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A queer futurity autofantasía: contouring discourses of Latinx through memory and queer youth literature

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ABSTRACT

This communication-centered performance studies analysis forefronts Latinx positionality in three key childhood moments to offer examples of queer futurity. An autofantasía presented through performative writing, the research essay brings Latinx into embodied practice via the memories of queer childhood, the themes of queer youth literature, and the contemporary understandings of Latinx. From the vantage points of my four-year-old self, my nine-year-old self, and my fourteen-year-old queer self, I draw upon queer and latinidad themes found in three separate queer children's books. All analyses combine to contour, for the moment, the changing discursivity of Latinx as a queer futurity.

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The South Texas I knew as a child and know as an adult is much more Mexico than U.S. From the language, to the rituals to the bodies to the terrain, my South Texas context is a Mexican Texas. Since the region's discovery (theft) in the 1500s, various burgeoning and established non-indigenous nation states have claimed Texas: Spain, France, Mexico, the Confederate U.S. and the U.S. At one point, Texas was even its own country. As each of the nation-states acquired us, they required loyalty to their definition of us. Today, Texans still often state our pride for being Texans, loudly—even if we cannot exactly explain why. Due to our history of continually shifting sovereignties, Texans have become accustomed to speech acts of pride that name us with clear, if imaginary, boundaries.

Four years, three months, and twenty-five days after the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that anti-miscegenation laws were unconstitutional, and one year, three months and fifteen days before the U.S. Supreme Court ruled against laws that criminalized abortion, I was born in a Texas town called Taft. My seventeen-year-old White mother's post-high school admission to nursing school was rescinded upon their learning that she was pregnant with me. My twenty-year-old Latino father, who would eventually return to a second tour of duty to Vietnam, struggled with drug addiction. And there I was: born into a world roiling in societal ideologies of civil rights, women's rights, disability rights, race rights, gay rights … A baby who was almost named Tomas Martínez but instead was named Shane Moreman. The contrast of the two names is a contrast of two worlds—and somewhere in between existed a little queer Latinx child.

At my birth, my mom sized up her situation and made survivalist decisions. We left. We left my father, demanding that he right his own life before he made a presence in

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mine. We left her family, demanding that they respect a bastard child. My mom and I traveled to homes of friends along the U.S./Mexico border. We lived out of suitcases until she could gain stability for both of us. Within the context of national social turbulence, she fought to be proactive in a shifting borderland. In the beginning years of my life, I said my first words and phrases without a need to ever say "home."

Some four years later, my mother fell in love with a White man who fixed her flat tire on the side of the road. They married and raised me in a mostly-Mexican rural area seven miles down a one-lane, unpaved road. I spent my only-child, solitary childhood reading books, swimming in the nearby creek, and visiting friends who lived in Spanish-only households. I blended in. Within these contexts, there were words that I never knew had an English equivalent. Within these family, community, and Texas contexts, my name was not Shane, it was and still is Chango. As a Texan, I learned to proclaim speech acts that named my statehood with clear, if imaginary, boundaries. As Shane/Chango, I learned to adjust my speech acts to the contours of the imaginary but real cultural boundaries around me.

This communication-centered performance studies analysis forefronts my own Latinx positionality by considering three key moments in my childhood to make larger claims about queer futurity. Each of these moments exposes the dominant discourses of masculinity, latinidad, and sexuality that guide understandings and enactments of Latinx identity. Contexts are always important when reflecting upon discursive meanings. As described above, the discursive context of my memories is the rhetorical contest of the South Texas geographical national border, a contested zone of our nation, a borderland "in a constant state of transition" (Anzaldúa 7). Our southern national borders are volatile spaces reflecting our nation's regard for cultural diversity. For example, as I write this essay, the U.S. is engrossed in debates about how to receive and reunite impoverished and endangered Latinx immigrant family members and whether or not our south border needs a wall. Over 15,000 migrant children sit in some 100 different shelters in the U.S., separated from parents they may never see again (Jordan). The U.S. Senate discusses blocking President Trump's funding for his declared national emergency calling for a wall between the U.S. and Mexico (Peterson). These most recent national aggressions against Latinxs are material manifestations of our nation's disdain for the discursive potentiality of latinidad. We, Latinxs, cross borders literally and figuratively. Our border crossings are threats to the control exercised by our governmental and capitalist institutions and also a threat to the control of dominant discourses that serve to reify the power of these institutions.

Within the communication discipline, performance studies scholars like me approach discourse, very often, by amplifying the lives and embodied meanings at the edges of normative boundaries where discursive hostilities and limitations are being challenged, altered, and improved. A performative writing approach (see Madison) to understanding "Latinx" as an example of queer futurity, this essay is an examination of such amplification. "Performative writing … centers the self at the same time that the self becomes a site to engage in a dialogue about those forces larger than the self" (Chávez, "Breaking Trances" 3). Throughout my life, I have witnessed and experienced the hostility toward latinidad enacted within the border culture of South Texas. Not relegated to just Texas, this hostility is a phenomenon present across our nation. Dialogically juxtaposing my 1970s queer Latinx Texas childhood with contemporary youth literature, the three

moments from my childhood I offer in this essay are examples of times when my queer Latinx positionality placed me in an alternative self-understanding relative to that offered by dominant discourses. Via this essay, I reframe those alternative understandings as insights into the contemporary embodiments of "Latinx."

