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Night becomes “Latin”
Mariana Romo-Carmona
Living at Night and
the tactics of abjection

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ABSTRACT
This essay examines the tactical implications of the
subaltern discourse of “night” in U.S.-based Chilean writer
Mariana Romo-Carmona’s 1997 novel Living at Night about
a working class Puerto Rican lesbian woman employed on
the nightshift in an institution for mentally “disabled”
women. The essay argues that in the novel “nighttime” is
made to perform the cultural work of redefining diasporas
and borders, exilic memory, sexual, ethnic, and racial
identities, and social positioning in terms of power or
agency, deterritorializing these variables from conven-
tional or dominant values. Specifically, this deep-structure
redefinition is accomplished by confronting culturally
induced shame, fear, and repudiation and deliberately
embracing the abjection inherent in transculturation or in the
“contaminating” (“not-me”) contact zone between identities
and cultures that transgresses their limits. [Key Words:
abjection, cultural tranvestism, nighttime, politics of rela-
tionality, Puerto Rican, Romo-Carmona, transculturation]
Prefatory note: This essay is part of a second book project (combining new ethnic studies, affect studies, and historical and cultural analysis) on tropes of night in Latina/o cultural production and the ways in which they compose a subaltern discourse of “night” and “nighttime.” This discourse challenges not only many aspects of U.S. Anglo-American cultural hegemony, but also the very formation of subjectivity and identity within a dominant Western epistemology and ontology. The larger study of which this essay is a part seeks to demonstrate the way that Latina/o literary and cultural production suggests new transcultural models of identity through tropes of night. These tropes in U.S. Latina/o writing take the stigma of darkness and inversion as a condition, a cultural space, to be inhabited in terms of multiple markers of location (ethnic, racial, sexual, etc.) at the very time that some cultural critics are claiming that the fate of U.S. Latinas/os is to assimilate rather than to hybridize Anglo-American culture and transculturate between and among themselves. This essay begins to plumb the latter phenomenon in particular—that of the transculturation among “Latinas/os” in the broadest sense where “Latina/o” encompasses Latin Americans exiled to the United States who have adopted a transnational identity not bound or fixed to a single nationality from South America, Central America, the Caribbean, or Mexico, and who have commenced to identify with those generally designated as U.S. Latinas/os (Mexican-Americans, Puerto Ricans, Cuban-Americans, etc.). The vehicle for this investigation is, in this essay, a novel by a Chilean writer whose central protagonist is a Puerto Rican woman living in the Northeast of the continental United States: “A nighttime of love” and a love of the night

Numerous postcolonial scholars have written about cultural displacement and relocation from simultaneously privileged and yet historically subordinated positions as “masters” of many cultural codes and yet also as subalterns-émigrés, but as intellectual refugees within the context of the ongoing sagas of neo-colonial empire. Not surprisingly, much postcolonial theory and critique questions binarisms such as those of oppressor and oppressed, center and periphery, rationality and primitivism, and negative and positive images. Not only does it question the fundamental binary of there, aqui y allá, not only geo-politically but psychically speaking. One of the most persuasive drafts of chapter 9 — “The Postcolonial and the Postmodern: The Agency” — in his 1994 book The Location of Culture.

Critiquing Richard Rorty’s concept of rational liberalism and liberalism’s categorical certainties, Bhabha quotes two scholars of postcoloniality, an anthropologist and cultural critic, respectively: “Liberal bourgeois culture has historical limits in colonialism,” says Ranajit Guha (1989) ... Veena Das reinscribes [this dynamic] into the affective language of metaphor and the body: Subaltern rebellions can only provide a nighttime of love.” (Bhabha 1992: 63). Bhabha's
that seems merely evocative, poetically clichéd, and even lulling until one thinks of the pairing with “subaltern rebellions” and the emphasis on affect, on feeling, in the context of long, horrific legacies and continuing realities of oppression as psychic as well as physical repression. Nighttime is that time which structurally and mythically signals the “world turned upside down,” as Cuban writer and cultural critic Severo Sarduy commented of Chilean writer José Donoso’s novel 

*El lugar sin límites* [The Place That Hath No Limits] (Sarduy 1989: 33). But, moreover, and as this novel’s title would indicate, “nighttime” is a space-time where shapes shift and boundaries blur in the darkness. It is, moreover, a space-time as a metaphor for cultural work, redefines diasporas and borders, exiles men, sexual, ethnic, and racial identities, and social positioning in terms of power, agency, unmooring and deterritorializing these variables from specific conventional, expected, or “dominant” values.

The form of discourse that VeenaDas seeks—“where affective writing develops its own language”—is, I argue, manifest in *Living at Night*, a novel by transcultural Chilean editor and author Mariana Romo-Carmona and published in 1997 by the Spinsters Ink Press. Romo-Carmona is a native of Santiago, Chile, who has lived in the United States for the past thirty years, has taught in the MFA Program at Goddard College, Plainfield, Vermont, for twelve years, and currently teaches at Queens College (the JSM Center for Worker Education & Labor Studies in Manhattan). In this debut novel, she tells the story set in 1977 of a young, working-class Puerto Rican lesbian in her twenties—Erica García—who finds herself in snowbound New England—Willimantic, Connecticut, to be specific. A college dropout, she works the nightshift as an aide in an institution for mentally “disabled” women, the Training School for the Retarded. Erica mourns a failing relationship with Jewish girlfriend Millie who leaves her for a wealthy young Wasp woman named Scooter. “An interpellated or hailed subject conscripted into existence by the state,” to borrow psychoanalytic theorist Judith Butler’s concept, and, furthermore, complicitly required to administer it (Butler 1997: 106–31), Erica feels herself sinking deeper and deeper into her role as an accomplice of the state following orders to keep these institutionalized women—supposedly “retarded” and “disturbed”—socially controlled with doses of neuroleptics and phenobarbitals. She both works at night, the “graveyard shift,” and lives in a growing darkness more fearful than the hours between dusk and dawn, of cultural and emotional amnesia in which neither she nor the women would seem to have any other except that of a case history. And yet, paradoxically, this “mere” case history to disrupt such amnesia. A case history is still a kind of history; a history of each of them functioning as the multiple tips of the iceberg of experience and memory that lies, glacially and darkly waiting to melt, beneath a presumably sanitized and normalized polished surface of institutionalization.1

Erica becomes increasingly aware of the parallels between her own cultural disorientation [“I walked on the dead sidewalks of Willimantic, and I ate at the night diner, feeling a sense of community with the hookers, the drug dealers and pimps. It was like being in church” (Romo-Carmona 1997: 154)] and the pain of emotional isolation of these inmate women. It is precisely this awareness that
severed and damaged so much as embracing and giving these still bleeding, crying, and flowing parts a kind of coherence, a legible shape and meaning both through remembrance and through her acts of loving acceptance in the present. As novelist Martha Gellhorn informs her readers, “Sometimes, usually at night, driving with the top down, I’d stop the car on a quiet stretch of highway and look at the sky. The world made some kind of sense, and there was a part of it, a small part, that was mine.”

