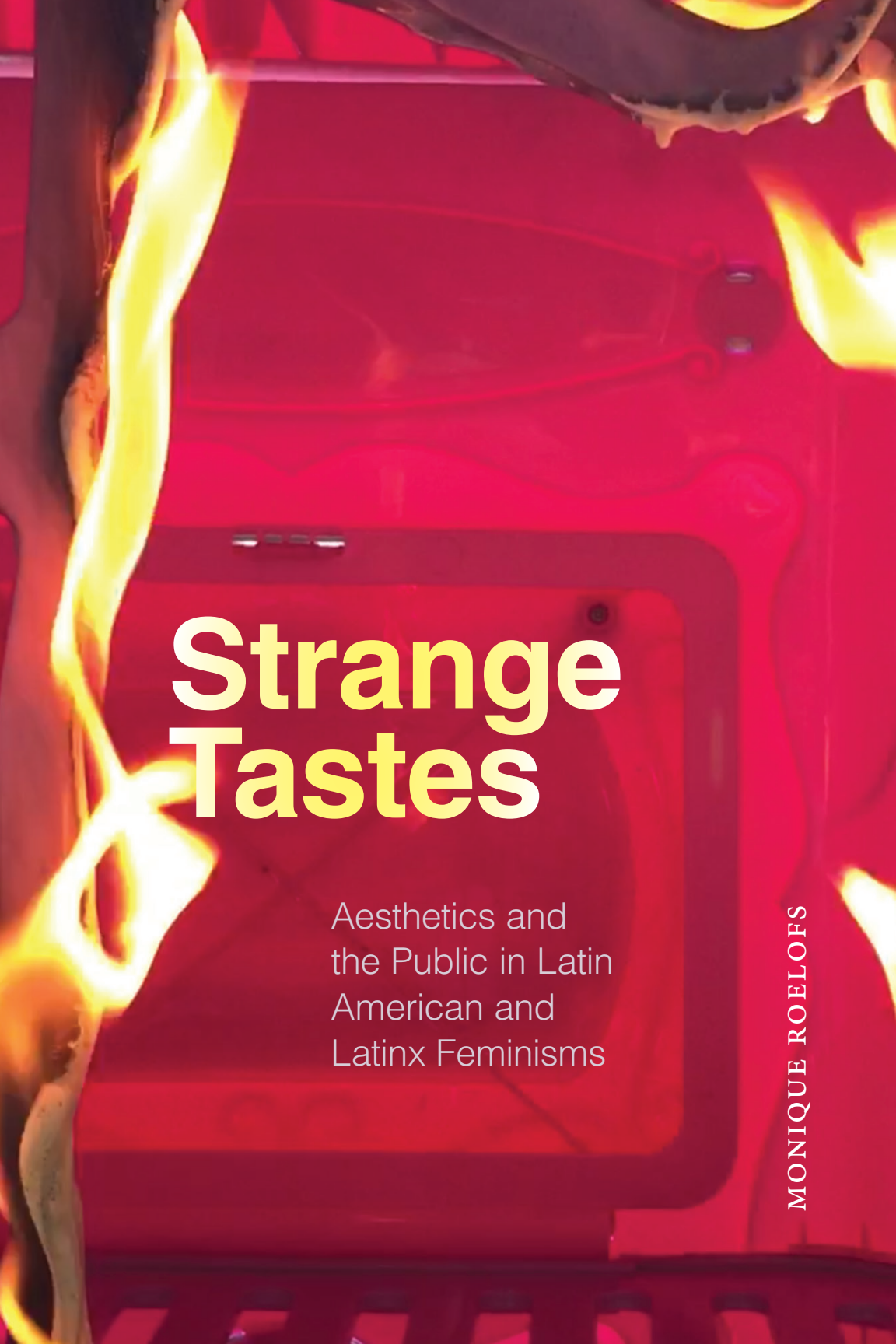

Strange Tastes

Aesthetics and the Public in Latin American and Latinx Feminisms

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Duke University Press
Durham and London 2026

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper ∞
Project Editor: Livia Tenzer
Designed by Courtney Leigh Richardson
Typeset in Minion Pro and Helvetica by
Westchester Publishing Services

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Names: Roelofs, Monique author
Title: Strange tastes : aesthetics and the public in Latin American and Latinx feminisms / Monique Roelofs.
Other titles: Aesthetics and the public in Latin American and Latinx feminisms
Description: Durham : Duke University Press, 2026. | Includes bibliographical references and index.
Identifiers: LCCN 2025033900 (print)
LCCN 2025033901 (ebook)
ISBN 9781478038658 paperback
ISBN 9781478033752 hardcover
ISBN 9781478062240 ebook
Subjects: LCSH: Aesthetics, Latin American—Social aspects | Aesthetics, Latin American—Political aspects | Feminist aesthetics—Latin America | Feminist theory—Latin America | Women artists—Latin America—Criticism and interpretation | Women authors, Latin American—Criticism and interpretation | Art and society—Latin America
Classification: LCC BH221.L29 R64 2026 (print) | LCC BH221.L29 (ebook) | DDC 111/.85098—dc23/eng/20260116
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2025033900
LC ebook record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2025033901

Cover art: Mariángeles Soto-Díaz, *Painting with Fire* (detail), 2017. Multimedia installation. MAK Center for Art and Architecture, West Hollywood, California.

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Acknowledgments

This book owes its existence to a whole collective of people. I'm grateful to Norman Holland for his amazing companionship in thinking and writing. Team teaching courses in Latin American and Latinx literature and cultural theory had me on the edge of my seat. Norm's capacious reading style, his way of innocuously floating a question and then leaving it hanging for everyone to muse on in all of its mind-boggling wondrousness is with me in my current classrooms, an ocean away. Many thanks for the times he pored over these pages, as well as for our collaboration on earlier published versions of parts of chapter 3. His voice is embedded in that chapter.

I thank Carla Damião and Mariana Ortega, dear friends, for dialogues about aesthetics that enriched this book and for vital organizational and editorial projects. The Estéticas No Centro Colloquia and the Latina/x Feminisms Roundtable are exemplary moments of collaborative decolonizing philosophical scholarship. The roundtables Mariana organized were an inspiration for this work. Workshopping central ideas in an integral and sustained manner in the minicourses and lectures that Carla hosted brought increased clarity to the project.

Beate Rössler welcomed me with warmth and friendship in the Department of Philosophy at the University of Amsterdam at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. In a period when face-to-face conviviality and live philosophical exchange beyond one's immediate circle took recourse to city streets and parks, our walks helped me land in Europe after spending decades in the United States.

It's a pleasure to acknowledge the Critical Cultural Theory group—Katia Hay, Stefan Niklas, Aukje van Rooden, Michael Thomas, Frank Rebel, Niki Hadikoesomo, Marieke van der Steen, and Jeff Diamant—for their exciting work, for being terrific academic sports, and for the rich perspectives they bring to our university's program in philosophical aesthetics.

The Film and Philosophy doctoral seminar that Patricia Pisters, Sudeep Dasgupta, and I organized for several years at the Amsterdam School of Cultural Analysis has been a treasured home for reflection. Many thanks to Patricia

and Sudeep for their friendship, for sharing their thinking, and for our mind-opening (and mind-altering) exchanges.

During the writing process I taught at different institutions, most extensively at the University of Amsterdam and Hampshire College in Amherst, Massachusetts, and for intermittent spells at Amherst College and the Netherlands Institute for Cultural Analysis. I thank my students, past and present, for the energy and questions they bring to our work together. I learn endlessly from the fascinating projects of my doctoral candidates at the Amsterdam School of Cultural Analysis: Turkuaz Benlioglu, Jack Dignam, Katy McAlary, Martina Flores Mendeville, Fabienne Rachmadiev, Pınar Türer, and Sabahat Zehra. Their courage is contagious.

Conceptual, imaginative, and didactic toggling among philosophy, political theory, film, literature, and the arts has deepened this book's vision. This habit puts me in the company of two extraordinary predecessors. Anecdote: I shared my essay on María Lugones's notion of play from the angle of several stories by the Argentine writer Julio Cortázar with her in 2018 after having a wonderful public exchange about it with her following a talk I gave, and again in the months before her death in 2020. In her last semester of teaching at Binghamton University, she included the essay in her syllabus along with the stories, which she mentioned she had enjoyed in her youth in Argentina. Strikingly, Gloria Anzaldúa names Cortázar as her favorite author (Anzaldúa 2009, 83). She cites Cortázar, who lived in France, as a stylistic influence and mentions his exploration of "in-between places of reality impinging on each other" (Lunsford 1998, 20). The reader will notice the reference to the famed notion of the borderlands. Jorge Luis Borges, another favorite of Anzaldúa's, provides further aesthetic texture to her figuration of liminal experiences. She reworks his renowned figure of the Aleph into an image for the borderlands, rendered as a site that brings together "all dimensions—the sky, spiritual space, the earth, and the underworld" (Anzaldúa 2015, 57). Indeed, the unfinished doctoral dissertation on art, literature, and aesthetic theory she was composing in 1975 was to include an early chapter on Borges and Cortázar, as well as a later one on Lacan and Cortázar (208n15). As late as 2002, she credits Borges for her insight that, "like the real self, the writing self is fictitious" (2015, 197, quoted by AnaLouise Keating). These imaginative crosscurrents point to a web of aesthetic affiliations that animates this book and that I hope to channel toward further social and praxical possibilities, although these reverberations do not necessarily make it in an explicit fashion into the following pages. This resonance is made possible by conditions of aesthetic publicness: universities, literary and artistic institutions, and plat-

forms for theoretical, narrative, and visual exchange, which currently all face vehement cultural, political, and economic pressures. This book is written in a spirit that recognizes the importance of these very public structures, which, as a former first-generation college student and a product of public education systems all the way through, I have everything to thank for.

Ryan Kendall, my editor at Duke University Press, supported this project with an enthusiasm that invigorated the writing. She offered spot-on editorial suggestions that kept me close to what I was doing and to where the argument was going. I'm grateful for her warm, insightful companionship during the writing process. Two anonymous reviewers offered valuable criticisms and keen suggestions that significantly strengthened this book. I'm deeply indebted to their generous readings. Additional thanks are due to the production team at the press, whose attentive care helped shepherd the project to publication.

I'm fortunate to have had the opportunity to share parts of this book with audiences at different places who helped the project along with their generative remarks. Many thanks to organizers and interlocutors at Amherst College's Center for Humanistic Inquiry; Duquesne University; Penn State University; the Radical Philosophy Association at University of Massachusetts, Lowell; the British Society of Philosophy at Oxford University; the Society for European Philosophy at Cardiff University; the University of Warwick; the Amsterdam School of Cultural Analysis at the University of Amsterdam; Leiden University; Tilburg University; the Dutch Research School of Philosophy at Utrecht University; the Federal University of Goiás, Goiânia; the Federal University of Minas Gerais, Belo Horizonte; the University of Brasília; the European University Viadrina; the German Society for Aesthetics at Leuphana University; the Kunsthalle and City of Nürnberg; the University of Antwerp; the University of Klagenfurt; Zuidpool, Antwerp; and meetings of the American Comparative Literature Association, the American Society for Aesthetics, and the Society for Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy.

I'm grateful to dear colleagues and friends for camaraderie, kindness, laughs, and intellectual sparks—especially Brigitte Adriaensen, Emmanuel Alloa, Christoph Brunner, Kandice Chuh, Katja Diefenbach, Adriana Clavel-Vázquez, Gürsoy Doğtaş, Fábio Ferreira de Almeida, Miguel Gally, Miguel Gualdrón-Ramírez, Jörg Heiser, Yolande Jansen, Eileen John, Michael Kelly, Eloe Kingma, Daniel Kojo Schrade, Jaap Kooiman, Jasmijn Leeuwenkamp, Helen Longino, the late María Lugones, Linda Martín Alcoff, Mari Mikkola, Ben Moore, Eleonora Orlando, Andrea Pitts, Sudha Rajagopalan,

Kati Röttger, Anna Schrade, Falguni Sheth, Ruth Sonderegger, Mariángeles Soto-Díaz, Jutta Sperling, Sanjukta Sunderason, Paul Taylor, Pablo Valdivia Orozco, Tom Viaene, and Manon van Zuylen. Thank you.

For her weekly poetic guidance into immersive planes of silence, quiet, and stillness, I thank my meditation and mindfulness teacher Nancy Lustgarten. For accompanying my personally strange, interchangeably super-slow and superfast voyages into the unthought, I'm grateful to my psychoanalyst, Tara Goldberg.

My family stuck with me during decades of phone calls between continents interspersed with yearly visits. Their support was essential during the writing process. A bit over three weeks after I returned to the Netherlands, my father died. In hindsight, I can't believe the stroke of luck that enabled him, at the end of a mandatory quarantine period, to pay me an overnight visit in my temporary home in Amsterdam South. He enjoyed the conversation, took pleasure in the view from the huge window of the trams and the pedestrians in the street, and even ventured outside for a brief walk. I thank my brother Lex for making this heartwarming visit possible, which wove threads of continuity among different worlds that nourished me as I learned to live with the losses and farewells of those years.

To my mother, Loes Roelofs-Vennekens, thanks for all our sustaining conversations and for your love of art and literature. This book carries the traces not only of your intellectual curiosity and joy but also of your wisdom and magnanimous listening skills to which I owe so much. To my sister, Karin, thanks for our closeness, for your encouragement, and for swapping the occasional story about Dutch and European university life in its stranger and more familiar manifestations. To my brothers, Sjoerd, Camiel, and Lex, thanks for all the good cheer and for being there at crucial moments. To Igor, Mirjam, Nicole, Linda, Peter, Marieke, Nathan, Ruth, Joart, Remco, Tobias, Mila, Sara, and Julie, thanks for sharing your arts of living with me. To all those unnamed interlocutors, friends, and colleagues who touched me and conversed with me in the period that this book was brewing, a big thank you for helping to make life so meaningful and so very strange.

Introduction

Aesthetics, Taste, and Public Inhabitance

A turn to the public whirls through contemporary Latin American and Latinx art and literature, establishing new sites of experience, pleasure, and critique. Aesthetic strategies of publicness permeate cultural productions, enveloping the strange in imaginaries of democratization.

This book contemplates strange tastes with an eye to their public reverberations and the political potentialities they activate within aesthetics. I investigate aesthetic sensibilities that deliberately bewilder by going against the grain of prevailing structures of feeling, forms of agency, and modes of responsiveness. Strange tastes are propelled by curiosity: They circumvent customary narrations and predictable readings with unusual twists of fate and uncanny interventions that lead us to unknown territory. They lodge the unexpected into webs of relationships among people, more-than-human beings, things, and places, where it kindles intimacies that call forth changing selves and transmuting others. An attunement to the weird and wonderful lends itself to perceptions and creations that exceed the bounds of the ordinary and hint at social alternatives. Thus, the strange animates ways of organizing public life. As a dimension of alterity and a catalyst of evolving relations among self and other, it fosters an expanded awareness and inhabitation of the realm of publicness.

Strange tastes that latch on to dust, pings, song, and light are at the center of my analysis. I highlight these tastes in the work of several prominent Latin

American and Latinx women writers and artists—namely Alicia Borinsky, Clarice Lispector, Claudia Llosa, and Diamela Eltit. Featuring sensibilities that are intentionally at odds with reigning intuitions and reactions, these feminist creators forge positions that fall outside common schemas of subjectivity. By endowing their female protagonists with aesthetic dispositions that are eccentric in a manner that is hard to draw a profit from, these artists and writers push back against the dominance of market arrangements. In their works, strange tastes inspired by residual materialities of dust, pings, song, and light activate disinterested play in the public domain. Politics moves, spurred by this aesthetics of the strange. For strange taste heightens the powers of artistic and quotidian imaginaries to awaken singularity, to remake city and nation, and to build human and more-than-human worlds.

How can the strange, which has been influentially construed as a constitutive corporeal, psychic, and social mechanism of subject formation (Kristeva 1991) and critiqued in that capacity for its tendency to efface structural differentiations of race, gender, coloniality, ethnicity, and sexuality (Ahmed 2000, 6, 73; 2005, 96–104, 108–9), realize this kind of effect? Strange tastes are unabashedly aesthetic and historical proclivities. These aspects of the strange have been undertheorized. It is precisely the aesthetic abundance and historical charge of strange taste that the artworks in my archive mobilize as incitements of public life. To clarify this point, I offer an initial description of what I mean by the term *publicness* and, in particular, *aesthetic publicness*. By examining a lecture and a short story by Jorge Luis Borges, I show how the field of aesthetic publicness entwines strangeness with taste and writing, and anchors self-making, while also generating mercurial positionalities. These processes prefigure the aesthetics of public inhabitance and becoming pioneered by the four feminist writers and artists.

Borges weaves the movements of the strange, conceived of as an aesthetic category, into figurations of identity. This gesture is embedded in a broader reflection on the impact of aesthetic forms on registers of social positioning and performance, and vice versa. Borges's proposal emerges in texts that contemplate the links between art and identity while putting forward modes of subjective becoming that give a distinctive role to aesthetic invention in the crafting of selves and the design of cultural positions. Before outlining Borges's vision, let me describe my approach to the markers of social identity and positioning announced by my subtitle, especially the term *Latin American and Latinx feminisms*, and sketch some features of the philosophical method that I bring to this book's archive.

