Norteada - In the Greater Geologic Span of Time, Just Fine

Clara Cruz

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NORTEADA

IN THE GREATER GEOLOGIC SPAN OF TIME, JUST FINE

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts, Painting + Printmaking at Virginia Commonwealth University.

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This one’s for Nano, Tano, Llama, Ty Ty, Asha, Noon, Miz & Lela
como siempre dice Omar - “familia primero”

✨✨✨

Para mis muertitos, sobre todo para Carlos, Elizabeth, ∴ y Soledad
más que nada y más que nunca
me hacen falta hasta en los huesos
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ABSTRACT

In this thesis I will spend some time talking to the dead. We’ll discuss callously mercurial and aquarian takes on things including LIVED TIME, DEATH, ART and VIBES. Keep in mind that this is just the beginning and these are just the bones - some fleshed out, some sucked to the marrow, some picked apart. Remind me that I will have forgotten at least half of what I meant to write and lost my keys three times before we’re done.
INTRODUCTION

*tripping over spacetime again*

You burned small holes into the linear flow of time like extra smoking breaks; eddies in the water. And left me snarling stories into votive objects. Empiezo con recuerdos, handled often and reworked. They wear thin at the edges and become burnished, repainted in bright, unsettling colors. They calcify, grow brittle and break. I mend them at the seams. The result isn’t really a memorial to a certain person or event, but a talisman with its own weight and significance that lets us laugh like used up lighters. Click click clicking at the burner of a gas blue stove.

This process of transformation has become a wormhole into my work, where figurative paintings and concrete sculptures string together in responsive installations. The subjects of my paintings inhabit deeply lived sensory moments where time vibrates in multiple directions at once. My sculptural works navigate the space between understanding death as a vital and regenerative force, and death as an imminent threat to particular communities marginalized under late capitalism. The installations move through rambling conversations about our kind of time: “laid out as if it were space.”

The surfaces, sounds and textures in my work are built up and worn away until sharp-edged images break into moments of visual noise. I never know if this process is moving towards creating skewed compass points or potent fossils, vital amulets or relics that don’t hold meaning anymore. I doubt I’ll ever figure it out for sure. But I do care about the movement back and forth, driven by its own contradictions. It catches and

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loses the thread between painting, sculpture, installation, space and time – a radio frequency fading in and out down the interstate highway.

PREQUEL (DISCLAIMER)

\textit{Disorientation - orientation - sometimes}

I’m mixed. I look white and I was born in the calm before a Nor’easter in New England back when it used to snow like that.\(^2\) Sometimes when I consider how this affects my relationship to being Mexican, I find myself \textit{norteada}. Literally ‘turned north,’ this word implies a state of being disoriented in geographic space or lost within your mind in northern Mexican Spanish. Sometimes that’s ok, like maybe it could even be a gateway to \textit{nepantla}.\(^3\) Sometimes it’s just lost. Sometimes I remind myself that there’s a winter wind driving the economic push for northern migration, the ongoing erasure of people of color in New England, assimilation, slippery social mobility, low-key mestizo blanqueamiento, whiteness and death. Being a lil norteada, I don’t actually trust myself to have great takes on any of this.\(^4\)

Maybe it’s the deep contradictions of race and class within my own family, but really it’s not just me. The vast majority of people around the world are experiencing tectonic shifts in the conditions of their contemporary life. The technologies of time are speeding up, driven by power struggles on an historic scale. We live in an age of mass death and mass extinction, but our perceptions of this reality vary radically based on personal and collective experience. Our markers of meaning and orientation are constantly contested.

A study conducted in the Northwestern United States details how interpretations of La Llorona vary significantly depending on the life experiences and social status of the people telling the story.\(^5\) These changes happen not just within the narrative, but in the motivations attributed to each character and the moral of the story. Chicano critical theory describes La Virgen de Guadalupe as a multivalent sign whose power can be wielded by various social groups for different purposes at different times.\(^6\) Meanwhile, border saints, folk saints often unrecognized by the Catholic church, gain new attributes

\(^2\) It was actually a blizzard, but you get the point
\(^4\) Goddamn mixed kids in the art world always talking shit about how special we are
depending on the needs and petitions of individual migrants within the constantly shifting political economy of mass migration north.⁷

Sometimes I have more faith in the conclusions drawn through reading multivalent symbols than in making sense of my own life. They serve as part of a system by which people orient themselves in a deeply disorienting world. They endure not because they are unchanging, but precisely because they can be molded by groups of people to form the compass points required by a given set of conditions at a given time. The ongoing process of triangulation between archetypes, individuals and their social context makes meaning fundamentally relational and social.