Various online reviews have described this novel as one about belonging. Important to note, however, is that a sense of existence and belonging occurs under the covers of night, of what would seem like alienation and erasure, the cancellation of distinctiveness, including that of identity. To chase away anguish, depression, detachment, and loneliness, Erica goes for walks “in the cold night” (23). One of her nocturnal walks is described as follows:

I headed south and crossed the metal bridge that connects the old districts left over from the growth spurt of the 1940s with the rest of the city. The river below was a soothing sight, reflecting stars and streetlights, although I knew that during the day it was shallow and dirty. (24–26)

The feeling expressed in Living at Night is not so different from the sentiments declaimed in the spoken-word poetry prologue of Afro-Puerto Rican writer Pedro compacto’s well-known novel Down These Mean Streets, first published in 1967:

Man! How many times have I stood on the rooftop of my broken-down building at night and watched the bulb-lit world below.

Like somehow it’s different at night, this my Harlem.
There ain’t no bright sunlight to reveal the stark naked truth of garbage-lepered streets.
Gone is the drabness and hurt, covered by a friendly night.
It makes clean the dirty-faced kids.

... YEE-AH! I feel like part of the shadows that make company for me in this warm amigo darkness. (Thomas 1967: ix)

All three passages, this latter from Thomas’s Down These Mean Streets and the two former ones from Romo-Carmona’s Living at Night, conjure a night time tender in relation to the banal indifference (even brutality) of a day in the United States, in Willimantic, Connecticut, as in Harlem, New York, for a Puerto Rican and/or a Latina/o who falls between the cracks of race, class, and, in Erica’s case, an ambiguous sex-gender system. Of course, this tenderness of the night is double edged. As the locus, the space-time, of feeling alive and part of something greater than oneself, the night life is also the location of trauma and the damages of everyday violence. And as the night world of what happens in the absence of light and in the absence of others, it is also the scene of humiliation, despair, and depression. (26–28)
threatens the ego with what lies beyond the ego’s defensive boundaries. In other words, the night is tender in as much as the ego is caught up in a process of redefinition of its own borders. In his mixed-genre memoir _Working in the Dark: Reflections of a Poet of the Barrio_ (1992), New Mexican Chicano writer Jimmy Santiago Baca describes “nighttime” as a psychic and cultural, not merely geophysical, space-time in which “the encroaching darkness that began to envelop me forced me to re-form and give birth to myself in the chaos” (1992: 10), a frightening process, no doubt. Carmona’s novel temporalizes as well as spatializes this nightwork by referring back to the growth spurt of the 1940s, a time when many Puerto Ricans would have been and were recruited to work in factories in the Northeast of the United States. The novel places the growth spurt in the past (the 1940s) and the night becomes haunted by history, a haunting that suggests “night” embedded in historical and material constructs of race, ethnicity, gender, and class.

**Abjection and transculturation as abjection**

Romo-Carmona’s novel, without the obligatory macho protagonists of night-centered texts such as _Down These Mean Streets_ or Santiago Baca’s _Working in the Dark_, runs the risk of being dismissed as “histrionic” with a sentimental ending to it. In fact, _Living at Night_ was published in the “Coming of Age Series” by Spinsters Press of Duluth, Minnesota (now located in Denver, CO), a press founded in 1980 and, in their promo words, committed to publishing works by women writing from the peripheral with fat women, Jewish women, lesbians, old women, poor women, runaways, writing from the margins and edges of society, as well as putting women back into the history of the past.
Accordingly, this novel might be judged of “inferior quality” or “slight literary value” by a critic schooled in or ideologically committed to the rather abstract criteria of “complexity,” “artful design,” or “masterful writing.” Such a critic would undoubtedly frown upon what would seem at first glance merely “identitarian” criteria for publication by Spinners Ink Press. Surely, a book should not be published just because it is written by or about women who are fat, or Jewish, or lesbian, or poor, or rural, or disabled, or all of the above! And, such a critic might ask, shouldn’t we be suspicious of a narrative whose characters, setting, and plot match this “bill of sales” so closely?

Of course, there are other ways to look at the press’s so-called “identitarian” criteria and the novel’s narrative fulfillment of it. The key phrase is “women writing from the periphery.” Most of the adjectives employed to describe the periphery in the press’s promotional blurb—“fat,” “Jewish,” “lesbian,” “old,” “poor,” and so on—strongly suggest that this periphery consists not merely of the marginal, but of the socially and culturally rejected. The suggestion is that marginality cannot be understood simply as those with less power or those who are invisible, but rather those who have been made invisible because they have been relegated in many cases to the obscene, to a realm both of the unseen and the not-to-be-seen. In that sense, one might say that the press and this novel in particular are concerned with the culturally abjected or abject. And, I argue, the abject cannot be dismissed under the rubric of “identity politics” or what some critics might call “victimology” or “politics as victimology.” Rather, the abject (not limited to people, things, and matter itself as it can be something not even recognized as a thing [Kristeva 1982: 116]) involves the inseparability of concepts of identity and aesthetics (defined as inquiry into the judgments made about the value of things, of qualities, and of perceptions). A consideration of aesthetics need not mean foreclosing questions of power.

Like other scholars before me, I call on French psychoanalyst and linguist Kristeva’s definition of the abject in her by now famous 1980 essay “Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection.” The abject is that which is of the self and yet the self will not assimilate, much less accept even while drawn to it through fascination. Instead, the self throws it away, ab-jects it from itself as the “not-self,” in fact, constitute the “me.” That which is deemed abject according to this definition includes blood, excrement, and its equivalents (including disease, decay, and physical death and disintegration, most notably the corpse). It also includes the maternal body and the threat of non-differentiation from it and sexual expression that violates patriarchal heteronormative social ordering and boundary-making, such as incest, homosexuality, and miscegenation. With regard to the latter, Carmona’s novel reminds readers that very “often the children of ‘mixed-race’ marriages between blacks and whites were institutionalized in places such as the Training School for the Retarded (68). In fact, of the three main historic Latino groups in the United States (Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, and Cubans) and even minority ethnic groups in general, Puerto Ricans have found themselves in a particularly vulnerable spot in relationship to medical and educational institutions that have pathologized and/or stigmatized people of color. Whatever economic gains were achieved from the time of the Great Migration from 1946 to 1964, whatever...
Ricans the target of many kinds of injustices, including the injustice of being stereotyped as a perennial part of a “culture of poverty” marked by failure, underachievement, and even mental instability. Lacanian psychoanalyst Patrice Gherovici’s study from 2003 entitled The Puerto Rican Syndrome is to some extent implicated in these associations by its very title that links a particular nationality and culture with a certain kind of hysteria that manifests itself in times of high stress (such as war). The historically and socioeconomically constructed “abjection” of Puerto Ricans is hardly a thing of the past.

