s Hollywood mansion or the 12 miles from downtown Los Angeles where Liz is viewing apartments (112, 33). Topographical space in the novel is clearly defined, yet the movement between these spaces is characterized or limited by the characters’ background or social status as a migrant. However, unlike the fictionalized version of Rita Hayworth, who is constantly followed by the flash of cameras or the lettuce pickers of her youth, EMF members find a space where they belong in El Monte. The space adapts to fit their needs and their backgrounds. Despite the large physical distance between Las Tortugas and El Monte, the town adopts elements that come with its new inhabitants. It becomes an in-between space where the “curanderos’ botanica shops, the menudo stands, and the bell towers of the Catholic churches” have also “pushed north, settling among the

flowers and the sprinkler systems” (Plascencia 34). El Monte reflects the past lives of its inhabitants, with elements from their Mexican heritage moving there with them. Unlike the character of Margarita, who transforms her identity and physical body to become Rita, in order to find belonging in Hollywood, de la Fe and the other Mexican migrant characters find work and belonging within the fields of El Monte, without sacrificing their culture or identity. However, despite Rita’s acceptance in Hollywood and on the silver screen, she longs for “the smell of mule piss and the burn of salt and ... for the days of tending plum trees” (Plascencia 42). What Rita wants, is the identity and culture she has shed. What de la Fe and the rest of EMF want is invisibility and the ability to move freely, without being watched. They shape their environment to suit their needs, while Rita reshaped herself in order to fit in in Hollywood.

The in-between space of El Monte, despite being a place of refuge for the text’s migrant characters, is not a utopia, but rather fits Michel Foucault’s definition of a heterotopia. Foucault defines a heterotopia as a space which “always presupposes a system of opening and closing that both isolates them and makes them penetrable” (Foucault, “Of Other Spaces” 21). The town of El Monte does just that, welcoming migrant and displaced characters, offering a space for them to elaborate their own cultural practices, while becoming a battleground for de la Fe’s war. As reflected through de la Fe’s war zone, the characters can cross back and forth over the border, collecting the shells of mechanical tortoises, amongst other things, yet while in the town, they are able to isolate themselves in lead lined homes, or even the entire town, by creating a ring of smoke surrounding the perimeter (56). El Monte is not a space of transition, but rather a space of Chicano culture (albeit somewhat stereotypical representation), a culture entirely its own, and not something “transitional.” Yet it is also not a “place without place,” Foucault’s definition for a

utopia, and does not present society in perfected form, but instead, a place that “mirrors” other places through a “mixed, in-between experience” (Foucault, ‘Of Other Spaces’ 17).

The town of El Monte is a real Los Angeles suburb, yet, as with the concept of “The Death of the Author,” where the Plascencia in the text is a fictional version of the author, or Rita Hayworth, a fictional version of the actress, El Monte, too, is a fictionalized version of the real town. Despite the town’s actual location as a marginal space compared to Los Angeles or Hollywood, the textual or fiction El Monte becomes the central space within the text’s geography— a feature crucial to Foucault’s definition of heterotopia. As with “The Death of the Author,” or rather the concept of not confusing fiction with reality, there is another aspect of the text’s narration and form reflected in the space. Heterotopias are “aporetic spaces that reveal or represent something about the society in which they reside through the way in which they incorporate and stage the very contradictions that this society produces but is unable to resolve” (Foucault, “Of Other Spaces” 25). Like the novel’s internal dialogue between the narrator or author-character and his characters, the heterotopia, too, is a space of contradictions and social commentary. The space of El Monte, like the narrative, represents the various levels of reality and fiction, and the contradictions that highlight the importance of multiple perspectives and the issues of confusing fiction with truth. Like the narrative, which contradicts itself, the town is named after a hill it does not have, and ravaged by “the most impossible of wars” (56).

One of Foucault’s examples of a heterotopia is the ship, “a floating piece of space, that exists by itself, that is closed in on itself and at the same time is given over to the infinity of the sea” (Foucault, ‘Of Other Spaces’ 22). The ship is self-contained but can also move from place to place, seeking great treasures. In the case of El Monte, although the town itself does not move, its inhabitants do. Along with the geography of the town, they mirror their Mexican heritage with all

of the elements that have “pushed north” over the border. Furthermore, the fictional town of El Monte also “mirrors” Plascencia’s own hometown of El Monte—both the fictional character of Plascencia and the author Plascencia. Therefore, through the various levels of reality and the way that El Monte both reflects and juxtaposes the characters’ past lives, the narrated space of El Monte becomes a heterotopia. A space where the characters, as on a moving ship, are rootless and bring elements of themselves, their heritage and their past. The heterotopia is also supposed to be universal, not tied to a specific moment in time—just like the rootless space of El Monte, whose adopted inhabitants and gang members remain rootless, without history or ancestral ties to the space, never having grown its flowerbeds, where the *brincas* took place (36).

The novel depicts more than one fictionalized version of El Monte. Saturn returns to his hometown of El Monte—where he first met his ex-girlfriend Liz. He distinguishes “this El Monte” from “the El Monte of warfare and lead houses” (110-111). Analyzing El Monte, the central space within the narrative, as a heterotopia helps to define and characterize the movement that floods into the town, creating the central space of the narrative, or the virtual image of the space—within the existing space of El Monte. The relationship between heterotopia and movement, in the case of El Monte, is that the town itself does not move, but its inhabitants do. Since it is not a space that is tied to tradition or heritage, although the space itself is fixed, its inhabitants travel from elsewhere and bring with them the elements that create the space. Foucault’s third principle is that “the heterotopia has the power to juxtapose in a single real place several spaces, several emplacements that are in themselves incompatible” (Foucault, “Of Other Spaces” 19). In the case of El Monte, where the space is defined by its inhabitants, the juxtaposition occurs amongst its own people, who all bring different elements to the space. The common desire, with the exception of Smiley, is that the people of the fictional El Monte want invisibility. The rootlessness or

shallowness of El Monte allows for this, as it is accessible to those searching for space and belonging who bring aspects of themselves and their culture with them. El Monte quickly accepts the migrant characters, but it also isolates them—or rather, they isolate themselves with their war against Saturn, creating a border of smoke around the town that shuts everyone out.

Although *The People of Paper* has been studied through a larger transnational lens in terms of space and migration, others have seen the benefit of a smaller scale focus on space within the text. Cristina Rodriguez sees the importance of a more localized study of the neighborhood of El Monte, against the grain of recent Latino criticism that has “widened its scope, turning toward theories of transnationalism imported from social sciences, with its focus on international movements, globalization and shifting immigration patterns upon US ethnic communities” (Rodriguez 482). Instead of zooming out and looking at the novel solely within the broader context of migration, Rodriguez takes a more localized approach, examining what she calls a “neighborhood geography” (482). As she puts it: “Starting from the backyard, so to speak, we can see larger hemispheric movements, without losing sight of the particular local conditions that make an experimental work like *The People of Paper* legible” (Rodriguez 498). Focusing on smaller scale movement and the space of El Monte, Rodriguez makes comparisons to the “real” town of El Monte and its history. However, the El Monte of the text is not just the “real” El Monte, but its mirror image, or heterotopia. Rodriguez’s study of the text and the space draws from traditions from the “real” El Monte that come specifically from Chicano culture and exists in the neighborhood—for instance, the concept of *con safos*, where “The danger of placing one’s name in a public location is mitigated by the application of a *con safos*, which allows taggers to proclaim themselves without suffering the humiliation of possible public defacement” (Rodriguez 486). Rodriguez’s interpretation provides insight into one ‘space’ or ‘topos,’ that of the real El Monte

where Plascencia grew up. Yet, in my analysis, borrowing from Barthes, “The Death of the Author,” This is not the real Plascencia, but an author character. Similarly, this is not the real El Monte, but a fictional or heterotopian space. Although these concepts may seem more culturally appropriate for defining the space of El Monte, the concept of heterotopia works to describe Plascencia’s version of El Monte, incorporating both the real and the fictional, as well as the transitional. Although the concept of a heterotopia comes from a non-Chicano, European tradition, the concept aids in explaining El Monte’s role as a space that transitions with and reflects the needs of its inhabitants—a space where concepts of labour and power are re-written, and where the centrality of the space has been altered.

2.8.2 *Work*

El Monte as the central space of the narrative—a space dependent upon its migrant and displaced population—is defined by what the characters do within that space. Federico de la Fe becomes an agricultural worker, because he is denied work in a dress factory that only accepts documented workers. He moves to El Monte because he is denied work in Los Angeles. However, once he is in El Monte, the space quickly transforms into the battlefield for de la Fe’s war against Saturn—taking the shape of his needs. During the war, EMF members cross back and forth over the border not for the “white powder of coca leaves and bales of chronic,” but instead to collect the lead shells of mechanical tortoises (87). Even as they isolate themselves from the outside world, EMF remains mobile and transnational. However, despite their mobility within the space, Saturn, the figure controlling their narrative, also shares the name of the Greek God of agriculture, or the God of

sowing seeds.⁸ Although the characters remain rootless, Saturn is still the controlling force who “planted” them there.

Nevertheless, when it comes to movement through and within these spaces, wealth and work are always tied to background. Although the character of Margarita transforms into Rita Hayworth, a famous Hollywood actress, she will never be able to escape the lettuce pickers of her youth, who follow her through every stage of her success. Yet, she still finds herself lonely and isolated. Not only does she alter her physical appearance to become a Hollywood star, but in doing so, she becomes an image on a screen, known for her role in the film *Gilda*, rather than her original self: “Every man I have known has fallen in love with Gilda and awakened with me...when she lay down on her bed she thought there was something lonely about making movies and counting cats. Her plum trees had wilted and died long ago, so whatever tears she wept seeped only into the worn hotel mattress” (48). Although her mobility increases, she is still held back by her past. At moments of success in her career, such as film screenings, there are always lettuce pickers present, to remind her of her past. Whatever the inconveniences, Rita remains nostalgic for her past, aware that though she can go almost anywhere she wants, she can never return “home.”

Federico de la Fe arrives in El Monte as a flower picker and a gang member, but he leaves as a prolific war commander. Just as the space is reshaped to adapt to his war, de la Fe’s war against Saturn leaves permanent scars on the town of El Monte. Froggy—now Froggy “el veterano,” laments the failure of de la Fe’s war, and the lack of desire by EMF’s new members to continue the war against Saturn. Froggy “did not want EMF to fight for drug turf or street names,” but rather to continue to fight the war against Saturn (49). Just as the war shaped the town, it also

⁸ “Saturn, Latin Saturnus, in Roman religion, the god of sowing or seed” (Encyclopaedia Britannica).

shapes those who fight in the war. The more they fight against Saturn, the less rooted to the land they become, as they stop picking carnations to focus on the war and their isolation. Although the work within El Monte appears ultimately to return to a struggle for drug turf and street names, the “work” returning to what it once was, the town of El Monte is still engaged in a battle for representation and recognition. Whether it be for visibility or invisibility, the work being done within the space of El Monte—even when characters arrive there as a last resort, or after being turned away elsewhere—shapes, alters and defines the space.

2.8.3 *Home*

As the narrative progresses, the idea of home, and the mobility that the characters have within their homes, becomes more and more limited. Although they are taking control over their stories and their territory by restricting Saturn’s access to them, in doing so, they also limit their own space and mobility. Even their thoughts must be limited in order to keep them from Saturn. Therefore, although home becomes the central space in their fight against Saturn, it leaves them stuck—not rooted. For de la Fe and Little Merced, their home in Las Tortugas, where they could sleep next to the river and everyday fill a new mattress, provided them with mobility. However, the daily routine is then broken by Merced, de la Fe’s wife, leaving. Although de la Fe believes that his wife has left him because of his bed wetting, she in fact has an affair with another man, from inside the walls of their adobe home. She, like Little Merced, is able to poke holes through the adobe walls: “I used to bore peepholes into the walls with a bit of saliva and my pinky... But now, all the walls were made of wood and plaster and all I could hear was the muffled talk of the men and the sound of ivory hitting the table” (53). The more opaque the walls become, the further she is separated from her parents. Instead of participating in her father’s war, Little Merced learns to build her own

walls, blocking Saturn from her thoughts. For Merced and Little Merced, freedom is the permeability of their space and access to the outside. De la Fe, by contrast, seeks freedom in the lead walls of his home, which temporarily protect him from Saturn and the outside world.

