Passivity and Nonhuman Absorption in Julieta Campos’s “Celina o los gatos”

This article examines how Cuban-Mexican writer Julieta Campos reevaluates passivity as a transformative force in feminism. Unlike contemporaneous authors such as Rosario Castellanos who define feminism as productive activity, I argue that in her book of short stories, Celina o los gatos (1968), Campos takes an inverse trajectory, deploying nonhuman material passivity in order to unravel the logic of the self-actualized liberal subject. Rather than articulate feminism as empowerment—directed toward reform and positivity—Campos imagines withdrawal, silence, and motionlessness as non-normative ways to resist prescribed purpose. In the titular story of her book of short stories, “Celina o los gatos,” Campos imagines depression as an affective mode that figures the Mexican bourgeois housewife. The gendered construction of the pet—a sentimental and non-utilitarian accessory that inhabits the domestic space—is used to invoke the commonplace that the housewife is a similarly domesticated creature. While on the one hand, the housewife’s negative feelings of depressive domesticity manifest themselves as inaction and withdrawal, I argue that Campos reconfigures passive negativity into a critique of the productivity mandated by traditional femininity as well as by the Women’s Liberation movement.

In her celebrated novel, Tiene los cabellos rojizos y se llama Sabiña (1974), Cuban-Mexican author Julieta Campos writes of the ocean: “El mar = res nullius = cosa de nadie” (110). The reference is to the sea’s legal classification as res nullius: an abstract, common space that lies between nations and separates continents, the sea is no one’s thing. Covering more than three-fourths of the earth’s surface, the sea envelops the planet, and is a space that cannot sustain human life (Mentz 586). Like outer space, it cannot be technologically mastered, nor claimed by any single state, and as such, constitutes a commons (Milun 76). Campos’s novel dramatizes through the ruminations of a woman staring at the ocean from a balcony in Acapulco, Mexico at 4:00 pm—a
meditation that takes the form of a single paragraph extending over two hundred pages—that the ocean cannot be captured. To the contrary, it absorbs those that engage it. Observing the endless lapping of the sea, Campos’s protagonist Sabina is simultaneously subject and object. The sea is the object of her gaze, but as she watches it, she also is absorbed. Transformed into inert matter, Sabina’s agency is dissolved as she is captivated by the sea’s vibrancy.

If, according to [Merriam-Webster](https://www.merriam-webster.com), property is “something owned or possessed,” then *res nullius* describes a thing that is destined for ownership (*res*), but has not yet been claimed: an object without a subject. This ownerless property is susceptible to appropriation, free to be possessed by whoever might seize it, exemplifying for Kant the boundlessness of human will. The law discerns humans from things: differentiating knowing, reasoning subjects from their others, their objects. What does it mean, then, to be *res nullius*, a thing that belongs to no one? An expression derived from Roman law, *res nullius*—no one’s property—is a contradiction in terms. Empty unclaimed land is colonized as real estate, and wild animal life, once captured, is domesticated. However, the second definition of *res nullius*—not just “property currently unowned,” but “property incapable of ownership” (Fellmeth and Horwitz)—shows that this concept not only indexes inexhaustible human ambition, but also those entities that confound it.

This ludic blurring of the traditional subject-object divide is characteristic of Julieta Campos’s oeuvre. Writing in the sixties in Mexico alongside the emergent Latin American Boom, Campos deviated from the Boom’s stylistic tendencies, aligning herself more closely with authors of the French *nouveau roman* such as Natalie Sarraute and Claude Simon than her contemporaries Carlos Fuentes or Gabriel García Márquez. Campos’s novels—including *Tiene los cabellos rojizos* and her first novel *Muerte por agua* (1965)—offer very little plot, are deeply invested in subconscious myopicity, and vertiginously construct a kaleidoscopic arrangement of time. While critics have celebrated her ludic use of language, Campos’s commitment to textual play has perhaps contributed to the perception that her work is overly contrived and disengaged from complex social realities. The impression that Campos is primarily invested in intertextual and metafictional intricacies—art for art’s sake—has led scholars to conclude that her “approach to fiction
is unconcerned with political issues” (Jehenson 86), which has resulted in her marginalization from the canon.

Following Debra Castillo’s observation that “the educated reader, who too easily mistakes [Campos’s] works for superficial and merely brilliant verbal games . . . embodies . . . the antagonistic reader who is indeed intended to misread the complexity of such games as an ideologically free surface” (169), this article reevaluates the claim that Julieta Campos’s work is apolitical. Specifically, I argue that Campos’s engagement with the nonhuman becomes a touchstone through which she reconceives the overlapping codification of women and the natural world as *res nullius*: currently unowned property. Rather than debunk the objectification of women and nature to argue that these entities are not things at all, Campos plays with the secondary definition of *res nullius*: property incapable of ownership. Against expectation, Campos figures women as material objects, but objects that resist possession. It is this play with the subject-object relationship that founds Campos’s unexpected political move: a move toward a politics of refusal that is not based on subjectivity or agency, but on passive material vibrancy, from which she problematizes the foundational rhetoric of feminism in Mexico and its argument that women should become more active, productive citizens that seize and master the world around them.

In Campos’s fiction, nonhuman intrusions are persistent topoi: the ocean in *Tiene los cabellos rojizos*, rain in *Muerte por agua*, and cats in *Celina o los gatos* (1968). This representation of the nonhuman has not gone unremarked by scholarship. Critics have proffered metaphorical or symbolic readings of her representation of animal and natural incursions, positing the ocean and rain that seep into Campos’s texts are evocative of the maternal, timelessness, death (Fallon), perpetual motion (Sánchez Rolón), or sensual humidity (Chambers). Without discounting the valuable insights of metaphor, this article expands upon existing scholarship by reading Campos’s engagement with the nonhuman as neither apolitical nor metaphoric. To the contrary, nonhuman natural bodies—including the cats, sun, and sea—become in Campos’s narrative exemplary of an active form of negation that appears at first glance to be passive, a mode of refusal Campos ties to domesticity and depression.