Some of the multivalent symbols I invoke in my thesis exhibition include La Llorona, tourist/harvest season in New England, Coca Cola, salt on snow, broken windows, Mickey Mouse, “the North Country,” ⁸ La Morenita y La Flaca Huesuda.

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BASSLINES

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My problem is that I never figured out how to be a good Marxist and a good painter at the same time and I’m still salty about it. It’s my own fault for reading John Berger’s *Ways of Seeing* in undergrad and never moving on. But how do you un-know the fact that the rich realism of oil paint made it uniquely suited for cataloging the wealth of the rising bourgeoisie in order to defy mortality? When asked to paint a still life, I painted a blurry photograph propped against a votive candle draped with my dad’s red graphic t-shirt (coke is it!). A street memorial as retaliation. Principled, but probably not correct.

Bravado in the face of death was my first sharp lesson in mortality held close. Cornered, forged and tempered by a system leveled against young men of color, you took up the challenge and hurled yourself at anything and everything por vida y hasta la muerte. You belonged to a raza that “tried to enter death and emerge from it.” Somos puros chingones, el barrio me respalda, aquí rifamos nosotros, perros! puro desmadre hasta la muerte cabrones! A la verga con la migra y la ley ¡chingao!

Claro que tenías miedo, but you didn’t start this war y por seguro no te ibas a dejar de nadie. You created me. Aunque salí tan fría como la nieve a tu alrededor, y tan blanca I would never be a targeted the way you were. You left me here with drawing hands por algo, que no?

Coming into grad school, I struggled to figure out how my paintings could reckon with this specific understanding of mortality. That deep awareness of a system stacked against you that turns self-determination into self-styled martyrdom, as vatos y morritas destined to die young decide to claim it. And still those click click clicking used-up-lighter bones kept asking - *who the fuck decided on this whole colonial machista-ass system of pre-ordained death anyways?*

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10 This is a maoist joke for llana, please don’t overthink it.
11 Rodriguez, Luis J. 2005. *Always Running: La Vida Loca: Gang Days in L.A.* Atria Books. 125. Also from this page: “we yelled: ‘You can’t touch this!, but *Come kill me!*” was the inner cry”
12 My remix of [Mil Horas](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0x123456789) by Los Enanitos Verdes
13 [Amigo Bronco](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0x123456789) by Grupo Bronco
Those early grad school paintings didn't work. I kept scraping away stiff faces and hands that held none of the razor sharp vitality of the “living dead.” But the build up and removal of paint began to mirror another process - the stubborn act of re-remembering. It's less about creating an accurate portrait of who somebody was than constructing them as who you need them to be. The shifting consequences of tending to a memory that turns into an amulet.

This process started making sense when I came across a Diego Rivera painting of Emiliano Zapata buried underneath a cornfield and thought, that must feel nice. Let’s make a painting that collapses space and time and family walking over buried under corn. Of course, my fallow Connecticut River cornfields give Anselm Keifer not Dieguito. Ni modo. I had started threading silty ground and grainy static through the acrid smell of marigolds and lingering smoke. Dusk was falling in my paintings, making room for conversations between the living and the dead.

Death in my paintings stopped being tied to specific events. Instead, it related to larger patterns of systemic violence, but also to an understanding of mortality as a necessary undercurrent of life. I stopped painting my muertitos and started painting little wormholes in lived time. Petitions for dense moments of intimacy that slow down and expand after dark. When space is sensed through heat emanating off of living things and the pressure of touch. Breath and heartbeats sync into each other in an implicit and relational understanding that being alive is linked to death.

The space within my paintings is shallow and touched, like the temperature between two people sitting next to each other outside at night, not talking. This distance could fit within my wingspan. Sometimes I invoke faux baroque compositions to draw you closer in until you feel the heat or walk away.

