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Transit-Oriented Performance
through Chicana/o Spaces in Southern California

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

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in Theatre and Performance Studies

by

Guillermo Aviles-Rodriguez

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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Professor Suk Young Kim, Chair

Through a critical examination of mobility as a social, cultural, and historical concept in and through Chicana/o communities in Southern California, *Transit-Oriented Performance Through Chicana/o Spaces in Southern California* argues mobility to be a consubstantial element in Chicana/o subject formation. It scrutinizes transit-oriented performances (TOPs) and their entanglements with history, space, memory, and identity. At the heart of this dissertation is an autochthonous philosophy informed by the earliest civilizations of the Americas (Olmec, Inca, Maya) that influenced the Mexica. In this way the relationship of mobility—the movement of people, objects, and ideas—and the shifting social, political, and cultural borders that they constitute will come into focus. Following the Mexica, this work acknowledges mobility, movement, and motion as autopoietic aspects of lived Chicana/o culture and argues them to be not only cultural markers of Chicana/o experience, but as a means through which Chicana/os become and are made conscious of their culture and identity. This postulation enables a robust

analysis of subaltern subjects and their negotiations inside of the perpetual motion in Los Angeles' Chicana/o communities. This dissertation studies the specific ways that site-based theory and praxis construct meaning in public space, and centers on the historiography and contemporary signification of Los Angeles through three instances of TOPs: *Hopscotch*, a mobile opera; lowriders; and *loncheras* (Mexican food trucks). Through a critical analysis of these performances held inside or through transportation vehicles, the dissertation highlights the ways these performances operate as a dynamic palimpsest that constructs important but undertheorized significations of and in motion.

The dissertation of Guillermo Aviles-Rodriguez is approved.

Sean Aaron Metzger

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En memoria de Maria y José Venegas

Table of Contents

Introduction……..1

Chapter One: Playing Hopscotch on Dangerous Ground:
Site-Specific, Transit-Oriented Opera in Los Ángeles……29

Chapter Two: Bodies in Motion: Body Art in Steel and Flesh…….62

Chapter Three: Movable Feasts: Maize, Mestizaje, and Motility……...116

Conclusion 162

Appendix..... 172

Bibliography 180

List of Figures

1. An unidentified Chicana female with handmade protest sign.

2. The McGee Roadster, Gypsy Rose, and the Hirohata Merc on the mall in DC.

3. 1985 Buick Regal - El Rey Azteca El Rey Azteca, full body.

4. 1985 Buick Regal - El Rey Azteca El Rey Azteca, passenger side panel close-up.

5. Returning to Aztlan, 1983.

6. The Plexiglas Pontiac Deluxe Six "Ghost Car," with girl in trunk.

7. Front view of Chicano Park car club mural.

8. Close up view of Chicano Park car club mural.

9. Back view of Chicano Park car club mural.

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Biographical Sketch

Guillermo Avilés-Rodríguez was born and raised in the community of Watts, California; he has built a career around using theater as a way of exploring issues of social inequality together with self-empowerment. His study of theatre has taken him throughout the Americas and to the Caribbean. Through a Cornerstone Theater Company residency, Guillermo was mentored by Bill Rauch, artistic director of the Ronald O. Perelman Performing Arts Center at the World Trade Center, and Juliette Carrillo, Associate Professor of Directing at the University of California Irvine.

He attended the University of Utah (U of U), where he was the first Chicana/o ever to star in a production. Upon graduating from the U of U, Guillermo attended the MFA program at the University of California San Diego (UCSD), where he collaborated with some of the most influential theater practitioners in the nation, including Athol Fugard, Michael Greif, and Les Waters. While at UCSD he devised a plan to study political theater in Cuba in the summer of 2001 and collaborated with a Havana-based theatre group *margenes del rio*. Over his seven-year tenure as Artistic Director of Watts Village Theater Company, the company received the American Theater Wing Award for being "one of the top ten most promising small companies in America." He has a long history of developing devised and ensemble-based work as a second-generation Joint Stock practitioner, in both community and professional settings. He is the creator of *Meet Me @Metro*—an innovative, interdisciplinary performance festival in and around the Los Angeles Metropolitan Transit Authority rail system.

He is a PhD candidate in the Theatre and Performance Studies Department at UCLA and a Lecturer in Chicana/o Studies and Theatre at California State University, Northridge. He has collaborated with Spanish-speaking theatre groups including *Grupo malayerba* from Ecuador,

Yuyachkani from Peru and *Teatro de los andes* from Bolivia, as well as the Los Angeles-based Cornerstone Theater Company. He also serves as a reviewer for *Lowrider Studies Journal.*

His academic articles include: "Theatre and Transit: A Transit-Oriented Site-Specific Triptych" in *Theatre Forum;* "Darning *Zoot Suit* for the Next Generation" in *Aztlan*; "Ethics and Site-Based Theatre: A Curated Discussion" (co-published) in Theatre History Studies; and the forthcoming "Playing Hopscotch on Dangerous Ground: Site-Specific, Transit-Oriented Opera in Los Ángeles" in the *Cambridge Opera Journal*.

Book reviews to date feature *Blacktino: Queer Performance* in *Chiricú Journal*; *Collisions at the Crossroads: How Place and Mobility Make Race* in *Aztlán*; *Traveler There is No Road: Theatre, the Spanish Civil War, and the Decolonial Imagination in the Americas* in *Theatre Annual*; *Latinx Theater in the Times of Neoliberalism* for the *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism*; and *Latinx Reception of Greek Tragic Myth* in *Critical Stages/Scènes Critiques*. His pedagogical publications comprise Discovery Guides for *en un sol amarillo* by El Teatro de los Andes, Culture Clash's *Palestine, New Mexico,* and *Zoot Suit* by Luis Valdez.

Introduction

One of my earliest childhood memories is of my first visit to the Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe, Mexico City. My grandmother, after recovering from a serious illness, took the family along on her pilgrimage of thanksgiving. On our way to the Basilica, I remember festive sights full of music, motion, and color. There were murals, food vendors, and musicians. As we reached the gate of our destination, the mood shifted to a more spiritual—even somber—one. What I saw was many people, mostly women, walking on their knees from the gate of the square to the steps of the church, messy ribbons of blood trailing behind them. In those days coarse gravel covered the plaza, and traveling only a few feet on one's knees was enough to scrape and cut the knees deep enough to cause bleeding.[1]

This story comes to me first when I think about early Mexican traditional performances of art, spirituality, culture, and the ways these have informed and sometimes guided the trajectory of contemporary Chicana/os and their performances. It was in this *zocalo* that I first appreciated the importance that many of my people place on the public manifestation of not only faith, but art, culture and penance as well.[2] This, in turn, creates *movimientos* that should be understood in the same way that "movement" in English invokes both the literal motion of a mass through space and a metaphorical struggle against oppression. Movement and mobility are

[1] Another factor that further cemented this event into my memory was the spirited thumping my grandmother gave me as a punishment for my less than reverent intimidation of the women around the square.

[2] Scholar Leo Cabranes-Grant calls this a *geochronic* mechanism that forms a type of *embodied historiography* in which performances become *modes of traveling*, re-encoding time and space through a manipulation of affect. Leo Cabranes-Grant, *From Scenarios to Networks: Performing the Intercultural in Colonial Mexico* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2016), 104.

here understood as autopoietic aspects of lived Chicana/o[3] cultural identity and experience, one of the most undertheorized means through which this specific demographic constructs and becomes conscious of their subjectivity. In this way, our family's pilgrimage was a microcosm of what Chicana/os have been doing since before Columbus sailed the ocean blue—creating *movimientos* through their beliefs, travels, and blood.

This dissertation argues that Chicana/os are detribalized people empowered by repertoires of embodied knowledge that allow them to resist the pressures exacted by neoliberal forces and their perpetual motion, uninhibited acceleration, and hegemonic power. Patricia A. Ybarra's definition of neoliberalism is particularly useful to this analysis because she identifies it as both a "political and economic philosophy whose proponents espouse free market and privatization of state enterprises as the mode by which prosperity and democracy are best reached."[4]

In what follows I embrace as much as possible philosopher José Vasconcelos's advice about the injudiciousness of initiating a valorization of devotion to one's land with contemporary achievements or figures. For example, Vasconcelos thinks it senseless for Mexicans to initiate their nationalism with Father Hidalgo's cry of independence, or the conspiration of Quito, or Bolívar's feats—all examples of recent revolutionary achievements in the Americas—because for him true patriotism requires a return to our indigenous roots. He claims that, if Mexicans do not source their pride with Cuauhtemoc and Atahualpa, our common indigenous ancestors, "it

[3] All the possibilities to identify them as a monolith contain embedded deficiencies. For the purposes of this dissertation, I will privilege word "Chicana/o" for its historiographical alignment with the periods discussed in this dissertation. I use this term because there is yet no word, term, or phrase that completely and perfectly articulates the mass of people discussed in this dissertation.

[4] Patricia A. Ybarra, *Latinx Theater in the Times of Neoliberalism* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2018), x.

will have no support or foundation."[5] Therefore, the historiographic postulation that follows draws from pre-conquest epistemes and philosophies. Beyond this, however, is the realization that scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith is correct in her assertion that "to acquiesce [to past narratives] is to lose ourselves entirely and implicitly agree with all that has been said about us. To resist is to retrench in the margins" and to seek new ways of knowing.[6]

By embracing a different way of moving Chicana/os enact a long-existent repertoire rooted in a time preceding neoliberal ideologies' reach, thereby creating a space for their alternate narratives to thrive. Or, as geographers Tim Cresswell and Peter Merriman have argued, they use mobilities as a way to "create spaces and stories—spatial stories."[7] To see how these movimientos manifest in contemporary contexts, one need only look at the way that Chicana/os have invented or popularized a plurality of exoteric performances that involve transit phenomena.[8] These include lowriders, modern food trucks, and transit-oriented performances (TOPs)—a modality here defined as performances depending upon, or making thoughtful and consistent use of, vehicles and/or transit infrastructure for their overall performativity. These types of performances are variants of minoritarian cultural production in Los Angeles and illustrate the city's tenacious relationship to mobility. This postulation enables the analysis of the neoliberal push towards unconstrained development in and on Los Angeles's Chicana/o communities. Such analysis interrogates the neoliberal hegemonic pressures that seek to banish

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[5] José Vasconcelos, *The Cosmic Race: A Bilingual Edition, Race in the Americas* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 11.

[6] Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, 2nd ed. (London: Zed Books, 2012), 4.

[7] Tim Cresswell and Peter Merriman, *Geographies of Mobilities: Practices, Spaces, Subjects* (London: Routledge, 2016), 5.

[8] Guillermo Aviles-Rodriguez, "Theatre and Transit: A Transit-Oriented Site-Specific Triptych," *Theatre Forum* 47 (September 2015).

the poor and other disenfranchised subjects from public places, even as their labor is exploited in many other spaces.[9]

Transit-Oriented Performance through Chicana/o Spaces in Southern California is the first study to explore the intersections, junctures, networks, nexuses, and crossings between TOPs, mobility, Chicana/os, and Los Angeles at large.[10] As James A. Dunn Jr. writes, "Los Angeles, with its famous freeways and broad boulevards, has long been considered the prototype of the auto-dominated American region," making this city an ideal platform for transit-orientated analysis.[11] It is in Los Angeles that the interactions among transit, motion, and Chicana/os become most visible. By bringing motion and its semblable mobility under the performance studies lens to concentrate on their manifestations in Los Angeles within Chicana/o communities, this study seeks to fill a lacuna in both Chicana/o studies and performance studies.

This work applies what philosopher James Maffie identifies as the cardinal manifestations of movement for the Mexica. According to Maffie, these movements are all "Inamic[12] partners which struggle against one another and unite with one another in three principle ways: *Olin*, *Malinalli*, and *Nepantla.*"[13] In this work these patterns of *motion-change*

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[9] For example, a 2010 white paper published by the UCLA Institute for Research on Labor and Employment, "Wage Theft and Workplace Violations in Los Angeles: The Failure of Employment and Labor Law for Low-Wage Workers," states that Los Angeles "has an especially high rate of workplace violations, even relative to the nation's other large cities." If Los Angeles and its 49% Latino population are behind on equality, it problematizes the recent and popular idea of Los Angeles as a sanctuary city for undocumented people. See United States Census Bureau, "2010 United States Census," https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/losangelescitycalifornia/PST045216.

[10] Another facet of this dissertation that makes it distinct is the author's indigeneity to the cultural and geographic artifacts discussed.

[11] James A. Dunn, *Driving Forces: The Automobile, Its Enemies, and the Politics of Mobility* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1998), 102.

[12] Loosely translated, "inamic" means "its other half," or a thing that is the match of its counterpart, e.g., life/death, light/dark, etc.

[13] James Maffie, *Aztec Philosophy: Understanding a World in Motion* (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2014), 13.

extend and apply to a Chicano/a context and historical geography that concentrates on Southern California. Briefly defined, these three cardinal motion-changes can be understood as follows. Olin is a "curving, swaying, oscillating, pulsing, and centering motion-change."[14] Malinalli is "a twisting, spinning, gyrating, coiling, whirling, and spiraling motion-change," and Nepantla is a "middling, intermixing, and mutually reciprocating motion-change."[15] I draw a genealogical connection between the way the Mexica enacted events that reified these three sacred movements and how their present-day descendants, knowingly or not, continue this tradition in rituals, customs, and behaviors. Just as the particulars of the Mexica's practice of human sacrifice point to a concept of a universe in perpetual need of blood to lubricate its motion, so does the celebration of *Panquetzaliztli*, the Festival of the Raising of the Blue Banner, illustrate and enact the choreography of Malinalli, Nepantla, and Olin in the way the falling body of a sacrificial victim moved as it bounced, rolled, and tangled itself down the steps.

This argument should not be mistaken as essentialist, but rather seen as a systematic demonstration of undeniable historic resonances between ancient Mesoamerican peoples (Mexica, Maya, etc.) and their detribalized descendants (Chicana/os, Latina/os, etc.). In all the illustrations that follow, scholar Diana Taylor's point that "neither individual genetic nor memetic material usually lasts more than three generations"[16] is factored in, as the argument for an undeniable *surrogation*[17] from the ancient Mexica to the modern Chicana/o is diagrammed. Another key concept supplied by Maffie when discussing the *how* of Teotl's self-emerging is the

[14] Maffie, *Aztec Philosophy*, 13.

[15] Ibid, 14.

[16] Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 173.

[17] Joseph Roach, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance.* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996).

idea of an "agonistic inamic unity" that is "characterized as duality, polarities, or contraries that are coexisting, mutually arising, compatible, complementary, interdependent, competitive, and locked in a continual process of agonistic, dialectical alternation with one another."[18]

This concept is particularly relevant to Chapter One. Chicana/os in their actions see borders and boundaries in their environs not as the end of a territory, but rather as their ancestors did: as an illusory point at which something both begins and completes its unfolding. Walls, then, are crossroads where Nepantla motion happens and things amalgamate, hybridize, and merge. Yet for every call back to their historical connection to Mexico, from their inception in the 1960s Chicana/os have understood themselves as distinct people living in a liminal space. *Ni de aquí, ni de allá* (not from here or from there), a well-known Chicana/o mantra, identifies them in opposition to both the Mexicans in the homeland and the Anglos in American society. With no definitive meaning to "Chicana/os," the term is set free to become, like race, a floating signifier that can mean many things to many people; it contains a permeability that is transferred to or projected on walls erected to contain, limit, or entrap it as deficient nomenclature.

The capacity that Chicana/os have historically exhibited to adapt, to change, and to move in between and through spaces and places of art and culture—in short their mobility (literal and figurative)—is at the core of this work. Chicana/os are a group for whom passing between borders of many kinds is second nature. They have constructed a mobile identity that is most recognizable when spotted on the mainline of the highway, zooming past the gore points on its way to being something and somewhere else, somewhere new. The concept of motion presented thus far is not exclusive to Chicana/os; however, what is unique is the way Chicana/os have managed to inform, influence, and shape Los Angeles's culture of perpetual motion. Los Angeles

[18] Maffie, *Aztec Philosophy*, 143.

is the place where a tenacious tradition of mobility—social, political, economic, and creative—has produced or popularized cultural artifacts such as lowriders, food trucks, RV motorhomes, and more aesthetically aimed products, such as Arnulfo Gonzalez's unique murals created by cleaning the dirt and grime from the back of his box truck,[19] or the protest serenade put on by Vandalize, a Pico Rivera punk band, from atop their truck during the Black Lives Matter demonstration in downtown Los Angeles.[20] What brings all these examples together is that they are manifestations of the way Chicana/os move.

Decolonizing: Philosophy, Space, and Mobility

The belief that philosophy is the sole invention of the Greeks has strong roots in Western culture today. Many a prominent thinker has made claims about non-Western peoples' primitive types of philosophy. Philosopher Emmanuel Levinas captures this ethnocentric attitude and tone when he states, "the Greeks and the Bible are all that is serious in humanity. Everything else is dancing."[21] Here Levinas wants to reduce what is valuable and worthy to the unchanging and immovable word, and what is valueless and fleeting to rhythmical motion, employing improvised or choreographed movements or gestures. Levinas uses his statement to specifically degrade African philosophy, but it is also useful to this study for its resonances with the themes of this work. Levinas may not have known this, but his binary between word and dance did not exist in Mexica philosophy, or at least not in the way Levinas proposes. Dance was an intricate part of Mexica life and culture; in some cases, even sacrificial victims had to dance with their warrior

[19] Artrucking, Instagram, accessed October 12, 2020, https://www.instagram.com/artrucking/.

[20] August Brown, "Meet the Punk Band that Provided the Soundtrack for DTLA Protesters from a Moving Pickup Truck," *Los Angeles Times*, June 1, 2020, https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/music/story/2020-06-01/black-lives-matter-protests-downtown-hardcore-band-truck.

[21] Quoted in Robert Bernasconi, "African Philosophy's Challenge to Continental Philosophy," in *Postcolonial African Philosophy: A Critical Reader*, ed. Emmanuel Chukwadi Eze (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1997), 185.

captors before their execution. Levinas's remark, true or not, is an inadvertent compliment to the Mexica and their descendants, a culture whose movement and rituals are inextricable from core epistemes, or ways of knowing.

For much of the history of anthropology, praise for the achievements of ancient American cultures has been both infrequent and reluctant, and in some cases unfortunate. For example, anthropologist John Greenway's introductory essay to *A History of Ancient Mexico* asserts that, after being first informed of a sighting of the Spanish aboard their ships, "Moctezuma and his subjects had much of a year remaining to pleasure themselves with their traditional pastimes of sodomy, sacrifice, and swilling."[22] Fortunately, the scholarship on ancient peoples of the Americas has gradually become more civil, and, as philosopher Manuel de Landa points out, "many historians have abandoned their Eurocentrism and now question the very rise of the West" as a universal frame.[23]

This study navigates palimpsestic history by using the concepts of space and place, as framed by the Mexica whose views of space and place differ from the modern and Western view, as theorized by Henri Lefebvre. He describes place as a co-constitutive concept emerging from a triad of *perceived*, *conceived*, and *lived* spaces—though Lefebvre's idea of the "Right to the City" is important to this study for the way it divorces urban citizenship and collective use of a space from a user's membership in a specific nation-state.[24] In this way, space and the ability to move within it become key elements for Chicana/os to achieve "self-presentations and self-

[22] Fray Bernardino de Sahagún, *A History of Ancient Mexico: 1547-1577* (Glorieta, NM: Rio Grande Press, 1976), 14.

[23] Manuel de Landa, *A Thousand Years of Nonlinear History* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000), 12.

[24] Henri Lefebvre, Eleonore Kofman, and Elizabeth Lebas, *Writings on Cities* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2008), 168.

representations."[25] In this way the spaces in which transit-oriented performances operate enable an analysis that accounts for the role history and motion play in both Mexica and Chicana/o cultural production.

The Mexica world was not simply in motion—the world was wholly motion. Legendary anthropologist and historian Miguel León-Portilla illustrates the consubstantiality of movement with life itself: "The profound significance of movement to the Nahuas can be deduced from the common Nahuatl root of the words movement, heart, and soul. To the ancient Mexicans, life, symbolized by the heart (*y-óllo-tl*), was inconceivable without the element which explains it, movement (*y-olli*)."[26] As scholar Caroline Dodds Pennock articulates it, the Mexica understood their universe "in far-reaching and temporally manifold terms. They understood the present in cyclical terms which drew insight from the actual and mythical pasts, religious and metaphysical interpretations, and projections of the future."[27] The idea of cycles or recurring flows permeates Mexica philosophy. As Maffie states, "at the heart of [Mexica] metaphysics stands the ontological thesis that there exists at the bottom just one thing: dynamic, vivifying, eternally self-generating and self-regenerating sacred power, force, or energy," which the Mexica called *teotl*.[28] This view understands the universe as one of *becoming* and not as one of *being*. Understanding the way Chicana/os connect to this worldview necessitates embracing the idea that the myths and stories scattered through the chapters that follow were real for the Mexica and still hold value for Chicana/os today.

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[25] Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford, Blackwell Publishing: 1992), 34.

[26] Miguel León-Portilla, *Aztec Thought and Culture: A Study of the Ancient Nahuatl Mind* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1963), 61.

[27] Caroline Dodds Pennock, *Bonds of Blood: Gender, Lifecycle and Sacrifice in Aztec Culture* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 90.

[28] Maffie, *Aztec Philosophy*, 12.

The supremacy of motion in Mexica mythology argued here is, as philosopher Thomas Nail puts it, "a unique ontological perspective in Western philosophy."[29] In Mexica philosophy motion is an essential quality of reality. Nail follows the Mexica (knowingly or not) when he makes the ambitious claim that his theory of motion can ontologically describe "space, eternity, force and time."[30] The Mexica offer decolonized alternatives to theorizing space, which for them is both terrestrial and nonterritorial. Space for them is "concrete, specific, qualitative, quantitative, alive, relational (nonsubstantive), locative, and timed."[31] It is charged with power by virtue of its ability to channel and concentrate *teotl*. In short, space is a "living presence with its own character."[32]

Space in Western science also has had a history of evading quantifiable elements. Einstein once wrote, "we entirely shun the vague word 'space' of which, we must honestly acknowledge, we cannot form the slightest conception and we replace it by 'motion relative to a practically rigid body of reference.'"[33] As this quote illustrates, defining space is an arduous task, so much so that it necessitates replacing space with motion. In this way, it is motion that science imports to speak of space; as with science so with ontology—motion heralds space. Consistent with this, the Mexica "believed that movement and life resulted from the harmony achieved by the spatial orientation" or "by the spatialization of time."[34] However, it would not be until the

[29] Thomas Nail, *Being and Motion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 13.

[30] Ibid., 26.

[31] Maffie, *Aztec Philosophy*, 421.

[32] Ibid.

[33] Enda Duffy, *The Speed Handbook: Velocity, Pleasure, Modernism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), 277.

[34] León-Portilla, *Aztec Thought and Culture*, 61.

twentieth century that modern philosophy caught up to the Mexica. There have been other philosophers who have considered motion's primacy or used it as a starting point of their work. Edward Soja described Foucault's work thusly: "Foucault asked why is it that time has tended to be treated as "richness, fecundity, life, dialectic" while in contrast space has been typically seen as 'the dead, the fixed, the undialectical, the immobile?'"[35] This quote illustrates just how powerful and deep-rooted the privileging of the historical imagination over spatial imagination has been. Any gesture towards problematizing the binary of space as a simple site or host of motion is dismissed by the assertion of the established doctrine that space precedes motion.

The pages that follow examine three transit-oriented performances that congeal around a pattern of socially, economically, and politically informed events that collectively reify an anthropomorphized concept of *Brownian Motion.* This term is named for botanist Robert Brown, who in 1827 first described the seemingly random motion of microscopic particles suspended in a fluid that move according to how they are struck, and in turn strike other molecules in their medium's immediate surroundings. This dissertation replaces this seemingly random movement of particles with the movement of Chicana/o bodies as they collide and intersect with elements of their surrounding environment. The concept of Brownian Motion is discussed in depth in subsequent chapters. Imagining Chicana/os as particles will help to concentrate on their movements, and the ways and circumstances under which they condense into groups or crystallize into communities. Just as water exists in a plurality of states depending on factors as unpredictable as temperature and agitation, so too can Chicana/os transform themselves through

[35] Edward W. Soja, *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-And-Imagined Places* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2014), 15.

movement. Just as water can boil, freeze, or flow and create waterways, so too can Chicana/os carve safe spaces to exist and thrive. Perhaps more significantly for this study, each of these states can co-occur with the others.

If we embrace the Mexica philosophy of a world in motion, then mobility and its semblables (movement, motion, and migration) enable us to attend to the way these phenomena change or redirect many uniquely Chicana/o activities, experiences, and perceptions. For example, take the issue of gentrification (which I discuss further in Chapter One). What is gentrification if not the satisfaction of the privileged few to penetrate in and out of a desired exotic other's intimate space? Mobility, then, is the ability to move at will in and out of a given space without restraints—a privilege reserved for only a few members of society.

This dissertation seeks to fill the lacuna of theorizations on the effects of pre-Hispanic Mexica concepts of mobility on the present-day descendants of the Mexica. More specifically, this work examines transit-oriented performances (TOPs) for their entanglements with space, memory, and identity. It studies the specific ways that site-based theory and praxis construct meaning in public space and centers on the historiography and contemporary signification of Los Angeles through three transit-oriented performances: *Hopscotch* (an opera held inside limousines across Los Angeles), the Mexican and gourmet food truck scene, and lowrider car shows in Southern California. Through a critical analysis of these performances held inside or through transportation vehicles, the dissertation highlights the ways TOP operates as a dynamic palimpsest constructing important new significations in public spaces.

Although I argue that TOP is a unique and emerging performance modality in Southern California, TOPs' influence has wider implications for performance in America, informally illustrated by the *Trunk or Treat* phenomenon, in which decorated car trunks serve as alternate

locations from which to dole out candy during Halloween. Or by *Shakespeare in the Parking Lot: MACBETH*, a performance in Kentucky created specifically as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic "with audience members viewing from the safety of their closed vehicle, listening to the production via short-range FM radio transmission."[36]

The rationale behind the selection of these performances was that they feature connections or interactions with Chicana/o cultural experiences and the places they inhabit. These performances also help answer key questions: How does the history of transportation and transit in Los Angeles specifically relate to and impact Chicana/o communities? What are the exact strategies that make these phenomena efficacious (or not) in communities with large Chicana/o populations? How do various communities respond to transit-oriented performances that they interpret as intrusive and domineering? By exploring these questions, I strive to show that this performance modality represents a type of resistance to neoliberalism's manic motion—what could be called a moving compulsion. Some of the phenomena examined in this study have roots reaching back to pre-Columbian peripatetic rituals in the Americas. However, our focus begins in the 1950s and carries through today, with an increased focus on the surge in transit-oriented performance between 2010 and 2020. This surge concentrated in Los Angeles, is rapidly making the city ground zero for this brand of what appears to be an exoteric performance for the eyes of contemporary urbanites.

Transit-oriented phenomena in Los Angeles are products of theatre makers' search for ways to shake free from the confines of what some see as traditionally exclusionary, elitist, and hegemonic commercial venues. Transit-oriented performance enables a much more dynamic and

[36] "Shakespeare in the Parking Lot: MACBETH", Kentucky Shakespeare, October 17, 2020, https://kyshakespeare.com/event/shakespeare-in-the-parking-lot-macbeth/ (accessed June 27, 2021).

less controllable environment, which facilitates interaction between performers and audience members. It is not surprising that these performances found a foothold in Los Angeles.

Moving to Los Angeles

There are no shortages of Los Angeles historiographies dedicated to examining the city's monuments, buildings, and sites, but the performances examined here offer an opportunity to gaze into what Cabranes-Grant calls "networking operations that flow through, against, and because of [intercultural relations]."[37] The friction between the film and television created for the widest audience possible (with the fewest obstacles to consumption and participation) and the less-accessible commercial theatre fuels the rise of this unique brand of performance in Los Angeles, a city characterized by perpetual motion. While not exclusively a Chicana/o phenomenon, exoteric theatre has found its most visible examples in Chicana/o Los Angeles. Los Angeles's status as a hub for people exploring new and iconoclastic ideas, seeking fame and fortune, or simply wanting to reinvent themselves has deep roots, harking back to the founding of the city by *los pobladores* on September 4, 1781. One of the great ironies of Los Angeles's history is that its founding was accomplished by a group of Spanish citizens who *walked* ten miles from San Gabriel to what is now a city so deeply associated with the automobile, freeways, and boulevards—so much so that the thought of anyone walking for ten miles anywhere in Los Angeles has become unimaginable today. This reinvention of mobility manifests in some artists' work, which criticizes the dominance of Los Angeles's film industry, as it casts a long shadow over live performance (transit-oriented or not).

Hollywood has played a large part in reducing Los Angeles to its car culture, such as when cinema director Sidney Lumet directed the 1976 classic *Network* in New York. Lumet

[37] Cabranes-Grant, *From Scenarios to Networks*, 5.

needed to film a scene set in Los Angeles, so he rented an office space overlooking a New York freeway. Then there is the 1993 thriller *Falling Down*, which opens with a massively congested freeway that ironically launches the lead character's journey on foot across Los Angeles. In 2012, *Saturday Night Live* decided to parody Angelenos in a skit titled "The Californians"; the characters speak almost exclusively about Los Angeles's freeways and how to navigate them. Most recently, in the opening scene of the 2017 Academy Award-winning original musical film, *La La Land*, morning commuters stuck in gridlock traffic on a Los Angeles freeway collectively decide to break out into a congratulatory song and dance. Thus, despite having the third most accessible rail system in the United States, it is the automobile and its trappings that have become a metonym for Los Angeles.[38]

Indeed, in contrast to *La La Land's* celebratory representation of freeway gridlock as a sign of urban prosperity and modern camaraderie, this dissertation approaches these artifacts as arteries that control, direct, or inhibit mobility. Freeways manifest internal borders, dividing communities and erecting reminders of the established power structures' ability to penetrate Los Angeles's poorest ethnic communities. To achieve this task, I focus on the Chicana/o community as a group that manifests a particularly ardent relationship with social and physical mobility and its neoliberal trappings. Taking seriously historian Reyner Banham's claim that he "learned to drive in order to read Los Angeles in the original,"[39] this writing surveys and investigates the socioeconomic structures that manufactured the landscape that is Los Angeles with the understanding that there is no definitive Los Angeles, only an ever-moving constellation of bodies in an age of mechanical and technological supremacy. Southern California's car culture

[38] "Access Across America: Transit 2014," University of Minnesota, 2014, http://www.access.umn.edu/research/america/transit2014/index.html.

[39] Reyner Banham, *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies* (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1976), 5.

offers a lens to examine the consequences of the uncritical adoption of unfettered motion, and the mad rush to embrace automobiles and their gift of velocity. Los Angeles and its relationship with automobiles can be described by James Fink's notion of *automobility,* or "the combined import of the motor vehicle, the automobile industry and the highway, plus the emotional connotations of this import for Americans."[40] The connections between Chicana/os lowrider owners and automobility are particularly ardent, so much so that lowriders routinely name, baptize, and maintain their automobiles as if they were not inanimate objects, but rather something akin to a fetish deserving reverence, or as in some circumstances discussed in this work, obsessive devotion.

The dynamic arteries of Los Angeles's streets, railways, and freeways create a historiography that accounts for Chicana/o communities and the networks they embody. Simply put, this work searches for how motion means in a place that—from its inception—has been defined by mobility. Eric Avila's scholarship on the interactions between Chicana/os and freeways specifically in Los Angeles aids in a robust understanding of how Los Angeles became "the first city of the automobile age."[41] With its ideal climate for driving, welcoming atmosphere, and vast amounts of undeveloped land, Southern California and its largest city, Los Angeles, became the national leader in private car ownership by 1920. During this same period Los Angeles produced 20% of all US oil, making it the "Saudi Arabia for American oil."[42] Since the '20s, freeways and the demands they bring have continued to play a central role in cultural

[40] As quoted by Cotten Seiler, "Statist Means to Individualist Ends: Subjectivity, Automobility, and the Cold-War State," *American Studies* 44, no. 3 (Fall 2003): 8.

[41] Eric Avila, *Popular Culture in the Age of White Flight: Fear and Fantasy in Suburban Los Angeles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 190.

[42] Norman M. Klein, *The History of Forgetting: Los Angeles and the Erasure of Memory* (London: Verso, 2008), 78.

representations of Los Angeles. By tracking the trajectory of how automobiles managed to captivate Los Angeles, this dissertation seeks to track the motions of the city—its networks and nexuses of social mobility, its dynamic convergences, its segregation of ethnic communities, and its diverse staging of contested growth and shifting movement—by providing a window from the cultural freeway that attempts to capture a view of Los Angeles and Chicana/os *in medias res*.

To aid in this analysis, I extend the concept of Brownian Motion and apply it to Chicana/os. Again, I adopt this term to help think through the unique types of movements and motions that descendants of the Mexica, an ancient people, have embraced as strategies to negotiate their hostile environments. In physics, the force exerted by an object is directly proportional to its mass and acceleration. This formula usefully illustrates why Chicana/os' increasing demographic mass is so threatening and is often countered by laws and policies aimed at decelerating its progress. Building upon the unique way Chicana/os engage with motion through automobility, the performances covered in this text illustrate how for Chicana/os the automobile is an actual place in motion. Understanding the automobile simultaneously as a means and a place permits a more targeted investigation of the uniquely spatialized urban setting of Los Angeles.

Motivated by and attracted to a distinctly proletarian ideal and intention to make art outside privileged repertory and commercial theaters, transit-oriented performance seeks out ethnic communities and makes audiences as much a part of the process and culmination of the work as those who design and produce it. In this way, it has the potential to "dramatically expand invented spaces of citizenship."[43] The site-based nature of these projects provides the added

[43] Clara Irazábal, *Ordinary Places, Extraordinary Events: Citizenship, Democracy and Public Space in Latin America* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 16.

benefit (or curse) of reaching involuntary audience members, who stumble upon one of these phenomena during their travels or commutes. As such, this mode is a unique attempt to bring live performance to people who might not otherwise see it and to coax traditional theatergoers to places they may not otherwise visit.

By highlighting a set of distinctive TOPs in Los Angeles, this dissertation aims to inspire further scholarly recognition of the modern audience's shift from passive consumption to active participation. The parameters of success for this type of performance and its exact differences from conventional theatrical presentations are in an embryonic state, but that these phenomena and their parameters are a recognizable and unifying pattern hinting at an intelligible movement in Los Angeles are unquestionable. The fact that such a robust transit-oriented performance scene has advanced in and around communities with large numbers of Chicana/os is a logical development, as Mexico prides itself on the political, peripatetic, and processional nature of its popular performances. The first to import this lambent spirit to the United States was the Chicana/o political theater group El Teatro Campesino (ETC), started by the United Farm Workers Union to represent itinerant farm workers. ETC blazed the trail for both transit-oriented performances and political Chicana/o theatre in the US, making this mode of performance a part of a long performance tradition in the Americas where the old ETC slogan, "the Teatro should go to the people and not the people to the Teatro," still resonates.

Transit-oriented performances bring aesthetic content directly to the spaces people frequent most—to places where people live, work, and play. These performances employ mobility, as we will see with lowriders and their representation, which brings art to people in the streets of the city. Some of the case studies discussed in depth later (e.g., "Movable Feasts") employ affordable, culturally relevant performances in situ. Others construct a collective

performance where participants are both the performers and the spectators (e.g., "Bodies in Motion"). In these case studies, we see the way Chicana/os accelerate across Los Angeles's cultural topography. Or, in some instances, the artifacts in this study work against physical mobility and arrest motion, creating a performance of immobility with their audience (e.g., *Hopscotch*).

This approach offers a template for understanding the ways that individuals can be empowered by "self-propelled mechanical vehicles," which became increasingly available to the American Anglo consumers from the close of the nineteenth century forward, and to Chicana/os in the 1950s.[44] In analyzing mobilities, this dissertation respects the distinction between the voluntary, leisurely mobility of the tourist and the coerced, urgent mobility of undocumented immigrants, along with that between the *haut monde* and the poor. These distinctions are critical to the analyses throughout this text, since it is the motions of subaltern subjects in a neoliberal context with which this research is mostly concerned.

Transit-oriented performance is a unique and emerging field in Southern California because of the engagement with audience members (willing or not) in its construction. This analysis builds upon the work of contemporary philosophers such as de Landa, Maffie, and Nail, who all have theorized mobility in useful and thought-provoking ways. De Landa's idea of a nonlinear and nonequilibrium historiography, in which seemingly contradictory states can coexist, has informed much of this work. Nail's theorizations on migration and how mobility manifests in a modern context have been exceptionally valuable when thinking of Chicana/os in Southern California. Maffie's *Aztec Philosophy: Understanding a World in Motion* is

[44] Cotten Seiler, *Republic of Divers: A Cultural History of Automobility in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 4–5.

foundational to this project for the way it builds on León-Portilla's work, and valorizes the non-Western philosophical perspective that the Mexica used to build their empire in the context of our current historical moment.