Following commentators in disciplines ranging from philosophy and literary and cultural studies to sociology and the arts, I understand Latin American and Latinx cultures and identities as evolving discursive assemblages shaped by intersecting social forces and categories.[1] The element of discursive construction I highlight resonates with the productive facet of a feminist politics that is also an aesthetics: The feminist part of my subtitle underlines an at once aesthetic and political project that occasions trajectories of subjectivity and encounter with the world.[2] More than that, as revealed by the critical phenomenologies of Gloria Anzaldúa, María Lugones, and Mariana Ortega, it signals how feminist actors who engage in a variety of modes of experience, strategies of critique, and forms of coalitional practice enact embodied stances in relation to other actors and material settings.[3]

Far from positing a unitary cultural frame, in my usage the term *Latin American and Latinx feminisms* speaks to a diversity of aesthetic forms and traditions and an array of social positionings. Because the three categories individually and conjunctively point to manifold, ongoing formations rather than to ahistorical givens, they circumscribe a restless cultural reality of tensions, imbalances, and internal differentiations. Entrenched intersectional power disparities undergird divisions within feminisms and among US Latinx and Latin American cultural positionings (Fusco 2000, 9; Dávila 2020, 4–17; Pérez 2019, 114, 157; Pérez 2020). So the mobile assemblage I take as my framing in this investigation encompasses splits, wounds, injustices, and contradictions. Simultaneously, art and theory have dotted the cultural arena with shards of conversation that are ready to be picked up and amplified into full-fledged dialogues, which then can yield further affiliations and solidarities. As the Latinx studies scholar Claudia Milian observes in her luminous celebration of the creative, nonbinary, often refractory force of the *x* in *Latinx*, distinct pathways of multisensory and imaginative interaction give rise to emerging unknowns as we figure out ways of "navigat[ing] the world" (Milian 2019, 2, 39, 77; Milian and Romera-Figueroa 2024). For Milian, *Latinx* is a sign for these navigations—these behaviors "in a social and ethnoracial world" (2019, 11). In tailoring the Latinx, sped up by *LatinX*'s louder grapheme, to a "philosophical unknown" and open-endedness, to "transitions," to "crossings" (2, 12, 14), she lodges it in public territory: "LatinX synchs up, not so sotto voce, with a multitude of discourses and signifiers already in the *public* eye" (11, emphasis added). Far from static, the public syncings are creative. They make things happen; they stretch desire.

Indeed, it is the *x*'s crossings that, as Milian indicates, make the name "Zeze the X" a site of desirous self-discovery to Sandra Cisneros's young Chicana

protagonist Esperanza as she engages intimacies and difficulties coming on her path in her Chicago neighborhood (Cisneros 2009 [1984], 11; Milian 2019, 13–14). Esperanza's longing finds a match in the craving of that other daring crossover type, Julio Cortázar's narrator in "Axolotl," who, switching positions with the creature he had been observing, transforms his visual fixation into the gaze of the enigmatic more-than-human other (Cortázar 1967a). *X*-powered crossings go on, traversing bodies, species, histories, continents, subject-object relations. And so my subtitle signals an aesthetic of naming, feeling, seeing, and reading. In short, I trace a field of multisensory bodily encounter, relationality, and address. Following established yet theoretically and interpretively underexplored artistic ventures, I enter a conversation initiated by Latinx and Latin American feminist voices that exceeds nationalist, regional, and other institutionalized demarcations. The audacious public interlopings and aesthetically reverberant cultural trajectories I sketch belie, as Anzaldúa, Lugones, and Stuart Hall have shown, any possibility of unalloyed separation.[4] Echoing in interwoven voices, transversal anticipations, and untested forms, the aesthetic sensibilities I spotlight partake of the operations of the strange. By seeking out the aesthetic quality of the strange, I swerve from philosophy's more typical strategy of address: Art and literature collaborate on an equal footing with philosophy in theoretical invention.[5] Anzaldúa's and Lugones's strategies of opening up social theory to narrative voice, verbal and bodily performance, and anecdotes that exceed their illustrative roles provide precedents: Philosophy encounters itself in a quotidian strangeness that outstrips the theorist's stated observations. Border crossing enters philosophical address, gender, and sexuality, weaving the strange into the queer in a manner that energizes the imagination beyond what a mere conceptual wrap-up could hope to achieve. At the same time, the notion of publicness, no longer dichotomously split from the domestic sphere or the marketplace, needs theoretical explication and conceptual analysis that I want to offer.[6]

Drawn from the open-ended sphere of imaginative searching spanning the Americas that I have just sketched, my archive in this book is a segment of a broader swath of cultural production. I use a limited but powerful set of creative works to shed light on strange taste and aesthetic publicness. These concepts' generativity stretches beyond the selected cases. Indeed, different sources could have advanced my argument. At the end of the book, I consider several works that bring out further angles in our concepts that may reshape the intersection of the strange and the public.

The variety, multiplicity, and flux of our area of inquiry notwithstanding, distinct continuities arise: The artworks that make up my archive yield a

narrative that laces the strange through the public in a manner that opens up unforeseen possibilities for agency, identification, and play. To the notion of the public I now turn.

Publicness, Aesthetic Publicness, and Strange Taste

The domain of the public is a historically emergent, material, and symbolic field of engagements where different constituencies enter into multivoiced, contestatory, and consensual encounters over norms, values, social orders, things, and infrastructures. Its participants form evolving coalitions, assemblies, splinterings, and disaffiliations; specific publics take shape. Emerging in a pluralist field of intra- and cross-species entanglements and affective interactions, dependencies, and mutual vulnerabilities among embodied subjects and things (Anzaldúa 1999 [1987]; Connolly 2005, 2013), publicness involves criteria of participation and belonging, institutionalized social and political procedures, standards of expression and publicization, and principles of legitimation adhered to by discursive communities, which implement contingent forms of societal organization. It is a morphing structure of mutual, multimodal address and responsiveness among individuals and among groups that fuels forms of collective and individual alignment and becoming.[7] More specifically, publicness concerns materially embedded, normatively inflected resources, objects, experiences, practices, and interactions.[8] The material and normative realities of publicness make clear that it constitutes aesthetic territory.

I coin the notion of aesthetic publicness to give expression to the aesthetic forms and structures encompassed by and conditioning public space and to acknowledge the fine-grained aesthetic processes bearing on the creation, development, persistence, and dwindling of distinctive publics. An example from a well-known Borges lecture is useful in clarifying what I have in mind. In noting that a present-day invocation of "the wine-dark sea" recalls not only Homer but also "the thirty centuries that lie between us and him," the Argentine writer (2000, 14) places Homer, himself, and his reader in an overarching constellation of aesthetic publicness. Borges implicitly locates the aesthetic powers and significance of aesthetic publicness in the resulting relational expanse when he contends that beauty can be found everywhere across this experiential province, this realm of address: Beauty "is always with us" (14). Aesthetic publicness makes this transhistorical and cross-geographical ambit of engagement possible. It underlies our ability to detect beauty from "the classics" to its current instantiations (14).[9] Borges's

treatment of aesthetic publicness merits further elaboration because he connects this phenomenon with taste and the strange.

Borges's democratization of beauty may please his audience with the promise of an infinite stretch of aesthetic joy and delight. However, in the lecturer's eyes, the realization that beauty is all over the place is not a comforting insight, by far. He associates beauty with deviance. Quoting the poet Robert Browning, he observes that it takes a hold of us "'[j]ust when we're safest'" (14–15). Beauty catches the subject unawares with its hazards, including its erotic lure and its messages of death. Borges amplifies: "[B]eauty is lurking all about us. It may come to us in the name of a film; it may come to us in some popular lyric; we may even find it in the pages of a great or famous writer" (15). Wherever there is language, there is the possibility of beauty. And it pops up in other places, as well. Indeed, Borges extends aesthetic publicness to the natural environment.

Taste supplies the necessary link between letters and physical objects or geographical locations. Borges prefaces a discussion of the metaphysics of taste qualities with an allusion to the aesthetic politics of the American settler-colonial system. Whether at the level of textuality or concrete materiality, in literature or food, taste preserves its transgressive allure. It situates knowledge in an ominous proximity to nature or the land of which continents are made:

> Speaking about Bishop Berkeley (who, may I remind you, was a prophet of the greatness of America), I remember he wrote that the taste of the apple is neither in the apple itself—the apple cannot taste itself—nor in the mouth of the eater. It requires a contact between them. The same thing happens to a book or to a collection of books, to a library. For what is a book in itself? A book is a physical object in a world of physical objects. It is a set of dead symbols. And then the right reader comes along, and the words—or rather the poetry behind the words, for the words themselves are mere symbols—spring to life, and we have a resurrection of the word. (3–4)

A natural object or an agricultural product such as an apple requires an eater who brings her mouth and her poetry into contact with the forbidden fruit to actualize its illicit pleasures, just as the life of the book and the library demands a reader who will free up the poetry nascently concealed "behind" the words. The mouth achieves its contact with the world through physical touch and words. It tastes. And it tastes strangely. Lawless taste lends its life- and death-giving powers to existence in the flesh, to quotidian objects, to the institutions of the book, and, no less ambitiously, to the colonial project.

From this unsetting portrayal of taste, Borges moves on to the faculty's ultimate and transcendent achievements. He offers an instance of apparently uncontested poetic perfection. His example of consummate taste is John Keats's sonnet "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer," which Borges interprets as a commentary on "the poetic experience itself" (4). He quotes the sonnet's final lines:

> Then felt I like some watcher of the skies
> When a new planet swims into his ken;
> Or like stout Cortez when with eagle eyes
> He stared at the Pacific—and all his men
> look'd at each other with a wild surmise—
> Silent, upon a peak in Darien. (4–5)

"Here," Borges observes while mimicking Keats's grand gesture and planetary spectacle, "we have the poetic experience itself" (5). He conjectures that the reader "will never have noticed, perhaps, how strange [this poem] is," for "perfect things in poetry do not seem strange; they seem inevitable" (4). Now we, his audience, are in a position to see through the pinnacle of perfection and spot the strange thing, too: Borges leads the aesthetic of the beautiful and the sublime to that of the strange. He emplaces beauty and sublimity as registers of poetic experience and conceptual determinants of the natural world and a geopolitical system, in a historical, global order of aesthetic publicness, to then leave behind these aesthetic categories and their supremely potent constructive labors—their "surge and thunder" (4)—in favor of an aesthetic of the strange, permeated by foreboding. By peeling off the beautiful and sublime sheathing that had enveloped the strange, surrounding it with an air of necessity and lending it the appearance of self-evidence, Borges uncovers the strange in its historical and political reality. "Cortez . . . stared at the Pacific," he quotes Keats's scrambling of the historical record while calling out the poet's fictionalization of Hernán Cortés and the sublime Panamanian terrain that, albeit rather flat, is supposed to feature mountain peaks.[10] The scene blazons colonialism. In the act of exposing the strange, Borges historicizes it. He doesn't state that Keats bungles truth but reveals the poet's inventive production of history, of geography, of conquest. He highlights his indiscriminate yet conventionally legible conjunction of signifiers. Keats is creating linguistically perpetuated aesthetic inevitabilities: He takes a dip in the wine-dark sea. Silently, Borges invites us to apprehend the poetics and cultural politics the strange enacts. He routes aesthetic publicness through strange taste. True to its name, the strange intimates questions, raises doubts,

and hints at unstated forms of knowledge more than that it traffics in explicit answers (2, 19).

Divested from its hull of perfection, "the poetic experience" in its bare, uncamouflaged strangeness exudes perplexity, which is exactly what Borges proclaims to offer his reader with his literature: "I can offer you only time-honored perplexities. And yet, why need I worry about this? What is a history of philosophy, but a history of the perplexities of the Hindus, of the Chinese, of the Greeks, of the Schoolmen, of Bishop Berkeley, of Hume, of Schopenhauer, and so on? I merely wish to share those perplexities with you" (2). More than about beauty or sublimity, Borges cares about animating and participating in aesthetic publicness with his words and touching us with the strange, having us join him in lingering on it. Perplexity enacts a relational aesthetics: It relies on a sharing and a public conditioning, a field of aesthetic publicness. Everyone is part of this realm, sometimes alone, sometimes together, as Borges hints elsewhere, but never wholly solitary or in harmony (1999a, 425).[11] The sharing occasions the threats and promises of perpetuating peculiar metaphorical iterations and detecting curious repetitions hidden by an aesthetic of the beautiful and the sublime. And it rolls further, bobbing up and down on the surf of the strange: Drenched in strangeness's at once perilous and exhilarating aesthetic tidings, the reader soaks up Cortés's soldiers' "wild surmise," their stunned searching for the other's gaze. The strange sinks the body deeply into a performance of coloniality and tosses it out of it again, lugging us above and below the surface.

Language, Borges notes, "is shifting" (2000, 14). "And the reader," he adds, "is shifting also" (14). Imagining language as the changing water coursing through the self-same Heraclitean river that no one can twice step into, he points out that readers who are contemplating this flow, fearfully and "with an emerging sense of awe, . . . feel that we too are changing—that we are as shifting and evanescent as the river is" (14). Strangeness infects the reader, carrying her onward to unsuspected places and dissolving any sense of cultural or political inevitability. Aesthetic publicness and taste are in motion under the influence of the strange. Positionality is in flux. Borges features a versatile, contagious, and highly active strangeness that runs between subject and world, reader/writer and text, and readers and writers. This strangeness stretches from mountaintop views and the philosopher's sense of the Americas' "greatness" to the apple's touch of the taster's mouth, and on to subaquatic consciousness.

Borges's aesthetic world is a masculinized arena, just as the lettered culture that he inhabits and takes for granted was for the longest time an orbit dominated by the preoccupations of male writers of a certain class. The feminist

performances of the strange I track in this book exhibit a public logic that is different from the one put forth by Borges's ventures into this quality. Nevertheless, against the backdrop of the aesthetic entanglements and reciprocal provocations between self and world he uncovers, the critical modalities under investigation in the pages that follow can be recognized in their full force and invention. To lay the grounds for this inquiry, I turn to his renowned short story "Borges and I."

Writing Selves, Public Selves

First published in 1966, "Borges and I" has an astonishing pertinence in the age of social media, video games, and digital culture more broadly, owing to the distinction the tale makes between Borges's walking and narrating self and the public persona that this self brings into being.[12] The story begins: "It's Borges, the other one, that things happen to. I walk through Buenos Aires and I pause—mechanically now, perhaps—to gaze at the arch of an entryway and its inner door; news of Borges reaches me by mail, or I see his name on a list of academics or in some biographical dictionary. My taste runs to hourglasses, maps, eighteenth-century typefaces, etymologies, the taste of coffee, and the prose of Robert Louis Stevenson" (Borges 1998a [1966], 324). From the start, the story envisions an intricately layered relation between artist and persona. The two enter into an interplay that encompasses a swirl of entanglements, indirections, displacements, takeovers, and movements toward and away from the local, the national, and the global.

Borges's "I" enters the inside edifice behind the arch and inner door from the outside—the Buenos Aires streets—to meet his public persona via textual materials such as the mail that has arrived, a list, and a reference work. In turn, what appears as the author's intimate assertion of his "I"'s taste is heavily mediated by literate culture and his own texts: This self is characterized by his interest in space, time, language, and, notably, coffee, which locates him in the public and not-quite-public spaces of the Buenos Aires coffeehouses where literary encounters and debates take place. Taste, once again, embraces the strange. It is eccentric and highly singular. It is even stranger than the registers of the idiosyncratic and the intensely particular suggest because of the way Borges's persona "shares" the "preferences" of his "I." The persona has a "vain" way of relating to these shared preferences "that turns them into the accoutrements of an actor." In doubling up, and doing so with a determinate and at once mysterious difference, taste makes itself strange. The tastes of Borges's "I" are no longer straightforwardly his. The persona lays a claim on them, too. This "other one"

transforms the tastes in the process, turning them into performative props. The "I" is well aware of "the perverse way" the other one has "of distorting and magnifying everything." Nonetheless, he gradually surrenders "everything to him." For instance, he feeds him the "games with time and infinity" with which the "I" has tried to "free" himself "from him" and "[move] on from the mythologies of the slums and outskirts of the city." It is not as if the "I" is overly enthusiastic about "the other one": "I recognize myself less in his books than in many others', or in the tedious strumming of a guitar," he announces with barely disguised rancor. The aesthetic of the strange, here, establishes a "point-counterpoint, a kind of fugue, and a falling away," coupled with a ready absorption and accumulation by "the other man." Neither of the two can claim taste and writing as in any clear-cut sense his own. Taste and writing carry splits between self and other and between interiority and exteriority that keep shifting. Taste is continually other to itself. Aesthetic publicness holds these alterities, which muddle dualities of public and private, separation and togetherness, giving and taking, being and writing or playacting, and having or making and losing.

While traversing distances and proximities between the "I"'s self and its public persona, the story marks the necessary yet impossible differentiation of the two, culminating in the final punch line: "I am not sure which of us it is that's writing this page" (324). Borges invokes the domain of the aesthetic through registers of performance and taste, artifacts, and visual/literary forms. He shows us how identity is mediated through aesthetic modalities that, as already mentioned, cross public-private and interiority-exteriority rifts and that transgress habitual-unusual/new, individual-tradition, local-global, and self-world divides. More than that, our aesthetic activities are productive of our identities. Indeed, these identities are aesthetic creations in a fundamental sense. In the age of digital avatars, artistic performances modulated by artificial intelligence (AI), and incessant demands for online self-representation and self-personification, the story is a crucial reminder of the complexities identity owes to the jumbled yet vital distinctions it presupposes.