About the role of the abject in defining the borders of the self, Kristeva opines, “Object and abjection are my safeguards. The primers of culture” (1982: 2). In fact, Judith Butler in her book The Psychic Life of Power points out that the abject is not only the repressed, but the *foreclosed*, that about which we are not supposed to even think, the unthinkable. She writes:

> Freud distinguishes between repression and foreclosure, suggesting that a repressed desire might once have lived apart from its prohibition, but that foreclosed desire is rigorously barred, constituting the subject through a certain kind of preemptive loss. Elsewhere I have suggested that the foreclosure of homosexuality appears to be foundational to a certain heterosexual version of the subject. The formula “I have never loved” someone of similar gender and “I have never lost” any such person predicates the “I” on the “never-never” of that love and loss. Indeed, the ontological accomplishment of heterosexual “being” is traced to this double negation.... (Butler 1997: 23)

To accept this “not-me,” to assimilate what has been denied existence, would entail the annihilation of self as previously conceived, or a radical transformation of the “monstrous” from the perspective of the guarded, fortified ego. Kristeva remarks that the abject is not experienced as the Other outside of the self but is not merely the Other versus the self, although it is experienced “being opposed to I” (Kristeva 1982: 1). It is the Other within the self, I, or self (the rejected self) or, equally disturbing from the perspective of a fortified self, it is the “I” within the Other (Kristeva 1982: 15). As such, the abject and abjection are central to questions of definition and form, of order and sense, in short, to identity but to identity as a branch of aesthetics with its psychological and political implications usually manifesting themselves in phobic and persecutory reactions. Furthermore, in violating the presumed difference between self and other inside and outside (because the abject is a part of self/society spit out or rejected from the body/body politic), abjection as condition and tactics involves not only marginalization, but, moreover, a crisis of boundaries or borders. It entails the crossing of lines that were not supposed to be crossed, returning the “not-me” to the “me,” turning the me into the Other, the *blurring of distinctions*, a blurring which “night” is one of the most powerful metaphors and which reaches tropes...
abjection and confrontation with culturally induced shame, fear, and repudiation across interrelated levels—sexual, racial, ethnic, metaphysical and so on. Living at Night...
and abjection as a transculturating knowledge of night’s dark sackcloth of repulsion and fascination exists simultaneously on at least three levels with regards to the novel Living at Night: intra-narratologically, extra-narratologically (on a biographical level and the intersection point between biography and narrative persona), and inter-narratologically.

Within the framework of the story of Living at Night the Puerto Rican lesbian narrator Erica García experiences transculturation as abjection from page one an abjection or, rather, a transculturation that she does not reject even though her interests of self-preservation she attempts to control it. The temporal, psychological, and cultural night is her time of trial and tribulation, but it is also her time for living at night: “It was the night before Halloween and I was twenty-one, or was I? I survived the next turn [of the wheel] and made it to work on time ... I was driving breakneck speed over poorly lit back roads to avoid being late” (6). It is only with transit, coming and going, moving through a dark, blurred landscape of the night she feels she belongs to the place. “[T]he only Puerto Rican around for miles in all directions” (2), she has “no illusions of being the typical New Englander” (6). But she is so close to self-annihilation, “taking curves with the edge of [her] tires” (6), she ethnically and sexually abjected, becomes “part of the landscape,” no more a part of the customary social-scape than the women inmates for whom “ward was home” (20). From whom Erica watches in their alienation, illnesses, and accidents. Though Erica watches her home “on the edge,” in the realm of the abjected even while she attempts to hang on the wheel, so to speak, the reader experiences transculturation as abjection with various counts. This constant crossing from one place to another, and the hybridization of places and, moreover, transmission of one place into another, characterizes the experience of many Latinas/os in the Americas. Chicano writer Richard Rodriguez has expressed as much in a speech delivered November 1994 at a White House conference.

... adiós was never part of the Mexican-American or the Puerto Rican vocabulary. We didn’t turn our backs on the past. We kept going back and forth, between past and future. After a few months of work in New York or Los Angeles, we would cross the border. We were commuting between centuries, between rivals. And neither country understood (Byrd, ed. 1996: 217)

This coming and going is particularly significant for Puerto Ricans. Alberto Sandoval-Sánchez’s essay “Puerto Rican Identity Up in the Air: Air Migration, its Cultural Representations, and Me ‘Cruzando el Charco,’” which focuses on the cultural and political implications of the mass air migrations of Puerto Ricans between Puerto Rico and the continental United States—that guagua aérea—testifies to the centrality of a coming and going, a continual crossing of borders.

The airport is without question a revolving door where Puerto Rican identity is at the crossroads of a nomadic journey. As migrants dwindle airports and airplanes in search for a homeland, their identities are...
approach Puerto Rican emigrant identity after air migration means to define it in the context of mobility, crisscrossing, transitivity, dispersal, errancy, discontinuity, and fragmentation, to place it within the experience of a metaphorical nomadism and exile, and to understand it within the philosophical habitat of separation, uprooting, distance, estrangement, loss, nostalgia, homelessness, and ultimately death as immigrants realize the impossibility of returning to their homeland.

(Sandoval-Sánchez 1997: 194)

In *Living at Night*, the Puerto Rican narrator’s coming and going and being between several space-times is encoded, among other ways, in the references to the constant jouncing and careening over poorly lit back roads from a rented apartment to the Training School for the Retarded and eventually to the nursing “home” that she shares with her mother. Erica feels the displacement, fragmentation, and alienation that Sandoval-Sánchez describes. However, the conditions of abjection which she experiences create the conditions for a kind of uncanny integration of the fragmented elements of her life, to the extent that separation as loss is not the equivalent of separation in terms of containment or keeping things in their designated places.

The text subjects the reader to a kind of cultural disorientation with references heterogeneous as “Halloween” (1), “Puerto Rican” (2), “George Sand” (7), “Víctor Hugo” (8), “Chris Williamson” (14), “Carlos Santana” (18), “post-Nixon era” (26), “direct-care aide” (27), and “sociology professor ... with an English accent” (74) along with repeated references to nighttime, physical and mental suffering, blood, urine, and disinfectant, floor mopping, grumbling inmates or “clients,” and destructive psychotropic drugs designed to “keep things under control” (42). The reader encounters a set of references that one might expect to find in a Latina text specifically, a narrative by or about a “Puerto Rican” woman. Except for references to Mami, Nélida (Erica’s sister), poems by Julia de Burgos (10), strong “bustelones” (162), espiritismo (142), some beaches in Puerto Rico (122), and the “Lucy Show” along with “West Side Story” (253)—the latter two common practically obligate cultural markers in continental Puerto Rican texts, nothing functions to place the reader in familiar or expected territory—no memories of *la isla*, no mouth-watering descriptions of food except for a few references to “arroz con leche,” no literal “*brincando el charco*” (jumping the puddle) from the island to the mainland or *Willimantic* to New York City, Nuyorica. Consequently, though Erica seems resigned to her melancholy nightlife as an aide in the Training School for the Retarded, the reader experiences dislocation, a cultural texturelessness slipping the ice of the Connecticut winters, a rather profound “lostness” reflective of the lostness and unsettling the vicarious pleasures of the text and certainly those generally sought in a work by a “Latina” or by a lesbian Latina, for that matter. When I taught this book during the Spring 2001 semester at UNC-Chapel Hill, the students remarked on how surprised they were to find that besides the plus inmates or “clients” at the Training School, the story quietly takes for granted...
providing no explanatory signposts on the journey into and through Erica's world. The text “normalizes” Erica's world but in “normalizing” it without blunting edges of loss and melancholy, it manages to press “normalization” into the service of abjection, quite literally transculturating the “normal” and the “abnormal” such that normality is suffused with abjection and vice versa.