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“Time appears to pass at different rates because our experience of its passing involves not a single but two dynamic processes which are opposed to each other: accumulation and dissipation. The deeper the experience of a moment, the greater the accumulation of experience. This is why the moment is lived as longer. The dissipation of time-flow is checked. The lived durée is not a question of length but of depth or density.”

***

I build up and scrape down paint, harden and dissolve edges until it feels like time and space have stopped pulling against each other and just kind of vibrate in place, like a densely lived moment. Paint scraped back to the grain of the canvas serves as a porous source of light that emanates like heat from underneath skin. Remember, we’re still alive right now. It gives my figures a grainy, staticky quality like old newspaper photos. The fact that we’re alive right now matters because one day we’ll be dead. Maybe we already are.

In drawing, erasure is a natural source of light, but translated to paint it can exert a certain kind of pressure. This pressure is a warring, monolithic force in the meat cleavers raked over Leon Golub’s flayed skins. It’s a subtle toothed and intimate allusion to violence in Jennifer Packer’s figures and flowers dissolving into space. It’s the banal and everyday brutality of Adrian Piper’s series of personal photographs, photocopied on graph paper with faces rubbed out and printed over with the words “everything will be taken away.” Erasure as memento mori has a strong material pull. You just have to calibrate the pressure and the read.

This staticky, transparent light often contrasts with a backlit nocturnal opacity in my paintings. Intimacy is linked with nighttime. In the dark we encounter each other through density and mass and “lived obscurity” rather than clear sight. Night invites altered states where memory, dreams and storytelling tease out the flow of time. 

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**duende**

The figures in my paintings oscillate between sharp edged and porous dissolutions. In duende dead morning glory vines frame dappled light and crumbling concrete like corrosive lace where the wisp of a little kid with a mickey mouse backpack runs a cemetery into a playground climbing up onto the slab where los tatarabuelos are buried, stands still for as long as a 2 year old can stand still and shouts, “mommy I’m a statue!” we click click clicking laugh. This is an amulet.

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**aunque poco**, 2023, oil, acrylic and soap on unstretched canvas; metal mesh, rebar, concrete, broken glass and clothes pin frame, 71” x 52”

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"^^duende, 2023, oil, acrylic & soap on unstretched canvas, dead morning glory vines, string, 74”X 47”

<<<This is a painting called *you could be a night that is volcanic rock, a black wind scrapes your skin*

This is a painting called *i’ll be there with you to hold the knife (sucks teeth)*

This is a painting called *tú me desprecias por ser vagabundo, y mi destino es vivir así, si vagabundo es el propio mundo, que va girando en un cielo azul, que importa saber quien soy, ni de dónde vengo ni por donde voy*.17

This is a painting called *lo nuestro, aunque poco*

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17 ♦ Bronco - Vagabundo (Cover Audio)
This is a promise to my sisters that we'll play this match out another time because la Flaca Huesuda has the most cackling and cutting insights on Foucault. Gracias a la Pelona, estas cabronas siguen vivas.
SCULPTURE_CONCRETE_BONES

Tu muerte me nortea, La Muerte me orienta

Casting concrete is a counterpoint to painting in my work. My paintings deal with moments filtered through memory and touch. Concrete churns the grinding, sludgy space of trying to maintain a vital understanding of death, while recognizing its fundamental brutality under capitalism.

Death is regenerative and ruthless like those January thaw and freeze cycles that break up sidewalks, heaved and bucking under ice and snow. Jutting into graveyard teeth. Death is regenerative and pavement tilting at the roots of trees pushes us upwards every spring. Death can be brutal but you grab at streams of concrete glitters when you’re rolling fast. That dangerous shimmer in summer that swallows up the sun, forcing the block too hot.

Sometimes I think it was the sheer pressure of all that concrete that drove my mom to raise me bare foot in the country, slapping down dirt roads. To leave “the city of coughing and dead radiators.” We had the privilege to do this. 18

Cracks in pavement mark city time like glacial striations mark geologic time. Incessant, unnoticed and fundamental, a rush of people grates over paved ground every day. The rhythm warps, speeds down and slows up depending on who controls a city block and how people navigate through it. Time when sidewalks, corners and the street are public spaces where all facets of life play out. And also death. Concrete is a witness, a stage for the turbulence of life and death.