Then, too, there are the performance, social, ethnic, and cultural studies scholars who have posited velocity, transit, or urban history as the central focus of analysis; these include Leo Cabranes-Grant, Enda Duffy, Dylan A. T. Miner, and Raúl Homero Villa. Specifically, I build on Cabranes-Grant's concept of "choreographies of becoming" to capture the dynamics of contemporary Chicana/o identity.[45] Duffy's idea of the destruction of space as a trigger for the disintegration of traditional subjectivity is useful in the scrutinizing of Chicana/os and the signification of mobility and transit-oriented performance in Los Angeles. Miner's "indigenist intervention into settler ontologies and colonial political formations that attempt to render [Chicana/o] presence as immigrant"[46] and Villa's championing the possibility of "re-creating and re-imagining dominant urban *space* as community-enabling *place*"[47] also fuel the articulation of the process through which mobility manifests as a cardinal cultural marker and an undertheorized means by which Chicana/os construct *Chicanismo*. By bringing these theories together, this dissertation aims to account for the many unexplored and under-researched dynamics of cultural motion found in both transportation and urban history, and thus enable an analysis of the frictions created by Chicana/os moving in and between urban transtemporal networks.

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[45] Cabranes-Grant, *From Scenarios to Networks*, 29.

[46] As quoted in Dylan A. T. Miner, *Creating Aztlán: Chicano Art, Indigenous Sovereignty, and Lowriding Across Turtle Island* (Tucson, Arizona: The University of Arizona Press, 2014), 7.

[47] Raúl Villa, Allan Sekula, and Sally Stein, *Barrio-Logos: Space and Place in Urban Chicano Literature and Culture* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010), 6.

Praising the Lowered

Another important factor in Chicana/o mobility is spirituality, particularly Catholicism, the form of cultural expression that has influenced Chicana/o art and its politics more than any other. The examples that follow demonstrate some key ways that Chicana/o mobility imbricates with spirituality, Catholic iconography, and rituals. As Nobel Prize–winning poet Octavio Paz is quoted as saying, when Mexicans have faith in nothing else, they will still have faith in two things—the Virgin Mary and the National Lottery.[48] The flippancy of the statement aside, Paz legitimately points to faith in the Virgin Mary as an important motivating factor in Chicana/o identity formation, as well as the underlying desire for economic mobility. Catholicism, with its mortification of the flesh, ecstatic iconography, and spectacle-rich celebrations, manifests itself in the case studies examined in this dissertation, which all include moving performances—literally and figuratively.

This religious fusion has contributed to a particular form of expression involving what scholar Margaret Werry has called "mobile occupation," where individuals inhabit a space not through stillness but prolonged movement in or through it.[49] Ancient Catholic religious pilgrimages are one example, as are many other pilgrimages in California communities. But a more relevant example can be found in how Chicana/os have opted to use the streets and not the rigged courts of law or the ivory towers of academia as the albumen of their political struggle. In the 1960s, when Chicana/os decided to fight for social change, it was *la marcha,* a processional demonstration calling on the religious repertoire of the pilgrimage, that provided the

[48] Jacques Lafaye, *Quetzalcoatl and Guadalupe: The Formation of Mexican National Consciousness, 1531-1813*, trans. Benjamin Keen (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974).

[49] Margaret Werry, "River Life, River Rights: On Performing Political Kinship" (lecture, Center for Performance Studies, Los Angeles CA, January 16, 2018).

definitive method of protest. For example, a Community Service Organization (CSO) dubbed the "Marching Mothers" organized to shut down the state-built underpasses and tunnels that pedophiles were using to sexually assault young women. They advocated that the underpasses be replaced with overpasses covered with chain-link fencing—they succeeded. The CSO president stated that this was "accomplished by these 'Marching Mothers' through two months of picketing the underpass and withstanding winter cold and rains."[50] In this instance, the Catholic pilgrimage shows up in Chicana/o culture under the secular name of the march. The same socially minded activist spirit that has inspired many apolitical demonstrations has also stimulated Chicana/o art, which grew strong and became an alternative to the often exclusionary mainstream art world. This new Chicana/o art stood as a form of resistance to and against oppression, and as a viable way for Chicana/os to affirm their social identity and worth.

In what follows, religious artwork that functions as a geochronic bridge between the religious and the secular, the ancient and the modern, and aesthetic and the political will come together to form a pattern that asserts mobility in general, and processions specifically, as defining characteristics of Chicana/o subject formation. The artistic and cultural forms of production discussed in this dissertation additionally highlight ways in which Chicana/os' artistic expression has been critical in and to Chicana/o subject formation. Starting with a look at some early Mexica myths and traditions, the dissertation extends into how they animate modern cultural artifacts and Chicana/no mobility.

I argue that the relationship between mobility and *Chicanismo* is a central element of Chicana/o subject formation, while paying attention to the plurality of those processes of subject

[50] As quoted in Mary S. Pardo, *Mexican American Women Activists: Identity and Resistance in Two Los Angeles Communities* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998), 31.

formation.[51] The role of migration in creating identities among modern people of Mesoamerican and pre-Hispanic descent is well documented. Less discussed are the motions other than and beyond migration that bind ancient peoples to modern-day Chicana/os. Through the exploration of the relationship of mobility—the movement of people, objects, and ideas—and shifting social, political, and cultural borders, this work acknowledges movement and mobility in historical, migratory, socioeconomic, and cultural registers that are autopoietic aspects of lived Chicana/o culture. In short, these registers are not only cultural markers of Chicana/o experience, but means through which Chicana/os become and are made conscious of their culture and identity.

The performances this text explores illustrate strategies of resistance that give name to Chicana/os' deployment of motion.[52] Viewed from this vantage point, the upsurge in transit-oriented performances in Los Angeles suggests a new and assertive form of resistance against spaces of privilege on the part of subaltern communities.[53] The case studies in this dissertation each exhibit strategies that serve to counterbalance the panoptic pressure imposed by the hegemonic power through what de Certeau called "contradictory movement."[54] This resistance enables Chicana/os to adapt and tactically navigate political, artistic, and cultural spaces and places, and thus resist institutions that seek to limit Chicana/os motion. *Motion* here refers to both the means of physical mobility and socioeconomic movement in urban environments; both geographic and metaphorical, motion provides a framework to narrativize the processes of identity formation. *Mobility,* on the other hand, operates more as a paradigm than a series of

[51] Pride in one's heritage, background, culture, and identity as a Mexican-American.

[52] Here "motion" is a change in position of an object or subject over time.

[53] Aviles-Rodriguez, "Theatre and Transit."

[54] Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 95.

isolated phenomena, for, as John Urry astutely argues, "there are countless mobilities, physical, imaginative and virtual, voluntary and coerced."[55] Nowhere are these mobilities more reified than in Los Angeles, a city defined by its relationship to the automobile.

Automobiles and the kind of mobility they facilitate are a defining characteristic of Chicana/o subjectivity formation, as witnessed by written archives and lived repertoires of urban protests. *Lowrider* magazine ran a 1980 interview with César Chávez where he emphasized the importance of a functional and reliable car for a working family in the 1950s, so as to be able to travel from one agricultural field to another.[56] On the fields of Delano, "during the early strike…the back of César Chávez's old station wagon often served as a portable shrine replete with holy images, flowers, and picket signs"; or in the urban protests against clerical decadence in the 1960s, Chicana/o youth carried placards reading "Jesus did not drive a Cadillac."[57] In Chicana/o Los Angeles "mobility outweighs monumentality," though for the city to become fully legible, it requires an exploration of both.[58]

Chicana/os have constructed an identity not simply featuring mobility as a key element but as consubstantial with it. In some performances explored in this dissertation (lowriders, food trucks), the automobile transforms into a place in motion. Thus, the perpetual motion that has become associated with Los Angeles enters the field of vision through the window of an automobile. This then enables a spatial analysis of the automobile that recognizes it as the

[55] John Urry, *The Tourist Gaze* (London: Sage Publications, 2010), 161.

[56] As quoted in Charles M. Tatum, *Lowriders in Chicano Culture: From Low to Slow to Show* (Santa Barbara, CA: Greenwood, 2011), 8.

[57] Felipe Hinojosa, "Católicos Por La Raza and the Future of Catholic Studies," *American Catholic Studies* 127, no. 3 (2016): 26–29.

[58] Reyner Banham, *Los Angeles*: *The Architecture of Four Ecologies*, 5.

"hybrid space": simultaneously mobile and fixed, open and enclosed.[59] Its fixity stems from the ability to preserve undisturbed a traveler's immediate surroundings, and its mobility from the ability to transit on roadways.

Road Map for What Follows

The first chapter, "Playing Hopscotch on Dangerous Ground," explores an ambulatory opera featuring six Los Angeles-based composers, and the ways the opera interacted with community members in one of Los Angeles's most politically active communities, Boyle Heights. The opera, titled *Hopscotch: An Opera for 24 Cars*, was a celebrated site-based and technetronic musical performance that sought to bring opera into various communities in Los Angeles, many of which were economically disadvantaged. Loosely based on Julio Cortazar's novel *Rayuela,* this opera tells a nonchronological story of a woman's disappearance across time and space. The audience experiences the performances in both a limousine, where artists and audiences share an intimate space, and at a Central Hub, a large, outdoor pop-up structure reserved for non-paying audiences and the show's concluding performance each day. At the Central Hub, all twenty-four journeys are played simultaneously, creating a wishful panorama of life in Los Angeles where audiences experience a virtual performance space electronically. *Hopscotch*'s construction set out to make each of the limo-riding audience members the protagonist of their own experience, offering an unforgettably intimate experience. In the process, this opera set off a firestorm of protests that ultimately resulted in confrontations with community members. Informed by the concept of transit-oriented performance, this chapter analyzes ways in which communities' unstoppable motion collides with neoliberalism's powerful flows.

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[59] Jan Jennings, ed., *Roadside America: The Automobile in Design and Culture* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1990), 3.

Chapter Two, "Bodies in Motion: Body Art in Steel and Flesh," examines the modern-day yet indigenous phenomena of tattooing and lowriding as aesthetic visions, and highlights the gendered, intercultural, and political mobilities they enable. Tracing the historical roots of influences in lowriding from pre-Colombian times to the present, this chapter frames this culture as one that sees the automobile as a means of resistance to oppression along with a form of positive cultural expression. I analyze the automobile as both a dynamic moving site that counters class inequalities and a canvas for Chicana/os to express their cultural identity, faith, and history.[60] This chapter further postulates the automobile as a performing entity unto itself that is charged with a type of autonomous signification. I theorize the imagery airbrushed on lowrider hoods as a portable mural that contributes to a reshaping of the urban geography. Focusing on the cruising tradition in East Los Angeles as a starting point, the chapter moves into the ways that lowriders are employed to take over public spaces through both motion and stillness. Lowrider culture in Southern California and within Chicana/o social relations is a powerful example of minoritarian cultural production. An important yet undertheorized aesthetic, political, and gendered cultural object, lowrider culture asserts an alternative understanding of identity, not through segregating the lowrider enthusiast's body from that of his or her vehicle, but rather by linking these two canvases and stretching them into a continuous signifying spectrum of self-inscription.

Chapter Three, "Movable Feasts: Maize, Mestizaje, and Motility," explores Los Angeles's *loncheras*, or food trucks, as sites of cross-cultural gastronomical fusion, cultural appropriation, and intercultural solidarity. It examines the Los Angeles food truck scene, its

[60] Denise Michelle Sandoval, "Bajito y Suavecito/Low and Slow: Cruising through Lowrider Culture" (PhD diss., Claremont Graduate University, 2003).

history in Chicana/o culture, and the ways that it has pushed a once exclusively Chicana/o phenomenon into a mainstream and corporate one. It draws a historical connection between the Mexica's world view and mythology and the culture and politics surrounding contemporary loncheras, including new-age food trucks. By analyzing the forces that have pushed a once primarily Chicana/o phenomenon into the mainstream and tracing a line from loncheras to new-wave food trucks, the chapter theorizes present and future significations of these gastronomic performances.

The research methodology in Chapter One, "Playing Hopscotch on Dangerous Ground," and Chapter Two, "Bodies in Motion: Body Art in Steel and Flesh," involves some critical ethnographic techniques and archival research, as well as participant observation. Other examples of participant observations include visiting fusion, gourmet, and traditional food trucks, as seen in Chapter Three, "Movable Feasts: Maize, Mestizaje, and Motility." These chapters also involved reviews of existing ethnographic interviews, including oral history and personal narrative interviews. While this text is not strictly ethnographic, the investigations found throughout are informed by conversations and face-to-face encounters with various members of the Los Angeles community. Specifically, I see critical ethnography informing, to one extent or another, every chapter of my dissertation. In the first chapter, for example, I interview activists whose perspective on city-sanctioned art was left out of the event's official narrative. In the second chapter, I reach out to members of many Los Angeles–based lowrider clubs, visit car shows, and seek input from enthusiasts who provide a different perspective on this modern-day phenomenon. In the third chapter, I employ ethnographic data to not only include the voices of a variety of food truck owners but their working-class customers as well.

This methodology aims to answer the call for alternatives to what Smith names the "collective memory of imperialism" that "has been perpetuated through the ways in which knowledge about indigenous peoples was collected, classified and then represented in various ways back to the West, and then, through the eyes of the West, back to those who have been colonized."[61] I hope that this collection of research offers a more balanced telling of the social-historical moments which have birthed the modern Chicana/o, and meets the challenge set forth Smith, to always demystify and decolonize.[62]

[61] Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 1.

[62] Ibid., 17.

Chapter One
Playing Hopscotch on Dangerous Ground: Site-Specific, Transit-Oriented Opera in Los Ángeles

The phone call came to me just before the opera was set to open. The director explained that a small group of interlopers at a park in Boyle Heights were interfering with his opera's previews and complaining about its portrayal of people of color. He asked me to help him communicate with the group. One of the first things I did after agreeing to come on board to help mitigate the situation was arrange to see the production in its entirety; if I was to ameliorate the situation, I needed to see what the community was taking issue with and other moments along the routes where the production could be vulnerable to similar accusations. I then set out to speak to as many individuals involved in this issue as possible, one of whom was a vendor at the park named Maria (pseudonym). She was in her late fifties, and wore a worn but clean smock. She sold fresh *tamales*, *churros*, and drinks from a shopping cart for a living. Maria only spoke Spanish, and as it turned out had never seen an opera in her life. When I asked if she knew what the group of people with instruments in the park were doing she said, "it looks like a tour, those people have been here for six weeks. But I have no idea what they are doing, they don't buy anything from me."[1] Maria was one of the individuals most affected by this project, titled *Hopscotch: An Opera for 24 Cars*, a site-specific opera that employed an episodic model of geographical and narrative fragmentation to tell its story.[2]

[1] Quote translated from Spanish by author, from confidential conversation with woman, who requested a pseudonym, in Hollenbeck Park, 2015.

[2] When speaking of site-specific performance this dissertation employs Mike Pearson Michael Shanks's and Brian Tarr's definition of site-specific performances as "conceived for, mounted within and conditioned by the particulars of found space," a definition that has served as a benchmark for what site-specific performance has been for more than twenty years. See Mike Pearson, Gof Britt, and Brian Tarr, *Site-Specific Performance* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

In *Hopscotch*, the art ostensibly objectified, belittled, and enraged Boyle Heights residents and stakeholders by overlooking the possibility that site-specific performance, as Michael McKinnie states, "involves performance assuming a more responsive and dialectical relationship to the environment […] in which it occurs."[3] By focusing on a single episode, on one of the show's three routes from the series that took place through Boyle Heights, this chapter examines the pronounced way that opera was used in an attempt to subjugate a community. More relevant to this study, however, is *Hopscotch's* mobilization of opera on behalf of a neoliberal capitalist agenda, illustrating the ways that even arts nonprofits can behave like large corporations and harness the power of classical music not to elevate but to displace. In just one recent example, Pachelbel's "Canon in C" was employed by a Dallas 7-Eleven franchise as part of a program where they blast classical music outside their stores day and night "to steer homeless people away," a program which their corporate headquarters is quick to point out has "received very positive feedback."[4] Eric Tars, legal director for the National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty, summarized this weaponizing of music as follows: "it's kind of about who is entitled to public space, who is desirable and undesirable."[5] In Boyle Heights, this question was ultimately settled through force, when the community demonstrated that it has sonic canons of its own.

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[3] Michael McKinnie, "Part I: Site Specificity and Economics," in *Performing Site-Specific Theatre: Politics, Place, Practice*, ed. Anna Birch and Joanne Elizabeth Tompkins (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 21-33.

[4] Benjamin Oreskes, "Stores Using Music Not to Soothe but to Deter," *Los Angeles Times*, September 6, 2019, California section, https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2019-09-06/homeless-7-eleven-franchise-classical-music.

[5] Ibid.

Hopscotch was a large-scale collaboration between composers, dancers, musicians, and actors. The producing company, "The Industry," founded in 2011 by now-MacArthur Fellow Yuval Sharon, commissioned six librettists and six Los Angeles–based composers to write original music to create and texture the production's soundscape. [6] The musical compositions were modular to accommodate unexpected delays. When The Industry produced *Hopscotch*[7] the show enjoyed effusive—if not oleaginous[8]—publicity in the days leading up to its opening and during its run, with coverage from major newspapers and magazines across the country, which will be discussed shortly.

The show was written in the style of a television series; *Hopscotch's* writers gathered in a room and brainstormed the main story's arc. The production organized its twenty-four episodes, or "chapters," into a triadic format consisting of Red, Yellow, and Green routes. Each route contained eight distinct chapters with a dedicated assistant stage manager who usually sat in the front passenger seat with that chapter's promptbook. Some chapters were complex enough to require up to four production assistants to shepherd the audience through the performance space. At one location, the audience followed a guide through a luxury apartment complex and up to a rooftop pool lounge via a warren of hallways and a cargo elevator. In another location, audiences

[6] Sharon won this prize in no small part due to the staging of *Hopscotch*.

[7] The Industry has produced three large-scale site-specific opera performances in Los Angeles going back to 2012. Its inaugural show *Crescent City* was a large-scale, interdisciplinary opera by Anne LeBaron and Douglas Kearney. In 2013, The Industry staged *Invisible Cities*, an operatic adaptation of Italo Calvino's novel, composed by Christopher Cerrone, and in 2015 The Industry presented *Hopscotch*.

[8] In a November 24, 2015, email, the director stated that a reporter saw the protest discussed in this dissertation. The reporter did not pursue the story. *The Guardian* also inquired about the events described in this article—on April 6, 2016, the author of this dissertation sent a response on behalf of The Industry that read in part: *Hopscotch* looked to engage in positive dialogue with Serve the People-Los Angeles and it was dismissed by STPLA, as were all the good-faith adjustments made to insure a peaceful coexistence with all other activity at the park. Everywhere else *Hopscotch* performed (including elsewhere in Boyle Heights), the cast and creative team were met with enthusiasm, encouragement, and support from individuals, businesses, and organizations. Given the size and scope of *Hopscotch*, it is important to note that this isolated event was the exception and not the rule of an otherwise excellent community engagement.

made their way through the Million Dollar Theatre, a two-thousand-seat venue in the heart of downtown Los Angeles.[9] Three stage managers each oversaw one of the three routes. The audience (no more than four people) boarded a limousine at the designated starting point for their route and traveled as a private party in either a clockwise or a counterclockwise direction. The performance order of the chapters was nonchronological and each route, lasting approximately ninety minutes, ended where it began.

Hopscotch cast the streets and people from some of the most disadvantaged ethnic neighborhoods of Los Angeles as *mise-en-scène* only to have some people violently resist their roles. The performance featured more than a hundred actors, dancers, and musicians who performed along three separate routes through which audiences traveled to unknown destinations inside various limousines.[10] This deployment of a vehicle as both a centralizing motif and a primary means of delivering a narrative makes *Hopscotch* a transit-oriented performance. The final performance of the day on each route ended with a grand finale scene at the Central Hub, where paying audience members and performers exited the limousines onto a reserved space where a waiting crowd of non-paying audience members provided a group of ready-made witnesses to their grand disembarkation.

Hopscotch also included ten online chapters that featured short animated films dramatizing some of the show's major arcs. These online chapters were in addition to its thirty-six live ones, as well as its most impressive technological feat, the construction of the Central

[9] See photos in "Million Dollar Photo Gallery," accessed August 2018, site no longer available, http://www.milliondollar.la/Photo-Gallery.html.

[10] Only one location along the Los Angeles River used a vehicle other than a limousine (a Jeep) because of the rocky and uneven terrain.

Hub, an arena-type structure where up to 180 people could enjoy recorded and live-streamed scenes of the opera via headphones and television monitors on a first-come, first-served basis. Audience members at the Central Hub received a set of headphones connected to a remote-control box. Upon entering the Central Hub, the audience found twenty-four television screens positioned on the perimeter of the space, ten to twelve feet in the air; all monitors had a channel and color that corresponded to an audio feed for that chapter. The audiences could then connect the scenes with the sounds in their individual headsets by pressing that chapter's channel. Instructions were distributed in the form of an oversized trifold printed program titled *How to Experience the Central Hub*. The main printed program feature was a color-coded map (Green, Yellow, Red) showing the intersection of each route to facilitate audience members following individual limousine routes from beginning to end.

It was the limousines in Boyle Heights, a Los Angeles neighborhood at the forefront of the city's anti-gentrification movement, that represented the overall failure of the production team to understand and proactively engage the residents and stakeholders whom the performance would most directly affect. *Hopscotch* provides a valuable opportunity to examine the implications and complications of staging site-specific work inside Chicana/o community spaces without first considerately communicating with those whom the site-specific performance directly affects. *Hopscotch* also illuminates the way neoliberal forces position the wealthy as creators of aesthetic value and the economically disenfranchised as background extras obscuring autochthonous cultural and social economies. This way of reading our current historical moment shakes loose the questions that motivate this dissertation. What responsibility do site-specific artists have to engage community members and stakeholders in ways that will construct a mutually beneficial relationship? What gains (or losses) result when one achieves what Miwon

Kwon calls "a more meaningful and relevant connectedness with an audience" in a site-specific context?[11] Finally, what are the best practices for contemporary site-specific artists to employ when performing for an audience in a way that acknowledges a community's sense of ownership over place and space?

While tackling these questions and issues, I pay special attention to the subtleties involved in the implementation of various transit-oriented performance techniques. In this case, techniques created a situation that exoticized economically disenfranchised people who also live in a historically immigrant community populated primarily by Mexican Americans, Latina/os, and Chicana/os,[12] and thus created art that reified a virulent version of social pornography. Scholar Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett theorizes this concept as an exploitation of private and public disparities in class and culture.[13] In practice, social pornography is a public, pronounced, voluntary, and compensated community participation in an artistic performance where an audience can gaze upon an artwork featuring community members as participants.[14] I extend the concept of social pornography to account for cases where the community participation is involuntary and uncompensated, to highlight the voyeuristic and scopophilic nature of the audience's gaze.

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[11] Miwon Kwon, *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001), 89.

[12] There is yet no word, term, or phrase that completely and perfectly articulates the mass of community people discussed in this essay. All the possibilities to identify them as a monolith bring with them deficiencies, to solve this and for clarity the word Chicana/o will be privileged to discuss, however loosely all the people of the community.

[13] Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, *Destination Culture: Tourism, Museums, And Heritage* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 54.

[14] Maria Lind describes this concept as art that exhibits and makes 'exotic marginalized groups' out of community members. Lind gives an example of this when she speaks of *Bataille Monument* (exhibition, Documenta 11, Kassel, 2002) a project that paid participants to work on an installation but ultimately cast them as executors and not co-creators. See Maria Lind, "Actualisation of Space: The Case of Oda Projesi," in *From Studio to Situations: Contemporary Art and the Question of Context*, ed. Claire Doherty, (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2004), 114.

John Urry defines the tourist gaze as "a system of social activities and signs which locate the particular tourist practices…through the contrasts implied with non-tourist social practices."[15] Urry calls attention to this desire to gaze upon when he highlights the similarities between the study of the tourist's gaze and "deviance" or "bizarre and idiosyncratic social practices." Urry goes as far as to state that a tourist chooses the place they will gaze upon based on an "anticipation…of intense pleasures, either on a different scale or involving different senses from those customarily encountered."[16] Correspondingly, the tourist gaze and intense pleasure locate themselves in places that are outside of one's familiar surroundings.

Though these two concepts gesture to different elements involved in the visual consumption of exotic images, the tourist's gaze and social pornography are complementary and useful ideas for this analysis. One (the tourist gaze) speaks to the practice of gazing and the other (social pornography) speaks to one of its primary motivations. Joining together these concepts—of the tourist's gaze as inherently voyeuristic and the expanded notion of social pornography—makes it possible to read the volatile events that follow in a more theoretically rich fashion, given that the contrast between the paying audience and resident community of Boyle Heights was one of the major attractions *Hopscotch* capitalized on by providing their audience a glimpse into what is not readily available to them.

Audience members could experience *Hopscotch* in one of two ways: free of charge at a Central Hub described as "a large pop-up outdoor structure," located in the parking lot of the Southern California Institute of Architecture in downtown Los Angeles, or by purchasing a ticket

[15] Urry, *The Tourist Gaze*, 1–2.

[16] Ibid., 2.

[16] Ibid., 2.

to experience *Hopscotch* for $125 during a regular performance and $150 for the finale.[17] Tickets were for one of three routes along which limousines transported the audience to experience different episodes of the overall narrative; some of the routes included audiences seeing performers suspended from rafters, standing atop buildings, or sitting inside one's limousine. Though the show played a few scenes outside of the limousine on each of its three routes, the audience enjoyed most of the show from the interior of the limousine, peeping out into the street through the its dark tinted windows.

Site-specific performance in the United States is an under-investigated field of study, and transit-oriented performances like *Hopscotch* are even more so,[18] despite the fact that American site-specific performance has also begun to show up as a "catalyst for revitalization" that elected officials and developers increasingly employ.[19] Michael McKinnie points out that in cities around the world "site-specific performance has become tied up with the political-economic management of the city"; accordingly, not all site-specific performances are singularly and necessarily valuable (or detrimental) to a community simply because they take place in sites within its borders. [20] However, as Bertie Ferdman points out, the field's failure to discuss problematic events and issues around space, access, and privilege remains a pressing issue.[21] Therefore, the importance of knowing when a transit-oriented performance becomes valuable or

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[17] The Industry, *Hopscotch* Official Press Release (Los Angeles: 2015).

[18] The majority of scholarship concentrating on site-specific work manifestations in dance and art, leaving musical and theatrical site-specific performances largely unexplored, to date there is no monograph available on American site-specific theatre and only a dozen or so Canadian and European edited collections.

[19] Andrew Ross, *Nice Work If You Can Get It: Life and Labor in Precarious Times*, e-book ed. (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 37.

[20] McKinnie, "Part I," in *Performing Site-Specific Theatre*, 27.

[21] Bertie Ferdman, *Off Sites: Contemporary Performance Beyond Site-Specific* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2018).

detrimental is important, and learning *what and how* transit-oriented performance specifically means is critical.

Chalking the Lines

According to *The New Yorker* magazine, *Hopscotch* moved people according to an "ingenious scheme."[22] *The New York Times* called it "a trippy exploration of time and memory."[23] *The Los Angeles Times* went as far as to herald *Hopscotch* as "a transformative moment for an art form."[24] Despite this uncritical critical acclaim, *Hopscotch* vitiated its art by failing to remain sensitive to the political history and socioeconomic realities of the ethnic community members whom the performance most affected. As D. Soyini Madison articulates the responsibilities involved with site-specific work, "entering a public sphere enlivens scrutiny, enlarges responsibility, and cracks open into plain sight hidden wrongs."[25] By not reaching out to members of key ethnic communities directly and from the start, *Hopscotch* claimed the realm of creativity as a property of the cultural elite and became vulnerable to the accusations hurled against it that ultimately resulted in a set of confrontations that tested the very premise of the dissemination of opera and performance outside of opulent stages.[26]

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[22] Alex Ross, "Opera on Location: A High-Tech Work of Wagnerian Scale is Being Staged Across Los Angeles," *The New Yorker*, November 8, 2015, http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/11/16/opera-on-location.

[23] William Robin, "'Hopscotch' Takes Opera into the Streets," *The New York Times*, October 30, 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/31/arts/music/hopscotch-takes-opera-into-the-streets.html?_r=0.

[24] Mark Swed, "Musical Ride-Along: Moving Around L.A., 'Hopscotch' Sometimes Can Transport," *Los Angeles Times*, 2015.

[25] D. Soyini D. Madison, *Acts of Activism: Human Rights as Radical Performance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

[26] However, *Hopscotch* moved quickly to adjust to this shortcoming, including bringing the author of this dissertation (who in 2014 consulted on The Industry's *Invisible Cities*, an opera performed in Los Angeles's Union Station) on board as a consultant and Spanish-language translator.

Hopscotch took place in locations as varied as the inside of apartment buildings, the newly refurbished Los Angeles river trail, notable Los Angeles locations such as Mariachi Plaza and Evergreen Cemetery in Boyle Heights, and architectural landmarks such as the Million Dollar Theater and the Bradbury Building in downtown Los Angeles. This transit-oriented brand of site-specific performance produces many questions about the ways mobility, location, and engagement influence a work's signification for performers, audience, and community members who live in the location where the performance is taking place. Meditating on these questions helps articulate how community members from the disadvantaged edge of the social spectrum reconfigured and then asserted a public park into a personal space by defiantly returning the gaze visited upon them by an opera company and their audience. In this way, the community members countered the outside forces with personal and intimate bonds that reflected belonging and kinship.

Hopscotch establishes the need to consider issues such as California's increasing wealth gap, and the ways in which the creative economy interacts with people of color and their spaces according to their wealth-generating capacity. When *Hopscotch* took place in Hollenbeck Park in Boyle Heights, it sparked a cultural uprising from community members and stakeholders who saw the show as a harbinger of gentrification. The concern in this case seems justified, since it is communities of color, and Chicana/o communities in particular, who have seen the most drastic increase in homelessness in the past few years.[27]

In the 1890s when wealthy landowners William H. Workman and Elizabeth Hollenbeck donated the twenty-five acres of land that the park now sits on to the city of Los Angeles, they

[27] Gale Holland and Doug Smith, "L.A. County Homelessness Jumps A 'Staggering' 23% as Need Far Outpaces Housing, New Count Shows," *Los Angeles Times*, May 13, 2017, http://www.latimes.com/local/lanow/la-me-ln-homeless-count-20170530-story.html.

did so under the condition that the city commit to allocating $10,000 over a two-year period for improvements to the park. This commitment of public funds seems to have been key to making Hollenbeck Park a highly visited pleasure ground. In 1905, Workman and Hollenbeck subdivided their substantial property surrounding the park into the Workman Park and the Hollenbeck Heights Tracts, which they then advertised as "Situated Just East of and Overlooking Beautiful Hollenbeck Park."[28] This business-savvy manipulation of public resources masquerading as philanthropy is articulated by Ferdman as follows: "Neoliberal economies have also greatly shifted views of private and public space, in particular as space considered public increasingly reflect private-public partnership in the interest of capital."[29] This privileging of moneyed might was one of the examples local community activists invoked to support their reading of *Hopscotch's* claims of aesthetic and altruistic motivation. The Industry's significant support from prominent Los Angeles real estate developers was also an issue.[30]

When asked about Boyle Heights's current battle with gentrification, Harry Gamboa Jr., who grew up in the neighborhood and is one of the founders of Asco, a famously confrontational and scatological art collective,[31] said, "some communities don't have a background of resistance…but Boyle Heights does and it has an intellectual base that goes back to the Chicano

[28] The March 5, 1905 edition of *The Herald* has an advertisement of the Hollenbeck Park Heights Tract, subdivided by Elizabeth Hollenbeck, featuring two views of the park to lure prospective buyers. See *The Herald* "Hollenbeck Park Heights Tract Ad," Newspapers.com, March 5, 2015, http://newspapers.com.

[28] Ferdman, *Off Sites*, 8.

[30] Developers gave both financial support and facilitated *Hopscotch*'s access to some of the historical buildings and spaces.

[31] One of Asco's most famous works is titled Asshole Mural, which features Asco members occupying the space around the cloaca of the Santa Monica sewage drainpipe. See photo and article by Bryan Wilson, "Art History Berkeley," accessed October 23, 2016, file no longer available, http://arthistory.berkeley.edu/pdfs/faculty%20publications/Bryan-Wilson/jbwAsco.pdf.

Movement."[32] This background of resistance has today been remanifested in a decidedly more aggressive and still scatological way, evidenced most literally when an arts nonprofit was deemed a gentrifying space and had feces flung at its building.[33] Today, Boyle Heights is seen by many as a real estate goldmine, so Gamboa's invocation represents a call for current activists to defend their community by drawing upon both Boyle Heights's past confrontational strategies and its rich history of resistance to exploitation. This call has been heard. As scholar Marianna Ritchey points out, "today, Boyle Heights is home to many revolutionary activist groups… joining together to resist the increasingly powerful gentrifying processes that they feel are transforming their community in harmful ways and without their input or consent."[34]

Part of the problem with *Hopscotch* was its staging, which made it difficult for the show staff and audience in their limousines to connect with community members outside of the insulated and exclusionary moving environment of luxury cars. This staging also prevented producers from fully recognizing that even the poor and disenfranchised have the capacity to lay claim to a site. As Melanie Keitel and Carolyn Pavlik have put it: "engagement with place has its political consequences."[35] A coalition of community activists and members of the Roosevelt High School marching band challenged *Hopscotch's* audience, cast, and crew, creating a battle of the bands and cultures. Though the disenfranchised may not control the historical archive,

[32] Carolina Miranda, "Watchful: Boyle Heights Has So Many New Galleries. Has Gentrification Begun?," *Los Angeles Times*, March 29, 2016.

[33] Ibid.

[34] Marianna Ritchey, *Composing Capital: Classical Music in the Neoliberal Era* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019), 103.

[35] Melanie Kloetzel and Carolyn Pavlik, eds., *Site Dance: Choreographers and the Lure of Alternative Spaces* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2011).

their repertoire of daily activities compose a cultural definition and ownership of an urban site.[36] Moreover, as the performers of *Hopscotch* learned, when the residents' ethnic identity enmeshes itself with a location, the community forges a powerful affiliation with a site that outsiders who attempt to signify its meaning must register. As Elin Diamond aptly articulates, no artist "can shake off the referential frame imposed by text, mode of production, and spectator's narrativity."[37] When a site-specific production chooses, as *Hopscotch* did, to appropriate cultural space, stories, and symbols, it should do so judiciously to better manage—if not prevent—serious, visceral resistance.

According to its commemorative program, *Hopscotch* "helps Los Angeles get to know itself better, to rejoice in the diversity and character that distinguish this city."[38] *Hopscotch* facilitated interracial encounters, but these encounters did not foster much visible rejoicing on the part of any Boyle Heights community members. What *Hopscotch* did in effect was expose fissures in the show's core concept: that opera could step into the streets of one of the most dynamic and ethnically rich cities in the world without a planned engagement with disenfranchised members of the communities in the locations where the opera took place. The omission of a thoughtful consideration of diversity, aesthetic representation, and strategic interaction with Los Angeles's massive ethnic diversity proved to be a complication. The events caused by this omission also bring into question *Hopscotch's* goal of dissolving the isolation, of

[36] I draw from Diana Taylor's work on *The Archive and the Repertoire* primarily for the way it reasserts the power of an embodied and ephemeral repertoire as a means of storing and transmitting historical, political, and cultural knowledge through gestures, dance, and song. Taylor's work is also useful in framing points of contact between diametrically opposed groups thrust into settings of discovery and conquest. See Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire*.

[37] Elin Diamond, *Unmasking Memesis: Essays on Feminism and Theater* (London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2006), vii.

[38] The Industry, *Hopscotch: A Mobile Opera* Commemorative Show Booklet (Los Angeles: 2015), 7.

driving into "an ecstatic vision of community in Los Angeles."[39] For, according to a group of Boyle Heights stakeholders, it takes more than an assemblage of "all-white performers…all-white staff and…all-white audience members" to bring art to Boyle Heights.[40]

One of *Hopscotch's* more developed episodes, *First Kiss*, took place at Hollenbeck Park. It featured one of the largest casts dedicated to one location. At the beginning of the show, two soon-to-be lovers are set to begin their first date. Lucha ("battle" or "struggle" in Spanish), played by Sarah Beaty, and Jameson, played by Victor Mazzone, await the audience.[41] Two other key players—Stephanie Williams, a parasol twirling roller-skater, and Linnea Sablosky on *Cajón*—wait just outside the audience's view. This chapter's full cast wears late-1950s outfits inspired by *The Pajama Game*, a Hollywood musical, of which a large musical number ("Once a Year Day") was shot on location at Hollenbeck Park. Lucha wears yellow, Mazzone a white shirt, black pants, shoes, and tie. The choice of costume and musical instrument indicate that the performance and music sprang from American popular and modern culture, rather than European classical influences.

