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Abstract: This article reads Salvador Plascencia's *The People of Paper* (2005) in dialogue with Édouard Glissant's concept of 'opacity', an ethical and aesthetic stance that finds value in impeding comprehension. This novel's opacity arises from various complicating mechanisms – translational, intersubjective, formal, and intertextual – which both invite and inhibit interpretation, and in so doing open up a space in which readers can think with the text. Bringing *The People of Paper* and Glissant's thought together shows how Plascencia's text thickens and complicates readerly engagement, and so enriches the ethical and aesthetic purchase of the novel. Conversely, Plascencia's innovative use of the page and his invocation of an intertextual history of such innovation expands the scope of Glissant's theory, by using the physical medium of the book and the workings of genre history as components of an opaque poetics.

Opaque Poetics in Salvador Plascencia's *The People of Paper*

'Sometimes what the page needs is a darkened square.'[1]

Salvador Plascencia's *The People of Paper* (2005) is a novel of concealment and revelation, of surveillance and sousveillance, of coded messages and their decryption, and of narratorial omniscience and its discontents. The novel's manifold limiting mechanisms inhibit or deflect understanding, but in so doing they create a reactive desire to unveil, to find out, and to decrypt. It is at these limit points, where attention is drawn below the surface of the text only to be rebuffed or diverted, that Plascencia's novel opens up a space in which to think with it, by actively limiting (and so partially directing) the reader's pathways of thought. These limiting devices can helpfully be understood in dialogue with Édouard Glissant's concept of 'opacity', an ethical and aesthetic stance that sees value in resisting comprehension. Bringing *The People of Paper* and Glissant's thought together shows, on the one hand, how Plascencia's text uses opacity to thicken and complicate readerly engagement, and so enrich the ethical and aesthetic purchase of the novel. On the other, Plascencia's innovative use of the physical medium of the book and his invocation of an intertextual history of such innovation expands the scope of Glissant's theory. Reading Plascencia's novel and Glissant's thought in counterpoint requires toggling between domains of experience – intersubjective, linguistic, aesthetic – and this allows a broader consideration of the murky dynamics involved when people, languages, and artworks come together. Both writers explore the extent to which one's inner life can be comprehensible to others (and to oneself), the troubled mediation of experience in language and between languages, and the ways artworks become enmeshed with, and allow some purchase on, the world.

For Glissant, opacity is a property or a process – of people, artworks – that inhibits the ability to fully grasp them. In Clevis Headley's succinct formulation, opacity is 'resistance to conceptual containment', or, as Martin Crowley puts it, 'Glissantian *opacité* […] has to do with that which cannot be reduced to categorical systems of thought that would recuperate alterity by making it understandable, by rendering it transparent'.[2] Opacity can take a number of forms: at times, it is an ideological stance that refuses a 'universalizing and reductive humanism' by insisting that aspects of others escape attempts at systematization.[3] At other times, opacity arises from the

[1] Salvador Plascencia and Max Benavides, 'Salvador Plascencia by Max Benavidez', *Bomb Magazine*, 2007 <https://bombmagazine.org/articles/salvador-plascencia/> [accessed 17 May 2020].
[2] Clevis Headley, 'Glissant's Existential Ontology of Difference', *The CLR James Journal*, 18.1 (2012), 59–101 (p. 94); Patrick Crowley, 'Édouard Glissant: Resistance and Opacité', *Romance Studies*, 2013, p. 106.
[3] Édouard Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays*, ed. & trans. by J. Michael Dash (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1989), p. 133.

differences between languages and the difficulties of moving between them. Opacity can also be a property of texts, in which the style, mode, structure, or presentation of characters in some way limits the reader's understanding.[4] In this regard, opacity overlaps with other forms of literary difficulty – for example Gertrude Stein's stylistic circling, Denis Williams's deflective characterization, William Gaddis's allusional recursion – and particularly the aspects of those difficulties that offer political affordances.

As the description above might suggest, Glissantian opacity shares characteristics with what Emily Apter, following Barbara Cassin, calls 'untranslatability', which she sees as a 'deflationary gesture towards the expansionism […] of world-literary endeavors.'[5] Apter focuses on the recalcitrant aspect of untranslatability – its resistance to projects of global assimilation – but untranslatability is not only 'pure difference in opposition to the always translatable' but rather 'a linguistic form of creative failure with homeopathic uses'.[6] In this formulation, presumably suggesting that encountering untranslatability in small doses can help inoculate against more serious cases rather than implying its clinical inefficacy, Apter is close to Cassin's position in the *Vocabulaire européen des philosophies : dictionnaire des intraduisibles*, in which untranslatability begins an ongoing process of negotiation rather than marks a dead end. In Cassin's words, 'to speak of untranslatables in no way implies that the terms in question, or the expressions, the syntactical or grammatical turns, are not and cannot be translated: the untranslatable is rather what one keeps on (not) translating.'[7] What Cassin identifies here – that untranslatability offers a point of departure, albeit to an unreachable destination – is aligned with what Betsy Wing, one of Glissant's translators, notes in her 'Translator's Introduction' to Glissant's *Poetics of Relation*: 'the stumbling blocks of a translation frequently exist at its most productive point. Their usual first effect is frustration caused by obstinate resistance (on both sides), but, in their ever-renewed demand for conjecture, these apparent obstacles can allow us to escape the cramped, habitual postures of our own thought.'[8]