The reader also experiences transculturation as abjection in the process of following Erica's experiences, her journey into and through the night. Though well acquainted with the night, even a creature of it [at one point her girlfriend Millie compares her to a “vampire” (59), and though “too dark for this area of Connecticut or not feminine enough,” (161), she feels more comfortable “living at night,”] the night brings Erica its abjecting terrors, too, a reminder of the double edged tenderness of the dark. She confesses, “The night might be good for a girl it only turned me into an ogre” (111), a statement which reminds readers that it is after all the time when “monsters come out of their lairs to roam the park, the empty lots at the city's edge” (Donoso 1979: 189). Following her breakup with Millie and returning to her apartment at dusk, Erica compares herself to a caged animal: “An orangutan, maybe. Any type of large primate who is smart enough to suffer from being caged up but is too clumsy to attempt to get away” (141). The mention of the orangutan, human demoted to simian, recalls Edgar Allan Poe's Gothic tale “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” and underscores the liminal moments in Henry David Thoreau's Walden (1854)—and in Walden there are such mindscapes shadowed by intimations of slavery, exploitation, and violence—the sky and pond threaten with their dark depths, casting the ego into an abyss of abjecting fear, imparting a feeling quite different from the sometimes self-cultivation of the self in Transcendentalist Concord. Here darkness is not comforting as it usually is for the “too dark” Erica who finds solace in Tina, her black friend after Millie leaves her for a wealthy white Anglo-Saxon Protestant, a Wasp. 

In the wake of the nocturnal attack in the woods, Erica gives up her nightshift for a dayshift (129). One of her primary motives for giving up the nightshift and transposing to a dayshift is to become a “normal person” (60) for her girlfriend Millie—that is, so that Erica can spend more time with Millie by better coordinating with her college person schedule. But while she is not quite willing to acknowledge that Millie is cheating on her with Scooter, Erica finds it “strange that Millie was just as busy during the days as she used to be when I worked at night” (129). Despite her new schedule, Erica experiences her own being in terms of a profound loss, a loss underscoring her limitations and her ability to cope with trauma—in short, wounding as her attempts to maintain some kind of sustainable “merger” with Erica’s break-up with Millie precipitates a temporary psychic splitting with Erica's two selves, her public image and her private self, her conscious self and her unconscious self, in the form of an analogy with the night and the day, with dark and light, with abjection and normality.
different people, day and night” (154). Her day job is supposed to signal that she is away from the “not-me” abject toward reparative narcissism: “I was materializing something solid, out of a fog, and stepping into myself. But not quite. In the back of my mind, Millie moved as I moved ... [c]hasing my shadow” (155). Erica is haunted by Other whom she has lost. Her “self” is both itself and other to itself—the “not shadowing the “me” at every turn, returning the self to a diminished image of a “mirror of love,” the time that Erica and Millie shared before Erica began her graveyards. Now the shared time is echoed in a mere shadow flitting uncannily through her thoughts, interfering with any reparative narcissism, with any “stepping into myself.”

Nighttime and its synecdochical figures such as shadows assume a monstrous “tender” aspect in these passages. These and other parts of Living at Night are reminiscent of an earlier Chilean work-writer Diamela Eltit’s and photographer Errázuriz’s El infarto del alma (1994)—that focuses on the existences and relations between inmates in an asylum in Putaendo, Chile, for those deemed “psychologically disturbed.” To point to the parallels between a story involving two lesbian women estranged from one another and a photo-text meditation on the intense relations between inmates in a mental asylum runs the risk of reinforcing the worst social stereotypes, with a long history in medical sexology, against same-sex particularly women. But the risk seems to be worth it as the parallels are significant.
and even to this day gender-and-sexuality nonconformists have been placed in asylums. The consequences on relationships between those socially marginalized to such a degree is that these relationships tend to be both more intense and volatile. They take their shape and substance from the very dynamic of social abjection—from ostracization, monster-ization. In the text to Errázuriz’s photographs of the inmates of the asylum, Eltit’s central image for passionate attachments between inmates is the Siamese twins joined at the hip and shoulder. These Siamese twins are considered miraculous but also and more often monstrous on account of their undifferentiation, an undifferentiation that is relegated to the abject because it threatens, confuses the socially policed boundaries between “me” and the “not-me,” the self and the Other. In particular, figures of Siamese have been deployed as a trope for lesbianism and lesbian mergers. With regard to a more generalized image of Siamese Twins, I quote from the section “El Otro mi otro” of Eltit’s and Errázuriz’s book:

Los alienados del pueblo de Putaendo ya portan los signos de una fatalidad. Arrastra el drama primario, la tragedia irreversible de la estallada sus mentes contra un laberinto simbólico frente al cual simplemente debilitaron letalmente sus defensas. Resultaron los vencidos, los derrotados en su confrontación prematura e imaginaria con el otro. Con la derrota de la lesión que sufrió su primer ser, sólo arrastran ahora la memoria estigmatizada de un siamés partido por los contornos de un punzante irregular espejo. Envizados por la demanda de una necesidad impuesta, transitan en medio de un mundo que se les ha vuelto incomprendible, porque se negó a obedecer sus órdenes. Sus órdenes de amor.

As with Freud’s interest in “abnormal” psychology as the key to the workings of normative relations, Eltit’s text offers the image of the Siamese twins to emphasize the deepest and most primal intimacy between self and other—the merging of “me” and “the not-me,” between lover and lover under the aegis of trust and love or between mother and child. Furthermore, Eltit’s narrative deploys the scenario of the separation or splitting of the Siamese twins from one another to illustrate the original psychic wound inflicted by society and the Law (in the Lacanian sense) cannot tolerate the “mad” love of the merger between self and other. The late modern society (generally patriarchal, heterosexist, racially discriminatory, classist, and classificatory, etc.) asks that each social subject internalize abjection, distinguishing between “the me” and the “not-me,” sacrifice the merger between self and Other that constitutes the “monstrous” socially (a)jectionable Siamese twins.

The Siamese twins—the two bodies joined into one and generally sharing and some portion of the circulatory system—raise fundamental questions about identity and self-identification. Though there is one pair of twins in Romo-Carmona’s Living at Night (the Kiniry twins, inmates of the Training School), Siamese twins actually appear in the text. However, the novel is clearly concerned with the question of conversion and the question of the self, the identity of the alienated other within the constraining framework of the asylums and prisons of society.
on how and whether Erica as a working class Puerto Rican lesbian belongs to England, to the northeast “Yankee” mainland of the United States. The meditative is a subtle one and manifests itself in casually dropped clues—“only Puerto island around for miles” (2) and “my old car” (2) that is falling apart (i), the implication being that Erica does not have money to get her car fixed or to buy another. As the story progresses, references to her mother—her “Mami”—and her sister Nélida start to appear scattered through accounts of Erica’s graveyard shifts at Training School and of her failing and finally failed relationship with Millie.