Little Merced first finds a connection to home and to her mother through the lime tree planted in their front yard. Little Merced carries limes with her during her journey from Las Tortugas to El Monte and finds a connection to her new home through the lime tree. With her mother absent, Little Merced finds a connection with her in their shared addiction to limes. Although Little Merced struggles in school to fit in among the other children, she does create roots within the land. Using the seeds from her discarded limes, she plants an orchard of lime trees in the field across from their home. So although she struggles to establish a place for herself within her new town, the orchard enables connections to remind her of home. Yet Little Merced's inherited addiction to limes grows out of control as she struggles to adapt to her new home, and the roots she finds to her home of Las Tortugas and her mother become uprooted, as de la Fe cuts down her lime tree when he discovers her hidden lime rinds.

Home is not so much a physical space, as a feeling. Characters return to their roots, not through physical movement, but through sights, sounds or smells, and de la Fe, for instance, is transported home through certain smells. Spanish names are often used for certain objects, especially food. For example, the word *camote* is used in place of sweet potato, or *manzanilla* tea instead of chamomile. This is more than just the language of a Chicano author, but of the region, where the two languages become mixed, and more mobile—English words also finding themselves on the other side of the border. Ramon Barreto, who “fled his childhood home adobe town and settled into one made of tinsel,” manages to find traces of home through Merced de Papel—“a way

to return home without leaving the comforts of central air conditioning and reclining living room chairs” (75). For him, home is a feeling more than a place.

Sandra, who had once lived with Froggy after escaping from her abusive father, no longer has a home in Froggy, after he defends her by killing her father with his carnation-picking knife and burying him in a flower field. Although she can no longer be with the man who killed her father, it is not Froggy’s physical home that she misses, but rather the home or sense of comfort she had found in Froggy: “If I could walk into the house and say, ‘Froggy I’m sorry I left,’ If I could hug him and unbutton his shirt and pick the petals from his hair. If I could do that, there would be no reason for me to fight this war” (85). She enlists in the war against Saturn in order to establish a space where she can feel at home and create roots. However, her home within Froggy has already been tarnished, so she must fight for a new space and a new life.

Unlike the other characters, Rita finds a “home” in many places, from her Hollywood mansion to New York City. Yet we are told that “Decades later, as she sat in her New York City apartment overlooking the East River, her brain dissolving into the dementia of Alzheimer’s, Rita Hayworth daydreamed about salted plums and a world where *Gilda* did not exist” (47). She wishes that the role she played at the height of her fame—and the character that ultimately overshadows the real Margarita—did not exist. Despite achieving the “American Dream” and having access to any space she desires, Rita still yearns for the salted plums of her youth.

2.8.4 *The Border*

One would think, this being a Chicana/o novel, that de la Fe and Little Merced, or Julieta’s border crossings would be moments of great peril and significance. From the cinematic depictions of riding on top of *la bestia* in Fukunaga’s *Sin Nombre* (2009) or crawling through the confined space

of an underground tunnel in Gregory Nava's *El Norte* (1983), the physical space of the border and the crossing becomes the central conflict in many narratives. But here, the border is significant only in its insignificance. The characters merely "step over a white chalk line" or at most a steel fence: "When Julieta reached Tijuana, what was once a border marked only with a line of chalk had been replaced with watchtowers and steel fences; cement barricades had been buried directly underneath the fences and no one could burrow to the other side. Stadium lights shone on the border all through the night until the early hours of the morning" (31, 48). The border grows and becomes imposing throughout the text, yet it never poses any limitations to the migrant characters' mobility. Julieta, possibly taking some of the decay from El Derramadero with her, finds a hole in the fence and simply climbs through. Their transition from a world built on dirt to a "world built on cement" is unobstructed, despite the novel's theme of surveillance and omniscience. For it is only Saturn that they fear and only Saturn who sees them.

The "space" that is the border becomes less and less defined: "Official measures said San Diego was now half a mile closer to Los Angeles than the week before. This is what machines did—they bridged the distance between cities" (156). Technology is bringing people together, bridging the gap between countries and cultures, but it is also related here to the mechanical tortoises, an invasive species. The mechanical tortoises have not only invaded Las Tortugas and killed many of the local population of tortoises, but they are also depicted as "every hour bringing El Monte and the border ten inches closer to each other" (156). Unlike a border narrative that highlights the dangers and hardships of the crossing, *The People of Paper* uproots the border itself, focusing less on the act of crossing and more on the cultural transformation of space. The more people that cross over, the closer the border gets, making it more difficult to define where other cultural, linguistic, and social borders begin.

2.8.5 *El Derramadero*

El Derramedero, Julieta's decaying hometown, is a space that incarnates an ever-increasing cause for migration from the developing world to the United States—environmental degradation. This town where “everything is becoming dust” must be rebuilt entirely of melted plastic, a way that Julieta does not want to live. Like many migrants facing changes to their natural environment, she migrates to the United States: “environmentally driven displacements, which must be considered within their historical context, occur most frequently where there are pre-existing relationships of migration between the sending and the receiving countries” (Kaenzig, Piguet 17). In this way, the relationship and history of migration into the United States is now brought about by causes beyond mystical, historical, or familial connections to the land—but also by the effects that the developed world is having on the developing world. Not only is the town of El Derramadero decaying, but Las Tortugas has also been invaded by the mechanical tortoises. These tortoises bring the border closer, “every hour bringing El Monte and the border ten inches closer to each other” (156).

Although Federico de la Fe does not leave Las Tortugas specifically due to environmental factors, in general migration from Latin American has increased due to the effects of climate change in Latin American and Caribbean countries. “Rebuilt entirely of plastic, El Derramadero symbolizes the growing homogeneity of place as the third world is rapidly being remade in the image of the first” (Cooney 208). Here, the people of El Derramadero introduce plastic to maintain their “natural” way of life. Illegal migrants often come to work the land, when their own land is no longer viable. Julieta comes to El Monte because she has been uprooted from her space—literally nothing can take root there. This search for rootedness goes beyond a desire for belonging, recognition or ancestry, and becomes about necessity. Although a town turning to dust and another

being invaded by mechanical tortoises are some of the more magical real images in the text, what they represent are historical causes for mobility and migration and shifting spatial designations.

Although the environmental aspects of the narrative appear at first to be minor plot details, the effects of environmental decay in the novel have been studied by several scholars, including David Vázquez:

Understanding *The People of Paper* in the context of the Anthropocene suggests that an awareness of environmental degradation is not the sole purview of white authors and dominant Western perspectives. Instead, the novel insists that we consider environmental degradation as more acutely experienced among people of color and the working classes, shifting discourses of contemporary environmentalism that imagine reform as lifestyle changes. (Vázquez 75)

Plascencia's inclusion of these environmental aspects points to a perspective on migration and access to land that is not often voiced from the Chicana/o perspective, despite its increasing role as a cause for migration. Environmental degradation may not be a primary theme within the text, but it does have an impact on nearly all of the spaces that the characters occupy, and although they seek to escape it, the border and its associated environmental degradation follows them North.

2.9 Space on the page

Just as the novel amplifies the theme of representation by depicting multiple perspectives through various levels of fiction, the theme of space is depicted not only within the narration but also on the physical page of the text. As Saturn fights to continue with his story, he is pushed both on and off the page. First, as he loses sight of the characters and is forced to tell his own story, his own life is pushed onto the page. However, towards the end of the text, the characters take over and

push him off the page entirely. The narrative is reflected in the experimental layout of the text, where a war against representation is reflected through the characters fighting for space—or blank space, on the pages of the text. The physical text also manifests a form of rebellion, made with irregular margins and die-cut portions of text, making it difficult to be converted into an electronic book meant for an e-reader. According to Plascencia, “The e-reader stops being this autonomous self-contained universe and it becomes dependent on the infrastructure of technology, electricity and it gets infiltrated by other things and it loses its autonomy” (Latino Studies ND, 22:19-22:30). The physical, paper text is important, not only because “an e-reader in a way takes away the body of the book” but also because when the “Anatomical parts of the book that you hold disappear, you don’t get to have the sort of territory that you’ve covered” (Latino Studies, ND 21:22-21:52). Not only does the reader lose the layout of the physical page in an electronic format of the text, but primarily, they lose the “territory” that is covered by the act of turning the pages, and moving through the text. Just as the characters move through various spaces, so does the reader, through the act of flipping the pages or turning the physical book to read all of the text. Plascencia sees the novel as the ideal technology for his purposes and creates a text that, like its characters, will always be made of paper. The narrative space is where the transformation occurs, but without the experimental layout, the narrative would not move, metaphorically and literally. Not only does the layout allow the reader to experience the narrative from multiple perspectives, but it also allows the reader to move through different spaces, countries, towns, and realities.

2.9.1 Table of Contents

The novel’s table of contents is divided into three sections, all marked by different hand signs. The first is the gang-sign indicating that you are a member of EMF—one that is still used to this day

by the real-life gang members of El Monte Flores (see fig. 1). These hand signs are a way of claiming space or indicating which gang or group you belong to. Here, the text has claimed space in three different sections, just as the novel exists in various realities of the fictional El Monte, the “real” El Monte, and Salvador Plascencia’s real life.



Figure 1. Members of the El Monte Flores Gang, self-identifying using the gang's hand sign (Vives).

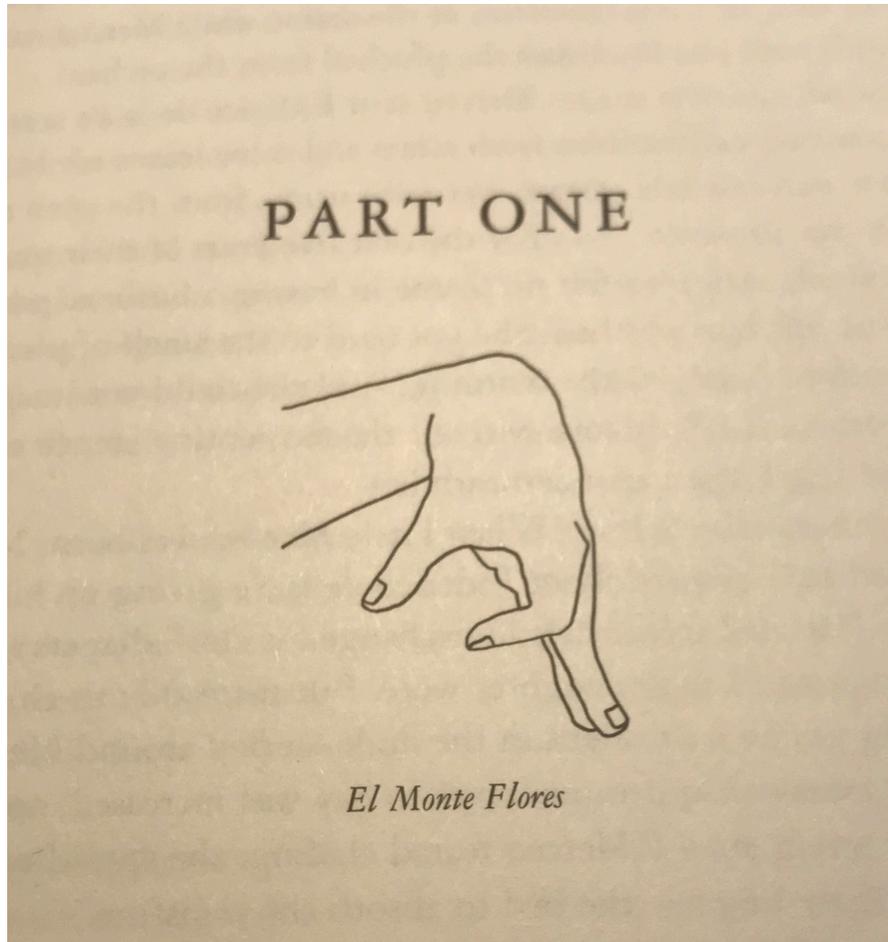


Figure 2. This image marks the start of part one of the novel. The hand sign shown is the same one used by the members of the El Monte Flores gang (17).