After the four-member audience exited their limousine, their guide encouraged them to stroll behind accordionist Isaac Schankler as he and his *legato* melody snaked their way towards the front of a bandshell, picking up Jameson and Lucha on the way.[42] This part of the show takes

[39] The Industry, *Hopscotch* Commemorative Show Booklet, 8.

[40] Serve the People Los Angeles Blog, 2015, accessed March, 2016; site no longer available.

[41] Sarah Beaty specializes in contemporary music; she premiered in *Invisible Cities* with The Industry. She is a founding member of the contemporary chamber ensemble Blue Streak. Victor Mazzone is a native Kentuckian who landed in LA via a degree in voice studies and theatre from Northwestern University. The supporting cast for this episode also included Logan Hone as a saxophone player, Stefan Kac on tuba, Isacc Schankler on accordion, and TJ Troy as another percussionist.

[42] The show's format had only one audience group aboard the limousines to begin the show. The other group of four simply followed the performers from the waiting area.

the audience toward the park's prominent lake and then to a patch of grass approximately twenty feet away from the front of the bandshell. The amphitheater's stage sits about four feet off the ground, with the bandshell as a backdrop. On this stage and in front of the lovers, Williams and Sablosky have a choreographed musical interaction involving Williams gracefully gliding on her roller-skates as Sablosky taps a barely audible rhythm on her *Cajón.* Lucha and Jameson watch this duet as part of their date while they continue to engage in their *recitative*.

The scene stages Jameson and Lucha's first date. They greet each other with the trepidation and seduction of relationship's beginning with no inkling of the abandonment that is to come, or, in keeping with *Hopscotch's* simultaneous format, the abandonment that has always and already happened. The Anglo Jameson seduces the Mexican Lucha and abandons her after she falls in love with him, destroying her hopes forever. This story inadvertently recalls a ubiquitously known cultural archive for the Chicana/o community of Boyle Heights and beyond: *La Malinche,* a young indigenous woman, seduced and abandoned by Hernán Cortéz. La Malinche, or Malintzin as she was originally known, was handed over to long-distance slave traders between the age of eight and twelve. She was then purchased by Mayas; she worked as a slave for about five years and became fluent in Chontal and Yucatec Maya, before being handed over in tribute to the Spanish.

It is worth noting that the term *tlacotli*, meaning "slave," referred to prisoners of war designated as human sacrifice, burden bearers employed by merchants, and "most often, to girls and women in households doing domestic work and serving as concubines."[43] It was in this way

[43] Camilla Townsend, *Malintzin's Choices: An Indian Woman in the Conquest of Mexico* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2006), 19.

that this illiterate but polyglot teenage girl would become, after smallpox, the single most important weapon the Spaniards had in the battle to conquer Mexico. These early scenes in *Hopscotch*, then, are sections atop a motif of colonial seduction and abandonment that plays out as both historical events and a romantic date in the multicultural city of Los Angeles in the new millennium before a Chicana/o community who are in effect the cultural progenies of La Malinche. *Hopscotch's* reiteration of this seduction and abandonment reveals how potent and lasting the legacy of this original seduction and abandonment is for the people in Boyle Heights. Recent scholarship feminist scholars such as Gaspar de Alba have countered the characterization of La Malinche as a simple victim and pointed out that this view robs her of her agency, but this point of view was not available to the community members who reacted to the play's immediate content.

Here one should not assume that *Hopscotch* knowingly pressed on this historical point, simply that had they invited more community input earlier in the process, the events that transpired could have been avoided. The gendered and political implication of this episode's plot can also be read as a modern manifestation of a subgenre of Nahua songs that center around the persona of the concubine. In one such example, titled "Chalca Woman's Song," the singer "veers between trying to make the best of her life with her new lord and expressing agonizing pain and regret."[44] These mixed feelings are familiar to many Chicana/os who exist in a liminal space between Mexico and the United States of America, just as Martin, Malinche and Cortez's son, straddled the Indigenous and European worlds. This straddling brought a price then just as it does now, for Martin would fall into the hands of Spanish torturers during his adult life.

[44] Townsend, *Malintzin's Choices*, 19.

As Lucha and Jameson continue on their path, leaving Williams and Sablosky behind, the audience shadows them as they stroll towards the lake holding hands. At this point the audience could hear Marc Lowenstein's musical composition the clearest. The next part of the scene has a small band form, with the addition of Logan Hone's saxophone and Stefan Kac's tuba to Isaac Schankler's accordion, in a romantic texturing of a conversation and song inside the covering of a boathouse. Erin Young wrote the text spoken along the stroll. The text does not help to ameliorate the communities' concerns about The Industry "bringing opera to the masses," whether they want it or not.[45] At one moment, Lucha praises the beauty of the park's avian residents, only to have Jameson respond loudly "yeah but it's horrible how those children throw rocks at them."[46] Whether this specific line references reality or not, it constitutes yet another articulation of the mindset that Taylor expresses as a "colonialist discourse that produces the native as negativity or lack."[47] The natives (in this case, community residents) do not understand as clearly as the colonizers (*Hopscotch's* audience, cast, and crew) how to properly deal with the natural resources around them, including perhaps the real estate.

After a performance inside the boathouse, Lucha and Jameson begin a walk back towards the street, stopping for the scene's climax, complete with a musical crescendo that adds TJ Troy's percussion. Until this point, Troy had been observing as an anachronistically dressed ice-cream cart attendee. Troy begins to use his ice-cream cart as a drum set and his rhythm leads our lovers to their first kiss. Fittingly, the overall musical composition for this chapter, originally

[45] Serve the People blog.

[46] Erin Young, "First Kiss scene text," in *Hopscotch*.

[47] Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire*, 64.

conceived by the *Hopscotch* director and the composer, seems to oscillate and then build from a *moderato* to a more *lento* pace and back again, resolving in an *allegro* fashion. Despite musical variations, the performance provoked a visceral reaction from the enraged community members, who took to smearing away the chalk lines that *Hopscotch* used to transform a public space into a private place.

Casting the First Stone

On typical weekends there are at least half a dozen vendors spread across Hollenbeck Park, selling everything from shaved ice to *churros* to *tamales*. The vendors cater to the constant stream of people enjoying the park, who stroll along the lake's pedestrian bridge and use the park's features as backdrops for various *in situ* photography sessions. The final day of performances for *Hopscotch* happened on November 22, 2015. It was early in the morning, but the park was already filling up with its usual traffic: vendors prepping for a regular Sunday in the park, families lounging near the lake, and a group of Roosevelt High School marching band members rehearsing on a hill in the northern part of the park. These students would later reify their school's motto, "don't flinch, don't foul, hit the line hard," by playing the most significant role in the day's protest.[48]

All looked normal but for a Chicana woman, described by a park employee as a local community member, who arrived around 10:00 AM equipped with noisemakers and a sign proclaiming the day's performance and the production as a whole unnecessary, unwanted, and unwelcomed. Her handmade sign read "your 'ART' is displacing people of Color #AntiGentrification" (Fig. 1). As the performance began, the woman with the sign approached

[48] Roosevelt High School, home page, accessed March 22, 2016, site no longer available, http://www.rooseveltlausd.org/.

the audience and performers, and began to heckle and disrupt the show by blowing on a whistle. Some of the audience (perhaps not knowing if the woman was part of the show) engaged her in earnest conversation, and others informed her, with threatening language, that she had no right to disturb the performance. During one such exchange, a white male audience member stepped out of the limousine and his role as a tourist and advanced towards the Chicana female protestor to silence her through physically menacing behavior and expletives. The exchange was serious enough to warrant an intervention from both *Hopscotch's* security guard and the park's on-site representative. Jon D. Rossini identifies a possible motivation for this behavior as a reaction to the Chicana/o body becoming a "synecdoche for an emerging political resistance and the potential transformation of public space and everyday life."[49] Thus both the Chicana female protestor's body and her political resistance must be contained and controlled in order to preserve the shows hierarchical integrity.

In this scenario, the white male audience member actively protected the integrity of his purchased opera experience through an aggressive and abusive public defense against the Chicana woman who injected herself into the action of the performance. Through her action she simultaneously works for, with, and against *Hopscotch*, in an attempt to recast herself, and by extension the community's Chicana/o identity. She challenges the white male by transforming his tour of an urban jungle into a struggle to maintain his positionality as the unquestioned dominant observer. The Chicana woman places this white male audience member in a paradoxical situation. She needs to be silenced, and eventually erased, yet she is vitally needed in the present to adorn the show's backdrop with her exotic body. Naturally her exoticism holds

[49] Jon D. Rossini, *Contemporary Latina/O Theater Wrighting Ethnicity* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2008), 3.

only for the opera's performers and audiences, since for the community in the park she is familiar and indigenous to the place. Were the Chicana woman to disappear from the scene, so would a key element of the performance that the white male audience member has purchased. He owns this creative experience, and yet one of the show's extras wrests it from him.

After this altercation the protestor posted a mass invitation to Facebook for people to come to Hollenbeck and protest gentrifiers. *Hopscotch's* production manager, Ash Nichols, was the first member of *Hopscotch's* production team to arrive on the scene to help manage the situation, which was initially relatively benign, but escalated quickly after his arrival. It fell to Nichols to activate some safety precautions, including calling in an alternate limousine in case of a potential cast and crew evacuation. After the cast's first break, the women approached the bandshell. where the fifteen or so members of the Roosevelt High marching band were rehearsing and briefed them on the issue. This quickly mobilized the youths and the band began to gear up their instruments, determined to do their part to defend Boyle Heights against the encroaching forces of gentrification.[50]

During the period that the students were preparing themselves, *Hopscotch's* leadership held a hurried vote among the cast and crew and decided to continue with the remaining shows. As the students approached the performance area and began to play from their musical repertoire to disrupt the performance of *Hopscotch*, musicians picked up the students' melody and increased their instruments' volume to subsume that of the marching band, thereby integrating the students' protest into what had now become not a performance of opera but an assertion of dominance. After an initial period of disorientation, the students decided that this type of

[50] The instruments consisted primarily of the brass section of the band and included: tubas, trombones, trumpets, and saxophones.

engagement cast them as *mise-en-scène* for the show, just as their neighborhood had been. The students refused to embrace *Hopscotch's* casting of them as extras and cast themselves as leads through an aggressive performance of resistance that will be discussed in depth shortly.

Hopscotch's musical director Marc Lowenstein framed this confrontation as a reconciliatory gesture on the part of the *Hopscotch* performers and told *The Guardian*: "I asked our own musicians to play along with the high school players, to engage them."[51] Lowenstein's attempt to engage the marching band students read to them as trivializing their grievances and protest, in effect causing an escalation that manifested in a cacophonous battle.[52] When two sonic repertoires collided, *Hopscotch* betrayed its initial desire to archive the community by using its repertoire to drown out the community's unscripted music. According to Lowenstein, the ultimate loss was for the students, for as he put it after the confrontation, "we could have helped those kids, given them classes on how to play real music, but now they can forget about it, they don't know how to act."[53]

Losing Balance

A particularly aggressive group calling the opera a gentrifying endeavor was Serve the People, Los Angeles (STPLA), a New Communist Party-affiliated group dedicated to serving the people of Los Angeles, and specifically the disadvantaged residents of Boyle Heights, East Los Angeles, and Echo Park who are oppressed in part by "capitalism, patriarchy, racism, and

[51] Rory Carroll, "'Hope Everyone Pukes on Your Artisanal Treats': Fighting Gentrification, LA-Style," *The Guardian*, April 19, 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/apr/19/los-angeles-la-gentrification-resistance-boyle-heights.

[52] Phone conversation with park security, 2015.

[53] Phone conversation with park security, 2015.

national oppression."[54] This group has made a name for itself by regularly distributing food and clothes to the needy of Boyle Heights and by confronting groups that it sees as gentrifying forces. STPLA core members are predominantly Chicana/o; a majority of them have family living or working in Boyle Heights.[55] In December 2015, they confronted a group of University of California, Los Angeles urban planning students on a walking tour of Boyle Heights and escorted them out of the neighborhood, asking them not to come back. STPLA later blogged that Boyle Heights is "under attack in the form of gentrification and therefore must be defended."[56] STPLA contended that the community was being exploited and was involuntarily (and without remuneration) serving as *mise-en-scène* for *Hopscotch*, and that this fact compelled the community to both resist and counterattack. This "group of exclusively white people strolling around the park" had to be stopped and they were the group to do it.[57] Members of *Hopscotch* disputed that STPLA and its members are a part of the Boyle Heights community, opting to characterize the group as opportunistic interlopers and obstructionists instead. STPLA's only response to this claim was to dismiss the accusation as a typical ploy employed by gentrifiers saying, "they always want to make people with problems seem like they are a problem."[58]

The first clash between *Hopscotch* and STPLA took place during rehearsals on Sunday October 4, 2015, after an STPLA member spotted a person they described as being dressed like a pseudo-vaudevillian in front of a *paletero* (popsicle vendor) cart, playing it like a drum. This

[54] Members of STPLA spoke under condition that all quotes from its individual members be attributed to the whole of the organization in keeping with their communal code of conduct.

[55] Phone conversation with park security, 2015.

[56] Brittny Mejia, "Gentrification Pushes Up Against Boyle Heights; and Vice Versa," *Los Angeles Times*, March 3, 2016, http://www.latimes.com/local/california/la-me-las-palomas-gentrification-20160303-story.html.

[57] Serve the People blog.

[58] Conversation with STPLA members at Hollenbeck Park, October 2015.

character was particularly offensive to STPLA because they interpreted the casting of a white man in this role as mocking the real-life Chicana/o *paleteros* who make their living in the park. In fact, all performers and production team members dedicated to this location were white at the time of this clash.[59] A confrontation ensued, during which a white *Hopscotch* assistant stage manager produced a city permit and waved it around as proof that the production had a right to use the park: "We have a permit to be here! See this paper it gives us the right!" To his declaration of right, a Chicano member of the group responded, "we don't need no permit to fuck you up!"[60]

As this anecdote illustrates, both sides of this issue justify and fortify their perspectives and rights to inhabit the same space, on the one hand, one group by invoking the unfettered privilege to defend a *de facto* ownership of territory, and the other by an official document from the city. For the stage manager, the permit is his archival document recording *Hopscotch's* sanctioned presence, purchased months before the event. For the Chicano youth, ownership of the space rests on a repertoire of temporal, historical, and corporeal occupation. They are saying the exact same thing, but approaching it from opposite sides of the same Möbius strip. One privileges an archive, and the other a repertoire.[61]

After this initial miscommunication, STPLA cast themselves as the spokespeople for the inhabitants of Hollenbeck Park and the wider Boyle Heights community. This leadership role was enabled by their six-month long residency in the park, during which they distributed food

[59] This was the event after which Sharon called me for help.

[60] It was after this altercation that the production team of Hopscotch decided to mobilize to defuse conflict in this location. Some of the steps they took included bringing the author on as a translator (English/Spanish) for their promotional material, hiring a community member as a security guard, offering a lottery for free tickets to people from the zip codes in the area and setting up a meeting to listen to the communities' grievances.

[61] See Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire*.

and clothing, in addition to their association with actual Chicana/o Boyle Heights residents and vendors. Feeling empowered, STPLA proceeded to interrupt *Hopscotch*'s performance by heckling the performers and agitating the nearby ducks into quacking to drown out the music and text of the show. STPLA's proclaimed that "the oppressed nationalities of Boyle Heights and East Los Angeles do not want empty art that says nothing of Chicano/Mexican/New Afrikan struggle and history."[62] Unfortunately, *Hopscotch*'s cast inadvertently escalated the situation by reportedly yelling "We're not gentrifiers! We're putting on an art show! We're entertaining the community!" Examining this rejoinder, one clearly sees a colonial logic at play; this response highlights an ethnocentricity whereby "community" is redefined not as the people who continuously live, work, and play in Hollenbeck Park, but as *Hopscotch*'s paying audience. This clash escalated to a more pronounced conflict that led STPLA to write this part of a blog post about *Hopscotch*:

> Boyle Heights is not a safe space for their circus, that the masses of Boyle Heights won't tolerate gentrification, that they are, in fact, in danger, that they will get physically hurt. Not by us. But by the people…And for the sake of their safety, they should immediately leave.[63]

STPLA then overlay their repertoire of live verbal threats with an archived and more direct message to *Hopscotch*: "Death to gentrification!...It won't stop unless you stop it!"[64] Here, it appears that STPLA considers threats of violence an appropriate means to arrest *Hopscotch's* performances in this community. This aggressive rhetoric is quickly becoming a hallmark of the activism in the Los Angeles anti-gentrification movement, and the Los Angeles Police

[62] Serve the People blog.

[63] Serve the People blog.

[64] Ibid.

Department has begun investigating some anti-gentrification activity under the classification of "hate crimes."[65]

Thus, STPLA's summarizing of *Hopscotch* and projects like it as nothing more than door jambs for "white artists and hipsters and gentrifiers and city council sellouts and city agencies who don't give a fuck about building proletarian power and preserving community" emerges from a centering of the proletariat.[66] Andrew Ross articulates the message underpinning the above sentiment as "a rubric to convert large sectors of social housing into luxury residences for prized beneficiaries of the creative economy."[67] In fairness, it was not the stated goal of *Hopscotch* to employ or develop best practices for performing opera outside of opulent theatres and among communities of color in a respectful and collaborative way; *Hopscotch* essentially did the best they could under the given circumstances, perhaps with a heavy dose of smug naiveté.

Returning to the interaction between the marching band and *Hopscotch* musicians, the marching band began to play in a mode of *counter-identification*, playing some of the same notes as the *Hopscotch* players and distorting them in a moment that José Esteban Muñoz might call "a strategy of resistance."[68] This strategy succors the minority subject in dealing with a "phobic majoritarian public sphere that continuously elides or punishes the existence of subjects who do not conform to the phantasm of normative citizenship."[69] In this instance, however, the students

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[65] Brittny Mejia, "Boyle Heights Vandalism Seen as Possible Hate Crime: Graffiti on Art Galleries Could Be Reaction to Gentrification Fears," *Los Angeles Times*, 2016.

[66] Serve the People blog.

[67] Ross, *Nice Work If You Can Get It*, 32.

[68] José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 4.

[69] Ibid.

would not be absorbed. STPLA arrived just as the marching band students were leading the confrontation with their instruments at full volume. During a break in the action of *Hopscotch,* a cast member made a sign reading, "I am a Boyle Heights Resident. We are not rude."[70] The sign was held aloft and waved. He proceeded to approach the group of youths and then brandished the sign in one youth's face; the youth slapped the sign out of his hands and stomped on it. In the ensuing moments, one of the protesters struck a female *Hopscotch* stage manager on the arm. Despite this altercation, *Hopscotch* chose to remain at the park. However, after seeing how the tension had escalated, audience members were no longer allowed to exit the limousine to walk onto the park grounds as part of the show. Instead, the performers only gathered at the limousine's windows and played. But by this time the students would not be ignored. The final day of *Hopscotch* at Hollenbeck would feature an unscripted performance of community engagement.

When the *Hopscotch* cast went to the limousine's window for the next performance, approximately twenty activists and student band members loudly and menacingly surrounded the cast, first corralling and then effectively trapping them inside a small space between the limousine and a crescent of bodies, brass, and sound. It was not until this moment that a retreat began, and the audience and performers hurried to get into a backup limousine as the community of protesters cheered, jeered, and waved their middle fingers and the marching band played a mocking tune followed by a victorious march. As the last performer entered the limousine, the group of community activists expectorated at and pelted the limousine with dirt and pebbles. Vera Caro, one of the community organizers present at the site that day, posted a video of the event, and summed up the day's events as follows:

[70] This claim of residency by this cast member is disputed by STPLA.

> Let this serve as a reminder that Boyle Heights does not want gentrifiers in the community, and that residents aren't going to sit idly as gentrifiers try to Columbus their neighborhood. Such a brilliant intervention, and one of the white males [sic] gentrifiers had the audacity to tell protesters that they were 'trying to bring art to Boyle Heights!' Hahahaha. Some people have no sense of history.[71]

Here Caro's version of history and the events is clear. She both transforms "Columbus" into a verb and invokes the performed, embodied, lived, and familiar repertoire by dismissing the idea that Boyle Heights invites, wants, or needs imported art.

Despite the vigorous opposition to *Hopscotch* in this one location, the fact that resistance was concentrated implies that it is unjustified to call *Hopscotch* a completely unproductive endeavor. It was an audacious, unconventional, ambitious, and perhaps truly unprecedented artistic experiment. In this context, the production's greatest achievement was not its aesthetic content but its execution, which in this location was admittedly momentously flawed. *Hopscotch* was completely unprepared to deal with the consequences of performing in communities where the historical memory of outsiders taking more than they bring is alive and well.

Hopscotch's inattentiveness to the inhabitants of the space they worked to arrogate manifests in claims by some of the *Hopscotch* actants that community members were not active partners and collaborators, but rather clusters of benign logistical obstacles or, in some cases, pests to be eradicated. An illustration of the consequences of this inattentiveness lies in the way reporters represented the community. *New Yorker* staff writer Alex Ross described a *quinceañera* during a scene from *Hopscotch* in Hollenbeck Park as "a young woman who had just been married, in a flamboyant purple dress…"[72] A Catholic coming-of-age ritual not unlike a Jewish *bat mitzvah*, a *quinceañera* is actually extremely popular in the Chicana/o communities

[71] Post quoted in its entirety.

[72] Ross, "Opera on Location."

living in the United States. Ross's misidentification could be an innocent illustration of how our experiences are limited to the categorical systems we know, similar to the story of Marco Polo who, upon seeing a rhinoceros for the first time, mistook it for a unicorn.

Conversely, this misidentification of a sacred ritual for young Chicana girls could be a sign of a much more detrimental semiosis, one that is unwilling or unable to account for any phenomena outside of its privileged colonial and Anglo-normative structure. Although Ross was not directly involved with the production of *Hopscotch,* his article is an important part of its overall signification as interpreted by STPLA and other Boyle Heights readers. It is clear that many other individuals involved with *Hopscotch* more directly suffered from the same cultural myopia as Ross did, as illustrated by events such as one of the ushers shooing away an older Chicano man who came too close to one of *Hopscotch's* limousines during one of the performances,[73] and an interaction between Ashley Allen, a non-Chicana woman who plays Lucha, and The Industry's founder Yuval Sharon.[74] In an ad-lib moment, Allen says "my dress is way better [than] that," as she spots a *quinceañera* dress displayed outside a store, which causes Sharon to laugh excitedly.[75] In this speech, act, and laughter is the legitimization and reinforcement of *Hopscotch*'s position of power over the communities it utilizes as *mise-en-scène*. Allen articulates a moment that Taylor describes as moving from the "here to an exotic 'there,' transferring the not-ours to the ours, translating the other's systems of communication into one [Allen] claim[s] to understand."[76] Sharon thinks this is funny. Sharon's risible attitude

[73] Interview with audience member, October 2015.

[74] Because all three of the main characters were played by different actors, subjectivity is purposefully and blatantly underdefined in the piece.

[75] Zachary Pincus-Roth, "L.A.'s Crazy Opera Inside a Fleet of Moving Limos," *LA Weekly*, October 20, 2015, https://www.laweekly.com/l-a-s-crazy-opera-inside-a-fleet-of-moving-limos/.

[76] Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire*, 54.

towards the community has been richly rewarded too. After *Hopscotch*'s success he won the MacArthur "Genius" Grant, became the first American director at the venerable Bayreuth Festival in Germany, and had one of his operas nominated for a Grammy.[77]

These examples, however, are tame when compared with a *New Yorker* story in which Jonah Levy (a trumpet player in the show) equates himself to a "musical sniper" who waits on a building rooftop until the go signal. Just what or whom Mr. Levy is shooting from his perch is not made completely clear, though Ross does venture to double down on this unfortunate metaphor by calling Levy "an assassin of the ordinary" at the close of his article.[78] Just what exactly "ordinary" means in this case is not clear, but what is clear is that this metaphor proves itself to be ill-fated, for as Ritchey puts it "art can indeed be a weapon" and that "part of practicing thoughtful citizenship under neoliberalism entails acknowledging this fact, as well as clearly identifying what such a weapon ought (and ought not) to be aimed toward."[79]

Ross seems to have inadvertently privileged opera as a civilizing force and to implied that *Hopscotch* is a grand event in the battle between civilization and barbarism; Ross's quote also evokes the historical violence used by colonizing forces to subjugate a people deemed uncultured and uncivilized. Or as STPLA would put it, "their inaccessible, white high-art is a cultural attack on the history and contemporary culture of Boyle Heights."[80] The polemic tone of this quote aside, it is not accurate to position opera as anathema to Chicana/os. After all Mexico, produced Manuel de Zumaya, the first indigenous opera composer in the Americas.

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[77] Jessica Gelt, "Long Beach Opera Reaches for a Star," *Los Angeles Times*, 2019.

[78] Ross, "Opera on Location."

[79] Ritchey, *Composing Capital*, 113.

[80] Serve the People blog.

Falling Down

It is the framing, however unfairly, of opera as an art form rooted in communities of elitist nobility[81] that allows one to see and understand why and how *Hopscotch* could not have much more than a cosmetic impact on bringing opera to those who would otherwise never experience it.[82] The best it could do was make fragments of the opera available to the city overall via monitors at the Central Hub, while preserving the more intimate limousine experience for its more well-off audience members. However, this discrepancy—reserving the live repertoire for the leisure class audience while offering the poor and working-class community members of Boyle Heights an artificial digital archive—may be at the root of why the show provoked Boyle Heights residents to perform an alternative repertoire. The repertoire took the form of a vitriolic spectacle of protest during the show's final day of performance. When STPLA demanded the opera leave immediately, it was too late. STPLA would later justify its actions thus:

> [W]e spoke to the local park vendors, the families and other regular park visitors. There was a consensus of negative feedback about *Hopscotch*'s unwanted presence at the park. The vendors complained that they couldn't understand what the singers were singing about. The vendors, much like the rest of the regulars at the park, are exclusively Spanish-only speakers. The vendors are predominantly Mexican immigrant women. Several of the women complained about recent rent increases, about not being able to afford to pay rent and how *Hopscotch* Los Angeles and their supporters do not purchase anything from them.[83]

[81] According to Stuart A. Kallen in *The History of Classical Music*, opera from its birth in 1597 has been for the gentry. The first opera ever was titled, *Dafne*, and was staged in a salon inside of a palace belonging to a composer named Jacopo Corsi who played Apollo, one of the three characters in the opera. He and his two cast mates sang all their lines, but perhaps the most relevant fact of this performance is that the seated audience consisted entirely of invited nobility. This homogeneity ossified, and opera became one of the most powerful tools for the maintenance and propagation of social status. See Stuart A. Kallen, *The History of Classical Music* (San Diego: Lucent Books Collection, 2013).

[82] This shortcoming is not unique to *Hopscotch*; all the previous attempts by The Industry have had similar issues but not the same results.

[83] Serve the People blog.

While it is true that the water and snacks given to the cast and crew at this location were not purchased from the vendors at the park, it is important to point out that *Hopscotch* did reach out and engage in positive dialogue with STPLA. The producers also moved quickly after the onset of the conflict with the community to provide free tickets via an online lottery for Boyle Heights residents; they also agreed to purchase advertising space in a local community newspaper. This engagement, however, proved to be too little and came too late: the community felt justified in criticizing *Hopscotch* because "none of those funds [from this million-dollar opera] are going to the community."[84] The 2015 total revenue for The Industry was in $1,120,131.[85] Tickets for *Hopscotch* were $125–$150, well beyond the reach of any of the people who make a living at the park and who served as the *Hopscotch's* backdrop. This exacerbated the perception that *Hopscotch* was little more than a tool through which the *haut monde* could revel in a scopophilic consumption of an unfamiliar, but potentially lucrative real estate topography from the safety of a limousine with dark tinted windows. In an independent, but relevant, example of this desire to tame the wild jungle, a Los Angeles-based realtor invited clients to tour Boyle Heights for "bargain properties" but, after a flood of threats, cancelled her tour fearing violence.[86]

STPLA cited the privilege of the rich to maintain a large geographic and psychological distance from the predominantly poor and ethnic neighborhoods as the very cause for the *Hopscotch* audiences' desire to access and consume the only space that the community of Boyle Heights still has to themselves. In this light, *Hopscotch* reads as an event designed to enable an

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[84] "Undeportable Productions Facebook Group," Facebook, 2015, https://www.facebook.com/pg/undeportableproductions/posts/.

[85] The Industry, *The 990 Form* (The Industry Productions Inc, 2015).

[86] Carroll, "'Hope Everyone Pukes on Your Artisanal Treats.'"

affluent audience to visit their gaze upon these neighborhoods, and, more importantly, to see mostly without being seen. Therefore, the audience is engaged in a classic dynamic of pornographic consumption, with the consumer protected by darkness and the consumed visible and fully exposed for most of the performance.

This dynamic of anonymous gazing enables the audience to penetrate the community's space without losing the place of privilege, which *Hopscotch* has rendered mobile through the limousine. The audience is situated as the discoverer, or as Taylor puts it, "as the one who 'sees' and controls the scene."[87] Therefore, *Hopscotch* becomes a metaphorical victory march into communities that can disrupt but never join the penetrating audience's tour, as only the audience can afford the cost of gazing out at the community from the inside of a limousine. This exclusivity was clearly evident to *Hopscotch*'s creators, since their title omits the one element without which the show would not have been what it was. Or, as Christopher Hawthorne put it in a *Los Angeles Times* article, "the opera as Sharon envisioned it simply would not have been possible without limos."[88] Accordingly, the problem is born. The art's chosen sign vehicle exudes exclusivity and privilege.

Hopscotch's limousines then can be read as a fleet of Trojan horses ready to evert the community. The audience's intentions, in this context, do not matter, as they emerged from a place of privilege (inside the limousine) to an exasperated proletarian space (Hollenbeck Park). The hapless audience became heralds of the evils of gentrification, and, by extension, of an urban colonialism that reduces community residents to found objects and, when the time comes, removes them in the name of power masquerading as progress. Consequently, the built-in

[87] Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire*, 61.

[88] Christopher Hawthorne, "A Window into L.A.'s Complex Allure," *Los Angeles Times*, 2015.

exclusivity, actual and perceived, that *Hopscotch* was constructed upon asserted itself in an unfortunate steady and undeniable pentimento. Or, as Ritchey puts it, "*Hopscotch* aestheticized and glorified the processes of gentrification that are currently displacing many working-class and minority communities from some of the very areas the opera was meant to celebrate."[89]

Peter Howard, a veteran of community engagement and longtime Cornerstone Theater Company member who performed in *Hopscotch*, articulated this sentiment best when he said it would be a shame if the events of one location were to ruin years of work, or if they discouraged other artists, a possible but unlikely scenario since *Hopscotch* almost certainly has inspired hundreds of other art makers to think of ways to breach the walls and borders of their own art forms.[90] Perhaps these artists will move forward in a sensitive, productive, and beneficial way for the individuals most affected by their art. Just how this sensitivity would manifest in future forays into public spaces depends on the strength of the outreach made before the first composition is begun.

Maria, the woman in her late fifties who sells food out of a shopping cart, no longer works in Hollenbeck Park. After the incidents discussed during the run of *Hopscotch,* a no vending sign appeared at the park and Maria had to take her vending elsewhere, rolling her makeshift food cart away, to both make room for neoliberal art to ride in on luxurious vehicles and to find another park that site-specific, technetronic, transit-oriented opera has yet to enrich.

[89] Ritchey, *Composing Capital*, 111.

[90] Maria, interview held February 8, 2016.

Chapter Two
Bodies in Motion: Body Art in Steel and Flesh

On June 13, 2017, a ceremony was held on the National Mall by the Historic Vehicle Association (HVA) to "tell the stories of auto genres that have been overlooked."[1] One of the three vehicles selected as the main attraction was the Gypsy Rose. In a photograph taken of the event the Gypsy Rose is displayed inside of a custom glass display case parked between the US Capitol and the Washington Monument, flanked by a McGee Roadster, a 1932 Ford V8 on its left and a 1951 Hirohata Merc, Mercury Coupe on its right (fig. 2).[2] Though all three of these vehicles will spend a week in the box, there is a particularly rich symbolism to a photograph depicting a symbol of Chicana/o cruising silently encased inside of a box. The Gypsy Rose is decked out in a pink interior of crushed velvet, with a chandelier, and covered in more than one hundred hand-painted roses atop a pearl white, candy red, and pink body paneled background that give it a decidedly feminine composition.

The HVA president Mark Gessler would then go on to state during an interview about this event that the more research the organization did on the Gypsy Rose and the Imperials (the car club it belonged to), the clearer it was that lowriders were fighting stereotypes and gang culture and "working to be an outlet for something good in a tough area. Really, it's kind of amazing that someone would pour so much time and money into a car like this and then take it out into an environment like East L.A. in the 1970s."[3] Mr. Gessler's quote clearly illustrates a

[1] Arthur St. Antoine, "Gypsy Rose, the Most Famous Lowrider of Them All, Goes to Washington D.C.," Motor Trend, June 13, 2017, https://www.automobilemag.com/news/gypsy-rose-goes-to-washington-d-c/.

[2] Mark Vaughn, "Washington's Newest Monument: A Trio of Legendary Custom Cars," *Autoweek*, April 13, 2017, https://www.autoweek.com/car-life/events/a1819071/custom-cars-and-hot-rods-National-Mall-DC/.

[3] St. Antoine, "Gypsy Rose."

phenomenon common in minoritarian cultural production: if the lowrider can be extricated from the environment that produced it, then there is a special box that it is allowed to be inside of.

The practice we now know as lowriding started in the 1960s. According to curator Nora Donnelly, it began "in East L.A., and spread rapidly across America through Hispanic communities in the 70s with the publication of Lowrider Magazine."[4] As this phenomenon grew, the lowriders began to incorporate a "traditional Mexican-American emphasis on craft and aesthetics into modern Chicano life" and presented these aesthetics to the world through their vehicles.[5] Today, lowriders often feature artwork with imageries ranging from expressions of religious zeal to historical episodes in Chicana/o culture charged with a legacy of political and social resistance. This artwork often resonates with the grand imagery of murals that bring art outside of relatively static indoor spaces, and functions to celebrate ethnic identity, which should be conceived of as an essential quality by what sociologist Amy L. Best calls a "historically contingent ritual enactment."[6] The similarities between murals on walls and artwork on lowriders are plentiful, but not exhaustive.

Lowriders are putatively known as any aesthetically modified vehicle lowered to within a few inches off the ground and equipped with a hydraulic suspension system. According to anthropologist Brenda Jo Bright and Liza Bakewell, at the beginning of lowriding the process of constructing a lowrider followed a recognizable pattern: "A Mexican American takes his car, usually an old model Detroit brand, and refashions it into a baroque ride." He achieved this by

[4] Nora Donnelly, Brenda Jo Bright, Ondine Chavoya, Royal Ford, Pat Ganahl, Leah Kerr, and Rubn Ortiz Torres, *Customized: Art Inspired by Hot Rods, Low Riders and American Car Culture* (New York: Abrams, 2000), 50.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Amy L. Best, *Fast Cars, Cool Rides: The Accelerating World of Youth and Their Cars* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 17.

removing "all signs of the manufacturer" and refashioning the vehicle into "a distinctly Chicano aesthetic."[7] Constructing a lowrider is no casual hobby. It typically involves securing a classic vehicle, preferably from the 60s or 70s, perhaps because their design offers the most surface area to customize and their sturdy steel frames can handle the stress of hydraulic induced shocks. Whatever the inspiration for targeting this era of automobiles, lowrider owners gradually started decorating these cars with high-gloss multicolored paint jobs, upholstering them with themed colored crushed velvet interiors, adding hydraulic suspension systems, and chroming every external metal surface (in some extreme cases, even the entire engine). Lowrider owners often add a sound system with amplification powerful enough for *blasting*, with a bass that announces the vehicle's approach from a block away by rattling windows and turning heads from both sides of a city street. These elements create a vehicle that American studies professor Ben Chappell calls "a place-identified means of mobility," or a way of moving through space without losing one's place.[8] Alternatively, a static personal space (the inside of a lowrider) merges with a dynamic public space (a cruising lowrider) to represent a literal and metaphorical slow-moving sign vehicle.

Cruising reverberates along multiple historical ley lines and has resonances with past cultural practices such as the *paseo*.[9] Bright describes the practice as a way of using the city by promenading, or "an activity that serves to mark out boundaries of performance and to create a theater of actions." In this way, Bright and Bakewell claim, "the park or the street becomes a

[7] Brenda Jo Bright and Liza Bakewell, *Looking High and Low: Art and Cultural Identity* (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 1994), 26.

[8] Ben Chappell, *Lowrider Space: Aesthetics and Politics of Mexican American Custom Cars* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2012), 25.

