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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA
RIVERSIDE

Conditional Inclusivity of Queer Presence in Chicanx Visual Culture:
The Q-Sides Exhibition, Contemporary California

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

in

Art History

by

Breana Carolina Lepe

June 2026

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2026

The Thesis of Breana Carolina Lepe is approved:

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Dedicated to those who were erased from both the LGBTQ+ and Chicana/o/x archives, my kitten Maya, who lifted my spirits while mourning my late cat Cheeto.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	iv
LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS	ix
INTRODUCTION	1
IT BEGINS WITH A VISIT TO THE GALLERY	1
TERMINOLOGY	3
CONTROLLING VISIBILITY IN LATINX SPACES	6
ROADMAP TO CRUISING	9
UP IN FLAMES: ICONOCLASTIC <i>POR VIDA</i>	11
A MURAL IN THE MISSION DISTRICT	11
VISUAL CUES OF <i>POR VIDA</i>	12
CULTURAL BELONGING IN THE AGE OF GENTRIFICATION	20
COMMUNITY RESPONDS	23
LIFETIME OF <i>POR VIDA</i> IN A PHYSICAL SPACE	26
THE ICONOCLASM	28
A MURAL REBORN THROUGH PRINT	32
CONSCIOUSNESS ACROSS MULTIMEDIA	35
CONCLUSION	42
DISIDENTIFYING THE LOWRIDER: PORTRAITS FROM <i>THE Q-SIDES</i>	44
FROM MURALS TO PHOTOGRAPHY	44
PHOTOGRAPHS FROM <i>THE Q-SIDES</i> SERIES	45
A DRAG QUEEN WITH LOWRIDERS	47

DISIDENTIFICATION AND SELF-REPRESENTATION	51
HOW <i>THE Q-SIDES</i> CAME TO BE.....	56
OUT IN THE OPEN.....	60
QUEER CHICANX BODIES AS DOCUMENTARY	64
CONCLUSION.....	70
CONCLUSION	72
WORKS CITED	77
ILLUSTRATIONS	81

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

FIGURE 1: MAP OF THE MISSION DISTRICT AND CASTRO DISTRICT	81
FIGURE 2: MANUEL PAUL, <i>POR VIDA</i>	82
FIGURE 3: <i>POR VIDA</i> , BLUE AND RED SPRAY PAINT	83
FIGURE 4: <i>POR VIDA</i> , BLACK SPRAY PAINT	84
FIGURE 5: <i>POR VIDA</i> , AFTER IT WAS SET ON FIRE	85
FIGURE 6: FRED ROWE FOTO, <i>HOUSE OF MORE!</i>	86
FIGURE 7: VERO MAJANO, BROWN ANGEL, KARI ORVIK, <i>THE Q-SIDES</i> , <i>VOLUME 10</i>	87
FIGURE 8: VERO MAJANO, BROWN ANGEL, KARI ORVIK, <i>THE Q-SIDES</i> , <i>VOLUME 3</i>	88
FIGURE 9: ANTHONY BOORLIS, <i>EAST SIDE STORY</i> , <i>VOLUME 10</i>	89
FIGURE 10: ANTHONY BOORLIS, <i>EAST SIDE STORY</i> , <i>VOLUME 3</i>	90

INTRODUCTION

It Begins with a Visit to the Gallery

Sometime in late June 2025, after an eight-hour road trip up state and months of viewing artworks in Southern California, I finally arrived in San Francisco. In the city, a mile from the Castro District and within the Mission District, was my destination, Galería de la Raza (FIGURE 1).¹ I excitedly reached for the door handle only to realize it was locked. The gallery attendant inside looked up from her desk and made her way to the door. She cracked open the door and held me at the entrance. She asked if she could help me with anything. Sheepishly smiling, I let her know that I was here to see the exhibition and that I was an art history graduate student seeking objects for my case study. She did not permit me to enter the space.