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[4] For a useful discussion of opacity and form, see Colin Clark, 'Resistant Literatures; Literatures of Resistance? The Politics and Poetics of Opacity in Kateb and Dib', *Research in African Literatures*, 47.3 (2016), 50–69.

[5] Emily Apter, *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability* (London; New York: Verso, 2013), p. 3.

[6] Apter, p. 26.

[7] *Dictionary of Untranslatables: A Philosophical Lexicon*, ed. by Barbara Cassin and others, trans. by Steven Rendall and others (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2014), p. xvii; Original French: 'Parler d'intraduisibles n'implique nullement que les termes en question, ou les expressions, les tours syntaxiques et grammaticaux, ne soient pas traduits et ne puissent pas l'être - l'intraduisible, c'est plutôt ce qu'on ne cesse pas de (ne pas) traduire.' Barbara Cassin, *Vocabulaire européen des philosophies : dictionnaire des intraduisibles* (Paris: Le Seuil/Le Robert, 2004), p. xvii.

[8] Betsy Wing, 'Translator's Introduction', in *Poetics of Relation*, by Édouard Glissant (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), pp. xi–xx (p. xi).

Opacity, here taking the form of untranslatabilty, sees the non-equivalence between languages as a means to step outside oneself in order to achieve a changed orientation towards the world.

If untranslatability offers one source of opacity, another comes from overtranslatability, when texts are, in Rebecca Walkowitz's words, 'born translated', that is, when translation appears as a 'medium and origin rather than as afterthought', and 'functions as a thematic, structural, conceptual, and sometimes even typographical device'.[9] While *The People of Paper* does not actively 'pretend[] to take place in a language other than the one in which [it has], in fact, been composed', it is the case that many of the interactions described in the novel are presumably carried out in Spanish, although they appear in English on the page.[10] This is made clear when protagonist Federico de la Fe and his daughter Merced enter a store 'run by an old Oaxacan who only spoke English and his native tongue. I translated for my father […]' (38). The world described in Plascencia's novel is then a multilingual one, in which Spanish plays an important role. The title of the book even hints at the hispanophone component of this multilingual substrate, by preferring the unidiomatic *The People of Paper* to, say, *The Paper People* (the novel was later translated into Spanish by Silvia Alemany Vilalta as *La Gente de Papel*). The opacity engendered by this linguistic palimpsest comes about because the multilingual world in the text only precedes the largely anglophone novel in the sense that a novel's fabula precedes its syuzhet, which is to say that the interaction between the two is complicated. In fictional texts, the fabula is produced by the syuzhet, although it logically seems to be the other way round, and similarly the anglophone novel *The People of Paper* only implies, rather than transcribes, a multilingual original. A similar linguistic doubling is present in Glissant's writing, although in this case the negotiation between languages is central to what Glissant calls a 'poétique forcée' [forced poetics], in which the subject matter and the language of expression are held in tension.[11] Glissant's first language was Créole, with French the language in which he studied and wrote. However, as Wing notes, 'French readers of Glissant's work would have a very clear sense that his vocabulary was not entirely that of mainland France, that it was something particular, Antillean perhaps'.[12] The tug between standard French, Antillean French and Créole – between their theoretically 'untranslatable' non-equivalence and the practical fact of moving between them – enacts one of the central philosophical problems of Glissant's thought: how we should act at the limits of equivalence and mutual comprehension.

[9] Rebecca Walkowitz, *Born Translated: The Contemporary Novel in an Age of World Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), p. pp.3-4.
[10] Walkowitz, p. 4.
[11] Édouard Glissant, *Le Discours antillais* (Paris: Seuil, 1981), p. 402.
[12] Wing, p. xvii.