[9] A jaunt where young people would gather in a public square or plaza to socialize.

setting where low riders can interject their narrative of belief and memory into the city."[10] Based on the fact that they both bring people together from many areas of Southern California, journalist and author Robert Rodriguez calls cruising "a Chicano alternative to Disneyland." He sees it as "unequaled entertainment for a minimal price," noting that all it takes for anyone wanting to participate was a tank of gas and, if one was satisfied with spectating, not even that.[11] Chicana/o studies professor Denise M. Sandoval links cruising to lowriding through the observation that the idea that "lowrider identity is developed in part through the ritual of cruising through a shared space," an area often shared with both enthusiasts and detractors.[12]

Alberto López Pulido and Rigoberto "Rigo" Reyes's exploration of lowriding from the 1950s to 1985 usefully frames lowriding as consubstantial with motion. As they see it, "it is impossible to talk about the history of lowriding without also talking about cruising."[13] Here López Pulido and Reyes rightly highlight cruising lowriders as a prominent feature on the historiographical map of Chicana/o motion.[14] This map begins with the *Mexica* migration myth, which enables Chicana/os to position themselves as heirs to a legacy of collective nomadism, and continues to the present, where lowriding has managed to spread its reach as far west as Asia and as far south as South America.[15] Historians Juan Gómez-Quiñones and Irene Vásquez

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[10] Bright and Bakewell, *Looking High and Low*, 29.

[11] Roberto Rodríguez, *Justice: A Question of Race*, (Tempe, AZ: Bilingual Press, 1997), 29.

[12] Denise Sandoval, *The High Art of Riding Low: Ranflas, Corazón e Inspiración* (Los Angeles: Petersen Automotive Museum, 2017), 5.

[13] Alberto López Pulido and Rigoberto "Rigo" Reyes, *San Diego Lowriders: A History of Cars and Cruising* (Charleston, SC: History Press, 2017), 94.

[14] Lowrider also describes the owner of or a participant in the lowrider scene. Given this level of complexity and imbrication between the human and the mechanical, this chapter aims to pin down lowriding as a cultural practice that illustrates the way mobility serves as a catalyst for a Chicana/o subject formation. The Mexica were the rulers of the valley of Mexico until the Spanish conquest of 1521.

[15] This myth is discussed in depth later.

summarized this as "a trend in the Mexican barrios of the southwest in the 1940s [that] became a means of expression for others around the world."[16]

Lowriders are not static products of social, political, and economic circumstances, but actants rich in agency who employ mobility to assert their unique cultural perspective despite the cost to them in flesh and blood. Juxtaposing auto steel and human flesh in the lowrider context invites broader questions of embodied knowledge and subjectivity in the Chicana/o lowrider community and recasts the modified lowrider vehicle as a literal and figurative extension of the lowrider owner themselves, where an image etched onto one's car becomes indistinguishable from the one tattooed on the rider's flesh. Both lowriders (owner and vehicle) convey an ineradicable index of atonement via the voluntary infliction of painful adornment onto oneself and one's avatar. This illustrates how a lowrider vehicle can substitute for its owner (rather than simply representing them). The images pierced into a lowrider's flesh also implicate them in what cultural studies scholar Ana Elena Puga calls "suffering-as-commodity" and "suffering-as-currency" where the former "may be packaged and sold" and the latter "traded for empathy, sympathy, or solidarity that may in turn *facilitate mobility*."[17]

Here mobility and movement are understood as a resistance to the immobility (economic, social, geographic) imposed on this subaltern community, often by the Anglo settler elite. This refusal to embrace Anglicized automotive expression, such as muscle cars or hot rods privileging large frames and fast speeds, is partly why Mexican-descent motorists in the early years of

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[16] Juan Gómez-Quiñones and Irene Vásquez, *Making Aztlán. Ideology and Culture of the Chicana and Chicano Movement, 1966-1977* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2014), 238.

[17] Ana Elena Puga, "Poor Enrique and Poor Maria, or The Political Economy of Suffering in Two Migrant Melodramas," in *Performance in the Borderlands*, ed. Ramon H. Rivera-Servera and Harvey Young (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 228, emphasis mine.

automobiles faced an accelerated interdiction aimed at bodies of color that had slowly begun entering into white-dominated spaces. Consequently, to think of the implications of the slow motion embodied by lowriders reveals the ways moving changes slowly and how Chicana/os experience identity—both of self and others. To inhabit space exemplifies a most valuable freedom, theoretically enshrined for people in the Bill of Rights under the freedom of assembly. Through movement, a subject can exercise agency, control, and navigation. Without movement, this subject remains fixed, affixed, contained, and imprisoned.

Be it through aesthetics, mobility, activism, or competition, a robust understanding of the ways lowrider culture deconstructs and reassembles the very ideas of legalized locomotion, normative art, mobility, and beauty will come into view. Accordingly, what follows is a critical reassessment that fixes on the dynamics that have both mobilized and arrested lowriding's interactions with freedom of movement. Today "lowrider" is a term used to describe the adornment of not only cars but various other objects such as home furnishings, clothes, art, and even toilet seats. The 2017 art exhibit *The High Art of Riding Low* at the Petersen Automotive Museum in Los Angeles featured sculptures, paintings, and installations, including a life-size lowrider piñata vehicle.[18] In this way lowriders and the art based on them drive a mobile metonymy that resists the economic, social, and geographic immobility imposed on subaltern communities. The idea of movement that lowriders have come to embody opens possibilities for alternative epistemologies within ethnic minority communities.

Today, lowriding has become a cultural phenomenon untethered to the one born in the Chicana/o community of southern California in the 1950s. This is thanks, in large part, to

[18] This is a decorated container usually made of papier-mâché and filled with candy designed to be repeated struck by dizzy blindfolded children with a stick as part of a birthday celebration.

mainstream representations of lowriding culture on television. Netflix's 2019 *Queer Eye* episode titled "A Tale of Two Cultures," for example, depicted a lowrider enthusiast learning to have confidence in herself with the help of the show's five non-Chicano stars. However, nothing can elide the fact that, even as it resonates across the globe in quantitative and qualitative ways, lowriding culture and the motion it enables are quintessentially Chicana/o. It is Chicana/os who first deployed lowriding as an embodied practice. Through stories, poems, books, music, television shows, and plays, they carved a cruising path through the American cultural scene. As Chappell asserts, "through all of these manifestations, lowriding has remained a site of Mexican American cultural authority for several generations of participants."[19] In an emic perspective, Chicana/os use mobility to shift from caricature to self-portrait; this self-representation plays out in how, where, and when Chicana/os move—or do not move—exemplifying the way motion epitomizes the characteristics of Chicana/o identity.

Of all the artifacts produced by lowriding since its inception, the 1977 magazine *Lowrider* (*LRM*) stands as the most comprehensive archive of key aspects of lowrider culture, including not only the cars but politics, music, and fashion. Journalist Roberto Rodríguez, who worked for *LRM* from 1977 to 1981, describes its early days thus: "The first issue of *Lowrider* was fresh and unique. It was kind of crude, but despite its crudeness, you could tell that it was on its way. It was aimed at the streets, the heart and soul of the barrios. The message was unity" (presumably the unity of Chicana/os.)[20] *LRM* became a place where young Chicana/os advertised their events, showed off their fashion sense, and gave their opinions on urgent issues of the day. It was in *LRM* that Chicana/os found a place to display their cars and themselves. A December

[19] Chappell, *Lowrider Space*, 3.

[20] Rodríguez, *Justice: A Question of Race*, 23.

18, 2019 *Los Angeles Times* article titled "The road ends for Lowrider," *LRM* praises for being "particularly popular among Mexican Americans" and for being "as much a statement about Chicano identity as it was about the long, ground-hugging vintage cars."[21]

As one of the most famed artifacts to come out of lowriding, this magazine has not been without its critics. Rodríguez himself states that three of his main complaints in the early days were "how Chicanas were portrayed in the magazine,"[22] the sense that "*Lowrider* was encouraging a negative lifestyle, contributing to projecting false stereotypes," and the worry that *LRM* "was not contributing anything of substance to the youth."[23] The magazine eventually moved to ameliorate these criticisms by phasing out the "featuring [of] scantily clad women on its covers," working to challenge "negative, stereotypical perceptions of lowriders," and establishing scholarships.[24] *LRM*, however, is only one of the many gears whose motion paradoxically both accelerates and, at times, debilitates the efficacy of lowriding as a form of Chicano/a cultural production. This led Rodríguez to conclude that, "when the dust settles, people will recognize *Lowrider* for something that no other magazine has ever done. That is, it penetrated into every neighborhood in the southwestern United States."[25]

A 1985 *LRM* feature on the Buick Regal nicknamed *El Rey Azteca* (fig. 3) is representative of how the magazine approaches its coverage of featured vehicles.[26] This article

[21] Dorany Pineda, "The Road Ends for Lowrider," *Los Angeles Times*, December 18, 2019.

[22] Ironically, it was a woman, Lolita Madrid, who loaned her son, Sonny Madrid "El Larry" Gonzalez, and his friends money to start *Lowrider*.

[23] Rodríguez, *Justice: A Question of Race*, 25-26.

[24] Pineda, "The Road Ends for Lowrider."

[25] Rodríguez, *Justice: A Question of Race*, 26.

[26] This translates into "The Aztec King."

features a modified airbrushed lowrider with a candy-red finish overlaid with ordered lines and shapes that hug the car's curves and accentuate its contours. The vehicle has a vibrant color palette with various hues of red, yellow, and gold leaf, and is raised more than two feet on four Coker whitewall tires, which give this vehicle a decidedly classic lowrider silhouette. The car's silhouette and color scheme resonate with the women's bodies depicted inside the magazine. This is not a surprising situation for *LRM* given its misogynistic reputation articulated succinctly by Sandoval, who called it a magazine selling the bodies of cars as well as those of women.[27]

Later in this magazine profile, one learns that this vehicle's owner—Ramiro Leon of San Luis, Arizona—was influenced in his love of lowriding by his brothers and by "living in a border town" with "connections both in the U.S. and in Mexico to help him customize his own rides when the time came."[28] This biographical information highlights the cultural and familial bonds welded into lowriding, together with the influence of the Borderland mentality shared by many Chicana/os, where they exist between the Mexican and Anglo. Purchased new from a factory-made dealer's stock, then subsequently modified into El Rey Azteca to better represent Leon's aesthetic vision, the Buick Regal proves itself invaluable for framing this chapter's theorization of lowriders and the mobilizations enabled by gendered, intercultural, and political mobilities.

Tricoated across the Regal's side panels, hood, trunk, tire carrier, and top are numerous detailed airbrushed imageries and patterns depicting classic 70s geometric designs, ancient Mexica iconography, and lightly clad Indigenous female bodies described as "culturally inspired

[27] Denise Sandoval, "Cruising Through Low Rider Culture," in *Velvet Barrios: Popular Culture & Chicana/o Sexualities*, ed. Alicia Gaspar de Alba (New York: Palgrave Macmillan Publishing House, 2003), 195.

[28] Dustin Volo Pedder, "1985 Buick Regal - El Rey Azteca El Rey Azteca," Motor Trend, December 8, 2014, Lowrider section, https://www.lowrider.com/rides/cars/1502-1985-buick-regal/.

Aztec murals."[29] One of these murals depicts the naked and headless torso of a woman. This creates a paradox of the construction of Chicana/o cultural space atop a dismembered, but still sensualized, female body (fig. 4). Thus, when actual whole material female bodies, often scantily clad and tattooed, place themselves next to a lowrider, they and the lowrider become two mirrors, one of steel (the modified lowrider) and one of flesh (the model's modified body), reflecting significations of mobility, misogyny, and modification back and forth *ad infinitum*.

Scholars of lowriding, most notably Charles M. Tatum and Bright, have theorized lowrider art as *portable murals* and scrutinized them for the unique ways that these murals redesign urban geography in large Chicana/o populations.[30] Ondine expands the relationship between lowrider art and murals: "Chicano car murals draw on a variety of relevant sources, such as Catholic imagery, Aztec mythology and American popular culture, to create visual narratives about identity, experience and fantasy."[31] What Bright leaves out are the more abstract designs that were "common on lowrider cars as early as the 1950s."[32] These purely decorative patterns and designs that adorn the majority of lowriders are critical to the theorization of lowrider art not exclusively as mural but as *transit tattoos* as well.[33] Both these modes of expression resonate deeply in Chicana/o communities and often draw their color from the inkwell of historical memory. It is body modification like tattooing that people have produced, as prehistoric archeologist Aaron Deter-Wolf and research associate Carol Diaz-Granados have put

[29] Pedder, "1985 Buick Regal."

[30] Tatum, Charles M., *Chicano Popular Culture: Que Hable el Pueblo* (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 2001), 174.

[31] Ondine, *Customized: Art Inspired by Hot Rods*, 41.

[32] Tatum, *Chicano Popular Culture*, 95.

[33] Culturally specific images that when displayed on auto bodies are indistinguishable in function to the designs found on human bodies.

it, "to define, classify, decorate, enhance, and sanctify themselves and others."[34] Understanding the art on lowriders as transit tattoos enables the theorization of the majority of automotive artwork found on lowriders, artwork that is more often than not small, hidden, non-narrative, and unsigned—like many tattoos. Danny D, one of the "top car painters on the West Coast of the United States," articulates a sentiment in keeping with this theory, observing that "painting a car is like doing a tattoo on somebody."[35] Beyond this, there is the "arbitrary juxtaposition of images" atop lowriders identified by Chappell, which finds its reflection in miniature on the tattooed human body.[36] Then there is the somatic element in much of lowrider art, which involves the scraping and carving of glass and steel, and is more akin to tattooing than to painting.

Before explicating this theorization, it is necessary to understand the importance of mobility to the way lowriders assemble meanings. Movement aids the lowrider enthusiast in maneuvering into, out of, and through exclusionary spaces and in defining an alternate identity that presents them not as immigrants, but as diasporic Indigenous people who, after the invasion of Mexico in 1846, became detribalized natives. The reverberations triggered by the imperialist methods employed to purloin the southwest have produced unique resonances in communities with large Chicana/o populations causing them to tether themselves tightly to the Mexica migration myth, which speaks of the Mexica as a collective of nomadic and more fixed people migrating in search of a promised land, planting the concept of Chicana/os as a displaced and de-

[34] Aaron Deter-Wolf, *Drawing with Great Needles: Ancient Tattoo Traditions of North America* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2013), xi.

[35] Danny D is also known as Danny Galvez. As quoted in William Calvo, *Lowriders: Cruising the Color Line* (PhD diss., Arizona State University, August 2011), 246.

[36] Chappell, *Lowrider Space*, 10.

territorialized body.[37] Ramon Vasquez, a Mission Indian and executive director of American Indians in Texas, frames this discovery of Native selves by contemporary urbanites as "the constant migration and evolution of a people," a migration that cannot be arrested: "Neither national boundaries nor government labels can stop the hunger to know our true selves. We are a migratory people with ancient migratory trails."[38] Framed thus, Chicana/os and their Mexican kin are merely returning to the motherland they call Aztlán. Lowriders then reify what is a characteristic, central element of Chicano subject formation—motion.

Cruising a Historiographic Map

Chicana/o studies professor Denise Sandoval has guest curated the only three lowrider themed exhibitions: *Arte y Estilo: The Lowriding Tradition* (2000), *La Vida Lowrider: Cruising the City of Angels* (2007–08), and *The High Art of Riding Low: Ranflas, Corazón e Inspiración* in 2017 at the Petersen Automotive Museum.[39] According to her, Gilbert "Magu" Luján was one of the artists to first recognize "the aesthetic and artistic value of the lowrider car." She credits him as saying, "we (Chicanos) have taken a Detroit machine and we have personalized it…We Chicano-ized it."[40] Magu colorfully depicts this very idea in his 1983 serigraph *Returning to Aztlan* (fig. 5), which features a south-facing view of the North American continent with two Mexica warriors aboard an ancestral themed lowrider who have crossed the border and are

[37] This event is known as the "Mexican American War" in the United States. When America invaded Mexico, many American government officials, public intellectuals, and artists vehemently opposed the declaration of war. Henry David Thoreau was jailed for refusing to pay a tax used to fund the war, and that experience later inspired him to pen "Civil Disobedience," his influential essay on following one's own conscience. A young Whig Congressman at the time named Abraham Lincoln also publicly denounced the pretexts for going to war. But perhaps the most damming condemnation of the war came from Ulysses S. Grant, who fought in the war under the rank of lieutenant.

[38] Ruben Hernandez, "Yo Soy Indio/ I am Indian," *Yaoui/Chicano Native Peoples Magazine*, January/February 2008.

[39] Sandoval, *The High Art of Riding Low*, 2.

[40] Ibid., 3.

marking the American road with stars and stripes as they slowly cruise across the southwestern United States. The artwork's evocation of the low, slow, and festive traversing of space reinforces Best's point that "cruising, and the public places where it occurs, is central for many Chicano/a youth," and that, "car cruising has had solid ties to Mexican youth's migration and settlement in the United States since World War II."[41] One of the most telling elements in *Returning to Aztlan* is that, for Magu, the land considered Mexico and the land considered United States of America are indistinguishable but for a thin strip of barbed wire, broken in more than one place and easily crossed by the lowrider, and a web of mountain ranges that look more like cicatrices than mountains, perhaps reminding the viewer of the colonial violence perpetrated on Mexico. The muted yellow color used for the earth is the same as the paint job on the image's central object: a lowrider whose scalar magnitude is larger than any other object in the frame, almost blending into the background and foreground bridging the two parts of the map.

The historical literature on Magu and this image is broad. Scholars such as Karen Mary Davalos and Dylan T. Miner have invested their time into explicating this artwork's relevance and significations.[42] Davalos, for example, claims that "returning to Aztlan rejects the socio-political hierarchy produced by US imperialism and European colonialism."[43] Miner, on the other hand, uses the image to reinforce the unifying theme of cruising in his book *Creating Aztlán: Chicano Art, Indigenous Sovereignty, and Lowriding Across Turtle Island*. Motion does

[41] Sandoval, *The High Art of Riding Low*, 3.

[42] See also Constance Cortez, "Making Menudo: Finding the Feminine in the Work of Gilbert 'Magu' Luján", in *Aztlán to Magulandia: the journey of Chicano artist Gilbert "Magu" Luján*, ed. Constance Cortez, and Hal Glicksman (Irvine: University of Irvine, 2017).

[43] Karen Mary Davalos, "Imagining Emplacement in the Hemisphere", *Aztlán to Magulandia: the journey of Chicano artist Gilbert "Magu" Luján*, ed. Constance Cortez, and Hal Glicksman (Irvine: University of Irvine, 2017).

play a key role in both examples. Davalos goes as far as to claim that this artwork "emphasizes the movement and expansive emplacement of its drivers," and that this image "extends beyond a static employment of the past or an indigenous antiquity."[44]

The lowrider centralized, both literally and figuratively, in this painting is not only the axis for the painting's metonymy, but also a type of avatar for migrant bodies who, like the Mexica in the artwork, are simply coming home and leaving their mark on the northern part of their country. The way they choose to traverse the terrain is also telling—they are off-roading, perhaps asserting other roads, highways, or paths that reconfigure, however slightly, the normative and dominant map. According to Sandoval, Magu traces the Indigenous roots of Chicano identity atop a pre-Columbian lowrider and, in the process, "creates a contemporary codex of Chicanismo"—a codex that accounts for Chicana/os not as objects fixed and thus arrested on a static map, but as drivers at the wheel of their own destiny.[45]

This artwork then activates the idea of the map as a body willing to be uncovered, explored, and decked with transit tattoos. The concept of leaving one's mark, be it on a lowrider, the road, or one's own body, is central to this image, as much as it is in Chicana/o culture today. In this context, tattoos offer a valuable vocabulary and template to articulate the ways lowriders and their art herald cultural, political, or erotic allegiances. In the image, the lowrider is not only making a mark, but it is marked with iconic Chicana/o imagery that serves as what Margot Mifflin would call "diary entries," "protective shields, conversation pieces and counterculture totems."[46] The images include the United Farm Workers' eagle logo, a raised fist, a cross, a

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[44] Ibid., 48–49.

[45] Sandoval, *The High Art of Riding Low*, 3.

[46] Margot Mifflin, *Bodies of Subversion: A Secret History of Women and Tattoo* (New York City: Juno Books, 1997), 178.

heart, a jaguar, and, the most political, "C/S."[47] These examples are small in proportion to the whole, strategically located in a non-narrative way and without signature, which make the symbols on the lowrider function more like tattoos than as murals. By refocusing the referent of lowrider art away from murals, paint on static walls, and towards tattoos, a more dynamic canvas of ink on and in human flesh, we can account for the crucial element of mobility. Scholar Ben Olguín goes as far as to claim that tattooing, "inevitably illuminates the collective condition of the post-1848 Chicano people."[48]

The simultaneous ways lowriders invest artwork with kinetic potential and the way they have been strategically criminalized are key to the idea that one cannot fully understand lowriding, and by extension Chicana/o identity, without understanding the way mobility, misogyny, and modification create a closed network in which a demonized identity can be modified and customized. For example, lowriders remove the model name from a car to take the symbolic step of making a vehicle *tabula rasa*, for, as Bright quotes from an interview, "your ride is your pride and to have a big chrome advertisement for Buick Rivera on it is tantamount to having Buick Rivera *tattooed on your chest.*"[49] Nevertheless, lowriders speak more to an amalgam than an all-out rejection of Chicana/os to normative capitalist artifacts. In Sandoval's words, lowriders "speak to the intersectionality of Chicana/o culture, weaving together Mexican and American archetypes to create a complex fabric of history and identity."[50] To this, Chappell

[47] C/S stands for "con safos" which loosely translates to untouchable or perpetually protected.

[48] B. V. Olguín, "Tattoos, Abjection, and the Political Unconscious: Toward a Semiotics of the Pinto Visual Vernacular." *Cultural Critique* 37 (Autumn, 1997): 159–213.

[49] As quoted by Bright from Cahill (1978) in Bright and Bakewell, *Looking High and Low*, emphasis mine.

[50] Sandoval, *The High Art of Riding Low*, 9.

adds that lowriders also "signify prestige, mechanical expertise, and artistic competency."[51] In all cases lowriders' robust investment in their cars illustrates a commitment not merely to transportation, but to a unique cultural practice fueling their agency, identity, and mobility.

Chappell contributes to this line of thinking by pointing out that "lowrider" is now an appellation for both man and machine, going so far as to claim that "low rider owners become identified not only by their vehicles but as their vehicle."[52] This would explain the patriotic feelings lowrider owners expressed in emphasizing the American-ness of their vehicles when confronted with the customization of foreign car models. As Roman, a lowrider from Austin, Texas, articulated, "I drive an American classic, not foreign plastic."[53] This lowrider aficionado sees himself as a man of steel, in contrast to breakable and unmalleable plastic. Bright extends this idea to cover even the lowrider owner's geographical home when writing about lowrider vehicles and the way they are "identified with their owners, and by extension, with both his 'home' turf and his cohort."[54] A lowrider, then, is not only able to provide an individual a new identity but a whole grouping of people as well.

In examining the effects lowriders have generated and the art they have inspired, not all have been universally or even necessarily positive. There are many instances of reluctant acceptance, ambivalence, or even alarm in the history of the reception to lowriding in America, even within Chicana/o communities, to both the cars and their drivers. These two kinds of bodies and their artwork then are an extension of each other. The lowrider enthusiast and the lowrider

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[51] Tatum, *Chicano Popular Culture*, 173.

[52] Chappell, *Lowrider Space*, 15.

[53] Ibid., 75.

[54] Bright and Bakewell, *Looking High and Low*, 101.

vehicle function as conduits and mediators between spectators and themselves. This transformation forms a protective skin decorated with automotive tattoos communicating the individual's status within the community—be that a club, a family, or society. The lowrider, particularly when modified with artwork and in public motion, serves as an avatar for the lowrider driver, and as Chappell professes, throughout his scholarship, the lowrider is not only identified by their vehicles but also as their vehicle. This mutual substitution of owner and vehicle has enabled the theorization of art atop lowrider bodies as transit tattoos, in turn, activating the transit-oriented performances that follow.

Inspired by Gilbert "Magu" Luján's *Returning to Aztlan*, this section adumbrates key historical posts atop the map of a lowrider cultural landscape. What Magu's art helps us understand is that a map represents a tool to reconstruct boundaries and actualities. However, a map also embodies movement atop the land, laying new meaning on the landscape and subverting the assertion of racial, economic, or political boundaries. From the first recorded broadcasting of a lowrider on the 1970s sitcom *Chico and the Man* to several present-day hip-hop music videos, lowrider groups other than Chicana/os deploy lowriders as signs of wealth, sexual appeal, and urban excess.[55] For example, Marilyn Manson's 2001 music video "Tainted Love" begins with the band pulling up to a party in a custom black lowrider with a front license plate reading "Goth Thug." The film *Lowriders* (2016) features Academy Award-nominated actor Demián Bichir as a lowrider-obsessed father trying to hold his family together. The 2018 "Lowrider Super Show Japan" remains indistinguishable from a lowrider show in Los Angeles, Phoenix, or San Diego. In these contexts and locations, as Sandoval argues, one fact remains:

[55] *Chico and the Man*, created by James Komack, aired September 13, 1974, to July 21, 1978, on NBC Broadcasting.

"Whether within a gallery's white cube or driving down a boulevard, the origins and roots of the lowrider-as art object reveal the complex interplay of history and identity-making, as well as the political struggle for civil rights."[56] It is a struggle that continues today in many inner-city communities where lowriding has taken root.

The period just before the United States entered World War II presented a time of massive industrialization along the West Coast, which made Southern California in general, and Los Angeles in particular, a major center for heavy manufacturing, including the automobile industry. According to Tatum, "starting in the 1930s Los Angeles was already beginning to seriously compete with Detroit as a major manufacturer and assembly center for new cars," and by 1945 only Detroit was a more important locale in the automobile industry.[57]

Large companies involved with automobile manufacturing, like Chrysler, Ford, and General Motors, had assembly plants in the Los Angeles region, which solidified Southern California as "a region where the car was rapidly becoming central to the lives of working- and middle-class Americans of all national and ethnic backgrounds."[58] Mexicans were one ethnic group that publicly embraced the automobile and its customization in the early days of automobility, and some authors believe that this affinity traces back much longer. When talking about customization, Rodríguez suggests "its tradition may go back to a time when people were customizing carts and animals, even to many hundreds of years ago when our ancestors used to adorn or tattoo their bodies."[59]

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[56] Sandoval, *The High Art of Riding Low*, 4.

[57] Tatum, *Lowriders in Chicano Culture*, 4.

[58] Ibid.

[59] See Rodríguez, *Justice: A Question of Race*, 29. Here Rodriguez did not have the benefit of knowing about a Chinchorro mummy found in South America, it has been dated to "6000 BC" and exhibits a 'mustache' tattoo on its

According to scholar Genevieve Carpio, in the 1930s "'Mexican district[s]'" had a forty percent automobile ownership rate, which was more than double the California state average (seventeen percent).[60] This was due, at least in part, to the fact that, "even if primarily used for daily transportation, a truck could moonlight as a mobile picket line, stage for mobile theater, or emergency shelter."[61] In 1930s, Anglo settler youth also started their modern car customizations, which were focused primarily on adjustments for racing. This automobile modification era created the "hot rod," "designed primarily for speed and racing," whereas the "custom car," or early lowrider, "was modified primarily to achieve a specific style, with the goal of showing off the vehicle by traveling slowly down city streets."[62] This era produced a dichotomy that exists to this day, wherein the hot rod automobile's adjustments are designed primarily to increase an automobile's power and speed and largely neglect the aesthetic considerations that Mexican American youth use their lowriders to embrace.

The power automobility first provided Mexicans as early as the 1920s would not remain unchecked. During the 1930s, the most common arrest charge given to Mexican youths was under the California statute that criminalized joyriding, so that Mexican youth were arrested precisely when they were most mobile.[63] In the late 1950s, the law turned its attention to criminalizing cars that were lowered by heating a car's back springs to compress them,[64] cutting

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upper lip, so if Rodriguez is correct, both tattooing and customization may go back thousands of years. See also Deter-Wolf, *Drawing with Great Needles*, xii.

[60] As quoted in Genevieve Carpio, *Collisions at the Crossroads: How Place and Mobility Make Race* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2019), 145.

[61] Ibid., 146.

[62] Tatum, *Lowriders in Chicano Culture*, 4.

[63] Carpio, *Collisions at the Crossroads*, 174.

[64] Pulido and Reyes, *San Diego Lowriders*, 24.

the suspension coils of the vehicles, or by placing heavy objects such as cement bags or bricks in the trunk.[65] Police adopted a statute prohibiting cars from riding on the street if any of their components were lower than the bottom edge of the wheel rim.[66] In 1959, this law may have had the unintended effect of inspiring an early lowrider, Ron Aguirre, to develop a new hydraulic technique to lower and raise his modified 1957 Corvette and create the "X-Sonic," which is credited as the "first hydraulically lifted car."[67] His exact motive for this innovation is disputed—some authors claim it was motivated by a concern over damage to the vehicle from "scrapes and speed bumps."[68] However, whatever the motivation, this innovation empowered lowriders to move in and out of the law's reach through the flip of a switch.

There are instances in the early history of lowriding as an ethnic phenomenon where it functioned not simply as a type of resistance but, rather, to mimic Anglo settler activities, albeit with a Chicana/o spin. For example, car clubs afforded Mexican American youth an opportunity to participate in activities that accelerated their social integration into community life and enhanced their leadership skills.[69] Here, the community in question represents code for the predominantly Anglo settler hot rod clubs, "initially inclusive in welcoming individuals from different ethnic and racial groups who shared a common interest in cars with altered suspensions combined with custom paint and other external elements."[70] By the 1950s, however, car clubs in

[65] Tatum, *Lowriders in Chicano Culture*, 9.

[66] Vehicle code #24008, as cited in Calvo, *Lowriders*, 4.

[67] Lowridingmesatv, "First Hydraulic Car," YouTube Video, 7:17, September 29, 2010, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hMsWomFcsd8.

[68] Shari Gab, "A Brief History of Automotive Hydraulics," Inside Hook, June 20, 2016, https://www.insidehook.com/article/vehicles/a-brief-history-of-automotive-hydraulics.

[69] Tatum, *Lowriders in Chicano Culture*.

[70] Tatum, *Lowriders in Chicano Culture*, 155–56.

Los Angeles began to conform to the same racial and ethnic segregation found throughout Southern California.

During this spike in racial animosity East Los Angeles became the center of the Chicana/o car club scene; these early car assemblies would evolve into the existing lowrider clubs. In their incipience, the organizations functioned as more than commonplace clubs, as they provided members with "social, cultural, and economic support as well.[71] They built community through local and weekly *caravans* or *convoys*, an activity illustrative of the constructions of networks shaped out of the united processional alteration of space.[72] In this way, lowrider culture in the Chicana/o community had begun to replace the "individualistic American dream of driving away to escape it all" with the notion "of driving together" towards a common cause of aesthetic, cultural, and spiritual expression.[73] The "why" of driving together then engendered many valuable cultural, historical, and geographical elements that lowriders could take pride in.

With names such as Latin Lowriders, Brown Image, and Chicano Brothers, these clubs provided marginalized youth with positive examples of Chicana/o identity. This connection between lowriding and cultural pride would play out in the 1973 founding of Chicano Park. As Hector Gonzalez, a member of the *Latin Pride Car Club* of El Paso, Texas, put it in a documentary on San Diego lowriders: "the low rider community has always been a very important part of the Chicano Movement. It can be traced back to the beginning, to the takeover of Chicano Park."[74] Scholar Eva Cockcroft buttresses Gonzalez's claim when she writes about

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[71] Tatum, *Lowriders in Chicano Culture*, 156.

[72] The terms for the organized procession of club vehicles down a street or highway.

[73] Rubén Ortiz Torres, *Customized*: *Art Inspired by Hot Rods*, 37.

[74] KQED Arts, "Lowriding: Everything Comes from the Streets KQED Truly CA," YouTube video, 8:31, September 15, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9RAavisatXA.

supporters using their vehicles to help with the takeover of the land that would become Chicano Park. She writes, "they formed a car caravan down Logan Ave. to join us." According to Cockcroft, it was after this car blockade that "everyone went home and got shovels and picks and…*moved* on the land."[75] In this example, movement aided the Chicana/o activists to maneuver into, out of, and through an exclusionary space and define an alternate identity for Chicana/os that presents them not as interlopers or outsiders, but as Indigenous people who, in the taking of this plot of land, initiated a small reclamation of their ancestral home.

Another epicenter of lowriding and cruising culture was East Los Angeles. If East Los Angeles was the heart of early lowriding, Whittier Boulevard was the main artery. As Rodríguez explains: "Whittier Boulevard throughout the country is seen as the lowriding capital of the world. Whittier Boulevard is probably the equivalent of the Sunset Strip in Hollywood or Rodeo Drive in Beverly Hills. But to compare it to those streets is actually to minimize the importance of Whittier Boulevard."[76] This famed street has shown up in many films featuring lowriding, and it was immortalized by the Thee Midniters—one of the first Chicano rock bands—in their eponymous 1965 song. Whittier has become synonymous with lowriders and cruising in East Los Angeles partially because it is where early lowriders chose to first "drive slow, pumping their music and blocking traffic, messing with a social system that is not eager to accept them."[77] This boulevard was particularly attractive for cruising because the "glass-fronted stores all along

[75] Eva Cockcroft: "The Story of Chicano Park", Aztlán: International Journal of Chicano Studies Research 15, no. 1 (1984): 82.

[76] Rodríguez, *Justice: A Question of Race*, 27.

[77] Ibid.

the cruising route reflected the drivers in lowered seats as they carefully and proudly paraded their low-slung cars with their striking paint jobs and other distinctive features."[78]

Whittier was also the site of a little-known mass protest in 1968, in which lowriders and activists joined forces to protest excessive police presence along Whittier Boulevard. This caused violence, looting and many arrests. This event then led to three nights of rioting across East Los Angeles, inspiring the prohibition of cruising on Whittier Boulevard, a prohibition not relaxed till the mid-1980s.[79] The policing of lowrider cruising signified a strategy to curb protest and control Chicana/o identity through immobilization. Lowriders, however, found other avenues (literally and figuratively) for their community in East Los Angeles, albeit in less pronounced ways. As lowriding communities emphasized cultural pride, the lowrider clubs extended from the local to the regional, giving birth to the car show, where clubs from all over the Southwest and, later, from across the United States joined to compete, as well as take part in an extensive lowriding community.

Riding Low and Slow for Show

Few potentially profitable activities can escape the rapacious neoliberal drive for profit, and the lowrider show, like so many cultural artifacts and activities, has become greatly corporatized.[80] The local car show ranges from ordinary groupings of cars arranged around a parking lot for a few hours on a Saturday morning to a full-day event with food and merchandise vendors. In less formal circumstances, people are invited to move around the parked vehicles and can admire them from a full 360-degree angle. At times, mirrors strategically placed underneath

[78] Paige R. Penland, *Lowrider: History, Pride, Culture* (St. Paul, MN: MBI Publishing, 2003), 16, 19.

[79] Ibid., 37–38

[80] The most flagrant and egregious example is the Walt Disney Company attempting to copyright the Day of the Dead.

the lowrider offer onlookers a view of the details underneath a vehicle. Larger car shows, however, follow a more formulaic agenda. They can draw anywhere from 10,000 to 25,000 people over two days, starting at midmorning on a Saturday and ending late on a Sunday afternoon.[81] The modern lowrider car show features a multiday series of events relating to various aspects of lowrider and general car culture. Some of the most popular outdoor activities at a car show include the car and truck *Hop and Dance* competition where vehicles compete in six events: Single and Double Pump Car Hop, Single Truck Hop, Radical Hop, Street Dance, and Radical Dance. During these competitions, held primarily outdoors, a "switchman" (remotely and from a safe distance) activates and manipulates the hydraulic pumps on the competing vehicle while a song plays from massive speakers around the arena.

Significantly, the rulebook for large-scale competitions includes motion and a vehicle's ability to move as key functions. An inoperable vehicle can be displayed as part of the show but cannot compete for prizes. To enforce this valorization of motion, a minimum standard is set for vehicles to demonstrate their mobility before the show officially opens to the public. (Because of their value the lowriders are transported in covered trailers, not driven to the car show.) A vehicle must start under its own power with an operable battery permanently positioned in it. In addition to other maneuvering requirements, the "engines must be fueled by a fixed fuel tank and transmission…and they must demonstrate their ability to travel 20 feet of *continuous motion.*"[82]

Lowriders competing in car shows often bear names signaling color, marking cultural pride. The names range in theme, but the most common ones reference colors and hues exemplified by names such as "Brown Sensation," "Aztec Gold," and "Crimson Envy." Calvo-

[81] Tatum, *Lowriders in Chicano Culture*, 173.

[82] Ibid., 177, emphasis mine.

