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nineteen sixty nine: an ethnic studies journal

Title

Critical Race Feminism at Home

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/16f782ks>

Journal

nineteen sixty nine: an ethnic studies journal, 3(1)

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Publication Date

2016

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Critical Race Feminism at Home

By Sebastian Martin Perez

I didn't want to return home after I graduated from UC Santa Cruz with degrees in Feminist Studies and Literature. I chose that campus to get away from home, fueled by a dovetailing desire to act out the get out of the hood narrative and to give myself and my family time to understand I was gay. But, the universe gives us what we want and what we need, but sometimes what we need is not at all what we want.

This is a story of intimacy and identity, and the difficulty of relation. It is an experiment in expanding Intersectionality to include matters of the ordinary: resentment, jealousy, sex, devotion, pain, and boredom. It is an attempt to follow legal theorist Patricia J. Williams footsteps. But, more to the heart of the matter, it is an attempt to answer the question of a specific why: Why, when asked what I majored in, have so many people "misheard" me when I said Feminist Studies, thinking that I said, "Family Studies," instead?

What follows are scenes of affection that render the break downs of relationships I have made, unmade, and remade after undergrad, a time when I felt like I had no choice but to make myself and confront the demons I had left behind there. It is a report on a conscious decision to force my theoretical investments to crash into the everyday. It was time when I failed, again and again, to secure a conventional identity within "gayness," "Latinidad," and its intersection. It is me realizing that community cannot be sustained by only the predication of shared identity, seeing as how citizenship, race, ethnicity, gender, and religion not only set the discourse for how we think ourselves and politicize; these intersectional arrangements of our non-exhaustive identity categories also undermine the myth of our solidarity, and moderate the possibilities of intimacy, trust, and affection.

But mostly, last year was an attempt to make myself and heal my relationship with my mom.

Activism

It is a day like any other in summer 2013. I am interning with Frontiers Media, a gay lifestyle magazine, in a pilot internship program where I take my first steps toward writing for publication. This is where I meet my best friend, [John]. He is an HIV test counselor and graphic designer transitioning into visual marketing. He lives in a studio apartment in Boyle Heights, a site that overlooks the 101 freeway where we would watch the sunset behind downtown Los Angeles' gleaming skyscrapers.

We are chilling inside while *Mean Girls* plays on his laptop computer. He is lying on his bed on his stomach while I am looking at mine in the mirror of his closet door. He is an occasional gym bunny and I am admiring the benefits of replacing carbs with planks for a week, passing my right hand over my belly while the left lifts my skimpy olive green American Apparel tank top to just under my nipple, even though the leftover crust of a Little Caesar's \$5 pizza mocks us from the kitchenette.

“You really hate white people, don’t you?” he asked, probably not abruptly, because I am a broken record about how white supremacy and statecraft are one and the same. I slide open the closet door to pull out some items to try on.

“Sometimes. But, I remind myself that there are white people that have been good to me. And, you can’t trust Latinos just because they’re Latinos. There are plenty that will sell out ‘the community’ in a heartbeat. I think that’s why I have so little to say about rights, in general.” I take my shirt off and I start buttoning a red and black plaid flannel.

He turns on his side with a look of consternation on his face. “I don’t get it. You complain about white privilege all the time, but you don’t have anything practical to say about fixing it. I mean, what was the point of you reading all that stuff on race if you don’t think we can fix anything? You’re not taking that shirt, by the way, you dumb jota,” he giggles.

I turn around, raise an eyebrow, and smirk. “Well, it’s not like we have very many choices. I’m a person of color. Of course I’m gonna read about race.” I shrug a little and open my eyes wide. “I just did it to protect myself. I’m not letting no white person tell me how to think about myself.” I begin unbuttoning the shirt dutifully.

“So, wait. If you were white you wouldn’t be reading any of this stuff, would you?”

“Guess not. I wouldn’t have a reason to.”

“The fuck? Then you’re not for the underdog at all. You’re just in this for yourself.”

I pause. “Maybe. Like I said, we don’t have many choices.” I hang the flannel back in his closet, slip the tank top over my head, and give myself a long, soft look in the mirror.