Borges conveniently, though critically, inhabits the global literate world of which the Argentine writer, as he notes in an acclaimed essay, is a full-fledged citizen (Borges 1999a). The expanded global aesthetic field as inhabited in Buenos Aires becomes the territory on which Borges resists the reification, commodification, and stultification of subjectivity, averting a hemming in of both the artist's "I" and his public persona. Identity, whose movements are buoyed by both selves and their shifting disjunctions and similarities, absorbs an aesthetic restlessness. It is not in a definitive manner engirded by categories such as the nation or class.

Borges's abstract cosmopolitanism plays games of "time and infinity" with identity at some distance from the economic forces shaping our globalized contemporary aesthetic culture (1998a [1966], 324).[13] Taste makes identity strange and carries this strangeness into the world, a world that, permeated by disquiet, itself becomes strange, even uncanny. This aesthetic venture, this spillage and self-overturning spreading of alterity, hinges on a literary social bedrock whose foundations have been shaken to the core. The aesthetic dynamics marking identity reflect the rushes of shifting rivers, rising sea levels, and wine-dark flows of spilled blood. While the artist's "I" and his public persona shift in relation to each other, aesthetic publicness morphs, too, in a manner that exceeds the interventions of the games that Borges's "I" plays with time and space and passes on to his public persona. For the cultural bolstering of the lettered enterprise has undergone substantial changes.

Toward a Decolonial Feminist Aesthetics of the Strange

Borges's strange produces formidable coilings, displacements, and sensitivities. However, it does not go far enough. It draws its nourishment from a narrow Western literary canon, which institutes a problematically gendered and racialized constellation of aesthetic publicness and valorizes an overly restrictive experiential ambit and an all too limited agential sphere. If Borges conscripts the strange to solidify an existing edifice of aesthetic publicness and saturate it with disquiet, then the artists and writers who make up my archive use it to tear down his uncanny domicile and design new abodes for cultural practice, even a new house of culture.

Estranging Borges's playlist of literate and quotidian tastes and composing an alternative repertoire, they put strange taste to work to bring into being unprecedented paradigms of aesthetic publicness. They center these models on the aesthetic travails of remarkable female protagonists, whose anomalous tastes mix jarring rhythms and hues into serialities of comfort and crisis. The characters' dissonant, unruly imaginaries rupture given societal templates and the aesthetic investments channeled by these schemes. Flaunting their idiosyncrasy in the face of normalizing desires, liminal figures craft aesthetic stances and forge aesthetic conditions that open up aesthetic publicness to positions of marginality. Equipped with curious sensibilities, they realize temporally disjunctive and narratively compound textures of experience in the fictional worlds they inhabit. In this manner, they uproot aesthetically mediated societal frames that seek to contain them. Strange taste, in my archive, thus informs an expanded orbit of decolonial feminist imagination

and social practice and supports projects of critique and world making. Like Borges, the four authors and artists engender intimacies that summon shifting selves and shifting others. In contrast to their predecessor, however, they extend the critical, transformative capacities of the strange to constellations in which coloniality intersects with gender race, and class, among other modalities and, in doing so, orient these formations and the sensibilities with which we meet them toward revised orders of experience and agency.

The strange, accordingly, is a strategy and a conceptual tool of a decolonial aesthetics and an aesthetics that queers itself. Anzaldúa's and Lugones's views of border experience are in the philosophical vanguard of this work. Inspired by their artistic and theoretical/praxical decolonial feminist outlooks alongside the perspectives of a cadre of kindred scholars, I use the term *decolonial aesthetics* to refer to a critical engagement with coloniality in cultural productions and aesthetic and art theory.[14] Coloniality consists of a matrix of ongoing, modern historical formations of space and time in which structures of race, gender, sexuality, and nation, among other social positions, intersect with one another (Anzaldúa 1999 [1987]; Anzaldúa 2015, 73; Lugones 2010; Pérez 2019; Quijano 2007; Wynter 1992, 2003). A decolonial aesthetics is a form of decolonial and postcolonial critique that is alert to the specificities of the aesthetic. Because the dimension of the "post-" in postcoloniality refers to an ongoing process of critical reading rather than a temporal designation, the postcolonial and the decolonial overlap significantly.[15] In two previous books, I theorize the aesthetic in a manner that affirms its specificity, while acknowledging its links to configurations of experience, power, and social identity and difference, including coloniality. The aesthetic, in my view, concerns activities that lend organization to perception, affect, and meaning, suffusing them with a dimension of normativity that ties into various kinds of promises and threats, among other forms of address and relationality (Roelofs 2014, 2020). The organizational devices of the aesthetic include so-called aesthetic categories, such as the beautiful, the fine, the detailed, the subtle, the grotesque, and, importantly, the strange. Aesthetic practice, sensibility, and judgment navigate—and, in the process, often destabilize while also reinstalling—dualities such as reason and emotion, mind and body, imagination and sensation, form and content, public and private, individual and community.[16] As Anzaldúa's (1999 [1987]) and Lugones's (2003, 2010) philosophies of culture underscore, a decolonial feminist aesthetics engages in productions and analyses that critically tune in to the experiential and social operations of these polarities. It resists reifying binaries of coloniality and postcoloniality/decoloniality (Spivak 2012, 2) and conqueror and conquered, while in the

same act questioning gender dichotomies and other intersecting dualities, such as heterosexuality and homosexuality or the queer.

Coloniality is marked by reciprocal mediations between local situations (such as a nation's music education system) and global arrangements (including musical diasporas with a worldwide reach, such as Black, Latin American and Latinx, African, Asian, and European sonic traditions).[17] As a set of practices that crisscross the domains of theory, institutional existence, and the everyday, a decolonial aesthetics interrogates these formations at all three levels, which interact with one another. Part of a decolonial aesthetics is then a critical, self-reflexive engagement with the relationships among theory, ongoing institutional histories, and day-to-day life (Anzaldúa 1999 [1987]; 2015, 47–64). In the realm of contemporary artistic and cultural production, a decolonial aesthetics creates objects, forms, norms, performances, experiences, traditions, and collaborations that unsettle or take a measure of distance from neocolonial modalities of power and sociality. In the theoretical domain, a decolonial aesthetics calls into question and rethinks socially entrenched conceptual structures that support (neo)colonial conditions of aesthetic meaning and normativity.

Creative and theoretical impulses, meanwhile, typically are part of each other: Artworks, as is widely recognized, engage in theory. On an autobiographical note, I'd like to share that Latin American and Latinx art, thought, and culture have been of immense philosophical significance to me. The notion of the aesthetic I elaborate in my previous works is fundamentally indebted to the writings of Pablo Neruda, Lispector, Anzaldúa, and Lugones and the paintings of Remedios Varo, among others. This book carries on in this critical lineage because quite a few Latin American and Latinx artists invent astoundingly generative kinds of play and bring them to bear on the forms and possibilities of publicness and the intertwinements of aesthetics and politics. Thus, they engage in vital theoretical explorations from which philosophy has much to learn. Part of this learning is to elaborate conceptual frames that recognize these inquiries as philosophy. Pushing back against certain disciplinary conventions, a decolonial aesthetic philosophy/practice thus operates at this self-reflexive level, where disciplinary and transdisciplinary modes are under construction.

Neither indexing an endpoint in a process of interpretation or design nor on a quest for unblemished moral and political excellence, a decolonial aesthetics, at a structural level, adopts a conjectural mode of address that acknowledges elements of indeterminacy, uncertainty, and opacity.[18] In short, it amounts to a multivalent, critical cultural politics of reading, making, and

encounters that incites further readings and rereadings, further makings and remakings (Anzaldúa 2009, 190–91; Anzaldúa 2015, 60, 64; Lugones 2003, 219, 229; Rooney 2017, 446–49), and further encounters and reencounters (Ahmed 2000, 13–17). The notion as well as the practices of strange taste are part of this process.

As it happens, taste has gone out of favor in influential quarters of aesthetic theory.[19] Yet cultural life is more massively conditioned by it than ever. Social media provide spaces for the articulation of people's aesthetic likes and dislikes. Digital platforms encourage the creation of aesthetic personas that mediate our encounters with the world and that we can identify with. Content providers track consumer habits and choices to fine-tune recommendations and relay the resulting profiles back to producers. Matters of taste thus constitute a huge driving force in our algorithmic ecosystem. This has a mainstreaming effect, owing to the sway of ratings, which privilege popularity and allow items that enjoy mass appeal to crowd out productions sought after by smaller constituencies of consumers. Media and entertainment industries, fed by consumer data, exercise control over what sees the light. Commentators attest in this context to a flattening and diminishment of culture (Chayka 2024) and a reduction of political discourse (Dean 2009). Given that the attention economy conjoins trials posed by overexposure, echo chambers, information bubbles, fake news, and nonstop vigilance with exhilarating and pathbreaking possibilities for connectedness fostered through technology, communication networks occasion a mixed bag of aesthetic and cultural effects. Nonetheless, questions of taste and the public take on a new form and urgency in contemporary societies, as algorithmically produced information exerts growing measures of control and as transformed patterns of self-expression and response tie into democratic decline and fuel rising and intensifying authoritarianisms.[20]

Most of the strange tastes threading through this book's archive are radically different from what the market prizes. In addition, they tend to be at variance with strategies of aesthetic homogenization and cultural blunting or dilution. The realm of strangeness is actually broader than my cases bear out. For instance, I imagine that it includes certain fixations on friendship bracelets or semiautomatic rifles that, though strange, may feed smoothly into the regular organization of things, especially when these items are all the rage in some segments of the population in a manner that reflects distinct economic interests. The strange, thus, is not insulated from the marketplace. It extends beyond the genres of strangeness that I discuss. My focus on strange elements that fly in the face of mainstream economic interests is a consequence

of my choice to zero in on feminist art and literature that casts an intersectional light on commodification processes and finance and venture capital.

Strange tastes, as already indicated, are sensibilities. They are bodily, socially, and ecologically emplaced modes of comportment toward the world. A whole slew of these capacities are worth cultivating. This does not imply that they are unqualified moral and political goods. Rather, they carry ambivalences. We need to be alert to their treacherous potentialities. Nevertheless, as I hope to show, these ambiguous predilections sustain life-enhancing, culturally and politically vital activities and perceptions.[21]

The strange is often queer. In her last, posthumously published book, the cultural critic Eve Sedgwick defines the queer in terms of the strange (2011, 188–89). The strange, I would propose, animates the motion of the queer, the fluctuations, multiplicities, and vagaries of the "across" she predicates of it while performing it: "Queer is a continuing moment, movement, motive—recurrent, eddying, *troublant*" (188). Strange taste keeps alive this anarchic queering. It suffuses the life-sustaining and simultaneously harrowing, excruciating social and personal journeys and transformations that scholars such as Anzaldúa (1999 [1987]), Lugones (2003, 2006), Ortega (2016), and Milian (2019) associate with nonbinary, queering Latinx liminalities, carnalities, and border crossings.[22]

In line with Borges's and Sedgwick's suggestions, read in the context of Latinx feminist philosophies of culture, my archive highlights the logics and potentialities accruing to the strange as an aesthetic category. The strange resonates with discourses of shock, rupture, wonder, excess, abjection, disquietude, restlessness, estrangement, defamiliarization, alienation, astonishment, the absurd, the neutral, the eerie, the weird, the grotesque, the monstrous, the horrific, the surreal, and the uncanny that frequently accompany it. Each notion holds specificities. The strange must be given its due alongside these other aesthetic categories, which have commanded concentrated theoretical attention. Strangeness is worth examining in its own right and for the impetus it lends processes of aesthetic interpretation, making, doing, questioning, and critique.

While sustaining distinctive logics, aesthetic categories often approximate aspects of one another. They typically carry elements that they share, and that support and feed into one another, sometimes to the point of being virtually inseparable.[23] The strange, thus, tends to display features that characterize, or even are prominent aspects of, other qualities. For instance, it may dovetail with forces of estrangement and alienation. Many an instance of the strange is illuminatingly seen as an aesthetic experience and intimation

of a condition of estrangement or alienation. At the same time, the strange commonly pursues paths and patterns of its own and diverges from trajectories outlined by, notably, Marxist, Existentialist, Surrealist, or Lacanian traditions. The sharing of contents and the interactions among aesthetic categories do not detract from the significance of any one of them individually. Overlap, cross-fertilization, and porosity indicate that strangeness offers portions of a story about other qualities, just as other qualities offer portions of a story about strangeness. It's a two-way street. Given the protean collaborations and volatile differentiations that characterize the life of any given aesthetic quality, we need to peer into manifold directions to see where we're going or coming from. In this spirit, I look to the strange side.

Another prominent attribute of aesthetic categories is that their meanings and connotations are likely to shift depending on the discursive, communal, and experiential contexts of their instantiations. This context-dependence can also be expected in the case of the strange. Relatedly, it is unlikely that all instances of strangeness have a single feature or set of features in common with one another that makes them strange. Again, this point is not unique to the strange but obtains for aesthetic categories generally—notably, beauty (Korsmeyer 2006, 52–56; Sibley 1959, 424–37). The variability and breadth of scope of the strange, which encompasses cultural elements that range from highly particular moments to general tendencies, are compatible with the concept's relevance. Apart from the inevitable assortment of difficult cases, furthermore, the strange emerges in uncontroversial instances that are readily recognizable as such.

Surpassing the expected and embracing the peculiar, strangeness is never insulated from the exotic. On occasion, strange taste shrouds itself in the garb of the calculatingly marvelous, the reliably outlandish, to make room for more surprising fascinations that upend entrenched forms of attachment and valuation. As a critical mode of bodily comportment, strangeness runs athwart established aesthetic scripts, including schemas of magical realism and transculturation; routinized registers of resistance; and patterns of euphoria and hope, disaffection and negativity, absorbed by existent cultural hierarchies.[24] The residual characters who cultivate these refractory sensibilities assert their humanity in the face of a racial and colonial apparatus that employs gender, sexuality, and class, among other forms of difference, as modes of production and dismissal.

Taste has a long history in Western philosophy as a practice of individuality and human worthiness. For David Hume, writing in the eighteenth century, it is a means by which subjects can assert their relative autonomy in

a world of accidental, happenstance occurrences. Thus, we can take charge of our own happiness. He holds that "we are pretty much masters of what books we shall read, what diversions we shall partake of, and what company we shall keep" (1998c, 11). Taste, for him, is the capacity that enables us to do this. It grants us a measure of independence from the eventualities of existence. Hume thought that this was a good thing, something that every "wise man" would try to achieve insofar as possible (11). Of course, not all of us are wise men, and in concocting this view of the matter, Hume lost sight of the conditioning factors that tend to facilitate or detract from the aesthetic autonomy of the subject of taste. He avoids examining the logic taste assumes when books are not permitted, diversions are ruled out, and company is reduced to a handful of relatives in a rigorously surveilled household that places one at the bottom. In short, Hume suffuses taste with the preoccupations of a white, propertied, heterosexual male intent on expanding his sphere of influence and enriching his interior world. There is much to question about Hume's views. Yet he ventured a notion of taste that has a great deal of pertinence in an era when societies are subjected to algorithmic rewiring and experience and agency undergo intensifications, as well as reductions, as a result.

Taste is a sensibility that can occasion a singular way of experiencing and responding to the world.[25] A culturally trained habitus, it is a faculty that permits relative, not unqualified, aesthetic self-determination, for our interdependences are constitutive of who we are. More generally, taste must be seen as an aesthetic position that we attain in consequence of a process of living. As an aesthetic stance, it involves a whole array of activities and states: Imagination, sensation, perception, emotion, understanding, questioning, desire, and fantasy are all part of it. These elements are components of taste. In exercising taste, we bring these elements to our encounters with what we seek out or have in front of us and to our interactions with people, more-than-human animals, things, and places. In sum, taste amounts to an acquired disposition to experience and relate to the world in a certain manner.

I have not yet mentioned taste's aspect of judgment, the dimension that has commanded most of the attention by far that philosophy has lavished on the propensity. Taste is so powerfully associated with the good and bad that it is hard to think about apart from these predicates. But I want to loosen this evaluative apparatus to bring into focus the potentialities of the strange as an operation of taste. For if habitual proclivities we acquire over time establish a baseline of what counts as normalcy to us, then this inevitably engenders a zone of the uncommon, the unusual, that defies expectation. And if the forcefully and immediately evaluative language of good and bad freezes

the temporality of taste to roll out judgments of performative achievement and failure, then the vocabulary of the strange points to the dialectical unfoldings of the ordinary and the extraordinary, where a new normal becomes the jumping-off point for a new strangeness that swerves around what happen to be the subject's approbations and condemnations of the moment. So the temporality of the strange, while lodging in the very moment, also sweeps that instant up in an ongoing movement. As an acquired predilection, taste can respond and change—for better or worse, to be sure, but no less powerfully for stranger or less strange. Taste shifts, propelled by the strange, as we saw in Borges's lecture. The ensuing vagaries affect the criteria of applicability for the predicates of the strange and the ordinary that are in effect. What does this dynamical, norm-changing aesthetics of the strange look like?