Campos’s understudied collection of short stories, *Celina o los gatos*, situates nonhuman presence centrally within both its title and
content. Interestingly, the title *Celina o los gatos* has so confounded readers with its unexpected use of the conjunction “or” where “and” is expected that some critics have mistakenly referred to the book as *Celina y los gatos* when analyzing Campos’s work.¹ This accidental misnaming is perhaps due to the reader’s unconscious desire to re-settle the disruption wreaked by the negative conjunction. *Celina o los gatos* can be read as two different, yet equally possible, titles for the work, which when separated, highlight different protagonists: Celina or The Cats. The “or” in *Celina o los gatos* also perturbs the assumed stability of relation between distinct categories of being—human and nonhuman—reformulating this pair to both emphasize difference and question nominal categorization: human *or* nonhuman? When articulated as *Celina* and *los gatos*, humans and nonhumans are configured as separate but joined, sequenced in an order that prioritizes the human individual, followed by the nonhuman clowder. Contrary to the assertions of traditional metaphysics, Campos indicates that the relationship between human and nonhuman is not necessarily additive or sequential. Instead, *Celina o los gatos* constructs the human-animal encounter as potentially exclusionary (one or the other); the second term threatens to swallow up its antecedent. Additionally, as Noé Jitrik suggests, *Celina* or *los gatos* directs attention to the human-animal divide not only as a distinction of species, but between named subject and undifferentiated pack: “individuo y masa, precisión y difuminación” (147). However, as a close reading of *Celina o los gatos* demonstrates, in Campos’s fiction, difference—between individual and throng, human and nonhuman, man and woman, nature and culture—is continuously disseminating. Consequently the intermediating “or” does not signal the threat of difference, but mobilizes ontological confusion. The “or” asks if there is a difference at all: is she Celina or is she the cats?

In the collection’s titular story, “Celina o los gatos,” Campos plays with this ontological confusion between domestic housewife and domesticated animal while imagining depression as the affective modality that characterizes Mexican bourgeois domesticity. Enclosed in the domestic sphere, the protagonist Celina is stuck, physically and emotionally. Although the negative aspects of depressive domesticity (and its associated feelings of disappointment, disillusionment, and despair) manifest themselves in the protagonist’s masochistic withdrawal from society, I argue that Campos recasts depression as a “politics of refusal”
that critiques productivity. Rather than articulate feminist empowerment around reform and positivity, the force of negativity in “Celina o los gatos” is deployed to trace an alternative feminist model that is rooted in passivity, a refusal that unravels the logic of the self-actualized, self-activating, productive liberal subject. Within this framework, feeling bad is not a political dead end, but signals a refusal to be a woman at a time when formulations of the self as active and choosing dominated the political sphere. By arriving at the threshold of motionlessness that depression embodies, Celina-as-subject becomes dismantled, refuses to cohere, and suspends purpose.

“Celina o los gatos” is narrated by Carlos, Celina’s husband, on the day after her suicide. Writing to make sense of her death and to examine his part in her self-destruction, the text is Carlos’s account of the past thirteen years: a fragmented record of the dissolution of their marriage and Celina’s retreat from society. As Carlos tells it, the beginning of their relationship was intensely happy. A successful surgeon, he moved through the public sphere, mediating the outside world for Celina while she remained at home, tending to the house and influencing his practice from afar. Intoxicated by Celina’s dependence, Carlos encourages her isolation, preferring she not go out or read the newspaper so that her experience of the world might be filtered through him. Reciprocating this assimilation, Carlos too becomes increasingly like his wife: “era yo quien reproducía (sin intención, por supuesto) el tono, la sonrisa, las palabras de Celina . . . un afeminamiento . . . Me miraba en el espejo tratando de espiar un brillo de los ojos semejante al brillo que tenían los ojos de Celina” (16).

Fearing this feminization, Carlos distances himself from Celina, taking refuge in the singularity of his name and identity.² Celina too pulls away, but rather than embrace her individual identity, erodes it further by subsuming herself into others, throwing parties that fill the house with guests. Then, in what Carlos perceives to be a further regression, Celina radically depopulates the house, invites her childhood nanny to return as her caretaker, and opulently refurnishes the bedroom with flowery rugs and thick green curtains that cloak the room in sickly green light. The bright, utilitarian apartment is displaced by disorder and excess, transformed into a sumptuous artificial landscape: bourgeois domesticity gone feral. Retreating further into isolated domestic enclosure, Celina stops leaving the house, inhabiting the bedroom with a cohort of purebred cats that permeate the room with their odor. Shut out
entirely, Carlos feels ostracized from the world that Celina has created without him. He also becomes intensely jealous of her intimacy with the cats. In retribution for her betrayal and in an effort to incite her jealousy and catalyze her demise, he sends her anonymous letters that claim that he has been unfaithful. As he expects, Carlos finds Celina dead of an overdose, surrounded by her cats. In the story’s conclusion, Carlos asserts his role in Celina’s suicide, because if not, “esa muerte de Celina sería como si ella me hubiera destruido a mí” (34).