Education and Your Voice

It is February 2013 and I meet my first Gay Latino friend in Los Angeles, [Jonah]. He is an undocuqueer organizer, 5’6,” and dynamic. My mentor introduced us after the end of the first in a series of meetings that convened to plan then-Mayor Villaraigosa’s LGBT Heritage Month Event. I can’t now remember what he said to me in our introductions. He is as intense as I am but lives for attention. He was frustrated with the steering committee’s white leadership, pointing out their blindness to Los Angeles’ Undocuqueer community, and that he felt like an outsider for raising his voice about the absence of Undocuqueers in every part of this event, I stood there listening to him, one hand over the other, eyes wide, nodding a little, trying to take the chain of words *intention, organization, assertion* that he projected onto nothing/everything, but not having any real narrative registers for a common language. He later told me that I was awkward.

Throughout our friendship we have bumped heads on our positions in the classic theory versus practice debate. Of the many friends I have made last year, he has been the most consistent in challenging the *practical* value of academia and my desire to return to it.

One such occasion was a Saturday afternoon in August we check in with each other over coffee in Koreatown. I am excited that my writing is becoming less jargon-filled, and that I will be publishing pieces of journalism soon. I ask him to let me write about actions and demonstrations that the Undocuqueer community coordinates, which he treats the way you would a fly buzzing around your head. I tell him that I am optimistic again about transitioning back into scholarship, and I share that I am interested in Medical Anthropology so that I can make an intervention and become an authority on speaking about bodies in a different way.

[1] “And that’s the problem, right? I think it’s problematic what it means to become an authority, right? Why can’t we speak about our own experiences without a piece of paper?” [2] “I just think that bio-medicine would be the final frontier for my training, and that I can do interesting things with my background in Feminist Studies and Literature.” [3] “Friend, I know many people that are getting their PhD’s right now. They don’t get the support they need. Their classes are hella white, girl, and their advisors don’t understand their projects. I think this is a waste of time, but, if this is what you want, *yo te apoyo*,” he says cynically, as he leaned back into her seat, exasperated by my reasoning and irritated that I continue to entertain this fantasy; another unwarranted effort to burst my bubble.

I sit across from him, sipping the iced coffee I had bought, fuming inwardly, the sound of cars rolling by on Wilshire Blvd. filling our silence. I tell him I am ready to leave, I grab my olive green messenger bag with the copy of *Fresh Fruit, Broken Bodies* I had checked out of the library that I decided not to show him, walk to the parking lot behind the café without saying another word, when he asks me,

“You’re not mad, right, girl?” to which I respond with murder in my eyes, “[JONAH],” He turns away, a little shocked, and walks the three blocks back to his apartment that I don’t even offer to drop him off at.

I crawl past downtown Los Angeles’ gleaming skyscrapers, caught in the middle of the 10 freeway’s traffic, my ego bruised and my thoughts racing about what the hell I am doing in this city with these people? But what I hadn’t known or considered was that he wanted to pursue academics when he was my age, and that he felt burned by his professors when it came to his writing. *My writing is good*, he would say whenever he remembered his hours in the classroom, on his computer, wherever he wrote. There was no DREAM Act to pay for him to have in-state tuition at a top public university when he was applying for colleges. And, existed by his experiences in the academy, he let his dream to complete a PhD in English Literature fade away.

I hadn't thought that his negative reaction might also have been a way to protect the both from more rejection. I hadn't considered that he found his alternative to academic work, as I was trying to find mine. I hadn't even thought that he learned how to value his voice in the face of whiteness in the academy, whiteness in the planning committee, or whiteness in my dreams. And then I started to realize that my attempt to craft a voice grounded in community solidarity was not only a self-conscious—but sincere—artifice; it was unwanted. I started to realize that it was not enough for him that we shared an intersection as Gay Latinos. I started to realize that it wasn't enough for me to relate my experiences to a reified Gay Latinidad; how could I ask him to understand me on those terms when I didn't even understand them myself? How could I ask him to affirm my dream when citizenship and, perhaps, dark skin were turned into your obstacles? The answer: I can't and I shouldn't.