Slowly, it becomes apparent that the shadow flitting through Erica’s thoughts, the figure whom she herself shadows (profound grief makes a ghost out of a living person so that one haunts one’s former life) is someone other, perhaps more primary, Millie. This someone emerges out of the dark womb not of night per se, but of a gaping wound in the forehead of an epileptic inmate whose “black leather helmet” (169) does not protect her head during a seizure:

I [Erica] don’t know why I thought of Mami at that point, but her face a veiled presence appearing before me, stubbornly, as I watched her. Quickly the towels kept staining with Coral’s blood, and I struggled to keep both sides of her head together. (170)

As with several other major incidents at the Training School—for instance, the death from pneumonia of Christina (5), one of the inmates or “clients”—Coral’s trauma returns Erica to her m(Other), to the Other of herself, the maternal body, and more specifically, to the abjected Puerto Rican maternal body of Mami left behind in time but also repressed in Erica’s memory. Though Erica takes a day job, she is still in the space-time zone of mother night covered or baptized from head to foot in Coral’s blood. The scene is primal and rehearses the trauma of birth—except this second birth eventually results in a return to, not a separation from, the maternal body. The blood and bloody head imagery connects Coral to Erica’s mother, whom she had suffered a stroke, a cerebral hemorrhage. Even Coral’s very name conjures Erica’s mother in complex ways—by its referent to coral reefs (typical of the Caribbean) and because the name itself is generally preferred among the working class, by implication, both Coral and Erica’s Mami belong.

The process of caring for Coral signals a kind of psychic integration of the “me” and the “not-me” through the acceptance of what has been abjected. What has been abjected is not only the maternal body of her mother as mother, but also her role as the carrier and purveyor of Puerto Rican culture—in terms of language, customs, memories, allegiances, and so on. This culture has been eclipsed in the Anglo-dominant cultural landscape of New England. However, like the Chicano poet Jimmy Santiago Baca’s memoir living on “in your darkness, in your cell, year after year after groping in your imagination for illumination that will help you make sense of yourself” (Santiago Baca 1992: 20) or “the Mayans, at the time of the eclipse rekindling their torches the altar flame” (20), Erica’s unconscious does not allow her to forget her Puerto Rican heritage. Of course, Puerto Rican heritage does not constitute a

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freedom and independence, and with an acknowledgment of and identification with the working class and the dark-skinned, whether Puerto Rican or African-American.

I use the phrase “mother night” to compress a number of allusions into the relationship between notions of “mother” and “night.” Beyond the reference to Vonnegut’s 1961 novel by that very title, the gendering of night as a female or source, a “mother.” In etymological terms, the word “mother” has been associated as a derivation, through Middle and Old English, of the Latin mater that is closely associated with the term materia for physical matter itself. In the Latin language used in the work, physical matter, mythologically birthed by chaos or night, is gendered feminine as is night or nox (f). Roman mythology personifies night as the goddess Nocturna, and Romo-Carmona’s novel follows a classical constellation of associations, with calling attention to them as such. It rolls together associations of night with mother with birth, and night with the physical and psychological formation and transformation of marginalized or abjected identities. Subsequent to the incident of the “nocturnal” baptism in Coral’s blood, Erica is involved in a car accident that becomes like the inmates, drugged out on Demerol to kill the pain of whipping. She has transculturated further into their world of mental and physical abjection of “dark despair” (86). Her African-American friend Tina helps her through the darkest hour, as do her resolutions to return to college and find her mother, resolutions which entail reconnecting with her sister Nélida and her niece Marisol.

On the one hand, the last three chapters of Living at Night would seem to depart from the association of transculturation with abjection in favor of reparative narcissism. In the process of discovering her mother’s precise whereabouts in Manchester, Connecticut, nursing home mostly filled with white Englishers (323), Erica gets a new car and a new girlfriend. Such gestures are conventionally assimilationist, hallmarks of living in the light of “American,” with the emphasis on starting anew or accommodating through acquisition. However, the car she acquires is a recycled one, not new. And, her girlfriend is not a Wasp, but an Anglo New Englander of whatever class, but rather a French Canadian. In Connecticut specifically and the United States more generally, a French Canadian is an outsider. Furthermore, Erica confronts her innermost feelings of abjection, the shame experienced growing up as Puerto Rican, how she and her family were seen outside the neighborhood (236), and her despair which she allows her African-American friend to doctor with her survivalist sense of sisterhood (257). That Living at Night should be a note of such strong solidarity between Puerto Ricans and African-Americans as to associate this solidarity with night—the time when Erica most vividly remembers her bond with Tina (257)—demonstrates the uses to which transculturation as such are put in Living at Night. Such abjection entails certain terrors but it also paves the way for multiethnic alliances. If Tina’s and Erica’s alliance is any indication, such alliance between the culturally, ethnically, racially abjected—a fascination that overarches the plot’s repetition, that merges what has been divided, separated, segregated, or segmented in the narratives about national and transnational identity—are represented as a default state of grace. This deterritorialization confers upon the other characters’ their own misspellings and mispronunciations of the narrator’s name as Erica Gracia a regulatory significance. Erica Gracia could be read as the elided Spanish equivalent of Erica Garcia — the inverted Spanish version suggesting, in its non-standardness, a transnationaledness to the story, to the very narrative itself.
Becoming Latina: Cultural transvestism and intertextuality

Transculturation as border-crossing abjection and vice versa figures extra-narratologically (beyond the narrative, in terms of biography) and inter-narratologically (between texts). Not only do the characters of Romo-Carmona's novel—Erica and her “charges,” the institutionalized women—live mostly in the realm of the culturally abjected, the dark “night” of the supposedly bright day, so does the author herself to the extent that she identifies with a Latina lesbian. In as much as the novel is written in the first-person about a Puerto Rican woman, the author, a Chilean or Latin American by birth, “becomes” a U.S. Latina—Chilean to Puerto Rican and, furthermore, Chilean middle class lesbian to working class Puerto Rican lesbian. Moreover, the author identifies as a Latina lesbian committed to progressive politics. I agree with scholar and writer Lawrence La Fountain-Stokes' evaluation of Romo-Carmona as the “key member” of “US Third World feminism” led by lesbians of color such as Gloria Anzaldúa, Chloris Moraga, Luz María Umpierrez, Juanita Ramos (Díaz Cotton) and Audre Lorde” (Summer 80). Repeatedly, Romo-Carmona has demonstrated a Third World feminist vision of an action directed toward certain kinds of ideological and structural change.

In as much as the novel is written in the first-person about a Puerto Rican woman, the author, a Chilean or Latin American by birth, “becomes” a U.S. Latina—from Chilean to Puerto Rican and, furthermore, Chilean middle class lesbian to working class Puerto Rican lesbian."