Quirós, who examined the use of color in lowrider car customization, theorized a link between a lowrider's "use, manipulation, and implementation of color as a visual/design element" and a lowrider's challenge, transgression, and resistance to what he calls the "preconceived notions of space, aesthetic hegemony, and social disparity they experience."[83]

In one example of color's signification in Chicana/o visual vocabulary, Calvo-Quirós asserts that color expression remains inseparable from its spatial and historical context, and that it creates "a new place for distraction, cultural safety, and auto-academia among members."[84] Lowrider competitions, one of the most recognized events in lowriding, exchange aesthetic ideas and make trends more visible. These shows also carry with them high stakes for the competing car clubs, and "skirmishes" between car club members sometimes occur.[85] The car clubs seem to prize bragging rights over the cash prizes. In some instances, the effects generated by the ultra-competitive atmosphere of a car show amplify the "potential of a car to generate not only affinity but also alarm, or to provoke reaction," a phenomenon that sometimes manifests in conflicts between competitors within the lowriding community.[86]

One well-known competitor and award-winning truck, "Wicked Bed," was incorporated into a video by Rubén Ortiz Torres titled *Alien Toy (Unidentified Cruising Object)* as part of *InSITE97*, a triennial public art event in San Diego and Tijuana.[87] The video of Wicked Bed featured it dancing out its moves, cutting back and forth to images of unidentified flying objects

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[83] Calvo, *Lowriders*, i.

[84] Ibid., 107.

[85] Chappell, *Lowrider Space*, 174.

[86] Ibid., 20.

[87] Ortiz, Rubén Torres, "Alien Toy," YouTube video, 9:59, September, 26, 2007, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nLSi7LMkOPk.

and Mexican dancing marionettes. The movements on the video helped Wicked Bed win the Radical Class category in the *Hop and Dance* competition three years in a row.[88] Including footage of Wicked Bed in a gallery setting is ironic since the lowrider, with or without murals, grew out of an attempt by Chicana/o artists to use the mural to "bypass the mainstream cultural 'gatekeepers' who dictated what aesthetic and artistic currents and themes were acceptable for consideration to be included in gallery and museum exhibits and collections."[89] This absorption of the lowrider aesthetic into the controlled and mediated environment of a museum complicates the continuity of Chicana/o tradition of using art to reclaim public places and encourage community participation of individuals receiving no formal artistic training.

Race[ing] Lowriders

Guided by Foucault's assertion that "the law averts its face and returns to the shadows the instant one looks at it," the criminalization of lowrider mobility and the Chicana/o community's reaction to it are central.[90] For example, when lowriders were banned from a parade in the Inland Empire, Chicana/os chose to hold an alternative gathering in the "city's historically Mexican Westside," thereby returning to a historically welcoming gathering place, when excluded from a historically exclusionary public one.[91] These bans varied in their justification, from public safety to protecting authenticity. The constant, however, seems to be that they sought to instill policies that regulated the movement of bodies of color that "experienced their racialization through

[88] Ondine, *Customized: Art Inspired by Hot Rods*, 43; For video of an actual competition held in 1997 as part of the Lowrider Magazine Super Show in Sacramento, California, see #Big.M.productions.678, "Lowriders -Truck bed dancing!," Youtube video, 3:16, April 30, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BJTp8AEon_c.

[89] Tatum, *Lowriders in Chicano Culture*, 97.

[90] Michel Foucault and Maurice Blanchot, *Foucault, Blanchot: Maurice Blanchot*, *the Thought from Outside* (New York: Zone Books, 1987), 41.

[91] Carpio, *Collisions at the Crossroads*, 1.

permissions and prohibitions on their mobility."[92] This is an example of how lowriding produces identity not simply by its countercultural expression, but by the reaction that it causes from institutionalized power structures.

Examining the ethnic and criminal encoding of cruising will aid a clearer understanding of the adverse responses and oppressive strategies institutionalized power structures employ when immobilizing lowriders and their vehicles. This institutionalized repression of cruising elevates lowriders from simple artistic artifacts to modern-day chariots in a battle for cultural survival. Cars have amassed a long history of serving as status symbols in American society; Best articulated a contemporary example of this when she contended, "cars often serve as indicators of social and economic worth as well as key markers of identity."[93] The lowrider enthusiast, however, has a more passionate relationship with their vehicles, portraying the lowrider not as a symbol or a commodity but as an "embodied avatar" of the lowriding enthusiast, enabling self-objectification.[94] They morph with their vehicles, transforming into artistic objects and mobilizing new epistemes. In this way, the lowrider engenders both as a dynamic moving site aiding subaltern subjects to circumnavigate class inequalities and as a canvas of Chicana/o aesthetic expressions.

Lowriders comingle their identity with their vehicles. The modification of the lowrider takes on a multifaceted signification depending on the lowrider owner's aesthetic motivation. In most cases, however, the lowrider vehicle functions as a mediator between the driver and spectator; the vehicle is his automotive and tattooed protective skin that communicates the

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[92] Carpio, *Collisions at the Crossroads*, 2.

[93] Best, *Fast Cars, Cool Rides*, 4.

[94] Uri McMillan, *Embodied Avatars: Genealogies of Black Feminist Art and Performance* (New York: Macmillan Press, 2016). Here I am extending this concept to include lowriding bodies.

individual's status within his club, a family, or society at large. When theorizing the idea of body-image conformity, Deborah Caslav Covino states that the aesthetic surgical industry "prizes bodies that are untroubled by agedness, physical impairments, gender ambiguity, and racial or ethnic difference."[95] This phenomenon can be seen in the anthropomorphizing of the lowrider in the Chicana/o culture, coupled with its promotion in many instances to the status of avatar for the owner or his loved ones. This illustrates one of the many unique ways lowriders navigate through Chicana/o culture, proffering slow and unorthodox motion and rejecting the speed and forceful movement of muscle cars and hot rods, demonstrating a long and slow journey of nonconformity.

This is not to say that Chicana/os did not participate in or have an impact on the drag racing scene in Southern California. The legendary Bean Bandits racing club, a small tight-knit interracial group, innovated the twin-engine dragster, graced the cover of *Hot Rod* magazine in February of 1955, and "won nearly 400 trophies in the early 1950s in races throughout the country, but their shoestring budget sometimes forced them to sell their trophies back to the drag-strip operators to get gas and food money for the trip home."[96] Chicana/os then are able to manifest their interactions with vehicles in more than one way and at varying speeds.

Scientifically, motion accelerates, one's sense of reality morphing proportionally, but this same morphing occurs in deceleration and a prolonged state of slow motion. Slow motion reflects a valuable expression in lowriding because its effect, as in film, paces the viewer,

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[95] Deborah Caslav Covino, *Amending the Abject Body: Aesthetic Makeovers in Medicine and Culture* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004), 1.

[96] Emmanuel Burgin, Colleen M. O'Connor, and Susan Wachowiak, *San Diego Drag Racing and the Bean Bandits* (Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2017), 38, 26.

allowing it to absorb—and most critically—to savor. The images on a lowrider are not created to be blurred by swiftness but rather to be accentuated by meditative observance or observation, swaying and rocking the viewer's gaze into a hypnotic state. One perceives differently when art moves and when one is moving as one sees. Lowriders cruise to exhibit, and relish seeing the spectators' appreciation. This mutual viewing moves all parties, literally and figuratively, from a passive state of witnessing to an active state of perambulation. Movement, however, is not exclusively physical; Chicana/os have moved through various identity markers and labels to identify themselves. The historical fluidity of Chicana/os' nomenclature has seen them go from Mexica to Indios, to Spanish, to Mexican, to Mexican-American, to Chicano, to Chicana/o, to Chicanx, to Latino, to Latina/o, to Latinx, to Latine.

As El Rey Azteca demonstrated, Chicana/os epitomize a people whose foundational myth resides in movement, be it in the concrete form of migration or the more metaphorical form of nomenclature—by its unique mobility, the lowrider rests in a place of privilege for the Chicana/o community. The automobile carries the expression of motion and movement to a material state since the car enables, facilitates, and epitomizes motion. Many other ethnic groups have formed intimate relationships with the car, but few can claim to have elevated the car to the same height as Chicana/os have. As Calvo-Quirós writes, "we mostly contextualize automobiles as fundamental, and 'sacred' objects."[97] For Chicana/os the lowrider signifies nothing short of a fetish, receiving treatment reserved for relics and religious objects imbued with mystical powers influencing the self and others. The car has managed to integrate itself into the quotidian lives of many groups, but few groups can claim to have integrated the car in such a transformative way as Chicana/os can, have, and do.

[97] Calvo, *Lowriders*, 135.

Body Modification, Tattoos in Transit

As Chappell explained in his book chapter titled "Neither Gangsters nor Santitos,"[98] "countering the stereotype of lowriding as a manifestation of gang culture was [and is] a priority for numerous car clubs."[99] Promoting a nongang reputation, however, is becoming an unmanageable task, given how lowrider has become a synecdoche for urban gang life in mainstream media representations of Black and Brown everyday life. Even within regions of lowriding, Los Angeles stands out as a gang-infested region. In an ethnographic interview conducted by Bright, a New Mexico-based lowrider reported that "we aren't like lowriders in L.A. We aren't into gangs."[100]

Lowrider participants differentiate themselves from gang members even though, next to Catholic and biblical iconography, secular representations of gangsterism are the most prominent imagery on lowriders. In light of this, various competitions held at large car shows feature elements drawing from a variety of policies and rules, apparently designed to foster order and even reverence; these include prohibiting "dented, damaged, unfinished, or incomplete vehicles" from the indoor exhibit space. Likewise, there is "strict prohibition against displaying anything in or around a vehicle that the judges could consider to be obscene, profane, or that could be construed as a weapon."[101] These rules indicate how the lowriding community places a high value on dismantling the notion that lowriding represents a hobby for gangsters and thugs. They

[98] Literally meaning "little saints."

[99] Chappell, *Lowrider Space*, 170.

[100] Bright and Bakewell, *Looking High and Low*, 4.

[101] Tatum, *Lowriders in Chicano Culture*, 177.

also illustrate the lowriding community's understanding of the power they have to change both the appearance and meaning of their lowriders.

Deeply influenced and energized by the explosion of ethnic pride and civic populism of the Chicano movement, Chicana/o youth of the 60s and 70s searched for alternate ways and innovative places to express their newfound energy. According to Gómez-Quiñones and Vásquez, they "sought to express their dreams and angers and to have their status recognized. [by using] their neighborhoods, their bodies, and their cars…as subjects."[102] This search for new canvases led them to the walls of their barrios, the skin on their bones, and ultimately to every part of their cars. In an ironic twist, Chicana/os' search for new ways to express themselves took them back to their pre-conquest roots, where newly rediscovered indigenous principles and practices were understood as resistance to modern normative culture and incorporated into the nascent and evolving Chicana/o aesthetic, political, and spiritual cosmography. In this way, Chicanos asserted themselves against the Pilgrims—who, when they first arrived, understood "personal adornment as a species of idolatry" and allied themselves with the Native people who "tattooed their faces, arms, and legs with elaborate geometric patterns and totemic animal symbols."[103]

Consequently, here lowrider art is framed as a manifestation of transit tattoos and examined for the unique ways these tattoos in motion enhance the reshaping of the cultural geography, both in sizable Chicana/o communities and beyond. By understanding that both steel and flesh bodies are in a constant state of change, the body modifications employed by lowriders

[102] Gómez-Quiñones and Vásquez, *Making Aztlán*, 237.

[103] Charles C. Mann, *1491: New Revelations of the Americas Before Columbus*, 2nd ed. (New York: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2006), 37–38.

paradoxically signify attempts to change as much as to keep one's identity from changing. To achieve this change, lowrider's employ historical, spiritual, and political palettes to execute their aesthetic vision. The artwork on lowrider cars features images ranging from representations of culture, religion, and history that are often charged with political and social resistance. The art has found its way from the "Chicano street" where it started to "influence copyists outside the neighborhood, including unique body tattoos."[104]

Much of the artwork and design painted on lowriders privileges abstract symbolism that combines color, shape, and lines to decorate and accentuate the body of a vehicle. Regardless of its thematic content, the defining characteristic of lowrider's art is the same as that of tattoos—they are both deeply embedded representations that signal an assertion of individuality and humanity through body modification. The basic fact that a spectator confronted with artwork on a mobile human or auto body must contend with motion as a factor of their visual consumption is key to the perception of the artwork. Unlike two-dimensional artwork, artwork on a lowrider is not observable in its totality from any one angle; for an illustration on a lowrider to be fully appreciated, the art, the spectator, or both must move. With both automotive and human tattoos, an observer must engage kinesthetically, circling a person's tattooed limb or a lowrider, though in some larger car show venues the lowrider rotates atop a platform.

Techniques to aid the audience in the consumption of a lowrider's artwork prove numerous, ranging from the technologically sophisticated platform to the more basic technique of placing car length mirrors underneath the car so the detailing under the vehicle is visible. Commonly, exhibited lowriders have their doors, hoods, and trunks wide open, symbolizing a complete comfort with almost any facet of lowriding. When it comes to bodies—automotive or

[104] Gómez-Quiñones and Vásquez, *Making Aztlán*, 237.

human—a lowrider show hides little from its spectators. As we saw with El Rey Azteca art's iconography and blood-red coloring, the combative and aesthetic sides of cultural identity are embraced equally. By centralizing the connection to both ancient migration mythology and human sacrifice, the artwork calls for a deeper consideration of these connections and requires context for a fuller understanding. As Calvo-Quirós states, the "link between blood, violence, and these pre-colonial communities…is a recurrent element, in the twentieth century, used to represent and typify Chicana/os and consequently their cultural production." This will in turn inform the justification for the oppressive policies that "propel state regulatory relationships with such cultural practices as murals, lowriders, zoot suiters and tattoos."[105]

The artwork on the body of a classic car can signify or narrate a story, even when the design is abstract or devoid of recognizable symbols. Other depictions emblazoned on the bodies of lowrider vehicles that support the idea of them functioning as transit tattoos feature not only what Tatum calls "visual imagery for the wider community's civil rights struggles"[106] along with more pop-culturally influenced iconography featuring cartoon characters such as the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, Bart Simpson, and (the most problematic) Speedy Gonzalez.

From its birth, lowrider art, like the tattoos inspiring it, has been about seeking out, inviting, and controlling an audience's gaze. The artwork on lowrider hoods, trunks, and side panels shares many elements with both the murals found on walls and the tattoos found on lowrider's bodies in the streets of many major cities, but they seem to complicate even as they manifest the basic qualities inherent to both. Transit tattoos alter not only a vehicle's signification but its functionality. For example, a mural found on a wall enjoys a fixity and

[105] Calvo, *Lowriders*, 103.

[106] Tatum, *Lowriders in Chicano Culture*, 97.

permanence on which people rely to construct its meaning. Even the horrid photograph of *Sokichi*, a servant who killed the son of his master and was punished by crucifixion, takes on a distinctive signification when reproduced by Mexican muralist David Alfaro Siqueiros as part of his *América Tropical* mural.[107]

The scale or size of a mural on a wall also large owing to its purpose: to be objectively viewed by as many people as possible. In cruising, the lowrider operates in much the same way, though it increases its audience not by staying put as the audience drives by, but by driving by as the audience stands still. Lowriders and their transit tattoos do not conform to fixity or scale, but produce their meaning by extending both. As Bright claims when theorizing lowrider art, "these cars bring pleasure from performing 'culture' disrupting boundaries and derailing expectations."[108] Indeed, lowriders and the pleasure principle are closely related and manifest most clearly on the pages of *Lowrider* magazine and on the show room floor of large car shows, where female bodies accessorize lowriders.

Motor Maidens

The black and white photograph of the woman shows her laying on her side, supported by her left arm with her legs tucked, as she waves and smiles. She is wearing a two-piece bathing suit and her hair is partially pulled back across her crown, accentuating a cascade of curls on either side of her face. Just in front of her is a plexiglass sign reading, in part, "Body by Fisher Pontiac Classic." The body the sign is referring to is presumably not that of the woman, but of a 1939 Pontiac Deluxe Six show car with custom white rubber wheels, white-painted metal parts,

[107] William A. Ewing, *The Body: Photographs of the Human Form* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1994), 250–51.

[108] Ondine, *Customized*: *Art Inspired by Hot Rods*, 41

and elements of chrome, copper, or nickel-plate. The car's exterior features an outer shell constructed completely of transparent plexiglass, revealing all of the vehicle's internal components. The photo in question principally shows the contents of its trunk, in which the cramped and immobilized smiling woman is confined, with only a replacement tire to keep her company (fig. 6).

The photo is dated June 11, 1940. General Motors (GM) and Rohm and Haas (R&H) chemical company originally built this vehicle, now known as the "Ghost Car," for the 1939–40 World's Fair. It is one of only two ever made.[109] Perhaps this collaboration was a publicity stunt or an unorthodox attempt to highlight the strength and merit of R&H's newly invented form of shatterproof synthetic crystal-clear plastic. Or perhaps, as automotive historian Robert Tate put it, GM was "looking to capitalize on the upward mobility of the consumer market."[110] Whatever the motivation for this design, the fact remains that in this photo we see that the car's body was not the only one to be constructed with a body intended to be a synecdoche for that of a woman.

The identity of the woman in the photo is still a mystery, as is the story of just how she came to be encased inside a compartment designed to carry chattel rather than humans. The car, on the other hand, has achieved more historiographical success. Displayed at the Smithsonian Institution from 1942 to 1947, it more recently brought in $308,000 at auction.[111] Whatever the Ghost Car's story, its connection to this unknown woman is this section's concern. The photograph of her reclining body provides an opportunity to investigate the ways that vehicles made long ago are still able to construct bodies in, through, and with motion.

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[109] Robert Tate, "Looking Back at the Pontiac Ghost Car," Motor Cities, August 27, 2017, https://www.motorcities.org/story-of-the-week/2017/looking-back-at-the-pontiac-ghost-car.

[110] Ibid.

[111] Ibid.

The intricate and intimate involvement of women in car culture is well documented. What is less well known is the way they have "rolled right with the Lowrider Movement but have had to work harder for the driver's seat."[112] It wasn't until the women's movement of the 1970s that it became acceptable for women to work on their own rides. When discussing the motivation behind the more than hundred-year-old history of automakers painting posters, erecting statues, casting hood ornaments, and commissioning models to "mesmerize car buyers with beauty and allure," Margery Krevsky succinctly concludes: "sex sells."[113] But if sex sells, it does so differently when it comes to lowriding. Sex does sell cars; it also sells tickets to car shows. But, in lowriding, it delivers a lot less than one may think. In the brief examination that follows, sex, erotization, and misogyny reveal themselves as dynamic components of a complex and tangled network of meanings that intersect in lowriding, revealing not simply the objectification of the female body but its *sparagmos.*[114]

It is difficult to untangle the sexual objectification of women (and in recent years the body in general) from lowriding. Lowriders are often called *pimpmobiles* by enthusiasts; upgrading and modifying one's vehicle is also known as *pimping out* one's ride. This supports an argument of the relationship between lowriders and objectification of the sexes—primarily of women. This reading, however, is incomplete. Take, for instance, Chappell's point that "the connection signaled by the term 'pimped' lies in a common aesthetic of degraded opulence," rather than a direct or actual relationship to the sex trade.[115] Thus, in the case of the seemingly

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[112] Penland, *Lowrider. History, Pride, Culture*, 44.

[113] Margery Krevsky, *Sirens of Chrome: The Enduring Allure of Auto Show Models* (Troy, MI: Momentum Books, 2008, 5.

[114] The act of wrenching, tearing apart, or mangling a human body.

[115] Chappell, *Lowrider Space*, 86.

objectionable elements involved in lowrider culture, the elements require a reading that considers broader context and accounts for the complex chain of signifiers that lowriding produces. Lowrider car culture reduces and compartmentalizes model's bodies, subjecting them to a process of surrogation in which the models' bodies represent immobile lowrider vehicles ready to deliver pleasure. This surrogation necessitates a symbolic dehumanizing and dismemberment of the woman—a phenomenon familiar in multiple mythologies. It is no coincidence that, of all the Mexica deities used to decorate El Rey Azteca, Coyolxauhqui was featured; she suffered dismemberment at her brother's hand.[116] Then there is Sage Agastya in Indian mythology. While he was not featured on El Rey Azteca, he also illustrates this compartmentalized conception of women. Sage decided to create a wife for himself by selecting the most desirable parts of various domesticated animals to create a beautiful woman named *Lopamudra*.[117] The female body, as conceived in these two examples and in lowriding, is often seen as a grouping of holes, not as a whole in itself, denying the female body unity, coherence, and agency.

In the Mexica myth explicating the birth of the gods, translated into Spanish between 1548 and 1585, we learn of the pious goddess Coatlicue's divine conception.[118] While sweeping the holy temple atop Snake Mountain, an orb of white feathers descended from the heavens. Upon seeing it, Coatlicue reached for it and placed it into her womb. When her four hundred children heard of this event, they became enraged, primarily because they did not know the father and the insemination had taken place on sacred ground. It was Coyolxauhqui, Coatlicue's only daughter, who rallied her brothers to cleanse their dishonor with their mother's blood. One

[116] Her name translates to "Bells on Cheeks" and she is the Mexica goddess of the moon.

[117] Her name means "assembled from the most beautiful parts."

[118] Her name translates to "Serpent Skirt," and she is the mother of the gods in Mexica mythology.

of the brothers however betrayed the plan to their mother and, as he did, his unborn brother Huitzilopochtli spoke to his mother Coatlicue and told her to have no fear. When his sister and 399 brothers came to perform their planned matricide, Huitzilopochtli emerged from his mother's womb fully armored. Brandishing a blazing serpent sword Huitzilopochtli vanquished his brothers and decollated his sister Coyolxauhqui before hurling her off the mountain to fall and become dismembered in the process.[119]

This foundational myth's impact on Mexica religious practices, and by extension on Chicana/o culture, is paramount. The role that motion plays in the completion of male superiority is critical to this myth. Huitzilopochtli initially uses his serpent sword to behead his sister but, rather than opting for a complete sparagmos, he thrusts her down Serpent Mountain to complete her dismemberment. Huitzilopochtli, then the god of war, exercises complete dominion over motion, since it is he alone who can both control and compel motion in others. Coyolxauhqui's fall may have stopped at the foot of Serpent Mountain, but the force of its impact managed to explode her body with so much force that parts of her have tattooed themselves upon and across the Chicana/o psyche.

In recent years many feminist artists, scholars, and theorists have taken up the task of remembering Coyolxauhqui—literally and figuratively. Scholar Alicia Gaspar de Alba, for example, has theorized the Coyolxauhqui myth to explore the themes of femicide, free trade, and border politics, and to theorize the ways Coyolxauhqui's image is incorporated into various artists' work, most notably Alma López's 2003 seriagraph "La Llorona Desperately Seeking Coyolxauhqui," which makes a visual connection between the hundreds of murdered women in

[119] It is his victory in this battle that positioned Huitzilopochtli as the supreme deity in the Mexica pantheon, making the woman subservient to the man, the moon to the sun, silver to gold, and the feminine to the masculine.

Juárez and the murdered goddess Coyolxauhqui.[120] De Alba states that, "it is of the essence that we re-member the dismembered Coyolxauhquis of Juárez, that we do something to stop the violence…to help the victims, their families."[121]

Recall El Rey Azteca's numerous detailed airbrushed images and patterns depicting ancient Mexica iconography.[122] These ways of representing both lowriders and the women on and around them are, according to Sandoval, characteristic of "the eroticization of the female in relation to lowrider cars, car shows, and magazine representations," which is "an endemic part of the vocabulary of low rider culture in general."[123] The artwork on the passenger side of El Rey Azteca is especially instructive—it portrays the headless and naked torso of a woman, with the decollated head of Coyolxauhqui superimposed as a face. This depiction points to the way lowriding sensualizes not women's bodies as wholes, but instead their dismembered parts. Even so, this examination eschews *wound culture*—the term used to articulate the idea of victims tenaciously embracing the label of victimhood and trauma in a counterproductive way. Instead, it favors a more empowering interpretation of these complex exchanges. That there are scars is undeniable. But so is the possibility, as scholar Petra Kuppers puts it, that "creative practices at the site of the scar can play with the mechanisms of repulsion and attraction, self and others, identity and production of difference."[124] Women can, have, and do select the parts of lowriding they want to embrace and reject the rest. As Caroline Acosta, a member of the *Brown Satins*, put

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[120] See Alicia Gaspar de Alba and Georgina Guzmán, *Making a Killing: Femicide, Free Trade, and La Frontera* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010).

[121] Ibid., 19.

[122] These were the indigenous people of the valley of Mexico who ruled until the Spanish conquest of 1521.

[123] Sandoval, "Cruising Through Low Rider Culture," 181.

[124] Petra Kuppers, *The Scar of Visibility: Medical Performances and Contemporary Art* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 1.

it: “We didn’t have wet T-shirt contests and all that…we concentrated on family entertainment.”[125]

Tropes, unexamined notions, blurred distinctions, and a consistent aversion to what Derrida calls *aporia*, or the notion that comfort with doubt or puzzlement is a sign of a mature and working mind, mark the discourse around lowriders and their representations of women. Here the analysis of lowriders and the visual representations of women that emerge in lowrider culture gains precision. This does not mean that the current theorization around lowriding and its problematic representations of female bodies is singularly incorrect, but it does stop short of its destination. Past theorization has called lowriding to task for displaying naked women in highly sexualized ways, when the lowrider’s problem is with femininity itself. As atrocious as lowriders’ portrayals of women may be, here their mobilizing of actual assault on the female body is the focus. Take, for instance the physical cost paid by female bodies, as articulated by Krevsky’s account of car show models: “behind the scenes, dressing rooms are filled with tales of trauma inflicted by hours in stiletto pumps, corsets, and dangling earrings. Metallic gowns gouge the skin; latex dresses stultify sweat glands.”[126] The female body is sacrificed for spectators atop the same stage where lowriders are worshiped.

The silhouette of many a lowrider unapologetically echoes the silhouettes of many female models’ bodies, which are often adorned with bikinis that match their corresponding lowriders.[127] These models also represent the source material for the images inside the covers of many car magazines, none more relevant to this chapter than *Lowrider*, a magazine famed for its

[125] Penland, *Lowrider*: *History, Pride, Culture*, 44.

[126] Krevsky, *Sirens of Chrome*, 6.

[127] This is by far the most common uniform seen at a typical lowrider car show.

misogynistic reputation, which is articulated generally and succinctly by Sandoval as "dependent" not only "on the bodies of cars, but also the bodies of women."[128] Upon further analysis of lowriding, however, Sandoval proves generous in her assessment, for the evidence indicates that as far as lowriding is concerned the only parts of women worth depending on are their T&As.[129]

Lowriding and its artifacts often function as a cog in the machinery of an oppressive and, in some instances, paradoxically empowering aesthetic value system. A single-minded analysis that casts women who participate in lowriding as hapless victims of an oppressive system inadvisably undervalues a key aspect in lowriding: agency, or a subject's power to make choices and affect change. Accordingly, the argument that follows accounts for the possibility that women have and do participate in lowriding as models, car owners, or support staff, and they may be acting in their own best interests. While the objectification of women in lowriding is undeniable, so is the freedom of women to profit from it. Lowriding, then, simultaneously limits options for women's self-representation and rewards them for conforming to its dictums. This duality of lowrider vehicles is what positions them as both "reliquaries of ancient and contemporary images," containing "keys to sexual and spiritual union," and a powerful tool for the exploitation and objectification of women.[130] According to Sandoval, "representations of the feminine in lowriding art vary widely, from figures like the Virgin of Guadalupe, to Aztec princesses, to *soldaderas* (Mexican women who fought in the Mexican revolution), to stylized

[128] Sandoval, *The High Art of Riding Low*, 7.

[129] Vulgar term widely used to abbreviate the phrase "Tits and Ass."

[130] Brenda Jo Bright, *Mexican American Low Riders: An Anthropological Approach to Popular Culture* (PhD diss., Rice University, 1994), 25–26.

bikini-clad icons of romance and sex."[131] However, the most represented images emblazoned on lowriders have to do with the female form, often scantily clad and suggestively posed, apparently for the audience's scopophilic enjoyment. Sandoval explains that "women's bodies are often accessories in or on cars—presented both as fantasy and inspiration."[132] This is one end of a spectrum; the other end is equally fraught, for the way it casts lowrider men as agency-deficient actants with little to no self-control. This gesture towards drafting lowriders into the ranks of wound culture in order to ameliorate their choices as benign "desires for a 'customized world,'" that they "erroneously" apply to the bodies of women," again undervalues agency, without which one has little hope of understanding lowriding's affordances.[133]

The consequences of sexualizing the lowrider by associating it with the eroticized female body has been examined by Chappell, who concludes that "it could be argued that when lowrider mural images draw on sexualized and objectified iconographies of the female body, they also conscript women to the role of pleasure providers for male subjects."[134] These sexualized representations on cars, however, tend to be eclipsed by the actual physical female bodies who pose and interact with audience members on and around the lowriders. Tatum states that it is "common to have women in tight, revealing two-piece outfits walk the floor of car shows."[135] The reality Tatum neglects is that this walking often takes place in drafty exhibition halls, and that women are unable to don sweaters, shawls, or scarves lest they destroy the full view of their exposed bodies. The preferred uniform for car models creates a level of exposure that tests

[131] Sandoval, *The High Art of Riding Low*, 7.

[132] Ibid.

[133] Calvo, *Lowriders*, 178.

[134] Chappell, *Lowrider Space*, 86.

[135] Tatum, *Lowriders in Chicano Culture*, 105.

endurance and vulnerability and, in this way, mechanizes the female body. If the lowrider must open its various private compartments to the audience's gaze, then so must the female model, whose job is to accessorize the vehicle.

While a commodification of female sexuality has been historically pronounced in automobility, women's stripping-down has not. Showgirls in the 1930s Chicago Auto Show, for example, known as the "original auto show models," "worked in fur capes, coats, stoles, and wraps in sable, mink, chinchilla, Persian lamb, and silver fox." The presence of women at this early auto show contributed to a rise in attendance from "125,000 visitors in 1935 to 225,000 in 1939."[136] A large-scale modern car show illustrates just how far the relationship between female bodies and automobiles has come. A quintessential featured event featured in the car show involves pouring chilly water down the front side of women wearing thin white T-shirts, so that the transparent fabric will cling and accentuate the shape of their breasts. In this wet T-shirt contest, the winner is usually determined by crowd reaction, which incentivizes the contestants' expressive poses and suggestive gyrations. Here, the curves of the women's breasts are accentuated towards a similar purpose as that of the car's glossy paint and designs—to hint at the promise of pleasure that riding either of them could bring. As crass as this reading may seem, it nevertheless withstands prudery.

Some shows have branded other types of contests that emphasize other portions of the female anatomy such as the "hot legs contest"[137] or the more performative "Bad Girl" contest, where mostly single women without children don "elaborate, seductive and beautiful dresses"

[136] Krevsky, *Sirens of Chrome*, 44.

[137] Penland, *Lowrider. History, Pride, Culture*, 45.

and, according to Bright, engage in "problematic" performances.[138] Over the last ten years, the lowriding community has opted to deal with accusations of female objectification by creating contests that objectify the male body. Large car shows now also feature hard body competitions in which men display their muscled and sculpted bodies to compete for prizes. Interestingly, however, they must keep their clothes on while competing.[139] Sandoval articulates this double standard thusly: "at car shows, women can walk around practically naked, but the men must leave their shirts on, so this clearly reveals how bodies are valued differently according to gender."[140] There are, in some lowrider shows, competitions known as Zoot-Suit Contests, where males wear zoot suits and line up on a stage in a stance known as "the warp," where they lean their body back with a leg extended.[141] This illustrates how men are included in the attempt to satisfy an audience's scopophilic gaze. A male lowrider enthusiast named Julian Quintana illustrates this perfectly with his vanity plate, which reads "'4U2SEE.'"[142]

Women's role in lowriding has often taken the form of objectification, but there are also significant undertheorized examples where women have played an active part in cruising, car clubs, and lowriding. For Sandoval, this involvement reverses expectations: "Ironically, Chicanas are also attracted to low rider culture…Despite their objectification, then, women have a paradoxically interdependent relationship within this male-dominated culture."[143] In only a

[138] Bright, *Mexican American Low Riders*, 57.

[139] The resonances with the hard body trucks and muscle cars that appear in the show room floor are worthy of a deeper analysis.

[140] Sandoval, "Cruising Through Low Rider Culture," 192.

[141] Bright, *Mexican American Low Riders*, 55.

[142] Ibid., 130.

[143] Sandoval, "Cruising Through Low Rider Culture," 183.

couple of examples from the 60s and 70s, we have the "*Fortunettes* in Orange County, California…the *Dukettes* (a branch of the *Dukes*, a lowrider car club)," the *Lady Bugs*, who built an identity and reputation around the Volkswagen Beetle, and another group in San Diego named *Ladies Pride Car Club* which has been called "the first women-only lowrider car club in the history of the movement."[144] Ladies Pride, founded in 1979, was a response to the San Diego car club's prohibition of women. The club was first composed of four nineteen- and twenty-year-old women.[145] By 1981, the club had grown to nearly fifteen members.[146] Other groups of women have embraced this form of cultural expression and have entered a lane in what has not only been a historically male dominated activity and practice, but also one that is hostile towards women.

The Specials Car Club, founded by Jo Anna Samora-Harris and a small group of high-school-aged women in the city of Imperial Beach, was formed to bring car-loving San Diego-based women together through "picnics, dances and car washes."[147] Nonie Samano, a cofounder of the Specials Car Club, articulates her perspective thusly: "The value that I saw in lowriding is that you made a commitment…stepping out of where you're supposed to be confined, you know, were not in our kitchens were in our cars…we're part of the community and we're being role models for the younger generations."[148] Samano illustrates how women's participation in lowriding is not likely to be singularly misogynistic; instead it, like so many other cultural practices, defies simplistic evaluations. In only one alternative reading of these oppressive

[144] Pulido and Reyes, *San Diego Lowriders*, 97.

[145] Ibid.

[146] Ibid., 100.

[147] Ibid., 101.

[148] YouTube video, accessed October 8, 2019, video no longer available, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N0RRh9u8xmY.

images, Calvo argues that "we should not dismiss the possibility that representations of sensuality might signal a desire to achieve power, to disturb, and to make a subversive statement."[149] This argument cautioning us away from an over-sexualized conception of lowrider images should not lead us headlong into the equally wrong impulse to ignore the key role that misogyny plays in lowrider life.

Lowriding then makes use of the female body, or its choice parts, only to consume them in the same way that a lowriding enthusiast may consume a meal at one of their routine "taco plate benefit picnics." Lowriders often employ food sales as "a popular means of fundraising for some cause, such as a neighbor's or friend's hospital bills."[150] This practice inadvertently recalls lowriding's early days, when young white working-class men in Los Angeles took to calling lowriders "taco wagons" on account of their consubstantiality with Mexican Americans.[151] It is also not coincidental that in the 1960s the winner of a "Miss Hot Tamale" contest in a chili festival would be hired to "extol the power of 'hot' engines."[152] For, as we have seen in this chapter, cars in general, and lowriders in particular, satisfy a hunger.

A Moving Encore

Lowriding privileges the handcrafted over the mass-produced, getting something from as close to the source as possible, making that thing much more valuable. For example, a lowrider modified by an owner is seen as much more authentic, and therefore more valuable, than one modified by an auto shop. This is at the source a sentiment that Rodolfo "Corky" Gonzales

[149] Calvo, *Lowriders*, 173.

[150] Chappell, *Lowrider Space*, 197.

[151] Best, *Fast Cars, Cool Rides*, 199.

[152] Krevsky, *Sirens of Chrome*, 92.

expresses in his 1967 epic poem *I Am Joaquin* when he writes: "I must fight, And win this struggle for my sons, and they, must know from me who I am."[153] In other words, if a story is to be told about a people, it is best if they themselves take an opportunity to shape it, independently of mainstream esthetics or preferences. After all, it is they who are the *de facto* "preservers of history" for they hold in them "memory, story, and ritual."[154] Lowriders are fragments of a wider cultural practice that pushes against colonially derived culture. These fragments are privileged as synecdoche because they are a part of it all, a firsthand, hands-on expression. What is true for these cars is true for people as well. There are a multiplicity of epistemes, many ways of knowing that cannot be captured without accessing people who participate in or partake of the lowriding life. When thinking about the dynamics of culture and the difficulty inherent in excavating knowledge, a customized vehicle is a good place to start a conversation about subaltern subjects and their memories as counterweights to state-sanctioned history.[155] Lowriders and their artwork often tell stories that only live in the community's memory, having long ago been erased from the community's history.