The potentiality of the queer future is made manifest within moments of reflection upon the dominant messages queer youth receive. This potentiality becomes discursive change when we devise lessons from the past to negotiate better messages for our present queer selves and queer communities. These messages can be considered better because they offer hopeful means, positive role models, helpful routes, or even happy modes of fantasy that can temporarily release one from painful materiality. Through self-reflexively embodying and enacting messages that are meaningful despite being outside of normative discourse, we, in turn, alter our queer future. To accomplish the goals of this essay, first, I overview communication research on youth literature along with interdisciplinary research on both queer and Latinx youth literature. Then, I offer a review of the scholarship in relation to youth literature studies that theorize and define the child and, specifically, the queer child. Next, I provide a theoretical understanding of "Latinx" and its relationship to queer futurity, two concepts that guide this research project. Finally, I analyze three key moments from my own queer youth in tandem with age-relevant queer youth literature and in coordination with Latinx positionalities.

Literature review

For this study, I am concentrating on research studies about English-language youth literature available in the U.S. that serve audiences from the pre-literate child to the literate young adult. When the cited scholars use the term "children's literature" or "young adult literature," I follow their lead. However, in general, I will revert to the term youth literature to mean literature that is written for and/or read by non-adult audiences who can range from the pre-literate child to the literate young adult (i.e. someone under the age of 18).

Youth literature and queer content

The communication discipline's research on youth literature moves along an intellectual spectrum from legitimizing to politicizing the genre. Mardel Ogilvie, G. P. Mohrmann, Robert Post, and Stacey Wieland and Janell Bauer all find value in using youth literature in both the K-12 and the college classroom. Other communication scholars such as Patricia Pace, Elizabeth Bell, and Dylan Wolfe examine youth literature for its latent and manifest themes that speak to contemporary cultural politics. Donald Malmgren's essay sits at the fulcrum of our discipline's legitimizing-politicizing range. Highlighting the representational importance of youth literature, Malmgren calls upon us to complexify the genre as well its theatrical adaptations with three considerations: (1) acknowledge that children are sophisticated thinkers, (2) provide characters with whom children can identify, and (3) understand that children are sibylline in their abstract-to-concrete thought processes, mixing reality with fantasy as they envision their worlds.

Outside of the communication discipline, interdisciplinary scholars champion the importance of analyzing queer youth literature. Michael Cart and Christine Jenkins note that the first U.S. young adult novel with a queer plotline was not published until

1969: John Donovan's *I'll Get There. It Better Be Worth the Trip*. Twenty-six years later, in 1995, the first Latinx characters appear in queer young adult books: R. J. Hamilton's *Who Framed Lorenzo Garcia?* and *The Case of the Missing Mother*; also Gloria Velásquez's *Tommy Stands Alone*. Publishers continue to release literature, although not as quickly as one might desire, with a wider diversity of positionalities that represent the wider diversity of queer youth readership. Kirk Fuoss—incidentally, the only communication scholar to directly address queer themes in youth literature—emphasizes the creativity required of those who write for and about queer youth. The multiplicities of the queer youth reading-audience spectrum (i.e. age, reading level, race, ethnicity, gender, and sex positionalities) necessitate authors to write in ways that broadly capture the queer youth readership. Thus both the conservative politics of the publication industry and the ambiguity of the queer youth audience present formidable challenges to writers.

Like queer youth literature, Latinx youth literature is an expanding area with an important socio-political offering. For Latinx youth, this literature often "publicly amplifies voices of people who have been left out of both U.S. and Latinx canons, and collectively questions and engages with key stereotypes of U.S. literature and culture" (Jiménez Garcia "Side-by-Side" 117). As Latinx youth readers search for themselves in books, the small-scale presence of Latinx youth literature is even more meaningful. Jiménez Garcia assesses Latinx youth literature and finds that it patternedly presents plots and themes of intergenerational relationships in which adults pass on social justice sensibilities and expectations to their children (En(countering) YA). As more and more Latinx youth literature becomes written and published in the Trump era, Jiménez Garcia remains intrigued with what is next; she wonders whether Latinx youth literature writers " … will choose to dwell on the complexity and intersectionality of Latinx history and the work of social justice" ("En(countering) YA" 47). Of course, the intersectionality of Latinx readers will not go away and, as Aragón points out, Latinx readers will continue to search for ways to explore their sexual identities. As both Latinx youth literature and queer youth literature are being published in a time of frightening national politics, both genres also hold the promise of developing confirming and supportive possible futures within their pages. In the next section, I consider how scholars have theorized queer children—the potential readers of queer and Latinx youth literature—as social beings and as audiences.

Performing the child and the queer child

As a societal role, the child serves as our futuristic cultural-political potential. "But the irony is that the very child figure upon which the political depends thrusts a wrench into the concept of the determinable future when it comes to desire" (Blair 62). Adults are separated from fully knowing and controlling what the child desires and therefore what will determine his or her future. Although the times may be changing, adults generally do not encourage children to pursue their developing sense that they may be queer, nor do they offer queer as an aspiration for the child's adult future. As such, the queer child is formed in memory and is not necessarily embodied in the present. "The gay child is not allowed to be conscious of herself *as* gay, and so [the gay child] conceptually exists only in memories of childhood" (Owen 256). If the queer child is without adult sensibilities, then the actions, motivations, and yearnings of a queer child are only made

meaningful upon becoming an adult with developed faculties to explain his/her/their own queer childhood.