But that doesn't mean that you should take it out on me; nor should I be the outlet of your frustration.

Affection, Auto-Affliction

It is International Worker's Day of 2013. I am interning in downtown Los Angeles at a time when I am desperate for work experience, professional contacts, skills, and direction. I daily ask myself what I am going to do with my life, what I am going to do about my student debt, when am I going to move out of my family's house in South Gate, and who could ever love me where I am now?

But that day felt like a good one. The sun was out, the sky was blue, it was beautiful and I was feeling like I was, too. The day before my mentor told me to participate in the demonstration with the May Day Queer Contingent, advising me to wear something red, so I chose my now four-year old maroon tank top because it's the closest piece of clothing I own to the color code—and, clearly, it makes more sense for me to choose something off-color.

My mentor, her husband, and I exit the building onto Broadway around 1 pm. Throngs of people take to the streets as they march in recognition of immigrant and worker's rights. I walk along the sidewalk with my mentor away from the destination of Placita Olvera, looking for activist queers wearing red T-shirts, holding rainbow flags, and banners; in other words, my own point of entry that I, my basis for recognition ("I see you, girl!), my suspense of cynicism about the inevitable co-optation of these demonstrations by state control. Ever the Aries, she told me to go on my own, have some fun, explore, and make friends.

I joined a group, following the refrain of women and men with mega phones yelling, "UNDOCUMENTED AND UNAFRAID!" feeling the sun on my skin and losing my self-absorption. I split off to use the bathroom in the building where I intern and lose the group, but I get lucky and run into [Jonah] walking by himself, so I join him for the remainder of the walk to Placita Olvera.

We stop in front of Our Lady Queen of Angels, La Placita. I am in the shade of the church observing the politicians and activists speaking on justice for the nation's immigrants, undocumented and otherwise, on the stage set up at the intersection of Alameda and Cesar E. Chavez, while a thin middle-aged white man minding the small poker table he has set up with books published by *New Left Review* makes no attempt to sell his books and I buy a lime flavored ice cream, the Mexican kind that are more ice than cream, as [Jonah] looks for the people he is supposed to meet.

That's when he arrives, a young man to whom I was introduced briefly at a *TransVisible* fundraiser I thought devastatingly handsome, not wearing the suit that I met him in, but a fading blue T-shirt with the letters U.S.E.U. He hugs [Jonah] as I spoon out the last of my ice cream, feigning polite nonchalance before we shake hands and are introduced again. His name is [Gabriel]. We are courteous and I am a little shy. He mentions to [Jonah] that he wants to meet for dinner to discuss challenges to representing the personal narratives of female domestic workers in mainstream media, and strategies for compelling their self-disclosure. I think to myself that it might be best not to challenge these women's will to silence, but I keep that to myself—because, what do I know—and instead say that it must be especially hard to circulate these stories with an audience of whiteness, expecting and hoping that these words would land on common ground.

A television reporter pulls [Jonah] aside for an interview. [Gabriel] asks me how we know each other, and I say we're friends, smile wide, and make eye contact.

"Cool. Yeah, you're really cute. What are you doing after this?" I can see a grin forming on his face and the appetite in his eyes and I am only too ready for him to feast, but I am stunned, my face flushes, my smile grows wider, I look down to the concrete, and I turn away slowly toward [Jonah's] interview to take pictures with my camera phone.

[Gabriel] follows, prompting the question again, "What are you doing after this?" with even more determination, now that we shared the image, the affect, clearer and intensified, of his body on top of mine, inside my mouth and my ass with his tongue and his cock.

It doesn't take long to convince me to drive him home, since he was not convincing me but teasing out a yes, a yes that was emphasized more and more as I led the way down Alameda past the roaring crowds of activists uniting for humane immigration reform, as I brought him past the security guard to the elevator onto Parking Level 2, as he pressed me gently against the window-paned wall of the elevator to kiss me, one hand on my cheek and the other on my side, as he did at every red light with our hands on each other's thighs.

