PREFACE

Facing Shame

I WRITE FROM my subject position as a Chicana woman born to a dark-skinned Chicana mother. Her circumstances and mine could help contextualize the importance of the present study, but I am not interested in defining who she is or justifying how I am. While stories and studies on migration, poverty, national unrest, bloodlines, and cultural affiliations are important and have uncovered many truths, I wrote this book because I want to understand the role of the soma—the intelligent, communicative body—in creative literature on racial discourse and in life. Building on the Greek etymology, I employ the term *soma* to chart how the gesture of the physical body evidences the internal response to external stimuli in a highly legible expression that is, some researchers argue, universally intelligible.[1] As I will argue in chapter 1 and throughout this book, the soma is a psychophysical and emotional register of our subjectivity, reflecting our response to our place in the world, and is also the unsuspected generative means by which we carry out political agendas. The soma is a powerful entity left out of hegemonic "method and theory [where] often we cannot recognize anything that is different from what the dominant discourse constructs" (Saldívar-Hull 2000, 46). Hidden in plain sight, the soma is a pervasive yet unexpected site of subjectivity, and pertinent to understanding racialization.

Although my mother's family has lived in the United States for over one hundred years, still we suffer varying degrees of political threat, economic hardship, and conditional social acceptance. The ways our bodies speak and listen in concert with, or in contrast to, how we might like to present ourselves socially, expose suffering intentionally caused. More than bloodlines or cultural ties, the pain I have suffered from somatic violence has led me, like my mother before me, to claim my Chicana identity.

In institutions where I have been relegated to a marginalized group and sometimes excluded from social goods, whether surmised Chicana on the basis of appearance or identified as such by virtue of ancestry or other reasons, I experience institutional racialization and racism much like a physical wall—a vertical force, erect, damning, impenetrable—but at least impersonal in its intersectional racism. More painful and stigmatizing are the interpersonal interactions that single me out for racial shaming.

These one-on-one and two-on-one scenes usually begin with a penetrating look—a look, too long and too deep, that betrays an agenda. More often, without approaching me physically, interlocutors use their somas to disturb my personal sphere with their glare, announced by their eyes, but soon communicated by their whole body posture. Beady eyes perch atop the neck, tense and extended, and a contemptuous half smile steadies on the authority of a tight jaw. Such racializers contravene conventions of polite physical and psychological distance, but their desire is not to know me, Stephanie. Their powerfully clear, imposing somas seek to expose what they consider my ethnic and racial secrets. An aping of intimacy, their incursion intends to pressure me to understand myself as different, inferior, apart from them and from majority culture. These experiences have emotionally carved me out of the imagined collective through a deep psychological whittling, setting me apart and away . . . and leaving me in a state I would later tenderly reframe and reclaim under the term Chicana, a politicized woman with Mexican roots and, in my case, U.S. citizenship. Contrary to what one might expect, these unwelcome encounters have occurred not only with strangers but even with people I know well.

In fact, friends have been among those who have most painfully shamed me into intersectional racialization. One of my earliest memories: I was a naive, eager eight-year-old, so fond of my best friend, Rebecca, a White, middle-class girl who had moved the year before from Texas to Southern California. We usually met up at the playground where we shared secrets, invented games, laughed. Then one day without warning, Rebecca refused to walk with me on our way back from the playground. Instead, she chose to accompany Mavorneen, our Irish-American friend. Confused, I ran up alongside Rebecca asking several times, and later imploring, "Walk with me! Why won't you walk

with me?" She barely turned her head to address me, but the rigid arrogance of her back told me what she finally confirmed in words: "You're a dirty Mexican." Rebecca may have been the first, but she was not the last friend in my life to subject me to a *scene of racialization,* a stepped social practice I propose in chapter 1 in which, with or without words, bodies impose social asymmetries through somatic expression. This scene with Rebecca plays itself out again and again in the stories of intersectional racial shaming I am told by my mother, uncle, cousins, friends, and students—and maybe you, too, reader.

Childhood photos allow me to examine my own somatic expression before this scene of racialization, and as I stood afterward. Looking at my younger self, I see my being perceptibly changed by these denigrating encounters: after experiencing intersectional racialization and racist acts, I see my prior vital, energetic self had effectively shrunk. In photos around the period of Rebecca's rejection, I notice my neck stretches out far from my torso, a somatic attempt to quickly assess and hopefully head off the shame that I anticipated lay ahead. My torso appears somewhat retracted, shoulders slightly slouched, pelvis tucked, protecting my internal organs from further harm. In contrast, my eyes record deliberate happiness, a defiant counter expression against the sadness and fear into which I had been initiated. My body posture and facial expression—my soma—register how I was feeling during the time when I came to accept my life would be conditioned by the violence of intersectional racialization and racism. What these photos reveal in image, creative texts detail in words.