Our childhoods are lived in the present but given meaning in the adult future. Patricia Pace explains that, when we remember an event from our lives, we cannot exactly and precisely re-perform that remembered instance ("All Our Lost Children"). She further explains that when we retell our memories we are improvising details of what cannot be precisely recalled. Hence, all memory has an imaginative element to it that helps us conjure the memory into the present. Kathryn Stockton describes queer childhood as growing sideways because the queer child contends with life options and desires outside of a heteronormative life trajectory. Thus, remembering one's queer childhood requires attention to the ways one improvised life pathways beyond the straight child others presumed one to be. In the performed memory-restoration of the queer childhood, we must imagine and re-imagine meanings that resolve conflicts, explain contradictions, and even make the bizarre mundane. In re-performing the queer child, we improvise a description of what happened, using words that were not available to us at the time of the experience. The act of remembering oneself as a queer child is an act of re-imagining and re-performing one's childhood by imagining its links to the queer future one occupies, simultaneously projecting additional queer futures of continuity between the reclaimed past, the present act of imagination, and a future made more survivable. Therefore, youth literature that confirms queer youth is so essential; this literature offers an architecture of potential representations that supports a sense of a future beyond the past and present erasures.

Queer futurity and Latinx

A queer life is lived differently than a straight, normative life. The central difference is that queer individuals experience time differently than straight individuals (Halberstam). Queer temporality is marked by its misfitting with the exclusive rites and rituals of straight culture. Queer people often avoid, are denied, or only participate in these types of rites and rituals within subaltern and private communities. When we do participate in straight rites and rituals, we are often constrained or stretched into compulsory heterosexual timelines. As a result, the trajectory of queer life is out of sync with straight culture. Queer life pathways are not often offered within mainstream media, resulting in a lack of mature-aged role models and a lack of a vision for what the queer can become (Goltz, *Queer Temporalities*). Moreover, sometimes the queer life is only presented as tragic (Goltz, "'Sensible' Suicide"). However, the lived variance and mystery of queer temporality is actually a source for possibility (Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*). As queer individuals navigate a life outside of heteronormativity, we improvise a life in creative ways. These improvisations are opportunities for altering normative discourses. These opportunities generate a future we may not have yet even imagined.

Today, "Latinx" is a term gaining popularity in usage because, arguably, it better describes latinidad for some groups. While some publics have begun to embrace the latinidad term of "Latinx," academia scrambles to explain and theorize it. Performance studies, separate from rhetorical studies and qualitative/quantitative communication studies, has been crucial within the communication discipline for theorizing and researching latinidad (see Moreman and Non Grata; Calafell and Moreman). As latinidad continues to change and adapt, queer Latinx performance scholarship should continue to

theorize and research those changes and adaptations. Currently, "Latinx" is being explained outside performance studies—for example, as a rhetorical construct by Karrieann Soto Vega and Karma Chávez who help shape the amorphous term by defining its multiple parameters:

> Latinx refers foremost to an ethnic identity that is often associated with a brown racial identity, but it can also refer to a white or black racial identity, as well as an indigenous identity … Latinx is an inherently interlocking category, overtly signalling attentiveness to coloniality, ethnicity, gender, and implicitly pointing to race and sexuality. (320)

Within education studies, Cristobal Salinas and Adele Lozano source the term's initial usage to Puerto Rico but without certainty. "While it may not be possible to pinpoint the exact time and place the term emerged, it appears to have been born out of LGBTQIA community in the U.S. as a way to resist the gender binary" (3). An effort toward intersectional inclusivity, "Latinx" acknowledges fluid citizenship, gender, and sexuality—but without an over-determining specificity. Across an interdisciplinary expertise, Sandra Soto-Santiago defends the confusions around usage, pronunciation, and political meaning of "Latinx:" "It does not seek to create a new rule but rather to dismantle what exists and invites us to re-think how individuals with different ideologies, perspectives, and identities are included or rejected from different spaces or communities through language" (91). Hence, the confusions of "Latinx" are its merits.

As a performance studies scholar, I argue that "Latinx" is a discursive act that is embodied as a queer futurity via a latinidad framework of inclusivity. The uncertainty of source, of application, and of vision of "Latinx" enhances its discursive possibilities and secures its placement as an example of queer futurity. Muñoz affirms that queer futurity offers a utopian possibility "in which multiple forms of belonging in difference adhere to a belonging in collectivity" (*Cruising Utopia* 33). Identitarian categories bring people into a collective sense of belonging, but—in order to reach a society of socially just inclusion—those same categories must be both incorporated and transcended. As "Latinx" evades clearly defining citizenship, gender, and sexuality, the usage of the term both incorporates those identities and transcends them. However, as Catalina de Ónis cautions, "Engaging questions about the 'x' signifier and the extent to which the symbol advances intersectional social justice efforts is both urgent and vital" (79). Bringing "Latinx" into embodied practice, I will correspond age-specific queer youth literature with moments of my queer male youth within my latinidad framework. Literature offers a space to imagine and re-imagine futures (Moreman; Stockton). Like Laura Jiménez, my presence in relation to these texts is not to queer or to Latin-ize the texts, rather my presence serves to provoke an intersectional non-dominant discourse.