On the surface, Celina’s retreat into domestic enclosure and subsequent suicide can be read as a cautionary allegory of female bourgeois decadence. The bored, purposeless housewife, dependent upon male mediation of the outside world, withers away to the point that death becomes preferable to a life of opulent paralysis. A similar critique of the Mexican woman’s adherence to conventional femininity is advanced in Rosario Castellanos’s canonical essay “La abnegación es una virtud loca,” published shortly after *Celina* in 1971. As Castellanos explains: “En México, cuando pronunciamos la palabra mujer nos referimos a una criatura dependiente de una autoridad varonil... sumisa hasta la elección del estado civil o de la carrera que va a estudiar o del trabajo al que se va a dedicar” (289). To counteract the feelings of frustration that emanate “del precario modo con que se consiguen los satisfactores de las necesidades, del encierro en una casa—a veces en una pieza—sin otro estímulo que las demandas del niño,” the Mexican woman subscribes to the cult of self-sacrifice, the belief that her worth is only found in the selfless and self-effacing charge of motherhood. For Castellanos, the fundamental injustice that the feminist movement combats is that only one partner is able to experience “la alegría de sentirse útil, partícipe de la vida comunitaria, realizándose a través de una obra, mientras que el otro cumple con una labor que no amerita remuneración y que apenas atenúa la vivencia de superfluididad y de aislamiento que se sufre... que uno tenga la libertad de movimientos mientras el otro está reducido a la parálisis” (291). To rectify this, each woman should fight “para la adquisición y conservación de su personalidad” and thus develop “seres humanos más completos, uniones más felices, familias más armoniosas” (292). Castellanos frames the Mexican feminist struggle in terms that align with broader Western female liberation movements: women must resist passive complacency and instead contribute to society. Rather than occupy predetermined archetypes,
women’s action outside of the domestic realm will strengthen, and not disrupt, the traditional heteronormative institutions of matrimony and the familiar unit.

The feminist project of the sixties, which sought gender equality through liberation from domestic and maternal constraints, thus defines feminism as activity. Within this discourse, a feminist actively rejects prescribed gender roles and instead embraces more productive forms of empowerment through sociocultural contribution. This rejection of the evasion or nihilistic tolerance of conventional femininity is further elaborated in Castellanos’s often-cited poem, “Meditación en el umbral.” Published in Poesía no eres tú in 1972, “Meditación” expands upon the precepts put forth in “La abnegación.” Castellanos reflects on the search for “otro modo de ser humano y libre,” an alternative mode of female existence that lies outside of the whore/saint dichotomy that has delimited the stories of fictional and nonfictional women for centuries (158).

Castellanos’s plea for “otro modo de ser,” as Pilar Melero points out, purposefully utilizes the verb ser instead of its counterpart estar. Whereas estar indicates a condition—how something is—, ser indexes an essence—what it is. Melero extrapolates from this verb choice that Castellanos’s pursuit of “otro modo de ser” is not linked to activity, but to a new ontological form of Being. However, while this foregrounding of “Being” over “being” moves Castellanos’s feminism away from “the urgency of the feminist project” that defines feminism as activity (Melero 86), the rest of the poem’s content foregrounds action—or rather the lack thereof—by highlighting how the dearth of constructive social activity obstructs the formulation of new ways of Being. Castellanos posits suicide, depression, and self-isolation as negative responses to the patriarchy that perpetuate women’s roles as victims or witnesses, roles that are passive and powerless. In “Meditación” she writes, “No, no es la solución / tirarse bajo un tren como la Ana de Tolstoi / ni apurar el arsénico de madame Bovary / . . . / antes de liarse el manto a la cabeza / y comenzar a actuar” (157). This repudiation of melancholy as apolitical frames feminism in terms of public visibility (“liarse el manto”) and engagement. Or, as Castellanos puts it in an essay praising Simone de Beauvoir, the liberated woman is she who can “move on from being a reproductive entity to a productive person” (Peña 128).3
This discursive emphasis on productivity as the privileged mode for undoing restrictive notions of femininity long predates the 1960s and 70s, and can be traced back to the early twentieth-century work of writers like Sara Estela Ramírez and Antonieta Rivas Mercado (Melero 84). In 1928, Antonieta Rivas Mercado published the essay “La mujer mexicana” in the Madrid newspaper *El Sol*, encouraging Mexican women to exorcise their characteristic “bondad pasiva.” Lamenting the lack of educated women in Mexican history—an absence the author provocatively argues indicates that “la mujer Mexicana no existe . . . Sin embargo, en México hay mujeres”—, Rivas Mercado attacks the prevailing delimitation of Mexican women to the domestic domain. Anticipating Castellanos, Rivas Mercado articulates the lag in feminism as resulting from inaction: “Las mexicanas no actúan . . . su labor no fue constructiva, sino sentimental . . . ni siquiera se hicieron oír . . . no hay feminismo” (317). In other words, passivity—the absence of action, defined here as public engagement—means that women have no voice, no impact, no constructive labor. As Melero glosses, for Rivas Mercado, “passivity is but a cultural sedative, a way to keep women in a numb state” (87).

Read within this framework defining feminism as activity, “Celina o los gatos” analogously narrates the immobilizing effects of domestic confinement and patriarchal mediation of female bodies. Unlike the other short stories in the volume, “Celina” is narrated by a single, coherent male diegetic voice. Whereas in Campos’s other works (including *Muerte* and *Tiene los cabellos rojizos*) male and female voices wrestle for narrative control, generating fragmented, discontinuous texts, in “Celina,” Celina’s husband Carlos is an uncontested narrator. By narrating from Carlos’s perspective, Campos dramatizes how patriarchal discourse diagnoses and regulates women. As Carlos struggles to process Celina’s depression he recurs to conventional descriptions of uncooperative bourgeois women as frivolous, decadent, and mad. Staging the expiations of patriarchal logos against mute, inaccessible Celina not only performs male externality to the woman-object, but also embroils the reader in this masculinist agenda. The reader can only access Celina through Carlos, whose confessional tone mobilizes the reader’s confidence in his retelling. However, strategic moments of transparency prompt the reader to be suspicious of Carlos’s account and notice the scientific and psychoanalytic discourse that he uses to supplement his incomprehension of her depression. Carlos’s drive to contain Celina’s
narrative within a logical framework is taken to the extreme when he asserts his own culpability in her suicide. His claim of responsibility affirms his control over her life and death. Yet it is precisely Carlos’s lack of control, his inability to penetrate Celina’s body as well as the world that she creates inside their bedroom—an intimacy with cats that is not heterosexual or (re)productive—that provokes what Carlos perceives to be the final unraveling of his masculine reason, the impulse to pen spurious letters, a recourse he disparages as “recursos de mujer, de mujer celosa” (30).