This book takes up this question by following a cast of recalcitrant types who wield taste as an antidote to aesthetically reductive social designs in which they are embroiled. Equipped with highly eccentric tastes, a troupe of contrarian characters populating novels, poems, and films go against the grain of a colonial system of racial capital that regards aesthetic meaning as one more area of expropriation and gain. Taste's capacities to encode a person's unique way of being and distinctive perceptual and interpretive outlook do not confine it to the sphere of the individual. By contrast, as we rely on our tastes to sift through headlines, videos, portraits, podcasts, performances, databases, websites, and the like, we participate in publics. These publics we bring into being as makers and recipients of cultural productions. Taste is a way of navigating our presence in these publics. It not only binds us to the materiality of objects, ecologies, and substances but locates us as sentient beings in a collective social reality, a world we share with other people and more-than-human living creatures. As subjects of taste, we are members of publics. Hume concurs enthusiastically. Indeed, aesthetic publicness was first theorized by Enlightenment philosophers. Invoking the eighteenth-century heritage, the next section lays out this notion in greater detail and highlights its contemporary generativity by way of two examples.

Aesthetic Publicness: Enlightenment Visions and Twenty-First-Century Artistic Tendencies

The European Enlightenment gave rise to a field of practices I call *aesthetic publicness*. This term denotes aesthetic conditions and forms that index a public domain. I have in mind aesthetic constellations that posit a sphere of public interactions as a structural ground for varieties of normativity and relation-

ality that they put forth and presuppose. More than a pattern of incidental exchanges, aesthetic publicness is a systemic phenomenon. It involves institutional arrangements that employ aesthetic norms and forms. It engenders experiential stances and distributions of power. Aesthetic publicness pertains to the aesthetically suffused structural organization that shapes encounters among artists, cultural artifacts, and audiences and leaves its marks on modes of cultural production and reception. It thus concerns the societal conditioning and infrastructural scaffolding of cultural practices and productions. Publics come into being to gather collectively around architectural sites, image flows, and sound repertoires by building on multivalent and disjointed histories. Aesthetic publicness yields forms and materials that make this possible. The public, meanwhile, permeates the private, and vice versa, for rather than binary opposites, these notions are mutually implicated in each other.

The field I am sketching encompasses social forces and technological developments surrounding the ways in which art-audience relations take shape and presuppose or contribute to the engendering of artistic stances and audience identities. Aesthetic publicness revolves around the platforms or forums in which aesthetic encounters and experiences occur. Besides the historical production and emergence of different kinds of publics, it undergirds the workings of aesthetic norms, codes, and strategies in the culture, within and beyond the artwork.[26] At issue are the ways in which artworks reach into such structural and normative elements and give them form.

Enlightenment philosophy forged a genre of aesthetic publicness based on the figure of the general observer. By reference to this idealized perceiver, concrete aesthetic norms and relationships could be construed on a universalist model, where experiences, values, and modes of creation and reception aspire to validity for everyone, regardless of their social position, geographical location, or place in history.[27] A problem with this paradigm, as many have recognized, is that what were taken to be a universal forum for aesthetic meaning making and a generally accessible faculty of taste are actually sites of fundamental exclusions. The ideal public is less than ideal. Should philosophy, hence, discount the notion of the public as a realm of aesthetic production and reception? And might we in the final reckoning do well to hold off from thinking about taste as a capacity that endows us with ways of navigating this field? I believe these notions have an enduring significance today that must be acknowledged. Let's consider two actual instances.

In 2019, the Chilean feminist art collective Las Tesis took the world by storm with its protest performance *Un violador en tu camino* (A rapist in your path) (figure I.1). In a mode of direct confrontation, the activists

chanted and danced truth to power, contesting gender violence at all levels of the society. "Y la culpa no era mía, ni dónde estaba, ni cómo vestía" (It wasn't my fault, neither where I was, nor what I wore), they sang. The joyful lyrics deployed the sayings of their abusers, underwritten by taste and decorum, against them. Furthermore, they shifted the violence against women onto the state. The initial performance was held in front of a police station in Valparaíso. Reenactments followed in Santiago, first on the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women and later outside the National Stadium, which served as a detention and torture center during the dictatorship. Social media worked its magic following the second performance, and soon public assemblies formed in about two hundred sites across Latin America and worldwide, before state and governmental institutions such as courthouses and parliaments. The performance's energetic corporeal synchronies and percussive sociality resonated online and offline. Public spaces became sites of critical and affective solidarities (Butler 2015; Serafini 2020). Collaborative participation in aesthetic publicness engendered incantatory scenes that provoked further collective aesthetic affiliations. Public territory marked by systemic gender domination and its authorizing procedures rolled out feminist mobilizations demanding change. Feminists aesthetically claimed public space as a domain where a reconfiguration of gendered existence should occur.

Dance squats during which the performers folded their arms behind the neck alluded to invasive body searches carried out routinely by police officers. Green scarves tagged the Latin American reproductive rights movement. Alongside the locations of their rendering, these aesthetic forms and histories were constitutive elements of the performance. By drawing on, implying, and activating existing frames of meaning and matrices of cultural production and reception, the performance enacted a structure of address that amounted to a formation of aesthetic publicness. The public extension of the happening also spoke from the lyrics' riff on a Chilean police slogan: "Un amigo en tu camino" (A friend in your path).[28] Clearly, publicness was in action. It supplied an aesthetic infrastructure against the backdrop of which the performance could assume its meanings and resonance. Seen from one angle, aesthetic publicness conditioned the performance.

Considered from another angle, aesthetic publicness was enacted and shaped by the performers, who redirected common sayings and recognizable gestures in public spaces toward public institutions. Las Tesis's performance exemplifies a broader phenomenon: Aesthetic publicness is a setting where cultural actors can create and communicate affirmations of their coalitional, female, and LGBTQIA+ embodiment in its manifold

FIGURE 1.1. Las Tesis, *Un violador en tu camino* (A rapist in your path). Santiago, Chile, November 25, 2019. Video still, Colectivo Registro Callejero.

interconnections. Hosting at once desirous and vulnerable corporeal and performative realities, this forum yields crucial capacities for collaborative political intervention (Butler 2015).

The Las Tesis performance burst onto the public scene by using a very direct form of address: the *je t'accuse* of the mantra "El violador eres tú" (The rapist is you), thrown with a pointed finger at a state apparatus. The catchy song and the dance's rapid, rhythmic pace articulate an unabashedly polemical sensibility, intent on transparency and broad communicability. Taste is in play here, and must hence be recognized as such. It is not exactly what I would call strange, although somewhat strange, puzzling elements, such as blindfolds, might give the bystander or the viewer pause and slow down reading, alluding to areas of experience that are not immediately legible, zones of devastating pain, concealed domains of brutality and suffering—affective and relational fields that necessitate the claim on publicness made by the performers. The strange in the sense I have in mind, consequently, is not absolutely strange but sufficiently mystifying and peculiar to mark a space where legibility is restricted. In this space, aesthetic practice and experience can provoke questions and push back against criteria of expected bodily comportment and social behavior.

My second case is Consuelo Jimenez Underwood's 2024 multimedia wall installation *Everything All at Once* (figure I.2). A migrant family is on the run, the crisp, brown-red strips schematically defining them overlaid onto a cartographic grid whose fiery orange-yellow lines partition the land. A spiky, triply painted and threaded, winding line reminiscent of barbed wire and carrying pins, necklaces, and sundry items is in turn superimposed over the human figures. *X*s mark places of presence and existential possibility, as well as of heightened surveillance. The border crossers find their existence reduced to bare parameters of speed and direction of movement by a long arrow piercing the adults' hearts, having swished by just above the trailing little girl. The family image, a recurring presence in the artist's work, is derived from a road sign cautioning Californian motorists from the early 1990s through 2018 against undocumented trespassers they might encounter on the highway.[29] Pen-drawn paper cutouts bookend the installation with two female deities who are watching over the scene, which is framed by multicolored abstractions and patterns of cactus leaves, oak leaves, and wiry stretches of woven fabric suggestive of fences. Maps of the Americas are embroidered into the chicken netting of nopal leaves below. Other leaves reveal open hands or hold a flower. Whereas the arrow abstracts the three migrants' existence into a ruthless path of banishment or coerced flight, a central hoop replenishes and

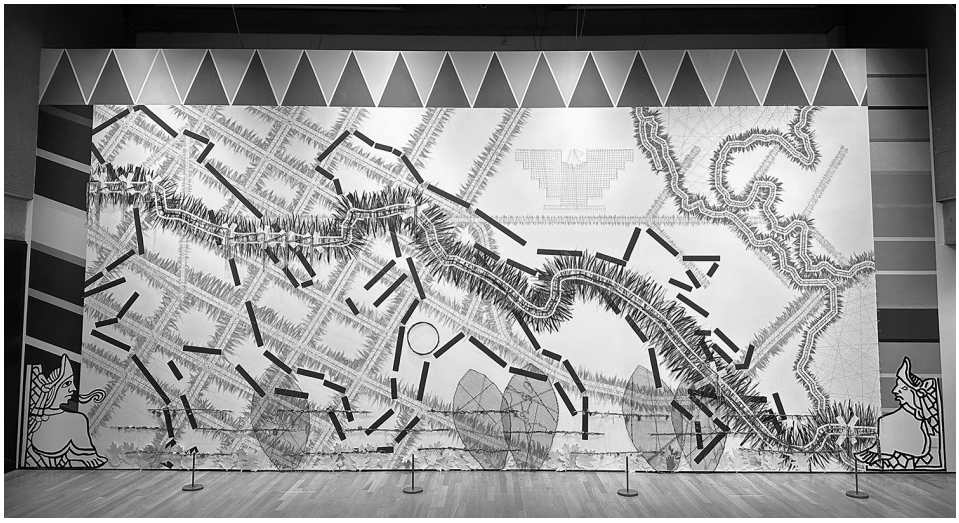

FIGURE 1.2. Consuelo Jimenez Underwood, *Everything All at Once*, 2024. Mixed media installation, 27 × 40 ft., Oakland Museum of California. Photograph courtesy of Oakland Museum of California.

affirms their lifeworld. It declares that undocumented people who are being pushed out of their longstanding places of residence belong in their fullness to the geographical and cultural locations they inhabit, connected as they are to concrete imaginaries and experiences of the land, to spiritual and material ecosystems that foster participating in the strength and courage of an eagle, and to the nourishment a meandering river or resilient plants may bring.

By reworking the highway safety sign, *Everything All at Once* transforms an official public space of terrorization into one where Latinx migrant and Indigenous communities can find revitalization, notwithstanding vehement forces of reduction. Publicness, the work's title stresses, encompasses "everything," both in its terribleness and in its delicate powers of sustenance. Rather than jettisoning the lexicon of the public, philosophy needs to rethink it, consonant with current tendencies in culture and the arts.

Publicness and the Arts: Three Feminist Models

Aesthetic publicness is an active register of sociality that pervades all of life. Surrendering it comes at a price. A loss is incurred. Agency shifts. We pass over control to market forces determined to incorporate it into societal cycles ruled by profit principles. Influence is ceded to authoritarian impulses that evince not the least hesitation about bolstering the sway of small groups of actors over others. Neither art nor the vast majority of people stand to gain from this arrangement. The benefits are stacked against those on the receiving ends of oppression by race, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, coloniality, and ability. Current practices of violent accumulation and extractivism rooted in historical structures demand a reply in terms of substantive figurations of the public. To be sure, publicness need not amount to a replica of the phenomenon that the Enlightenment made it out to be. And neither is it necessary to construe taste along the lines proposed by philosophers such as Hume and Immanuel Kant, who elevate this sensibility to the status of an adjudicating mechanism that issues distinctions between life-forms celebrated as human and worthy of existing and ones written off as nonhuman and deserving of eradication or curtailment.[30] Different notions of taste and the public can be devised and exercise their effects in the culture. The body of work by Latin American and Latinx women artists and writers assembled for this book enables us to imagine such formations.

By turning the lens of publicness onto this literary and visual archive, I'm following in the footsteps of several feminist scholars. In their writings on contemporary literature and performance and installation art in the Americas, the artist-theorist Coco Fusco, cultural critic Nelly Richard, and literary

historian Jean Franco stress the significance of public space as a site of artistic intervention. Fusco connects this public orientation in the Americas with the dual need to provide artistic responses to strategies of institutional control, including modalities of state power, and to sidestep conservative, culturally nationalist demands for authenticity (2000b, 5–6). In an analysis that speaks volumes about the era of Javier Milei and Donald Trump, Fusco points to hegemonic exercises of power that extend across the Americas and brings out how artists in the region turn to public arenas as sites of critical engagement with these forces (9). She observes that a focus on public formations characterizes both the responses of Latin American artists to realities of state-inflicted violence that persist during transitions from dictatorial regimes to democracy and the responses of Latinx artists to issues such as the operations of immigration and border patrol authorities, endemic exploitative labor practices, neofascist mobilizations, and racially segregated communities. While opposing any reduction of cultural expression to its political valence and meaning, Fusco underscores the political and symbolic import of art's use of public space in the Americas. Indeed, marking through lines in the work of Latinx and Latin American artists, she highlights aesthetic forms and choices that purport to foil certain institutional forces, to widen and reestablish "civic space," and to intervene into "public space" by marking its "absence" or "call[ing] it into being" (6, 10, 14). Publicness here is a register through which artists critically address social imaginaries in the Americas and participate in the making of culture.

Richard has long emphasized the public dimension of the happenings and activities organized by the Chilean experimental art group Colectivo Aciones de Arte (Art Action Collective [CADA]). In CADA's artistic practice, which includes events such as the distribution of milk in working-class sections of Santiago and the blazoning of "No+" throughout the city—a gesture cited by Las Tesis (see figure I.1)—the public constitutes, in Richard's words, the "scene of art production" (2000 [1986], 207). In her discerning reading of founding member Lotty Rosenfeld's 1979 performance *Una milla de cruces sobre el pavimento* (*A Mile of Crosses on the Pavement*), she notes the work's address to the "anonymous spectator (virtually anyone)," which provokes the viewer to "critically restructure their schema of daily experiences" (2009, 116). Richard here signals the form of address that lies at the core of Enlightenment constructions of publicness. The starting point for the reorganization of quotidian frames is the "insolent . . . orientation" of the stripes Rosenfeld affixes to the surfaces of roads, initially in Santiago and subsequently in other places across the Americas and beyond, and that run perpendicular to the regular lines guiding the flow of traffic in a forward direction. For Richard,

Una milla de cruces exemplifies CADA's investment in public engagement, its strategy to make interventions into "public space" (116). The "+" signs, in her reading, inaugurate "a new, rebelliously creative relationship with signs and codes" that exposes and counters totalitarianism with a "multiplicative plurality" of meaning (117).

Richard spots an analogous turn to the public in Rosenfeld's later multimedia installation *Moción de orden* (*Point of Order* [2002]). In this combined three-channel video work and site-specific action, the artist's strategy of publicness is to interrupt and displace a flattened global mediascape and its concomitant institutionalized dynamics of othering. Mapuche voices enter news flows. Crawling ants traverse city surfaces, passing through museums and galleries. Insinuating themselves into icons of the fossil fuel and financial industries, these dispersive, at once orderly and disorderly, border crossers enact an "art of the streets" that creates small disturbances in technologically mediated patterns of socioeconomic and cultural control (Richard 2009, 124). In this way, the installation targets aesthetically saturated forms of power channeled in the field of aesthetic publicness.

The public, here, is not a province of heroic monumentalism but a space where "strange" forms (Richard 2004b, 6) elude cultural binaries and upend ideological, institutional, and symbolic stratifications and closures (Richard 2004a, 18, 130; 2004b, 4–6). Artworks fulfill a public role by answering figurations of white, heterosexual masculinity of the middle classes, regimes of ableism, and sexual and gender oppression with a desirous, imaginative, and playful embrace of the as yet unknown (2004a, 119–27, 139–42, 160–76). Thus, the public is a site of confrontations among tastes and among other sensibilities that hosts unceasing negotiations between "margins" and "institutions" (122–23, 130, 173; 2004b, 32–33). Regarding the horrors of the dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet and the forgetful, mass-mediated neoliberal order it installed, this ongoing contestation attests to the need to animate our "powers of public invocation and convocation" in the name of direly pressured cultural memories and alternative imaginaries (Richard 2019, 103). Publicness, for Richard, is a key site of collective, creative world making and an antidote to destructive authoritarian mobilizations.

In a discussion of the work of Latin American women writers in the context of social movements of the 1980s and 1990s, Franco signals the problematic gendered nature of historical public-private divides and argues for a reorganization of existent gender constellations. Literature, she notes, must contend with the hegemony of a pluralism that renders everything commodifiable, including political engagement and difference (1992, 69, 79–80).