By placing myself within the history of queer to explain a future of queer, all within a latinidad framework, I am enacting an autofanatasía (Millán). As an autofantasía, I invoke magical realism to resist a linearity of time so as to place my queer childhood past in conversation with contemporary queer youth literature. The books did not exist in my childhood; and even if they did, perhaps I would not have had access to them anyway. As magical realism, both my childhood and the books exist in the same time together. Through the lessons of that autofantasía, I write a future for myself, for my contemporaries, and for those who will succeed me. My memories are presented as vignettes, serving as a type of codeswitching, not only from past to present but also as a

codeswitching between private performances of self (not generally publicly presented) and public performances of self (that often occlude the private). Embodied meanings are not stable in that we grow through and/or move along to other meanings in other times and places. Also, embodied meanings are sometimes beyond language because words cannot capture what is viscerally felt and what is heuristically meant by those feelings. These vignettes, then, become affective Latinx presentations in their aesthetic arrangement of a queer past that is performed for the benefit of projecting a queer future. In the remainder of essay, I counterpose my own stories with three books: Thomas Scotto's (2018) *Jerome by Heart*; Cory Silverberg's (2015) *Sex is a Funny Word*; and Benjamin Sáenz's *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* (2012). Each counterposition will become an apposition to "Latinx" that will then offer lessons of queer futurity.

Cuando Tenía Cuatro Años: Latinx as play

My mom liked to have me near her. At female-only gatherings—Tupperware parties, card games, baby showers—if you saw my mother, you knew that I was not too far behind. At these otherwise childless events, I would blend into the background with my cornflower blue satchel filled with Big Chief writing pads or Little Golden Books.

At one gathering, I wandered off. Mom was playing canasta at a friend's house only one block from a rail yard that harbored dormant railroad cars. Encouraged by my mother's adult friends, I walked out of the house to explore. Out of earshot of the grownups' Spanglish chatter, my curiosity turned to the railroad tracks. Sometimes inside the open boxcars was evidence of tramps—rumpled clothes, empty food cans, crushed cigarette butts—but never the actual vagrant.

On this day I found a pornographic magazine missing a front cover and with swollen and curled pages. I thumbed through the pages, blushing but curious. Then I placed it in my satchel to take home. Once home, I went to my bedroom and closed the door. My mom had one of her recurring migraines and went to her own bedroom to lie down.

When I was sure I would not be interrupted, I pulled the magazine out of my satchel. Tattered and mildewed, the magazine had one photo essay that was complete from beginning to end. It told the visual story of a dark-haired sheik with silver aviator glasses and a blond white woman dressed in a khaki safari outfit. In a white robe with a white head covering that draped to his shoulders, he carries her into a tent in the desert.

Statuesque in most of the shots, he stands either hands akimbo or with his arms crossing his chest. The camera focus is upon the woman shyly undressing herself. She unbuttons and removes her too-tight blouse and too-short shorts. She slides down the shoulder straps of her lacy bra. She stands nude with blonde hair between her legs. Her breasts are weighed-down but perky.

She steps forward to bring the sheik into the shot and to begin undressing him. She unbuttons his robe and it drops to the ground revealing a naked man with dark body hair. His penis is stiff, and she kneels to put it in her mouth. Eventually, she lies back on pillows and he positions himself on top of her. In one photo, he puts his face between her legs and his ass is in the air. His balls hang and a dark anus is exposed.

I touched myself through my shorts. I became aware that I was drawn to the man. When he was out of the shot, I envisioned what he was doing … biting his bottom lip, swallowing hard, touching his own penis. In my fantasy of being alone with him, I objected

to kissing him but reveled in touching his penis and having him touch mine. I knew at this moment that I was different from other boys in that I preferred other boys.

Cory Scotto's (2018) *Jerome by Heart* is a children's fiction book translated into English from French by Claudia Zoe Bedrick and Karin Snelson. Just as important as the writing are Oliver Tallec's illustrations. For Chango, the book offers a narrative told through words and images, of Raphael, a male child narrator, who crushes on his male friend Jerome. In the opening scene, the two boys ride bicycles side-by-side, hand-in-hand as they obliviously hold up a line of rush hour automobile traffic behind them. Throughout the book, Jerome and Raphael share public space as a couple: at a museum, in a park, and on streets and sidewalks. The book begins with a description of their nonverbal expression of affection: "He always holds my hand" (Scotto). Innocently sensual and cheerfully nurturing, it is the story of two boys who realize their desire for one another and act upon it in public. For Chango, the book demonstrates same-sex touch that need not be sexual and still could be loving.

When Raphael brings Jerome to his home, his parents' underwhelmed perception of Jerome does not match his own pride and excitement: "My mom thinks Jerome is very polite. 'So, so charming' … " (Scotto). Raphael's father "thinks it's 'a pity' that Jerome doesn't play soccer" (Scotto). One morning Raphael wants to share his dream from the night before: "I had the best dream last night! It was good in a Jerome kind of way" (Scotto). His parents show no interest in hearing the dream and his father admonishes Raphael for being petulant at the breakfast table. Raphael retreats to his room to fantasize about being alone with Jerome and being Jerome's sole center of attention. The book ends with a declaration: "And I say—yes. Raphael loves Jerome. I can say it. It's easy" (Scotto).