This refusal caught me off guard. When planning this trip, I knew where I would be stopping and when the places would be open because I read the hours of operation on their websites. The attendant noticed the confusion on my face and assured me that this was a temporary closure. She invited me to return in approximately two hours. The delivery of her words suggests that this closure was urgent and crucial due to its brevity. The closure was not a typical, inconvenient delay for gallery operations, but rather a far more serious response to the ongoing Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) raids throughout California that had begun earlier that month. In light of these raids, the gallery chose to temporarily suspend public access to host an informative private meeting for

¹ Satellite view of San Francisco, Google Earth, accessed June 2026,
<https://earth.google.com/earth/d/1A-zUAQTLy8BEELjaNKcDF6tQBeHTk4JO?usp=sharing>

locals in the Mission District. This meeting showed these individuals how to exercise their legal rights by detailing the steps to follow if they ever ran into an ICE agent. The gallery became a space beyond observing and interpreting artworks, and one that could offer collective care and legal education to those affected by the raids.

In the absence of a public notice about the urgency of the closure and the gallery's decision to prioritize community safety over transparency, this came off as just one example of how visibility and intersectionality infiltrate daily life in the twenty-first-century United States. Visual and material culture among queer Chicanx communities intertwines with contemporary realities of inner-cultural control. This intertwining creates a dialogue that continues to shape how queer Chicanx artists create objects in response to those who authorize who and what can belong. The circumstances under which objects in a gallery in Northern California are accessed and interpreted depend on broader political acts towards Chicanx and LGBTQ+ communities. The exchange at the gallery entrance presents a chain of cause and effect: conducting immigration raids restricts access to spaces, which in turn affects control over visibility, ultimately impacting these communities. Acts of authority evoke fear and vulnerability, redirecting the narrative of the objects present in the gallery at the time, *The Q-Sides: 10th Year Anniversary* exhibition. The moment the attendant told me to return once the gallery reopened points to the main focus of this thesis: how intersectionality serves as a historical framework and prompts an inner-cultural force that controls what is visible by selectively showcasing parts of Chicanx visual culture in California during the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

Terminology

The title “Conditional Inclusivity” is a term that came to mind when writing this thesis. It refers to general populations being accepting of those who do not fit within the status quo expectations of being, on the condition that these individuals, in this case queer Chicanx, do not do anything to shake those expectations or go against them. Hence, this is not an unconditional acceptance of queerness, as there are prerequisites to be followed in Chicanx and Latinx communities.

Before delving further into this thesis, I must also consider how I use terminology to describe ethnicity and race in this study, more specifically, “Chicanx” and “Latinx.” When using Chicana/o/x, I abbreviate it throughout the thesis as “Chicanx.” My reason for this is that Chicana/o falls under Chicanx, intended to be a gender-inclusive term for even those who do not identify with the binary. Chicanx refers to an individual or group who identifies as Mexican American or as someone who exists within the U.S. borderlands. With that in mind, not all Mexican Americans wish to identify as such. Gloria Anzaldúa describes that those who occupy the borderlands develop a *mestiza consciousness*, a new way of thinking that comes from navigating a contradicting and intersecting identity.² The borderlands subject must learn to live in the middle of these spaces, often facing multiple forms of discrimination but managing to pivot it towards resistance and creativity.

Like Chicanx, I adopt the term “Latinx” from Elizabeth Ferrer’s book *Latinx Photography*. Latinx is a gender-neutral term that also acknowledges gender diversity by

² Anzaldúa, “La Conciencia De La Mestiza,” 188-190.

including individuals and groups that identify as Latina/o/x.³ You will notice that I do not use the term “Hispanic,” which, like Ferrer, I believe centers around Spanish ancestry in a colonial context and ignores the multiracial realities of Latin American roots, such as those with Indigenous and African heritage.⁴ As an umbrella term, Latinx is inclusive and anti-colonial. Chicanx, if anything, falls under the Latinx umbrella since Latinx is not a singular group.

It is worth stating that these terms are imperfect. For Spanish speakers, the “x” at the end is awkward to pronounce, leading to a lack of acceptance among those who prefer either “Latino” or “Latina,” vice versa with Chicanx. LGBTQ+ communities in Spanish-speaking countries prefer to use the term “Latiné” as the “e” at the end is in use with other non-gendered nouns.⁵ The term also fails to reflect the diverse histories, classes, regions, immigration experiences, languages, and politics across Latin America, flattening cultural differences.⁶ Still, I chose to use the term because it helps name a set of shared histories and social experiences that transpire across the diverse communities of Latin America. A broad and practical term is necessary to discuss overlapping experiences until scholars can develop a more progressive solution.