I sit on the edge of his bed as he moves to the opposite end, removing his sneakers as I unlace my boot strings and look out the window onto other apartment buildings

and their parking lots, and I notice that no one stirs in the world outside. I remove my right boot and watch the silence of the white stucco in the afternoon light when I feel his thick arm wrap around my torso and his breath against the nape of my neck and every single inch of myself is pulled into his desire. My skin is on fire, my eyes roll back in my head as the lids shut over them. He lies me on my back and he overtakes me under the weight of his body as I wrap my legs around his hips and feel nothing but the world we are making.

I remember white cotton bed sheets, sweat trickling down my back, carpet burn when I was on the floor, locking eyes in the mirror of his closet door as he entered me, grinning, locking eyes as we lay with each other after our two hours of being our bodies, grinning, locking eyes at the door after he kissed me goodbye.

And that was it. A few text messages in the following week, but we revisited nothing. I fell in love with him then and there. Senselessly. I asked myself *why* for months. Endlessly. I asked myself daily why he had overtaken my thought. I asked myself why I had let his image seep through every fissure of me emotional architecture. Why I would give everything to one young man in Los Angeles. Why I would run away from this city because of him. Why I was so sick for his love. Why I was so sick.

“(Someone tells me: this kind of love is not viable. But how can you *evaluate* viability? Why is the viable a Good Thing? Why is it better to *last* than to *burn*?)”

So I clung to this parenthetical voice. Even today, revisiting this scene of affection, I feel no less shame for obsessing over someone for whom my viability was measured in the obedience of my hole; someone who was another dick among the many in Los Angeles. I tell myself I was vulnerable then, self-conscious of my underemployment, “unestablished,” as I figure him to be, saying this now in light of improved emotional, financial, and professional circumstances. But that’s just a story I tell myself to continue being-in-the-world, a “learning experience” that it was better to learn now than later, one I should have already learned, that I am hopelessly stupid about matters of intimacy, wildly unrealistic, desperate. I have no answer, even now as I write this to seal away 2013 and all the emotional turmoil I entertained and inflicted upon myself. Even as I bring myself to light from the shadow of his power.

Ethnic Ressentiment

[1]

It is Thursday night. A good friend of mine [Gregory] from my hood and I take drive to Silverlake to hang out with our mutual friend [Anthony] that lives just this side of East Hollywood. Earlier that day I had an emotionally exhausting conversation with my mother, and I was ready to let the heaviness of our dialogue wash away from the impending rainstorm—and a drink or two.

We arrive at [Anthony's] doorstep, the last in a long row of apartments that stretches directly in from the street. The screen door is locked, and the first person to answer the door is my ex-fling, [Thomas], who, through the infrequency of his texts throughout the preceding weeks, sent the message that there would be no more intimacy between us. His eyes and smile were as warm as the lighting of our friend's apartment. I remember saying hi, hugging our mutual friends, and averting my eyes as quickly as I could, the same as I do now when I run into him.

Earlier [Gregory] and I had decided that he would celebrate his successes and I would play designated driver. But as soon as I saw [Thomas]' face, humorlessly I tell [Gregory]:

"Girl, I wanna get fucked up tonight."

So we drink. [Thomas] mixes strong martinis for the four of us. I focus on the taste of salt and bite slowly into the olives to protect the crowns of my teeth as I slide headfirst into my buzz and interject with simulations of levity into the general mirth. [Thomas] and I are tense with each other, and each sip or gulp feeds my wakening resentment, an affect that slips unnoticed in the atmosphere. Fifteen minutes of drinking the four of us become restless in the apartment and walk up Hoover to Akbar, Silverlake's self-named neighborhood Oasis.

The dance floor is dark and empty of people, and a single beam of filtering rainbow lights shines from the DJ booth as house remixes fill the room. As my group trickles onto the dance floor with their Vodka Tonics, mingling with the few twenty to thirty-something year-old white men that make it out on a rainy February night, I twirl, shake my ass, move to the rhythm as my body hungers for the feeling of its own freedom on the dance floor and of being alone.