“The difference between seasons, as also the difference between day and night, shine and rain, is vital. The flow of time is turbulent. The turbulence makes lifetimes shorter both in fact and subjectivity. Duration is brief. Nothing lasts. This is as much a prayer as a lament.”19

18 Martin Espada. The city of coughing and dead radiators. 39.
cutting teeth

you broke heart and
out     i still light candles for
your safe journey to
the corner

- Suheir Hammad

Cutting Teeth is a series of concrete slabs embedded with votive pillars. It inverts the way that glassed-in candles sit on sidewalks in memoriam or ofrenda. In my work burnt out veladoras hold up the concrete, tending to the memory of sputtering prayers, flared hopes, and sooty milagritos.

The work sets and crumbles into various iterations of the same questions: how do you unwind the cause of death when somebody was killed by an entire system? Where do you get to lay the blame? You know that thing that happens when the whole racist capitalist machista world collapses down onto one person and their body breaks open on the pavement bleeding out? What do you do with all that impotencia and rage?

Sometimes you focus on the moment of impact and turn it into a kind of shrine. You laugh hard at the corners with the dead. You gather language from unsanctioned public and collective mourning. This one’s for the memorials we weren’t old enough to make and the ones when we were too far away to make it there in time.

cutting teeth, 2023, concrete, empty veladoras, broken tinted windows, fire glass

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In the latest iteration of *cutting teeth*, sidewalk slabs tilt into a sacrificial stone. It’s the chafa baby cousin of Federio Silva’s *Hombre Fragmentado*. A stone sculpture of a man that, broken in the making, lays where it fell on the museum floor. It wants to boomerang that pious, anthropological gaze directed at the Coyolxauhqui stone back on ourselves. We practice human sacrifice without ceremony.

In *cutting teeth*, the relief of a figure in broken glass mosaics is divided between three slabs - head, legs and torso. Each rectangle predicates, holds and conforms the structure of the body - containing, bisecting and abstracting it into an impossible shaking dance. The flattened, fluid form becomes a stylization shifting between icon and cartoon. But to flatten a body is also to break it, to puncture lungs and split vertebrae and

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You were somebody on the block, the street contained you and gave you life and gave you death. Because you never left, because you made it to the border, had a vision and turned back, because you crossed the border and kept crossing and found the block in the north Northeast. And the block still claimed you.

No nanes otra ves I’m conflating space and time - I wasn’t there - I don’t remember. But history repeats itself and, though I’m not the target, it turns out that I’m a rabiosa, vengeful spin off of your deaths. *Cutting teeth* will never canonize you. But it’s a promise that when we start counting your pecados, we weigh them against the pecados of the empire first. When they say crime, they mean the street, and therefore you. When we say crime, we mean the trans-national ruling class destroying our planet and killing everyone. Sin duda en esta reta, I take your side.
los tiernos que llevan veneno

I started casting bones after I stopped trying to make sense out of the lulls between corona trips, grad school y los cinco muertes. Numb feet and fever lungs, brain matter mush again and again and again. The pulse oximeter said I wasn’t even close to death. But pandemics fuck with all of us. I stayed thinking about Kathe Kollwitz’s print *Woman Embracing Death as a Friend*. I needed some bones for company, a live vaccine for death.

Esta pasó años después de haber conocido a mi bisabuela que en paz descanse almost tripping over her bones before an open family grave. I take solace in the fact that we’re still laying generations in the ground together bone to bone.

Los tiernos que llevan veneno are still jostling against each other, figuring out their form. Basically, they’re concrete casts of driftwood forms adorned with bits of shattered car windows, broken bottles and other glittery roadside debris. I wrap them in strings and benign salt crystal growths. They hang from webs in clusters between paintings and assemblages, overlapping different works depending where you move through space. I claim Janine Antoni’s tenderly visceral, novela-worthy milagros and Ledelle Moe’s mythically eroded forms as madrinas to my little osteoporotic bones.