In its most extreme form, opacity would foreclose all communication, but for Glissant the limit point where relation and interpretation falter should not constitute an end in itself. Rather, opacity creates the structuring conditions in which a more ethical set of relations with others and with the self can be conceived. The limiting function of opacity might be thought of as demarcating a space or architecture in which actions take on structure and meaning, much as the lines around a tennis court give sense to what happens within them, or a picture frame invokes a set of understandings about the form of attention its contents might require. By structuring experience through limitation, opacity should be a spur to engagement and entanglement, rather than serving only as a blocking mechanism. It offers a way to

> conceive of the opacity of the other for me, without reproach for my opacity for him. To feel in solidarity with him or to build with him or to like what he does, it is not necessary for me to grasp him. It is not necessary to try to become the other (to become other) nor to 'make' him in my image.[13]

Glissant here suggests that opacity structures our interactions with others in a more ethical way than absolute transparency would allow. The role of opacity is not to sustain a state of hermetic purity, but rather – and similarly to Cassin's figure of untranslatability – to encourage the co-creation of a new and more ethical architecture of encounter. Further, acknowledging intersubjective opacity offers a model for accepting one's opacity to oneself. In Glissant's words:

> it does not disturb me to accept that there are places where my identity is obscure to me, and the fact that it amazes me does not mean I relinquish it. Human behaviours are fractal in nature. If we become conscious of this and give up trying to reduce such behaviours to the obviousness of a transparency, this will, perhaps, contribute to lightening their load, as every individual begins not grasping his own motivations, taking himself apart in this manner.[14]

In this beautiful formulation, selfhood is fractal. Like blood vessels, seashells, lightning bolts, or hurricanes, human behaviour is a pattern which perpetually repeats and unfolds at different scales. This model allows for – perhaps even requires – a life to be examined, with no precondition that a fundamental stratum of meaning will be reached.

The model of intersubjective engagement that Glissant proposes, in which inscrutability demands an ongoing process of alignment with others and with oneself, has important consequences for understanding the role aesthetic opacity might play in the analysis of artworks. Glissant's ethics are tightly bound to aesthetic practices, and to resist the easy rendering of experience into information, he advocates a clotted poetics in which opacity 'encroaches on the

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[13] Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. by Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), p. 193.
[14] Édouard Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*, pp. 192–93.

mechanics, the technologies of unveiling: to thicken it.'[15] This means, in part, that writers should be wary of producing works that too easily offer up their community for scrutiny, and it further offers a prompt to critical practice. In Nicole Simek's words, '[o]pacity does not so much thwart interpretation as alter its course',[16] it does not block analysis so much as deflect or reroute it in unpredictable ways. This refraction of critical attention precludes any calculable or transactional relationship between reader and text, creating a space to 'build with' the text that is demarcated by opacity, and in which an anterior meaning cannot be uncovered.

Plascencia's novel offers a useful foil to Glissant's thought, in that there is a discrepancy between the relatively straightforward prose style and the complexities of plot, myriad formal effects, idiosyncratic formatting, and intertextual webbings that impede and dilate the reading experience. Before turning to the opacity created by the novel's *mise-en-page* and intertextual allusion – two dimensions of opacity that extend Glissant's theorization – it is worth considering the limits to comprehension imposed by the book's baroque plot. The story begins with a Prologue which introduces Merced de Papel, a woman both literally made of paper, and an intertextual entity made from the 'leaves of Austen and Cervantes […] Leviticus and Judges' among other things.[17] Part One of the novel begins in the Mexican town of Las Tortugas, seemingly in the 1940s, when protagonist Federico de la Fe's bed-wetting causes his wife Merced to leave him. Sick with lost love, he leaves Mexico with his daughter, Little Merced, for Los Angeles, but ends up in El Monte, 'a small town fifteen miles east of Rita Hayworth's Hollywood mansion'.[18] El Monte, Plascencia discusses in an interview, is closely tied up with the opacities of translation, as it is 'the gateway for thousands of Latinos and Asians into an American life', and is where these 'immigrant stories [make] first contact with the English language You have these narratives being translated and mistranslated and trying to find meaning in a new American context.'[19]

Federico finds work as a flower picker and later becomes the leader of the El Monte Flores Gang, the EMF, but from the moment his wife left him, he has felt 'the weight of a distant force looking down on him', and as he reaches Tijuana this feeling intensifies, becoming a 'hovering force pressing down on him. He sensed that he was being constantly watched from above'.[20] His proximity to the border suggests the watchful eye of the Border Patrol – 'my father looked around

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[15] Édouard Glissant, *L'intention poétique* (Paris: Seuil, 1969), p. 180; Édouard Glissant, *Poetic Intention*, trans. by Nathalie Stephens (New York: Nightboat Books, 2010), p. 165.
[16] Nicole Simek, 'Stubborn Shadows', *Symploke*, 23.1 (2015), 363–73 (p. 365).
[17] Salvador Plascencia, *The People of Paper* (San Francisco: McSweeney's, 2005), p. 15.
[18] Plascencia, p. 33.
[19] Salvador Plascencia and George Ducker, 'An Interview with Salvador Plascencia', 2006 <https://www.hobartpulp.com/web_features/an-interview-with-salvador-plascencia> [accessed 18 August 2020].
[20] Plascencia, pp. 18, 26.