As many have observed in the wake of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's famous treatment, an unproblematic enunciative stance in the margins is not available to the cultural and political actor. Indeed, the aporias of this position necessitate alternative forms and structures of address. Whereas Argentina's Mothers of Plaza de Mayo could gather "in a public place" and "reclaim the *polis*" from a position of marginality while "making public both their children's disappearance and the disappearance of the public sphere itself" and testifying to their own anomalous presence "in the symbolic center of the nation," according to Franco, this strategy is no longer available in the same way to the contemporary woman writer because of literature's changed societal status (67). In response to this predicament, she advocates for a form of literary critique: "The imperative for Latin American women is . . . not only the occupation and transformation of public space, the seizure of citizenship, but also the recognition that speaking as a woman within a pluralistic society may actually reinstitute, in a disguised form," various relations of privilege (80). Women writers, consequently, must "broaden the terms of political debate by redefining sovereignty and by using privilege to destroy privilege" (80). In Franco's assessment, literature thus faces the twofold task of engendering a transformative participation in public space and producing an intersectional mode of aesthetic and political engagement that reconstructs what we mean by autonomous agency and avoids the traps of single-axis gendered aesthetic politics.

In her subsequent book-length study *The Decline and Fall of the Lettered City* (2002), Franco spells out in greater detail what this option implies for the societal role of contemporary cultural production. Tracing the shifting positions of Latin American and Latinx art and literature, she exposes the untenable, internally contradictory claims to direct public participation of the Mexican muralists, who in various ways were in cahoots with the state apparatus and an art market that they purported to challenge in the name of the people (67–69). Analogous contradictions undermine, in her view, the pose of the iconic poet of the streets (in contrast to libraries or diplomatic and political chambers) Pablo Neruda, who used to read his work at public gatherings—notably, union meetings (72–85). Franco situates these artists in a large narrative span. Placed under this arc, Borges becomes a stand-in for an imaginative rehearsal of "the end of the social" (176), notwithstanding his uncanny investigation of the categories of the universal and the particular.[31] And Cortázar epitomizes a dematerialization of public space achieved through the fantastic projection of a white masculinist coterie onto a sphere of actual social complexities (Franco 2002, 116–17), notwithstanding his unsettling inquiry into the relation between art and politics. Franco's narrative privileges a social-realist mode of reading.

Despite the limitations of her literary analyses, Franco offers a cultural history that usefully documents shifts in the status of art and literature from a position of autonomy that she believes mimics national sovereignty, through a violent reordering effected by military repression, to an ambiguous state of immersion in a globalized economy, where established registers of domination persist in newly emerging forms and put shifting pressures on the political aspirations of the aesthetic (1–18). Literature generates aesthetic fissures whose ties to social classes and groups have become severed (219). Economic change accompanies a curtailment of the public space where popular demands can receive political articulation (272–73). Literary writing has lost its purchase on tastes, which are assimilated by commodity culture and its criteria and ratings (5, 50, 186, 263–64). Pronouncing "'literature'" today "an uncertain category," Franco tells a story of attrition. She chronicles the "founder[ing]" of artistic utopianism and the prevalence of the marketplace over the literary institution and its practices. Under the rubric "What's Left of Literature?" she refers to aesthetic modes of negation and rupture whose links with the social and the collective are unclear (274–75).

Yet while Franco assigns the artist to a cultural position that is decidedly fraught, ambivalent, and complex, the final decades of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first century reveal for her "reenactments in new circumstances of demands for the not-yet-realized universal" (18). She attends to forms of art and cultural criticism that "expose strategies of containment" and push back against the "geopolitics of domination" (18). Indeed, she ends her account on a hopeful note, for "among the rubble" of utopian visions and literary projects of world making, "something is still alive": Planetary "stirrings" are heard (275). This detection of sustained aesthetic life and the voicing of demands for a yet-to-be-actualized universal and for a caring, responsible fulfilment of social needs require the public space that, she argues, women writers have been and should be entering in a transformative manner. The reciprocal structure of address that she hints at necessitates a forum in which stirrings occur and demands are made and can be registered, interpreted, and responded to.

Franco's cultural charting delineates a profound, tremendously jolting problematic. Aside from certain interpretive worries, I find her argument highly generative. It pinpoints a dynamic of aesthetic publicness that constitutes a pivotal reality but is simultaneously in turmoil, if not in crisis. By scrutinizing the works of four Latin American and Latinx women writers and artists—two of whom inform Franco's overview and two of whom remain unmentioned—I intend to further the theorization of this fundamental concept.

An Archive of Tense Multiplicities; an Archive of Pleasure

In curating the works at the core of this investigation, I aim to respond to three principal concerns. First, the Enlightenment heritage to date puts its stamp on institutionalized settings, such as governance models and other societal infrastructures. Smaller-scale phenomena, such as encounters among racialized and gendered bodies and modes of cultural creation and interpretation, are likewise affected. The enduring cultural influence of Enlightenment paradigms makes it imperative to conceptualize forms of aesthetic publicness that surpass historically entrenched exclusions, which seep through all levels of experience.

Second, taste exerts an ongoing impact on the culture as a register of self-fashioning and world making. In this capacity, it engenders aesthetic enjoyments and aspirations. Regardless of what objects the propensity fastens on, as human beings we tend to hold dear certain tastes we cultivate. In exercising them, we shape them. Partaking of waves of information, we daily hone our individual and collective sensibilities. An awareness of taste's productive functioning should factor into our understanding of the social realm. My first two points speak to each other: By reflecting on taste, we can recognize how this propensity nourishes or detracts from publicness.

The third driving force for this investigation revolves around the nature and contours of aesthetic practices broadly conceived. It is crucial that we conceptualize the aesthetic domain and the notion of the aesthetic in a manner that is up to par with the current day and age. Aesthetics needs to reckon with contemporary cultural and economic developments, which speak to its fundamental presuppositions. This philosophical endeavor stretches to the frames of the public: Publicness must be considered in light of the conditioning powers and functioning of the aesthetic even as we need to think through how shifts in registers of publicness bear on the aesthetic.

These three lines of reflection delineate an intricate orbit of entanglements. It is here that, as the works in my archive demonstrate, we can open up ways of thinking, feeling, sensing, and making and devise trajectories of aesthetic being at the edge of what has been thought. I investigate aesthetic facets of publicness that resist rapid legibility, engaging in a significant stretch of interpretive labor. This is precisely what the four artists and writers are calling for. Their works do not give away their insights on first blush. These strategies of paced aesthetic elaboration are deliberate. They establish a dialectic between an aesthetics of opacity and clarity, lightness and depth, giving and withholding, satire and seriousness that is part of what the aesthetic brings to the field of cultural agency and the public.

Meanwhile, the aesthetic is of key relevance to the propensity of taste. This sensibility, after all, juggles and traverses the polarities just mentioned. Taste is a quintessentially aesthetic phenomenon. It harbors a vortex of tense multiplicities. The archive assembled here enables us to explore the manifold potentialities of taste in light of changes that are happening with regard to the organization of our aesthetic lives, broadly speaking.

Philosophy and cultural criticism, as already indicated, are of a piece in my approach to my archive. The cultural objects that fuel the discussion engage at once in aesthetic theory and forms of institutional intervention and quotidian practice. A writer such as Lispector wrestles with theoretical and existential questions about aesthetic, moral, and political life. These interweavings also mark contemporary Latinx feminist philosophy and cultural theory, ranging from Anzaldúa and Lugones to more recent analyses by Laura Pérez (2019), Ortega (2025), and other scholars (Pitts et al. 2020). My readings, motivated by the three considerations that drive the selection of my archive, thus are philosophical inquiries in the same act that they are investigations of artistic productions. So this book embraces a realm of pleasure.

Indeed, were we to single out the aesthetic for one achievement only, an admittedly absurd but nonetheless instructive venture, I submit this would be pleasure. We may care all we want about imagination, ethics, politics, insight, and critical questioning and other facets of the aesthetic, but apart from the enjoyment that comes with them, aesthetics rapidly loses allure. Here I am thinking of profound and possibly enduring pleasures (which are not necessarily the same) as well as of thin and fleeting ones that remain on the surface. The question of pleasure—its effusiveness, its compulsions, its orientations—is a vital preoccupation in my archive and informs my engagement with this archive throughout these pages. As aesthetic practitioners and theorists have known for many centuries, by seeking out pleasure, by getting us to go where pleasure proposes to take us, worlds open up. Accordingly, I am guided by the directions into which my artists and writers travel propelled by pleasure.

Following their cues, we find gratification in dust, pings, song, and light. These entities lend their structures to the sensibilities they awaken in the cultural objects under consideration. They activate contingent relationalities. Siding with pleasure, we go after materiality and give ourselves over to the ways things feel. We may be present to the body, in intimacy with ourselves, with others. We sense twinges of desire. We march in lockstep with repetition. But we also trail off in flights of fancy, drawn to remote corners of the imagination. These journeys give us a sense of the states of subjectivity,

collectivity, and agency that we inhabit as we slip into and out of pleasure. Pleasure, meanwhile, encounters displeasure typically not in some sort of standoff. Their relation is more complex than that. Indeed, these experiences often nourish each other. They are commonly part of one another.

Thinking about the rich categorical repertoire through which we apprehend our pleasures and about the manifold forms in which we enjoy them calls to mind tinges of adventure and possibility we likely sense when at play. For play can be a quite pleasurable activity. It involves freedoms in ways that alert us to unfreedoms. A playful comportment rests on disinterest in a manner that speaks to our interests. Disinterest here is not the rigorously nonconceptual, non-purpose-bound mode of attention theorized by Kant, but a more qualified concern for experiences in their own right and qualities that are intrinsically valuable. Thus, it is mixed with elements Kant would count under the umbrella of interest, as acknowledged by theorists as diverse as Theodor Adorno (1997, 9–13), John Dewey (1934, 257–66), Jerrold Levinson (1996, 16–18), Peg Brand (1998), and Amelia Jones (2003, 78–79, 82–84).

From another angle, play ties into the stories we tell about ourselves and other people and that we enact as a matter of our day-to-day living. Playfulness has a seemingly inexhaustible narrative and performative generativity. Children's games make this clear: "I'm the murderer, you were the corpse; you kept watch over the bridge, I was the thief; you were the pirate, I was the dancer; the princess had been kidnapped but we didn't know it yet." These ludic hints can precipitate dramatic happenings that carry on for entire afternoons.

Pleasure is interlaced with a whole array of adjacent aesthetic occupations. How might aesthetic existence harness these sundry practices in response to contemporary information circuits and socioeconomic conditions? One reply rings loudly from the artworks under discussion in this book: by making a turn to the public.

As noted before, my analyses in the following chapters zero in on the work of four Latin American and Latinx woman artists and writers. These creators investigate aesthetic life with an eye to the possibilities and limits of publicness. In a corporatist epoch when consumerism is massively promoted as an answer to the challenges the world faces at the same time that growth has become caught up in catastrophic cycles that cry out for intensified regulation, the four artists and writers confront our investments in market-boosted pleasures with stories, modes of play, and trajectories of subjective and collective being that exert traction, resisting capture by instrumental reasoning. The aesthetic forms and strategies enacted by the works that constitute this book's archive carry seeds of recalcitrant relationalities, alternative intimacies.

I commence with poems in the collection *Frivolous Women and Other Sinners / Frívolas y pecadoras* (2009), by the Argentine-born fiction writer and scholar Alicia Borinsky. Then I caper back in literary history to linger over the Brazilian writer Clarice Lispector's last novel, *A hora da estrela* (*The Hour of the Star* [1998 (1977); 2011]). Next, I leap forward to the Peruvian filmmaker Claudia Llosa's feature film *La teta asustada* (*The Milk of Sorrow* [2009]), before ending with two late twentieth-century novels by the Chilean writer and performance artist Diamela Eltit: *Lumpérica* (*E. Luminata* [1997a (1983)]) and *El cuarto mundo* (*The Fourth World* [1995 (1988)]). Each work (or set of works) initiates orientations toward the notion of the public while self-reflexively probing the question of the aesthetic, intent on teasing out its conceptual underpinnings and reverberations.

Through the juxtaposition of these works I make visible fundamental facets of historically embedded, corporeal, decolonial feminist agency: An embrace of publicness enables us to participate in practices of seduction, intimacy, and play in a manner that incorporates a self-conscious gender politics into our aesthetic actions and gestures, as I indicate in reading Borinsky's poetry. Publicness is also a terrain where all manner of love stories play out and where we may find ourselves enacting stories that don't really work for us, stories we don't even want to read or write. Institutions of art, such as literary and musical traditions, may trap us in narratives from which we want to steer clear. Historical structures of aesthetic need, desire, and demand are realities to be reckoned with in reflecting on the social functioning of art and literature and the possibilities of decolonial feminist aesthetic agency, as we observe when perusing Lispector's novel and Llosa's film. And while individuality and collectivity bear relations to each other, these relations can take different forms depending on the specific genres of aesthetic publicness that are in effect in our communities. When economic and political pressures have a heavy hand in public life in a manner that threatens to submerge us, as we learn in Llosa's movie and Eltit's novels, aesthetic publicness in all of its richness and shortcomings may just be an ambit where, following our imagination and sensibilities, we can realize and access the resources we need to embark on different subjective and collective paths—ones that open up possibilities of aesthetic flourishing, notwithstanding the barriers and procedures that stand in its way.

Through figurations of strange taste and disinterest, the four artists and writers that make up my archive probe aesthetic publicness. With Borinsky, I reflect on aspects of gendered desire that revolve around storytelling and that point to a generative form of aesthetic publicness driven by disinterested play. This practice needs to contend with the power of entrenched

aesthetic politics, as I demonstrate in my reading of Lispector, which enables us to see how the lines between positions inside and outside modern aesthetic institutionality are becoming blurred and dislodged. Present-day aesthetic constituencies and publics work with and against these ambivalent and oscillating positionings to enact decolonial alternatives at a communal level, as I find in Llosa's case. While the aesthetic affordances and demands of the marketplace are a constant theme in my archive, they raise questions about technology, which, reading Eltit, I fold into my evolving reflections on current trajectories of subjectivity and collectivity. Aesthetic publicness is marked by complex entanglements between technological mediations and political and economic constellations and can be activated, responded to, tweaked, and reconfigured in multiple registers of intercorporeal existence and feminist sensibility.

My archive's conjectures about the public become visible if we read the works from a fully fledged, unabashedly aesthetic perspective, which to my knowledge has not yet been done. From this perspective, neglecting publicness is not an option. Indeed, society requires aesthetic publicness to grapple with the very concerns about differential structures of power and being that tend to lead present-day critical discourses away from the public domain in a substantive sense of the notion. In addition to building this case through my readings, I underscore the need to construct aesthetic publicness on new terms. My analyses of the different cultural productions thus highlight facets of these works that gesture toward such alternative constellations.

To clarify the philosophical grounds for this project, I give a brief overview of Hume's and Kant's basic understandings of taste and aesthetic publicness that brings out these entities' imbrications with coloniality and race and attendant forms of difference. Then I describe two contemporary takes on questions of the public that constitute further starting points for this inquiry.

Philosophical Interlocutors on Taste and the Public

How can aesthetic judgment be both a matter of the perceiver's subjective feelings and a phenomenon that permits clear-cut valorizations of some artistic oeuvres over and above others? In his essay "Of the Standard of Taste," Hume famously answers this question by centering a notion of aesthetic normativity around the figure of the ideal critic and the joint verdict of a panel of such critics (1998e, 147). Their aesthetic judgment is determinative of beauty or goodness in art. With his invocation of the ideal critic, Hume posits a general observer whose aesthetic experience is shaped by five appreciative propensities, or, in other words, marks of taste. These proclivities are delicacy

of taste or imagination, freedom from prejudice, good sense, and an interpretive skillfulness honed by both practice with relevant kinds of art and a history of making aesthetic comparisons. I briefly walk through these criteria.

The first characteristic, called delicacy of taste or imagination, amounts to a sensitivity to fine feelings that, when all is good and well, indexes "clearly and distinctly" what is "universally found to please" in the field of perception (137–38, 143). Confirmation that we are on the right track in this regard can be derived from the "durable admiration" enjoyed by great works and the "rules of art" we can base on them, which guide the observer toward works of "universal" goodness or beauty, functioning as a kind of benchmark for our experience (138–39).[32] Taste, thus, is fundamentally an appreciative propensity. But this perceptual disposition needs some shaping to do its work properly, which the other four characteristics help to ensure. The second criterion of taste, freedom from prejudice, mandates judgment from the standpoint of "man in general" (145). This requirement calls for a gesture of abstraction. In Hume's words, "[W]hen any work is addressed to the public, though I should have a friendship or enmity with the author, I must depart from this situation, and, considering myself as a man in general, forget, if possible, my individual being, and my peculiar circumstances" (145). Certain "interests," such as the appreciative concerns one has "as a friend or enemy, as a rival or commentator" need to be ignored (146). In response to such biases, "[c]omprehension" must be adequately "enlarge[d]" (146). Moreover, "a proper violence" should be "imposed" on the observer's "imagination" (146). The observer is expected attain "a certain point of view," which is "conformable to that which is required by the performance" (145). In the case of works that originate in a different era or geographical location than the observer's, the observer is asked to make "allowance" for the interpretive barriers this engenders by letting go of "his natural position" and "placing himself in that point of view which the performance supposes" (145). So the second criterion explicitly foregrounds the figure of the general observer and his disinterested stance.