*Now there you go again you say
You want your freedom
Well, who am I to keep you down?*

At this point it began raining, the first rainstorm in the middle of a drought. I had made it clear to [Thomas] all night that I had nothing to say to him, and the clauses I did share were of my arsenal of "fuck you's" in so many other words. He had his. The four of us separated throughout the bar at midnight so I light a cigarette under the awning on Sunset Blvd. and feel out my simultaneous resentment toward and yearning for him. [Thomas] finds me and asks if I have seen anyone. I maintain eye contact with him for the first time all night and I am falling in love again. Big, sad eyes and a perfect smile. He leads me behind the bar and I offer him a cigarette.

[1] "I don't know why, but I feel like I can tell you these things, so I am. I know you're going through shit right now, but this isn't the time for you to be drinking. You're not eighteen anymore." [2] *What.* [3] "And also, you need to stop being so post-modern. It's too academic." [4] *I'm a post-structuralist.* [5] "Whatever. It has

nothing to do with the revolution. You can't say you're not esoteric though." [6] *What.* [7] He takes a drag. "And I feel like I can handle it now." [8] *So I should be getting beat by cops like you instead?* [9] He glows while he narrates his memory of surviving brutality, the stitches, the cause he defended. "Let's go back inside and find the others. Get with it," as he flashes a smile and turns back toward the entrance of the bar.

I am balancing myself on my heels, lighting another cigarette, thinking to myself why he would tell me these things; why I had let him tell me these things; why I had intimidated him so that he would have to evaluate how "esoteric" I was; why an aspiring scholar would make it a point to trivialize my investments; why he was using these tropes to hurt me when I had given him everything I could?

*When the rain washes you clean you'll know
You will know
You will know...*

[2]

It is 2 am and we are back in [Anthony's] apartment, in his kitchen, drunk, planning to leave the next morning to avoid the rain and the highway patrol, hungry for pizza and planning to drink more. I play X's "Unheard Music" from my phone and catch [Thomas'] sidelong glance as I confirm how esoteric he thinks I am. Someone grabs paper cups from the cupboard and another pulls out bottles of champagne and orange juice from the refrigerator and a bottle of Vodka from the freezer, and I sit on the countertop, taking the mimosa that [Anthony] gives me while I crack jokes with [Gregory] as he takes the shots that [Thomas] pours for the two of them.

I run in circles with a lot of fire. When you add fuel to the flame...

[Thomas] informs [Gregory] that he does not know how privileged he is to be Mexican (*You little shit.* I think to myself), and that [Gregory] must know less about El Salvador than [Thomas] knows about Mexico, given how Chicano studies predominates in academic discourse. Privilege is *the* trigger for [Gregory], and he is incredulous and angered that privilege would ever be attributed to him as a DREAMER. I make one intervention by giving [Thomas] a stern look and I criticize him for turning [Gregory] into an object for his discourse, but I remember that this argument is not mine, and that the lion can defend himself.

[1] "What do you know about El Salvador other than *pupusas, huh?* All you know about El Salvador is *pupusas*. You can't ignore the privileges you have of being a Mexican in the United States." [2] "Do you not think that I am conscious of the privileges that I have to be where I am today as a DACAmented individual? Do you not think that I am aware of the privileges I have to do the work that I am doing? To have gotten my degree? Do you not think I do not remember crossing the border from [x] when I was four years old?" [3] "You can't ignore the fact that Mexico has

stopped entry for Salvadorans at its southern border, and that we have to cross three borders just to get to the U.S.”

And the argument unfolded like this with exponential intensity, [Thomas] and [Gregory] raising their stakes against this field of shifting and uneven field of social and structural relations. I am still sitting on the countertop sipping my mimosa and hoping the energy will burn out soon while [Anthony] stands next to me in similar wonderment. [Gregory] essentially shuts [Thomas] down and commands attention with a booming voice, and, conscious of the undocumented family renting the apartment next to his, [Anthony] asks [Gregory] to lower his voice, telling him that, of all people, you know what it’s like for an undocumented family to live in a small apartment when they are just trying to get by and raise their children, such being the living situation that [Gregory] had been in at the time of this argument. But he didn’t take that well. He continued raising he voice against his feelings that he was being silenced, up until the point that [Anthony] had had enough and told [Gregory] to leave.