Another key term I use throughout the thesis is intersectionality. Based on the theory by Sumi Cho, Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, and Leslie McCall, intersectionality

³ Ferrer, *Latinx Photography in the United States*, ix-xi.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ “Hispanic, Latin@, Latinx or Latine?,” Cambio Center, accessed January 2026, <https://cambio.missouri.edu/about/hispanic-latin-latinx-or-latine/>.

⁶ Ibid.

refers to disproportionately impacted individuals with overlapping race/ethnicity, gender, class, sexuality, and nations; women and gays in communities of color are subject to more harm.⁷ The interconnectedness of social categories forms an overlapping and interdependent system of disadvantages fueled by discrimination. In an American society shaped by predominantly white and classist perspectives, it is essential to acknowledge differences and diversity as real challenges faced by individuals of underrepresented intersecting identities, often in the form of discrimination. Recognizing and appreciating the interconnected nature of these experiences is important for a fuller understanding of how queer Chicanx individuals are being affected by a variety of social factors. Intersectionality is especially valuable when it comes to exploring gender differences among various ethnic groups; it “connects to the problem of exclusion and marginalization of certain topics and voices from debates that should have been more inclusive and accessible to different minority concerns and interests.”⁸ By foregrounding the ways social identities cross, intersectionality provides a critical framework and term for understanding the complex and often compounded forms of marginalization experienced by queer Chicanx individuals.

Additionally, I use “visibility” throughout this thesis as a shorthand for “social visibility,” a concept that goes beyond surface-level visual perception. Visibility is the degree to which others recognize an individual or social group that is distinct from society based on their experiences of violence and exploitation being dismissed from

⁷ Cho, Williams Crenshaw, McCall, “Toward a Field of Intersectionality Studies,” 786.

⁸ Clark, “Intersectionality,” 477.

public view.⁹ The artists in these case studies use their works to increase the visibility of intersectional identities and experiences, a reality that cannot be avoided in this discussion.

Lastly, I use the term “inner-cultural control” to refer to the mechanisms by which the general community regulates and enforces its own social norms among its members. In this context, Chicanx and Latinx communities are oppressing individuals within their own culture through family expectations, religious teachings, gender roles, and other community standards. A queer Chicanx individual is of intersectionality, facing discrimination within their own community and broader society because they are pressured to conform to the expectations of gender, sexuality, and identity. This inner-cultural control serves as a force of power that impacts the narrative of the objects presented in this thesis.

Controlling Visibility in Latinx Spaces

There is a long lineage of tactics around controlling how people of color, specifically those in Chicanx and Latinx communities, represent their culture and identities. This lineage examines violence within their own communities and how control operates through subtler means to shape who occupies space, who has access, and what constitutes a danger or threat to society. For Chicanx and queer communities, visual culture emerges from within these constraints as artists negotiate their works between self-representation and self-protection. The processes of producing artworks and planning an exhibition then become practices seen as compliant under the gaze of the status quo.

⁹ Congdon, Crary, “Social Visibility,” 2.

Artists employ techniques such as embedding semiotics and engaging their works with their communities in response to ongoing exclusion and inner-cultural monitoring. The observation of bodies and movement extends to the artists in these communities and is reflected in the imagery of their works, orienting visual culture as both a site of vulnerability and a mode of resistance to the authoritative structures in place in California.

One of the main themes of works in *The Q-Sides* exhibitions is lowriding, a custom-car culture within Chicanx communities. To understand what lowriding is, I will provide a brief overview of its origins from the modern era. Henry Ford's assembly line revolutionized car production, making the U.S. a leader in the automobile industry.¹⁰ As production increased, consumers demanded lighter, faster cars.¹¹ Technological and cultural changes sparked innovation and public interest, leading to new ways of expressing identity through postwar cars. Owners of Ford Model Ts began customizing their cars for better performance by stripping them down. After WWII, a trend of buying older models emerged, with young adults engaging in two-car cultures: 'hot rodding'—speed enhancements through engine swaps—and lowriding, with cars cruising low to showcase designs.¹² The lowrider movement, rooted in Southern California, grew into a regional identity and spread beyond Southern California.