to see if anyone was following us or watching through telescopes'[21] – but this observer is elsewhere. The presence is Saturn, also known as 'Salvador Plascencia. Salvador Plascencia Gonzalez, to be exact', a would-be omniscient narrator whose powers are frequently impeded by his characters' efforts to limit his oversight.[22] They hide under lead shields, think 'only inconsequential things and in a jumbled logic' to limit narrative interest, wage war against him, and plot either to slit his throat, 'dragging the blade across the skin and stubble of his neck, letting his ink drip', or even to steal his manuscript, leaving 'nothing behind but the title page and table of contents'.[23]

A second strand of the narrative begins in Part Two, when the physical integrity of the fictional world in El Monte is ruptured, as one EMF gang member, Smiley, saws a hole in the papier-mâché sky and meets his creator, Saturn. Like the wizard behind the curtain in Oz, this is no great and powerful sorcerer, but rather a saturnine and disheveled figure, with dirty laundry scattered on the floor. Saturn/Salvador, much like Federico de la Fe, is pining after his lost love, Liz. She has left him for a white man while Saturn was fighting his war with the EMF, a war that is now both that of a planet with men on Earth and that of a writer struggling to finish a manuscript in the face of his material's obstinate resistance. The seven chapters that make up this section seem to be set in the early 2000s, and are both bitter and melancholy, with Saturn/Salvador in a seemingly shallow rebound relationship, while trying to win back Liz through hopeless pleading ('I'll build you bookshelves like you always wanted/It's too late') and cruel insults ('You are awful. Worse than Rita Hayworth. […] You are worse than the Malinche, worse than Pocahontas. Fucking white boys […]').[24] He launches into a misogynistic 'diatribe against womanhood', and the section ends with a response from lost love Liz, who accuses him of having revealed too much of his community to a wider public and asks to be removed from the book.[25] Part three responds to her demand for privacy by starting the book again, including a new title page and dedication, this time with Liz's name redacted. This section begins with Saturn disempowered, his columns empty, and the EMF holding the upper hand. Over the course of 13 chapters, Saturn makes a powerful comeback and despite the EMF's efforts to regain control of the narrative – visualized through an increasingly chaotic *mise-en-page*, with multiple columns running in different directions – it is eventually Saturn who wins out.

As this involved description might suggest, the novel is as indebted to Gabriel García Márquez's labyrinthine compositions – Plascencia claims to have read *One Hundred Years of Solitude*

[21] Plascencia, p. 31.
[22] Plascencia, pp. 21, 102.
[23] Plascencia, pp. 95, 104, 105.
[24] Plascencia, p. 118.
[25] Plascencia, p. 133.

on a loop for three years[26] – as it is to the metafictional gymnastics of John Barth and Donald Barthelme. These multiple narrative and ontological threads cloud interpretation, and more opacities yet arise from the novel's divergence from the standard book formatting of unbroken pages of text, and in its creative blending of text and image. The book contains pages split into multiple columns, sometimes of differing widths and lengths, sometimes running at right angles to the usual top-to-bottom reading direction. There are blacked out columns – described meiotically by Jennifer Harford Vargas as evincing an 'ethics of […] narrative restraint'[27] – hovering black shapes that obscure portions of the text, images of *lotería* cards, graphs, a piece of musical notation, what might be a tattoo or piece of graffiti, a telephone bill, a meteorological diagram, and a name which, depending on the edition, is either die-cut or scored out from the page. Plascencia's incorporation of design into the substance of the text begins even on the contents page, in which chapters are differentiated by drawings of coded hand signs, accompanied by a series of dots and bars attached to the chapter numbers. Even before the novel has begun in earnest, the reader is prompted with the idea that information is somehow being withheld from them, and that a mode of reading that navigates will be required.

These ciphers in the text have encouraged several critics to read *The People of Paper* as encoding a form of political or social critique: Ramón Saldívar describes the novel as having an 'aesthetic idiom […] committed to social justice';[28] Harford Vargas describes it as 'a formal response to inequitable socioeconomic structures in the borderlands that are exacerbated by the militarization of the border and by the exploitative actions of NAFTA-supported multi-national corporations and agrobusiness';[29] Marcial González reads the novel in the context of labour movements, arguing that *The People of Paper* 'can be read as an allegory of the Chicano/a farmworker struggle against capitalist structures of power'.[30] While evidence for each of these readings can certainly be found, to focus on these aspects risks overstating the political commitments of Plascencia's novel, or perhaps more accurately, these readings have a different understanding of this novel's political mode to mine. The novel's opacities create too many inconsistencies to be

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[26] Plascencia and Benavides.