For four-year-old Chango, *Jerome by Heart* offers a space to contemplate the there-but-not-there visibility of his queer Latinx identity. It is a visibility that is both validated and obscured through play. In relation with one another, Raphael and Jerome publicly enjoy each other's company through the context of play. Their play conjures a make-believe world in which they can touch one another, protect one another, and tell one another stories that are "so good they seem so real" (Scotto). Johan Huizinga emphasizes that play is crucial to the creation of culture and that all play is significant with larger societal meanings. As Raphael and Jerome play, they are exploring a relationship that they most likely do not see around them. As they play, others do not see them as exploring a male-to-male relationship. Their play becomes a way for them to be seen without being judged. Their relationship is there without being there. Of course, frustration ensues when Raphael wants his parents to recognize his relationship and they do not. Perhaps they refuse to see what is in front of them; however, it is also likely that they do not understand Raphael and Jerome as being in a relationship. To the adults, it is only play.

"Latinx" carries its own complex relationship to visibility. In some ways—to others and sometimes to ourselves—latinidad can be there-but-not-there. Indeed, all identities are play. We are performing scripts of dominant discourse, often forgetting that our realities are enactments that could be presented in multiple different ways. While we all play scripts, some scripts benefit some better than others. José Muñoz states, "Socially encoded scripts of identity are often formatted by phobic energies around race, sexuality, gender, and various other identificatory distinctions" (*Disidentifications* 6). To break with the xenophobic, racist, heterosexist, and gender binary scripts, "Latinx" does not provide information about citizenship, cultural background, sexuality, or gender. Conversely, "Latinx" does

not also offer a secure or certain non-dominant script. As Sandra Soto-Santiago maintains, "Using the 'x' could be a way to empower ["Latinx"] and a way to shake up what is normal and appropriate. The 'x' makes you think and questions who I included and opens the possibilities to basically everyone" (88). Queer latinidad is not always recognized or honored (Calafell and Moreman). Very often, we are insultingly assumed to be complacent with being folded into Whiteness and heterosexuality. Other times, we are seen as hostile to Whiteness and heterosexuality, whether or not we actually are (Calafell). To disempower us, we are not taken seriously. Conversely, though, we can also be empowered when we are not taken seriously—just as Raphael and Jerome are able to pursue their relational exploration and avoid censure and surveillance because their parents do not yet recognize the quality of the relationship. In the next section, I continue exploring "Latinx's" playfulness but warn of a need for consent.

Cuando Tenía Nueve Años: Latinx as consent

The summer before fourth grade, I went to stay for two weeks with my Tio Panchito and my Aunt Patti on the seedy side of Corpus Christi. They were my fun uncle and aunt, giving me unsupervised autonomy. For example, my uncle would hand me $10 and I would walk six blocks to a video arcade room—alone.

My favorite video game was *Vanguard*. Playing nearly every day, I had the high score but had not won the game. One afternoon, I had a spectator: a short, thirty-ish, white adult man who smelled like clean laundry. I'm not sure how long he had been watching me. As the days wore on, he began to stand closer.

The first time he touched me, it was a congrats-pat on my shoulder. Then he began to rest his hand on my shoulder. Playing two-player, he would only move over slightly as I moved in to play my turn. He would wedge me between him and the game. It was embarrassing, but I also liked it. I wanted him to keep touching me, to keep leaning on me, to keep groaning at mishaps or cheering at close calls.

Once when he and I were both out of quarters, he offered me a ride home. I was excited I'd be riding in his car, as if I were his adult friend, maybe even adult boyfriend. Stepping out of the dark arcade, he got into his hot car and reached over to open the locked passenger door. The inside handle was broken.

Then he tried to raise the door lock knob but it was stripped. Calling himself stupid, he came to where I was standing to manually unlock the passenger side door from the outside with the key. Without exactly knowing why, I numbly told him, "I'm going to walk home."

Jangling the keys in the door, he opened it and turned around with anger. "No!" I began to back away, panicking. "I'll walk."

He lunged to grab my arm and I ran. I ran out of the parking lot and I ran six blocks to my aunt's and uncle's house. My aunt was gone but my uncle was home. Panting and crying at the same time, I threw myself on the couch pulling up my shirt over my face. I was angry and scared and ashamed. My uncle sat beside me, confused and concerned. I told him everything, except that I liked it when the man would touch me.

Tio was angry, like the guy at the arcade. He stood up, looked out the windows, and paced. "That arcade is near a gay bar. In high school, we used to drive by that bar and beat up the queers for their money. Pinches jotos, culeros! That fucking faggot. That puto pervert."

I was relieved that my Tio came to my defense. I was hurt by his threats. I knew I was gay. Was I also a pervert? Someone who should be beat up? Deserving hatred? I tried to even out my breathing. I hated myself for being gay like that man.

Written in a comic book style, Cory Silverberg's *Sex is a Funny Word* is a reference book to help young people with questions about their changing bodies. Fiona Smyth, the book's comic book artist, illustrates a fictitious world for the non-fiction reference information. Four main adolescent characters guide the layout of the information: Zai, Cooper, Mimi, and Omar. Like everyone else in the book, they have varying human physical characteristics (e.g. ability, body type, race, gender, and sexuality). Moreover, all characters have visual characteristics that most humans do not naturally have (e.g. blue hair and/or purple skin). The book begins by admitting to the discomfort about the word sex: "Sex is a funny word" (8). It quickly moves to granting agency to the young reader in defining sex and the discourse around sex. "Everyone has their own idea of what sex is. Some people think they don't know anything about sex. Some people think they know it all. All of us have questions about sex. And all of us have answers too" (8-9). For Chango, the book offers answers to questions he is too embarrassed to voice.