¹⁰ Campos, "Cruising The Borderlands," 25.

¹¹ Tatum, "The History and Evolution of Lowrider Culture," 2.

¹² Ibid.

Though the lowrider culture is often associated with Southern California cities such as Los Angeles, it has spread to other cities throughout the state, including San Jose and San Francisco. Lowriders in the Bay Area became more involved in social activism, such as joining anti-Vietnam War demonstrations, where police would harass participating activists.¹³ Activism within lowrider culture led to a decline in participation in the scene throughout the 1970s in this part of California. Clearly, this did not mean the end of lowriders in the Bay Area, as not all lowriders were politically active; those who stayed away focused on showcasing their ethnic pride using the art and design of their cars. Local authorities attempting to put a stop to the anti-war activism in the Bay Area is one example of the many encounters those in Latinx communities would face when colliding with law enforcement.

The public's increase in linking lowrider culture to criminality led to an intense policing of Chicanx public spaces. This policing became hard for queer Chicanx individuals as they began to face further exclusion from the public and within their own environments. Lowriding visual culture extends beyond tradition and functions as a site for negotiating notions of belonging and cultural legitimacy. In response, artists in *The Q-Sides* exhibition use muralism and photography to reclaim lowrider imagery, emphasizing queer and trans Chicanx presence in a culture that has often marginalized these groups. This thesis asks: how do queer Chicanx artists use lowrider visual culture to navigate existing as intersectional individuals and reclaim visibility, belonging, and self-representation in contemporary California?

¹³ Tatum, "The History and Evolution of Lowrider Culture," 17.

Cruising the Roadmap

This thesis answers the question above in the two chapters, examining how queer Chicana artists negotiate belonging under inner-cultural control through lowrider visual culture in *The Q-Sides* exhibition. The first chapter, “Up in Flames: Iconoclastic *Por Vida*,” focuses on Manuel Paul’s mural *Por Vida* in San Francisco’s Mission District. I begin with a formal analysis of the three panels of the mural to show how Paul transforms traditional Chicana imagery to represent queer intimacy, transgender visibility, and lesbian autonomy within a historically masculine cultural context. The chapter then goes into the mural’s presence on Instagram, revealing how comments and reactions demonstrate digital control of visibility, and uses Koritha Mitchell’s “know-your-place aggression” to interpret efforts to regulate queer visibility in the community. It also traces how these issues led to acts of vandalism and arson, framing the mural’s destruction within a broader history of policing the intersectional queer and Latina bodies in public spaces. The chapter concludes by considering the afterlife of *Por Vida* through photography and *The Q-Sides* exhibition, especially Fred Rowe’s photographic print and House of MORE!, exploring how queer Chicana artists utilize reproduction and performance to reclaim agency and preserve collective memory that confronts the erasure of queerness in Chicana spaces.

The second chapter, “Disidentifying the Lowrider: Portraits from *The Q-Sides*,” explores how *The Q-Sides* photographic series reimagines lowrider visual culture from a queer perspective. I take photography, portraiture, and performance into account in how the photographs aim to reclaim visibility for queer and trans Chicana and Latina subjects

within a traditionally heteronormative and masculine cultural context. I analyze two photographic prints from the twelve photographs in *The Q-Sides, Volume 10* and *Volume 3*, by artists Vero Majano, Brown Angel, and Kari Orvik, to demonstrate how José Esteban Muñoz's concept of disidentification embeds itself within the series. As with working on a lowrider, the artists rework the familiar visual language of *East Side Story* mixtape covers and modify imagery associated with heteronormative Chicana identity into symbols of queer belonging. Chapter Two also contextualizes the photographs within the broader histories of criminalizing lowriders and the policing of Chicana fashion. By looking at local queer and trans community members as documentary-style portraits, *The Q-Sides* broadens the visual archive of queer Chicana photography. This series of photographs uses the medium of photography as a tool for collective affirmation for individuals of these intersecting identities.

