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Choloborg: The Disappearance of the Latino Body

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Race, gender and capital require a cyborg theory of wholes and parts.

—Donna Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto"

In her epochal essay on the effects of technology on subjectivity, "A Cyborg Manifesto," Donna Haraway coyly positions the cyborg as something of a technologically evolved monster and claims that "Monsters have always defined the limits of community in Western imaginations."¹ If this is true, then one might conclude that race was the monster that has defined those early limits of the cyborg community.

Returning to my epigraph, it is clear that Haraway acknowledges a certain fragmentation when she writes that cyborg theory must be made of "wholes" and "parts." Race is one of those parts that has yet to be fully theorized, specifically with regard to Latino bodies. Nevertheless, she later argues that, informed by situated and embodied knowledges, such fragments contain a critical potential.² Given the triumvirate of race, gender, and capital, conventional knowledge tells us that Latinos

embody physiological difference and are "situated" both economically and culturally, raising the question: are Latino/a bodies cyborg bodies?

In 1999, the saucy stylings of Ricky Martin made it to the Grammy Awards, while Jennifer Lopez continues to enjoy the admiration of television and movie audiences, suggesting that Latino bodies have never been more visible. They are on the pop charts, in magazines, and on television; yet, according to the cultural critic Mike Davis, Latinos have seen the lowest income growth, with the median household income increasing only \$276 between 1980 and 1995, compared to \$4,845 for whites and \$4,576 for blacks.³ Likewise, under NAFTA, companies like Hyundai, Sony, Sanyo, and Toyota have redefined the notion of a transnational economy. In *Magical*

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Choloborg; or, The Disappearing Latino Body

1. Donna Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto," in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 180.

2. Haraway discusses situated and embodied knowledge in the chapter following "A Cyborg Manifesto," entitled "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective," in *ibid.*, 191.

3. "Census and You," U.S. Bureau of the Census, November 1996, 10; cited in Mike Davis, *Magical Urbanism: Latinos Reinvent the US City* (New York: Verso, 2000), 99.

Urbanism: Latinos Reinvent the US City, Davis writes: "Just as rows of ultra-modern assembly plants now line the south side of the border, so have scrap wood and tar paper shantytowns become an increasingly common sight on the US side of the border."⁴ Migrant labor played a central role in California's agricultural prosperity, and if hidden and undervalued, Latino/a workers may play the same role in the new global economy. Davis goes on to note that Apple, Sun, Adobe, Netscape, and Oracle have all "been fined or sued for racial discrimination or for failure to meet federal diversity deadlines."⁵ In a nutshell, new technologies have yet to transcend old race and class relations.

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

Capitalism makes use of the Latino/a body, but what of the particular appearance of this body? Ricky and Jennifer are currently sporting buffed bodies and blonde highlights, and why not? But what of the workers in Tijuana's factories? Do they tend to look a little different, highlights or no? Latinos can range from *indio*, to *mestizo* or mixed blood, to blonde with blue eyes. Even before the contemporary development of genetic engineering, the dynamics of colonization, migration, politics, capital, economics, love, and war had already reshaped the Latino/a body. Dr. Harold P. Freeman, in a recent article in the *New York Times*, was quoted as saying: "If you ask what percentage of your genes is reflected in your external appearance, the basis by which we talk about race, the answer seems to be in the range of .01 percent."⁶ In the same article, the author, Natalie Angier, reminds readers that race encompasses both genetics and culture.⁷

As if all this gene mixing wasn't confusing enough, according to the U.S. Bureau of the Census, "Hispanic" refers to people whose origins are Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, South or Central American, or other Hispanic/Latino. At last count, the Latino population in this country was estimated at 31.7 million, or 11.7 percent of the total population.⁸ On the 2000 Census, Latinos were asked to indicate their origin in a question on "Hispanic origin," not in the question on race, because in the federal statistical system ethnic origin is considered to be a separate concept from race.⁹ The Census went on to explain that Hispanics might be of any number of racial groups, and as of October 1997, the Office of Management and Budget announced the revised standards for federal data on race and ethnicity. The official categories for race are now: American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian, Black or African American, Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, White, and "some other race." In addition, two ethnicity categories were established: Hispanic origin and Not of Hispanic origin.¹⁰ Because the Census identified Latinos as Caucasian for most of the twentieth century, these recent changes may allow new statistics to emerge as researchers can now do more than simply track Spanish surnames.