In the section on touch, Cory Silverberg lays out a thorough overview of a range of different types of touches that one may like (e.g. hugs, masturbation, snuggling) and touches that one may not like (e.g. being accidentally elbowed, being intentionally punched, getting painful medical care). Touch becomes problematic when a child is required to keep the touch a secret. To relieve the burden of secrecy, the child is encouraged to "find someone you trust and try to tell them … . The first person you tell might not know what to do, or might not believe you. If that happens, find another person you feel safe and comfortable with and tell them" (113). Touch, while often personal, should never be taboo.

For nine-year-old Chango, the realistically varying characters with their non-realistically varying somatic characteristics help to conjure an inclusive and imaginative quality to the book. That is, he could easily be these characters in the world in which he lives; while at the same time he could only be them in a world more fantastical than his own. The book is not concerned with maintaining binaries of any sort. Just as importantly, the book and its characters honor the physical space of the body. One can self-explore without guilt. Also, one can be touched by others, but only with consent and with the agreement that secrecy is always a bad omen. Therefore, the space of the body extends into the space of community and to the public, in general. Transgressions are not necessary in a world where people are given the right to decide who can touch their body and how that body can be touched. Secrecy is never necessary if power-balanced mutuality is at the core of the touch.

"Latinx," as a term, calls attention to the cultural body. It beckons forth a cultural body constituted via colonial conquest or through nation-state boundaries or even as new positionalities resulting from globalization. "Latinx" offers belonging regardless of normative boundaries, transcending its own cultural limitations to be in solidarity with other positionalities like non-Latinx queers, gender non-binary peoples, and cross-national citizens. Importantly, the potentialities of cross-connecting with other positionalities calls for ethical considerations. Alliance building requires invitation, permission, and self-reflexivity (Carrillo Rowe). Most importantly, it requires mutuality. While using "Latinx" as a speech act can be a moment for resisting the oppression of dominant discourses, it is

also a moment to consider the condition necessary for true alliance with others not like us. To re-name our cultural body so that it may more openly be in relation with other positionalities is a privilege. To practice ways to truly and ethically commune with those desiring political alliance is an even greater privilege. As Silverberg tries to reveal, coercion or co-option are both harmful and dangerous realities that manifest from non-dialogic assumptions and/or intentional abuse. In the final section, I consider how "Latinx" possibly offers playful possibilities and ethical considerations despite and because of the clumsy concreteness of words.

Cuando Tenía Catorce Años: Latinx as understanding beyond words

I entered kindergarten with about twenty-five peers. On that same small-town campus, I finished the twelfth grade with thirty-three peers—thirteen of whom had started kindergarten with me. Along the way, I found my best friend, Chris. He was a skinny white kid with blonde hair and brown eyes.

As best friends, we spent a lot of time together. Over the years, I developed an unspoken romantic attraction to Chris. Occasionally, I would put my arm around him or try to hold his hand. Chris had no interest. Maintaining the veneer of a friendship, I considered Chris to be a substitute, imaginary boyfriend for me.

In the eighth grade, Chris became infatuated with a new-to-our-school girl named Julie. I was instantly replaced. When summer came, Chris and I were both home alone. With neither of our parents knowing, he would drive his parents extra vehicle, a truck, to my house during the day. He'd show up and we'd hang out.

One day, he suggested we drive to Julie's house together. She lived seven miles outside of town in the opposite direction. I opposed, mostly out of jealousy. He got angry. He made up his mind to go alone and sped away. Sulking, I sat around waiting for him to call me.

About twenty minutes after leaving my house, Chris flipped the truck going around a curve and died.

Days later, with three other teen peers and two adults, I was a pallbearer carrying his casket to a freshly dug, moist grave. I tried to slow down the process by dragging my shoes. The junior high principal behind me kept stepping on my heels. We placed the coffin on belts that the funeral director would use to lower it into the ground. While I was deeply grieving the loss of Chris, I still had not cried—not before the funeral and not at the funeral. Not once.

A month later, my mom had dropped me off at the dentist's office for a routine checkup. She went to run errands while I waited to be seen. Alone, I picked up a children's magazine. Flipping through the pages, I came to a charcoal sketch of a winding path leading over a hill and into the horizon. In the middle of the page was "'Poem' by Langston Hughes."

> I loved my friend.
> He went away from me.
> There's nothing more to say.
> The poem ends,
> Soft as it began—
> I loved my friend. (Hughes 54)

First one tear. Then another. I didn't want to cry. I didn't want to cry! I carefully tore the page out of the magazine and folded it into four. The receptionist came out from her side of the office window, inquiring if I was okay. With tears dripping onto my jeans, I wouldn't look at her. Hyperventilating, I sputtered, "I'm not going to cry."

Just then, my mom came in from her errands. I would only look at her feet. "I'm not going to cry. Mom, I'm not going to cry." She dropped her purse and all of its contents scattered: a hairbrush, a pocketbook, keys, gum … I fell to the floor to pick it all up and then just lay there. I couldn't move. My body was not my own. I wasn't in control. I was making a scene. I feared that someone might realize that I loved Chris as more than a best friend.