Together, these chapters demonstrate that queer Chicana visual culture does not merely respond to complexities of visibility but actively reshapes the conditions of visibility imposed upon it. Artists in *The Q-Sides* use various mediums such as muralism, photography, and drag to assert queer belonging in lowrider visuals. Their art demonstrates that visibility is never neutral and interlocks with issues within systems that continue to control bodies over race and gender. By exploring how queer Chicana artists address these challenges, this thesis contends that visual culture serves not only as a form of representation but also as a means of survival by self-representation in modern California.

UP IN FLAMES: ICONOCLASTIC *POR VIDA*

A Mural in the Mission District of San Francisco, June 2015

The vibrant street art scene in California between the 2010s and the 2020s unfolds in public spaces where visitors from all over can approach these artworks with little to obstruct the space in between the visitors and the work. Murals are central to the landscapes of Mexican American and Latinx communities, especially in *Por Vida* (FIGURE 2) in San Francisco's Mission District. The Mission District is the epicenter of the city's Latinx culture, with a neighborhood rich in murals and home to Latinx artists since the late 1960s, including organizations such as Galería de la Raza and the Mission Cultural Center.¹ The mural *Por Vida* by Manuel Paul of the Maricón Collective serves as the primary object of this chapter. Paul designs the mural as a triptych with three arched panels that frame a total of five figures. Each of the three panels are within spiky silver chains and red flowers, on an aged paper-colored background. This arrangement situates queer intimacy within a stylistic vocabulary long associated with Chicana muralism and barrio aesthetics. The mural offers an unapologetic portrayal of intersectional representation of queer and trans livelihood when representing imagery of same-sex couples embracing and a postoperative transgender man standing with visible surgical scars across his chest.² The exposure of this vibrant, immobile mural acts as a record and shapes the space of the Mission District with queer bodies in lowrider Chicana communities.

¹ Cordova, *The Heart of the Mission*, 8-9.

² Hernández, "The Iconoclasts of Queer Aztlán," 44.

In this chapter, I will examine the significance of this mural in the Mission District and why a perpetrator set it on fire in June of 2015. The mural arose in a working-class Chicanx neighborhood with a rich history of murals. Part of the culture shown in the murals has portrayed traditional values on heteronormativity of family and gender roles. By depicting queer and transgender Latinx bodies in a visual language dominated by lowrider and Chicanx barrio imagery, *Por Vida* has questioned who belongs in this cultural sphere and who can be publicly present. The message conveyed across the mural defies the visual expectations of public artworks, raising questions about perception and patriarchal upbringings.

Visual Cues of *Por Vida*

Beginning from left to right, the first part of this mural depicts two Latino men embodying cholos. The cholos are shown in the visual appearance of both men, mostly by the man in the front's white with a yellow-ish tinge undershirt, and with brushed-back hair.³ The man from behind appears topless with no sign of his shirt's sleeve as he engages in a tender embrace that turns away from the "unbashed hardness" of the homeboy aesthetic, holding his lover from behind and nestling his lips on the back of his lover's shoulders as his black mustache brushes against the strap of the off-white ribbed tank top.⁴ The man in the tank top conveys a calm, comfortable expression through his shut eyelids and at-ease eyebrows as he faces downward in a three-quarter profile. These

³ Rodriguez, "Queering the Homeboy Aesthetic," 127-128. Rodríguez mentions Mexican cultural critic José Manuel Valenzuela's *¡A la brava, ése!* (1988) as he examines the rise of the cholo identity on both sides of the U.S. - Mexico border, situating them in a broader sociocultural context to explain how the imagery spread and became a stigma, carrying a variety of meanings.

⁴ Ibid.

men are set against a light blue background, alluding to the gay pride flag's pointed lines, as if they were emitting light. The cholos reflect scholar Richard T. Rodríguez's concept of the "homeboy aesthetic." Viewers can identify this concept by combining visual cues on a man's body, such as baggy pants and undershirts, hair or lack thereof, a bold stance, and distinct language, as part of a distinguishable Los Angeles street culture.⁵ Like Rodríguez's understanding of artworks that show characteristics of this concept, this first part of the mural reads as a contest to dominant power structures in visual modes of understanding. The artist's choice in representing two cholos speaks openly about homosexuality in Latinx homeboy culture, flipping comfortable beliefs of masculinity to display that traditional visuals of patriarchy are not automatic indicators of someone's sexual identity.