I ran out the door after [Gregory]. The rain was pouring and I grabbed him by the shoulder, pleading him not to drive home. He began crying, telling me that he no longer cared; about having the good moral character requisite for DACAmentation; about being in the United States; about anything that might happen to him. I began crying, too, telling him that I cared as I wrapped my arms around him, trying to convince him to stay with me in many senses.

He pulled away and continued toward his car. I am yelling after him now, determined to keep him away from the wheel as I walk alongside him, reminding him that he cannot compromise his legal status this way, all the while that he deflects all my pleas with no’s in so many words, like:

“Why didn’t you say anything when they were talking to me like that? You’re my friend! You’re supposed to have my back!” as he looked at me with red, puffy eyes.

He stopped and gave me one hard look to show me how betrayed he felt, and then continued toward his car. “I knew you could take care of yourself,” I call from behind, unsure if I had done the right thing.

He opens the driver’s side door, ignoring my protests, sits, locks the door from inside as I demand him to let me in. He turns on the ignition and the headlights as I move to the front of the car, banging on the head and yelling, “YOU’RE NOT GOING FUCKING ANYWHERE,” at the top of my lungs. Through the windshield I see him rest his forehead against the steering wheel, hands at 11 and 1, and I walk around to his window. He lowers it and I reach in to wrap my arms around his shoulders as he begins to cry and tell me how tired he feels. I tell him something stupid, like “you’re strong,” or “I’m proud of you.”

“I’M FUCKING TIRED OF BEING STRONG,” he yells, as he yanks his keys from the ignition and tosses them to the floor of the passenger’s side seat.

I walk around to the passenger’s side door and grab the keys before he can change his mind and drive back to our hood. I tell him that I forgot my Dodger’s cap back at [Anthony’s] place and that I need to retrieve it, hoping that he falls and stays asleep there, feeling guilty for leaving him, but not too much because it’s not a cold night and all of me is exhausted. I walk back to [Anthony’s] place and arrive at his door right behind the pizza man. He asks for [Gregory], the person that ordered the pizza. I don’t fucking know what to tell him. He waits for a minute or two and leaves.

[Anthony] answers the door, shirtless and in his pajamas, while [Thomas] comes to on the sofa. I tell him that [Gregory] is asleep in his car and ask to use the bathroom.

The lamp in [Anthony’s] bedroom casts a warm glow. He sits up on the right side of the bed (the left must belong to his partner) as he reaches for his glasses. He invites me to take a seat and asks how I am feeling, so I sit at the corner and tell him that I am drained.

“Yeah, I bet. Especially with what you told me about your mom.”

I asked my mother to speak to me in the kitchen that day. My aunts had given her an ultimatum: pay your share of the rent or find another place to live. She had chosen the latter to continue some overpaying the church that constantly keeps her broke—*pero, ni modo, it’s none of my business, I tell myself*. For a few weeks she had been saying that she was trusting the lord to shelter her, acknowledging that she had no plans, no place to go on her own, and that homelessness was a real possibility for her; and she was, daily, resigning herself to the latter, because, not even the church had room for her. Even as I told her that her decisions are her own, I was guilty and devastated, imagining an impending future where my mother was living on streets rather than with me, for refusing to pay rent that is well within her means. I felt like I was losing my mother, so I had nothing left to lose but to tell her how I felt. I told her that I was feeling abandoned by her again, neglected as I did when I was a child, feeling very much *not a man* for neither providing for myself nor having enough to provide for this decision she was making, but, mostly, just telling her that I hope she takes the time to reflect on her choices, that she is choosing her religion over her son that loves her, her family that has supported us when she could not, our family that has supported me when she neither had the energy nor the will. I told her God had given her an opportunity to heal her own relationship with her father, the abandonment the women in my life have struggled against, that we are reproducing coldness and distance, that there is a metaphysical reason her father and I share a birthday.

And that had its own set of tears and catharsis.