To proceed to Hume's third criterion, good sense concerns an interpretive or reasoning capacity, such as the ability so see the point of certain aesthetic strategies or to follow a character's thinking (146–47). In the fourth and fifth place, practice in judging art and a history of comparing the qualities of artworks with one another are required to sharpen aesthetic judgment and correctly pitch the degree of appreciation it conveys (144–45, 147). Hume allows some sources of legitimate variability in taste, but with the apparatus just laid out, he essentially provides a standard of taste or, in other words, a way of adjudicating between mutually contradictory beauty judgments,

both synchronically and across time and space. Now we have a ground on which we can all agree about what is aesthetically good: The judgment of the true critics is decisive. Taste is a normatively inflected appreciative faculty for Hume. Artworks have a place in a public sphere.

Structural racial and colonial difference enters Hume's theory of taste by way of two direct paths, along with a whole array of more intricate trajectories. I consider the direct ones first. One, the criteria of practice and comparisons blatantly lock out from the realm of taste a whole group of observers who lack access to the relevant kinds of art, for these observers cannot obtain the required experiential training.[33] Two, Hume's writings are rife with dismissive remarks about the mental faculties and productive skills of different populations, such as Amerindian people, Black people, white women, and women of other races. The presumed subject of taste, accordingly, is a white, male European of the middle classes. Besides these two quite clear-cut senses in which Hume construes taste and the public domain in which it is enacted in racial and colonial terms, there are many tricky ways in which coloniality and race reverberate within the culture he envisions.[34]

To get a handle on the interlacing of race, taste, and the public Hume envisions, I want to recall a few terms that point to the depths and range of cultural practices and zones of experience in which these entanglements play out. If we enter the nitty-gritty of his theory, we find that Hume, through socially differential allocations of reason and emotional responsiveness and through conceptions of the cultural functioning of artistic, scientific, and commercial endeavors, forges distinctive webs of *aesthetic relationality*. This term, as suggested earlier, refers to patterns of aesthetically mediated relationships among people, more-than-human animals, things, and places.[35] Hume organizes these structures by way of trajectories of aesthetic racialization and racialized aestheticization and intersecting procedures such as aesthetic gendering and gendered aestheticization. These processes pervade the culture, as Hume construes it. White cultural flourishing is held out as a promise that he attaches to practices of taste. Aesthetic life aspires to whiteness, implementing processes of aesthetic racialization. Whiteness feeds aesthetic life, realizing processes of racialized aestheticization. The world where taste rules is ultimately a white one. Black cultural productions and creativity are construed as threats to this world. They are to be avoided and curtailed. Taste assists in this invidious eradication and diminishment. Aesthetic publicness is simultaneously construed on white terms, by way of white racial delineations (exemplifying racialized aestheticization), and fosters whiteness (enacting aesthetic racialization). These cultural processes fuel each other.

The intersection of aesthetics and race that results from Hume's theory is a zone of entwinements among the two processes. They forge constellations of aesthetic relationships that are institutionalized in practices of art, science, commerce, love, domesticity, national and class development, and publicness.[36] They suffuse cultural life.[37] This, in outline, is Hume's take on aesthetic publicness. Let me turn to Kant.

In theorizing the conditions of possibility for what he regards as the pure judgment of taste, Kant, in his *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, construes aesthetic experience as a mode of disinterested attention—that is, a form of perception devoid of any interest on the part of the observer in the actual existence of the item that is being perceived (Kant 2000 [1790], 90–91). Such interest, in Kant's view, links up with desire, a faculty that distinguishes people from one another (90). By rendering aesthetic experience free from interest, he characterizes it as a contemplative condition, tying it to mental faculties that human beings presumably share with one another. The examples he gives of interested states concern things we like and don't like, such as palaces or cook shops, and items we deem to be worthy or unworthy of the effort of making or imagining them (90). These instances are not altogether univocal, but Kant's point is clear enough: By essentially separating out from aesthetic experience everything that differentiates observers as the culturally situated individuals they are, he renders the experience universally accessible. The perceiver's concepts and goals are prevented from hindering this universality. Indeed, for Kant, pure judgments of taste are nonconceptual. They stay clear of purposes. They are not regular cognitions, valorizations of what is merely agreeable to the senses, or the kind of judgments of the good involved in moral verdicts (91–101). Instead, judgments of taste index what Kant describes as the free play of the faculties of imagination and cognition, capabilities that all human beings can be assumed to share (102–3). Universalizability is attained because all differentiating factors are purportedly bracketed from the beauty experience. Hence, if one of us judges a cultural object aesthetically valuable or beautiful in the manner just sketched, then everyone else has to agree (101). This is what Kant means when he says that the pure judgment of taste has subjective universal validity (100).

Kant's third *Critique* is part of an oeuvre that also includes his apparently more incidental approach to beauty and sublimity along with explicitly anthropological and geographical discourses (Kant 2011 [1764], 2012a, 2012b). In both the *Critique* and these other works, Kant, like Hume, offers comparative assessments of people's capacities for reasoning, for fine feeling, and for aesthetic apprehension. Among others, Black, Native American, Caribbean,

Asian, and Romani people of different genders, as well as white women, fall short by his measures. Taste, accordingly, is an exclusionary phenomenon. So is the public sphere where it is exercised. Not everyone can participate in the presumed universally accessible forum comprising the aesthetic public and the objects produced and received by this public. Conditions of participation reflect formations of structural social difference, belying Kant's attestations of universality.

I analyze relevant Hume and Kant passages elsewhere, and Kant's views of race have been discussed with great critical acumen by other interpreters.[38] I therefore sidestep the details, limiting myself to the observation that Kant, like Hume, theorizes pronounced patterns of aesthetic relationality, which he structures with the help of lineages of aesthetic racialization and racialized aestheticization. In sum, while voicing ideals of human equality that place humans on an equal footing as possible participants in aesthetic practices, both philosophers also develop valorizations of aesthetically produced inequality that applaud culture insofar as it exemplifies white, heterosexual masculinity of the middle classes and deprecate culture insofar as it is associated with male and female Blackness and Indigeneity as well as with, among others, Asian, Native American, and Caribbean positionalities.

While of great significance, the notions of taste and the public we inherit from the Enlightenment are fraught. How should aesthetics approach these problems? The present book aims to reclaim both taste and publicness from the Enlightenment by showing their pertinence to contemporary cultural commitments and encounters and by marking their indispensability to our capacities to deal with algorithmically perpetuated, simultaneously intensified and diluted experiential textures that we enact as inhabitants of currrent consumerist societies. This agenda, however, necessitates that we design alternative constructions of taste and publicness.

In hoping to open up novel conceptualizations of publicness, I flout certain orthodoxies in aesthetics. The current state of the discipline is divided on the question of the public. On the one hand, philosophy in various analytic and continental genres continues to rely on Enlightenment paradigms of aesthetic normativity, experience, and value. Concerns about social difference and hierarchy are kept at a distance from a basic conceptual outlook that is retained, especially with respect to questions of race, gender, and coloniality.[39] On the other hand, a good deal of postcolonial and decolonial scholarship sets aside the issue of publicness by replacing the vexed, timeworn field of aesthetics with the allegedly more salutary practice of aesthesis or, in other words, forms of imagination, emotion and perception.[40] Although these different approaches

have important insights to offer, neither is adequate. The difficulties at hand call for a richer conceptual framework. This account I aim to develop through the turn to my archive.

While rejecting the tendency in postcolonial and decolonial thought to step over aesthetic publicness, I also tread in the footsteps of important work in these quarters. I specifically mention Stuart Hall's writings, which incipiently insist on the aesthetic significance of publicness. For Hall, cultural and performance spaces are among the conditions for the realization of an intersectional cultural politics that includes modes of artistic creation and reception (1996c, 467, 471, 474).[41] By revealing how identities arise in "historical and institutional sites" and observing that categories of aesthetic value are not transcendental criteria but must be seen as elements of critical social practices, he makes room for theorizations of aesthetic publicness (1996a, 4; 1996b, 446, 448). Beyond the confines of binary notions of high and low culture and oppression and liberation, Hall attests to the "ordering of different aesthetic morals, social aesthetics, the orderings of culture that open up culture to the play of power" (1996c, 469–70; 1994, 396). Hall here associates modes of aesthetic ordering with evolving power dynamics. The analytic of power and culture he elaborates also rejects binaries such as resistance and incorporation, authentic and inauthentic, experiential and formal. What is especially suggestive about his approach in light of the present inquiry is the notion of aesthetic orderings, which allows him to avoid getting caught in restrictive oppositions that hinder the scope of cultural criticism. These orderings are elements of the social ontology Hall sees in effect. Aesthetic publicness, I submit, must be counted among them.

Hall remains cryptic about what, precisely, he has in mind with the aesthetic orderings he posits. This reluctance is related to the departure that cultural studies, from the late 1960s to the late 1990s, purported to make from philosophical aesthetics. Today, however, these lines are drawn much less sharply, at least from the cultural studies side. It is timely to push the aesthetic side more forcefully in interpreting Hall. Indeed, with the notion of aesthetic orderings, I suggest, he is pointing to structures of aesthetic relationality. This includes differentiations between self and other and belonging and otherness that are stabilized by intersecting oppressions and critically contested by an intersectional cultural politics of difference (Hall 1996b, 445–46). Accordingly, Hall is alluding to a web of aesthetically mediated societal consolidations and displacements, where the mediating items include factors such as "memory, fantasy and desire," intertextual resonances, and technologies (448). The relevant relational structures are fruitfully understood in

terms of a framework of aesthetic publicness. So I propose to read Hall as a major advocate of aesthetic publicness.

Because cultural analysis, as brought into being and institutionalized by Hall among other trailblazing scholars, defined itself in stark opposition to philosophical aesthetics, this line of theorization has been left undeveloped. At the current juncture, however, when cultural theory embraces vast swaths of aesthetics, it is illuminating to pursue the path the earlier epoque had shunned. It is all the more intriguing that a scholar such as Hall has been leaving spoors for later scholarship that can be usefully traced and picked up on.

My approach to the aesthetic facets of publicness and the public registers of the aesthetic finds inspiration in the work of another predecessor, whose writings cross the lines of feminist philosophy, critical studies of race and ethnicity, and cultural theory. Anzaldúa combines genres of poetry, storytelling, historiography, and essay writing to create a theoretical perspective that connects with her lived experiences in the borderlands of Mexico, white Anglo-American traditions in the US Southwest, and Nahuatl culture (1999 [1987], 23–32, 44; 2009, 190). She brings to expression hitherto unsuspected intimacies, in their nightmarish as well as joyous dimensions (19, 42, 80–83). Philosophy and art are interwoven in an approach where aesthetics is part of all facets of life—quotidian, functional, spiritual, and political (88–97). Her genre-straddling writerly strategy enters public territory through moments of self-exposure and self-fictionalization and by asking the reader to meet her texts with their own experience (1999 [1987]; 2009, 190, 196). By means of her distinctive auto-poetic mode of address, Anzaldúa intervenes into structures of aesthetic relationality. Accordingly, when she discusses racial and gender restrictions and possibilities inherent in a variety of public spaces, such as museums, classrooms, auditoriums, literary and academic writing, and public culture broadly conceived (1999 [1987], 90; 2002, 185; 2009, 190, 195; 2015, 10, 17–22, 48–49, 154), she is at once querying and rewriting registers of aesthetic publicness.

Salient vestiges of Enlightenment philosophy appear in her texts. In her renowned "Speaking in Tongues" letter, written, as the subtitle indicates, to "Third World Women Writers," on May 21, 1980, she both rejects the "distance" mandated by institutionalized writerly modes and acknowledges that writing allows her "a margin of distance" that is lifesaving (Anzaldúa 2002, 185, 188). Distance, which was so central to Enlightenment aesthetics, is decidedly problematic but can also be invaluable. There is more. A sense of universality suffuses the experience of writing when Anzaldúa is gripped by it: "And more and more when I'm alone, though still in communion with

each other, the writing possesses me and propels me to leap into a timeless, spaceless no-place where I forget myself and feel I am the universe. *This* is power" (191). Difference and hierarchy somehow are suspended in the experience to be given a new form that energizes and empowers. Aesthetic experience, it seems, is sometimes characterized by a dimension of universality, not unlike the Enlightenment would have it. Even if aesthetic publicness is not directly on the table for Anzaldúa, her view of individual and social knowledge production, storytelling, and transformation, notably her notion of *conocimiento*, or an expanded, embodied form of awareness, powerfully speaks to it (2015, 117–59). Further theorization of the topic promises to expand our understanding of this poet-scholar's aesthetic and political project.[42]

Anzaldúa's philosophy of culture provides additional entries into questions of publicness. Life in the borderlands, in her account, is weighed down by oppressive cultural norms. It unfolds in regimes of normalcy on which border crossers, "*los atravesados*," infringe as they pass through and move away from "the confines of the 'normal'" (1999 [1987], 25). Living in the borderlands combines feelings of being at home with a constant presence of the strange, which attaches to an animation of a shifting awareness, of capacities that are being "activated, awakened" (19). "In the borderlands," as she puts it in a poem, "you are at home, a stranger" (216). Experience that transgresses the routines of normalization, for Anzaldúa, thus manifests itself in a tense coincidence of the familiar and the strange.[43] I see in this insight an intimation of a public aesthetic of the strange.

Intriguingly, tastes make their appearance in Anzaldúa's letter. She puts faith in the "words" that "germinate in the open mouth of the barefoot child in the midst of restive crowds" (2002, 192). She shares how a craving for an apple Danish pastry hits her just before reaching a crucial insight, getting her to drop her letter for a visit to the store. As familiar as this may sound, perhaps it is also an incursion by strange taste. After all, suffering from diabetes, she had been off sugar for three years (189). Austerity dissipates. We learn how last night's beer weighs on the day, necessitating her bribing herself into writing with pizza (190). She tells her addressees to "*write with your tongues of fire*" (192). Moreover, she wants a thunderbolt effect for her and her fellow feminists of color's texts, a moment of bewitching, incantatory strangeness: "I say mujer mágica, empty yourself. Shock yourself into new ways of perceiving the world, shock your readers into the same" (191). Deep down, there is a voice to be freed: "Find the muse within you. The voice that lies buried under you, dig it up" (192). Necessitating intimacy with the self's bodily substances, a closeness that exacts labor, that is in touch with pain, it takes "blood and pus and

sweat" to touch the reader (192). In Anzaldúa's text, taste highlights the corporeality of the writing process.[44] It leans into the social differentiations that shape what is brought to expression and brings the writers' and the readers' bodies into the text and hence into the "public arena" (2015, 154). It refuses to back off from the strange. Taste, it turns out, is a part of *la facultad*, of the shifting and transformative experiential capacities of the border crosser, a sensitivity that is "excruciatingly" and at the same time "exhilarating[ly]" "alive to the world," finely attuned to distance and love (1999 [1987], 19, 60–61; 2009, 182). And it offers the reader a way to connect with this life-sustaining sensibility.

While Borges's games with identity deal quite summarily and incidentally with the body—whether this body is walking through the Buenos Aires streets, toying with hourglasses, or having coffee—Anzaldúa understands the body and its tastes as intercorporeal phenomena.[45] She feels called by taste's demands and responds to them. She also makes demands on the body herself, keeping it in line until the writing is finished and the pizza's time has come. In response to a show of Aztec art, she critically engages the embodied spectatorial position she brings to the work as a citizen of contemporary consumption society, a member of an art public (2015, 58–62). Anzaldúa theorizes Latina and Latinx bodies and the bodies of other women of color at the cross section of public and private spaces and at the point where other dichotomized polarities reveal their mutual participations in each other: mind and body, individual and society, standardization and individuality, and, yes, self and other (1999 [1987], 101–3; 2015, 6, 139–43, 151). The binary of universality and particularity, I suggest, is also among the oppositions that Anzaldúa scrambles with her aesthetics. Aesthetic publicness, from this perspective, is a site of tense potentialities that Anzaldúa reframes by rendering it a gendered, racial, and culturally situated corporeal reality and orienting it toward a more egalitarian condition conducive to the flourishing of women of color, their creative productions, and the planet—a collective, interspecies reality (1999 [1987], 72, 103; 2015, 137–38). While her theory powerfully enriches our understanding of public life, the functioning of aesthetic experiences, categories, productions, and institutions demands further conceptualization for the ways these entities shape people and societies, including the registers Anzaldúa terms *light* and *dark* (1999 [1987], 71; 2015, 10).

The present investigation, then, takes root at the junctures where postcolonial and decolonial thought meets with the ambivalent heritage of Enlightenment social and political philosophy. This terrain is marked by points of convergence that have been unnoticed or wrapped in mutual quiet. By encountering this hesitation with a strategy of philosophical inquiry that at

the same time is a mode of aesthetic reading, I intend to strengthen the repertoire of conceptual options and methods we bring to contemporary culture.

Before proceeding to discuss the specifically aesthetic dimensions we have at stake in aesthetic publicness—and that will be foregrounded in this investigation—I want to reap a quick takeaway from the ensemble of approaches just outlined. Hume's and Kant's accounts and Hall's and Anzaldúa's theories trace concrete historical processes.[46] The aesthetic sensibilities and strange tastes this book features are elements of these shifting formations. This bears on the specific forms of strangeness deployed by the artists and writers who make up my archive. The strange qualities of the tastes that jump out from their works are subtle, mutinous instigators of a historical dialectic. They move in and out of evolving pairs of oppositions, such as the extraordinary and the standardized, the out-of-bent and the regular, the norm and the exception, the familiar and the exotic, home and the unhomely, the contemporary and the archaic or futural. The strange here is an operation that unsettles while also creating space for situationally, socially attuned forms of connectedness with places, such as the sites of belonging and nonbelonging we engender through the improvisatory practices Ortega calls "hometactics" (2016, 201–10) or the fluid spaces that make up Lugones's "hangouts" (2003, 220–21). The artists and writers showcased in this book employ strange tastes to realize modes of affective, sensory, and conceptual friction, affiliation, and change. The question then becomes how these modalities link up with structures of publicness.