In the middle of the mural, a singular transgender Latinx man is visible from the torso up. This man is explicitly transgender, as shown through the top surgery scars on his chest, as one would have after a gender-affirming, breast-removal surgery.⁶ A community forum at City College of San Francisco held a panel to guide the conversation, offering insightful perspectives on the haunting of queer placemaking.⁷ One of the panelists, Luciano Sagastume, speaks on how transphobia and antiblackness hinder

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Gender-affirming care involves a range of interventions made to support and validate an individual's gender identity, whether it differs from the sex assigned at birth.

⁷ Carrillo, Vicente. "The Riddle," 699.

community-building efforts towards intersectional identities when reflecting on their first encounter with the mural in a video by Galería de la Raza⁸:

“I noted this man in the middle who has these thorns going across his chest. Really in the same place as my own scars where I have had [top] surgery. And I told one of my friends, isn’t that amazing how that could be a trans man up there. The thorns are just in the right place. And my friend was like, Luciano, that is a trans man up there. That is you. You are being depicted there. And it was this moment where I had this huge realization that I’ve never seen myself up on a poster.” (*Galería de la Raza Community Forum*)⁹

The panelist describes the moment when he suddenly sees himself in the mural. The thorns across the central figure’s chest draw his eyes because of how they line up with his own top surgery scars. Seeming like a passing thought, Sagastume wonders if the figure could be a trans man but second-guesses himself. His hesitation underscores how rare it is to encounter trans bodies in public artworks. Once his friend tells him the figure represents trans bodies like him, Sagastume’s understanding of the work shifts. He realizes that for the first time, a public artwork recognizes a body that represents his can exist in these spaces. This moment demonstrates what it feels like to finally see this representation, changing how someone on the margins can understand their place in a community that may help them feel they belong.

In the center panel of the mural, the top surgery scars blend in with the yellow, pink, red, and blue flora around him because of their similarity in shape to the thorns of the flowers, as well as the chains unraveling or even breaking before him. He looks heroically upwards, displaying strength and vitality, with the furrow of his brows, the

⁸ Interview conducted by unnamed contributor from *El Tecolote*.

⁹ Ibid.

neutral position of his lips, and the slicked-back black hair, to ensure his face is fully visible. The display of confidence in his strength complements the soft yellow background and the black, pointy lines emanating from around his head, giving this figure a saintly appearance with a halo. Beneath him, a paper with cursive Spanish text reading “Por Vida,” translating to “For Life,” is also the mural's title, reflecting a lifetime commitment to identity and a sense of pride in it.

The right panel of this mural tells another story of Latinx identities within the LGBTQ+ community. Depicting an intimate act of love between a woman-loving-women couple in the mural creates visibility for Chicana lesbians who have historically faced erasure and the dangers of stigma within the Chicano Movement and mainstream feminist movements. The right panel of this mural portrays a woman-loving-women couple, from the chest up, both in side profile, facing each other. Both women are topless; however, the woman to the left has her chest exposed, but the artist censors her nipples by blurring the bottom of her chest. Her long, voluminous black hair falls below her shoulders when she tilts her head upward to make eye contact with her lover. She gently caresses her lover's jaw, guiding it downwards so that their eyes meet and red wine lips align for a possible kiss. Her lover appears to be pleased by this gesture as the corner of her smile lifts against the pink blush on her cheek. The lover's long, black, curled hair cascades down to obscure her own shoulders, meeting the red flower at the corner of the window. This scene unfolds against a rosy pink background, alluding to the main colors of the lesbian flag.

This panel challenges the anti-familia discourse prevalent in the 1980s and 1990s, undergirding representations of women who identified as lesbian. The term anti-familia means to be against family structure and beliefs in Chicana culture.¹⁰ As a result of the image projected by this discourse, Chicana communities would view lesbian Chicana as threats to the familiar structure and culture of family. Chicana feminists often faced attacks that used the word “lesbian” as an insult to what they were fighting for. Along with the word “lesbian,” critics within their own Chicana communities would use hurtful names such as “agringadas, Malinches, and FBI spies” towards these feminists to express that they were anti-familia. Chicana feminists became subjects to harassment even outside of their own communities. Organizations such as NOW, the National Organization for Women, threw out lesbians.¹¹ The mural portraying this panel sends a message that reclaims queer love as part of familial belonging by challenging anti-familial rhetoric through two Chicana women in a tender state, showing affection for one another.