On numerous occasions she has spoken out against homophobia and racism in Latin America and the United States and has educated her audiences about the egregious civil rights violations that occurred during and subsequent to the military coup in Santiago, Chile, on September 11, 1973. She has plumbed in detail what it is like to live as a person whose life is not acknowledged and is threatened on a daily basis. Recently she edited Spanish-language coming-out stories by and for parents of Latinas and Latino gay men entitled Conversaciones: relatos por madres y padres de hijas y hijos gay. Furthermore, instead of emphasizing her status as a Latin American or emigré, in 1999, two years after the novel Living at Night, she published a short story collection entitled Speaking Like an Immigrant. If Living at Night turns night into “Latina time,” the title of this short story collection underscores an identity as an “immigrant” and, unpretentiously, an immigrant who still speaks like one. Romo-Carmona writes and speaks in English and Spanish. She is fully bilingual bi-graphic, and she has lived in the United States for over thirty years. But, it seems that she is determined to identify and side with immigrants, not repudiate them as so many do in this country filled with no one but immigrants except Native Americans (not to be confused with nativists). A title such as Speaking Like an Immigrant” does not allow the reader or the writer to escape into either romance of exile or bourgeois upward mobility within the system. It represents
Gender and Geography, this is not the first time this kind of transculturation has taken place with regards to Mariana Romo-Carmona. Many questions arise in light of this new critical discourse, and Romo-Carmona's transformation hardly exists in isolation; on the contrary. It symptomatizes a transculturality for which a widely acknowledged critical discourse is just beginning to be elaborated. Many positions may be advanced about this type of transculturalism or what some might call cultural transvestism, including the perhaps hasty judgment that, in the case of writers from Latin America, it is the product of expedient publishing and marketing strategies. After all, "Latina/o" is hot right now in a way that it has never been before, when it played second fiddle to things Latin American. Following and elaborating on La Foy Stokes's claim about "a profound gesture of solidarity of the type that precisely women of color feminism in the United States" (81), I likewise contend that what might seem like "mere" cultural transvestism is a legitimate and exciting case of transculturalism. It is a transculturality in which a Latin American writer makes common cause with the cultural struggle of "U.S. Latinas" around issues of gender, sexual orientation, and cultural amnesia and subsequent attempts at recovering the context of Anglo-American culture that is itself being changed. This makes a "common cause" is represented as well as produced by an aesthetics and politics of abjection, the embrace of whatever falls or has been placed within the category of the "object." However, controversial this observation may be, there is no question that a number of Latin American intellectuals have considered U.S. Latina/o culture beneath a déclassé contamination of "Culture" with a big "C," a view shared with and by culturally jingoistic segments of Anglo-American culture. And, of the many cultures that fall under the rubric "Latina/o" and of the three main ones in the United States (Mexican, Puerto Rican, and Cuban), Puerto Rican culture is most historically "abjected" as a more than 400-year-old colony, first of Spain then of the United States.

In view of these attitudes, Romo-Carmona's novel could be seen as a rewrite of the well-known Chilean writer José Donoso's 1970 novel El osceno pájaro de la noche (a source, by the way, for Eltit's and Errázuriz's El infarto del alma), in which a Puerto Rican working-class lesbian is cast as the central protagonist and heroine who confronts the cultural night of the soul. Indeed, Romo-Carmona's novel takes cultural inflections other than mere publishing industry opportunism. Instead of opportunism, one is compelled to speak of a transculturation as intertextuality as abjection. To refer to intertextuality—the way in which one text references a previous one or another one viewed as "prior" or "outside" the text question—in terms of abjection may seem strange at first thought. However, one considers abjection as that which points to what is supposed to lie outside the boundaries of the self or a given text, the logic of this association may be appreciated. A categorization of "inter-" or between-ness does rest, in part, on the categorization of something lying beyond or outside the covers of a given book or the stanza of a given poem. But despite this directional similarity with the abject, with what is posited to exist outside and yet is found within the self or the text, intertextuality usually plays or is made to play a role diametrically opposed to abjection, to the humbling (and even humiliation) implicit in abjection. Critics and creative writers
Significantly, however, Romo-Carmona’s novel is intertextual in subtle, elemental ways. It does not announce or frame its intertextuality in the way it practices it except perhaps when explicit references are made. These are to popular songs or popular U.S. customs such as Halloween, things that are accessible to most people living in the United States and that do not require special training or education. They just require memory and a knack for the osmotic absorption of culture that floats around us in the form of, for example, popular tunes. (By the way, Romo-Carmona’s latest novel is entitled *Lo que queda en la memoria* or *What Remains in Memory.*) In fact, *Living at Night* pokes fun at “high-brow” forms of intertextuality even within lesbian culture(s). The high-festivities with which the novel opens provide an occasion for poking fun at potentially pretentious allusions. Erica, the Puerto Rican protagonist, decides to go trick-or-treating as George Sand, a famous straight feminist from France, who was born into the upper classes (turned a baroness by marriage), but who, perhaps her class privileges in the process of identifying with those of the working classes and becoming a supporter of the 1848 revolution in France and a proponent of Christian socialism, and living as a bohemian. Tina, Erica’s African-American friend’s response is, “Erica, you look ridiculous—What are you, some Victorian lesbian?” (9). The Wasp wealthy Scooter answers before Erica has a chance to explain, “Radclyffe Hall, to be exact!” (9). This answer is anything but exact; it confuses George Sand with Radclyffe Hall. Despite her privilege, Scooter does not know her lesbian heritage. Her reply could be interpreted as a sign of desire to be identified with an upper-crust British lesbian (even though she’s disguised as Robin Hood) or her baiting of Erica, whose class politics and opinion are far removed from Hall’s. On the one hand, there is something campy and subversive about a working class Puerto Rican woman dressed as the poly-French feminist George Sand and being mistaken for the very Anglo Radclyffe Hall. The latter was the lesbian author of the infamous *The Well of Loneliness*, a novel that became the object of obscenity trials in both England and the United States for its showcasing of several relationships between Stephen, a woman, and the upper classes, with women of classes “beneath” hers. However, despite her sexual gender dissidence (she was a lesbian who dressed as a man and was known around the name of “John”), she was known for her conservative politics (say crypto-fascism) and for her insistence on dressing like an upper-class gentleman, a lord-of-the-manor type. On the other hand, Tina’s comment “What are you, some Victorian lesbian?”—seems to be aimed at bringing out any high-minded class-bound “whiteness” or as a check to ensure that Erica’s costume up is only a costume after all, a transvestism that tricks the desire for the figure of passing as white, as straight, or as an upper-class lesbian (dressed as a man as a rewriting of Donoso’s novel, among other things, Romo-Carmona’s *Living at Night* is, however, intertextual by definition. It is ghosted by the same spirit that haunts Eltit’s and Errázuriz’s *El infarto del alma*, which is, in turn, ghosted by Donoso’s *El obsceno pájaro de la noche* about a group of old women inmates locked up in a decrepit convent (called La Casa), and an impotent (but lustful) deaf-mute man. The latter, once a personal secretary to a

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he does not reveal his sex, that is, remains disguised. The old women, the deaf-mute man, and the orphans who have also been forced to find “asylum” in La Casa, mostly at night and in the darkness of the shuttered and barred convent except for occasional forays into the world beyond its walls, usually at night.