4. *Ibid.*, 30.

5. *Ibid.*, 102.

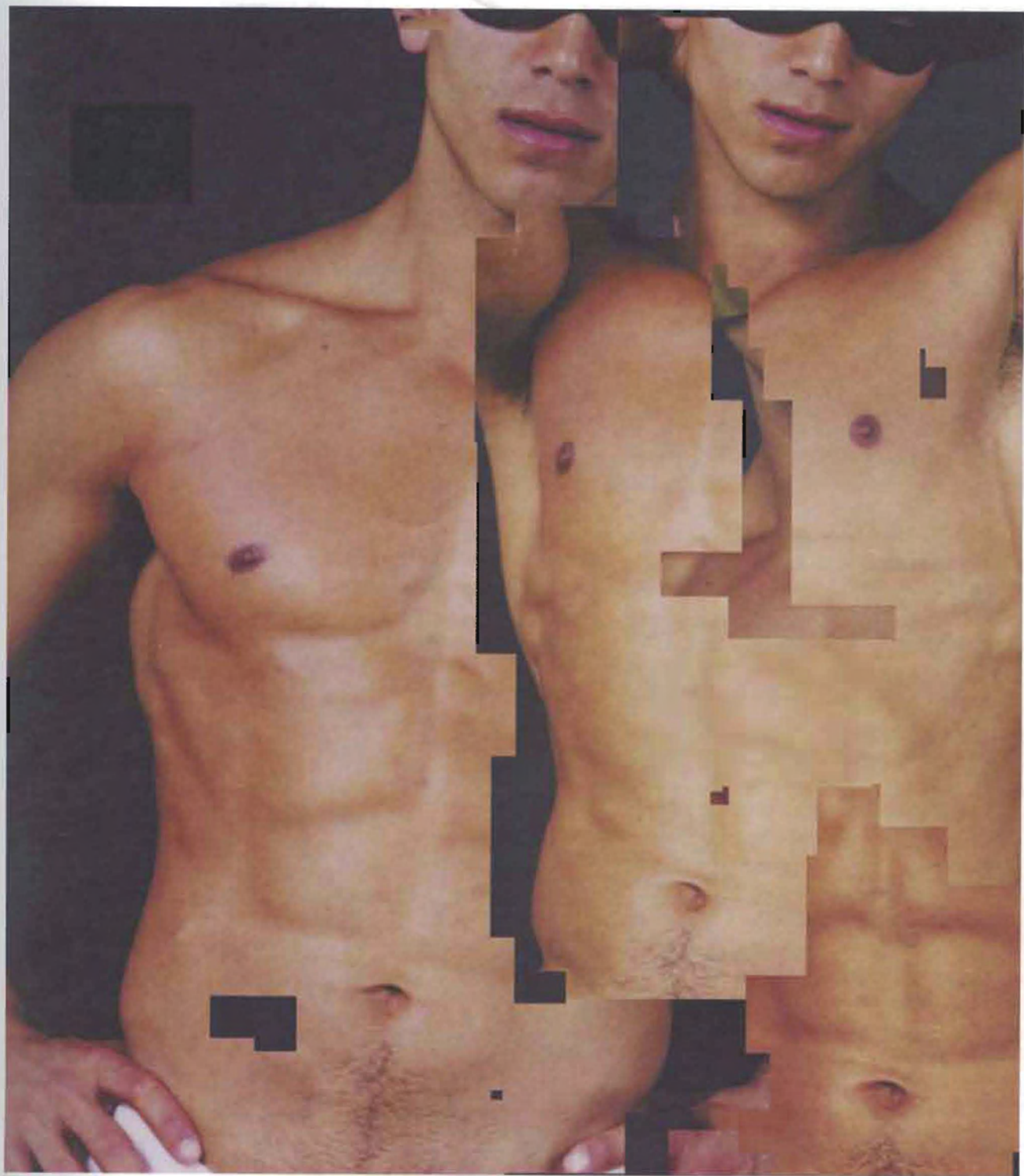
6. Natalie Angier, "Do Races Differ? Not Really, Genes Show," *New York Times on the Web*, Archive, Science Desk, August 22, 2000.