That message is not the only one the mural sends, but it recalls the known experiences of lesbian Chicanas during the late twentieth century. Anyone who chose to defy the expectations of the patriarchy and reject familia would be considered a lesbian. This stereotype came to broadly project ideas about heteronormative relationships and even police the way many feminist Chicanas distance themselves from the feminist label and their lesbian colleagues in fear that others could accuse them of abandoning their

¹⁰ Gaspar de Alba, “[Un]Framing the ‘Bad Woman,’” 74-75.

¹¹ Ibid.

culture.¹² There were a few publications that addressed the Chicanx and Latinx lesbian experiences during the late 1980s and early 1990s that exposed how women grew afraid of violence from family members, harassment at work, and legal consequences in places that criminalize same-sex relationships.¹³ By showing this act of love between two Chicanx women, I interpret this panel as a way for the mural to reclaim dignity for Chicana lesbians and their contributions to feminism and the Chicano Movement.

Where family and heteronormative roles are often core to Latinx women's identities, *Por Vida* challenges the longstanding tensions between lesbian identity and traditional notions of familial love or La Sagrada Familia. La Sagrada Familia refers to the icons of the Holy Family of Mother Mary and Joseph with Baby Jesus. Lesbian identity disrupts the idea that women must define and fulfill themselves through relationships with men, a patriarchal concept in Latinx and Chicanx households.¹⁴ When lesbians refuse to propagate the race or raise a child with a man, Chicanx and Latinx, who follow the projected institution status quo on heteronormativity, typically see this as a failure to their calling as “good Catholic women.”¹⁵ The lack of progeny for Chicana lesbians has given them the insulting name of malflora or “ugly flower,” further empowering the use of floral ornaments by Paul in *Por Vida*.¹⁶

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Hernandez, “Epistemologies of Love and Desire,” 383-4.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Hernández, “Viral Delay/Viral Display,” 173.

Following this, the mural counters this stereotype by making a visual statement that affirms that the Chicanx lesbian does not need a romantic relationship with a man, demonstrating that women can form meaningful relationships with one another and inhabit autonomous lives. The claiming of autonomy disrupts the traditional framework of familial love or *la Sagrada Familia*. Moraga describes the Chicana lesbian as claiming “the most visible manifestation of a woman taking control of her own sexual identity and destiny.”¹⁷ Paul’s portrayal of the intimacy in a woman-loving-women relationship, along with surrounding floral motifs, transforms the idea of the “ugly flower” into a visually affirming symbol of Chicanx lesbian autonomy, intimacy, and belonging within a Chicanx cultural space.

Since a rainbow of colors is central to the pride flag, the mural's colors play a prominent symbolic role in each panel. Blue, yellow, and pink are more than just background color choices because they signify more to the LGBTQ+ community. Not only do the three colors hint at the pansexual pride flag’s colors, but they also signal cyan, magenta, and yellow (CMY or CMYK) as the primary printing colors. These are the main printing colors, likely used for the vinyl mural of *Por Vida*, which can produce a full rainbow of hues. The creation of this colorful spectrum with these primary colors relates to the symbolism of the Pride flag and its inclusivity of other flags within niche corners of the LGBTQ+ community, each with its own colors. This subtle display of the rainbow in subtracted colors allows individuals to relate to feelings of comfort and

¹⁷ Hernandez, “Epistemologies of Love and Desire,” 383-4.

accomplishment, attracting them to certain areas of their cities that embody these displays, helping them feel good about themselves.¹⁸

This mural depicts visibility for gay, trans, and lesbian individuals through its three panels and the aged brown background. Although this may seem positive at first glance, it becomes complicated when considering those with opposing views towards the LGBTQ+, in this case, the Latinx and Chicanx individuals who identify as such. Paul chose to make the mural's background color match the paper's color as it ages, giving it an effect of aging or longevity. This choice in color suggests that queer modes of living are not new ideas and have been around for quite a while, contrary to the belief of some locals in the Mission District.