The page layout for each chapter is indicated by circles and vertical lines, which represent the number of perspectives being represented and the type of narration. The number of lines or circles also indicates the different perspectives or narrators. The vertical lines represent the columns, or the narrative that is controlled by Saturn (See fig. 3) The circles are the other narratives, from Plascencia's "real world" or other characters portrayed as having agency beyond his control. The number of vertical lines or circles indicated for each chapter represents the number of perspectives included in that chapter, with Saturn and Little Merced as the only two constant vertical perspectives. When Saturn's narrative switches from the war against his characters to the

battles he faces in his personal life, the text often shifts from vertical columns to traditional horizontal layout of the text. These are also the sections within the narrative that are always the most disrupted. When speaking to Liz, Plascencia crosses out lines of text, fades out or is cut off without finishing his idea (see fig. 4), or even re-starts the novel entirely, in order to cut her out of the dedication. Although Saturn controls the narrative, he is also the least in control. Not only could the text be visually representative of writer's block, where Saturn disappears from the narrative at times, but also visually representative of his emotional state.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

PROLOGUE		●
CHAPTER	✍️	PART ONE
1		
2		●
3		●●●
4		
5		●
6		●●●
7		
CHAPTER	✍️	PART TWO
8		●
9		●●●
10		
11		●●●
12		●
13		●
14		●
CHAPTER	✍️	PART THREE
15		
16		●●●
17		●
18		●
19		●
20		
21		●
22		●●●
23		●
24		
25		●●●
26		●
27		

Figure 3. The novel's table of contents (9).

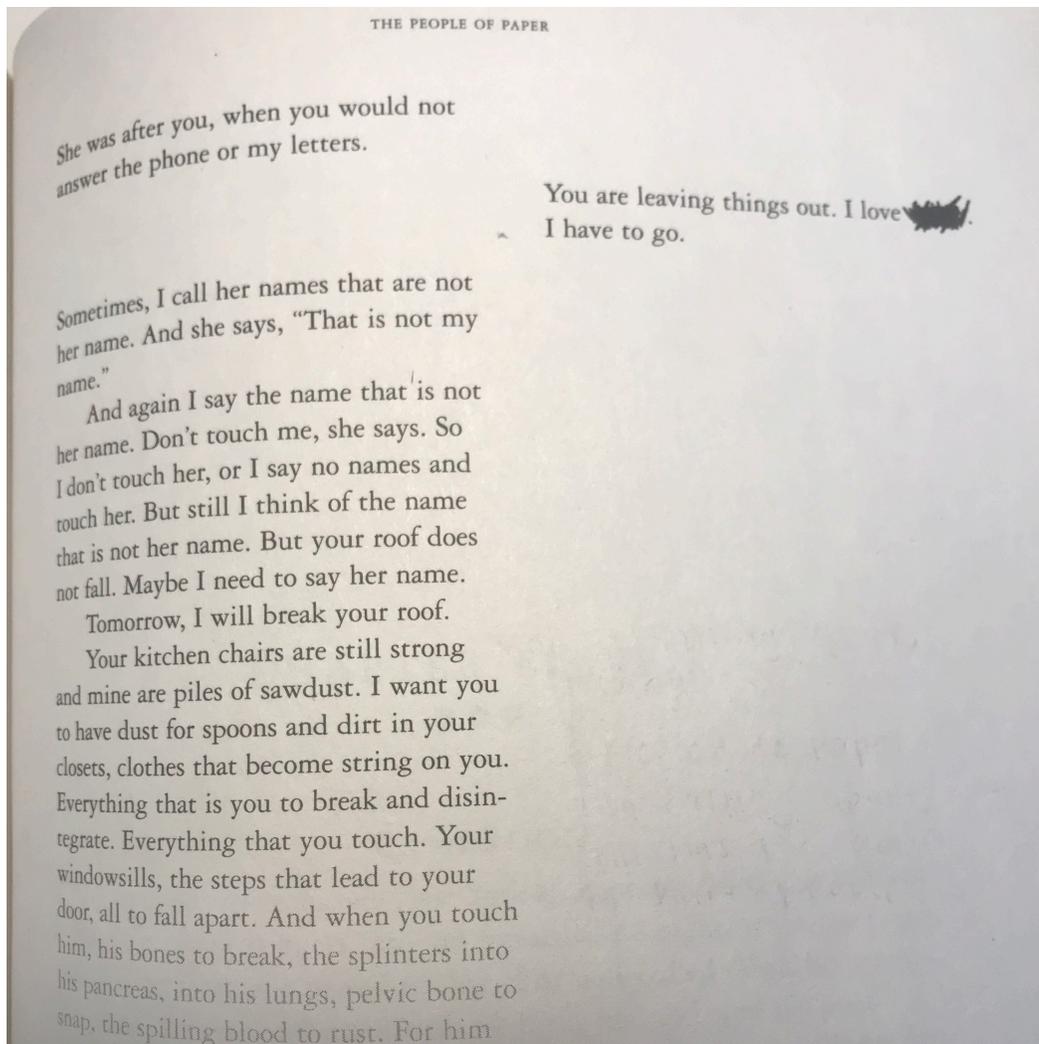


Figure 4. Saturn's narrative begins to fade due to the emotional distress he feels, also indicated by Liz's new partner's name, which has been scratched out by the narrator (119).

2.9.2 *Tagging / Graffiti*

When he visits El Monte, Saturn blames the war on EMF and his preoccupations as a war commander as the reason that Liz has left him. EMF becomes the cause for all of his sadness, so he crosses out the EMF tag—visually shown in the text—in his now ravaged hometown (112). In this particular chapter, Plascencia's narrative has taken over the entire page, no longer in columns. While he speaks for himself, and occupies the narrative space, he defaces EMF's tag, and their claims to the space (See fig. 5). Saturn shapes the narrative and the space around him, just as EMF

uses tags to claim space of their own. The use of tagging and the claims to space reflected in the physical text are representative of how Cristina Rodriguez describes *con safos*: “Considering the explicit references to turf wars and graffiti tags in the text, my local reading proposes to think of the role of writing in the novel as governed by the practice of *con safos*, a Southwestern Chicano mode of understanding public writing as sacred and vulnerable. Viewed in this light, the novel becomes a graffiti tag” (Rodriguez 482-483) This idea of *con safos* is associated with the act of tagging or claiming a space, and acts as protection for that written name. In a sense, Plascencia’s entire text is a tag, laying claim to the space and the stories of those who inhabit it. However, Plascencia’s visit to El Monte, where he defaces EMF’s tag also sees him breaking the idea of *con safos* and breaking not only gang rules but also narrative conventions with the text’s format. There are other visual elements in the text, Mexican *Lotería* cards, a graffiti style food pyramid, and graphs indicating strategies in EMF’s war. However, of the visual elements, EMF’s tag is visually representative of their battle over the space and the importance of claiming within their gang’s culture. In commodifying their experience, Plascencia is breaking the rule of *con safos*, just as he breaks the rule of defacing the EMF tag. This lack of respect for their turf and the claim that their tag represents, visually reflects the lack of accountability that Saturn feels, and the cause for de la Fe’s war against him.

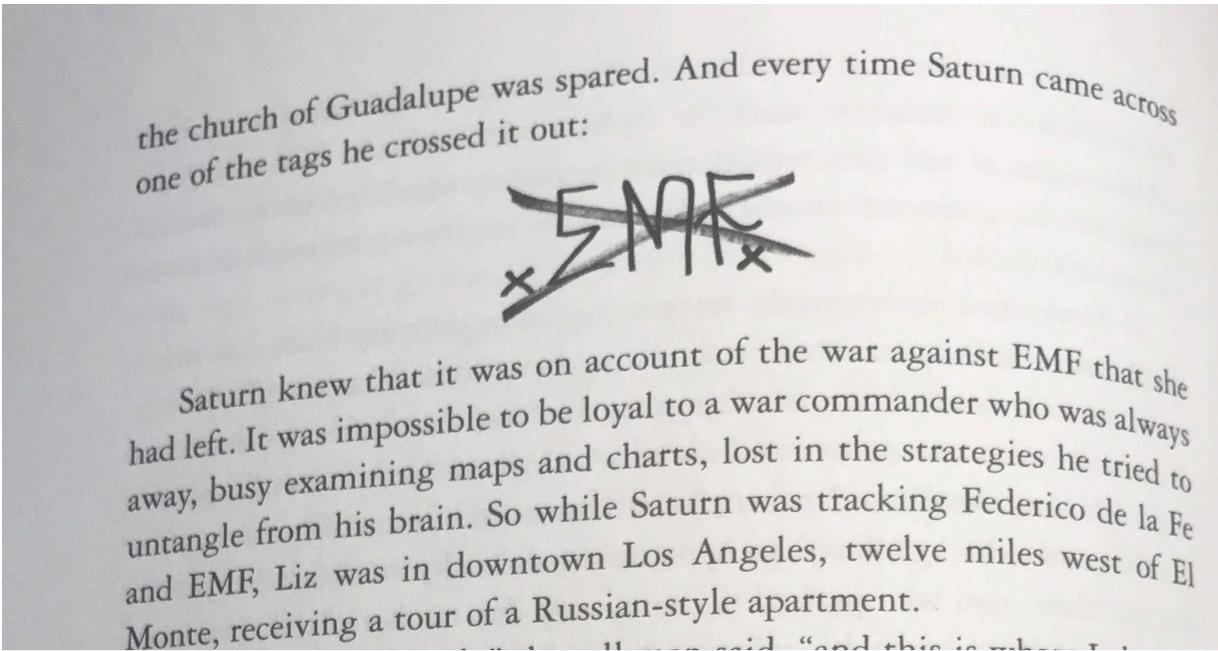


Figure 5. As Saturn visits El Monte, he crosses out the EMF tag, disrespecting their claims to the space (112).

2.9.3 Columns

Saturn initially shapes the textual space, but as other characters gain control and take over their own narratives, they begin to push him out—the more rooted they become, the more uprooted he becomes. Saturn’s narrative also suffers the most alterations due to the constant theme of his sadness over Liz. There are moments in the text where he struggles to write to her, crossing out his own sentences (110). He also cannot bear to write the name of Liz’s new partner, constantly scratching it out, or cutting it out of the text. He even begins to come apart, where in a conversation with Liz, his text fades away (119). He goes as far as to start the novel again halfway through, re-creating its initial pages, removing Liz from the dedication. After the novel re-starts, Saturn also goes missing for several pages, his columns left blank.

Initially, the text’s format is controlled by Saturn, and the moments where the text fades away, or is blacked out, reflect Plascencia’s own emotional state. However, the Baby

Nostradamus, the only character whose thoughts remain shielded from Saturn, teaches Little Merced to block her thoughts from the narrator. At first, this is represented through small black circles or squares covering parts of her narrative, but eventually Little Merced learns to block Saturn from her thoughts entirely (See fig. 6). These blanked-out spaces indicate both the war and the struggle for power within the text. Normally, censorship is about taking control, and taking power away from someone else. Here, Little Merced's self-censorship is power. The blanked-out text allows her both movement and stasis. As Saturn cannot see her, she is able to move more freely, beyond the confines of her lead walls or smoked-out city, eventually fleeing the town of El Monte with her father.

Before Little Merced learns how to fully shield herself and de la Fe from Saturn, the other characters also change their strategy from hiding from Saturn to ambushing him with their thoughts. The characters return from the margins, crowding the book's pages, defying Saturn's narrative structure of vertical lines and circles. Instead, the narrative is crowded onto the page vertically, horizontally and sideways: "But there was no time to think of her. Saturn heard them approaching, crowding into the page, pushing and trying to press Saturn further and further to the margin" (208). Some characters "who had been absent for chapters and chapters" return to give their perspectives and take control of the story (211). Saturn compares himself to the biblical figure of Samson, whose "columns supported him" (232). Like Saturn, Samson's power is drained by his lover, and his characters push his column to the corner of the page: "After all these pages, as Saturn faded, it was our voices that directed the story, our collective might pressing Saturn into a corner" (216). The characters achieve the control over their narratives that they have been fighting for, reflected on the space of the page. The reader must also engage with the text physically, turning

the book in order to read all of the text that has been placed in different directions (See fig. 7) as the characters launch an attack against Saturn, pushing him into the margins.