[27] Jennifer Harford Vargas, *Forms of Dictatorship: Power, Narrative, and Authoritarianism in the Latina/o Novel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), p. 82.

[28] Ramón Saldívar, 'Historical Fantasy, Speculative Realism, and Postrace Aesthetics in Contemporary American Fiction', *American Literary History*, 23.3 (2011), 574–99 (p. 584). This 'postrace' aesthetic, as Saldívar characterises it, links 'fantasy, history, and the imaginary in the mode of speculative realism in order to remain true to ethnic literature's Utopian allegiance to social justice.' (p. 585).

[29] Vargas, p. 83.

[30] Marcial González, 'Labor Movements and Chicana/o Literature', *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Literature*, 2019 <https://oxfordre.com/literature/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190201098.001.0001/acrefore-9780190201098-e-927> [accessed 7 July 2020].

able to map it directly onto to a particular extra-textual struggle, and it is rather the workings of opacity itself that perform the novel's politics. Plascencia has discussed his ambivalence to advancing a defined political position in his work, and, even with the caveat that authors are sometimes unreliable witnesses to their own novels, it is worth bearing in mind that '[a] lot of the book was meant to be taken very literally […] It's not a metaphor', and further that '[a]s a writer, I align myself with aesthetics, not ethnicity. […] I just don't have the desire to forefront my ethnicity over my writing'.[31] While this preference is no impediment to readings of Plascencia's text that pursue such questions, my focus is rather on how Plascencia's novel requires a particular kind of reading, in which opacity draws the reader in, but on the understanding that it will not be clarified. Rather, the novel encourages a greater awareness of how opacity's workings affect our interactions both with those around us, and with the works of art before us. To be clear, I do not mean that politically or socially motivated readings of this novel hold any less currency. Rather, I am suggesting that there is value in considering this novel through a different optic – in this case one that sees through a glass, darkly – and that this different way of seeing offers a critical yield that shapes our understanding of this novel as well as of the process of reading more broadly.

Given the particular demands of its plot and form, *The People of Paper* can be thought of a book that in part creates the readers it requires. Plascencia's novel is neither a static carrier of information nor an allegory of the kind that disguises one story as another, but is rather a means of co-creating knowledge, what IA Richards described as 'a machine to think with' or later a 'speculative instrument', with the instrument of speculation here working by restricting the field of view.[32] Alexander Starre makes a useful observation in this regard: 'Salvador Plascencia's book is anything but a neutral communication medium. In the hands of its readers, it becomes a thing capable of coevolving with its observers.'[33] Starre's interest is particularly in the book's self-referential physicality, but the logic of how the book works with the reader to produce knowledge holds more broadly. The process of reading any novel is based on an intuition that that there is a formal structure – an underlying organising principle or logic – to be discovered in it, and that the route to comprehending or unveiling that formal structure is accessed through a

[31] Salvador Plasencia and Angela Stubbs, 'An Interview with Salvador Plascencia', *Bookslut*, 2006 <http://www.bookslut.com/features/2006_06_009056.php> [accessed 8 May 2020]; Salvador Plascencia and Daniel Olivas, 'Guest Interview: Salvador Plascencia', *The Elegant Variation*, 2006 <https://marksarvas.blogs.com/elegvar/2006/12/guest_interview.html> [accessed 8 July 2020].
[32] IA Richards, *Principles of Literary Criticism* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Tubner, 1924), p. 1; IA Richards, *Speculative Instruments* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955).
[33] Alexander Starre, *Metamedia: American Book Fictions and Literary Print Culture After Digitization* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2015), p. 196.

sustained engagement with the work. However, there is always some aspect of form that eludes us: as with the fractal model of selfhood, the closer we get, the more it appears there is to know. The form of a novel is, in Austin Wright's words, not a 'fully realized entity but […] an emergent hypothesis of reading', and the 'interest and life of a form for the reader depend strongly on what impedes or delays perception of that form'.[34] In *The People of Paper*, Plascencia uses the impedance of opacity both to draw the reader in and to rebuff them, creating a series of unstable affective responses to the text – desire, frustrated desire, curiosity, disappointment – that are aligned with the thwarted desires the characters experience, and become interwoven with the text's meaning event. As with the workings of untranslatability or intersubjective opacity, the process of moving towards the work, in the knowledge of its final opacity to us, becomes the basis of our most productive encounters with it.