Initially, I was surprised to find what I am theorizing are scenes of racialization, a common narrative feature in many Latin@/x creative texts.[2] Regardless of genre, I came across scene after scene, usually appearing in the development of the protagonist's story, specifically indicating how physical postures and actions express feelings and intentions that shape racializing soma. And in text after text, I noticed how these scenes use the soma to accomplish the psychological pressure necessary to impose social marginalization. Specific social technologies of the soma emerged in these steps, shedding light on how human beings actually *transact* race where one comes to make another see herself in racial terms. I identify the soma, exemplified by Rebecca's hateful back, an efficacious, extra-juridical means of subjecting individuals to intersectional racialization where gender, sex, age, class, physical ability, religion, sexual orientation, and other factors dynamize the occasion of its expression.

Similar to the accounts of family and friends as well as my own story, literary characters often describe a time before they understood themselves as Chican@/x or Latin@/x, a time in which they see, in retrospect, they held impressions of social discord but did not see themselves clearly demarcated

as social inferiors. Writers posit particular events as the catalyst for this transition, revealing the theoretical importance of an *evolving cognition* in which characters learn and practice how to racialize and how to manage the experience of being racialized. In my study of these narratives, I trace specific social transactions in which corporeal gesticulations of the soma interpersonally cathect racial shame onto the other. This volley, receipt, and response to shame demonstrates first, how feelings power social paradigms (Ioanide 2015), and secondly, how racialization specifically employs shame to give affective materiality to the physical notion of race. How one negotiates this oppressive, largely unspoken, stigmatizing social imposition charges my investigation of the resonances between these literary depictions and lived experience.

In their careful and compelling exposition of these experiences, Latin@/x creative texts are my "unexpected source," to use Saldívar-Hull's words (46), for my theory, providing a literary roadmap of the soma as a primary tool for racial shaming and for expressing the social investment, codification, and successful implementation of the soma in intersectional racialization. This theory helped me appreciate what confused me as a young person about my Brown mother. After a lifetime of subjection to such scenes, I now understand the pained and frustrated look in my mother's nevertheless smiling eyes; the crooked, angry resistant corner of her mouth when she grins. With a twist of her neck and head held back, her eyes can blaze her retort at the whiff of disparagement, while moments later she may display a slightly collapsed torso and pelvis, eyes wide but slightly self-loathing as she crumbles into self-deprecation, railing against a sociopsychological landscape that acts as if she is just *naturally* wrong for some unspecified reason. My mother's contrasting somatic countenance and responses reveal the mark and conditioning wrought by numerous formative scenes of racialization where she resists being made to feel Other and lesser than herself.

No paradox here: somatic expression is ephemeral, changing moment by moment in its environs at the same time, in its resting state, it reveals longstanding hurts and joys. Its temporalities do not confound the soma's succinct register and record of its experience. Is somatic expression any less reliable and real than the fleeting, varying machinations of our minds and spirits? Indeed, as René Descartes elaborated his *cogito,* Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia, his epistolary friend and intellectual peer, challenged his disregard for the experience of the body as an integral source of human subjectivity.[3]

Sometimes I am asked, why study this problem of the soma and shame through Latin@/x literature? Such questions are typical of hegemonic thinking and leave me uneasy and agitated. They attempt to compel nonhegemonic subjects to produce theories in symbolic, rhetorical, and physical forms with

which hegemonic forces feel comfortable and, therefore, authoritative. These forces impose practices in an effort to contain others in what they suppose are neutral terms, somehow magically outside the machinations of racializing social agendas. Underlying such questions is a demand to essentialize Latin@/xs in certain forms of academic discourse or compel Latin@/xs to disappear as subjects of study.

As subtle as this effort at co-optation may be, the question is ultimately misdirected. Had I studied the soma in Shakespeare's work, nary a critic would believe justification necessary. I have no desire to quantify or qualify Latin@/xs along any rubric: the dynamic I study has nothing to do with Latin@/xs in terms of who or what they are or are supposed to be. I study racial shaming as a disturbing and powerful phenomenon inflicted both institutionally and interpersonally on individuals some refer to as Hispanic or maybe, as a concession, Latina/o and more recently, Latinx. The use of these terms by certain parties gentrifies the contempt that lies behind the hegemonic discourse that attaches the stigma of Brown through the generic "Mexican" or "Spanish," just as it does in the more overtly derogatory terms: *beaner, spic, greaser, brown nigger, mongrel, illegal, wetback,* etc. In line with Linda Martín Alcoff's recent work on Whiteness, so-called race is not a problem of the Latin@/xs or other communities of color: the notion of race and subsequent racism is a manufactured problem of White interest and culture (2015). For those interested in race as a term or category, there are excellent studies specifically addressing *latinidad,* many of which make the case for its viability as a political construct, while others highlight the unassimilable contradictions and differences that such a pan-ethnic term connotes. I refer my reader to those studies because I am not interested here in race per se but in racialization, a study of social practices that conduct hegemonic interests and normalize interpersonal and institutional interactions that coerce certain people to feel "Brown."[4]