The many ways in which Living at Night rewrites Donoso’s El obsceno pájaro de la noche, however, is material for another essay. Allow me, therefore, to develop these points briefly. First of all, Living at Night unobtrusively rewrites El obsceno pájaro de la noche. It does not quote passages from the other novel. In fact, Romo-Carrión indicated to me that she had not read Donoso’s novel when she wrote Living at Night, but that he is one of her favorite writers. So, it is possible that she knew of Donoso’s novel only by hearsay or osmosis. My intention is not to establish conventional intertextuality. This is the point: Intertextuality is a much broader phenomenon than the literal intersplicing of the details of a text into another text. Living at Night, for example, does not borrow characters’ names. It does not reproduce particular scenes or conversations or twist them so that they appear as both themselves and as other. It does not dub one text with another to create a composite text that reads as a single text. One story is not invaded with another through superimposition or textual montage. None of these things happen. And yet, Living at Night is intertextual. It is ghosted by El obsceno pájaro de la noche. The intertextuality can be described as an inter-narratological reference—a question of elemental correspondence on the most basic thematic and emotive levels, not in regard to specific references. I want to analogize the relationship between Living at Night and El obsceno pájaro de la noche with the memory of a tune without a memory of the words, the music without the text. This is intertextuality not as referentiality so much as impression and resonance, a certain vibration. The vibration entails a ghosting that is a remembering and forgetting and that leaves only the elemental, the contact zone between thought and feeling where feeling is a form of thought: feeling the censorship of thought and feelings all around one; feeling invisible; feeling invisibility and obscurity as a way of life, a form of survival; feeling not only a sympathy for but a kin to the socially despised, the socially dead; feeling one’s being as a form of not-being, an anti-identity—the deaf-mute man who becomes an honorary crone; the Latin woman who, as Monique Wittig would say, is not one; the Latin American who shades into a U.S. Latina; the marginalized who know the night to be the time when “los monstruos salen de sus guaridas, recorriendo los parques y los baldíos de las orillas de la ciudad” (Donoso 1970: 232), “when monsters come out of their lairs to roam the parks and the empty lots of the city’s edge” (Donoso 1979: 173). As monsters, as portents of the limits of the recognized world, they know their limits as their time to roam, to travel across borders and boundaries, those demarcated territories, those parks and lots. Intertextuality as resonance travels just like the “monsters” across demarcated terrain without paying tribute to it. This is essentially what Living at Night does to and with El obsceno pájaro de la noche. Readers do not need to notice the relation between the texts to enjoy and comprehend Living at Night.

On the other hand, and this is my second point, if readers do notice, do detect resonance, a similarity of impression, then they can pursue how Living at Night not only explores dislocation and transculturation as abjection and vice versa, but
again out of the ashes of its own destruction (“pájaro,” among other things, is Spanish slang for “phallus”). Instead, in Romo-Carmona’s novel, night becomes “Latina” and Latina as Puerto Rican feminist, lesbian, working class, multiethnic, multi-“racial,” and a trope for the attempt to turn abjection into a mode of self-acceptance and, I hesitate to even say it, into “love” rather than self-hatred and xenophobia.

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### A politics of relationality and the trope of night

Having said “self-acceptance” rather than “self-hatred,” I do not mean to suggest that this narrative functions as a conversion narrative that is singular or directed at the individual as in the resolution of an anguished, isolated case-history. Yes, the narrator is a first-person narrator, and yes, events are told through the eyes of one of García. But, just as her last name “García” is somewhat homophonous with the Spanish word “gracia” for “grace”—a distributed state that cannot be pinned to a single source—her story unfolds in relation to those of the women with whom she works, both her co-workers and especially the inmates of the Training School for the Retarded. Christina, Eva Nathan, Madeleine Mallard, Rosita, the Kiniry twins, Darlene, Angelina, Sally Mayo, Diane, Judy, Agnes, Betty DuMonde, Donna, Elaine, Frances, Joanie, Jean, Myra Jenkins, Gloria, and Coral, to name a few of the women inmates, are the ones who in their suffering and their isolation (the latter despite their lifelong confinement) bring out a capacity to care that goes beyond the more ego-gratifying assurances and securities of functional coupledom. The isolation and grief of these women, abandoned by their families and their closest kin, also prepare Erica to cope with her own feelings of abandonment when her girlfriend Millie, two-timing with her and a well-to-do Anglo-American woman named Scooter, finally chooses the latter because she, Scooter, does not demand or expect the intimacy, the merging of identities, that Erica wants.

Though Erica is designated as a caretaker of these inmates, a role that interpellates her into a position of power in relation to them, it is the women residents’ physical struggle to resist objectification and dehumanization, a resistance which frequently takes the form of an inassimilable abjection, that teaches her to take care of them. Who “takes care” of whom is not clearly divided into agent and patient. The “patients” furnish the motivation for Erica’s agency in a way that echoes the dedication that forms part of the front matter of Living at Night: a dedication that reads, “To the women who raised me, some of whom are younger than I...” Romo-Carmona as teacher is acknowledging a dialectical relationship with her teachers.
and not a strategy. In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Michel de Certeau (1988) distinguishes tactics from strategy by pointing out that a strategy usually implies resistance through the establishment of an oppositional identity and a particular place from which one speaks while "a tactic insinuates itself into the other, blurring the difference between self and that against which self resists" (Certeau 1988, 38 and xix). Hence, in recoding assimilation as something other than conformity or even as something other than a predictable conformity or nonconformity, *Living at Night* insinuates a Puerto Rican working-class leaning into the very symbol of "American" assimilation as cool rebellion or chivalric disillusionment—into the driver's seat of a Plymouth Valiant convertible across the "dark fields of the republic roll[ing] on under the night" (Fitzgerald 1922, 182). Or, more specifically, that Plymouth Valiant and later a Ghia carry her place to place in Connecticut as do her own two feet: Willimantic, Gurley, Manchester, and New Britain. As Lawrence La Fountain-Stokes points out in an article on representations of diasporic Puerto Rican women's queer sexualities and Romo-Carmona is "marking territory" (84), making all these locations in Connecticut part of racialized queer/lesbian and Puerto Rican Latina experiences. At first glance, the references to cars seem like capitulation to the codes of individualism *a la americana* (in the American Way) complete with the quintessential symbol of individual freedom and mobility—especially in relation to a convertible that allows the wind to blow freely through one's hair, that converts confinement in a metal frame into wide-open spaces. However, *Living at Night* tactically seizes this stock image of individualism and self-interested mobility and deracines cars from that very individualistic tradition by speeding Erica toward the Training School for the Retarded, where she and does connect with her relationally and collectively constituted "nightly" social mission, her night work, through those abjected from the daylight established and rationally legitimated identity.