For you - marigolds, but also goldenrod, queen anne’s lace, bindweed, black eyed susan, cattails, sumac, tiger lilies, dried grasses, asters, maple keys

Your death reverberates through every hollow in my body and every season of the year. It’s one of those deaths, the kind that shifts the way we look back on your life. It water stains our dreams. When you died, I sifted through your ashes looking for a bone shard big enough to hold between my teeth at parties so I wouldn’t be alone. I licked tequila off your urn. You came from people whose memorials invoke the spirit not the body. But I should have sat with your corpse day and night, blotting water from your ears and mouth como lo hicimos con ellos. Instead I traced ice forming at the edges of your nose. You used to hold me by the scruff of my neck between your jaws, just like a cat.
SPACE_DEBRIS_TEMPERATURE_&_TOUCH

Let’s start with the fact that there’s no ideal installation for my work, because there’s no ideal installation for me, and no one told you life would be easy, so the work had better learn to adapt as much as possible to any given situation and when it can’t adapt anymore it should probably just break, and we’ll think of another solution.

Or

A shine of survival²¹

Ok so if we’re laying out our time as space, this installation is a choreography of counterbalanced residue. It’s time as sparking, fizzing, sluggish, filled with belated premonitions, catatonic, joking, jarring, suicidal, fatalistic, corrosive, hyperactive, por vida, prickly, dull, sensory, sad-boy, worn-out elastic, ecstatic, dumb, fervent, syncretic, joyous kind of events that break shape the flow of time. It’s not a fractaling spiral or a snake swallowing its tail, it’s just a twist of balloon ribbon caught on barb wire attached to a bathtub hairball the sound of screeching wheels clasped to a knotted silver chain. What a fucking mess.

Bad Habits is an ongoing series of material explorations with no fixed or finished form or function. As a poem, it’s a laundry list of roadside magpie treasures collecting indefinitely on the back of an envelope. As an installation, it starts with a solid base - a pyramid of glass-pillared concrete slabs or a wormhole web of laundry lines. From there, it spins off in glitchy fractals, stacked and counter-balanced, twisted and high-strung. It glitters and dangles with driftwood and 7 years of broken mirror luck, salt crystallized concrete bones, 2 years of worn out baby shoes, dry flowers, rusty things, shiny things, kitchen things, and sharp things that fit within the palm of my hand.

“children when they ask you why is your mama so funny say she is a poet she don’t have no sense”

-Lucille Clifton, *Admonitions* 22

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The work moonlights as a storage system for collected and cataloged matter, a latent sculpture. At the root, it’s an ofrenda to short term magical thinking, memory loss, mommy fog and covid brain. It's about the importance of keeping a key hook by the door, even though you know you'll lose your keys regardless.

*Bad habits* is a record of the kind of time it takes to establish new routines in an unfamiliar apartment. It's building muscle memory to find the lightswitch in the dark without bumping into things. *Six months? A year? Never.*

"Teasing makes time trip up"  
from a lecture on “what’s real”

*TIME_WORMHOLES_BURN_HOLES_SNARL_&_SMILE*

Lo nuestro, aunque poco

Ok, so let’s agree that time moves in a spiral. On a grand scale it's non-linear, therefore linear time as a lived phenomena isn't real either. Only capitalists claim that time hurdles in one direction with ever-increasing speed towards progress or the second coming or whatever, forcing the majority of the world to live within its constraints. But functionally, even capitalist time has a looping logic, squeezed into ever-tightening boom and bust cycles. It plays jittery scrolling reruns of itself.

Time is both a medium and subject matter in my work. Not cosmic, geologic or historical time, but the jutting fizzing fabric of lived time. I’m interested in how lived experience shapes our perception of time’s form and flow and how our perceptions of time inform our lives.

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24 There will be morning glories whenever you need them  
25The Wikipedia page on *Capitalist Realism* states that, “According to [Mark] Fisher, the quotation ‘it is easier to imagine an end to the world than an end to capitalism’, attributed to both Fredric Jameson and Slavoj Žižek, encompasses the essence of capitalist realism.” The end of the world as the final outcome of linear time says a lot about the ideological essence of capitalist time.  
26 Sarah parkers thesis on
I’m not talking about a total derailment of time as money and the protestant work ethic. Ha. This can only be brought about through collective, principled and enduring struggle. I just want to burn little holes in the flow of linear time, eddies in the water like an extra smoke break. I’m coming to realize that over the past year I’ve been distilling three distinct registers of time.

Time as dense moments that reverberate longer than they should because your body syncs with another being or your edges flare.

Time striated with deep grooves of grief.

Time as the accumulation of debris.