Troubled by how his gestures have begun to mirror Celina’s and by her slipping recognizability as his bourgeois wife, Carlos’s account is steeped in anxiety about trans-formation of kind (male to female, female to animal, subject to object). This preoccupation with categorical stability is put into crisis when Carlos’s mediation of Celina transposes and the mediator becomes the mediated. Fearing feminization he recurs to signs that index his identity: “me llamaba Carlos Manuel y tenía un apellido, y . . . esa persona que era yo estaba completamente separada de esa otra persona que era Celina” (13). Fearful of becoming Other (feminized or unmoored from the signposts of bourgeois health and success), Carlos invokes his proper name to reinforce his stable, continuous identity as a man of medicine. Unlike Carlos’s relieved embrace of his identity, Celina fears hers and progressively vacates the conventions proper to the Mexican bourgeois housewife. As Celina withdraws from the role of wife and assimilates into other affective constellations—from friends, to nanny, to clowder—the regulated relations of the housewife (directed toward husband and children) explode into non-normative, unproductive groupings. Carlos pathologizes this behavior, viewing her progressive self-confinement as mad, as a depressive agoraphobia that leads to the loss of the world, “el verdadero mundo, el mundo de afuera” (30).

Read under the feminist-as-activity model propounded by Castellanos, Rivas Mercado, and others, Celina’s failure to free herself from convention—or develop the personality advocated by Castellanos outside of it—is progressively paralyzing to the point that death is preferable to the stasis of bourgeois domesticity. Suicide, in this interpretation, is the upshot of the Mexican woman’s self-sacrifice. Scholarship reinforces this conclusion, suggesting that Celina’s suicide
demonstrates that domestic confinement leads nowhere and that death is the logical consequence of feminine passivity (Lagos-Pope 39). However, although “Celina o los gatos” doesn’t recount the heroic defeat of woman’s “(mad) imprisonment in convention” (Castillo 9), or Celina’s activation into a participatory subject, I propose that Celina’s opposing trajectory is not a cautionary tale underlining the urgency of the feminist project, but rather a divergent mode of feminism that questions the established model of active, choosing subjects. By excessively inhabiting the domestic space, Celina alters domestic imprisonment into a frame of her own making, a refuge from external control and refusal of the paradigm of bourgeois housewife as well as of the active woman whose aim continues to be the production of “uniones más felices, familias más armoniosas” (Castellanos, “La abnegación” 292). Celina’s immanent intimacy with cats and metamorphic unraveling is not presented as a redemptive narrative, but a way of persisting at the limits of liberalism, until even that liminal frame is exhausted, and becomes unsustainable.

While Celina’s silence, social isolation, and self-destruction appear incompatible with feminist objectives of emboldening women to live more vibrant, participatory lives, passivity and evacuation are not necessarily antithetical to feminism. To the contrary, Celina’s trajectory can be located within what Judith Halberstam terms “shadow feminisms.” For Halberstam, shadow feminisms have “long haunted the more acceptable forms of feminism that are oriented to positivity, reform, and accommodation rather than negativity, rejection, and transformation. Shadow feminisms take the form not of becoming, being and doing but of shady, murky modes of undoing, unbecoming, and violating” (4). Characterized by “negation, refusal, passivity, absence, and silence,” these feminisms offer “spaces and modes of unknowing [and speak] in the language of self-destruction, masochism, [and] antisocial femininity” (126). Rejecting the social mandate to cultivate identities by becoming productive members of society, shadow feminists purposefully fail at being woman as stipulated by Western philosophy. In neglecting to speak, do, or cohere, these subjects “refuse ‘being’ where being has already been defined in terms of a self-activating, self-knowing, liberal subject” (126).

Celina’s trajectory of attachment travels from husband to friends, nanny to cats, and closes with her self-annihilation. This progression can be interpreted as a descent of the humanist ontological
Passivity and Nonhuman Absorption in Julieta Campos’s “Celina o los gatos” 61

hierarchy; a Freudian dive down to the unconscious to surface unprocessed material and differentiate one’s animal drives from those of the reasoning human. However, rather than become animal in order to resolve unconscious qualms and reemerge as an integrated individual, Celina instead occupies the threshold where binaries such as life and death, culture and nature, and human and animal muddle.

This representation of Celina’s limit dwelling can be constructively read through Rosi Braidotti’s lucid examination of Deleuze’s theory of “becoming animal/insect/imperceptible” in her essay “The Ethics of Becoming-Imperceptible.” Braidotti explains:

Our culture has confined into the container-category of ‘self-destruction’ or ‘nihilism’ bodily practices and phenomena which are of daily significance: disaffection of all kinds; addictions of the legal (coffee; cigarettes; alcohol; over-work; achievement) and of the illegal kind (natural and pharmaceutical toxic and narcotic substances); suicide . . . ; birth control, abortion, and the choice of sexual practices and sexual identities; the agony of long-term diseases . . . depression and burn-out syndromes. (145)

Under the moralizing rubric of Christianity, which holds life as sacred, these sorts of liminal practices have been repeatedly pathologized and condemned. However, following Deleuze, Braidotti argues that such a view is rooted in a narcissistic understanding of the individual, for whom it “is unthinkable that Life should go on without my being there” (144). To the contrary, Braidotti affirms that “Death is not a failure, or the expression of a structural weakness at the heart of life: it is part and parcel of its generative cycles” (147). Therefore these sorts of dark practices should not be seen as self-destructive, but rather as “a process of experimentation with [the] limits of sustainability” and as “merely another phase in a generative process” (145). By thinking about life as a generative process, propelled forward by “an impersonal, or rather an a-personal force” (147), we are pushed to reconsider that like life itself, the subject too is non-unitary. This understanding of life as impersonal and non-unitary is, for Braidotti, at the core of what she terms a post-humanist ethics, which resists being reduced to the life of a single human individual. At the center of such an ethics is the paradox “that while at the conscious level all of us struggle for survival, at some deeper level of our unconscious structures, all we long for is to
lie silently and let time wash over us in the perfect stillness of not-life” (152). It is this stillness, this passivity, this unraveling of the self as a coherent singularity, that Campos brings to her figuration of Celina.