7. Quoting Dr. Sonia S. Anand, Assistant Professor of Medicine, McMaster University, Ontario, Angier writes: "Thinking about ethnicity is a way to bring together questions of a person's biology, lifestyle, diet, rather than just focusing on race. Ethnicity is about phenotype and genotype, and, if you define the terms of your study, it allows you to look at differences between groups in a valid way."

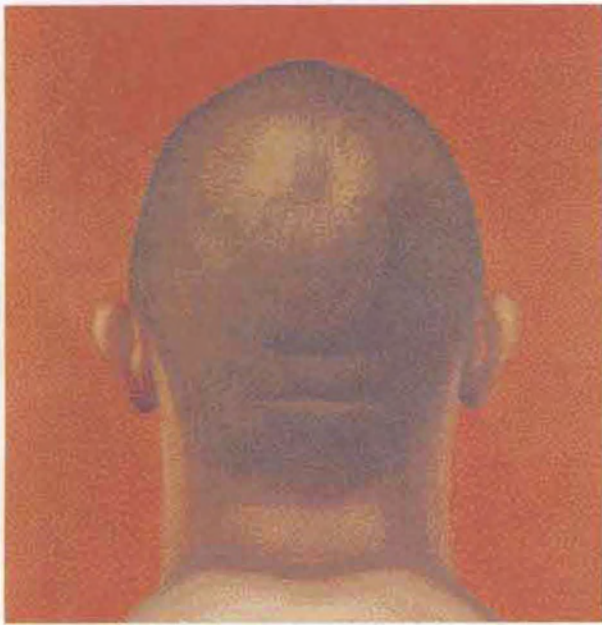
8. Roberto R. Ramirez, "Current Population Reports," U.S. Bureau of the Census, Ethnic and Hispanic Statistics Branch, Population Division (www.census.gov), Internet Release Date: March 8, 2000, 20-527.pdf., p. 1.

9. U.S. Bureau of the Census, Population Division, Special Population, "Racial and Ethnic Classifications Used in Census 2000 and Beyond" (www.census.gov), created: April 12, 2000.

10. *Ibid.*



Ken Gonzales-Day.
*Untitled #132 (Composition
with Lines)*, 2000.
Ektacrome print.
24 x 18 in. (61 x 45.7 cm).
Courtesy of the artist.



Salomon Huerta. *Untitled Head*, 2000. Oil on panel. 11½ x 12 in. (29.8 x 30.5 cm). Courtesy of Patricia Faure Gallery, Los Angeles.

Salomon Huerta. *Untitled Head*, 1998. Oil on canvas on panel. 12 x 14 in. (30.5 x 35.6 cm). Courtesy of Patricia Faure Gallery, Los Angeles.

If one goal of Haraway's "Cyborg Manifesto" was to propose a world without gender, then perhaps in acknowledging the possibility of a wide range of genetic combinations among the descendants of America's other indigenous peoples (south of the U.S. border) the OMB is trying to create a world without race. If this is so, then the Census Bureau has created 31 million Latino/a cyborgs whose racial complexities may, on the one hand, break down the barrier of race, and on the other, erase historical notions of *la raza*, statistically identifying millions of dark-skinned, straight-haired, sharp-featured, Maya and other indigenous descendants as "some other race."

The terms Hispanic, Chicano, Latino, and Cholo speak to the contested history of this chimerical body.¹¹ While miscegenation law in the United States, best understood as a crime of "blood," as in the criminalization of marriage between white women and black men, concerned itself with even a single drop of black blood, the racial politics involved in the colonization of the Americas was far less precise.¹² Thus, even in the wake of technological revolutions like the Human Genome Project, Latino/a bodies may pose the ultimate "ironic political myth." Assimilated, evasive, unshakably linked, we are Choloborg.

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

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

12. See Eva Saks, "Representing Miscegenation Law," *Raritan* 8, no. 2 (Fall 1988): 42.