*Living at Night* hitches the individualistic yet assimilationist freedom of the American automobile to the service of a relational structure of labor and social relations among the socially abjected in the Training School, the hospitals, and nursing homes. These institutions, theorized by Michel Foucault in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, as being in the labyrinthian business of control and containing body and behavior, are temporally subverted and thus transfigured through an alliance of the socially abjected, into crucibles of an awakening solidarity rather than alienation among the marginalized (Foucault 1979). Asylum and hospital become tactical grounds for the emergence of "people of the night," not merely their murderous (however bloodless, as in psycho-pharmaceutical) torture and disappearance. Such a transformation is not represented in triumphant terms under the rubric of "permanent" change. Instead, it is survivalist and could be viewed as a pro-active queer feminist pan-Latina patients' and workers' rights revision of French writer Louis-François Céline's *contemptus mundi* depictions of night and hospitals as spaces where subordinated and persecuted people may hide from the demands of a hierarchy and colonial social system. In the portion of his early 1940s novel *Journey to the End of Night*...
for that matter, as quite this kind of time out that in Céline’s work foreshadows death as a relief from the living hell of life. Abjection results not in contentment in mundi but rather in the making of a common cause between multiply loosed people marginalized or “minoritized” by an Anglo- and Anglo-identified, heteronormative, middle class U.S. society invested in this status quo, the order of the day, so to speak. Transculturated Chilean writer Romo-González sensibility in Living at Night much more closely parallels that of Chicano Santiago Baca’s Working in the Dark (1992). Inspired among other currents of politicization of affect so centrally a part of the 1970s women’s movement and the earlier African-American civil rights movement, he uses his familiarity with life on “the dark side”—quite literally during the “nightshift” in so-called “correctional” institutions such as orphanages, prisons, and hospitals—against the erasure of Chicano Latinos and others who tend to know and share the hardship and pain of marginalization and minoritarization in the dominant system. In place of contemptus mundi or a nihilistic alienation characterized of, though not exclusive to, Célinian journeys into the dark night of the self, a “nighttime of love” unfolds in Living at Night that disturbs the dreams of sleepers by embracing a transculturating abjection where night becomes “Latina,” and “Latina” manifests as Puerto Rican feminist, lesbian, working class, multiethnic, and multi-“racial.”

Living at Night is a novel, but like the plays Alberto Sandoval-Sánchez and Nancy Saporta Sternbach analyze in Stages of Life: Transcultural Performance and Identity in U.S. Latina Theater, this novel dramatizes a politics of location that acknowledges “relations of power within that space and the identity formations that emerge from it” (3). In doing this, the novel offers a politics of relationality that could be seen as the precursor or the psychic work that must take place there to be a truly viable form of what Sandoval-Sánchez and Saporta Sternbach describe as a “politics of affinity”:

A politics of affinity—embracing Chela Sandoval’s theorization of “oppositional consciousness” (1991: 11)—recognizes difference without attempting to erase uncomfortable and painful issues such as homophobia, racism, class boundaries, and AIDS. A firmly placed politics of affinity enables the protagonists ... to derive strength from their communities and their agencies. (5)

This politics of affinity needs to be both preceded and accompanied by a politics of relationality that not only acknowledges an interdependence between the Self and the Other, but the existence of the self, “the me,” as Other, the “not-me.” In other words, a politics of relationality to be fully relational must come to terms with abjection and with identity in an abjected, not a heroic or sanitized, state. Otherwise any such politics runs the risk of being easily defeated under the schismatic pressures of socially induced, socially imposed shame.

As in other Latin American and U.S. Latina/o texts, the trope of night...
Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987), Francisco Goldman's *The Long Night of White Chickens* (1992), Felipe Herrera's *Night Train to Tuxtla* (1994), and Francisco X. Alarcón's *From the Other Side of Night/De otro lado de la noche* (2002). However, in *Living at Night* this trope reaches one of the finest expressions of the politics of relationality as a series of images, figures, and scenarios of the merging of Chilean exile and Puerto Rican immigrant sensibilities, of the cultural double *allá* with an *aquí y allá*, of the culturally dominant with the culturally marginalized, of the canonically central with the canonically obscure, of the socially normative with the socially ostracized, and of the “me” with the “not-me.” Between the covers of a first novel marked under the rubric “coming-of-age” the result is quite stunning, particularly to the extent that abjection is not neutralized but instead politicized through the “living at night.”
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NOTES

1 I am grateful to my colleague María Sánchez for pointing out the double valence of a case history as both a reduction and forgetting of the subject and yet also a kind of remembering, a recorded symptomology of the body that remembers and will not allow us to forget.

2 Actually, Santiago Baca’s macho protagonist, his narrative “I,,” intermittently claims “feminine” powers of perception. During his incarceration in jail, he takes up reading Romantic poets, declaring that it is through their work (particularly that of Wordsworth) that he learned to read and write in prison. However, he rehabilitates them according to the macho code of survival (8) at the same time that he states that he becomes a woman in his heart when he writes (66).

3 Kristeva writes, “The abject has only one quality of the object—that of being opposed to I. ... Not me. Not that. But not nothing, either. A ‘something’ that I recognize as a thing. A weight of meaninglessness, about which there is nothing insignificant, and which crushes me. On the edge of non-existence and hallucination of a reality that, if I acknowledge it, annihilates me” (1982: 1–2).

4 Consider, for instance, the image of Marlene Dietrich and Greta Garbo as Siamese twins that appeared in an April Fools Day issue of a popular Berlin magazine advertising a forthcoming film entitled The Tragedy of Love. Dietrich and Garbo are represented joined at the hip and shoulders, with one arm each (Weiss 1992: 41).

5 This passage translates as follows: “The alienated ones of the town of Putaendo already carry the signs of a fatality. They drag with them the primal drama, the irreversible tragedy of having crashed their minds against a symbolic labyrinth against which they lethally lowered their defenses. They became the defeated, those who still suffered by their primary self, they now drag behind them only the stigmatized image of Siamese twins cut in half by the frame of a sharp and irregular mirror. Punished by a demand of an impossible necessity, they traverse a world that has become incomprehensible to them because it refuses to obey their orders. Their orders of and for love.”

6 About the name “Marisol” Elyse Crystall suggested to me that it contains a reference to the sun when parsed into “Maria” and “Sol.” “Sol” means sun in Spanish as well as loneliness if one takes “sol” to be the shortened version of “soledad” in the name of “Maria” and “Soledad” in the name “Marisol.” If the name connotes both sun and loneliness then its function could be interpreted as following the logic of Derrida’s pharmakon, both poison and remedy, antidote to the loneliness of “living at night.”

7 In an email to me dated 13 October 2006, Romo-Carmona writes, “I actually read Donoso’s El obsceno pájaro de la noche when I wrote LAN—he’s one of my favorite writers, and in fact I was waiting to get that particular book in Spanish before reading it. It used to be much harder to get titles from the southern cone writers here in North America.”
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