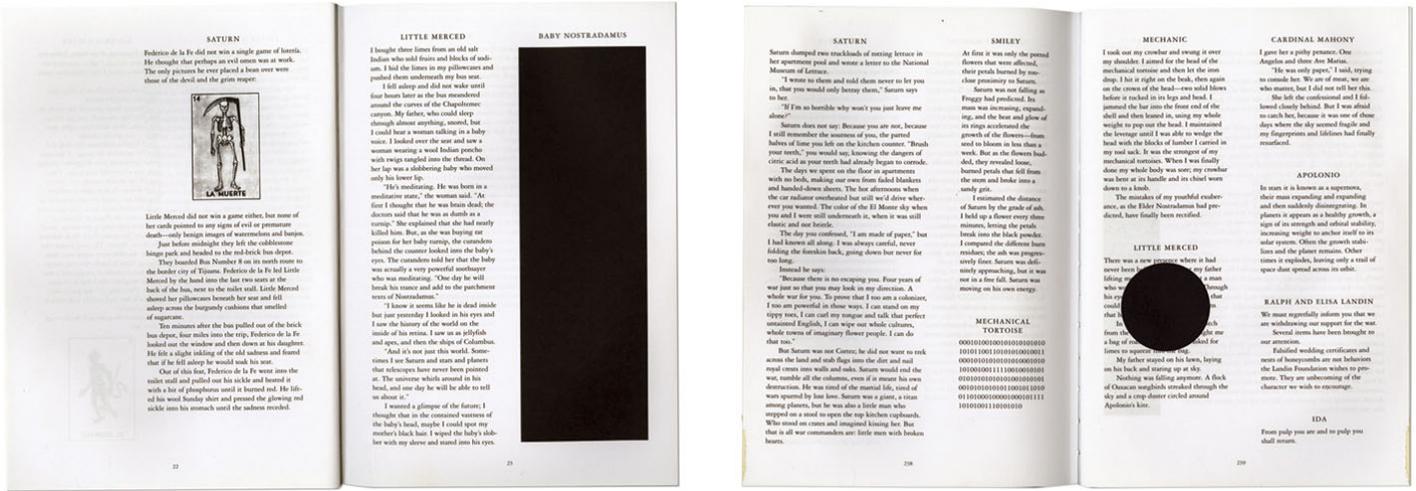


Figure 6. (Benavidez)

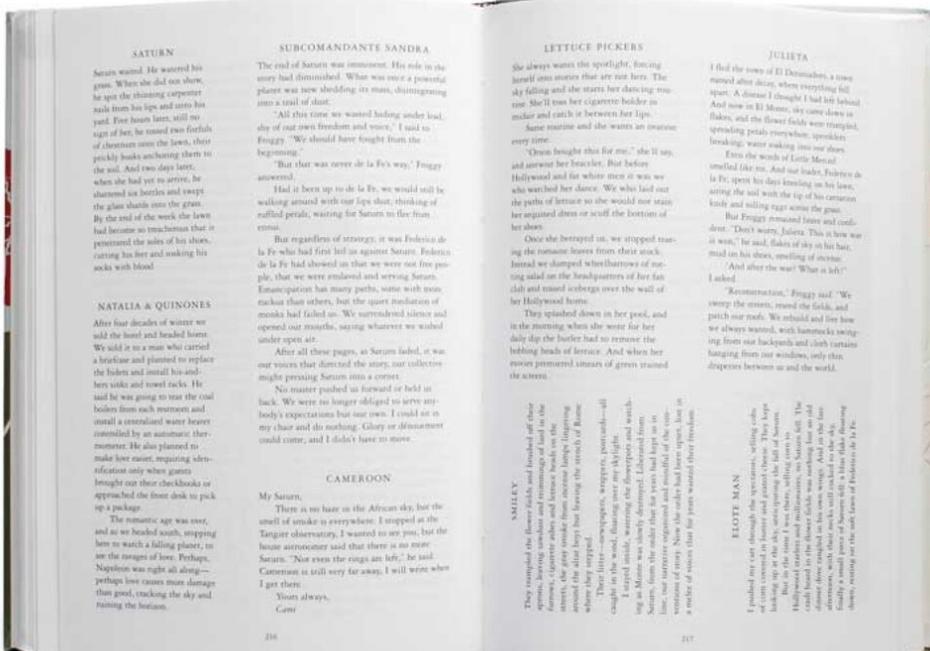


Figure 7. As the characters, some missing for many chapters, flood back onto the pages of the text, the reader must turn the book sideways in order to read it (Benavidez).

Like the space of El Monte, which is shaped by its inhabitants, the space on the page is also specifically shaped. The form of the novel, like its content, shapes the message of authorial control. As the novel progresses, Saturn loses control first of Baby Nostradamus and then of Little Merced, and eventually, as the characters flood back into the narrative and crowd the pages, the columns crowd the space. Just as the characters and narrator both acknowledge and address the reader, so does the typography. The reader must interact with the text, turning the physical text sideways in order to read the crowded pages, or choosing which column to read first when they split in half. This reflects EMF and de la Fe's battle plans, where "the plan was to split the army and force Saturn to choose between the two battalions" (65). Not only is this a narrative strategy that depicts the military tactics being used in the narrative, but it is also another way to represent multiple sides to the story.

The novel's final words are: "they walked south and off the page, leaving no footprints that Saturn could track. There would be no sequel to the sadness" (245). The following page is blank, except for a black circle, which might represent Federico de la Fe and little Merced escaping from the novel, under an umbrella. This self-imposed sequestration by the characters puts an end to the narrative, and can also be seen as a large period, typographically ending the story.

2.10 Chapter Conclusion

The People of Paper makes the marginal central, both in terms of narrated space and the space of the physical pages of the experimental text. El Monte becomes a heterotopia, a space that is both open and closed, real and fictional, universal and central, but also lacking history or ancestry. The migrant and Chicana/o characters living in El Monte remain rootless, as they alter the forms of power and labour within the town, in their war against Saturn. I explored the spaces of work, home,

the border, and El Derramadero in order to understand the spaces that the characters move through, their motivations for mobility, and where they become stuck, as the text alters the form and function of many of the spaces commonly associated with Mexican migration. As the characters become mobile or static, rootless or rooted, within these spaces, the physical text also moves. Along with the topography, the typography is also uprooted from its traditional layout, and as the characters move, so does the reader, “covering ground” as they flip through the pages of text. Ultimately, the text’s many characters and narratives participate in the novel’s questioning and complicating of both movement and the spaces that these characters move through. Their motivations to move, and the stereotypical roles that they both occupy and defy, again ask the reader to question the levels of reality and fiction within the text—not only in how the characters are depicted or represented, but also the representation of these spaces and the social roles that they occupy within each space.

Chapter 4: The Power of Paper and Female Coalition

In a 2013 interview with the Institute for Latino Studies of Notre Dame, Salvador Plascencia states that his initial inspiration for *The People of Paper* was a metafiction of a woman made of paper, whose body disintegrates in the narrative while you hold the physical text in your hands: “I started with this woman made out of paper, because I wanted to have the ultimate metafiction... where you would read this story and this woman would fall apart in your hands and you would be holding her, and it’s paper” (Latino Studies ND, 3:49-4:03). In other words, this character made of paper is also an allusion to the paper object that is the book. Although the character of Merced de Papel is not the main character in the final text, her important role in the novel and the creation of her origin story is indicative of the centrality of the depiction of female bodies and identities in the narrative. Despite the fact that she is literally made of paper, the title of the novel refers not only to her, but also to its cast of many one-dimensional, and primarily non-testimonial and non-first-person narratives. However, exploring the power of paper and the importance of the first person narrative interruptions within the text, is crucial to my argument within this chapter.

Just as the novel participates in a conversation about representation, by both depicting migrant and Chicana/o characters and narrating their fictional fight against the ways in which they are depicted, I will now examine the specific representation of female bodies and identities. Having explored what it means to be a one-dimensional “paper person” I will consider what it means to be made from paper. Female bodies in the text—some of “meat,” others of “paper”—become tools or technologies for reclaiming representations of the female body and for depicting the migrant experience. Unlike most of the male characters, the women in the text adapt their physical bodies to the spaces they inhabit and undergo physical, metaphorical, and cultural metamorphoses. What

they are “made of,” how they transform, and how they adapt, grants the female characters a level of agency that allows them privacy and the ability to move through spaces unnoticed and unobstructed. On the other hand, there is a tension or an ambiguity with the characters involved in Sal or Saturn’s life—specifically Cameroon and Liz, who face his scrutiny and vitriol. Unlike the other characters, not involved directly in Sal’s life, they are not given the tools to hide or adapt, but instead they are given a voice. From their perspectives, Sal faces criticism of his own, which marks an anxiety about women’s bodies and their stories. Plascencia has built his own critics into the text, in order to create a tension between the narrator and his characters, but also to offer a defense against the narrator’s tyrannical male gaze.

In the novel’s final pages, we discover that Liz, one of the novel’s dedicatees, is also made of paper, as she touches the face of her new partner, whose name remains scratched or cut out of the text, too difficult for Saturn to even write down: “but still she said (name scratched out), all these years and I still love you, ‘and she touched his face with her paper hands’ ” (244). What does it mean that a female character, central in the text’s debate surrounding representation and commodification, is also made of paper? Perhaps, Liz also stands as another reminder that she is not the Liz of lived reality, but another character in the novel, despite her narrated ability to “speak” for herself. I will explore the women made of paper from the perspective of the omniscient narrator who dictates the depiction and representation of female bodies from an often violent or voyeuristic gaze, as well as ways in which characters take control over their own bodies and their own stories, and create a coalition or communal ground

I implement Donna Haraway’s “A Cyborg Manifesto” to examine paper as a technology that enables the creation of new social realities. I will also borrow from Laura Mulvey, employing her term “the male gaze”, which “projects its phantasy on to the female form which is styled

accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness. Woman displayed as sexual object is the leit-motif of erotic spectacle” (Mulvey 364). There is a tension, in that the characters are viewed from this male gaze, yet are also able to critique it, to speak their minds and to reprimand the narrator. Here, Haraway’s view of harnessing technology in order to re-write women’s narratives and origin stories is a useful way of viewing and understanding how the characters in the text find their power and agency. Viewing paper as a technology makes us think about both the strength and fragility of a woman made of paper and what these paper bodies mean both socially and culturally. Beyond the argument that migrants are tied to paper and are divided between those “with” and “without” papers, which defines belonging and legality within the United States, what else does it mean to be made of paper? Further, I will examine other cultural and metaphorical transformations of female bodies, and what it might mean to be made of “meat” versus made of paper.

In *The People of Paper* the female body and narrative voice are a means to represent, transform, and embody many different female experiences, and to rebel against the representation and violence of the male gaze towards women. Female characters act out strategies of resistance, or socialist-feminist images of the cyborg, more so than male characters, by transforming their bodies, spaces, and narratives. In so doing, the female characters create a coalition of female voices, depicting the power and danger of fiction, and representing a network of female social realities.

2.11 Ambiguities and Tensions

There is an ambiguity or a tension between the varying perspectives that Plascencia offers—adding another layer of metafiction to the text. Patricia Waugh defines metafiction as “a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality” (Waugh 2). The text acknowledges its own artifice through various contradictory narrative voices and their dissension over the narrator’s lies, as well as its status as an artefact. The text alludes to Plascencia’s characters witnessing him writing the novel and participating in creating it: Liz and Cameroon read, or know the details of the novel while it is being written; Merced de Papel adds scraps of Plascencia’s text to her body, once having to “strip the whole of her back where someone had written the name Liz a thousand times over in blue ink” (165). Liz intervenes in the novel, while Merced de Papel embodies it, using the scraps of paper to shape her own story. Yet, with its levels of reality and fiction, the text is never more than fiction.

The author-character of Salvador Plascencia complicates our understanding of the text, yet, as noted in the first chapter of this dissertation, the author as he lives and exists in “real life” does not enter into my analysis. Here and throughout, Plascencia refers to the author’s character—without forgetting that in terms of their agency, these characters have been depicted as having agency by the author. Therefore, “Plascencia,” as he is referred to in the text, is a character; nevertheless, the narrative agency of all of the characters was given to them by the author. Again, there is a tension between reality and fiction, and although the author’s biographical details or personal beliefs are not in question, the perspectives within are nevertheless a creation. Not only does Plascencia directly address his readers, reminding them that the text is fiction, but he also manifests conflict between these contrasting perspectives. The characters contradict or criticize

the narrator—metafiction here not only reveals the fictionality of the text, but also how we cannot trust fiction. Nevertheless, the untrustworthiness of the text and its narration, instead of undermining the novel's engagement with certain social issues—in this instance, the treatment and representation of women's bodies—instead prompts the reader to question the text's perspectives.