Disinterested in the pursuit of happiness or positivity, Celina rejects prescribed purpose and instead de-activates her self. A melancholic subject who refuses to move forward or outward, Celina kills the fantasy of marital proximity and the promise of well-manicured domesticity. She eschews female emancipation in which the self-actualized woman leaves the house only to become newly subsumed into capitalist paradigms equating one’s worth with one’s production. From Carlos’s point of view, by not cleaning, mating, or socializing, Celina not only becomes less visibly woman but also less human. As she transforms the ordered domestic space into an artificial landscape populated by animals—including herself—and objectifies herself into a motionless body, one item among others, she becomes less recognizable and narratable. Celina’s masochistic refusal to be active critiques the convention of organizing agency and subjectivity through liberal humanist reason, productivity and able-bodiedness.

This critique of productivity is still attentive to the privilege at work in the politics of refusal. That is, Campos’s reappraisal of depression and passivity as a form of politics is still situated within larger social structures of class and race. Celina’s depression is marked by her class privilege; to become undone, she requires the assistance of her Jamaican nanny Lydia, who manages the house while Celina deteriorates in bed surrounded by her cohort of purebred cats. This is an example of what Braidotti deems the “politics of location”: the awareness of one’s position within a larger collectively composed spatiotemporal fabric (Metamorphoses 12). Following Braidotti, by accounting for one’s “embodied and embedded location,” the limitations of familiar truths and discourses are disclosed. Rather than locate difference in the Other, these “materially embedded cartographies” of difference locate estrangement within the self. In “Celina o los gatos,” Celina undergoes a process of affirmative deconstruction of the power she inhabits: in the presence of her maid, the bourgeois woman metamorphoses into domesticated animal; not shedding her power-relations but moving toward a hybrid, multilayered subject position not intended by the phallogocentric system. Campos dramatizes the importance of situated perspective through Carlos’s narration, which observes Celina’s metamorphosis from an
external, stable site, contrasting phallogocentric unicity against the estranged self, which recasts domesticity in radically altered dimensions.

While Carlos’s narration endeavors to pathologize Celina’s inertia—a critique of bourgeois immobility echoed by Castellanos’s argument that complacency is antithetical to feminist political action—, the text compels us to reconsider why negative feelings are automatically associated with the pathological or politically useless. The withdrawal, melancholy, and death narrated by Campos certainly manifest antisocial tendencies, yet these negative feelings also create new attachments, a distinction recently made visible by scholars of queer theory (Cvetkovich 5). Without lapsing into wishful thinking or redemptive exposition—depression does lead after all to Celina’s suicide—Campos’s work doesn’t dismiss the bourgeois woman’s isolation as a frivolous or elitist concern, but instead engages the felt sensations of depressed domesticity.

Depression manifests the refusal to engage with society and instead withdraw into oneself, setting aside productivity to let the body be ruled by base requirements for survival. If depression is the condition of being stuck, Celina’s flight from society and restriction to the bed with other beings unconcerned with productivity or gentility—the cats—reimagines how domestic enclosure both perpetuates depression but is also an impasse that opens up possibilities. This feminism of stasis appears passive (to Carlos) but actually deconstructs the association of productivity with creativity, instead relating creativity to unbecoming, depersonalization and meditative silence. This is what Halberstam terms a “politics of refusal,” the rejection of feminist political models that prioritize self-activating subjects. Campos reworks resistance from an active stance to a posture of passivity and evacuation: refusing to be in terms dictated by patriarchal society. While the notion of the impasse appears to index inaction, it can also be understood as a knot of unresolved tensions, simultaneously confounding and promising. This sort of impasse slows us down, and as Lauren Berlant explains, in the “unbound temporality of the lag,” the impossibility of moving forward frames a space for exploration, “dog-paddling around a space whose contours remain obscure” (“Starved” 434).

Campos’s approach to woman’s confinement to the domestic sphere similarly engages the dynamic intersection of circumscription and potential. In an essay titled “Mi vocación literaria,” she explains: “Habrá en aquella limitación del espacio vital la privación de una
Carolyn Fornoff

gama extensa de experiencias que le estaban vedadas, pero, a la vez, un ahondamiento en cierta vivencia de lo fundamental, un apropiamiento del corazón palpitante de lo real” (469). While acknowledging the housewife’s privation of experience, Campos finds in this limited mobility a means of investigating the depths of the “real.” Celina inhabits domesticity by constructing a delimited frame (enclosed, withdrawn, surrounded by luxury) that is stripped of productive coordinates.

Rather than leave the purportedly apolitical home to participate in the social political sphere, Celina’s excessive dwelling of domestic immobility politicizes the home. The world of feral domesticity fostered in her intimate, enclosed relationship with the cats and her radical refusal to engage with the demands of society stage the failure of patriarchal control. The reproduction of normative life is suspended by Celina’s retreat into feral intimacy with the cats, creating a “space of internal displacement [that shatters] the normal hierarchies, clarities, tyrannies, and confusion of compliance with autonomous individuality” (Berlant “Cruel” 34). The appearance of the cats in the domestic space creates an interruption in which Celina is lost to the narrator, dissolved in the somatic animal encounter. The reader, who cannot access an explanation that sheds light on this Other affective space because Celina doesn’t speak, also experiences Carlos’s externality from this intimacy. Celina’s absent testimony at first appears to be a privation (enforced by Carlos) or a reiteration of the predictable collapse of language with masculinity, but this withdrawal from language is not negatively configured. Celina and the cats’ remove from speech points to Campos’s belief that the mysterious, affective, and nonhuman unfold on a nondiscursive terrain that cannot (and should not) be fashioned into a coherent, cogent account. By not divulging its secret to the narrator or reader, this Other affective space retains its alterity, and externality to reason, science, language, and patriarchal control. The secret of intimacy is thus maintained and this opacity to interpretation is what refuses phallogocentrism (Derrida’s neologism for masculine privilege in constructed meaning).