Given the ambivalent attractions and repulsions that mark stale regimes of exoticization, as well as our mundane attachments to quotidian rites that keep things and people in their place, the strange is dreaded even when desired. Culture often turns this common element into something to be feared while brushing off the enticement. It makes us forget our commonality. Strange tastes return to remind us of our humanity. They find assistance in Sigmund Freud's uncanny. They are not just exotic but stagings of the odd, performances of the queer. They produce uneasy and unruly intimacies that shape our experience of the common, the world, ourselves. Strange tastes exercise curious critical effects, whose logic gives us pause and incites us to think, to feel at the limits of right and wrong, expediency and uselessness. So these remarkable tastes compel us to expand the bounds of what we sense as and understand by feminist and decolonial agency. The run-of-the-mill contrasts are light and dark, and juxtapositions of silence with sound, noise, music, speech, and listening. What happens when we travel from dust by way of pings and song to light? Philosophy tells a strange tale and intimates what it might be like to tell a strange tale.

Four Zones of Aesthetic Meaning

I now turn to the distinctively aesthetic phenomena to be highlighted in my archive in the following chapters. The first phenomenon is playfulness and the kinds of stories for which it casts around. Decolonial feminists value play as an experiential state that fosters travel among worlds separated by lines of oppression. As such, play is key to sustaining selves under domination. It supports coalition making. From the side of postcolonial feminisms, scholars understand play as a state that allows us to maintain in tension antithetical demands we are facing, rather than dropping one polarity in favor of an unambivalent embrace of the other.

Against the backdrop of these two approaches, chapter 1 investigates the capacities of certain kinds of play. What kinds of stories do we produce and reproduce in our games? What happens to gender and intersecting varieties of difference as we fall for certain narrations or hope finally to be done with them? How do these tales occasion freedom or states of captivity? In poems that voice questions of reading and writing, Borinsky teases out intimacies and gatherings, modes of aliveness and forms of the terrible, that skirt the constraints of commodification. Poetry here lingers in public space after the staged spectacle is over, telling tales, making up games, fancying untold endings. The aesthetic functions as a critical resource that yields designs by which we can run athwart of hierarchies of gender, race, and coloniality. In Borinsky's collection, as I show in the chapter, the aesthetic claims publicness as the site for trenchant encounters that keep alive conflict while also promising journeys to other worlds. The text's frivolous poet character incites us to imagine a kind of publicness that pushes the boundaries of literary respectability and market appeal. Floodgates open up to pleasure. Postcolonial and decolonial thought, I argue, needs aesthetic desire and fiction in a richer, more encompassing sense than it had surmised. Crossed through by disinterest, desire in the poems becomes a force of singularity and individuality. At the same time, disinterest and its accompanying condition of autonomy risk slipping into commodification and idealization. A distancing strategy of autonomous self-fashioning may well lose itself in the marketplace. I show how aesthetics can critically respond to this complication by recognizing how disinterested play and the strange tastes that embrace it awaken new intimacies in the margins of publicness, tying into open-ended forms of relationality.[47] Borinsky has us play in the dust, which becomes the ink for unusual writings, fodder for peculiar sensibilities. In reply to overly abstract postcolonial and decolonial appeals to play that end up paring down

its messy realities alongside earlier philosophical approaches that, likewise, minimize its problematic workings, I offer a historicizing notion of play that is rich enough to at once push back against troubled constellations of race, gender, and coloniality and cherish its own, inexorable aesthetic situatedness and productivity. With this notion, chapter 1 reclaims disinterested play for decolonial feminism and cultural criticism. My main interlocutors, besides Borinsky, are Lugones, Spivak, and Walter Benjamin.

Disinterest is an Enlightenment asset. Yet it is given over to furtive strolls, stunningly acrobatic feats, and mesmerizing tricks of hide-and-seek that we might not have expected from a policy so devoted to distance, so insistent on holding things at arm's length, so committed to keeping at a remove from life's ordinary hubbub. Indeed, disinterest has prowled into aesthetic canons and the societal structures that uphold them, where it is now solidly implanted. It has lodged its crafty gimmicks at the core of market formations, as already suggested. After considering disinterest in connection with the exigencies of play in chapter 1, I focus on its structural functioning as a register of aesthetic publicness. This is the second kernel of aesthetic and public activity I foreground in this book. We keep playing. Disinterest is responsible for a bounteous array of aesthetic pleasures for which we look to the arts and culture. At the same time, its moral and political record is decidedly equivocal: Our games intuit ample room for playing double binds.

A key tool of Western canon formation, disinterest has served to inoculate aesthetic existence against worries about the social distribution of excellence and power. These concerns, after all, fall outside the autonomous sphere of intrinsic aesthetic value. They threaten to contaminate art's sui generis valorizations with external realities. Historical figurations of disinterest hold these heteronomous conditions at bay by pronouncing them ancillary to the sphere of artistic goodness and truth. Consequently, notions of disinterest, for several centuries, have bolstered Eurocentric canons and their attendant societal institutions, ranging from museums and performance venues to the fields of art history, cultural critique, and education. Yet, as chapter 1 makes plausible, might disinterest gain a different kind of traction when we shift aesthetic attention to societal settings that fall outside the scope of its mainstream formulations?

Incited by Lispector, let's contemplate a young, literally dirt-poor Brazilian woman who encounters her dilapidated urban surroundings with an aesthetic fascination for residual occurrences, such as the pings she hears on the radio or a creaky, rusty gate. And let's dwell on the fact that this character likes to perceive these sonic and visual items for themselves, finding

pleasure in them for what they are. Our subaltern perceiver may not be undergoing the rigorously nonconceptual gratification advocated by Kant, but, analogously to the beauty feeling he commended, her viewpoint reflects a bracketing of immediate interest in a host of phenomena. They include the normalized cultural conditions that declare things such as pings and peeling paint irrelevant to the main conduct of societal affairs. Now what kind of narrative can accommodate the aesthetic pleasure that this penniless, barely literate aesthete is enjoying when she is touched to the core by the whistling of the cargo ships passing by the Rio de Janeiro docks? Here we return to the question of linguistic description and storytelling. Animating, like Borinsky, a residual zone of aesthetic practice, Lispector probes the institutional underpinnings of the literary enterprise and scrutinizes its public limits and potentialities. There is a lot of dust to go around. We continue to play with it. There also are stars. We play with them, too, at our peril.

In her final novella, *The Hour of the Star*, as I argue in chapter 2, Lispector tackles the problem of aestheticized poverty—that is, the problem of the complicity of the aesthetic in the hardships of those who barely live hand to mouth. She asks how language and literature can give expression to this imminent catastrophe without looking away from it or assisting the reader in tried and tested ploys of evasion. In reply, she engages a template of aesthetic publicness that dovetails with the Enlightenment paradigm while also reflecting its own cultural logic. By casting the story of the urban travails of her destitute protagonist Macabéa, to whose aesthetic pleasures I have alluded, in the voice of an invented male narrator, Lispector examines the gendered and class dynamics of the so-called lettered city (Franco 2002; Rama 1996 [1985]). This is a constellation of power and knowledge fostered by all manner of lettered practices that have underwritten colonialist positions of authority and modes of epistemic and political legitimation in Latin America since the conquest. Authorship and its attendant symbolic strategies are among them.

By coining the notion of the lettered city, the Uruguayan critic Ángel Rama (1996 [1985]) sought to theorize a sociocultural constellation that entwined letters with the colonial apparatus in Latin America over the previous four centuries and ongoing. This entanglement has engendered an institutionalized system of aesthetic relationality that extends its effects throughout the region. Rama documents literature's contributions to the establishment of a colonialist state order and class society rooted in the occupations of a lettered elite and the control they exercised over the fields of education, bureaucracy, politics, jurisprudence, and the military. More than the operations of a select group, however, he spots a discursive structure organized around

historical forms of lettered address. The lettered city, I propose, amounts to a model of aesthetic publicness. It is a framework of aesthetic production and reception that installs capacious patterns of aesthetic relationality, address, and normativity. Rama didn't have too much to say about gender or sexuality. By giving us Macabéa and her male author, Lispector begins to address this omission and advances our understanding of both Rama's guiding conception and aesthetic publicness more broadly. The aesthetic import of her novel reaches yet further than this.

Disinterest, as I already suggested, makes a comeback through the aesthetic perceptions of Lispector's protagonist. Macabéa is a subject of taste. She enacts a decolonial form of aesthetic agency. By interlacing disinterest with a decolonial figuration of time and space, Lispector highlights capabilities of this aesthetic strategy that philosophy, so far, has left unrecognized. Beyond the frame of the proprietary middle-class preoccupations that it is presumed to negate, disinterest, it turns out, takes on roles that Enlightenment philosophers did not foresee, although they may in effect have been building on them, as becomes clear in due course. Outside the ambit of its better-known functions, disinterest, thus, displays operations that expand the repertoire of a decolonial aesthetics and that enhance the range of resources that accrue to the aesthetic, more generally.

My third nexus of aesthetic meaning centers on the collective forms that the aesthetic assumes. Songs, potatoes, and furniture have a place in aesthetic traditions. These traditions exercise callings on the members of the communities and publics that place value on them. Colonial histories of violence and extraction impact these callings. The meeting points between different cultures and different cultural segments give rise to competing demands. A decolonial aesthetics needs to develop a theoretical framework that acknowledges and gives a place to these demands. What if they conflict in a manner that deprives an Indigenous singer of the air she needs to breathe, to live? How can we account for the possibilities for agency and collectivity taking form around the tensions that are her lot?

In her second feature-length film, *The Milk of Sorrow*, which I discuss in chapter 3, Llosa engages these questions from the perspective of a confrontation between colonial Lima and a Quechua worldview beholden to Andean village life. The protagonist Fausta and her family have left the village for a sprawling informal settlement in Lima's outskirts. Indigenous norms dictate that, upon the death of her mother, Fausta bury her in the village. Owing to the conflict that has raged from the 1980s to the present between the Peruvian government and the left-populist, revolutionary movement the Shining Path,

the mother suffered a trauma that Fausta ingested with the breast milk that she drank as an infant. The milk of sorrow puts the daughter on a death track. To gain the funds for burial, she takes up employment in the household of a haughty composer in the city center, who, unbeknownst to Fausta, reworks the young woman's songs into her own piano recital. For a moment it looks as if the lettered city remorselessly swallows the distraught Fausta, without suffering the slightest loss or facing any consequences for it. Nonetheless, inspired by the everyday creativity of her community, Fausta invents a way to honor her mother's body and her memory. Singing a new song, she negotiates an Indigenous aesthetic stance of her own devising, which lets her live. Her singular tastes offer her the breathing room to survive. She plays, whether in a muted register that provides solace for her agony or in a loud pitch, propelled by her curiosity, her wish to participate in her social and material surroundings.

Away from a ruinous modernity (perpetuated by the colonialist household and the concert hall) and a confining tradition (the Andean village as a site of resistance), her young town becomes an evocative site of aesthetic publicness. What looks like a grave is a makeshift pool hosting people's laughter, play, and socializing. Llosa supplants official culture and its principles of racialization and gendering by a sociality anchored in Fausta's evolving aesthetic agency and her and others' aesthetic interactions with one another around cultural artifacts, including photographs, TV shows, pool, and potatoes. Fausta answers her predicament with an aesthetics, not a preexisting identity. Tellingly, in the film's final scenes, she receives a flowering potato plant in the vicinity of two dancing children, one of whom is teaching the steps to the other. The aesthetic is key to the life of the community.

For our purposes, several particularly important insights follow. First, aesthetic publicness, I show, not only allows Fausta to tweak the tensions between worlds in accordance with her aesthetic desires but also thrives by her decolonial interventions and the path of becoming she initiates. Indeed, aesthetic publicness is a site of community building that nourishes individual aesthetic agency while, additionally, absorbing lessons from this kind of agency, lessons that it makes available to new generations, who can draw on them as they contend with their own difficulties. Second, the notion of aesthetic publicness offers a framework for theorizing the encounters among cultures and among differentially racialized cultural groups that moves away from paradigms of transculturation, magical realism, and syncretism. These latter models enjoy widespread artistic and theoretical appeal, yet they collude with the global marketplace and end up dulling and quenching strange

tastes. More generally, these models elide aesthetic modalities that owe their normative and experiential contours to the evolving structural workings of aesthetic publicness, and they must be understood as such. Third, as a historically embedded propensity, strange taste offers the community a vehicle of cultural memory attuned to a changing world. Both supported by and supporting aesthetic publicness, strange taste embodies a stance that can meet adversity with a trajectory of growth, play, and pleasure rather than primarily destruction, suffering, and withdrawal from life, which would ultimately result in individual and collective collapse.

My fourth and last set of aesthetic considerations revolves around the historical, symbolic, and material underpinnings of trajectories of subjectivity and modes of cultural gathering. In a society awash with technology, where imaginaries and taste often lock into the marketplace, apparently unmoored from the public apparatuses that since the Enlightenment have undergirded forms of creation and identification, it is easy to lose sight of aesthetic publicness. Nonetheless, loops between the aesthetic and the public channel crucial societal lineages in which art and capital, literature and neoliberal entrepreneurship, history and presentism attain reciprocal orientations toward one another. Philosophy needs to develop conceptual frames that acknowledge these routings. To this end it can build on Plato's cautions about itinerant discursive ventures and critical theory's concerns about exploitation and rootlessness. But the aesthetic side of the matter remains insufficiently articulated. While the demands of market rationality are a constant preoccupation in the archive under discussion, chapter 4 places this concern front and center.

At issue are the reverberations of finance and venture capitalism for dynamics of subjectivation and formations of collectivity. The status of literature is in doubt. Is this art form conscripted into symbolic regimes perpetuated by a technologically dominated corporatism hell-bent on overtaking what remains of the Enlightenment public sphere and the lettered city? Or do literature and adjacent artistic endeavors hold out aesthetic and political potentialities that escape consumerist principles and the lure of the latest technological advances?

Chapter 4 addresses these questions from the perspective of two novels by Diamela Eltit that were published during the Pinochet dictatorship. Both *E. Luminata* and *The Fourth World* carry out what philosophy calls a thought experiment. They raise the specter of all-out technologically dominated neoliberal control over the society and incite the reader to critically reflect on this condition. Eltit's thought experiment resonates with an actual socioeconomic experiment that was being carried out to devastating effect

at the time of the novel's writing. As many have documented, Chile of the 1970s and 1980s served as a testing ground for neoliberal policies. At massive human cost, the country's trial run laid the ground for significant social and economic overhauling worldwide in subsequent decades. Eltit's polysemous texts engage this overwhelming historical reality, which not only continues to stir right-wing militant zeal in the region but also keeps tearing at deep wounds incurred by survivors and subsequent generations.[48]

We currently live in an era of democratic backsliding. Autocracies and right-wing populisms battling to destroy civic institutions they take advantage of are enjoying a heyday in many countries. These developments are tied up with an explosive ascendance of technologies that generate content that is disassociated from its societal contexts and local modes of production. Aesthetics is barely beginning to reckon with these developments. Eltit's novels speak to them by offering us images of a hegemonic marketplace that reduces language, literature, the cinema, and other symbolic forms to free-floating corporate input and output. Consumerism consumes all and everything. Discourses become evanescent flashes that light up for an instant before disappearing. In a prescient fashion, the two texts bring to a climax long-standing tensions that have only intensified today. They lay out in stark outline choices we have knowingly or unknowingly been making. Yet they are experimental thought images, not realistic documents. They ingeniously make the reader aware of facets of aesthetic life that elude their own guiding premises, inspiring us to take a close look at aesthetic historicity and, more than that, to recall a tradition that champions the agora and light as pillars of democratization.

In *E. Luminata*, her first novel, Eltit literalizes the notion of enlightenment through the image of an advertising sign that casts its projections over the people gathered in a public square in Santiago. The sign endows the Chilean people with an identity in the global marketplace, construing them as a colonial aftereffect and heralding society's total governance by a neoliberal world system. However, through strategies such as counterstatements and temporal disjunctions, the text also makes visible an alternative form of aesthetic agency. Eltit's later novel, *The Fourth World*, develops this approach further by countering a global process of relentless accumulation with critical figurations of taste, race, sexuality, and nation. By juxtaposing Enlightenment constructions of taste and the public with aesthetic readings of crucial aspects of Eltit's two texts, I argue for the importance of aesthetic publicness and agency and signal ways in which we can construct these notions on new terms.