The novel's dichotomous depiction of female bodies establishes a dialogue between its female characters and its narrator over female power, sexuality, and agency. Plascencia both gives and takes away female power in the text. The multifocal narration allows for the characters to answer back and contest the male gaze, both denying Plascencia's portrayal of them and turning their own gaze back on him. However, the representation and discussion of female bodies seems to be of some concern to the author, who provides us with characters that dispute the narrator's views of femininity and sexuality. Although the author's personal details are not relevant to the narrative, we should take into account the fact that any agency of characters is merely a perceived agency, given to the characters by the author.

2.12 Women in Latino/Chicano Writing

Fiction, by definition, is deceitful or invented. However, there is a power in the way in which narratives can conjure up other voices or perspectives. These voices may enlist the reader to question the social norms that they think they understand, and to construct new forms of community. There are many Chicana and Latina texts that seek to broaden and expand the notion of a female experience or Chicana feminism.

Helena María Viramontes's *Under the Feet of Jesus*, Brando Skyhorse's *The Madonnas of Echo Park*, and Sandra Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street*, all explore varying forms of transitioning from childhood to womanhood, experiences of motherhood, and community ties in

which Chicana/o lives, histories, and identities are explored through the depiction of local neighborhoods. Within these neighborhoods, themes of gang violence, language, and the development from childhood into womanhood are explored. In *Under the Feet of Jesus*, Helena María Viramontes explores the roles of mother and daughter, and the transition from daughter to mother. Estrella, the eldest daughter, often plays the role of mother to her younger siblings, and on the cusp of womanhood, she falls in love and falls pregnant, preparing to become a mother herself. Despite the family's financial struggles, both mother and daughter occupy the role of maintaining the family bonds. In *The Madonnas of Echo Park*, Aurora struggles to cope with the violence she encounters at home and within the neighborhood where gang violence is ever-present, and where her mother works as a housekeeper. There are certainly stereotypical experiences in many of these novels, where family or social roles confine women to the roles of mothers and daughters, narrating them only within these domestic, family, or community roles or structures. However, to draw from *The People of Paper's* line of inquiry, there is also an onus on the reader to question these fictional experiences. In *The House on Mango Street*, for instance, Esperanza questions aspects of growing up in her Chicana culture. She asks why her hips should be confined to carrying babies and not for dancing, or why her name or birth year should indicate weakness. Esperanza questions why being born in the Chinese year of the horse "is supposed to be bad luck if you're born female"? She thinks "this is a Chinese lie because the Chinese, like the Mexicans, don't like their women strong" (Cisneros 10). Here, the narrator takes a stereotypical depiction of womanhood and asks why this must be her own experience. Here, although Esperanza is asking the question, her interrogation of social norms and cultural practices is what enlists the reader to question these conventions.

The People of Paper depicts female characters outside of common or typical social and family roles and shows how they evolve as individuals. Female characters change and adapt to

move through different neighborhoods and spaces—both physically as with Rita Hayworth and Merced de Papel, and culturally or socially, as with Little Merced, who transitions from childhood into womanhood. In *The People of Paper*, women’s bodies reflect the changing environment, neighborhood, or culture around them. The female body is not explored in terms of motherhood or its ability to bear a child, but in relation to more individualistic freedoms. For the female EMF members, “Because we lived within the ashen boundaries, Little Merced would start her cycle at the same time I and every other woman in El Monte did. In El Monte, sisterhood and solidarity were always marked by bloodshed” (85). Although Little Merced transitions into womanhood surrounded by the community of EMF, this is without the presence or influence of her own mother. In fact, as she struggles to assimilate into American life, going to school with other children, her father is also not very present, instead leading his war against Saturn. Little Merced’s guiding influence in the text is the Baby Nostradamus, who teaches her how to hide from the male gaze and to shape her own narrative. Little Merced, with her childlike sense of imagination and trust, befriends the all-knowing, soothsayer. She learns to fight for herself and, in a war against Saturn, to shield her thoughts and to take control of her own story—which appears both thematically and typographically in the text.

The People of Paper separates mothers and daughters, and the relationships explored are always between men and women, or better, women as individuals. The other elements of sisterhood and solidarity within El Monte come from the shifting structure of the gang culture and hierarchy. The once all male gang begins to allow female members, where eventually, “Sandra coordinated the initiations: though she honored the tradition of EMF, she did so in the kindest way, electing the meekest members for the brincas, sparing as much injury as possible” (68). Here, female bodies play a role in the violence and tradition of beatings as initiations into EMF—despite

the “bloodshed” and its connections through the women’s “cycles”, community in El Monte came from the community ties of gang membership, and not motherhood.

Although *The People of Paper* may not explore the bonds between its female characters, the polyvocal narration still serves to create a community of female characters. The characters’ individual experiences allow the novel to explore female narratives outside of the traditional spheres associated with femininity and womanhood. Yet in *The People of Paper*, women’s stories are commodified and made public against their will, and the information that is shared about them is not their choice. Since they are fictional characters, what is at stake in sharing and representing their stories? In *Lost Children Archive*, Valeria Luiselli asks “who am I to tell this story?” and “why would I even think that I can or should make art with someone else’s suffering?” (Luiselli 79). Luiselli’s narrator tells the story of her own life and family focalized through her own children, instead of through the “lost” or migrant children that the narrator is searching for. Yet even the narrator’s own children are still fictional characters. What Luiselli is doing, in place of narrating a single experience meant to represent a broader whole, is instead to represent a specific experience. This is an approach that does not seek to represent or stand in for a larger community or collective experience, but instead views illegal migration from a different perspective—that of a non-migrant child and his mother.

Both *Lost Children Archive* and *The People of Paper* are concerned with the question of commodifying the stories of fictional characters. But should this be a concern of fiction, which is by definition, deceitful and invented? Furthermore, should an author only have to write what they know? Should a male author not write from the perspective of a female, or a child? In the case of Plascencia and *The People of Paper*, the representation of his characters is not necessarily the author’s views, but rather the characters’. Though the male characters are primarily represented as

disdainful towards women, most of the female characters are written from a feminist perspective—able to decide their own fate, freedom, sexuality, and partners, and to reclaim their own voices and narratives. Only in the moments at which female characters—specifically, Liz and Cameroon—are able to speak for themselves, do they reclaim these experiences. They are still merely characters, of course, created and written by a male author, but when they speak for themselves, or are provided with narrative agency, they are imagined as defying the dictatorial or tyrannical confines of the male gaze and of Saturn’s scorn. Instead of representing a specific experience, Plascencia represents many and, in doing so, enlists the reader to question these narratives realities and perspectives. Here, fiction plays a role in incorporating the reader into a discussion surrounding female bodies and identities—not representing or speaking on behalf of all women.

Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands* describes the achievements of “The Latinoist movement (Chicanos, Puerto Ricans, Cubans, and other Spanish-speaking people working together to combat racial discrimination in the marketplace)” as “good but it is not good enough. Other than a common culture we will have nothing to hold us together. We need to meet on a broader communal ground” (Anzaldúa 109). There is an importance in the collective experience in terms of discovering and depicting this “communal ground,” however, in order to establish a larger territory or to expand this idea of a “communal ground,” it is also important for individuals to share their own personal experiences. Addressing the question of commodification, Luiselli depicts or represents a more personal and individual experience, not meant to stand in for the journey of Mexican migrants, but rather, to add to and broaden the theme—specifically, the way the mother’s desire to find these migrant children made her own children feel. In the case of *The People of Paper*, the novel represents many individual experiences, none of which stand in for a single identity or experience, but rather add to a network or a “communal ground.”

2.13 A Cyborg Manifesto

How can a woman take control of emerging technologies? This was a concern of Haraway, whose “A Cyborg Manifesto” asks how women use new technologies as a means of empowerment, to change traditional views of the female body. Haraway’s cyborg feminism, which proposes the image of the cyborg as an instrument for illustrating a new socialist-feminism, transforms the female body into a tool for constructing a new female social reality: “A cyborg is a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction” (Haraway 5). Following Haraway’s perspective, how can the idea of the cyborg contribute to the perception of the social realities of a woman made out of paper? Haraway says she is “making an argument for the cyborg as a fiction mapping our social and bodily reality as an imaginative resource suggesting some very fruitful couplings” (Haraway 6-7). Despite fiction being synonymous with invention, fiction has a power to reveal social realities. The idea or fiction of the cyborg is representative of a new feminism, which rejects older views of femininity and the female body, and instead creates a fictional image of power, strength, and resourcefulness, in harnessing new technologies. In *The People of Paper*, instead of putting up with tyrannical control over them as a collective, the characters demand control over their bodies.

Unlike the characters in many Chicana novels, Haraway sets her vision of a feminist cyborg future outside of the social locations associated with women and femininity: “Home, Market, Paid Workplace, State, School, Clinic-Hospital, Church” (Haraway 46-49). Haraway sees “no ‘place’ for women in these networks, only geometries of difference and contradiction crucial to women’s cyborg identities” (46). Haraway claims that only “If we learn how to read these webs of power and social life, we might learn new couplings, new coalitions” (46). In *The People of Paper*, we also see the characters, for the most part, outside of the spheres or networks that Haraway

characterizes in her manifesto. Instead, new coalitions are explored through female rebellion against social norms, where the common thread amongst the female characters is that they take their narrative, history, sexuality, and maternity into their own hands.

Like Plascencia's potential justification or protection of himself through female characters defending themselves, Haraway too is open to critique. Veronica Cassidy has argued that a cyborg, a hybrid of woman and machine, has become a social reality in the form of sex dolls: "where Haraway dreamed of a feminist utopia, [sex dolls] suggest a technologized misogynist nightmare" (Cassidy 211). Certainly, the focus on Merced de Papel's sexual encounters could put her into this category, fetichized much like Cassidy sees sex doll clients seeking "an increasingly sentient love machine, while maintaining their interest in the doll *as non-human*" (Cassidy 211). There is certainly something voyeuristic about Merced de Papel's narrative, and a fetishization of her paper, non-human skin. However, in taking a less literal view of machine, and instead viewing paper as a technology, paper becomes more than just materiality and mechanism, but also, a process, method, or technique. Merced de Papel acts as a more multifaceted combination of woman and machine. Unlike a sex doll, Merced de Papel is portrayed as having control of her own body. She was created by a man, but she writes her own story.

Martin Heidegger defines technology as both "a means to an end" and "a human activity," reconciling these two definitions, "for to posit ends and procure and utilize the means to them is a human activity" (Heidegger 4). Heidegger proposes an urgent need for "mastery" the more technology "threatens to slip from human control" (Heidegger 4). In the case of Merced de Papel, she herself is a form of technology. Perhaps, in her mastery over her own technology, learning to harness her own narrative over her body and sexuality, there is power in paper. Like the novel,

also made of paper—paper, and the stories and fictions contained in its pages, have the power to shape the way we view our own human experiences.

Within the text, there is another more obvious connection to a mechanical view of technology, with the image of the mechanical tortoises, which have gained their own form of autonomy from their creator, taking over from the real tortoises and becoming an invasive species. However, this mechanical autonomy is dangerous, whereas Merced de Papel is not an invasive species, but part of the collective female identity within the text. Instead of something “other,” without any distinct division between machine and human, she is both. Merced de Papel is a process or a technique for representing the female body, both a technological process and a human activity. Her mastery of technology comes as she acts out female realities, without the necessary attachments of motherhood or sisterhood associated with being a woman. This also goes back to the physical form of the novel, where each page is shaped to fit the narration. When the narration is polyvocal, the text is written using columns, and when there are single narratives they are divided more traditionally—or finally, when the characters all speak at once, they are crowded onto the page. There is a technology or materiality in this community or “communal ground” within the storytelling. Not only is it communal ground, it also covers a certain area or space.

2.14 Female experience as coalition

Making comparisons and providing definitions from Chicana/o fiction is not intended to function at the level of identity politics,⁹ but to place *The People of Paper* within these literary categories or genres, to also analyze how the novel breaks free of these constraints or definitions, but also

⁹ “identity politics n. the adherence by a group of people of a particular religion, race, social background, etc., to political beliefs or goals specific to the group concerned, as opposed to conforming to traditional broad-based party politics” (‘identity’).

how it participates in broader traditions or collective experiences. Like Anzaldúa, who is seeking a greater “communal ground,” Haraway too seeks an alternative responsive to feminism’s crisis, than “the endless splitting and searches for a new essential unity,” through “coalition—affinity, not identity” (Haraway 17). Gloria Anzaldúa, despite narrating her personal experiences as a queer Chicana woman, still situates herself amongst other Chicana and Latina women, where “The *mestizo* and the queer exist at this time and point on the evolutionary continuum for a purpose. We are a blending that proves that all blood is intricately woven together, and that we are spawned out of similar souls” (Anzaldúa 107). Instead of limiting her own identity or following what Haraway refers to as “endless splitting,” she identifies her unique experience within the context of many all other “*mestizo*”.