In the short story, Celina’s identity progressively becomes undone until what remains is the material singularity of her body, which she renders static, inert, and lifeless: an object. Carlos is troubled by Celina’s ontological scrambling, which once felt accessible, but has transformed into an elusive thing: “Quizás eso es lo que era Celina;
algo duro y perfecto. ¿Y cómo algo así puede desvanecerse?” (11). This description of the “hard and perfect” woman alludes to the classic configuration of the bourgeois woman as an item of luxury: an aesthetically beautiful, capricious object. However, the desire to possess the “hard and perfect” thing is offset by its “dissipation,” contrasting the object’s psychical constancy with its disappearance before the phallocentric eye: res nullius. Rather than denounce the metaphorical collapse of women and objects—as might a more expected feminist critique in order to re-humanize women as active subjects, not passive, static objects—Campos reworks the ontological hierarchy deeming humans more agential than objects. She asserts that humans are in fact things: objects composed of chaotic interactions between human and inhuman matter. As Celina objectifies herself—becoming an object of her own design and no longer the feminine object desired by her husband—her identity dissipates, until it becomes imperceptible.

This construction of the human as a nonhuman thing is a philosophy Campos shares with the proponents of the *nouveau roman*, the “new novel” of 1950s France frequently identified as her most significant literary influence. The novelty of the *nouveau roman* resides in its critique of the traditional construction of literature as a sense-making medium, structured through plot-driven narrative and propelled by active, choosing subjects. Instead, the new novel stresses representation’s inability to disclose the universe, privileging the depiction of opaque surfaces over the excavation of meaning. The resultant aesthetic of alienated, sketchy characters and refused narrative cohesion has been alternately critiqued as “asocial, ahistorical, excessively formalist, [and] solipsistic” or more positively received as depicting “the depersonalization and alienation of postwar capitalism” (Higgins 3). Campos’s association with the *nouveau roman*’s conception of the novel not as a given, stable fictive universe but instead as a space for the “constant gestation of . . . an estar siendo” (qtd. in Castillo 173) has been proposed as a possible explanation for why her work has been less attended to than that of her contemporaries. Critics hypothesize that this tempered reception may be due to the perception that her work engages more with French than Latin American counterparts, the difficulty of her experimental prose (Tompkins 156), or its “non-political, ludic quality” whose disinterest in plotting national history thematically distances her work from that of her Mexican contemporaries (Jehenson 86).
While many critics have commented on the stylistic affinities Campos shares with the *nouveau roman*—notably the opposition to linear plot and narrative cohesion—their overlapping critique of humanism has been less remarked. Campos’s wry remark in *Celina’s prelude* that erudition is a delusion echoes Alain Robbe-Grillet’s contemporaneous assertion that humanism’s defining trait is the comprehensive ambition to sublimate every nonhuman thing into human terms. In “Nature, Humanism and Tragedy,” Robbe-Grillet rebuts the foolish projection of unity between the human and nonhuman that has characterized humanism. In what can be considered a provocative antecedent of post-humanism, Robbe-Grillet’s essay maintains that our desire to commune with the nonhuman world has resulted in the tendency to imaginatively inhabit the nonhuman point of view by projecting human feelings onto it, an anthropomorphizing empathy that “amounts to denying their reality, their opaque presence” (77). In literature, this delusion of solidarity is evidenced by the “systematic search for analogical relationships” and the use of metaphor to humanize the nonhuman in order to construct a fallacious sense of totalizing harmony. To unravel this fantasized reciprocity, Robbe-Grillet describes the thing’s surface without imagining its (inevitably humanized) inner life to “establish [the object’s] exteriority and its independency” so that “the world around us once again becomes a smooth surface, with no meaning, no soul and no values, on which we have no further hold” (78). The imperative to undo the human grip on the nonhuman world is at the core of Robbe-Grillet’s maxim: “Man looks at the world, but the world doesn’t look back at him” (70). While this point is at odds with the animal’s returned gaze favored by Jacques Derrida in “The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow),” Robbe-Grillet’s emphatic claim of nonhuman indifference similarly undermines humanist paradigms imagining the human to be more active and knowing than other beings and objects.

Campos’s work analogously attacks humanist projections of human superiority, an endeavor that runs parallel to her challenge of the patriarchal circumscription of female bodies. The prologue to *Celina o los gatos* establishes that the compiled stories trace the progressive “desdibujamiento” of human characters until all that remains is atmosphere, “alojamiento” or abode. This “desdibujamiento” is developed within each story, as well as in the structural sequencing of the collection as a
whole. *Celina o los gatos* begins with stories that center around human protagonists, such as “Celina” or “El bautizo,” and ends with stories like “La casa” and “La ciudad,” in which humans are displaced entirely by the nonhuman as protagonist. The environment is narrated as a felt and material presence that remains long after the transient human inhabitants are gone and, as such, possesses a distinct temporality that resists human conceptions of time. Campos’s fiction imbues nonhuman objects and spaces with agential vibrancy without dissolving their otherness through anthropomorphic projection. Yet unlike Robbe-Grilley’s total estrangement of nonhuman-human worlds, Campos inscribes the female human body as an object affecting and affected by the environment in which it is imbricated.