My mom lay with me. "I love you. It's going to be okay. You're going to be okay. Cry. Let yourself cry." I had no words.

Benjamin Sáenz's (2012) novel, *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe*, is told through the protagonist, Aristotle, an angsty and contemplative fifteen-year-old. He meets and befriends Dante, a more convivial but equally contemplative fifteen-year-old. Spanning two years, the plot spins around the tensions between the two boys as they both struggle with their impending adulthood and its corresponding coming of age into sexuality and latinidad. What one lacks, the other has. One struggles with his identification with being Latinx and the other is tenuous but more comfortable with his latinidad. One becomes resolute in his gay identity; the other is oblivious to his sexual identity. Their struggles are exemplified in their sarcastic and conflicted self-consciousness around language. For fourteen-year-old Chango, their language play is well understood. As they code switch between English and Spanish and between everyday language and academic vernacular, they validate Chango with multiple ways of being.

Code switching between languages is a way for multilingual persons to navigate across cultures and even between them. When we code switch, we usually do so for one of three reasons: (1) to include others, (2) to exclude others, or (3) to express our cultural identity (Martin and Nakayama). Of course, none of these reasons are mutually exclusive and all could potentially overlap. Early in his friendship with Dante, Aristotle establishes his latinidad through code switching when he explained the family lineage of his names: "'Aristotle is the English version of my grandfather's name.' And then I pronounced my grandfather's name with this really formal Mexican accent, '*Aristotiles*. And my real first name is Angel.' And then I said it in Spanish, '*Angel*'" (18). Throughout the novel the English/Spanish switch occurs, marking moments of latinidad: interaction (e.g. *A ver*. *Di me*.), alienation (e.g. *pocho*), artifact (e.g. *sopa de arroz*), affection (e.g. *hijo de mi vida*), and aggression (e.g. *pinchi joto*). Switching between Spanish and English, their use of Spanish is consistently enacted against the dominant discourse of U.S. Americanism, Whiteness, and middle classness.

Parallel to their exploration of their latinidad is their exploration of their sexuality. While Aristotle is more comfortable being Latinx, Dante is not. His discomfort evidences itself against his imminent self-outing as gay. Throughout the book, Dante frets about his Latinx identity. His awkwardness around his cultural identity becomes a hint at his gayness: "You know what I think, Art? I think Mexicans don't like me" (40). As he learns his latinidad-against-dominant-White cultural discourse, he recognizes that other positionalities can be learned, as well. "Okay, so maybe I'm *pocho*. But the point I'm making here is that we can adopt other cultures" (45). He points to how genetics

determine our positionalities: "Everybody looks more Mexican than I do. Pick it up with the people who handed me their genes" (72). He expresses his confusion about latinidad, masking his exploration of his sexuality. "You know, I still don't really know if I'm a Mexican" (172). Finally, after coming out as gay, he begins to entice Aristotle with queries on the queerness of latinidad: "Do real Mexicans like to kiss boys?" (273). In the end, Aristotle's queer identity is awakened in his love for Dante that is both platonic and romantic. Within the innuendo of post-coital cuddling and using index fingers on bare skin, they transfer their identities to one another: "He traced his name on my back. I traced my name on his" (358). The boys begin to find comfort in the confusions of living between multiple codes. Rather than contradictions, the code switching becomes poetic and provides a discursive space for the full range of their sexual identities.

"Latinx" offers a way to subvert normative discourses of heterosexuality, Whiteness, and nationality through its subversive lettering. Embedded in the spelling of "Latinx" is the politics of code switching. To pronounce the word requires a linguistic creativity sourced from the speakers' preference for English or Spanish, preference for male or female, preference for cis or trans. As a Spanglish word, "Latinx" requires the speaker to adopt the politics of code switching that are linked to Queer politics. Lawrence La Fountain-Stokes asserts that Spanglish's code switching and queerness are intertwined: "[B]oth relate to notions of purity and impurity: of that which is civilized or nominally acceptable, as opposed to that which is considered to be taboo, savage or degraded" (5). "Latinx" admits to the fiction of pure forms of gender, sexuality, race, and nationality. Historically, the U.S. began militarizing its border with Mexico concurrent to the time that the words homosexual and heterosexual came into usage (Perez). As Karma Chávez explains, "[T]he US-Mexico border had to be protected to ensure white purity at the same time that non-heterosexuality had to be pathologized to guarantee sexual and marital purity" (*Queer Migration Politics* 11). "Latinx" plays with and against those anxieties of purity by offering permission for inexact and, therefore, multi-coalitional imaginaries of what the word can mean. As shown with Aristotle and Dante, both queer and latinidad hold and encourage conflicting embodiments. "Latinx" reflects and projects the nuances of complicated positionalities, providing discursive space for the forbidden, the conflicted, and the yet-to-be.