This broadening of collective experiences ensures that the limitations of particular social groups or categories does not exclude those who do not fit within these limitations—those who may not fit the depicted image. Instead, “The new *mestiza* copes by developing a tolerance for ambiguity” (Anzaldúa 101). In her discussion of Chicana/o novels that represent the migrant experience, Anzaldúa’s dream of a broader vision of a communal experience often comes in the form of characters questioning or disputing their experiences. The experiences within these novels attempt to build common ground, not only by sharing typical or common experiences, but also by broadening the scope of what a Latina/o novel or character looks like. With its dichotomous portrayal of female characters, *The People of Paper* also calls into question both the collective experience of female characters, and others’ right to tell their stories and share their experiences. This contrast or tension between tyrannical and testimonial portrayals of female characters marks the text’s participation in a broader conversation surrounding migrant and Chicana representation.

The idea of not only embracing or using technology for empowerment, but becoming or embodying it, is most relevant to Merced de Papel's narrative. Although Merced de Papel was created by Antonio, the origami surgeon, the papercuts that she inflicts upon him during her creation leave her alone in the world, as the first person ever made entirely from paper. Although she is an illegal migrant, without papers or documentation, she is made from paper, and uses this to move freely and unencumbered throughout different spaces. She settles in Los Angeles, the city that has rejected the other migrant characters. The only other exception is Rita Hayworth, who had to transform her body in order to fit in with her environment. Merced de Papel, however, does not need to transform, but instead uses the power of her paper skin to exist within these spaces. She does not belong to any specific race—and unlike her fellow illegal migrants, her raceless paper body excludes her from other prejudices. Furthermore, she continues to shape her own narrative both by adding papers to her physical body, and by writing her own novel.

Marion Rohrleitner reads *The People of Paper* from the perspective of race, drawing from the #BlackLivesMatter movement to “highlight the ways in which the novel's main female characters are particularly vulnerable to subjection and exclusion, and yet embody the empowering concept of #BlackGirlMagic, as they constantly challenge male authority, which ranges from the paternal (Federico de la Fé) to the authorial (Sal/Saturn), legal, and historical, in both Mexico and the United States” (Rohrleitner 505). These characters do adapt and are both empowered and commodified in order to do so. Rita Hayworth “pinched her cartilage until her mestizo nose was pointy,” used “needle-shaped electrodes to push back her hairline,” and “pinched her cartilage until her mestizo nose was pointy,” choosing to adapt to a new life in order to gain fame and fortune—turning her into a mere image, remembered as a moment in time or a character, rather than herself (Plascencia 47). However, neither race nor skin colour are at the forefront of this

discussion. Characters change and adapt, overcoming their backgrounds and the narratives they have been given, yet this is reclaimed through paper. Merced de Papel's paper skin is not seen as a limitation or as having any of the preconceptions that come with race. Instead, the fact that she is made of paper gives her control over her body—allowing her to add new stories and used newsprint daily.

2.15 Paper vs. Meat

Merced de Papel is indeed the ultimate metafiction. The novel certainly has a complicated relationship between fiction and reality, but also with its status as an artefact. As mentioned before, Merced de Papel is made of paper—with the intention of being the “ultimate metafiction,” where the reader holds her, the paper artefact, or body of her text, in their hands (Latino Studies ND 3:49-4:03). she is the most violated of all of the characters, held and touched by every person who reads the novel. The Baby Nostradamus is narrated as knowing the fates of all the characters, and the end of the novel, before it has been completed. His visions also extend “beyond the constraints of this book. He knew the different grips of the readers, how some cradled the open covers while others set the book on the table, licking their fingers before turning each page, saliva soaking into the margins” (166). Merced de Papel's paper skin, which would become stained by the blood and salt from her many lovers, cut by her sharp edges, would never allow “history to accumulate” using newsprint to change her skin “with the news of the world” (164). Like the men who stain her paper skin, the readers of the text, “their saliva soaking into the margins,” both accumulate, adding to her story, but also, participate in Saturn's commodification of her story and participate in his voyeurism, physically holding her in their hands. Not only does Plascencia play with the artifice of fiction, but also with the idea of the novel as an artefact. Plascencia, the author, claims that “The

novel, it's one of its main virtues that it has a body" (Latino Studies ND, 20:41-20:43). The novel is a body, just as Merced de Papel has a body made of paper. There is something unsettling about the idea that you're holding her in your hands. Yet, through the storytelling—like a novel—the machine becomes animated. Just as Haraway asks, "Why should our bodies end at the skin, or include at best other beings encapsulated by skin? (Haraway 61). Both the physical body of the novel and Merced de Papel's paper body are both technologies for this storytelling, technologies for generating a dialogue surrounding the surrounding the female role, outside of traditional spheres or spaces of femininity or the female body.

What does it mean that the reader is essentially holding her, or the material she is made from, in their hands? Does it make her somehow more tangible? Can a critique be made that every reader is touching her, invading and commodifying not only her story but also her body? Returning to Veronica Cassidy's critique of Haraway—her comparison of cyborg to sex doll—we are reminded that if Merced de Papel's body is the text itself, it is sold to be touched and to be consumed. Yet her character is more than an object, and her perceived agency gives her the power to write her own novel. Haraway's focus is on mechanical and electronic machines, but Plascencia sees the electronic book as flawed and inferior to paper and the printing press. Within the technology of print media, and the power that has been depicted and enacted on paper, there is a power to paper and fiction. So what happens when paper is considered a form of technology? At the end of the novel, Saturn watches Liz stroke the face of her new partner, with paper hands. Liz, also made of paper, has left Saturn and started her own story, one that he cannot commodify and is not a part of. Paper may portray Saturn as having the power to tell his own story, but in turn, it also enables Liz, Cameroon, Merced, Little Merced, and Merced de Papel to reclaim and reinvent their own stories.

2.16 Origin Story

The novel begins with the origin story of the character eventually named Merced de Papel, the first ever person made of paper. Her origin story undermines the biblical female origin story which sees women as the cause of original sin and shame. Although her creator dies from the papercuts he sustains in bringing her to life, and she never truly establishes strong ties with any of the males she later meets, Merced de Papel is born without shame and does not cover her newsprint body. Despite her sharp exterior, she is also soft and will turn to pulp in the rain. Although she is the first and she is alone, Merced de Papel is independent and sexually free, able to be with many different men without ever being possessed by them, “Merced de Papel never let any man spend more than a month in her bed” (168). Although she is made of paper, making her racially ambiguous or even exempt from any distinctions of race, she is still tied to a cultural heritage. Ramon Barreto found that with Merced de Papel, “As always, with those estranged from their patrias, it is a woman who reminds of the maize fields and songbirds” (75). Despite being made from paper, Merced de Papel still has the ability to outwardly reflect her heritage and identity, reminding Barreto of his homeland. In this instance, home was his Mexican homeland, and despite being made of paper, Merced de Papel is also tied to and identifiable by her Mexican heritage. Although her physical body is a blank canvas, she has an identity not tied to her skin, but to her homeland. Therefore, her origin story is also tied to her Chicana identity, one with its own origin stories.

For Gloria Anzaldúa, “*La gente Chicana tiene tres madres*. All three are mediators: *Guadalupe*, the virgin mother who has not abandoned us, *la Chingada (Malinche)*, the raped mother whom we have abandoned, and *la Llorona*, the mother who seeks her lost children and is a combination of the other two” (Anzaldúa 52). Although Merced de Papel is the first of her kind, she is one of a trio of Mercedes in the text, where motherhood and abandonment are key issues.

She also takes on a name and a background, tying her to the family of Mercedes. She herself cannot bear children but becomes a symbolic mother for the abandoned little Merced, and a freedom seeker, like her mother. Although other characters in the novel have their own origin stories, for instance Margarita who transforms into Rita, Merced de Papel's is distinct in its biblical language even as it contradicts depictions of the "first woman." For she is the first woman made from paper, "made after the time of ribs and mud" (11).

Despite the tool or technology that her paper skin offers in a narrative sense, shaping new feminisms and views of femininity, Merced de Papel still dies. The power of machines is still a threat to her paper body: "As with all people made of paper, there was no official record of Merced de Papel's death, no death certificate or funeral announcement; even the accident report refused to acknowledge her." There is no documentation of her history—beyond the scars left on the bodies of her former lovers. As an illegal migrant, despite being made from paper, she is still *sin papeles*, and dies without proper documentation. She was "cautious of a legacy of scar tissue" and instead kept her own record, on the scraps of paper that were her body.

Another element to Merced de Papel's origin story is the "myth making" aspect. About myths, Haraway suggests:

One important route for reconstructing socialist-feminist politics is through theory and practice addressed to the social relations of science and technology, including crucially the systems of myth and meanings structuring our imaginations. The cyborg is a kind of disassembled and reassembled, postmodern collective and personal self. This is the self feminists must code (Haraway 33).

Merced de Papel exists outside of the traditional mythology and origin stories of women. She has her own origin story. But she is still a woman, and despite her own mythology, she takes on the

political and social role of a female. She is an individual, but her story also participates in a collective female experience: “The cyborg would not recognize the Garden of Eden; it is not made of mud and cannot dream of returning to dust” (Haraway 9). Like Merced de Papel, Haraway’s cyborg is a woman who originates from new social realities and is not dragged down by biblical or social rules against shame, sin, or morality.

Although paper skin could be seen as a blank canvas, paper also holds all of these origin stories. Merced de Papel was created with her own origin story, and the material that she is made from is what carries the histories, manifestos, and legends that depict or shape female experience from its beginnings. The concept of the machine and the technological is grounded in the idea of something new, modern, and strong; but machines can still break and are often fragile. Although Merced de Papel’s origin story could be read as a poetic narrative device, making her the ultimate metafiction, paper and its myriad meanings and definitions within the text shapes her body into more than just the paper that you hold in your hands. She is new or novel because she is the first person ever made of paper, yet she is also one of the countless people whose stories have been told or represented on paper.

Unlike Merced de Papel’s new origin story, which sets her apart from other characters, Rita Hayworth also has her own origin story as a young girl who sows a plum orchard in Jalisco, Mexico. Her journey from sowing a plum orchard, to working in casinos, to ending up on the silver screen seems like an American dream. Rita Hayworth was a real person, but her narrative here is fiction, listed as lie number sixty-three that Saturn has told, that “Rita Hayworth was never Mexican” (136). The historical actress Rita Hayworth was in fact not Mexican (she was born in New York of a Spanish father), nor did she ever sow a plum orchard. However, her story also humanizes an image or a pin-up, which becomes more of a symbol than a story. Nevertheless, like

Cameroon, whose narrative is noted in the text as a lie, Hayworth still faces public shame and scrutiny over her sexuality, stemming from traditional biblical origin stories. Donna Haraway's cyborg body "is not innocent; it was not born in a garden; it does not seek unitary identity and so generate antagonistic dualisms without end" (Haraway 65). Like Merced de Papel, who was born without shame or innocence, she also seeks to avoid dualisms. The other female characters in the text and the multiple perspectives depicted by themselves and the male narrator, certainly lead to dualisms. Haraway sees another way where cyborg imagery can "suggest a way out of the maze of dualisms... This is a dream not of a common language, but of a powerful infidel heteroglossia¹⁰" (Haraway 67-68). With the different use of language surrounding each individual female characters, including (in the case of Liz and Cameroon) their own narrative voices, , the novel itself becomes a form of discourse.