Lowriders are a contemporary metaphorical manifestation of the walls of the past that held murals going back to Mexica times. These vehicles and the murals atop their hoods and on their side panels tell a story whose roots go back to Mexico. In the 1930s it was famous Soviet director and cinematographer Sergei Eisenstein's relationship with Siqueiros that influenced Eisenstein's development of the *Dynamic Square* cinematic theory. Rivera and Siqueiros enjoy

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[153] Rodolpho Gonzales, *Message to Aztlán: Selected Writings of Rodolfo "Corky" Gonzales*, compiled by Antonio Esquibel (Houston, TX: Arte Público Press, 2001), 28.

[154] Dwight Conquergood, *Cultural Struggles: Performance, Ethnography, Praxis,* ed. E. Patrick Johnson (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013), 8.

[155] Though Foucault points out that "history…is primarily and fundamentally memory." Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language* (New York: Vintage Books, 1982), 7.

significant scholarly attention, given the substantial commissions both had in the United States. Siqueiros's controversial 1932 Los Angeles mural *América Tropical* has been preserved and given a small visitor center and museum, all after being whitewashed shortly after its unveiling. William David Estrada details some of the process of *América Tropical* creation as follows: "Siqueiros consulted with renowned architect Richard Neutra…as well as with Sumner Spaulding. Estrada was assisted in the forty-seven-day mural project by a collaboration of artists that became known as the Bloc of Mural Painters and may have included Jackson Pollock."[156] This mural is now a symbol for many Chicana/os of the legitimate value of consistent and uncompromised artistic expression in the face of oppression. Many a lowrider has taken literal or figurative copies of these muralists' work and used them to speak of the contemporary Chicana/o struggle.

Though Siqueiros did not set out to offend or criticize his patrons, shortly before he began painting the mural *La Opinión*—the leading Spanish-language daily—reported that Mexicans in the city were being indiscriminately apprehended at the Plaza and given one-way rail tickets to Mexico. These events deeply affected the artist—how could this be otherwise given Siqueiros' zealous Stalinist allegiances.[157] He did, after all, conspire to have Trotsky murdered after Trotsky settled in Mexico City.[158] Along with Rivera and Siqueiros, José Clemente Orozco completes the trinity of Mexico's most influential muralists known as *Los Tres Grandes* or the "the three great ones." These three most influenced the Chicana/o muralists of the

[156] William D. Estrada*, The Los Angeles Plaza: Sacred and Contested Space* (Austin: University of Texas Press), 2008), 209.

[157] Ibid.

[158] "The Return of 'America Tropical,'" *Los Angeles Times*, October 9, 2012, http://articles.latimes.com/2012/oct/09/opinion/la-ed-mural-siqueiros-los-angeles-20121009.

1960s, and they illustrate just how exactly early Mexican artistic expression enhanced the mobilization of the *movimiento* generally and Chicana/o lowrider art specifically. Here then is an illustration of the permeability between and within the indigenous, political, and historical elements of murals in many communities of color, again showing murals migrating through and between space and time on their way to lowrider hoods.

The mural and muralism have a pronounced resonance between Mexican and Chicana/o cultural expression. Historically, muralism is one of the art forms that enjoys much attention from the Chicana/o scholar community. This attention has produced valuable research that provides historiographic information tracing murals back to before Columbus's arrival in the Caribbean. Both the length and breadth of murals in America, and specifically in the land that would one day become Mexico, point to their paradoxical ability to embody mobility while existing in fixity. It is notable that the contributions and influences of the Mexican mural movement extend far beyond the Chicana/o community. Rivera's commissioned work in the United States has had a deep impact on contemporary Chicana/o muralists, but also in the Anglo community. George Biddle, for example, is credited as the architect of one of the New Deal's five federal arts projects responsible for hiring unemployed artists to decorate schools, post offices, and other government buildings. What is seldom mentioned however, is that he was a one-time student of Mexican muralist Diego Rivera and that the Mexican post-revolutionary government-sponsored mural program inspired his federal arts project's design.[159]

In a contemporary example discussed by Dylan A. T. Miner, the late 1970s Detroit Michigan mural *CitySpirit*, painted by George Vargas and Martín Moreno with logistical help from Carolina Ramón, stands as one of the few remaining Movement-era murals in the Motor

[159] Rabin J. Dunitz, *Street Gallery: Guide to 1000 Los Angeles Murals*, (Los Angeles: RJD Enterprises, 1998).

City. Vargas cites Rivera's *Detroit Industry* fresco cycle executed in 1932 and 1933 at the Detroit Institute of Arts as "one of his most important models."[160] Thus Miner concludes that *CitySpirit* "directly links Vargas and Moreno, as well as Detroit [Ch]icanos, to Diego Rivera" and by extension to the *Movimiento*.[161]

Today, the Chicana/o Movement is admittedly attenuated in comparison to the 1960s and 70s, possibly due to the vacuum created by the dearth of sponsorship for the next generation of Chicana/os. However, even given a climate that prides imitation and discourages emulation, some artists and groups have managed to be truly innovative in their artistic expression and to push the boundaries of what Chicana/o performance can be. This pushing, however, often uncovers uncomfortable historical elements not meant to be excavated, and so has repercussions. As Shifra Goldman argues, "to excavate a hidden history often means to fracture or overturn the existing and exclusionary hegemonic history; it means to replace the well-worn heroes and heroines...with new faces, personalities, and agendas."[162] A world war would provide these new heroes in the Chicana/o community.

The Chicana/o community focused on the automobile as a symbol influenced by both spirituality and aesthetics that was "no longer informed by minimalist notions of elegance and Puritan disdain for decoration."[163] This quotation gestures to the pronounced historical relationship between Catholicism and the social movements of the 60s, informed in part by the 1962 Second Vatican Council's call for clergy to shift from a spiritual to an earthlier focus. This

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[160] As quoted in Miner, *Creating Aztlán*, 138.

[161] Ibid.

[162] Shifra Goldman, *Tradition and Transformation: Chicana/o Art from the 1970s Through the 1990s*, ed. Charlene Villaseñor Black (Los Angeles: UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center, 2015), 2.

[163] Bright, *Customized: Art Inspired by Hot Rods*, 38.

new direction would feed the rise of an emphasis on social issues and tangible ways the Church could help its most oppressed members. This shift would come to be known as Liberation Theology. The Church's intimate involvement in labor and social issues post-Vatican II seems to have influenced Chicana/o nationalist ideology, and manifested in both subtle and overt ways. For example, the 1969 Chicano Youth Conference in Denver, Colorado, titled their culminating document "*El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán*" or the *Spiritual plan of Aztlan* (emphasis mine) in English.[164]

Perhaps this is why, from the first days of the Chicana/o movement, vehicles like automobiles and trucks show up not simply as means of transportation but as nodes of spiritual and community building, as well as organizing tools. A performance group embodying these uses of the vehicle is El Teatro Campesino (ETC). Founded in 1965, ETC is known for a political style of theatre that uses *actos*, short political plays; *mitos*, plays based on Mexica and Mayan history and myths; and *corridos*, Mexican ballads that recount history from the common people's perspective. ETC prepared the path for many Chicana/o theatrical productions today, and did so first from atop flatbed trucks in the fields of Delano during the United Farm Workers (UFW) strike in the 1960s.

As part of the strike, workers, many of them immigrants, kept a twenty-four-hour vigil at this makeshift altar and attended daily mass celebrated at the station wagon shrine.[165] Given this history, it is not insignificant that Rubén Ortiz Torres titled his contribution to the first edited collection dedicated to hot rods, lowriders, and American car culture "Cathedrals on Wheels."

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[164] Tatum, *Chicano Popular Culture*, 165–66.

[165] Yolanda Broyles-Gonzalez, *El Teatro Campesino: Theater in the Chicano Movement* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994), 59.

Some scholars have implied that this phrase refers to the "many opportunities" that artisans and artists have to "exhibit their various talents, just as cathedrals afforded many skilled persons multiple and varied opportunities to display their talents."[166] This interpretation however, does not account for the fact that cathedrals were never completed in any one person's lifetime and that they could not be individually conceived, designed, and completed. Many lowriders can and are the sole creation of an individual. It is conceivably the mixture of politics and spirituality that would make these mobile cathedrals synonymous with the Chicano civil rights movement. As Tatum puts it, "religious themes and images…are popular in Chicana/o muralism and in lowrider mural art."[167] Biblical quotes and scriptural passages abound on the insides and outsides of many lowriders at car shows; Saint Christopher (the patron of bachelors, drivers, and travel) cards and figures can be found in or near many lowriders.

The two Catholic religious figures whose iconographies predominate are "Jesus in various incarnations…and the Virgin of Guadalupe, who plays a central role in Mexican and Chicana/o religious culture."[168] Of these two, the Virgin of Guadalupe is much more present in lowrider mural art, perchance due to her association with the most humble and unappreciated of subjects, as evidenced by her appearance near what is now Mexico City to Juan Diego, a poor Mexican *indio,* not a rich land owning *Español*. As for the specific historical importance of the Virgin Mary, one can point to the ubiquity of the Virgin's persona on jewelry and clothes worn by Mexicans and Chicana/os, along with the way she is used to adorn cars and walls in communities with Chicana/o populations. Pilgrimages are held in her honor all over the

[166] Tatum, *Lowriders in Chicano Culture*, 81.

[167] Ibid., 101.

[168] Ibid.

southwest. The longest of these excursions is held yearly in the Coachella Valley of California. Pilgrimages, processions, and other peripatetic endeavors are key since, as Cabranes-Grant points out, "public festivals are, by definition, activities that aim to transform their audience into a fundamental part of the show."[169] I extend this idea and claim that in a pilgrimage and other mobile performance an individual is not simply part of the show—they are the show.

Art scholar Charlene Villaseñor Black attributes the Virgin's potency partly to the dominance of Mexican culture for whom the Virgin Mary is sacred and to the Virgin's association with the oppressed and the downtrodden. Writer Alena Maschke echoes this when she states that "Our Lady of Guadalupe has a long history of accompanying those who fought against oppression and for the independence of Latinos, starting with the Mexican War of Independence against Spain and continuing today."[170] In validation of this claim one can point to the prototypical highway-enabled mobility that so many Chicana/os find themselves engaged in. Even a cursory scan of archived photographs of the early Chicana/o movement will yield many examples of people carrying standards emblazoned with Our Lady of Guadalupe's image as they traverse streets and highways. It is hardly a coincidence that "the figure of the Virgin was prominent in the iconography associated with César Chávez and Dolores Huerta-led UFW, which played an important role in the Chicano movement of the 1960s and 1970s" and in the lives of many Mexican immigrants.[171] As Jerome Krase and Timothy Shortell articulate this role, "immigrants generally lack the power to recreate the valued spaces of their home cultures, but

[169] Cabranes-Grant, *From Scenarios to Networks*, 67.

[170] Alena Maschke, "Meet the Devoted Coachella Valley Catholics Leading the Longest Pilgrimage in the United States," Desert Sun, December 12, 2017, http://www.desertsun.com/story/life/2017/12/12/meet-devoted-coachella-valley-catholics-leading-longest- pilgrimage-united-states/929430001/.

[171] Tatum, *Lowriders in Chicano Culture*, 107.

their day-to-day lives are full of expressive and phatic signs of their ethnic, religious, and class identity."[172]

Chicana/o Studies scholar Mary Pardo has also written about the "Guadalupanas," a highly active religious association composed of Catholic women who provide spiritual leadership and social services, and perform works of charity for the benefit of the poor and disenfranchised Catholics and non-Catholics alike. As Pardo notes, the group takes its title from The Virgin Mary's full nomenclature: "Our Lady of Guadalupe, La Reina de las Américas [Queen of the Americas]." Another name used to venerate the Virgin Mary that highlights her association with subaltern subjects is "La Morenita, 'the small dark one.'"[173] This diminutive, more than anything else, points to the high esteem with which she is revered. But the Virgin Mary's presence is not limited to the visual examples discussed thus far—there are also many literary references to her, as well as the use of her portrait in many of the *movimiento's* foundational documents. In only one example, Rodolfo "Corky" Gonzales features her in his famous poem *I am Joaquin*. He writes "I am faithful, humble, Juan Diego the Virgin de Guadalupe Tonantzin, Aztec Goddess too."[174] Here Gonzales not only includes her, but also gestures to the Virgin's indigenous predecessor, subtly equating the Mexica goddess with the Christian saint. Indeed, the Virgin Mary represents a syncretic amalgamation of the indigenous

[172] Jerome Krase and Timothy Shortell, "On the Spatial Semiotics of Vernacular Landscapes in Global Cities" *Visual Communications* 11, no. 3 (2011): 367–400.

[173] Any time a Chicana/o affixes the "ita" or "ito" suffix to a name, it signals affection, love, and intimacy. Pardo, *Mexican American Women Activists*, 275.

[174] Gonzales, *Message to Aztlán*, 22.

and the European, the polytheistic and the monotheistic. Chicana/os are then truly "Aztec Prince and Christian Christ," as Gonzales later puts it.[175]

[175] Ibid., 29.

Chapter Three
Movable Feasts: Maize, Mestizaje, and Motility

On August 13, 2019, forty-one-year-old Dana Hutchings fasted the whole day but for a few beers, and set out to win an amateur taco-eating contest, demonstrating his speed and prowess at eating tacos—according to witnesses, without chewing. He was competing in a sponsored event at Chukchansi Park in Fresno, California, during a minor league baseball game of the Fresno Grizzlies. The event was part of a Taco Tuesday promotion and was a foretaste to a ninth annual Taco Truck Throwdown at the stadium.[1] During the competition Hutchings started choking and fell face down on the table; he was taken to the hospital where he was declared dead an hour later.[2] This event also took place on a date that gives it much historical relevance with another that happened 498 years earlier. It was also on an August 13, in 1521, that Tenochtitlan fell to the Tlaxcalans and their Spanish collaborators, effectively killing the Mexica empire. In the lead-up to the Tlaxcala victory, there were many culinary encounters of which the following serves as an illustration.

Before the historic 1519 face-to-face encounter between Moctezuma, the Mexica king, and Hernán Cortés, the conqueror of Mexico, on a causeway outside of Tenochtitlán, there were other less spectacular interactions between these two via their representatives, which involved food in some shape or form. One notable example includes Moctezuma sending his emissaries to intercept Cortés and his men before they reached Tenochtitlán. Moctezuma's ambassadors carried comestibles, such as eggs, turkey, tortillas, and human hearts, all covered in human

[1] "US Man Dies at Eating Contest 'Shoving Tacos Down Without Chewing,' NDTV, August 15, 2019, https://www.ndtv.com/world-news/dana-hutchings-dies-at-chukchansi-park-in-fresno-california-shoving-tacos-down-without-chewing-2085635.

[2] Though a critical analysis of this event as it pertains to the performance of masculinity and unfettered consumption would be useful, this tragedy is more important to this chapter for other reasons.

blood. This gift was motivated by the *teopixqui* perception of eating habits as the best way to establish divinity.[3] This emetic meal tested the Spaniards' eating patterns, which would then determine whether they were divinities or demons. Markedly, this bloody meal was delivered to the Spaniards along their journey, meaning that it met them *in medias res*.

This encounter illustrates the way mobility permeated every aspect of Mexica life. Unlike the Spaniards, who were accustomed to banqueting, for the Mexica food—like their very existence—depended on motion. Another important aspect of this interaction a political. The ability to eat the right food in the correct way can have political consequences, as demonstrated by the Great Tamale Incident of 1976, where President Gerald Ford, while campaigning in San Antonio, Texas, in front of the Alamo, was served a tamale, and because of his unfamiliarity with its shuck covering took a bite—and nearly choked. This food faux pas may have contributed to him losing the state in the election.

This chapter compasses around the ways that Chicana/os have deployed motion in their culinary and alimentary endeavors via patterns that echo movements that the Mexica called *Malinalli*. Malinalli is a pattern of motion associated with the transmutation of life into death and back again, and as a flow of "energy-conveying, life-sustaining bloodstream and foodstream" that ultimately exemplifies the "cooking and digesting food."[4] This analysis accepts anthropologists Peter Farb and George Armelagos's argument that cultural traits, social institutions, national histories, and individual attitudes cannot be entirely understood without also understanding a people's "varied and peculiar modes of eating."[5] One of Chicana/os' most

[3] Also *tlamacazqui*, Mexica spiritual leaders, known as guardians of the divine, or the ones who make the offerings.

[4] Maffie, *Aztec Philosophy*, 14.

[5] Peter Farb and George Armelagos, *Consuming Passions: The Anthropology of Eating* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1980), 4.

common modes of eating is explored on the way to championing Chicana/os as the pioneers of modern food trucks. However, even as Chicana/os are highlighted as the food pioneers that they are, the conception of mobile food units cannot credibly be argued as historically autochthonous to LA, but instead to south and Mesoamerica over 7,000 years ago.

Nobel Prize-winning poet and writer Octavio Paz claimed that Mexicans of his day held "ancient beliefs and customs" that were "still in existence beneath Western forms."[6] Contemporary Chicana/os and their cultural productions are nothing short of or beyond a deterritorialized indigenous people possessing a "framework for spiritual alignment and cultural cohesion" with their rich indigenous epistemologies that Eurocentric doctrines have endeavored to stifle.[7] The stifling of Chicana/o's indigeneity has prevented them from asking where Asian cuisine would be without chili peppers, Italian cuisine without the tomato, or the world without chocolate—or, crucially, without the number one consumed crop in the world—corn.[8] All these modern gastronomic ingredients were first sourced in the Americas. Most meaningfully, however, they serve as palpable illustrations of the positive impact indigenous ingredients have had on the world. This argument is also guided by the idea championed by journalist Gustavo Arellano that to speak of taco trucks intelligently, one must not ignore the elements that constituted them. By rooting this contemporary study of loncheras in conquest-era Mexica, notions of motion their consubstantiality with Chicana/os identity come into focus.

What follows is an investigation of how current food practices connect to ancient food customs, and the potential futures that these connections engender. Lonchera mobilities are

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[6] Octavio Paz, *The Labyrinth of Solitude: Life and Thought in Mexico*, 1st ed. (New York: Grove Press, 1961), 89.

[7] Paloma Martinez-Cruz, *Food Fight!: Millennial Mestizaje Meets the Culinary Marketplace* (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 2019), 6.

[8] Ernesto Hernández-López, "Fighting GMO Corn, for Mexico's Soul," Latino Rebels, September 16, 2020, https://www.latinorebels.com/2020/09/16/fightinggmocorn/.

traced through space, place, and culture, along with their historical and modern gustatory encounters, competitions, and fusions. The concentration of these factors all contributes to an acceleration of a historical momentum generated by ancient Native American peoples and how this positions Chicana/os as dynamos exerting a centrifugal motion where eating transforms into a practice of cultural resistance to inconsistent rules, regulations, and normative permeations on mobility in and through private and public space. To achieve this task efficaciously requires tracing and appreciating food networks and their mobility, beginning with a panoramic view of ancient attitudes towards food, moving closer to modern mobilizations of those attitudes, and finally zooming in on loncheras in Southern California.

In the late 1960s, after wanting to open a restaurant but not having the capital to do so, Raul O. Martinez, a Mexican immigrant and dishwasher, started selling tacos with his wife, Maria, at a local park from the back of his pickup truck in East LA. In the summer of 1974, he moved his operation into a used ice cream truck reconditioned to handle a propane stove, creating a "restaurant on wheels."[9] With this innovation, he sold tacos on the street outside of East LA bars with his father-in-law. Through this informal economic practice, the Martinez family opened King Taco, a now-famous LA institution. The ice cream truck in which the Martinez family worked would become the first modern lonchera, spurring industry and culture that many have come to appreciate and ape.

By zeroing in on the public street activity, behaviors, and patterns of present-day loncheras in Los Angeles, a culinary network comprising social, commercial, and culinary mobility appears. Street vending and its built-in motility permit many minorities to gain, as historian Jeffrey M. Pilcher asserts, "a measure of social mobility by traveling to find work, or at

[9] "King Taco History," accessed August 1, 2019, https://kingtaco.com/history/.

least to find a customer willing to pay for a cheap and tasty meal."[10] Connecting food vendors and food trucks requires beginning with some key under-theorized, fundamental factors. As scholar Kenny Cupers puts it when describing this phenomenon, "street vendors transform urban space primarily by virtue of their mobility…it is only by being mobile that they are able to transform highway intersections into shops and parking lots into restaurants."[11] Significantly this transformation of dead or unused city space often succeeds in large part because of Chicana/os' deployment of mobility—mobility that fosters lively, social, economic, and culinary encounters, often in the most inhospitable of places.

Here place is not a container but a flow defined by both the movement of food and interfacing of different urban demographics with Chicana/os. The motility surplus displayed by loncheras in disadvantaged communities is a characteristic that city powerbrokers have not simply endeavored to regulate but also to eliminate. As Jordan Michelman writes, the taco has become a "marvel of complexity in the guise of three-bite simplicity, a canvas for innovation and a home base of deep comfort for Angelenos of all backgrounds, ages and tax brackets," all elements that officials committed to a compartmentalized and segregated city loathe.[12]

It may not be a coincidence that the most draconian regulations aimed to stop street vending target the behaviors that serve mostly "working-class Latinos, who are quite diverse" and not at those aimed at a largely Anglo and "relatively hip and affluent clientele."[13] Tacos sold

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[10] Robert Lemon, *The Taco Truck. How Mexican Street Food is Transforming the American City* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2019), ix.

[11] Kenny Cupers, "The Urbanism of Los Angeles Street Vending," in *Street Vending in the Neoliberal City*, ed. Kristina Graaff and Noa Ha (New York: Berghahn Books, 2015), 139–63.

[12] Jordan Michelman, "Give These Vegan Tacos a Try," *Los Angeles Times*, September 2, 2020.

[13] Jesus Hermosillo, *"Loncheras: A Look at the Stationary Food Trucks of Los Angeles*" (Los Angeles: UCLA Center for Labor Research & Education: 2010), 7.

from trucks remind citizens of how urban planners and city officials have not equitably designed or supported all communities. Loncheras trespass the regulation that governs LA's urban planning schemes, along with the economic regimentation that sustains them. Loncheras' ability to profitably move within and through areas neglected by urban planners did not sway regulatory agencies to make even a tepid acknowledgment of loncheras as beneficial practice in these communities, opting instead to tag them as nuisances and eyesores. However, the attacks launched against Mexican food trucks in the past have found themselves on steep terrain; as journalist Lucas Kwan Peterson has put it, "there are few things that better represent the greatness of Los Angeles and our love of constant movement than the taco truck."[14] Here Kwan Peterson hints at the reason why critics have failed to eradicate this moving target.

Historically sociopolitical and currently neoliberal forces have monitored, allocated, and systematized movement into "patterns or regimes" of motion that function to fix subaltern subjects in place and to dissipate the potency of their kinetic energies.[15] Here I follow philosopher Thomas Nail in reconsidering the modern conceptual and ontological framework used to articulate becoming through the "historical primacy of motion" broadly in Chicana/o subject formation, and specifically in loncheras.[16] Motion's kinetic and ontological potential enables understanding of why deep-rooted institutions and economic systems would seek to disperse the forces generated by Chicana/os and their various mobile food units. Framing Chicana/o culinary mobility in this way begins a push towards a recognition of the ancient contributions indigenous peoples have made to our modern culinary landscape, despite the

[14] Lucas Kwan Peterson, "Into the Belly of the L.A. Taco Truck," *Los Angeles Times*, May 23, 2019, F4.

[15] Nail, *Being and Motion*, 11.

[16] Ibid., 13.

Spaniards' narrative built around a belief of their superiority over the Mexica and their culinary traditions. One example of this belief that persists to this day encompasses viewing wheat flour as a marker of divinity and relegating maize to an uncouth status.

Food as an indicator of civilization and superiority is also found in tenuous politics. A 1967 *Time* magazine article described East Los Angeles as a barrio full of "tawdry taco joints and rollicking cantinas" with "the reek of cheap sweet wine" competing "with the fumes of frying tortillas."[17] Additionally, culinary epithets were given to a Chicano landmark and a group of twenty-six Brown Berets who, in the summer of 1972, occupied a hillside near Catalina Chimes Tower and renamed it *Campo Tecolote,* claiming Catalina Island as unceded land.[18] Not long after the nearly month-long occupation subsided, Campo Tecolote would be renamed "Burrito Point," and the Berets renamed "soggy, chocolate soldiers."[19] In the former nomenclature, Burrito likely referenced the food rather than the animal, since a burrito is the collection of many beans in a tortilla, and the "soggy" in the latter likely implied that the Berets were wet, including their backs. Putting aside the reprehensible implications of some of these terms, the relationship of this political group with food is well-founded. In 1969, for example, Irma Lerma Barbosa, a member of the Brown Berets, imported the Black Panther's belief that better nutrition facilitated better education and critical thinking, and that these were more important than self-defense training, for Chicana/o organizations she was involved with in Sacramento, California. By early 1970 Lerma Barbosa had started *Breakfast for Niños*, which

[17] Julian Wasser, "Minorities: Pocho's Progress," *Time*, April 28, 1967.

[18] "Camp Owl" in English.

[19] Brittny Mejia, "'Brown Berets' 'Invasion' of Catalina Island Revisited," *Los Angeles Times*, August 16, 2020.

Latino/a studies scholar Ella Maria Diaz describe as a "Chicana/o response to a basic need" within the community.[20]

These modern Chicana/o practices that politicize food also find resonances in ancient alimentary interactions that allowed for food consumption at a roadside as readily as in a banquet hall. The ritualized positioning of eating and food as part of an elaborate social and political celebration is illustrated by a Mexica food-related legend dealing with the god Tezcatlipoca (Tez-ca-tree-POH-ka),[21] the "omnipotent god of rulers, sorcerers and warriors."[22] Book VI of the Florentine Codex highlights this deity's close relationship with motion: "at His will He shifts us around. We shift around, like marbles we roll; He rolls us around endlessly."[23] The resonances with this Tezcatlipocan myth that incorporates food, religion, and mobility are still observable in present day Chicana/o culture and its productions. The story positions power outside of a hierarchical, centralized, and static center, towards a horizontal, decentralized and dynamic periphery. The story also provides a historical example that echoes the antagonism political leaders have had toward street food vendors in LA and across the country, dredging up more contemporary memories of racially motivated campaigns utilizing uneven and inconsistent enforcement of food-vending prohibitions.

Set in Tula's marketplace, where Tezcatlicpoca took over the Tulan kingdom by seducing the youngest and the most beautiful daughter of Huemac, Tula's king, Tezcatlipoca transformed

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[20] Ella Maria Diaz, *Flying Under the Radar with the Royal Chicano Air Force* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2017), 102.

[21] This god's name translates to "Smoking Mirror," a reference to the dusky quality to the obsidian stone with which he is associated, as well as the literal smoke of battle and the cooking of human sacrifice that he demands.

[22] Mary E. Miller and Karl Taube, *An Illustrated Dictionary of the Gods and Symbols of Ancient Mexico and the Maya* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1997), 164.

[23] As quoted in Maffie, *Aztec Philosophy*, 168.

himself into a foreign, uncivilized, itinerant, and lowly chili pepper vendor named Toveyo.[24] He wandered Tula's marketplace naked, selling his chili pepper plants. While squatting atop his cart, the princess, who was standing in the marketplace flower section, was mesmerized by his displayed manly attributes and immediately fell in love with him. Markedly, in contemporary vulgar Spanish conversation, a man's member is often referred to as his "chile." As she was of royal blood, a union with this street merchant was prohibited, so she was dragged away. Nevertheless, so ardent was her desire to know this vendor, she became sick and could not eat or drink. Her distressed father sent for doctors who could not cure her. The princess' nurses indicated the only cure—a mingling of Toveyo and the princess.

Huemac, who dearly loved his daughter, had his men search out Toveyo. They found him vending in the marketplace, presenting a rough and dirty appearance. He willingly followed the search party to meet the king, who ordered him washed and scented to make him presentable. The princess, gazing upon the chili vendor's prowess once more, began to recover. Huemac, overjoyed with his daughter's progress, approved the marriage. The princess was immediately cured, for she could finally eat with, and of, Toveyo.[25] In this way, the myth inverts the normative rectilinear direction of what scholars such as Christian Groes and Nadine T. Fernandez have called intimate mobilities, or "forms of mobility shaped, implied or facilitated by bodily, sexual, affective or reproductive intimacy…as well as any kind of mobility motivated by emotions, desires or pleasures, or conditioned by kinship, family ties or reproductive ambitions."[26] This story also values movements that are creative or otherwise enhance one's

[24] Also "Tohuéyo" in some versions.

[25] In Spanish "to eat someone" is slang for having sexual intercourse with them.

[26] Christian Groes and Nadine T. Fernandez, *Intimate Mobilities: Sexual Economies, Marriage and Migration in a Disparate World* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2020), 1.

ability to maneuver and ultimately succeed in hostile environments. In this way present-day Chicana/o food vendors have a place to trace their profession's genealogy to long before Columbus landed somewhere in what is now Haiti or the Dominican Republic.[27]

The rest of the story reveals the roots of many Chicana/o attitudes, beliefs, and relationships with motion, food, and sexuality. When Tezcatlicpoca decided to materialize himself, he eschewed approaching the princess as a noble prince, a respected priest, or decorated warrior. Instead, he became an industrious street vendor with a unique or well-endowed chile. This compulsory proclivity among Mexicans and Chicana/os to sexualize food directly ties to the indigenous liberal attitude towards sex and sensualizing language. For example, in Nahuatl, the word for avocado, *ahuácatl*, means "testicle." Chicano writer Jose Antonio Burciaga also identifies the chili as a "phallic plant."[28]

Toveyo's foreignness was also essential, since the story cited the prohibition of mixing classes and ethnicities. Mexican writer José Vasconcelos extended this indigenous exogamy or willingness to comingle more broadly to their descendants' proclivity of "not taking the ethnic factor too much into account in their sexual relations."[29] When word of this hasty marriage reached people in Tula, they were displeased and organized an uprising. Huemac then had to plot to get rid of his new son-in-law to appease them. His idea involved equipping Toveyo with an army of dwarfs and hunchbacks, and then compelling Toveyo and his motley crew to move into the front lines of a battle against Tula's fiercest enemies. Huemac then gave secret orders that

[27] It is a little known fact, but Christopher Columbus never set foot on the American continent.

[28] José A. Burciaga, *Drink Cultura: Chicanismo* (Santa Barbara: Joshua Odell Editions Capra Press, 1993), 17.

[29] Vasconcelos, *The Cosmic Race,* 19.

this grouping of motley fools be abandoned, reasoning that this would quell discontent and promote his daughter's widowhood.

The king's plot failed, for when the first battle started and Toveyo was left to die, he rallied his men and worked his magic. The mass of men he had may have been small and weak, but its divine acceleration was unmatched and so the force of Toveyo's crowd became unstoppable. The conflict ended with the intended sacrifice—sacrificing his enemies and making a feast of their flesh.[30] When this humble chili vendor triumphantly returned to Tula, the king had to greet him as a brave hero, something the people in the marketplace had already started doing. The Tulans no longer mocked Toveyo as a wandering outsider, but instead joined him in his orgiastic celebration and drank, ate, sang, and danced to his praises, likely consuming liberally of his merchandise. Chili peppers became so vital to the Mexica diet that "fasting often meant forsaking chilies alone."[31] To this day, in Mexican and Chicana/o culture, being able to handle spicy flavors demonstrates masculinity.

Thus, this uncivilized street vendor transformed into a grand champion of Tula's people. Similarly, he holds resonances with many Chicana/o vendors in Los Angeles. They include vendors selling sundry snacks out of shopping carts, who, like Maria in Chapter One, cover a determined geographical area, stopping only for customers and rests. All these types of vendors—the ones who sell tacos out of makeshift stalls or taco truck drivers who sell from a vehicle—are united by the fact that they must remain transient, and that motility defines what and who they are. This story further illustrates the many ways food can generate symbolic

[30] For one of the most popular versions of this story, see Bernardino de Sahagún, *General History of the Things of New Spain* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press: 1970), 243–44.

[31] Manuel Aguilar-Moreno, *Handbook to Life in the Aztec World* (New York: Facts on File, 2006), 373.

meaning such as familiarity, belonging, intimacy, and identity between people, but also the possibility of distinguishing people through a type of culinary synecdoche that produces racially themed references, such as beaners for Latinos, krauts for Germans, and Tio Tacos for acculturated Chicanos.[32] These examples and the ones that follow will illustrate some of the essential intersections of race, power, food and gender with mobility going as far back as one can.

In the ancient indigenous peoples' understanding, maize was from its inception androgynous. As historian and anthropologist Inga Clendinnen described, maize "changed sex in mid-course, being *Xilonen*, goddess of the young maize when the cob was slender, the kernel milky and the corn-tassel long and silky, and becoming *Centeotl*, Young Lord Maize Cob, as the cob swelled and hardened."[33] Furthermore, even though Centeotl was unequivocally masculine, he was occasionally identified as female. In this way, the taco not only depicts an androgynous comestible, but illustrates that the staple ingredient in Mexican cuisine has at its core been fluid and dynamic from its genesis.

The mobility inherent in this key indigenous ingredients is echoed in the taco truck's Spanish etymology and English nomenclature. *The Royal Academy of Spain's Dictionary of the Spanish Language* contains no fewer than twenty-five definitions and numerous connotations for the word "taco." Mexican food historian Salvador Novo, however, contends that a pre-Hispanic etymological reading offers some worthy candidates for the root of the word "taco," unveiling sources predating the European arrival. The first Nahuatl candidate is "*Ta'col*" meaning "shoulder." He lists declensions and conjugations of this root word, so that the first four letters

[32] As an equally tasteless example, there is the slang terms for lesbians: "tortillera" or "women tortilla makers."

[33] Inga Clendinnen, *Aztecs: An Interpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 186.

(T, A, C, O) correspond to the prefix of the word. Novo's conjugated list begins with *Tacolchimal* meaning backbone; *Tacolnacayo,* meaning the arm's fleshy parts; and *Tacolpan,* meaning atop one's shoulder. Anthropologist Maribel Álvarez attributed Ta'col with meanings "inclusive of any circumferential piece that enveloped something softer inside."[34] Read another way, the fact these possible words involved flesh parts could mean Ta'col became the name for a meal eaten on a tortilla featuring cuts of meat from a sacrificial victim.

Álvarez gives other Mexican colloquial expressions to catalog other taco-related innuendos, such as *echar taco* to "consume, to plug the hole of a cretin kind of hunger," and *taquear* or "have lots of tacos in one sitting." This phrase can have an erotic meaning as in "to feel one's pleasure to satiation."[35] Two other additional prudish taco-based phrases exist. *Darse uno taco* is to put on airs. Moreover, to *hacerse uno un taco* is to become flummoxed or wrap oneself in difficulties.[36] Though the latter remains tangential, it reflects that other foods could have been selected to herald Mobile Food Preparation Unit's popular name. For instance, as Arellano illustrated, the tamale embodies "the ultimate movable feast."[37] There must exist another reason for this tortilla-dependent food to end up as the prefix of choice. That factor might entail its carnality.

Like the myth, the etymology has favored what Álvarez indicated as "a masculinist signification of the act of consumption."[38] Furthermore, as she demonstrates, many Chicana

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[34] Maribel Álvarez, "Food, Poetry, and Borderlands Materiality: Walter Benjamin at the Taquería", *Arizona Journal of Hispanic Cultural Studies* 10, no. 1 (2006): 222.

[35] Ibid., 223.

[36] Royal Spanish Academy, *Diccionario de la Lengua Española*, 21st ed. (Madrid: Real Academia Española, 2000).

[37] Gustavo Arellano, *Taco USA: How Mexican Food Conquered America* (New York: Scribner, 2012), 16–17.

[38] Álvarez, "Food, Poetry, and Borderlands Materiality," 223.

lesbian writers contribute alternate perspectives to these gendered and sexualized food renditions. Álvarez de-masculinized the taco. For Álvarez, the feminist and traditional appropriations of food metaphors shared a critical ingredient: the defiance of bourgeois etiquette: "They reposition the eating habits of ancient indigenous people [and Chicana/os by extension] into bastions of resistance to Europeanization."[39] This resistance shows up in the simple act of eating while standing and with one's hands, or in more complex ways by patronizing only socially responsible eateries, many of which use locally sourced organic ingredients and fair wages as part of their business plan.

If the taco's origin remains apocryphal, its mobility does not. The humble taco has managed to make its way aboard trucks, drones, and even spaceships. Mexican scientist Rodolfo Neri Vela requested tortillas to make tacos as part of his allotted space provisions. The concept rapidly caught on, and quickly flour tortillas became both figuratively and officially out of this world,[40] and why not? They can be filled with many ingredients, do not crumble, and do not quickly spoil. NASA has embraced the taco and has "even blasted soft tacos into orbit to feed astronauts on the International Space Station." However, not all traditional Mexican ingredients have been as popular. "In 1982, Astronaut Bill Lenoir took some jalapeno peppers into orbit and got an upset stomach,"[41] proving that the taco's mobility reaches velocities that not everyone can handle.

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[39] Ibid.

[40] Gustavo Arellano, *Taco USA: How Mexican Food Conquered America* (New York: Scribner, 2012), 2-3.

[41] Burciaga, *Drink Cultura*, 19.