Eltit's metaphors of light and the public plaza recall moments in *The Hour of the Star*, placing her residual characters and their experiences in conversation with Lispector's marginalized protagonist and her aesthetic pleasures. Satirically reimagined, the Enlightenment public sphere and the lettered city disclose their corporeal commitments. Showcasing the previously banished subaltern female body—indeed, celebrating their historical other—these formations can also animate along fresh lines the people's powers of gathering and self-fashioning. Storytelling, far from running out of steam or being doomed to reiterate already known tales, reveals its vitality to pressing questions of our era. In close touch with conditioning factors such as the square, literature and the other arts well exceed their roles as fodder for market designs, search engines, and generative AI bots. The notion of aesthetic publicness sheds light on the aesthetic workings and situatedness of the materials, objects, and content that populate public spaces. It enables us to find in a vibrant sense of aesthetic connectedness an answer to the profound loss of belonging, the slippage of roots and home, experienced on a large scale today, an existential phenomenon that Hannah Arendt in a different context associated with the rise of totalitarianism. Aesthetic publicness, further, concerns the structural underpinnings of aesthetic experience and interaction. Enlightenment philosophers saw this point clearly. Eltit joins their ranks in this regard. She is not alone. As I indicate in the conclusion, a whole range of contemporary artists and writers across different media and genres, champion aesthetic publicness in efforts to rethink the institutional frames in which social existence unfolds, from the house, the plaza, and the concert hall to the milonga and the nation.

The artists and writers in my archive build on contingent relationalities that they give form around the tropes of dust, light, song, and pings. While the first two figures engender a play between counterpoints of idealization and destruction or dissolution, ethereality and the residual, the latter two connote unstable points of, on the one hand, entry into modernity and, on the other, a banishment from or a rebuffing and redoing of these structures. The four items constitute material and figurative nodes in a contemporary critical and imaginative engagement with Enlightenment constructions of subjectivity and publicness. With its extolment of light, as Latinx feminists and other theorists of color have recognized, the Enlightenment posited a darkness, an obscurity, and a messiness that it sought to dispel yet that didn't cease to intrigue. By unsettling the relations between light and dust, we can move with and through the Enlightenment to actualize different aesthetic and social potentialities. While other figures might have been selected, the ones I have chosen articulate a dynamic of idealization and dismissal/repudiation

that sheds light on the way in which we experience modernity's contradictions as well as the tensions inherent in projects of critique and revisioning. The four elements sustain an ongoing relational engagement that employs but also goes beyond strata of negative dialectics, to give expression to the manifold, concrete experiential contents and lived concepts that we bring into being through a playful encounter with dust, light, song, and pings and their many analogues.

Cumulatively, the zones of concentrated aesthetic investment this book explores put the aesthetic to the test in domains where, in ever changing colors and forms, it conjures pleasures that entice and impel. Strange tastes and other aesthetic sensibilities run the gamut between the exceptional and the ordinary, the unusual and the routine, without allowing themselves to be caught on either side of these oppositions. Storytelling, disinterested attention, and adjacent subjective and collective aesthetic capacities work their spells to summon into being feminist and decolonial lifeworlds. Key philosophical concepts reveal unsuspected collaborations: Strange taste carries disinterested attention into the territory of aesthetic publicness, enlisting disinterest's energies in support of a vibrant communal existence. Institution-altering shifts come to light in structures of aesthetic relationality.

We play with the stars; we play in the dust. We play with muted hues; we play in loud tonalities. As our four writers and artists enable us to see, the aesthetic, when juggled in certain ways, beckons with a calling: Let's reenchant public inhabitance, and here's how we're going about it.

Notes

INTRODUCTION. AESTHETICS, TASTE, AND PUBLIC INHABITANCE

1 A condensed sample of these views includes Dávila 2020; Hall 1996a, 1996b; Levinson 2001, 25–28; Alcoff 2006; Milian 2019; Milian and Romera-Figueroa 2024; Muñoz 1999; Ramírez et al. 2012.

2 Judith Butler (1988, 523, 529–31) and Ellen Rooney (2017, 446) underscore the political project of feminist subject formation. Butler's invocations of theater and play and Rooney's deployment of aesthetic categories signal an aesthetic generativity that must be theorized more fully, an agenda this book aims to advance.

3 For their detailed theorizations of these dimensions, see Anzaldúa 1999 [1987]; Lugones 2003, 2006, 2010; Ortega 2016, 2025.

4 Anzaldúa's critique of dualities (1999 [1987], 68–73) and notions of border crossing and border culture (25–35, 37–45) and Lugones's critique of purity (2003, 121–46) and her decolonial feminist critique of dichotomies (2010, 742) are central here. So are Hall's critiques of cultural purity and binaries (1994, 400; 1996c, 170–71).

5 Like Pérez (2019, 136), I read art as proposing cutting-edge theoretical insights.

6 For a qualified, nonbinary view of publicness, see Lugones (2003, 136–39, 210; 2010, 746). Milian (2019, 11), as already noted, marks the public register of "Latinx." As a relational phenomenon, publicness in my usage is intertwined with interiority. On such entanglements, see Kelly and Roelofs (2024, 12–17).

7 For the notion of multimodal address employed in this book, see Roelofs 2014, 2020.

8 For an approach to the public that acknowledges these dimensions while distinguishing publicness from what falls under the categories of the state, shared space, and the commons, see Honig 2017. On the entanglements of human and ecological forces and conditions, see Connolly 2017.

9 Borges's take on aesthetic publicness invokes the notions of Homer and "the classics" (2000, 6, 14) in a problematic, Eurocentric manner that others African culture and yet pushes back against this move, as I clarify momentarily (see note 11).

10 Since it was Vasco Núñez de Balboa, not Hernán Cortés, who colonized Darién and spotted the Pacific from a mountain peak in 1513, Keats is overlaying different conquistadores.

11 Borges displaces and reconceptualizes traditional views of Homer and "the classics" by extending the scope of beauty well beyond these authors, as we have seen, and by inscribing a strange, "lurking" kind of beauty into their texts (2000, 15). In this way, he attains a self-reflexive stance on the idea of such "great or famous writer[s]" and the Western canon. With his self-displacing invocation of Homer

and "the classics," he then locates himself in a position analogous to Keats's: Both dwell in the strange.

12 On Borges's anticipation of digital forms such as hyperfiction, though not in the present story, see Sassón-Henry 2007.

13 With the proviso that Borges sheds light on the ties between information/language and identity. My point also needs complication in view of the many figurations of the marketplace pervading his stories. Think, for example, of the stockbroker in Borges 1999b, 232.

14 My approach rests on the shoulders of theorists such as Audre Lorde, Sylvia Wynter, Chela Sandoval, Achille Mbembe, Okwui Enwezor, Anne Anlin Cheng, Gayatri Gopinath, and Denise Ferreira da Silva, among others.

15 See, e.g., Ahmed's take on the prefix (2000, 9–14). While some theorists sharply contrast these approaches (see, e.g., Mignolo 2007, 452), the proposed distinctions are often quite loose and slippery. My primary interest is in forging a conceptual apparatus needed to carry out the necessary critical and constructive work, less in pinpointing the relevant differentiations.

16 For detailed cases, see Roelofs 2014, chaps. 5–6.

17 On this intertwinement, see Gopinath 2018, 8–10, 16–17, 169–70; Alcoff 2020, 18, 26; Mignolo 2012; Wynter 1992.

18 These facets are important to call out here, although they are not all-determining but operate in tandem with registers of clarity, certainty, and determinacy, which also fulfill important functions in a decolonial aesthetics. On the centrality of opacity and uncertainty, see Lugones 2003, 196, 231; 2006; 2010. On the undetermined aspect of border dwelling, see Anzaldúa 1999 [1987], 25. On opacity, see also Glissant 1997.

19 In large outlines, contemporary analytical aesthetics follows on this point in the footsteps of Ted Cohen's (1973, 2018), Arthur Danto's (1998), and Noël Carroll's (2022) reservations about the philosophical significance of taste and their (to my mind, partial) displacements of taste at the level of art criticism and aesthetic experience (see also Horowitz and Huhn on taste in Danto's philosophy [Danto 1998]). Benjamin's critique of the aestheticization of politics has further contributed to taste's dismissal in many strands of continental aesthetics.

20 Jodi Dean underscores the limitations of discursive structures that emerged with the ascendance of the web and networked media. Protecting market principles from political contestation, these communicative formations, she argues, foster a class society and empty out democracy, leaving it in an impasse (2009, 76, 93–94).

21 For a theoretical approach that ascribes a crucial role to sensitivity and the strange in political contexts, see Connolly 2013, 7–11, 50, 133; 2017, 7, 56–57, 61–62. The strange suffuses Walter Benjamin's aesthetics, limning the aura (2002b, 104), the novel, information circuits (2002a, 147), and the modern city, whether directly (2003a, 321–22) or in a familiarized form through cinematic play and training (2002b, 117–120, 132n33). For Francine Masiello (2018), the strange is a part of a wide-ranging politics of the senses that shapes democratic practice. In Melvin Rogers's reading (2023, chap. 5), Billie Holiday's *Strange Fruit* exemplifies an activist, democratizing

aesthetics of the strange that awakens the horror of anti-Black lynchings alongside hope for social transformation. Holiday's poignant adjective recalls W. E. B. Du Bois's description of the spirituals, or "Sorrow Songs," as strange and "strangely" moving (1986, 536, 542). James Baldwin picks up on both interventions with his notion of the "strange vividness that is life" (2010, 286), and by often, like Du Bois, using the strange as a starting point for narration. Touching on strange narrations, Alva Noë (2015) associates art in general with the strange. James Haile (2025, v–vi, 139–40, 159) invokes the strange as a register of Black speculative fiction. On perplexity, which suffuses Borges's strange, see Benjamin (2002a, 146). On perplexity's epistemic and correlative societal potentialities, see Medina (2013, 18–21).

22 For a Latinx feminist aesthetic of carnalities, see Ortega 2025.

23 For examples and discussion, see Korsmeyer 2006; Roelofs 2021a, 40–43, 45.

24 Strange tastes differ from Sianne Ngai's ugly feelings (2005) in that Ngai's ugly feelings tend more heavily in the direction of negative and dysphoric states, while strange tastes include both positive and negative affects and, as it happens, often are quite euphoric in character. As an aesthetic category, the strange is frequently ambivalent in a way that is closer to the zany, cute, and interesting, which Ngai analyzes elsewhere (2012), than to ugly feelings, which, although they encode political ambivalences (2005, 6) and link to ambivalences at the level of agency (1–5, 14, 27), remain in Ngai's analysis definitionally tethered to negative affects.

25 Yuriko Saito (2017, 14) gives sensibility a central role in everyday aesthetics. Kant considers singularity crucial to the beauty judgment (2000 [1790], 100), which requires immediate perception and invites experiential dwelling (107), rather than being rule-bound (101).

26 For a reading of the historical emergence of certain cinematic publics informed by Benjamin's notion of experience, see Hansen 1991. Hume and Kant theorize different kinds of publics—namely, historical as well as universally accessible ones. On their interplay, see Roelofs 2020, 66–86. On the cultural workings of aesthetic norms and codes, see Ngai 2012.

27 Hume and Kant are proponents of this approach. For analysis, see Roelofs 2014, 5, 29–56, 195, 202, 205–6; 2020, 60–87.

28 On these and other locally specific references, see Vanessa Barbara, "Latin America's Radical Feminism Is Spreading," *New York Times*, January 28, 2020; Liinason 2024; Martin and Shaw 2021.

29 For these dates, see Aunye Boone, "A Conversation with Fiber Artist: Consuelo Jimenez Underwood," *National Endowment for the Arts Blog*, September 28, 2023, https://www.arts.gov/stories/blog/2023/conversation-fiber-artist-consuelo-jimenez-underwood.

30 On Hume, see Roelofs 2014, 35; 2020, 85. On Kant, see Roelofs 2014, 36–37; 2020, 61, 64.

31 On these notions in Borges's lecture and stories, see Roelofs forthcoming.

32 My reading here is indebted to Jerrold Levinson's (2002) interpretation of the functioning of canonical works in Hume's theory.

33 See Korsmeyer 1995, 1998.

34 I document these interconnections extensively in Roelofs 2014, 31–36.

35 See Roelofs 2014, 1, 8, 10, 210–11.

36 See Hume 1998a, 1998b, 1998d.

37 I develop the theoretical concepts deployed here and argue for their pertinence to the notion of the aesthetic in Roelofs 2014.

38 Illuminating readings of Kant's views of race and coloniality in difference sources include Bernasconi 2002, 2003, 2011; Kleingeld 2024; Larrimore 2008; Lu-Adler 2023. On some of the aesthetically pertinent issues, see Kelly and Roelofs 2024, 2, 20–21n2; Roelofs 2014, 36–37; 2022, 61–78.

39 This is visible in the deployment of a Humean framework by analytical philosophers such as Noël Carroll and Kendall Walton. In continental thought, this tendency appears in the work of Jacques Rancière, who, despite his critical approach to various dynamics of aesthetic power, subscribes to the notion of the "indifferent democracy" (2004, 15) or "undifferentiated public" (2009, 9–10) within the aesthetic regime of the arts, thus preserving Kantian persuasions.

40 On aesthesis as an antidote to the problems of the aesthetic, described as a hegemonic, exclusionary, Eurocentric regime of art, beauty, sublimity, normativity, sensory regulation, and mimesis, see Mignolo 2012, xvi–xvii; 2021, xii, xvi–xvii, 5, 55–56; Mignolo and Vázquez 2013. For different approaches to aesthesis, see Ortega 2025; Rancière 2013. On aesthesis and taste, see Probyn 2012.

Approaches to publicness in postcolonial and decolonial scholarship include Franco 1992; Muñoz 1999. Drawing on José Esteban Muñoz, among others, Gopinath offers rich cultural analyses that home in on public cultures and eschew neocolonial public–private divides and their attendant dynamics of inclusion and exclusion, visibility and invisibility (2005, 20–23, 30, 188; 2018, 33, 65, 78). While there is much to appreciate in these approaches, the aesthetic and the public enter into more extensive entanglements than Franco recognizes, necessitating further exploration of aesthetic publicness (Roelofs 2014, 2020). Furthermore, aesthetic publicness encompasses social and aesthetic formations that fall through the mazes of Muñoz's (and Gopinath's) analytics of majoritarian and counterpublic spheres (see, e.g., Muñoz 1999, 147–48). The same goes for Rancière's (2004) conception of the distribution of the sensible, which fails to acknowledge structural dynamics of aesthetic publicness that stand in need of analysis.

41 Hall specifically emphasizes the role of black popular cultural spaces and repertoires (1996c, 471).

42 For different angles on the public in Anzaldúa, see Ortega 2025, 58–62; Pitts 2021, chap. 2.

43 Importantly, Lugones follows Anzaldúa's move away from normalcy, and links this to "an unsettling quality of being a stranger in . . . society" (2003, 143–44; see also 231).

44 For a phenomenologically expansive and profound reading of Anzaldúa's corporeal and political aesthetics, see Ortega 2025.

45 Under the rubric *carnalities*, Ortega (2025) highlights the aesthetics of these extended intercorporeal movements. Meanwhile, in reading Borges, it is of course crucial to realize how a figure such as the hourglass poignantly and ominously

situates the body in relation to life and death, introducing complex corporeal registers.

46 This involves explicitly recognizing the historical dimension of enlightenment hypothesized and acknowledged by Kant, a point that I argue elsewhere is of major significance to his aesthetics (Roelofs 2020, 61–62, 69), although it has been downplayed by influential strands of Kant scholarship.

47 I agree with Lauren Berlant's (2008, viii) observation that "publics presume intimacy." Aesthetic publicness differs from Berlant's intimate publics in that it comprises a more general, historically emerging structure of address that is less centered in affect and expectations of a shared worldview.

48 As the national and international debates around the 2023 pro-Pinochet demonstrations during the fiftieth anniversary of the coup made abundantly clear.

CHAPTER 1. DUST: A SNIFF OF GETTING TOGETHER

An earlier version of a part of chapter 1 appeared in my "Decoloniality, Identity, and Aesthetic Publicity," *Contemporary Aesthetics*, special volume 10 (2022).

1 Quotations from this collection (Borinsky 2009) are reprinted by permission of Swan Isle Press.

2 Lugones further elaborates the notion in a critique of Danto's take on resistant feminist expression, arguing that his conception of worlds misrecognizes feminist resistance, complex communication, and the tense and fractured multiplicity of the social (2003, 21–26). Her view is a major contribution to a decolonial feminist aesthetics.

3 On these traveling tongues, see Roelofs 2016, 383–85.

4 On humor as a tool of feminist social criticism, see Willett and Willett 2019. On play's subtle element, see Benjamin 2019, 69.

5 Benjamin (2006, 54, 123) voices an analogous perception.

6 Although Lugones sometimes uses the term *political* in related contexts (see, e.g., 2003, 28), she here might prefer *infrapolitical* (2006, 77, 83). In my usage, which is broader than hers, the political exceeds the transparently legible and publicness understood as the universally accessible. Relatedly, I employ a broader notion of agency than she, one that surpasses the realm of autonomous intentional action.

7 With the figure of the key, Borinsky reimagines the dilemmas of two Cortázar stories (1967d, 1967e [1946]) activating linkages I elaborate in this book's conclusion.

8 Lugones (2003, 17–18) criticizes the hierarchical distribution of world traveling, which is demanded of women of color to a much greater extent than of white men and women (depending also on intersecting social categories). This critique leaves the practice of playful world traveling itself untouched, however.

9 While I later consider elements of Lugones's social philosophy that speak to this limitation, my focus here is on the aesthetic state of play.

10 For Spivak, this process involves embracing an intended mistake (2012, 14–15, 20, 25–28).