[Gregory] stumbled in, looking for his keys, which I forfeited, uncomfortably resigning myself to driving in the rain, post-buzz. [Thomas] reminded me that [Gregory] is my friend, and that I should follow him, before he returns to the plush couch to rest. I give [Anthony] a hug and walk toward the door. But before I leave, I ask [Thomas], checking apps or messages on his phone, from the door to clarify something for me.

“I thought you said you were born here,” a detail about his relationship to migration that I may or may not have misheard during his argument.

“I was. But I’m one-point-five generation. You’re third.”

One more fuck you for the night.

“I see.” I pause. “I may not be radical. But I care.” I close the doors behind me, and drive [Gregory] and myself back to our hood, feeling like I’ve been driven back to my home.

Home

It is a week and a half before my edits for this piece are due, around 8 pm on a Wednesday night. I am excelling in my political job, saving money, and feeling, generally, more hopeful about my career prospects. But for the week and a half prior, I have been a wreck. My allergies have been relentless with the start of the heat wave and I have been anxious, emotional, and sleepless with vivid nightmares for reasons I could only associate with a nameless evil in my bed sheets, my bed, or my bedroom. The women in my life thought it was in the painting my friend had given me only a few days before.

I pulled into the driveway of our home in South Gate feeling numb when I see my mother standing over the canvas she had laid on the concrete beyond the rusting brown gate. It was an abstract of a naked white man lying on his side, piercing blue eyes, staring directly at you wherever you went, against a crimson red background. It was sensuous and a little unnerving. Earlier that day I had resigned myself to letting her destroy it, tired as I was and tired of hearing everyone comment that the painting looked like the devil. I was also tired of myself agreeing with them all; that it might have brought “something” into my bedroom that may not have been evil, but symbolically wrong, or too much, for me.

I am sure my mother felt nothing but gratitude for helping me cleanse myself of this entity. All I felt at that moment was an imploding heat slowly turn into a stone pressing against my stomach. I am angry and frustrated when I grab my bag and lock my car and unlock the screen door that keeps the women in my life *safe from men*, I think to myself, haunted as they are by the memory of Richard Rodriguez’s serial rape and murder of women, until I think to myself that I need to stop my nonsense thoughts, that this is just a locked door into a celibate home.

Hi yeyas, my Tia Francis greets me, a nick-name my four-year old cousin invented that has stuck, before she informs me that there is nothing to eat other than *huevos en salsa*, and that I should go buy myself something.

“What’s wrong?” she asks me, no nonsense, assessing the spiritless look on my face that betrays the inner operations of my seasonal existential crisis. I walk into the kitchen, pull the lid up from the frying pan of scrambled eggs in deep red salsa, close it, walk to my bedroom to drop my olive green messenger bag and cast off my polo shirt onto my bed, turn back into the kitchen, and hop onto the kitchen countertop. I tell her I am frustrated, that I have been purging myself of books, CDs, and unhealthy habits and relationships, that I *still* feel like a wreck, and that I don’t know what to do. She tells me that she thinks the painting has something to do with it when my mother opens the screen door to the backyard and comes into the kitchen. I raise my voice to the household, the space itself, and say that it’s not the painting; that I understand that *you all think it’s the devil, that I am angry at myself for allowing you to destroy it*, and that, over their mutual insistence that the painting is the source of my anxiety, I protest that *they are not listening; that something has taken residence inside my bedroom, and that it might be time for me to move out*.

My tia becomes a little sad. “If that’s what you think will make you happy, Sebas, you know you have our support—from everyone. But I don’t think it’s a good idea for you to run away from your demons instead of facing them head on.”

I hop off the countertop and open the refrigerator, purely out of habit because my appetite is dead and I am not feeling my hunger. I close the refrigerator door, rest against it, and slowly slide down to the tile floor. My mother sits in front of the oven opposite me and my tia brings a chair from the dining room to sit.

I tell them I am emotionally exhausted, that I have been “doing good” for weeks and have been unable to shake this panic I feel despite it. I tell them that I have been distancing myself from the Undocuqueer movement that has taken me as an ally, feeling hurt and back stabbed by purported friends who, I know, pragmatically, have more important things to worry about than my emotional stability; that they no longer merit my trust as intimates; that creating alternative values and habits makes me face demons that I thought I had already exorcised; that I’ve been afraid of changes.