Let Them Eat Tacos

Fray Diego Durán recounted a curious story of the Anáhuac Confederation's unusual use of food as a weapon to subjugate the Coyohuaques, a rebellious group, by means of economic and geographic blockades.[42] The Confederation shut down all commerce and travel to and from the Coyohuaques' townships. When this failed to bring about the Coyohuaques' capitulation, the most exotic, delectable, and delicious animals were cooked downwind of the rebellious population to torture them with the delicious aromatic delicacies, forcing them to surrender. Aside from the idea of food's power to persuade and its usefulness in conquest, this story critically elucidates food mobilization as an oppressive and discriminatory surrogate.

The *General History of the Things of New Spain* or *The Florentine Codex*—a twelve-book codex (interestingly, the last two books were completed during and despite a smallpox pandemic) with nearly 2,500 illustrations, was compiled and transcribed by hand thirty or more years after Cortéz first set foot in the Americas.[43] Fray Bernardino de Sahagún supervised this proto-ethnographic compilation of the records, stories, and recollections of native nobles who lived through the conquest. In *The Florentine Codex*, Sahagún cataloged the distinctive characteristics of various *tlaxcalli*: maize dough shaped into flat, thin circular pieces of bread—tortillas, as we now know them.[44] They were divided by their temperature, color, size, thickness, texture, and shape.[45] This complexity has invited comparisons to its feminine resonances

[42] Fray Diego Durán, *The History of the Indies of New Spain*, trans. Doris Heyden (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1994).

[43] Carolina A. Miranda, "Scribes of the Past Reach Out: The Florentine Codex Speaks to Resilience in Face of Contagion," *Los Angeles Times*, 2020.

[44] Manuel Aguilar-Moreno, *Handbook to Life in the Aztec World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 372.

[45] Salvador Novo, *Las Locas, El Sexo, Los Burdeles: (Y Otros Ensayos)* (Mexico, D.F.: Editorial Novaro. S.A., 1972), 45.

highlighting the need to recalibrate the masculine tortilla. In its earliest manifestation, a tortilla represented one of the many ways the Mexica prepared maize. However, in its modern exhibition, it has become, as Álvarez expressed, nothing less than a "weapon of the weak."[46]

The tortilla's shape, a circle devoid of any sharp edges or hard lines, is also relevant to its femininity, its thickness such that it can and often is cupped in one's hand, forming a space in which the eater can freely wedge a condiment of their choice. The way Novo describes it, it sits "atop of the palm of the helpful left hand; a tortilla holds the generosity of the right and arches to give itself over to it."[47] Again, this exhibits the Mexican wholehearted embrace of the tendency towards sensualizing food, due mainly to the legacy left by the Mexica who saw maize not as simple sustenance but sacred nourishment: "human flesh and maize kernels were seen as the same substance."[48] The Mexica saw their maize as made of flesh and flesh made of maize, making both equally fit for human consumption, a consumption supported by the vast availability and variety of maize including: white, blue, purple, red and other colors of maize in approximately sixty varieties.[49]

A gendered approach to this comestible also reveals its complexity. Sahagún's tortilla taxonomy takes one to the lunate resonances inherent in the tortilla's circular shape. A top view of a tortilla indexes a full moon and a half-moon view of a folded one, symbolically echoing key lunar phases as well as the menses. Here the ancient practice of taking the umbilical cord of a newborn child, cutting it over a mature maize ear reveals a practice that illustrates the life-giving corn and blood and the child's entrance into the mystery of this food from and of the gods,

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[46] Novo, *Las Locas, El Sexo.*.

[47] Ibid., 46.

[48] Clendinnen, *Aztecs*, 251–52.

[49] Hernández-López, "Fighting GMO Corn."

associating maize and blood with nourishment. As art historian Mary Miller and archeologist Karl Taube contend, the bloodied kernels were saved and became "the child's special crop."[50] This association can be observed in part three of the *Codex Mendoza,* where the tortilla is represented along with a set of moons to mark the ages and passage of time for two Mexica younglings. At three years of age, both are depicted with a half tortilla. At five, they are allotted a whole one, and at six, their ration becomes one and a half. This visualization could demonstrate the passage of time, but it likely illustrates a gradual child weaning away from the mother's milk and towards the solid substance of Mexica society.

Corn tortillas also possess a malleable property. They can be folded in half to make *quesadillas*, made into a roll to make *taquitos*, fried flat to make *tostadas*, cut into eighths to make *totopos,* pressed in and around a mold then deep-fried into a *chalupa*, or left as is and eaten hot off the griddle with salt. In short, tortillas, more than any other foodstuff, excite the Chicana/o culinary imagination. The tortillas' flexibility and versatility rival any rigid and inflexible edible. A tortilla, astutely labeled an "edible spoon" by Novo, "offers the security of a fork when holding onto food," and taking it towards the "knives that are our teeth."[51] Burciaga calls the tortilla "the spoon and the fork, the plate and the napkin," in his tribute to the tortilla, eponymously named "Tortillas."[52] In this way, the tortilla both empowered and promotes a choreographic dressing of one's taco; it puts one's meal literally in one's own hands.

In the preparation of a taco meal, a person never pierces, cuts, nor slices the food. Like the chopsticks that so mesmerized Roland Barthes in the *Empire of Signs*, tortillas do not wound,

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[50] Miller and Taube, *An Illustrated Dictionary*, 108.

[51] Novo, *Las Locas, El Sexo*, 45.

[52] Originally titled "I remember Masa." See Jose Antonio Burciaga, "Tortillas," accessed September 7, 2021, http://pelusophuhs.weebly.com/uploads/8/5/4/7/8547113/tortillas_-_extended_def.pdf.

but handle and transport. Moreover, even when they are used to exert pressure, "the foodstuff never undergoes a greater pressure than is precisely necessary to raise and carry it."[53] The tortilla allows one to absolve the violence required to alienate both animal and vegetable through what anthropologist Anna Tsing termed the tearing of things "from their lifeworlds to become objects of exchange," a particularly useful concept since Tsing used alienation as a potential attribute for humans, plants, minerals, and fungi alike.[54] Through the tortilla then, the eater's hand transubstantiates the food and the violence perpetrated upon it into an esculent meal guiltlessly consumed. In this way, Mexican food, tacos, and tortillas can manifest as symbols of excess to the American mainstream, a surplus perhaps reflected best in their excessively spicy salsas and cuisine, that, like the people who produce it, need to be made milder.

The taco has served as a weapon of resistance. The indigenous people's unwavering allegiance to maize over the white flour in their diet signaled a reluctance to be colonized. The presence of the tortilla in several blood rituals testified to its associations with combat. In at least one ceremony, "a tortilla replaced the sacrificial blade in simulation sacrifices."[55] Tortillas as weapons provide a deliciously complex example of how they can be both terrestrial and celestial. However, this led Catholic missionaries to eradicate this indigenous staple.

Given that the corn tortilla in place of the sacramental bread in the Catholic mass is prohibited, it demonstrated to the Mexica that they had gotten it wrong. God, the true God, is made of white flour, not of maize. This antinomy between white flour or bread and maize or corn tortillas was ultimately resolved through the flour tortilla's syncretism. Wheat flour then aided

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[53] Roland Barthes, *Empire of Signs* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982), 16.

[54] Anna L. Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 97.

[55] Aguilar-Moreno, *Handbook to Life in the Aztec World*, 372.

the indigenous subject's entry into colonial structures, if one lacked the resources to make bread, then one was excluded from one of the dominant culture's daily practices. After the conquest, this ultimate edible symbol of civilization depicted class in New Spain, as Mexico was known in Europe. The flower tortilla became a comestible that promoted the colonial project since wheat flour instead of corn tortillas allowed women who cooked them and men who ate them "an everyday claim to Hispanic status."[56]

The rejection of the colonizer's diet as part of the resistance to their power has swayed Chicana/o communities. An example of this encompassed Latinx Cultural Studies professor Paloma Martinez-Cruz citing a lawsuit by the Mexican-American Anti-Defamation Committee brought against Frito Lay in the 1960s for their "Frito Bandito" caricature. Likewise, the Taco Bell Chihuahua was "phased out owing to the efforts of Hispanic advocacy groups."[57] Globally, anthropologist Elizabeth Fittings explained, "the ongoing transnational campaign against Monsanto, Dow Chemical, and DuPont's commercial transgenic (GMO) maize crops" constituted the defense of many Latin American countries "preeminent symbol of […] place."[58] And nowhere was this campaign more relevant to this study, than in Mexico where the phrase "*sin maíz, no hay país*" (no nation without corn) was popularized and where a group called *Colectividad del Maíz* (Corn Collective) sued the Mexican government in 2013. The group demonstrated the ways that GMO allocated plots "surpassed levels authorized by México's biosecurity law" and how "commercial authorization of GMO corn posed irreversible damage to

[56] Jeffrey M. Pilcher, "Old Stock" Tamales and Migrant Tacos: Taste, Authenticity, and the Naturalization of Mexican Food", *Social Research* 81, no. 2 (2014): 446.

[57] Martinez-Cruz, *Food Fight!*, 95.

[58] Elizabeth Fitting, "Cultures of Corn and Anti-GMO Activism in Mexico and Columbia," in *Food Activism: Agency, Democracy and Economy*, ed. Carole Counihan and Valeria Siniscalchi (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014, 175–92.

biodiversity" in Mexico.[59] Ultimately, Colectividad del Maíz was able to mobilize a network of farm workers, environmentalists and other human rights advocates to halt all authorizations to grow GMO corn. However, a more complex manifestation of resistance has illustrated how food could substitute for, rather than represent power.

In 1969, part of an art show held in the California state capitol, put on by the Royal Chicano Air Force (RCAF), a Sacramento-based Chicano art collective founded in 1970, ended in "an altercation" when RCAF members found and confronted the staff person responsible for coordinating hospitality for ignoring the RCAF's suggested caterer. RCAF felt that their first exhibit should have had "the appropriate food," exemplifying just how important a role Mexican food played in this art collectives' identity.[60] Or as Juanishi Orozco, one of founding members of RCAF, suggested, "Mexican food was perceived as a presentation of a collective identity, politically intervening on the status quo in a Chicano/a art show at the state capitol," supporting the idea that Mexican food was not only "an integral component of the exhibition" but of the group's identity.[61] This phenomenon of food as a key element in social and political struggles has contemporary resonances in situations where the power of food in general and the taco in particular is mobilized.

The Islamic Center of Santa Ana, California, organized an event in 2017 that one participant called "Trump's worst nightmare." It involved a mostly Indo-Chinese Muslim congregation during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan and a lonchera. The participants celebrated their iftar meal—many of them for the first time in their lives—by eating halal

[59] Hernández-López, "Fighting GMO Corn."

[60] Diaz, *Flying Under the Radar*, 100.

[61] Ibid., 101.

chicken and beef tacos from a bright green Mexican taco truck. Co-organized by Santa Ana community activist Rida Hamida and history teacher Ben Vazquez, this campaign launched on Twitter was christened #TacoTrucksAtEveryMosque,[62] directly alluding to the 2016 MSNBC segment featuring Marco Gutierrez, the founder of Latinos for Trump, describing Latino culture as "imposing" and that the failure to address this problem would result in "taco trucks on every corner."[63] Gutierrez inspired others to craft taco truck themed voting campaigns, including the "Guac the Vote" drive organized by the US Hispanic Chamber of Commerce and the "food truck voter drive" created by designer Thomas Hull in partnership with *Mi Familia Vota*, a nonpartisan group specializing in Hispanic civic outreach.[64] Then the 2019 Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) teacher strike featured picketers fed by food trucks showing up "en masse" to feed the LAUSD teachers paid for with funds raised by a GoFundMe campaign titled "Tacos for Teachers."[65] However, Mexican food has not belonged exclusively to progressive causes.

Anglo experts have elevated Mexican food from its social-political roots and its status as a promising idea to a full-fledged phenomenon. This Americanization and pushing of Mexican food away from its ancestral roots to adapt it "to [Anglo] tastes"[66] is a large part of its popularity, a popularity that Burciaga claims is built on "The fast-food enterprise is cashing in on the unabashed sale of Anglicized and commercialized Mexican food to low-income Latinos, and the

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[62] David Leveille, "Muslim and Latino Communities in Southern California Mix During Ramadan—Thanks to Taco Trucks," The World, June 8, 2017, https://www.pri.org/stories/2017-06-08/muslim-and-latino-communities-southern-california-mix-during-ramadan-thanks-taco.

[63] Juliann Agyeman, Caitlin Matthews, and Hannah Sobel, eds., *Food Trucks, Cultural Identity, and Social Justice: From Loncheras to Lobsta Love, Food, Health, and the Environment* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2017), 2.

[64] John L. Mone and Will Weissert, "Taco Trucks Sign Up Voters," *Chicago Tribune*, 2016.

[65] Mona Holms, "Even in Times of Trouble, Tacos Save the Day," *Los Angeles Times*, January 14, 2019.

[66] Arellano, *Taco USA*, 37.

message is clear: "'Hey! We can't make it as good as you can, but we can sure sell it faster and cheaper than you.'" This, in turn, inspired his claim, "Our burritos and tacos are not only the real thing but our first line of defense."[67] It remains unclear against what Burciaga wants Chicana/os to defend themselves against. However, it unmistakably deals with Mexican cuisine's cultural appropriation since Chicana/os are being called through their food choices to remain authentic and defy the bourgeois diet and etiquette in favor of foods and practices that adhere more closely to their indigenous roots.

This premise echoes the long resistance to Europeanization through communal culinary opposition. Authors Luz Calvo and Catrióna R. Esquibel have taken this concept a step farther by titling their 2015 cookbook *Decolonize Your Diet: Plant-Based Mexican-American Recipes for Health and Healing,* directly referencing modern eating habits as an opportunity to assert one's political, social and cultural agency. This being so, Martinez-Cruz rightly points out that "Mexican food in the United States […] continues to be regarded as a thoroughly vernacular cuisine, identified with hemispheric indigeneity and the hierarchies that Mexicanness in America evokes."[68] Chicana/os then should eat their tacos where, and how they want, free from the constraints of dinner reservations and the shackles of silverware. They should also feel free to mobilize their food for a purpose greater than themselves.

Taco Tantrums

The animadversions aimed at street vendors in Los Angeles have largely been concentrated in communities experiencing rapid gentrification. For example, at a Glassell Park monthly neighborhood council meeting in 2019, masked protestors unfurled a banner outlined in

[67] Burciaga, *Drink Cultura*, 25.

[68] Martinez-Cruz, *Food Fight!*, 19.

red with the phrase "Little Tijuana" spray-painted in white. This protest came in response to the release of an aggressive letter written against street vendors, in which the author called vendors who have been in the neighborhood for years "pop-up," and a member of the council was quoted as stating "we do not want a little TJ here."[69] TJ refers to Tijuana, a border city in Mexico, famed for providing American tourists with bustling streets lined with souvenir shops and lively bars as well as multiple opportunities to indulge in activities outlawed in the United States.

Despite the presence of two police officers at the meeting, emotions ran high and insults and boos were aimed at the author of the complaint letter and the sole commenter against street vendors. One person yelled "why do you hate working-class people?"[70] According to reports, the Glassell Park neighborhood council president, Karin Davalos, did the best she could to maintain order but finally had to threaten to cancel the meeting after at least one member of the audience used obscenity. The most powerful moment of the night, however, came when chef Alex Ramirez spoke of her place in a long matriarchal line of street food vendors: "I grew up selling tamales to my neighbors with my grandmother and that's how I got my training as a chef before I went to culinary school. I'm extremely upset at the board for saying that TJ comment. That is hurtful to me as a woman of color."[71]

Behind the campaign to eliminate loncheras from LA's culinary landscape, officials have favored the mobilities of mainstream food trucks, thus rewarding not the original Chicana/o cultural practice but the mostly Anglo aping of it. Martinez-Cruz refers to this eradication as

[69] Javier Cabral, "'Little Tijuana:' Drama Erupts at Neighborhood Council Meeting over Backlash to Street Vendors in NELA," L.A. Taco, September 18, 2019, https://www.lataco.com/little-tijuana-drama-erupts-at-neighborhood-council-meeting-over-backlash-to-street-vendors-in-nela.

[70] Ibid.

[71] Ibid.

"culinary brownface," the mobilizing of dining experiences that, like early American stage performers performing blackface minstrelsy, coopt racist facades of Black people.[72] In this research, culinary brownface engenders normative neoliberal forces and their predatory, profiteering nature in exploitatively raiding loncheras.

Ultimately this antagonism towards minoritarian entrepreneurship shows the way legal restrictions are designed not only to combat loncheras but to promote gentrification. As law professor Ernesto Hernández-López articulates, "LA County and the City's increased enforcement occurs in urban areas close to recent gentrification."[73] Regulatory agencies have consistently endorsed parameters that strengthen gentrifying forces and weaken loncheras' profitability. Not surprisingly, loncheras have employed motion to resist, survive, and cope with the targeted attacks against them. The proprietors of various micro food businesses have had no choice but to continue to operate, despite the attempts to criminalize their means of earning a living. Notably, street vendors have had friends and family look out for police and health code officials to aid their evasive escapes. According to the Los Angeles Bureau of Street Services, the division charged with overseeing sidewalk vending figures, vendors number between "15,000 and 20,000…some estimates place the number as high as 50,000," all feeding profits into an underappreciated food vending stream best sampled on the move.[74]

Entrepreneurs and architects Tim Lai and Eliza Ho's construction of *Dinin' Hall* illustrates this gentrification. Lai and Ho created this concept eatery in a renovated warehouse near downtown Columbus, Ohio, with indoor tables for people who want to align themselves

[72] Martinez-Cruz, *Food Fight!*, 58.

[73] Ernesto Hernández-López, "LA's Taco Truck War: How Law Cooks Food Culture Contests", *University of Miami Inter-American Law Review* 43 (2011): 235.

[74] Patricia Escárcega, "The Fight is Far from Over for L.A.'s Street Vendors," *Los Angeles Times,* April 26, 2020.

with "middle-class Anglos' dining preferences" by having artisanal food truck orders delivered to them in a regulated environment.[75] According to Lai and Ho, this arrangement would "solve *practical* issues of eating at food trucks and carts."[76] The practical issues or obstacles to which Lai and Ho refer are not made clear in their advertising. However, as they are positioned outside the active food truck phenomena, Lai and Ho reject any loncheras who will not submit to the immobility demanded by their business plan, a plan that attracts trucks into a controlled space where their mobility is traded for access to a captive audience. A kinetic reading of this business model revels an attempt to invert the lonchera's centrifugal accumulation into a centripetal one that pulls only selected trucks into its cavernous space. Lai and Ho attempt to commodify, compartmentalize, and segregate Mexican food trucks. They want to consume the Mexican food truck idea, but without the Mexicans, qualifying their cultural façade as culinary brownface.

The way urban geographer and environmental designer Robert Lemon frames this dynamic proves that artisanal food trucks have created spaces that "represent forbidden territory to many Mexican immigrant taco truck owners." Lemon identifies this displacement as the "whitewashing [of] food truck space," and theorizes this segregation from gourmet food truck spaces as "economically unattainable and culturally distinct" from and to loncheras and their Chicana/o operators.[77] This correlation does not imply that when any group other than Chicana/os adopts lunch trucks it necessarily constitutes culinary brownface, or that any attempt to streamline mobile food vending facilitates gentrification. Instead, I hope to frame the taco truck genealogy in its distinctly economic, social, political, and frequently ethnic contexts.

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[75] Lemon, *The Taco Truck*, 134.

[76] As quoted in ibid.

[77] Ibid., 135.

The owners of The Blaxican, a Black-owned food truck and restaurant based in Atlanta, Georgia, credit their exposure to Mexican culture as an influence on their commitment to "serving those who are less fortunate."[78] This food truck goes as far as to allocate tips and donations towards feeding less fortunate people through Atlanta charitable organizations, illustrating the possibilities of food truck association with the redirection of resources towards those most in need. Then there is the LA-based, vegan Tehuanita 2.0 lonchera, owned and operated in Echo Park by Janelle Hu and Richard Chang, who provide customers with free samples of their plant-based food as a way of "breaking down walls and preconceived notions."[79] Here the lonchera imports healthy food options to a region of the city saturated with fast food options, again an idea informed by Chang's time living and cooking in Tijuana and Guadalajara, Mexico.

Additionally, Anthony Suggs, a Long Beach native and formerly incarcerated person, has overcome odds to open his Los Angeles-based Antidote Eats food truck. He hoped it would become a force for good, providing people a sense of community. As he exclaimed, "everyone has an experience with a meal where you remember where you were when you ate that meal."[80] Suggs understood, better than most, how a lonchera can sometimes create livelihood, place, and memory in the most unlikely of spaces. For Suggs, his truck represents an opportunity for economic upward mobility. The Blaxican Food, Tehuanita 2.0, and Antidote Eats food trucks not only explicitly acknowledge that they have built upon the lonchera lineage, but they also illustrate that many food trucks are rooted in values that more closely align with loncheras'

[78] Blaxican Food, "Social Media Feeds," accessed June 1, 2020, https://www.blaxicanfood.com/info-location.

[79] Michelman, "Give These Vegan Tacos a Try."

[80] Lucas Kwan Peterson, "Into the Belly of the L.A. Taco Truck," *Los Angeles Times*, June 23, 2019.

genealogy and inclusionary mobility. This mobility encourages popping into and in some cases out of America's food deserts, reifying loncheras as much more than a simply profitable endeavor, but a dynamo drawing Los Angeles's most malnourished to their side, no matter their color or class. As Aaron Sonderleiter, a teacher and activist who lives in the Highland Park neighborhood of Los Angeles put it, "taco trucks are iconic…You go to one and you see black people, white people, old people, young people. They really capture a microcosm of LA."[81] This microcosm is enabled by loncheras' mobility and hints at how they have managed to transform from categorization as roach coaches to an inspiration for LA's gaudy gourmet movement.

"LA's Taco Truck War" was the name the media gave to the legal battle between brick-and-mortar business owners supported by the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors on one side, and food truck owners, food bloggers, construction workers, and loyal customers on the other.[82] This struggle elucidated the way institutions have attempted to immobilize minorities, engaging in controlling what political theorist Hagar Kotef labels "excessive mobility"—the movement patterns of "savage or native" individuals who roam "unsettled lands that are by definition without law and reason."[83] By analogy, "regulated mobility" becomes a marker of a free but civilized people. Individuals who refuse to embrace this way of moving, however, have

[81] Jennifer Steinhauer, "In Taco Truck Battle, Mild Angelenos Turn Hot," *New York Times*, May 3, 2008, https://www.nytimes.com/2008/05/03/us/03taco.html.

[82] Hernández-López, "LA's Taco Truck War."

[83] As quoted in Mimi Sheller, *Mobility Justice: The Politics of Movement in the Age of Extremes* (New York: Verso, 2018), 123.

their mobility criminalized, as evidenced when loncheras[84] and industrial lunch-trucks[85] are ticketed but artisanal, boutique, gourmet, new-wave, or Twitter trucks[86] are unmolested.

This so-called taco truck war runs ahead of other food vending battles, both legal and covert, waged by loncheras and their allies to frame street food and taco-truck vending not as a nuisance or a problem, but as a productive cultural practice providing primarily disadvantaged communities with healthy, affordable food in places where Chicana/o culture is welcomed. Martinez-Cruz describes these as eateries where a window of permission, however little, "to other areas of expression such as language, music, fashion, visual art, and the geophysical presence of mestizo bodies both at work and leisure with family and friends," unbridling cultural manifestations of movement and motion.[87]

As part of the attack on loncheras, anti-vendor advocates seized on long existent racialized perceptions of Mexican food as unsafe, unsanitary, and more prone to contamination due to the lack of disposal and storage services. But loncheras are actually inspected more often than most brick-and-mortar restaurants. One interesting complaint leveled at loncheras has to do with a perception that they have an unfair advantage over "fixed" restaurants because they "have the ability to *relocate operations when consumers move.*"[88] Here a lonchera's motility is framed negatively and added to the lists of complaints which include: "litter, noise, public urination and

[84] Staking out a single spot to do business for an entire workday on a daily basis for years on end.

[85] Operate on fixed routes making multiple fifteen- or twenty-minute stops and serving primarily precooked or fast food meals to factory and construction-site workers.

[86] Tweeting about their planned one- or two-hour stops in fashionable districts.

[87] Martinez-Cruz, *Food Fight!*, 17–18.

[88] As quoted in Hernández-López, "LA's Taco Truck War," emphasis mine.

excessive parking space hoarding."[89] While some people may embrace Mexican food consumption, its actual embodied mobilization remains derogatory. As Arellano describes, the consumption of Mexican food "has not always been pretty," including "caricatures of hot tamales, Montezuma's revenge, questionable ingredients, Frito Banditos, talking Chihuahuas, and sleeping peons." These representations "continue to influence American perceptions of Mexican food and Mexicans."[90]

For example, approximately one hundred people gathered outside of the 2018 American Society of Human Genetics in San Diego, California. They observed six shaggy, shirtless white men flexing their biceps and pectorals as they danced wildly to loud, indistinguishable rock music, alternating between crouching poses and chugging half-gallons of unpasteurized vitamin-enriched milk. The gyrating men were proud members of various white supremacist groups passionately demonstrating their genetic superiority, as their ability to digest lactose in copious quantities evidenced. As their drink dripped down their chins after imbibing their half-gallon of milk in one swig, they yelled into the camera, "Hey, you, non-whites, I can do this, and you can't." More recently, in 2021, a San Diego high school basketball team, composed largely of Latino students, had tortillas thrown at them during a post-game altercation.[91] However discomforting this gustatory performance may seem, it lags behind others on the scale of violence.

[89] Steinhauer, "In Taco Truck Battle".

[90] Arellano, *Taco USA*, 8.

[91] David Hernandez, "Another Racist Incident Roils San Diego High School Sports," *Los Angeles Times*, June 22, 2021.

Chicana/o street food vendors in Southern California have been aggressively targeted by both state and non-state actors since at least the 1920s. In a contemporary example, a viral video shows Carlos Hakas, a musician, losing his temper with a street vendor named Benjamin Ramirez. After berating Ramirez about moving the cart out of the way and directing him to leave the neighborhood immediately, Hakas handed his dog's leash to his companion and began approaching Ramirez while holding what appears to be a stun gun. As the menacing stranger approached, Ramirez threw a handful of chili powder in his face. Hakas then flipped Ramirez's cart, spilling cooked corn cobs and shaved ice into the street. This hostility is a modern manifestation of a long history of violence that has started to spill onto the street. Similarly, there is a history of protests against this violence, as illustrated in a July 2017 remonstration where approximately two hundred people marched along Santa Monica Boulevard in Hollywood, briefly shutting down traffic in solidarity with a victim of violence aimed at street food vendors. These attacks have managed to include food trucks as well. In 2009 The Taco Zone taco wagon in Echo Park was attacked by Molotov-cocktail-throwing thugs, again leading devotees to organize a benefit concert to help the vendors recuperate from the attack.[92]

Given the migration patterns from Latin American countries and the demand for healthier food options, modern food trucks are almost entirely a product of Southern California. As Arellano contends, "wherever there was a Mexican, his food, and something on four wheels capable of creaking from place to place, mobile meals played an important part in dispersing Mexican food."[93] However, the modern self-propelled "cook aboard" food truck—known in

[92] "Tazo Zone Benefit Tonight ~ Silver Lake," L.A. Taco, November 7, 2020, https://www.lataco.com/tazo-zone-benefit-tonight-silver-lake/.

[93] Arellano, *Taco USA*, 163.

many communities and celebrated in popular culture—was born, evolved, and reached its peak in Southern California. Until September 2018, when Governor Jerry Brown signed the Safe Sidewalk Vending Act (SB 946 Sidewalk Vendors), selling food on the street was prohibited and unsanctioned in California.[94] This legislation brought California in line with other major American cities.[95] Before this, those who engaged in these and other informal vending activities across the state were predominantly immigrants, creating a situation straining the "relationship between mobile food vending and municipal governments." This relationship has prompted municipalities to create "incoherent and biased policy environments in which they have differentially criminalized forms of vending based on race, immigration status, and geographic categories."[96]

A Lonchera by Any Other Name

A campaign coordinator at National Nurses United, Jesús Hermosillo conducted the first wide-ranging ethnographic study on Mexican food trucks in Los Angeles, entitled *LONCHERAS: A Look at the Stationary Food Trucks of Los Angeles.*[97] Hermosillo classifies loncheras as "stationary" because they use the same location day after day and remained fixed there for an extended period. Here the practice of driving from a commissary to the same spot daily is interpreted as characterizing a lonchera as mobile. As this ambiguous status of the lonchera illustrates, it draws part of its signification from its ability to be both mobile and fixed

[94] Lemon, *The Taco Truck*, 171.

[95] See John Rogers, "LA Joins Other Big Cities in Legalizing Street Vending," *Seattle Times*, November 27, 2018, https://www.seattletimes.com/business/pushcart-vendors-in-la-for-decades-might-become-legal/.

[96] Agyeman, Matthews, and Sobel, eds., *Food Trucks, Cultural Identity*, 9–10.

[97] Hermosillo, *Loncheras.*

depending on where it finds itself on a continuous moving route. As part of his research Hermosillo interviewed *lonchera/os* (food truck operators), customers, school officials, and other stakeholders, including neighborhood residents and police officers. One of the most revealing aspects of this study was the realization that for many the lonchera was a key step towards financial independence. In what follows there will be examples of individuals for whom loncheras are a blight and a commercial drain for brick and mortar businesses. Hermosillo's work, however, demonstrates through qualitative data that loncheras contribute significantly to their local economies, and in particular to the city's most disadvantaged communities. The timing of this study is also fortuitous, since it measured the lonchera's economic dynamics shortly after loncheras were transformed from ethnic curiosity to hip Twitter trucks.

Hermosillo crucially points out that "loncheras…are part of the huge and varied mobile-food sector in Los Angeles, which includes motor vehicles and wagons as well as pushcarts…that are often seen on the City's sidewalks."[98] His approach to food trucks was helpful to this analysis for the expansive definition it provides, encompassing street vendors in the taco truck orbit. After all, as he established, "motorized and non-motorized peddlers range from those selling readily consumable meals, snacks, desserts and beverages to those that specialize in retailing fresh produce, uncooked meat and fish or other groceries."[99] This designation usefully situates the lonchera's location within a much larger constellation of ambulatory merchants.

Hermosillo highlights the number of loncheros contributing to the American economy. By his estimates, based on all the food trucks operating in LA according to the Environmental

[98] Hermosillo, *Loncheras*.

[99] Ibid.

Health Division (EHD) in 2009, "the subsector's contribution to the public treasury and local businesses" would approach $200 million throughout the EHD service area. This figure is now astronomically larger given that in 2019 there were already "more than three thousand licensed food trucks and carts roaming the streets"[100] However, the synthetic sugariness of the neoliberal promise to immigrants is hard to render from the bitter gall of reality. Many have invested their labor, assuming that this demanding work will be rewarded, even though the majority of these primarily immigrant investors will end up as food truck operators "working long hours for low wages on leased trucks" with no hope of ever being able to reach entrepreneurial independence.[101] In only one example of a lonchera's day, Jennifer Ramirez, a twenty-one-year-old from South LA, on a good day "clears $200 after expenses," and on a bad one she "goes home with nothing but the names she has been called."[102]

The promise of success alone has drawn many to America, including Francisco "Pancho" Ochoa, a Mexican shoe salesman who came to the US and opened a Mexican food restaurant that grew into the chain El Pollo Loco.[103] In an open letter to the *LA Times* in celebration of Hispanic heritage month, Ochoa explained that he "came to this country with little more than his mother's recipe and a belief in himself...the story of a young immigrant from Mexico is in many ways the story of America."[104] The discursive foci of the success narrative afforded no time for anyone's plight but the triumphant individual. If others lacked the social or financial capital or could not

[100] Peterson, "Into the Belly of the L.A. Taco Truck."

[101] Pilcher, "'Old Stock' Tamales and Migrant Tacos."

[102] Sonja Sharp, "Lunch is a Battlefield in Bel-Air", *Los Angeles Times*, June 11, 2019.

[103] Literally "The Crazy Chicken."

[104] El Pollo Loco, "What a Mexican Former Shoe Salesman Can Teach Us All About the American Dream," *Los Angeles Times*, September 23, 2018.

evade anti-immigrant or anti-Chicana/o gaze, they lacked good fortune. "The complete view of immigrants and food vending practices, however, must include governmental regulations—in-vehicle, health, parking, land use, and business laws—and their consequential penalties."[105] The historically capricious and discriminatory ways in which these laws have been enforced have benefitted new gourmet trucks and disadvantaged loncheras and their moving to fill the unmet needs of a hungry city.

Framing loncheras as microenterprises helps reveal how they function as stepping stones to economic independence for Chicana/o families and bring underrecognized value to their communities. Hermosillo notes that his lonchera sample group predominantly served "low- and moderate-income areas. Areas that lacked healthy or even adequate food options. These wheeled kitchens are not commonly known for directly competing with brick-and-mortar restaurants."[106] The inverse however is not true: many brick-and-mortar chain restaurants such as In-N-Out Burger have created mobile food units that deliver their food *in situ*.[107] This creates another anxiety for ambulatory vendors and their allies, as articulated by chef Alex Ramirez: "There are restaurateurs who are already looking into receiving street vending business permits and these people have money backing them.…I fear they will push out all the street vendors who have been doing it because they have no other choice."[108]

Street vending in LA remained illegal and was considered a misdemeanor criminal offense until LA city officials voted unanimously to decriminalize it and establish a system in

[105] Hernández-López, "LA's Taco Truck War," 235.

[106] Hermosillo, *Loncheras*, 6.

[107] In-N-Out, "Cookout Specs," https://www.in-n-out.com/cookout/specs#menu-section.

[108] Cabral, "'Little Tijuana:' Drama Erupts."

which the sellers could obtain permits to conduct business. Vendors could still face fines for not complying with municipal code, but they were no longer cited criminally. To reach this point, vendors had to organize against institutional and cultural opposition, opposition often couched in the guise of health safety and equality, as illustrated in a June 2014 interview with Chuck Patterson, the chair of the Greater Hilltop Commission. He highlights the unfairness brick-and-mortar restaurants suffer: "we've got to even the playing field for the brick-and-mortar and the vending people at the same time. The aesthetics are important. If we are going to get streetlights and new development to spread, you don't want it to encounter something that is not pleasing to look at."[109] Mr. Patterson left out the fact that vendors produce a vital element necessary to attract capital to an area—a sense of place. Ultimately it is loncheras' inherently ruderal capacity that enables them to thrive in neglected and underserved areas.

When city officials in LA enforced regulations prohibiting street retailing, vendor mobility marked the difference between vendors who survived and vendors who did not. And still, lonchera extinction remains possible, given that the attacks on them are also indirect. Silicon Valley-based startups like Postmates have a self-delivery robot named "Serve" that can carry fifty pounds and travel thirty miles on a single charge; it is under development and testing in Santa Monica, California. There is also the TacoCopter, a start-up still in an early concept phase that plans to deliver tacos via uncrewed drone helicopters.[110] This concept has captured many people's imagination, including Jason Gilbert, a technology columnist for *The Huffington*

[109] Lemon, *The Taco Truck*, 114.

[110] Elise Morrison, *Discipline and Desire: Surveillance Technologies in Performance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2016), 237.

Post who champions these trends toward automation.[111] The significance here is not the technologically advanced delivery but the food choice. Many foodstuffs, due to their packaging, travel atop a drone better than tacos. Chinese food, for example, comes individually packed in cartons. Still, other foods have an established tradition of being delivered, such as pizza. Granted, TacoCopter sounds like a more marketable name, but tacos could have earned their spot for another reason. This Silicon Valley start-up could have embraced any other deliverable food possibilities, such as hamburgers, sandwiches, or hotdogs. Nevertheless, they support the idea, through their nomenclature, that the taco travels best.

Tacos will not be flying around any time soon, because this potential practice violates the US Federal Aviation Administration regulations prohibiting the use of unmanned aerial vehicles for commercial purposes.[112] So the injunction against using them to deliver tacos may remain uncertain. A cofounder of Tacocopter, Star Simpson, summed up the idea as "a conversation starter about the future of food delivery (and delivery in general), together with the commercial uses of unmanned drone rather than an actual startup plan or business."[113] Whatever the outlook of food delivery may be, Mexican cuisine, with its tradition of mobility, is sure to be a part of it, despite how hard some try to entrap its mobility.

There are also the corporately minded entrepreneurs who will rush to co-opt any and all cultural productions they can reach. The main difference between this group and the former is the availability of capital, since a recently arrived immigrant will need years to build enough principal to compete with established or corporate interests. Others have the capital to get a head

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[111] Jason Gilbert, "Tacocopter Aims to Deliver Tacos Using Unmanned Drone Helicopters," HuffPost, March 23, 2012, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/tacocopter-startup-delivers-tacos-by-unmanned-drone-helicopter_n_1375842.