Conclusion

This essay argues that "Latinx" is an example of the discursivity of queer futurity. Through performative writing, I create an autofantasía in which I use magical realism to provide an instance of my own queer Latinx childhood, correspond that instance with a contemporary queer youth literature book, and then explain "Latinx" in parallel to the themes of both my childhood and the book. As an autofantasía, Chango becomes witness to Latinx discursivities that both nurture and extend the memories, presence, and future of his queerness at the intersection of his latinidad. Raphael and Jerome model play as a way to explore same sex desire as imaginary but also as real. Silverberg provides permission for bodily pleasure but also affirms that consent and open communication are necessary elements of pleasure. Finally, Aristotle and Dante demonstrate that the awkwardness of languaging latinidad is also how the queer selves can be expressed and explored. In the end, queer futurity is offered as a concept that is created by performing the remembered queer

Latinx childhood in the present. To nuance the queer futurity performance, queer youth literature is read for its thematic offerings so as to provide a positive and possible framework for queer futurity. Finally, "Latinx" is also explained in relationship to the performance and the reading to give deeper understanding to development and refinements of queer coalition building enacted through latinidad.

In this essay, each mode of a Latinx-informed queer futurity (i.e. the performative writing, the literary criticism, and the discourse analysis) inform one another as they also combine to provide a more complex and meaningful way to understand contemporary efforts toward inclusive and reformed queer futures. Children's literature, performative writing of people of color, and the embodiments of the term "Latinx"—each of these discursive forms are often not taken seriously as forms of knowledge (see Brady; Calafell "Depression"; de Onís). However, in this research essay, each form of knowledge is taken seriously as a validation of how both imaginary and material approaches to queer communal change are both individually necessary and collaboratively stronger. In the end, the chimera qualities of queer childhood memories, queer youth literature, and the term "Latinx," all intersect to contour shifting meanings of queer futurity. The three vignettes I provided in this document are three abridged stories that profoundly marked turning points in my Latinx childhood. Re-performing them has always been painful for me. However, from the moment that I opened my first queer youth book to the moment I envisioned my final vignette, I have been negotiating my Latinx past with the current queer youth literature offerings. These negotiations have helped me to better understand Latinx positionality as queer futurity. Despite the past-resolving positivity coming from contemporary queer youth literature (or most likely because of it), concluding this project still comes hard to me.

On the last day of writing this essay, I have decided to revisit the Arne Nixon Center for the study of Children's Literature, which is housed within California State University, Fresno's Henry Madden Library. Tucked away on the far end of the main library's third floor, the Arne Nixon Center holds the largest collection of LGBTQ children's literature in the nation. Unfortunately, you are not allowed to peruse the stacks. The books must be brought to you. As the head librarian explains, many of the books are rare or first editions or signed by the author.

At the initiation of my project, I had provided raw and longer versions of my three vignettes to Arne Nixon's head librarian and asked her if she could help me locate queer youth literature that would correspond to my queer Latinx childhood moments. She kindly admitted, with a bit of despair in her voice, that there wouldn't be much that was Latinx. I nodded and told her that I was accustomed to the scarcity of Latinx resources in the academy.

One week later, I visited the head librarian's office and she wheeled out a curated cart of books for me. Considerately, she summarized each book, carefully avoiding making overt connections to my childhood stories. For Sáenz's novel she wouldn't tell me how it ended. As I glanced over the different spines and book covers, she pulls out *Jerome by Heart* and hands it to me. I politely smiled and put the book in my lap to read it later. "No, read it," she firmly commanded. Then she softly offers: "I'd really like for you to read it now."

The wide pages, almost double the width of notebook paper, create a dramatic sweep as I lift each page to open upon a swath of goldenrod yellow, tangerine orange, and evergreen. I identify with Raphael's frustration with the world's misrecognition of his relationship

with Jerome. On the last pages, the two boys rush across a street, holding hands, heading into a mostly blank page. The final words neutralize so many toxic doubts and toxic fears around my queerness that I had normalized. "It's easy."

On this last day, I ask if I can view the stacks with all the books. A staff librarian agrees and walks me to the back and I enter a forbidden area and stand in front of books and books and books. I begin to reminisce on all the libraries that helped me throughout my own life—all the libraries that have provided me a home: the Skidmore-Tynan library where I fell in love with books and with performing literature; the Joe Barnhart Bee County library where I would lose summer days within fantastical literary worlds; UTSA's John Pease library, where I first discovered the queer works of Tennessee Williams, Gloria Anzaldúa, and (a meaningful surprise to me) Langston Hughes; the Tampa Library at USF where I found José Esteban Muñoz and developed a respect for deep and meaningful research.

And on this 100-degree Fresno summer day, I am within the cool stacks of the Arne Nixon Center within the Henry Madden library, my new favorite library. I ask to see where all the queer youth literature is and the head librarian generously walks me to a wall of books on six-level shelving. I almost can't look at the books because I'm so overcome with emotion. I scan the spines and locate the copy of *Aristotle and Dante* that I read. Within my latinidad and as a Latinx, I stand here as both Dr. Moreman and as Chango. I lightly tap the book with my left ring finger to let it know I'm here.

Queer futurity is here; and I am optimistic about what's next. Beyond even "Latinx," I ponder all the possibilities for identities that we haven't even imagined yet. Futures are waiting for some child and/or some adult to connect to a word, a phrase, a color, an image and then put the book down to make the connection to the world around them. I try to imagine the different types of children who will read about themselves and then conjour the strength to name themselves within speech acts of confidence, of defiance, and of self-love. While queer futurity cannot be easily named across all these books, I hope at its core will be self-love that is balanced with a careful love of others. I smile as I picture Raphael and Jerome happily running toward that blank page. It's easy.

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