The fact that Merced de Papel is without shame, is what allows her to explore her sexuality without experiencing any of the castigation that the other female characters experience. Unlike the scorn that Liz and Cameroon face from Sal, Ramon Barreto, one of Merced de Papel's lovers knows that he cannot own her and that she will eventually leave him: "though Ramon Barreto had spent almost a year of his life sleeping happily next to her, he was not surprised when he awoke one day and she was gone. He understood the restlessness of people made of paper" (72). However, Liz and Cameroon do not become the victims because they choose to feel ashamed, rather because of the history and preconception of women's bodies and their biblical origin stories that shroud them in shame. Rita Hayworth, by contrast, is followed throughout her life and career by lettuce

¹⁰ "In the theory of Mikhail Bakhtin (1895–1975): the coexistence of multiple language varieties within a notionally unitary national language, literary text, or other form of discourse; the language varieties (regional, social, ethnic, professional, etc.) that coexist within a notionally uniting dominant form. Also in extended use: a plurality of attitudes, beliefs, values, or ideologies within a supposedly unitary culture or community" ('heteroglossia').

pickers, some of whom praise her while others chastise her for having once “made love with a lettuce picker” (Plascencia 50). Hayworth’s sexual history and multiple marriages become a prominent and reoccurring theme within her narrative, surpassing her cinematic accolades. Although she faces both admiration and scorn from the lettuce pickers who follow her, the sexual experiences of her youth haunt her throughout her life, whereas Merced de Papel is free to be with whomever she pleases and can leave at any moment, removing the wet scraps of paper her lovers leave behind on her body from their saliva and adding new ones. The characters who face the most scrutiny and shame for their sexuality are Liz and Cameroon. Saturn not only alters Cameroon’s narrative and existence, but also her identity. He puts her in Liz’s shadow and he renames her Cami, denying her of her own name and reality—which is still a fictional “reality.” All of these women are voyeuristically displayed, their sexual experiences put on show and made public by the narrator. Despite Merced de Papel’s escape from sexual shaming by her former lovers or vitriolic comments from the narrator, her body is commodified more than the other characters—the object that every reader holds within their hands.

Liz, the cause of Saturn’s heartbreak, faces the greatest scrutiny for leaving Saturn/Plascencia for another man—specifically, a white man. Saturn is never fully defeated and, right to the end of the story, still watches over Liz, gazing into her life without him, or fantasizing about doing so. Furthermore, although the novel was written for Liz or as a reaction to her, before the novel restarts in order to remove her from its dedication page, there is an entire page with but a single word, directed towards Saturn’s former girlfriend: “*cunt*” (139). Not only is this a loaded word, defined as “A woman as a source of sexual gratification; a promiscuous woman; a slut. Also a general term of abuse for women” (“Cunt”), but it is given even more power with the space that it occupies, taking over an entire page. Although the novel only briefly touches on physical abuse

towards women, with the mention of Sandra's abusive father, the novel, and specifically Saturn, doles out verbal abuse towards its female characters.

2.17 Agency, Anxiety, and Commodification

Women's bodies are a matter of anxiety to the author/narrator—enough that he repeatedly returns to them. He seeks control over these women, especially the “real” women in his life, who he feels have wronged him. Here, the novel becomes apparently autofictional, as Plascencia is unable to keep his sadness, fury, and rage towards these women out of the story. His gaze and the commodification of their stories is a violation, and while Federico de la Fe begins the war against Saturn and narrative omniscience, it is the female characters, and most notably de la Fe's daughter Little Merced, who gain some agency over their creator. He claims that Liz has “fucked everything... all for a white boy” (116), calling her worse than “the Malinche, worse than Pocahontas” (118). Yet instead of providing an anticolonial perspective, Saturn attempts to deny Liz the right to write her own story and to choose her own partner. He shames her for the pain she has caused him, with a rage that causes him to scribble over or even punch out the name of her new partner, too unbearable for him to write. Although Saturn/Sal chooses to shame these women, they have all moved on from the constraints of the male characters in their lives: Little Merced chooses her own path, no longer controlled by her father's decisions or his war, and Liz and Merced both start new relationships and leave their respective tyrants.

Few scholars have focused their analysis on the female characters in the text, with the exception of Jennifer Harford Vargas and Marion Rohrleitner. Rohrleitner's argument deals with the text's magical realism and the ways in which it expresses an authoritarian or tyrannical power over its characters. Where my analysis differs is in examining the role of a paper person,

specifically Merced de Papel, as not only representative of *papeles* or legal documents but as a tool that questions notions of female origin stories and differs from the journey and development of other Chicana and migrant characters. Rohrleitner focuses on the characters of Little Merced, Cameroon, and Liz. Although she does mention Merced de Papel, she excludes the character of Rita Hayworth from her analysis, whose transformative qualities are fruitful for further analysis. Rohrleitner sees the “female protagonists” as women who rebel against the male figures in their lives: Little Merced against her father Federico de la Fe, and Liz and Cameroon against the control of Saturn/Sal. Although neither Rita nor Merced de Papel take control from men, they do take control over their transformations and their own narratives.

Jennifer Harford Vargas explores the role of the writer as dictator in *The People of Paper*, in the context of the Latin American literary tradition: “Latin American novels have explored the relationship between narrative creation and dictatorial control, they have done so by figuring the dictator as a writer” (Harford Vargas 2). Instead of the autofictional narratives which paint the writer as the hero or protagonist of their own story, here the writer as dictator or tyrant exploits or manipulates others’ narratives for the sake of artistic production and economic gain.

Some of these characters—most notably Liz and Cameroon—criticize the commodification of their stories and correct the misrepresentation and Saturn’s own faults. In a letter to Saturn, after learning of her narrative fate whereby her body is thrown into the ocean to be eaten by fish, Cameroon responds:

I have come across people, they say they know me. Know of me, they say. They began learning of me on page one hundred and twenty-one, that’s what they say. To them I’m honeybees and your cold-weather fuck. A clingy and desperate girl sitting on a bidet. They know the ways and coordinates of where we fucked. They know the feel of my pussy and

yet they have never touched me. Not enough for you to fuck me, you must tell others. In your world of fiction and imagination you may fuck whomever you want; masturbate with your genius. But I'm not of paper. It is not decent, Sal. To fuck and then tell is one thing, but to write about it—to allow the telling to never end... (226-227)

Cameroon not only faces his misrepresentation of her story and his fictionalization of her death, but also the voyeurism and the effects of having her story told. Instead of being known or recognized for her own actions and her own story, her life and people's perception of her is shaped by Saturn/Sal's version of her. Like the character of Rita Hayworth, she is merely an image on the silver screen or a token on the test bomb, not a real person with a real story. Yet Cameroon is a character, and her complaint of being recognized cannot be true, even if, like Rita Hayworth, she is based on a real person. Nothing she says was mentioned specifically in the text—the reader cannot even be sure that she is reading the same version that we are. Her experiences, even the metafictional reading of her own story, is still part of the narrative—not a real-life experience. With that, although the metafictional or metaleptic interruptions in the text, where we cross into Plascencia's real world, reflect the narrative's untrustworthiness, within fiction, this is the most trustworthy action that a narrator can do. In pointing out the lies of fiction—where all fiction is a lie—again, the reader is cautioned against reading the story as true or real.

However, like Liz, Cameroon holds Saturn/Sal accountable for the commodification of her story and the role that he has forced her into. He has, after all, cast Liz as the Malinche or the whore, and presented Cameroon as object of his sexual desire and pity. Cameroon turns the scrutiny back onto Saturn, invoking ineptitudes and insecurities that he himself has not depicted. But does this fictional empowerment of a female character justify Saturn's stance? The author presents us with these two contrasting perspectives—one which degrades and another which

redeems. Can Cameroon's power really right the balance, or is this merely a metafictional alibi, which gives the author license to degrade women all over again? Is this, perhaps, a way to neutralize any criticism? Tearing them down, just to build them back up again may be a narrative strategy. Further, although critics and reader are inclined to read the author's fiction as a reflection of their personal views, from my reading, this narrator may be named Salvador Plascencia, but he is not the author, merely a character. Nevertheless, the female characters show a growth and a strength that the male characters do not. Exploring their growth, power, and adaptability allows for a reading of the female characters as a more powerful force than their creator.

Rohrleitner's comment is that "Liz's objectification to what way Saturn/Sal tells her story, only comes to the fore because of the public nature of fiction" (Rohrleitner 513). The question of commodification arises because the story is made to be sold. The question is, what is the author selling? In depicting so many characters, the novel's representation is broad, and, again, helps to creation a coalition of female identities, not a limitation to certain identity politics, or experiences meant to be typical of all migrants or all women. Instead of asking whether it is legitimate for Saturn/Sal to represent them, the author frames the discussion by giving the female characters the ability to fight back and to tell their own stories.

Plascencia's control and power is grounded in the male gaze, whereby he wants to see women degraded and to see them suffer and be punished. The narrator does not have control over his rage, or the frustration he feels at the lack of control he has over the women who leave him. He is frustrated at what escapes him. However, in giving female characters a voice, there is another side to the story and a war over representation that arguably eclipses that of de la Fe, who shows no personal growth or development—unlike the female characters, who begin new lives, surpassing the men on whom they once depended. Not only are characters' sexual experiences

made public, but also their habits and addictions. Federico de la Fe burns his own flesh, and the substance addictions that Little Merced and Cameroon struggle with, are also made of flesh. Little Merced's addiction to sucking on the flesh of limes, and Cameroon's addiction to bee stings not only take commonplace items and make them harmful, but also give substance to the substances that they are abusing. Just like the power of paper, both delicate and sharp, or a blank canvas and the site of all of recorded history, there is a power in narrating commonplace objects as technologies, or even weaknesses. Just as a bee can sting or a lime can cause citric poisoning, paper can also cut. Making the commonplace dangerous adds another layer to the notion that paper is both powerful and dangerous. These objects may seem harmless, but commonplace items have the power to harm, control, and even to kill.

The novel's play of representing, demonizing, and voicing the experiences of female characters may not offer a conclusion, but it does offer at least the fantasy that female characters might gain power over the narrator and defend themselves against the male gaze—both within the novel and within our social reality. Being made of paper allows them, perhaps Merced de Papel above all, to enact new forms of female social realities, allowing them to harness the power of the narrative and the power of paper. Their experiences may be as individuals, but this creates a network of experiences, which contribute to what Anzaldúa calls a “communal ground.” Instead of limiting the female experience, or standing in for all female experience, the text depicts many experiences, and warns the reader not to believe everything they read. Ultimately, the novel ends with Little Merced, who, according to Marion Rohrleitner “moves from a powerless little girl who follows her father into the North, to a strong young woman whose visions far exceed the limited imaginary of her father. Little Merced, similar to Cameroon and Liz continues to live their lives independently without the knowledge, consent, or influence of their formerly dominant male

figures” (Rohrleitner 510). Little Merced’s ability to help her father escape from Saturn shows the power of a young Chicana woman, and her development beyond the male gaze. Liz and Cameroon—whose ethnicity or cultural identity is never mentioned—participate in the coalition of female identity, by taking back their own narratives and refuting the narrator’s authority and veracity. The novel engages in debates surrounding the female body and female identity by questioning the ways in which fiction is a lie and the notion that female roles and experience cannot bear a singular definition—all by giving female characters a say over how their own bodies are represented. Ultimately, despite fiction’s artifice, there is a power in paper and a power in the coalition of female experience.

2.18 Chapter Conclusion

Just as the text makes the marginal, central, and focalizes through various narratives, the novel also creates a coalition of female voices, bodies, and origin stories, which reclaim and expand their narratives. Instead of being relegated to the margins, Rita and Merced de Papel transform their physical bodies in order to freely move through these spaces, whereas Liz, Cameroon, and Little Merced reclaim or hide their narratives in order to regain power over their own identities. Ultimately, paper has power, and the communal or coalition of female experiences within the text—despite the artifice of fiction—has power in narrating and debating these social realities.

Chapter 5: Conclusion: Since When Must Fiction Tell the Truth?

To return to the debate over representation raised by Jeanine Cummins's *American Dirt*: if Cummins should not have told her story of Mexican migrants, should Plascencia have written from the perspective of female characters, or children? Does fiction need to convey reality, or reflect someone's own experience? Throughout this thesis, in my analysis of *The People of Paper*, I argue that fiction is not reality, nor should the reader expect to come to understand lived and social reality simply by reading fiction. Instead, the reader should question the act of reading, and the experiences that fiction can convey. I analyze the formal layout, and the ways in which the novel's experimental form allows for polyvocal narration, which allows the characters to move through many different spaces and to question their narrator.