[112] Ibid.

[113] Ibid.

start. For example, anyone visiting LAX Terminal 4 in 2019 would have witnessed a curious eatery with a sign and logo reading "Leo's Express" which sells Mexican street food. What makes this eatery stand out is not its sleek orange and black color scheme, nor the long line of people waiting to patronize it, but rather the fact that it faithfully replicates a lonchera. This food truck parody occupied a prominent spot in the terminal's food court, and its functioning headlights shone like two beacons calling the wayward travelers to a sanitized façadeomy of LA's urban culinary landscape. Its chrome counters and order and pick-up window positioned at truck height encourage people to imagine gnawing a taco in the streets under an LA sky. Leo's Express offers a morsel of the LA food truck scene, where the patrons can sample LA street food without having to deal with finding a lonchera in an actual LA street. Leo's Express also enacts a performance of culinary brownface. Though based on Leo's Tacos Truck, which has been in business since 2010 and received national recognition, this performance still fuels the neoliberal spirit that sanitizes loncheras of their offal parts, repackages them, and ultimately makes them unaffordable for the people who live in the places where loncheras were born. This dynamic of repackaging some of the most affordable food available to low-income people into a gourmet and higher-price consumable is not unique to Leo's Express.[114] Uber Eats and other food delivery apps are also rapidly pricing out Mexican food for low-income people, since many restaurants raise their overall prices to compensate for the 15% to 30% fee charged to a restaurant that uses these delivery services.[115]

[114] Harriet Baskas, "LAX Food Truck Serves Up Tacos", Stuck at The Airport, July 1, 2019, https://stuckattheairport.com/2019/07/01/lax-food-truck-serves-up-tacos.

[115] Khushbuh Shah, "Delivery Platforms Need to Give Restaurants a Break," *Food & Wine*, March 17, 2020, https://www.foodandwine.com/fwpro/delivery-apps-restaurants-coronavirus-commission.

The reaction to ethnic food trucks has not been solely antagonistic from people outside the LA Chicana/o community. A cottage industry has developed across the US where enterprising foodies have organized taco truck tours, where groups can safely sample the best, most authentic tacos. However, this pursuit of authentic ethnic cuisine represents a colonial impulse to master the ethnic subject's cultural production and monetize it, rather than an altruistic urge to bring people together in gastronomic harmony. At its core, the concept of lonchera food tours desires to "acquire a measure of cultural distinction through their command of exotic cuisines" and, more importantly, demonstrate "their ability to discern what is truly authentic."[116] In this way, Chicana/os are positioned to arrange the flavors which tour guides have deemed worthy for mostly non-Chicana/o tourist consumption.

Kogi BBQ Tacos, a Korean-Mexican fusion concept food truck, exemplifies yet another manifestation of the neoliberal tradition with which loncheras are increasingly confronted. The story of how many non-Chicana/os "are making millions by stuffing their barbecue in tortillas and selling them from fancy food trucks" has illustrated the profitability of modified Mexican food for many non-Mexicans.[117] Kogi food trucks have become an LA-based food sensation, spawning many imitators and contributing to a food truck movement. In many ways, this craze has displaced the traditional lonchera in Los Angeles. Kogi has inspired an army of young, mostly white cooks to abandon culinary school and start the next big food truck business. These industrious epicureans have not all achieved financial success, but they did accomplish what

[116] Jeffrey M. Pilcher, *Planet Taco: A Global History of Mexican Food* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 222.

[117] Arellano, *Taco USA*, 9.

traditional Mexican lonchera operators had been attempting to achieve for decades, mainly fair and just treatment for the food truck industry.

This wave of entrepreneurs navigated through the "antiquated laws that prohibited or severely curtailed the selling of food from trucks," thereby making an almost exclusively Chicana/o food into a mainstream American one.[118] However, Martinez-Cruz cautions that eateries built atop the Chicana/o culture represent little more than cheap imitations lacking the historical, social, and cultural flavor that Chicana/os provide.[119] Incorporating traditional Chicana/o food practices has a long history in America, from the tamale salesmen of the 1890s, to the founding of Taco Bell, to the birth of Kogi, which, according to its marketing department, achieved success by "set[ting] off a flavor bomb that would shake up the foundations of the industry so that street food would never be looked at the same way again."[120] Left out in the praise is that this flavor bomb exploded many a lonchera worker's livelihood. A selection of an autobiographical account of this gourmet food truck's beginning is worth unpacking:

> [W]hen we hit the streets of LA with a humble little Korean short rib taco that met Twitter in the middle of the night in front of a nightclub in Hollywood. We then started to create crowds and cravings across the whole city transmitting a new form of dialogue and culture between food and technology. Over the years, we've gone on to feed almost every street from LA to OC…Our operation has grown to include several trucks, a full catering operation, a bar called Alibi Room, a Taqueria and a rice bowl counter shop, Chego! Our Kogi team is extremely dedicated to the communities and customers who have supported us over the years. We remain true to our roots while always pushing forward. As we say, Kogi Por Vida.[121]

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[118] Arellano, *Taco USA*, 268–69.

[119] Martinez-Cruz, *Food Fight!*, 46–47.

[120] Kogi BBQ, "About Kogi BBQ," https://kogibbq.com/about-kogi/.

[121] Ibid.

This quote reveals that Kogi, a food truck that grossed $2 million in its first year of business still sees itself as humble and that it attributes at least part of its success to the synergy of their Korean short rib taco, Twitter, and Hollywood nightlife.[122] Here the outlier of a social media app in their formula is key—the mobility that shrewd deployment of social media enabled set this food truck apart from the rest of the competition. By using social media, specifically Twitter, as their primary advertising and marketing tool, Kogi claimed a space of hip outsiders who did not need or want to put out stuffy press releases but rather to "remain true to [their] roots *while always pushing forward,*"[123] even when their pushing topples many lonchera employees out of a job. This excerpt's use of Spanish, though slight, is significant for the way it motions towards issues of not only linguistic but culinary hybridity, appropriation, and ultimately culinary brownface. After all, a truly balanced fusion would call for a corresponding phrase in Korean. Kogi then sets up the possibility for a clash of ethnic tastes in more than just the culinary sense.

Many credit Kogi with outmaneuvering the competition with new exciting combinations of flavors, most notably their bulgogi (fire meat). But it is the ability to orchestrate their customer base's mobility that stands out the most. Other trucks have had delicious food or Mexican food fusion concepts, but the fact that Kogi *started to create crowds* and transmit in a new way that brought together food and technology marked the difference. This is nothing less or beyond the virtuosic use of technology to orchestrate consumers' mobility, as evidenced by Twitter user 49driscoll on December 15, 2008: "looking for the Kogi truck to get some food—

[122] Zach Behrens, "Kogi BBQ Grossed $2 Million in First Year of Business," LAist, January 13, 2010, https://laist.com/2010/01/13/kogi_bbq_grossed_2_million_in_first.php.

[123] Emphasis mine.

anybody?"[124] Where before loncheras' mobility may have been predictable, it was not until Kogi that it became coordinated with that of customers, so that no matter Kogi's location its core of "extremely dedicated" customers would follow to eat the same food but on different streets. As Misses V wrote on Twitter, "Trying to find out where Kogi's is located today!"[125] It was this innovation of fusing trucks and technology above all others that catapulted this concept to phenomenon status.

Kogi took the centrifugal force that had spread loncheras across LA and inverted it into a centripetal force that drew consumers like a spiral to itself, no matter where they found themselves. One thing Kogi shared with their lonchera predecessors is that it operated as a family affair. Alice Shin focused on social media, while her brother-in-law, Mark Manguera, handled the numbers.[126] It was Manguera who conceived the idea for a taco truck with a Korean twist. The concept came to him "after eating tacos to cap a late night of bar-hopping" what is often lost in this narrative is the fact that the main ingredient in Kogi's success was provided by Alice's mother, who "provided the bulgogi recipe."[127] In this structurally solid and meticulously planned strategy, the not particularly distinguished or successful (at the time) Roy Choi took charge of the cuisine. However, it was Choi who would make history as a food truck purveyor named the best new chef by *Food & Wine* in 2010, with paltry acknowledgment of the collective reality of Kogi's success.[128] Choi would go on to use his notoriety to spin off into brick-and-mortar

[124] "Kogi Search Query," Twitter, December 9, 2008, https://twitter.com/search?q=Kogi%20until%3A2008-12-30%20since%3A2008-11-01&src=typed_query.

[125] Ibid.

[126] Martinez-Cruz, *Food Fight!*, 267.

[127] Behrens, "Kogi BBQ Grossed $2 Million."

[128] Martinez-Cruz, *Food Fight!*, 278.

restaurants including "LocoL," a failed venture in Watts, California, a neighborhood known for drugs and violence. Today, Choi focuses on his two successful eateries, Flamin' Hot Spot and Kogi Taqueria, and his bar Alibi Room.

When visiting a lonchera parked on a busy street corner, one witnesses the meals transform into choreographed movement. The cooks assemble an order using choreography akin to a dance that enables patrons to ritualistically partake in culinary communion. The culinary performances in, on, and around a lonchera often involve the cook preparing the food inside the truck while visible through a large glass window for the customer outside, or on an open-air grill next to the truck. The meal comes together as one spectates; this event elicits many delicious contemplations, from the slapping of raw flesh on a sizzling grill to its landing on one's plate.

The mobility of food trucks intertwines food and customers ubiquitously. As the San Diego-based Taco Shop Poets, a group of poets dedicated to combining politics, poetry, and tacos, put it in one of their bilingual poems "the taco maker plays with our senses; he knows we are watching and that's why he can transform the making of a taco into a spectacle dramatic and transcendental… facing up to the taco maker we are all the same…please…two tacos of social justice to go!"[129] Here the poet places his audience at the side of a taco truck "facing up" to plead not only for physical but social nourishment, in the form of tacos, justice, and equality. As Adolfo Guzman, a founding member of this group, put it, taco makers "treat everyone the same and serve everyone the same,"[130] leading anthropologist Maribel Álvarez to conclude that staging performances in taco shops "augment[s] the holdings" of an "impromptu repository of

[129] "Dos de lengua para llevar" (Two Tongue Tacos to Go) as quoted in Maribel, "Food, Poetry, and Borderlands," 222.

[130] Ibid., 214.

social memory."[131] These memories are much more flavorful than the ones assembled in many hermetically sealed archives. This concept of a mental aftertaste is picked up by poet Francisco X. Alarcón's *Canto a las Tortillas* (Song for the Tortillas in English), which reads "I go on/ calling/ *nana* to/ Earth/ feeding on/ the subversive/ canto sown/ by *los antiguos*/[132] inside/ the humblest/ tortillas/ of life."[133] For Alarcón, as for the Mexica before him, the recipe for ancestors, maíz, and subversion are consubstantial.

Culinary Coda

On August 24, 2019, at approximately 5:15 a.m., a speeding silver Range Rover swerved, lost control, and crashed into the center divider of the westbound 105 Century Freeway in LA. A tanker-truck driver transporting nine thousand gallons of gasoline slammed on his brakes, attempting to avoid the Rover, and jackknifed. The tanker smashed into the divider and began spouting gasoline "like a river."[134] The tanker burst into flames, sending a fireball skyward and across the expressway. Flames were visible for miles and ignited roughly five kilometers from Los Angeles International Airport (LAX). The accident forced a thirteen-hour closure of the westbound freeway and an extended closure of the Metro Green Line rail running parallel to the

[131] Maribel, "Food, Poetry, and Borderlands," 218.

[132] The ancient ones.

[133] Francisco X. Alarcón, *Snake Poems: An Aztec Invocation* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1992), 77.

[134] Nathaniel Percy and Alma Fausto, "Westbound 105 Freeway Reopens After Fiery Tanker-Truck Collision Kills 2," Daily Breeze, August 24, 2018, https://www.dailybreeze.com/2018/08/24/tanker-truck-fire-leads-to-closure-of-i-105-freeway-in-hawthorne-just-before-rush-hour/.

throughway.[135] This conflagration claimed the lives of both drivers, and contributed to a scene that news reporters described as a "true L.A. moment."[136]

The quintessentially LA event the reporter referred to was not the grinding halt of thousands of commuters and dozens of first responders and reporters clamoring to the crash scene. Nor was it the irony of a truck spilling gasoline atop the freeway system constructed for that same fuel's consumption. Neither was it the exit of dozens of travelers headed to LAX from their taxicabs, Ubers, and Lyfts with their luggage to search for alternative avenues to reach their flights. The real LA event involved Isabel Larios, a lonchera (food truck) operator since 1986, exiting her gridlocked lonchera to make herself a coffee. When Larios opened her truck's side panel, it set the backdrop for an inadvertent transit-oriented performance that provided momentum for a centripetal force that pulled many stalled motorists away from the disastrous standstill towards an opportunity to partake in an unusual gustatory community ritual in what food truck scholars have termed "pop-up placemaking."[137] This intersection, between food trucks' forces generated by and motorists atop freeways (a network of highways constructed to facilitate commerce), illustrates the way Chicana/os deploy food mobility in locations and contexts within systems that are often economically and legally unreceptive, or—as in this incident—unsuspecting.

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[135] Joseph Serna and Alejandra Reyes-Velarde, "Eastbound Lanes of 105 Freeway in Hawthorne Reopened After Fiery Crash That Killed Two," *Los Angeles Times,* August 24, 2018, https://www.latimes.com/local/lanow/la-me-ln-tanker-fire-freeway-20180824-story.html.

[136] Daniel Hernandez, "We Mostly Sold Burritos': Taco Truck Serves Breakfast for Motorists Stuck on 105 Freeway After Fiery Crash," L.A. Taco, August 24, 2019, https://www.lataco.com/food-truck-to-the-rescue-lonchera-serves-breakfast-for-motorists-stuck-on-105-freeway-after-fiery-crash/.

[137] Agyeman, Matthews, and Sobel, *Food Trucks, Cultural Identity*, 5–6.

Larios's commerce atop a gridlocked and completely stagnant highway demonstrates that, even in the midst of a complete stoppage of cars, capital, and people on a freeway, loncheras can produce what Tsing calls "salvage accumulation."[138] Tsing explains salvage as a value produced without direct capitalist control that behaves as mushrooms do, popping up, as Larios's commercial activity, in the most unpredictable of places. This proclivity to find underserved populations to provide with freshly made and affordable food is a key part of why loncheras flourish in the food deserts of LA, using their motility to navigate the rhythms of the streets. That takes a lonchera from the construction sites of Beverly Hills mansions to the industrial areas of the downtown, and many places in between, in the same day.

Larios's industriousness during the freeway gridlock, "simultaneously inside and outside capitalism," translated the disruption, congestion, and destruction into profit by maneuvering her lonchera uniquely through the ruins of excessive traffic and surplus mobility that congests highways, consumes space and poisons the environment.[139] But how does salvage accumulation specifically relate to mobility and motion? Here this concept of salvage inspires a recognition that a static and hierarchical economic structure no longer epitomizes the most productive way to examine modern structural systems. Instead, what is needed is an analysis calibrated on a new conceptual tool that picks up on the present-day primacy of motion and its deployment by subaltern subjects in ways that are increasingly rhizomatic, subterranean, methodical, and unpredictable.[140]

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[138] Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, 85.

[139] Ibid.

[140] In doing so we will need to keep Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's work in mind for its treasured observation that there is value in research that allows for multiple, non-hierarchical epistemes and ontologies, though the relevant aspect of the rhizome that interests this theorization borrows more from the original botanical concept, in which a horizontal underground system sends roots and shoots out from nodes. See Gilles Deleuze and Félix

Following Tsing's mycological approach to examining economic structures exemplified by rhizomes, loncheras and their movement are metaphorically juxtaposed with that of mushrooms, whose hyphae, or threadlike filaments, spread in a subterranean fashion, fanning and entangling cords in the soil.[141] Both loncheras and mushrooms revitalize depressed ecosystems and flourish in neglected and alienated locations. As Hermosillo puts it, loncheras are mostly found in "Latino-heavy areas that lack speedy and affordable food options." What is more significant is that the supplies for a lonchera's needs are often "met in the same neighborhood they work in."[142] The resources in a neglected community are localized and benefit it in the same way that mushrooms collect and concentrate nutrients found in exhausted soil.

According to Tsing, it is in this way that both "people and things become *mobile* assets."[143] This mobility unshackles people from their world, allowing their nyctinasty to liberate them from capitalism's shadowy regimentation. Here loncheras' mobility correlates with that of rhizomes; for when parked they appear static when in fact they are perpetually in a subterranean motion just under a socio-political cultural, and economic surface.

In this way, mushrooms and loncheras move slowly and methodically, permitting both to pop up suddenly according to environmental conditions or possible encounters. The transit-oriented performance created by Larios's lonchera and the accident featured numerous stranded passengers: Black, Asian, Anglo, and Chicana/o motorists purchasing food, drinks and snacks

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Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* trans. Brian Massumi, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

[141] Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, 174.

[142] Hermosillo, *Loncheras*, 26.

[143] Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, 24, emphasis mine.

from the truck, lingering and commiserating about their misfortune. Travelers talked, laughed, and listened to music in a temporary but powerful encounter. When the freeway reopened, Larios had allowed dozens of strangers to dine collectively. At the end of the blockage, dozens of coffee orders were sold, and most of her food stock was consumed.[144] The food truck's mobility filled a niche during a temporary halt in motion, exemplifying how LA has intertwined food and transit into its cultural landscape. This event further calls attention to how rapidly Chicana/o culture uses its mobility to transform transitory spaces into communal places. It is these movements that ensure Chicana/os, street vending and loncheras can never be eradicated, but only temporarily [dis]placed.

[144] Joseph Serna, and Alejandra Reyes-Velarde, "Drivers Were Unmovable, but They Did Have a Feast," *Los Angeles Times*, August 24, 2018.

Conclusion

Throughout this work I have attempted to demonstrate some of the critical ways in which the spectacle of transit-oriented performance reveals the importance of mobility's role in Chicana/os' construction of collective selfhood. This study investigated some processional modalities and the issues they agitate through three registers of mobility: first, the literal physical and kinetic motion in and of transit-orientated performances; second, the social and economic mobility of Chicana/os in the twenty-first century; and third, the historical diachronic movement tracing Chicana/o identity formation in relation to their pre-Hispanic roots in ancient indigenous mythologies. The goal was to reach a more complete understanding of the ways Chicana/os have shaped Los Angeles into its present-day formation: a decentralized network of crisscrossed and overlapping causeways that agitate social, economic, political, and geographic bodies in motion.

By working to arrogate a space in the work of theorizing modern-day mobility in an indigenous context, the collection of case studies selected in this dissertation employed a variety of techniques that illustrated Chicana/os' construction of space through dynamic (automobiles, video, film) and static (photography, murals, magazines) singularities, together with engagements with public sites and landmarks. In this same way the modern case studies in this text illustrated one or more of the three cardinal forms of ancient motion-change. To provide a vital background in the field of site-based performance theory, this dissertation turned to Mike Pearson's foundational work on site-specific theatre in Chapter Three to elucidate the conversation about how automobiles are not simply a mode of movement, but a manifestation of a conscious attitude towards them as well.[1] In some cases the resisting of urban gentrification

[1] Seiler, "Statist Means to Individualist Ends," 5.

was treated as a backdrop for motions of socio-political empowerment. In all cases we saw how motion creates networks of cross-cultural culinary interactions. By connecting Mexica alimentary mythology to new-wave food trucks, the text explained, analyzed, and theorized present and possible future of olfactory and gustatory performance. By highlighting some ways that the Mexica worldview cycles its way into and throughout Chicana/o culture, these case studies showed that, for Chicana/os, mobility is nothing short of a survival tactic.

The High Price of Freeways

It was the mid-1980s in Watts, California, and the news that had been rumored for some years had finally and officially been confirmed. Our family, triply unlucky for being poor, of color, and in the way of progress, would have to move out of our home to make room for a freeway designed to run atop our community. It may have been coincidental, but this freeway which buried the homes of many people of color would come to be named the "Century Freeway," a nomenclature that reified in steel and concrete the erasure of bodies of color that had begun many centuries before. I was only a child, but I remember what this progress did to me and many of my friends—and our families. Later, I would learn that freeways and the spaces they create underneath them breed crime, vagrancy, drugs, and other ills. Pardo writes "freeway construction…displaced thousands of residents, compelling some families to move more than once" which describes my families fate exactly. The freeways not only contaminated the neighborhood with noise and air pollution but "divided neighborhoods without consideration for resident's loyalties to extended family and parish church."[2] Freeways bring with them a high price tag that, more often than not, is left to the poor and of color to pay.

[2] Pardo, *Mexican American Women Activists*, 61–62.

What I hope this story illustrates is that mobilities and the artifacts they produce (cars, streets, freeways) are not singularly beneficial. One must critically analyze where and how the motion of a given artifact interacts with objects around it. My family's Brownian motion stood no chance against the city's determined march towards highway expansion, illustrating that a family's, people's, or group's identity often depends upon their ability to move, or to stay in motion when there is no stable place they are wanted. (If one is looking for a way to divide communities, destroy cultures, and breed isolation, freeways are an efficient strategy.)

My work has attempted to comprehend the factors and circumstances under which Chicana/os often move, and then to point out that these factors and circumstances have historical resonances going back to peoples long ago immobilized and buried. But what was buried can begin a slow germination and push its sprout towards the sun, where the next generation of scholars can help it grow—even if that growth must happen through concrete, from under a freeway overpass. As Eric Avila points out, "even the deadest spaces created by highway infrastructure sometimes find redemption through local efforts to create a sense of place."[3] People's buried histories sometimes become seeds, and no amount of concrete can keep them from pushing through to transform "segments of freeway architecture into sites vested with spiritual meaning and cultural pride."[4] One such site in Southern California is Chicano Park. In a predominantly Mexican American neighborhood known as Barrio Logan in the southeast section of San Diego, Chicano Park was the result of a community action that saw the annexation of a parcel of land underneath the Coronado Bay Bridge by a coalition of concerned residents fed up

[3] Eric Avila, *Folklore of the Freeway: Race and Revolt in the Modernist City* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 150.

[4] Ibid.

with the ill treatment of the community. According to Chicano Park's official web site, "the state of California initially agreed to lease 1.8 acres of state land in Barrio Logan for a neighborhood park…The lease would run for a period of twenty years…and the state would prepare the site for public use."[5]

The city later reneged on this agreement and sent bulldozers to grade the land in preparation not for a park, but for a California Highway Patrol station. When Chicano residents spread the word that city and state officials had deceived them about the development of their park, a flood of demonstrators composed of Barrio Logan residents, youth, and Chicano activists gathered at the park site to prevent the bulldozing, both by forming a human chain around the bulldozers and by blocking the street with their lowriders. The Chicano flag was raised on a telephone pole, and a twelve-day occupation of the disputed land began.

> During the occupation of Chicano Park, the three-acre parcel was transformed into a desert garden of plants and grass. Chicano youth and student organizations from Santa Barbara and Los Angeles traveled to Barrio Logan to offer their support. Women prepared meals for the demonstrators, while others donated trees, seeds, and fertilizer. The occupation represented the first time in which residents had come together in unity for themselves and their community.[6]

As part of the park's beautification, a massive mural-painting project was first conceived by San Diego-based Chicano art groups such as Los Artistas de los Barnos, Los Toltecas en Aztlan, and El Congresso de Artistas Chicanos en Aztlan*,* and then organized by a resident of Barrio Logan, Salvador Torres, and a fellow artist, Victor Ochoa, in order to "express [Chicano] identity as Indian/Spanish/European/American."[7] So, in 1973, the bare concrete surfaces of the pylons and walls underneath the bridge began to tell a different, brightly painted story, one that

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[5] Chicano Park, "The History of Chicano Park," http://www.chicanoparksandiego.com/index.html..

[6] Ibid.

[7] Ibid.

Avila describes as "people of color striv[ing] to reclaim this space through expressive cultural traditions, weaving it back into the fabric of their communities."[8] This painting of murals on the concrete piers holding up a bridge that displaces so much of the community brings with it many theoretically rich elements, as the bridge becomes no longer merely a stationary monument facilitating transit of automobiles and locking community residents out of whole swaths of land.

One of the most featured murals at Chicano Park reads "San Diego Lowrider Council" (fig. 7). The letters in old English font along the top are in gold, as if to echo the lowrider plaques used to identify a car club affiliation. This mural wraps itself around the four sides of one of the pylons and features a collection of the most popular classic cars in the lowriding scene. Located between a sidewalk and an enclosed recreation area featuring handball and basketball courts, the images of lowriders are prominently visible to the youth who use the courts. The mural is positioned in such a way that the gate surrounding the area is interrupted by the pylon. One side of the mural contains a list of some of the prominent San Diego car clubs (fig. 8). Two figures appear on the street-facing side of the pylon. They are positioned as father and son, but their torsos are obscured by a lowrider, and the boy smiles as he holds up a trophy. Here the generational and kinship elements of lowriding are made clear. The final two sides of the pylon feature six lowriders positioned so as to appear stacked on each other (fig 9). The lowriders are painted across the corner of the two walls to complete a three-dimensional optical illusion that lends movement to the cars as they wrap themselves around the pylon, demonstrating that, for Chicana/os, even their murals move.

Zooming out from this mural and taking in the site fully, one sees an entanglement of art, automobility, and transit. The mural seems to hint at the perspective that if this bridge transports

[8] Avila, *Folklore of the Freeway*, 14.

cars, that is due at least in part to the Chicana/os underneath facilitating it through their culture, art, and ingenuity. The mural creates both a place for lowriders and what Chappell would call a lowrider space that "ties the immediate context of a lowrider car to the barrio spaces of Latino urbanity in the United States, both material and imagined."[9] As such the lowrider mural is a heterotopia, a place where multiple spaces of multiple and perhaps contradictory possibilities and significations coexist.

America moves fast and worships speed and, by extension, its most available form: the automobile. As Enda Duffy puts it, "the personal thrill of the new-century motor speeds and politics of late imperial capitalism turn out to be unexpectedly and uncannily related."[10] The nation's addiction to speediness made the automobile (or the opportunity to own one) the greatest promise of American capitalism. This promise positioned car ownership in communities with significant Chicana/o populations as one of the key down payments on the material signs of comfortable living, and so past generations of Mexican migrants embraced this aspect of the American Dream. But, first the capitalist promise and now the neoliberal promise of monetary rewards were not delivered through increased capacity to buy into the American consumerist culture. The descendants of early Mexican Americans have grown up understanding this notion and have opted to meet the hot rod's and muscle car's rapidity and power with the lowrider's lowness and slowness, opting not to remove themselves from a perceived Anglo fixation on speed, but to elegantly resist it. Contrasting hot rods and muscle cars with lowriders requires an understanding of their relative velocities more than their material differences.

[9] Chappell, *Lowrider Space*, 25.

[10] Duffy, *The Speed Handbook*, 10.

By giving the lowrider a prominent place among their many murals, the activists and artists of Chicano Park show their modified version of the American Dream as one of many artistic interventions into US culture, particularly car culture. The viewer sees the lowrider mural among other murals offering more traditionally activist images: agriculture (including United Farm Workers symbols), immigration, oppression, and revolt. The viewer sees these images as part of the act of moving into, reclaiming, and repurposing this concrete landscape built to hold up a freeway. All the while, the viewer hears cars whizzing overhead.

Moving Violations

Some Chicana/o artists have made murals that literally move in slow motion. In 1971, the Chicano arts collective Asco created *The Walking Mural,* which featured three of Asco's members walking down the sidewalk dressed as a Christmas tree (Gronk), a Virgin de Guadalupe-in-black (Valdez), and a living mural (Herrón). The fourth member, Gamboa, served in the role of photographer. In Asco's work the mural begins to lose fixity and size as it is stretched into three dimensions and placed upon a street or vehicle, where it gains mobility and visibility.

Asco's inaugural 1971 performance *Stations of the Cross* is an excellent contemporary example of the ways in which early peripatetic and processional Mexican traditional forms have found their way into the US and helped to shape and inform contemporary Chicana/o performance art. This performance was a response to the city's cancellation of the Whitter Boulevard Christmas parade, but its broader context was the Vietnam War. In *Stations of the Cross,* Asco deployed a religious pilgrimage theme, along with the story of Christ carrying the cross on his way to Golgotha and the Catholic narrative of the fourteen stations along Christ's path. (This Catholic devotion commemorates Jesus Christ's last day on earth as a man; the

stations are commonly used as a mini-pilgrimage for an individual to move from station to station reflecting and reciting a specific prayer for each.) *Stations of the Cross* was the group's reinterpretation of an old Catholic ritual to highlight the pointlessness of life, or alternately the pointless deaths of young Chicanos in Vietnam. Appropriately, Asco's procession started along Whittier Boulevard in East Los Angeles with a Christ/Death character, a Pontius Pilate, and a ghoulish altar boy, wailing as they marched along with a fifteen-foot cardboard cross spray-painted in an assortment of colors. Their march, or funeral procession, ended at a United States Marine Recruiting Station, where they blocked the entrance with the cross and stood in the station for five minutes or so, observing a moment of silence that concluded with the Pontius Pilate, played by Gronk, scattering handfuls of popcorn in the station.

Asco reclaimed space to such a degree that they even ran afoul of mainstream Chicana/o sentiments. During early performances, they were seen shoving unsuspecting pedestrians out of the way on a public sidewalk. Their most controversial performance interrupted a mass held on the lawn of Evergreen Cemetery during a Day of the Dead celebration. Several hundred people at an event sponsored by Self Help Graphics, an organization founded by Catholic nuns that is still in existence, witnessed Asco show up with huge cardboard props including an envelope containing an absurdist message. Asco's performance, as ill-advised as some may feel it to be, had precedents in other earlier anti-Catholic actions taken by progressive Chicana/os, actions fueled by perceptions of the Church's paternalistic neglect.

Asco's name even came from their embracing of an insult once used to describe their work: "*asco*" is the Spanish word for nausea. The things they did "made people sick." Their brand of anti-clerical performance earned the group the reputation of being a satanic cult. With time, however, this quartet has managed to earn much scholarly attention; today it is considered

a forerunner of the Chicana/o avant-garde, due to its specialization in various forms of aggressive and confrontational performance art. Asco's scatological and sometimes sacrilegious performances gradually raised them to the status of the most influential of Chicana/o performance art troupes, famed for pushing boundaries and people alike.

In all the Asco performances mentioned above, the literal or figurative element of motion and movement appear as a defining characteristic of the group's work. However, their 1974 work *Instant Mural* addresses motion by presenting the audience with an example of extreme immobility. *Instant Mural* featured Valdez and a young man named Humberto Sandoval being taped to a wall by Gronk, and then lingering there an hour, long enough to have at least a few passersby offer to help set them free. In this moment of audience participation, the public as it moves by can choose to share their freedom, in other words their mobility, with the constrained performers.

Making History Out of Los[t] Angels

It is my view that only a new way of thinking about motion can help us make sense of our present historical moment. It has been my goal in the artifacts I have examined to salvage what I could from many forms of Chicana/o art and experience, and to reform it all into a new description of motion that builds upon the guidance of ancient philosophy. If, through this attempt to calibrate the instruments we use to gauge the impact of motion on Chicana/o subject formation a better understanding of Chicana/os and other subaltern subjects is revealed, then the study has not been in vain.

One of the great philosophers of the twentieth century, Walter Benjamin, used one of his prized belongings, a painting titled *Angelus Novus*, to explicate his feelings about the forces at work on society and individuals. This painting, a watercolor artwork by Paul Klee, was largely

unknown during the artist's life, but was made famous by Benjamin, who refers to it as the angel of history. This angel seems to be riding the shock waves created by the meeting of an unmovable place and an unstoppable force. In his view, historical progress was no progress at all, but an illusion. Following Benjamin, I would like to close this work by reflecting not on the supernal Angel of History, but on the chthonic Angels that seem to drive us today—an apposite way, I think, to describe the effects that uninhibited growth is having on humanity in this age where motion is everything.

The contemporary violence of motion's force has shattered Benjamin's angel; it now exists as a multiplicity—*nova angeli* (new angels). This is a useful way to articulate the ontology of these new angels who drive cars with bloodshot eyes and madly grinning mouths, knuckles bone-white from tightly gripping their steering wheels, feet sore from pressing down hard on their accelerators. Their faces everlastingly point towards the future, and if they ever look back, it is only via their rearview mirrors. They have no time to pause and check on the things they have smashed or the dead they themselves have run over and crushed, for they are preoccupied with the problem of the gas pedal going no lower. These driving angels are the irresistible storm that we call progress. But, as I have attempted to show, there is another storm blowing from *Tlalocan,*[11] and it may one day trigger our collective dashboard warning light. So, in keeping with the Mexica worldview, this completion is not an ending but rather always and already a beginning.

[11] Mexica heaven.

Appendix



Figure 1. An unidentified Chicana woman protesting *Hopscotch*, November 22 2015. Photo courtesy of Serve the People, Los Angeles.



Figure 2. *The McGee Roadster, Gypsy Rose, and the Hirohata Merc on the mall in DC*. 2017. Photos courtesy Historic Vehicle Association.



Figure 3. Dustin Volo Pedder, *El Rey Azteca*, 2014. Photo courtesy of Motor Trend Group, LLC.

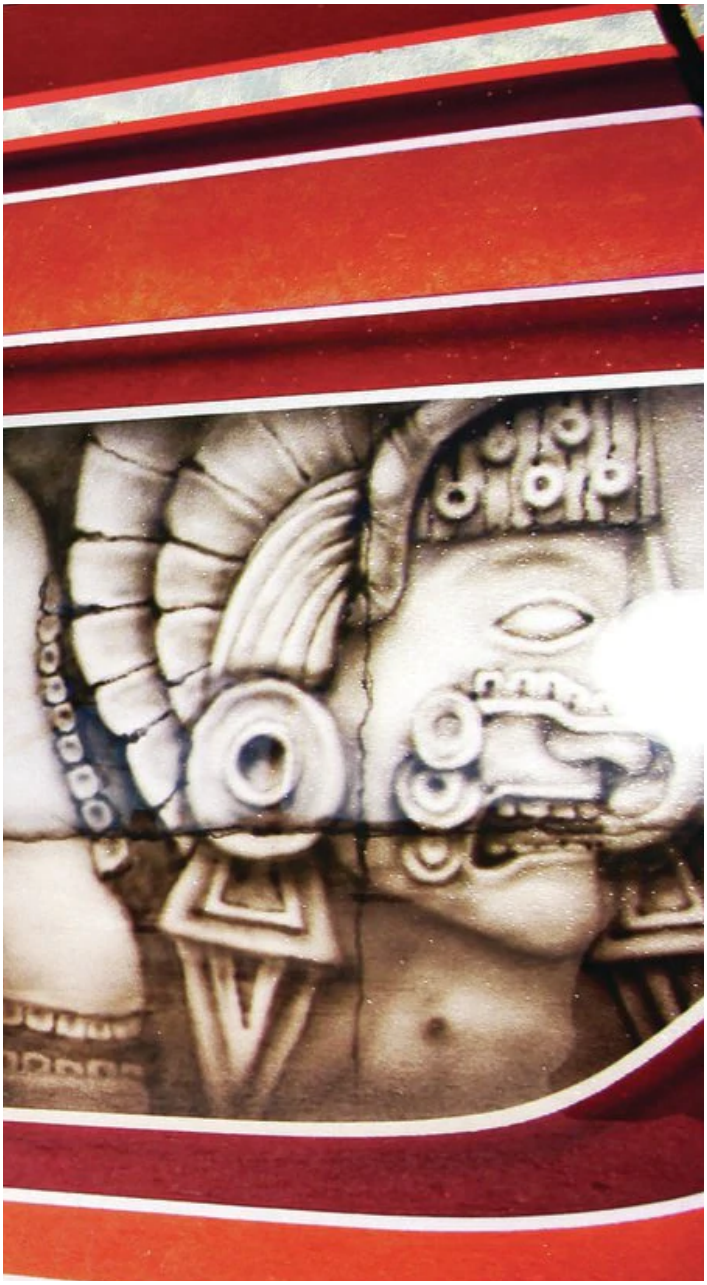


Figure 4. Dustin Volo Pedder, *El Rey Azteca*, 2014. Photo courtesy of Motor Trend Group, LLC.



Figure 5. Gilbert “Magu” Luján, *Returning to Aztlan*, 1983. Serigraph 29 x 32½ inches. Photo courtesy of the Estate of Gilbert “Magu” Luján.



Figure 6. General Motors exhibit at Golden Gate International Exposition, San Francisco. *Transparent Car with Pontiac Chassis and Body by Fisher*. 11 June 1940. Photo courtesy of the Wyland Stanley collection.



Figure 7. Front view of view of Chicano Park *Strength Thru Unity* mural, 2020. Photo courtesy of the author.



Figure 8. Close-up view of Chicano Park *Strength Thru Unity* mural, 2020. Photo courtesy of the author.



Figure 9. Back view of Chicano Park *Strength Thru Unity* mural, 2020. Photo courtesy of the author.

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