In los tiernos que llevan veneno I drag up grief as tangled time collecting river driftwood. I make concrete casts of roots eroded by hurricanes and water. Spiked with broken glass, they start to be like bones. Their weight feels good in my hands. Concrete time and bone time are longer than our lifetimes, but not by much. Strung in jointed knots and red mesh hammocks over briny water, they start growing salt crystals that will corrode the concrete over time. I don’t know how long this will take. I doubt I’ll ever stop missing you hasta en los huesos. They look like something trapped & washed up from the sea.

If I try to locate grief inside my body (no, I haven’t read *The Body Keeps the Score*) I often find it in the hollows in my joints between my bones. The spatial logic of my sculptures is based in proprioception. It’s a bruisy, broken, cackling conversation between bones: concrete bones, my bones, my dead relative’s bones, and yours, if you’re down.

*los tiernos que llevan veneno (again)*

In los tiernos que llevan veneno I drag up grief as tangled time collecting river driftwood. I make concrete casts of roots eroded by hurricanes and water. Spiked with broken glass, they start to be like bones. Their weight feels good in my hands. Concrete time and bone time are longer than our lifetimes, but not by much. Strung in jointed knots and red mesh hammocks over briny water, they start growing salt crystals that will corrode the concrete over time. I don’t know how long this will take. I doubt I’ll ever stop missing you hasta en los huesos. They look like something trapped & washed up from the sea.

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In music we have metaphors for time that allow for variation of speed and cadence. Sound gives us a certain kind of legibility that’s undone when it turns into noise. But noise can be understood as a marker of space, a form of sonic mapping. And it registers on the level of static and vibration, recalibrating, tuning out and in.

**y más alla**

is an eclipse. It expands on the premise of a classic cellphone-in-a-solo-cup amplifier by placing speakers in 5 gallon buckets stacked on top of hollowed veladoras. The buckets are filled with layers of red plasticked lights, water and broken glass. The glass blows out the bass, if you know the kind of songs to play. The water dampens reverberations. This distortion riffs on the spatial dynamics of music turned up loud outside at night. The way it bounces off of buildings, busted and distant, turning sound into a mirrored signal. If you hear it here, it comes from over there.
CONCLUSION

If only I knew the difference between phenomenology and affect theory maybe I wouldn’t be such a philosophical hack. If only I wasn’t so fucking seria I probably wouldn’t care.

Of all the books I never finished reading, two are on my mind right now. The first, What Time Is It? was meant to be a conversation between critic John Berger and artist Selçuk Demirel. But Berger died before it could be written. Instead, his thoughts on time are drawn from previous works and compiled with images in this brief, meandering text. Because of this, some ideas hit hard while others feel decontextualized or worn out.

The second book is A Sense of Brown by José Esteban Muñoz. He spent his life expanding on affect in queer theory. He starting writing this book on the affects of being brown, but died before he could finish it.

Both projects were undertaken in the authors’ final years of life. Both were published posthumously by colleagues and comrades. I find these texts alternatingly frustrating and hopeful. The frustration is a way to sidestep grief. I have so many trailing questions, but I’m left hanging in the space where lived time and the time of art and ideas don’t coincide in their conclusions. The hope comes from knowing that each writer found it worthwhile to embark on these projects and other people found value in continuing their work. As someone who is currently alive and in a university library, I am lucky to have access to them. My own practice reckons with, teases and breathes alongside other people’s unfinished work.

My thesis is full of theoretical pot holes, lingering covid symptoms and not enough “quality time” spent with my kid. The writing is shifty and opaque. Approach it from the corner of your eye - she’s a lil skittish. I hope I’m leaving with more questions than I came with, because for sure I don’t have more answers. I hope I planted these questions in fertile ground. I want them to grow up into morning glory weeds or cook down into a belly-warming, bitter drink. For now, I’ll let them be. Like my mother taught me - bring the pot to a boil, then put it on the back burner. Let it sit and simmer and think about itself for a while.

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https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TNz9Aqsq9D0.


Clara Cruz was born in midwinter, Boston, 1993. She received her GED from the Vermont Adult Learning Center. She received her Bachelor of Fine Arts in Painting from Hunter College *summa cum laude* with departmental honors in 2019. She received her Master of Fine Arts in Painting + Printmaking from Virginia Commonwealth University in 2023.