The “desdibujamiento” of the human into nonhuman ecology is made visible in “El bautizo,” the second short story in *Celina o los gatos*. In “El bautizo,” the female body is again brought to rest in a domesticated landscape, the garden, and becomes effaced. Like in “Celina,” the domesticated—with its implications of being tamed, cultivated, or trained—is a privileged site for unraveling the patriarchal authorship implicit in these terms, which signify the feminine or natural loss of freedom or wildness. In *Bodily Natures*, Stacy Alaimo argues that because women have been historically defined as “stuck” in nature and thus unable to access reason, subjectivity, and agency, feminist theorists have sought to disentangle this relationship and separate women from nature: “Feminist theory’s most revolutionary concept—the concept of gender, as distinct from biological sex—is predicated upon a sharp opposition between nature and culture” (5). However, by turning to the body, Campos addresses the question of biological determinism, seeing the body as what feminist theorist Lynda Birke describes as “changing and changeable, as *transformable*” (qtd. in Alaimo 5).

The adolescent protagonist in “El bautizo,” Natalia, is uncomfortable with her maturing body and its legibility to the male gaze:

> A veces, cuando camina sin nada en las manos, como ahora, quisiera quitarse los brazos y dejarlos en alguna parte. No sabe qué hacer con ellos. Entonces se pone a pensar que tiene estómago y columna vertebral, pero sobre todo que tiene cara. Y es tan molesto saber que se tiene una cara y los demás puede reconocerla, mientras que ella sólo puede verse, con sus propios ojos, en el espejo. (36–37)
The trouble, again, is with the female self’s external identification as a singular, coherent entity. Natalia’s disidentification with her body—as if it were not of her—is assuaged only once she lies down in the garden amidst the summer light, heat, and sounds. She doesn’t transcend her body in order to find relief, which would reinforce a mind-body schism. Rather, as her body stops moving, she senses its permeability: “El calor se sube con lentitud por las piernas, incorporado ya e igual que si saliera del interior de la piel, hasta que el sudo la va humedeciendo y aflojando, hasta que siente las piernas como si no fueran suyas” (40). The sun’s warmth and Natalia’s body heat mix indistinguishably, and the energy’s uncertain origin scrambles the division between the human-subject and nature-object so that both are figured as actants. Like in “Celina” and Tiene los cabellos rojizos, stillness is essential for the evacuation of identity in “El bautizo.” The unproductive, motionless body “melts” into the environment: “se deja fundir sin ninguna transición con la calidad del ambiente, que se ha ido volviendo sonoro, hasta que ella misma parece vibrar y transmitir el sonido” (40). Prostrate in the garden, heat and noise act on the embedded body until it vibrates and transmits ambient sound. This transformation occurs “without transition,” the body always already a natural object. In the absence of productivity, the girl no longer constructs a coherent narrative of identity, but senses herself integrated and embodied. The substance of the self is thus understood as interconnected within a broader network of ecology, dramatically shifting the sense of self from one of a bounded, coherent identity to deindividualized material subjectivity.

Many critics, including Margo Glantz, have read Campos’s identities-in-decomposition as a critique of self-destructive narcissism: “Son seres que miran desde un encierro, desde la locura, desde la identidad pantanosa en que se confunden . . . La identidad no se logra porque la contemplación es malsana e inerte” (74). For Glantz, the characters’ “malsana” self-absorption prevents the healthy formation of strong, individual identities. Echoing this rejection of counterproductive negativity, much of the scholarship on Mexican feminism, from Jean Franco’s canonical Plotting Women to Emily Hind’s more recent, insightful Femmenism and the Mexican Woman Intellectual, define female liberation as achieved through activity, cultural production, and public visibility. However, my argument is that Campos is not interested in critiquing malformed individuals, whose excessive self-absorption or
passivity prevents the development of stable and productive identities. To the contrary, Campos explores the pleasure of becoming undone, unraveling the socially-constructed trappings of identity, and giving in to the Baudelairean “voluptuosidad del aniquilamiento” (*Tiene los cabellos rojizos* 141). Rather than redirect negative feelings into optimistic utility, the annihilation of the self—through summer heat, ocean sounds, becoming feral—refuses to transcend the impasse and move forward. Rather than focus on identity as a model for political subjectivity, Campos’s non-anthropocentric feminism emphasizes the embodied female subject’s de-essentialized complexity. The nonhuman surrounds and constitutes the human body, modifying it inside and out, decentering the image of the autonomous human. The human individual is configured in constitutive relation to nonhuman others: “No más déjate flotar, haz el muertito, relájate, descansa, no tengas miedo del mar” (*Tiene los cabellos rojizos* 159).12

Campos further problematizes the human-nonhuman divide by demonstrating that human culture is inseparable from nature. Language, like the ocean, is not just a visual or sonic object, but tied to rhythm and vibration, felt bodily:

[dejo] que me invada . . . un ruido que parece de palabras pero que es el mismo ruido que me acecha desde el principio: el ruido monocorde, el ruido incesante, el ruido terco, el ruido sibilante, el ruido amenazador, el ruido apaciguante, el ruido lejano y familiar, el ruido excitante y letárgico, el ruido que me colma y me deja vacía, el ruido persistente y lacerante del mar. (*Tiene los cabellos rojizos* 178)

Sound is active: pursuant, charged with multiple affective vectors that surpass and mobilize the human body. The ocean’s vibrational forces are monumentalized, waves resonate with the woman looking at the ocean, and in this resonance she becomes emptied, divested of individuality.

An analogous process, reading has the power to subsume the reader in language and erase her identity. Yet like the ocean, with reading one has to give up control—“haz el muertito”—to successfully float. As one of the anonymous narrators of *Tiene los cabellos rojizos* sardonically remarks:

En el caso improbable de que [el lector] se haya dejado devorar por la avalancha de palabras . . . , si se ha dejado hipnotizar por las palabras, entonces se encontrará él mismo al borde del precipicio, exponiendo su propia identidad y yo diría que aun su vida, para compartir en la terraza
Overwhelmed and absorbed, the motionless reader holding the book affects and is affected by the text. In this way, literature doesn’t just stage the dissolution of identity, but acts out this dissolution on the reader, who loses sight of herself when overcome by the rush of language. The hypnotic sensation of giving in to nonhuman and human vibrancies pushes the individual toward the precipice of de-individuation: becoming nameless and faceless. The encounter with *res nullius*—ocean, book, and woman—stages our desire to claim “no one’s thing” as our own. Yet, the passive, seemingly possessable material object frustrates and absorbs us. The apparent passivity of *res nullius* resists productivity and blurs the subject-object relation until it explodes into new, unforeseen cartographies.