There are some striking parallels between Glissant's theorization of opacity and Plascencia's novel. While Glissant calls for a 'right to opacity', Plascencia's protagonist Federico de la Fe seeks a 'right to be unseen', and 'claims […] dignity through privacy'.[35] One of the central motors of the novel is found in the dynamic between surveillance and what Steve Mann calls 'sousveillance', in which the observing party is not in a position of power over the observed.[36] This takes a number of forms, including: the tension between Saturn's omniscient surveillance and the sousveillance of the EMF gang ('It was never Saturn's intention to destroy any of them, if only they had not rebelled and just lived their lives without looking up'[37]); allusion to the longstanding trope of Catholicism's reliance on surveillance in the absence of Protestant self-discipline (Plascencia notes in an interview that '[t]he characters can't think things, because Saturn will discover them. In Catholicism you can't think these things even if you're not acting on them'[38]); the recurrence of codes and ciphers, from gang signs and graffiti tags to binary code, all of which invoke the need to obscure interpretation;[39] and the question of ethics around an author's willingness to offer up personal or intimate experience for public view. Saturn's ex-girlfriend

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[34] Austin M. Wright, 'Recalcitrance in the Short Story', in *Short Story Theory at a Crossroads*, ed. by Susan Lohafer and Jo Ellyn Clarey (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989), pp. 115–129 (p. 116).
[35] Édouard Glissant and Manthia Diawara, 'Conversation with Édouard Glissant Aboard the Queen Mary II (August 2009)', *Afro Modern: Journeys through the Black Atlantic.*, 2010, 58–63 (p. 14); Plascencia, p. 46.
[36] Steve Mann, 'Veillance and Reciprocal Transparency: Surveillance versus Sousveillance, AR Glass, Lifeglogging, and Wearable Computing', *Weartech* <wearcam.org/veillance/veillance.pdf>; See also Kelly Ross, 'Watching from Below: Racialized Surveillance and Vulnerable Sousveillance', *PMLA*, 135.2 (2020), 299–314.
[37] Plascencia, p. 46.
[38] Plascencia and Benavides.
[39] For a reading of the novel through the coded aesthetics of *con safos* and *rasquachismo* see Cristina Rodriguez, 'Grounded Transnationalism: Neighborhood Logics in Salvador Plascencia's *The People of Paper*', *Latino Studies*, 13.4 (2015), 481–500.

accuses him: 'you have offered up not only your hometown, EMF, and Federico de la Fe, but also me, your grandparents and generations beyond them, your patria, your friends, […] You have delivered all this into their hands, and for what? For twenty dollars and the vanity of your name on the book cover.'[40]

The limiting structures that shape both the narrative and the reading experience of *The People of Paper* also inhere in its composition, particularly in terms of the physical constraints of the published book. Plascencia remarks in an interview that *The People of Paper* was 'rejected by every major house. Grove/Altantic, Random House, I can't even remember all of the different ones, but I have the rejection slips for them', before finally being picked up by McSweeney's.[41] In part, this was to do with the limiting structures of commercial publishing when faced with the novel's generic unclassifiability: Plascencia found himself too atypical to be marketable as a 'chicano author' – he notes that '[t]he Latino imprints never called when it was going around'[42] – and too experimental to be published by many mainstream presses. But it was also to do with the practical difficulties and expense of bringing the novel to print in the form Plascencia imagined it: the novel's formatting includes illustrations, columns that run at right angles to the page, die cuts, and other eccentricities. As a result, *The People of Paper*'s opacity comes about in part through the book's 'metamedial' form, Starre's term for literature that 'uses specific devices to reflexively engage with the specific material medium to which it is affixed or in which it is displayed', or that 'interrogates the relationship of verbal art to its carrier medium […] a form of artistic self-reference that systematically mirrors, addresses, or interrogates the material properties of its medium.'[43] The additional interpretative resistance engendered by the physical peculiarities of the book contribute to what Wright would call its 'formal recalcitrance', a phenomenon that occurs when a reader encounters 'two opposing forces', namely 'the force of a shaping form and the resistance of the shaped materials'.[44] The book's metamedialty limits readerly understanding, with 'limit' here understood in the sense of 'direct' or 'alter' rather than 'block': *The People of Paper*'s self-referential physicality offers an architecture through which thought can move, by actively inhibiting (and so directing) its path.

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[40] Plascencia, pp. 133, 138.
[41] Plasencia and Stubbs.
[42] Salvador Plascencia and Mark Ehrman, 'Elegy for El Monte', *Los Angeles Times*, 2005 <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2005-jul-31-tm-crplascencia31-story.html> [accessed 16 July 2020].
[43] Starre, *Metamedia*, p. 8; Alexander Starre, '"Little Heavy Papery Beautiful Things": McSweeney's, Metamediality, and the Rejuvenation of the Book in the USA', *Writing Technologies*, 3 (2010), 25–41 (pp. 25, 31).
[44] Wright, p. 115.