Inspired by my experiences in learning about racialization from a transdisciplinary approach, I leave it to readers to decide how, where, and whether my work will be of use to them.[5] I offer the soma as a dynamic entity to study racial shaming in particular, but I propose that somatic analysis may be useful as a general method to unpack the body as a register of subjectivity in various disciplines. Scholars of some disciplines, and particularly literary scholars, may feel discomfort with taking something as ephemeral as somatic expression—a feeling, an attitude, a complex physical gesture—seriously. Is a fleeting corporeal expression worthy of scholarly attention? I counter this stance throughout *Shaming into Brown: Somatic Transactions of Race in Latina/o Literature,* but here I assert that our bodies are fundamental to how we live and how we make meaning. Our everyday self-perception as mind-dominated

individuals denies that our human condition is thoroughly interpolated by the intelligence of our material organism and simultaneously influenced as "beings amongst" in a social field. We bring the soma—this physical, emotive, and social register of our subjectivity—to the text as we do to our lives. This more complex conception of what it means to be human has been widely accepted by scholars in several fields in the social sciences, and by researchers of cognitive science, biology, and neuroscience.

Other fields and social practices employ, or conversely, interrogate narrative. As an example, as legal scholar Gerald Torres often says, court cases are about storytelling. They seek to determine the truth through a process of contrasting the facticity of narratives, but narrative also shapes how facts can be known and who can be known. Critical race theorists have shown how the reliance of the law on hegemonic legal narratives has unearthed the cultural incompetence of judges and juries. These theorists advocate counter-storytelling, using narrative to make the complex situation of raced people legible to hegemonic judges and juries (Delgado and Stefancic 1993). Similarly, scientists formulate hypotheses in narratives, the form of discourse they deem appropriate to present a problem for research. Later, conclusions are drawn in relation to whether and how the hypothesis told in the original narrative proved true or untrue. Yet, despite the use of narrative across nonliterary fields, and despite the work on the embodied mind in cognitive literary studies, feelings in affect theory, and body studies, many literary studies continue to look askance at the body's patent role in the act of reading, in connecting the role of narrative to our lived experience, and, specific to my interests, the importance of the soma in social practices in literature as in life.

Despite self-professed progressive political leanings in practice, many literary scholars seem protective to any threat to the Cartesian self, employing modes of analysis that sustain the notion of a mind-dominated, individualistic literary subject, and its reader. This oddly conservative practice stands in contrast to the facility with which other disciplines engage our disciplinary subject, in general terms, narrative. We literary scholars should consider our disciplinary sublimation (if not rejection) of the material body in our work. We simply cannot ignore society's reliance on many forms of reading that impact the material functioning of the body. Nor can we isolate the experience of and by the flesh in some incommunicable realm such as the abject. Much work has been done on reading bodies as social surfaces, in gender performance, as inscription sites, but rarely do we consider the actual workings of the body, especially in relation to the expressive soma. Why do other fields claim the authority to challenge issues of ontology while many literary scholars remain so bound to Cartesian norms?

Let me alert the reader that throughout *Shaming into Brown,* I use "we" frequently, rather than write in an authoritative phantom voice typically ensconced in scholarly declaratives. I do so because the social practices studied are so culturally embedded that, like it or not, whether as racializers, subjects of racialization, or witnesses to scenes of racialization, I contend we all participate in racialization in some way. I make this claim based on what I have learned by analyzing somas in Latin@/x literature. Racialization and racism are vividly portrayed as moment-by-moment exertions of social power expressed and imposed by the soma. The power to racialize and to commit acts of racism is not exclusively held in the hands of hegemonic subjects to be wielded against given other(s). Power shifts across space and time.

The same actors in another place can occupy a different position of power, and the racialized can assume the position of the racializer. The contextual nature of power does not mean that all harms are equal, nor does it negate historical legacies that continue to legitimate institutional and interpersonal oppressions of Latin@/xs and other groups. However, as with many forms of oppression, we all, when the occasion arises, may take advantage of our temporal ability to subjugate another. Allow me to point to my own experience again. It pains me to recall how, in middle school, I ignored the migrant farmworker kids who stood out so starkly against the blindingly intolerant 1980s White culture of Irvine, California. And perhaps like you, admitting to my abuse of my relative social power against others did not come easily. I turned my back on these first-generation migrant classmates; defiantly, and in my situational hegemony, I was baldly dismissive. Many of us have internalized shaming racist attitudes and thus frequently commit racism against ourselves or our kin as well as against those we consider out-group members.

This focus on the process of racializing does not obviate responsibility or in any way equalize grievances. Racializing by a member of the dominant group stands apart from other acts of racializing and racism committed by the racialized, most notably because of the support the culturally dominant racializer receives from peers and from institutions of the State. By pointing to racialization and racism as processes, we may come to understand why we are (in)variably victims of a retrograde human sociality, impeding ourselves and others from fully appreciating our respective humanity. Accordingly, I entreat the reader to have the willingness to deeply consider their own role in these entrenched practices of U.S. culture. I humbly invite you to accompany me on a read that may expose your biases with respect both to literary interpretation and to people. Racializing behaviors and racist attitudes may surface, and with them, perhaps you will acknowledge the pain you've suffered—and perhaps the pain you have caused.