My mom knows that I’m not speaking to the core issue, and I didn’t even realize it. “I think you need to confess it, Sebas. Whatever it is. Sometimes, you just have to release it, whatever it is, and give it to the Lord,” reads my mom.

“A few weeks ago I snuck someone back into our home,” against the one commandment that they have set. A familiar scene of affection: that night I picked him up from a Jack in the Box off Whittier Blvd. He gave me a bouquet of white lilies and kissed me in front of the Mexican families, against an affect telling us to respect

heteronormativity by keeping our affection private. I spent the night with him listening to my favorite songs in my car as he kissed and bit me. I took his cock and his *aliento* into my mouth. He asked me if I loved him. Bewitched by the way he looked at me, the way he asked *me quieres*, the way he embraced me, thinking to myself that these words are performative, that they might make “love” as such, that my Spanish is still such shit that the equivalence I am making might be wrong, that it all feels too good to think about the ontology of love in this dark, private space in mi Soledad (my car) in South Gate, and to just be present and say: *Si. Te quiero*. So, yes, I took him to my bedroom when he asked me to, where we made love in my bed for the first time since I’ve moved back home, after sleeping in each other’s arms as lovers do; as I literally bring the matter of gay sex into this home I share with celibate women.

And in the morning I dropped him off at the home he shares with others, as he gives me a quick and passionless kiss, turns straight toward the door; and the last memory I have of him is his back towards me.

“Beauty. No great secret. Not ashamed to say I loved him for his beauty.
As I would again
if he came near. Beauty convinces. You know beauty makes sex possible.
Beauty makes sex sex.
You if anyone grasp this—“

[2]

The essence of those lines by Anne Carson is what I tell my mom as she sits on the floor across from me. I tell her that daily I see more of herself in me, for better and for worse. I tell them both that I have written about them in this piece you are reading, and that I have been sorting through memories and feelings trying to figure out what it means to relate when we have dissimilar sets of experiences. I tell them that it’s been hard to relate to anyone in this home about intimacy, and I tell my mom that I know it still makes her uncomfortable that I’m gay. She says that (at this point in the drama of self-disclosure) that it’s less about *that* than it is about intimacy being an essentially private matter—*I don’t want to hear about that. I don’t want to hear about anyone’s business, no.*

It’s not that I want to talk about the details of sex with you—not at all (hell nah). I’m just saying; how is it possible to relate about these things in a home that is, by and large, sexless? My tia, defenselessly, thought that I was being judgmental. I apologized and said that that’s not what it was. But I took this opportunity to ask her if she shamed my mother for her “wild years,” a period of her life when she was my age, right before she conceived, when she would, still with some shame, call those years *promiscuous*, the only name for the discourse that everyone in my home has assented to. I ask, because, to ask a question is already to answer it.

I used to put men on pedestals, too, she tells me. When my father left us I felt a freedom like never before, and I just didn't care anymore. I didn't care about anything. I was angry at God, 'Bastian. And I was so angry for years, I thought to myself, 'I'm going to hell anyway. What does it matter?'

And there it was. The basis of our mutual recognition. I am looking for answers outside of my home to heal what was broken.

I think I reflect a lot of you, mom.

My appetite begins to return and my body reminds me that it needs food. I thank my tia and my mother for helping me sort through my bullshit and ask them if they are hungry, too. My tia goes to the bedroom she shares with my grandmother to watch her novela ("this is the last one, I'm tired of them," as she has tired of every one she's watched throughout the duration of my near 25 years of life), and I ask my mom if I can take her out to the new In n' Out down the street from our home. I drive, I buy ourselves two double doubles, a strawberry milkshake, and animal style fries because it had been hours since my last meal and my mom has the healthiest of appetites. We sit across the table from each other as she prays over our meal, the employment that lets me pay for it, and the time we have to share with each other. And we close the scene of affection stuffing ourselves, discussing evil, politics, student debt, racism, labor exploitation, and faith that something good is coming for us all.