Fiction is a lie, and this book's polyvocal narrative voices remind the reader that what they are reading is fiction—enlisting them to question the veracity and reality of the narrative. However, despite fiction's deceitfulness, there is still a power within these stories to reflect aspects of social reality. I discussed the debate surrounding representation and *American Dirt*—both in how the characters are portrayed and how the author is depicted or promoted. Yet, another important distinction is the goal of the text. Cummins made claims that she wanted to “*be a bridge*,” with an implied didactic goal of educating her readers on the migrant experience (Cummins 382). She hoped that in presenting “one of those unique personal stories—a work of fiction—as a way to honor hundreds of thousands of stories we may never get to hear,” her fictional narrative would remind the public that “these people are people,” referring to the migrants depicted in the news (Cummins 382). This form of representation—where a single narrative is treated as representing a broader experience, is another pitfall of Cummins's claims about the task of her novel. *The People*

of Paper, on the other hand, does not claim to stand in for migrant, Chicana/o, or female experience. Instead, it questions fiction's role in representing reality and truth. The text constantly contradicts itself, yet, in reflecting any forms of social reality, the text represents a community of characters with many different experiences and asks the reader not to attempt to see themselves, or someone else's experience, reflected through the narrative, but to question what they are reading.

In the span of 246 pages, *The People of Paper* creates a new origin story for the first woman made of paper by the first origami surgeon, dismantles the invasive species of mechanical tortoises, turns an entire town to dust, re-imagines the life story of a Hollywood star, fights an impossible war, and pushes the narrator out of his own story. All this alongside many other narratives, which were not included in my analysis, yet are no less valuable to the text's representation of its numerous characters. Many of the magical elements in the novel aggrandize and perpetuate stereotypes, making them larger than life, in order to encompass modern political realities. Themes of addiction, gang violence, power and labour, and the female body are all explored in magically real ways—however, instead of existing within a single reality, the text explores various levels of reality and fiction. The novel re-shapes the space of El Monte—both within the narrative and on the physical pages of the text, and also makes its own reality a lie—in order to question the representation of narration and the act of reading, depictions of space and movement, and the portrayal of the female body.

The novel questions the act of reading, analyzes the characters as they move through a multitude of spaces, and narrates the story through the heteroglossia of various dialogic representations in order to create a greater coalition of female characters and perspectives—who fight their own war, not one of sadness or about being watched, but a war over their own bodies

and identities. All of this contributes to the novel's polyvocal narration. Narrating these events, spaces, or opinions through multiple perspectives allows the novel to engage in greater debates surrounding representation taking into account the important politics of having multiple sides to a story, and multiple distinctions, definitions, and coalitions of identity. Roland Barthes' "The Death of the Author" became the primary methodology of my study of *The People of Paper*, and by removing the author and viewing Plascencia merely as a character, I explored the levels of fiction in the always fictional text—analyzing the act of reading and its importance in Chicana/o literature, which, according to Ramón Saldivar, should question the assumptions of fiction, instead of reading fiction as truth. Michel Foucault's concept of the heterotopia inspired an extension of the division between fiction and reality into the discussion of space—specifically the town of El Monte. Just as the characters and the typography moves, so does the topography. The real town of El Monte becomes a fictional version in the text and, like a heterotopia, a system of both opening and closing, allowing the migrant characters to shape the space to their needs, and allowing the text to explore different cultural ties to space, without the limitation of mobility or preconceptions of history. Finally, I discussed Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands* and Donna Haraway's *A Cyborg Manifesto* through the rejection of identity politics and the importance of a communal ground or a coalition of female experience. Instead of limiting female identity, Plascencia's novel creates a network of female voices, which, when analyzed through Anzaldúa and Haraway's theoretical lenses, broadens the novel's theme of representation, and allows the fictional text to participate in narrating and debating social realities. Finally, through Haraway's socialist-feminist lens, I examine the power and technology of paper. These stories may be fiction or lies, but there is a power in representing the social realities of female or Chicana experience.

In giving the characters their own narrative voices, making the marginal central, and by giving the female characters greater forms of mobility and growth within the narrative, Plascencia plays with tensions. The novel is both a conversation and a battle between the narrator and his characters, and in removing Plascencia the author from the analysis, I have been able to focus on the discussion and tension between narrator and character, as opposed to solely thinking about authorial intent. Yes, this novel is a “discussion” written by one person—or various characters interacting with and contradicting one another— yet this discussion ultimately engages readers to question the veracity of storytelling and fiction, and to not necessarily trust the creator, but rather, to acknowledge the power of the creation.

2.19 Final Words

This study has given me the opportunity to examine the power of fiction as well as helped me to become a more discerning, less trusting reader. As a white, Canadian, non-Latina person, I read the Chicana/o texts discussed throughout this thesis with the initial goal of understanding or defining Chicana/o culture. But I learned also to question the cultural truths held within the pages of these fictional or testimonial narratives. Instead of reading a single narrative as truth, I sought to understand these individual narratives as part of a collective identity. Cummins may have been correct, or rather her friend, who told her that “We need as many voices as we can get, telling this story” (382). However, instead of telling “the” story, a singular narrative meant to represent the experiences of hundreds of thousands, if not millions of people, my analysis of *The People of Paper* suggests that migrant and Chicana/o narratives should contribute to a network or community of voices, and should ask the reader to question these experiences. *The People of Paper* depicts the power of paper, and instructs the reader to be wary of fiction and the views expressed within.

Bibliography

- Aldama, Frederick Luis. "Brownface Minstrelsy; or a Defense of Our Freedom in the Art of Latinx Storytelling?" *Latinx spaces*, 24 Jan. 2020, www.latinxspaces.com/latinx-literature/tag/Frederick+Luis+Aldama. Accessed 21 Aug. 2020.
- Ahuile, Leylha. "Time for publishers to Broaden their View." *Publishers Weekly* vol. 267, iss. 11, March 13, 2020: 80
- Alvarez, Julia. *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*. Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 1991.
- Anzaldúa, Gloria. *Borderlands La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. Aunt Lute Books, 1987.
- Bal, Mieke; Christine van Boheemen. *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*. University of Toronto Press, 2017.
- Benavidez, Max. "Salvador Plascencia by Max Benavidez" *BOMB Magazine*, 1 Jan. 2007, bombmagazine.org/articles/salvador-plascencia/. Accessed 20 Jan. 2020.
- Cassidy, Veronica. "For the Love of Doll(s): A Patriarchal Nightmare of Cyborg Couplings." *English Studies in Canada*, vol. 42, no. 1, 2016, pp. 203–215., [doi:10.1353/esc.2016.0001](https://doi.org/10.1353/esc.2016.0001). Accessed 31 Aug. 2020.
- "Chicano, n. and adj." *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, June 2020, www.oed.com/view/Entry/31526. Accessed 22 August 2020.
- Cisneros, Sandra. *The House on Mango Street*. Vintage Books, Random House, 1984.
- Cooney, Patrick. "Metafictional Geographies: Los Angeles in Karen Tei Yamashita's *Tropic of Orange* and Salvador Plascencia's *The People of Paper*" *On and Off the Page: Mapping Place in Text and Culture*, edited by Ari J. Adipurwawidjana and M. B. Hackler, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009. pp. 189-218.
- Cummins, Jeanine. *American Dirt*. Flatiron Books, 2019.

- De Caeter, Lieven. "Other Spaces for the Anthropocene: Heterotopia as dis-closure of the (Un)Common" *Heterotopia and the City: Public Space in a Postcivil Society*, edited by Michiel Dehaene and Lieven d. Caeter. Routledge, 2008. pp. 19-33.
- Foucault, Michel. "What Is an Author?" *Textual Strategies: Strategies in Post-Structuralist Criticism*, edited by Josue V. Harari, Cornell Press, 1979. pp. 141-160. DOI: [doi-org.ezproxy.library.ubc.ca/10.7591/9781501743429](https://doi.org.ezproxy.library.ubc.ca/10.7591/9781501743429)
- Foucault, Michel. "Of Other Spaces (1967)" *Heterotopia and the City: Public Space in a Postcivil Society*, edited by Michiel Dehaene and Lieven d. Caeter. Routledge, 2008. pp. 13-30.
- Fowlkes, Diane L. "Moving from Feminist Identity Politics to Coalition Politics through a Feminist Materialist Standpoint of Intersubjectivity in Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*" *Hypatia*, vol. 12, no.2, 1997. pp. 105-124.
- González Echevarría, Roberto. *Myth and Archive*, Cambridge University Press. 1990.
- Gurba, Myriam. "Pendeja, You Ain't Steinbeck: My Bronca with Fake-Ass Social Justice Literature" *Tropics of Meta: Historiography for the Masses*, 12 Dec. 2019, tropicsofmeta.com/2019/12/12/pendeja-you-aint-steinbeck-my-bronca-with-fake-ass-social-justice-literature/. Accessed 21 Aug. 2020.
- Haraway, Donna J. *A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century*. University of Minnesota Press, 2016.
- Harford Vargas, Jennifer. "The Borderlands of Authoritarianism" *Oxford Scholarship Online*, 2018. pp. 1-29. DOI: [10.1093/oso/9780190642853.001.0001](https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190642853.001.0001)
- Heidegger, Martin. *The Question Concerning Technology, and Other Essays*. Harper & Row, 1977.

"heteroglossia, n." *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, June 2020,

www.oed.com/view/Entry/64762592. Accessed 31 August 2020.

Huehls, Mitchum. "The Post-Theory Theory Novel." *Contemporary Literature*, vol. 56, no.2,

2015. pp. 280-310.

"identity, n." *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, June 2020,

www.oed.com/view/Entry/91004. Accessed 31 August 2020.

Jansen, Anne Mai Yee. "(Dis)Integrating Borders: Crossing Literal/Literary Boundaries in

Tropic of Orange and The People of Paper." *MELUS: Multi-Ethnic Literature of the*

United States, vol. 42, no. 3, 2017, pp. 102–128., doi:[10.1093/melus/mlx047](https://doi.org/10.1093/melus/mlx047). Accessed

31 Aug. 2020.

Kaenzig, Raoul, and Etienne Piguet. "Migration and Climate Change in Latin America and the

Caribbean." *Global Migration Series*, vol.2, 2013. pp. 155-176.

Latino Studies ND. "Salvador Plascencia Oral History Interview." *Youtube*, interview for the

Institute for Latino Studies, University of Notre Dame. Nov. 25, 2013.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LYFcVr1x5nI&t=229s>

Luiselli, Valeria. *Lost Children Archive*. Vintage Books, Random House, 2019.

"metafiction, n." *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, June 2020,

www.oed.com/view/Entry/239935. Accessed 31 August 2020.

"metalepsis, n." *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, June 2020,

www.oed.com/view/Entry/117228. Accessed 31 August 2020.

Mulvey, Laura. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" *Screen*, vol.16, no.3, 1975. pp. 6-18.

Plascencia, Salvador. *The People of Paper*. Harcourt, 2005.

- Rodriguez, Cristina. "Grounded Transnationalism: Neighborhood Logics in Salvador Plascencia's *The People of Paper*." *Latino Studies*, vol. 13, no. 4, 2015, pp. 481–500. doi:[10.1057/lst.2015.34](https://doi.org/10.1057/lst.2015.34). Accessed 31 Aug. 2020.
- Rodriguez, Luis J. *Always Running: La Vida Loca: Gang Days in L.A.* Touchstone, 1993.
- Rodriguez, Marc S., *Rethinking the Chicano Movement*. Routledge, 2014.
- Saldívar, Ramón. *Chicano Narrative: The Dialectics of Difference*. The University of Wisconsin Press, 1990.
- Santiago, Danny. *Famous All Over Town*. Plume, 1984.
- Skyhorse, Brando. *The Madonnas of Echo Park*. Free Press, 2010.
- Thomas, Piri. *Down These Mean Streets*. Vintage Books: Random House, 1997.
- Vázquez, David J. "Toxicity and the Politics of Narration: Imagining Social and Environmental Justice in Salvador Plascencia's *The People of Paper*." *Symbolism: An International Annual of Critical Aesthetics*, vol. 17, 2017, p. 55.
- Viramontes, Helena María. *Under the Feet of Jesus*. Plume, 1996.
- Vives, Ruben. "El Monte boy 13, arrested for taking two loaded guns to school" *LA Now/LA Times*, October 2009.
www.streetgangs.com/news/101009_elmonteboy#sthash.Buhm5SF5.dpbs
- Waugh, Patricia. *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction*. Routledge, 1984.
- Zamora, Lois Parkinson, et al. *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*. Duke University Press, 1995.