To explore in more depth what this process looks like in practice, I will now turn to a striking example of opacity in the novel and how it shapes the reading experience, in the figure of the Baby Nostradamus, a 'slobbering baby' who is first thought to be 'brain dead' but who is identified as a powerful soothsayer by a local *curandero*.[45] Baby Nostradamus's appearance in the book is marked by an entirely blacked-out column, and this block of solid black where the text would normally be seems to constitute a poetics of absolute opacity. With the column inked out, it is not even clear if a message is being obscured or if there is nothing there at all. The effect of this black block is not, however, that of a total absence of meaning. Instead, it leads to a series of reactions, which range from immediate perceptual ones to more learned interpretations that draw on a history of other novels and artworks. Let me begin with the most immediate visual and affective responses and their accompanying cognitive calibration. The double page that has the black column on its right-hand side begins with a column written by Saturn about Federico and featuring an image of a *lotería* card depicting *La Muerte* in the form of a skeleton holding a scythe. Before reading the text on the page, the eye is drawn to the card, depicting death, and to the black column visible on the far right. As a result, these pages are experienced in different order from the typical top-to-bottom, left-to-right of anglophone novel reading, and frames the reading of the text with the foreknowledge of two opacities: the end of life and the withdrawal of communication. The net result is a feeling of curiosity – dread would be an exaggeration – but one that seems unlikely to be sated, at least not immediately and not in full.

The juxtaposition of the images on facing pages invites association between them, suggesting that the inked block on the right might be linked to the card on the left: is there a death to come on these pages? The imaginative prolepsis involved in trying to decrypt these signs both foreshadows the appearance of the soothsaying baby, and in part transfers the role soothsayer's role to the reader: divination and foretelling are central to how reading works, particularly in plotted narratives, but this practice is ironised here, as the spatial layout of the page encourages a mode of reading that is non-linear and associative rather than sequential and developmental. The middle column on the page is narrated by Little Merced, Federico's daughter, and describes her encounter with Baby Nostradamus on a bus. She stares into the baby's eyes, hoping for a glimpse of the future, or of her departed mother. The blackness that follows, as well as bearing the meanings it has already accreted, also pictorialises Little Merced's view of the baby's pupils, dilated in emotional or cognitive response, but incomprehensible from the outside. Little Merced's pining for foreknowledge, or for some understanding of the source of her sadness, is unsuccessful, as the baby's black eyes offer no clear response. Nevertheless, she does receive an answer of a kind, just

[45] Plascencia, p. 23.

one that both absorbs her question and turns it back on herself – how should one act when one's desire to know cannot be realised? The illegibility of the black block then becomes a visual cipher for the final unknowability of others, and for how this opacity both draws us in and rebuffs us, forcing us to negotiate this intractability. As discussed above, for Glissant, this is no cause for regret, but rather should provide the basis of a way of being in the world that does not require the absolute comprehensibility of others to us.

In parallel with these responses, which might be characterised as internal to the text, come another order of responses, this time rooted in the history of the novel, and equally concerned with the function of the limit. *The People of Paper* explores the limits of the novel form, the generic framework in which Plascencia's text takes on meaning. When asked about the conception and composition of his novel, Plascencia situates it in a tradition stretching back to some of the earliest novels, to '[Laurence] Sterne, to early books', leading him to 'the realization that the way we understand the book is only a domesticated version of the wild, feral, origins of the book. We have housecats, when we once had sabretooths.'[46] Few readers with an interest in the history of the novel would miss the black square's allusion to Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* (1751-67), and as with Sterne's novel, Plascencia's uses a variety of formal effects that encourage the reader's participation in co-creating both work and reader. For Plascencia, the *lotería* card of *La Muerte* prefigures the black column on the facing page, echoing Sterne's famous double page, which has 'Alas, poor YORICK!' on the left-hand page with the opposing page filled with black ink.[47] As well as referring to Sterne, who in turn refers back to Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, the black square sets off a chain of further associations, from the inked mourning pages of Josuah Sylvester's *Lachrimae Lachrimarum* (1612) via the mystical non-objectivity of Kazimir Malevich's *Black Square* (1915) to works which postdate Plascencia's, such as Frederik De Wilde's *NANOBlck-Sqr#1* (2014), a painting made of 'ultra dark nano engineered material' that is an 'attempt to capture all light at all frequencies behind its infinite and boundless blackness'.[48] What each of these works suggests, in its own way, is that absolute blackness might not be nothingness, but rather serve to disguise boundlessness. This is an idea already present in Sterne when he suggests, albeit ironically, the 'many opinions, transactions and truths which still lie mystically hid under the dark veil of the black one',[49] at once mocking forms of reading that look for hidden meanings while hinting that such meanings are in fact hidden beneath. If the black squares of Sylvester's and Sterne's works