**Lycoming College**

**NOTES**

1 See Martha Martínez, for example. It is worth noting that the titular negative conjunction was a trend in Mexican literature at the time. *Celina o los gatos* (1968) was a relative latecomer compared with Octavio Paz’s *¿Águila o sol?* (1955) and Salvador Elizondo’s *Farabeuf o la crónica de un instante* (1965) and *Narda o el verano* (1966).

2 Carlos’s fear of feminization echoes Octavio Paz’s “Los hijos de la Malinche,” which helped solidify notions of feminine passivity and masculine action.

3 In order to escape the Madonna/whore binary that she critiques in “Meditación,” Castellanos crafted a public persona that was intentionally asexual and whose productivity was linked to intellectual rather than domestic labor. As Emily Hind argues, Castellanos emphasized the precepts of reason, compliance, and decency as central behavioral modes for a woman to be taken seriously as a writer.

4 For the savvy reader accustomed to Campos’s distrust of coherent, linear narrative, it is precisely the cohesion of Carlos’s narration that inspires distrust. This strategic depiction of woman as externally discursively-constructed is developed further in *Tiene los cabellos rojizos*, in which the “woman with reddish hair” is the passive yet inscrutable object of a cacophony of competing voices.

5 Most scholars of Campos’s feminism cite an interview with Beth Miller in which she criticizes women who “let themselves be seduced by the ease with which they can fulfill
themselves effortlessly, through men, passively, without assuming the responsibility for their own destiny” (qtd. in Lagos-Pope 40). While this quote aligns Campos with “responsible” self-actualization, rather than resistant passivity, I argue that her fiction opens up ways to read passivity differently.

While I do not read this short story as a national allegory, it was written during a decade of economic and sociopolitical tension in Mexico. Widespread resentment bloomed in response to President Gustavo Díaz Ordaz’s policies that primarily benefitted the entrenched elite. Increasing repression and censorship spurred student protests, which culminated in the bloody events of Tlatelolco in 1968, when over three hundred people were shot and hundreds more wounded by the Mexican army. Depression, thus, could be read as the national affective mode.

The model of the dynamic, assertive woman unbound by the constraints of femininity unsettlingly aligns with the neoliberal ideal of self-determination. The move toward individual responsibility under neoliberalism advocates that as long as women work hard enough they can get ahead, regardless of social inequity.

Passivity is similarly thematized in Tiene los cabellos rojizos, in which the self imagined by competing discourses refuses to be part of any story at all, dissipating to the extent that it becomes an open-ended vessel that the narrative pours through, never sticking, a refusal that leaves the reader rudderless and disoriented. The woman with reddish hair considers suicide to escape the narrative voices that try to define her, but the narrative resists this and inhabits the masochistic death drive without moving forward or backward.

Because Campos’s fiction often takes place in enclosed domestic spaces (home, garden, balcony), figured nonhuman life is often of the domesticated variety (cats and roses). Exemplary of the passive, non-productive subject, the domesticated cat is of particular centrality, seemingly superfluous yet resistant to domination, unperturbed by human expectation or the pressure to please. The socially-constructed divide of nature and culture has made the domestic cat a categorical challenge, as it is considered both dependent and independent, wild and tame, lazy and vigilant, loving and aggressive. Zoologists have noted that modern-day cats are strikingly similar to their predecessors and that “the domestication of cats can be seen as incomplete inasmuch as cats resist human attempts to dominate and control them” (Thompson 84).

Campos’s book of literary criticism, La imagen en el espejo (1965), sheds light on the new novel’s impact on her work in its discussion of Alain Robbe-Grillet, Nathalie Sarraute, and Claude Simon, among others.

Juan Rulfo exemplifies the fraught reception of the nouveau roman in Latin America: “en lo personal, la antinovela me desagrada. Escribir antinovela es, precisamente evitar toda acción del pensamiento; ver simplemente, y explicar lo que se está viendo. . . . La antinovela, que creyó en un principio ser un movimiento aceptado y fuerte, capaz
de crear un nuevo estilo, una nueva forma de desarrollar la conciencia humana, acabó siendo simplemente . . . una antiexpresión y un antídoto para caer en la nada” (405).

12 To avoid drowning, the human body must relax in the water, with fully inflated lungs. But if this fails, after drowning, the human body is again propelled to the water’s surface by gas produced by bacteria. This process suggests that the nonhuman isn’t just external to the human subject (threatening to envelop it like the ocean) but immanent to it. Indeed, of all the cells in the human body, only one in ten is human, while the rest are nonhuman organisms, viruses, and bacteria.

13 According to Campos, an author is not just an active subject, but also an object: “El pintor, el escritor, no está al margen del mundo, contemplándolo únicamente como espectador y con una facultad singular para constituir otros universos dentro de ese mundo. Es un objeto más dentro del mundo y puede ser contemplado desde afuera, por un espectador capaz de contemplar su obra, de contemplarlo a él creando su obra, de contemplar el mundo que él ha creado dentro del mundo” (La imagen 90).

WORKS CITED


**Keywords:** Julieta Campos, feminism, affect, nonhuman, animal, domesticity, depression.

**Palabras clave:** Julieta Campos, feminismo, afecto, nohumano, animal, domesticidad, la depresión.

Date of Receipt: November 15, 2015
Date of Acceptance: October 16, 2016