[46] Plascencia and Benavides.
[47] Laurence Sterne, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (York, 1759), I, p. 72.
[48] 'NANOblck-Sqr#1', *Frederik De Wilde* <https://frederik-de-wilde.com/project/nanoblck-sqr1/> [accessed 13 July 2020].
[49] Laurence Sterne, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (London: R&J Dodsley, 1761), III, p. 168.

represent – obliquely – the limits of language in the face of death, Malevich's and De Wilde's draw out the spiritual dimensions that can emerge through withdrawal from representing the objective world. In each case, the limit to perception imposed by blackness does not signal an absence of meaning, but rather points to a plenitude – an excess of sorrow that lies beyond words, 'the supremacy of pure feeling',[50] the containment and concealment of all frequencies of light – towards which the viewer can move, but which will never fully be reached.

In this rich intertextual and intermedial network, a new dimension of *The People of Paper*'s opacity emerges, and it is one that expands the conceptual reach of Glissant's theory. In addition to drawing on the mixed affective charge of indicating while withholding, attracting while deflecting, that is present in these other works, Plascencia's novel offers a coded language of reference to a longer history of opacity in artworks. If the blackness before Little Merced's eyes leads interpretation towards the final unknowability of others, this intertextual chain of reference asks us to consider the limits of art's interpretability, even as those limits invite acts of interpretation. On the one hand, this invitation encourages an understanding of the work's ontology that is dependent on intentional acts of consciousness towards it – in Roman Ingarden's words, the work is 'ontically heteronomous'[51] – on the other, the deflection suggests that even such constitutive intentional acts will always fail to fully realise the artwork, that some residue will remain. While an encounter with intersubjective opacity might, following Glissant, structure a more ethical relation with others, aesthetic opacity shapes the encounter with a work of art, deflecting readings that seek to explain away the work in favour of those that continue to move towards it, and so more fully articulate how these works help us, in Christopher Holmes's words, 'think[] *with* rather than *of* the world'.[52]

Opacity offers no guarantee of success, whether in terms of the resistance to structures of power with which Glissant's theory is often associated, or in the linguistic, intersubjective, and aesthetic domains I have discussed over the course of this article. This possibility for failure is even present in Plascencia's novel, as the characters' attempts to conceal themselves from Saturn's gaze with lead shielding results in a 'malady of lead' that 'thicken[s] their blood and clot[s] in their vessels', leaving them 'hunching over and vomiting in the grass'.[53] The novel ends with the characters abandoning their blocking techniques and Saturn re-establishing control over the narration. While on one ontological plane of the novel – the world of the EMF in El Monte – the

[50] Kasimir Malevich, *The Non-Objective World*, trans. by Howard Dearstyne (Chicago: Paul Theobald, [1927] 1959), p. 67.
[51] Roman Ingarden, *The Literary Work of Art: An Investigation on the Borderlines of Ontology, Logic, and Theory of Literature*, trans. by George G. Grabowicz (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), p. 126.
[52] Christopher Holmes, 'The Limits of World Literature', *Literature Compass*, 13.9 (2016), 572–84 (p. 574).
[53] Plascencia, pp. 180, 182.

right to opacity has been revoked, on another, that of Saturn/Salvador, we see the narrator negotiating the opacity of the parts of himself he cannot fully comprehend, and finding a way to live despite them. The sadness of loss that was 'commodified' to drive the book is not gone: '[it] still circulated […] his liver never able to filter the melancholy, but his body had adapted'.[54] In writing this work, Saturn/Salvador has not seen through this patch of darkness so much as he has learned to live with it. The novel ends with a final opacity for the reader to address, as Federico de la Fe walks alongside his daughter little Merced, who 'raised her parasol, shading her and her father. They walked south and off the page, leaving no footprints that Saturn could track. There would be no sequel to the sadness.'[55] The body of the text ends here, but over the page there is a two-page spread, all blank save a large black dot in the bottom right-hand corner. The dot perhaps represents Federico and Little Merced, seen from above and obscured by the parasol, but in the context of this artwork's end it is also the black sun of Julia Kristeva's melancholia, the dark and present absence of a struggle to align the self with loss. In the last instance, the dot offers a stylised full stop, an end to the artwork that marks the limit of authorial control and the start of its reception. This ultimate limit point of the work constitutes a final and profound opacity, offering the reader at least a point of departure, although promising nothing more.

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[54] Plascencia, p. 242.

[55] Plascencia, p. 245.

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