Some locals of this neighborhood see the acceptance of queerness as unfamiliar, aiming to push it out of the Mission District and relocate to other parts of San Francisco that are more accepting of queer visibility but have fewer Latinx residents such as the Castro District. Although the Castro District maintains a reputation as San Francisco's primary queer hub, this neighborhood, consisting of predominantly white, upper-middle-class, gay men, contains a history of excluding individuals who are either LGBTQ+ of color, of lower socioeconomic status, or transgender women.¹⁹ The neighborhood being a suggestion for queer Chicanx and Latinx to relocate to reinforces the idea that queerness belongs elsewhere instead of within the cultural space of the Mission District.

¹⁸ Wolowic, Heston, Saewyc, Porta, and Eisenberg, "Chasing the Rainbow," 558.

¹⁹ Blackmore, "Your Church, My Bar!," 106.

The remarks of these locals set the Castro District and the Mission District as places that regulate queer and racial visibility. By using familiar barrio visual cues such as lowrider aesthetics, religious symbolism, and mural traditions, Paul reworks them to center queer and trans bodies in a high-traffic space. This perspective also reveals a belief that only certain bodies can claim authority over barrio imagery, and that placing queer bodies signals gentrification of the Mission District. Users watch, judge, and attempt to regulate both the artwork and the gallery, allowing or not allowing the visible representation of queer Chicanx figures in these spaces.

Cultural Belonging in the Age of Gentrification

Commenters on the social media app Instagram began to actively police who and what represents the Mission District and belongs there. These users comment on posts about the mural and on what it means for it to exist in the Mission District. Their comments disengage from the mural's imagery or political intent and instead focus on the territorial lines of San Francisco neighborhoods, enforcing spatial and cultural boundaries that designate areas for tolerating queerness. Taken together, the comments towards the mural illustrate Koritha Mitchell's concept of "know-your-place aggression," in which successful moments of visibility and inclusivity for intersectional groups provoke more backlash than acceptance.²⁰ A closer look at the mural reveals what prompts these commenters to engage in conversation online and in person, through captions, hashtags, and comments, about their own thoughts on lowrider identity and how the community relates to the mural.

²⁰ Mitchell, "Identifying White Mediocrity and Know-Your-Place Aggression," 253.

The mural's story involves people engaging with it by posting photos or commenting on posts. Those who posted and commented on the mural became agents in actively sharing and shaping the work's meaning with a wide audience beyond the Mission District's local community. Before the mural was installed on Bryant Street at 24th Street by the gallery for Pride month in 2015, *Por Vida* first came to life on Galería de la Raza's Instagram post of a photo of the mural, sparking a mix of emotions within the Latinx community that show forms of policing the artwork through digital platforms but also the intersecting racial and sexual aspects of the bodies in it.²¹ The reproduction of this mural as an accessible photograph relates to Roland Barthes's concept of layers of meaning against "natural documentation" that will be further explored later in the chapter. Instead of limiting the mural's message to the wall, viewers and the media take photos and share *Por Vida* with people far beyond the Mission District. Smartphones allow almost anyone to take and upload photos, making it so that many people can express how they see and connect with the mural, no matter where they stand in social status.²²

Some commenters stage this mural as cultural harm towards the Chicanx and Latinx communities of the neighborhood. The Mission District in the 1990s became a target for tech companies and new residents seeking affordability and cultural status. The "gritty mix of Latino families, free-spirited artists and cause-oriented nonprofits" was not

²¹ Khaled Sayed, "'Por Vida' Mural Vandalism Is Only Latest Attack on Latino LGBT Community," Bay News Rising, September 7, 2015, <https://baynewsrising.org/2015/08/13/por-vida-mural-vandalism-is-only-latest-attack/>.

²² Ferrer, *Latinx Photography in the United States*, 198.

the only appeal for employees of these companies but also borrowing artist identities to occupy the living spaces of moving into this part of San Francisco.²³ They criticize the gallery's support for this mural, claiming that it "sexualizes a culture" by appropriating the lowrider aesthetic. These viewers believe that the gallery is contributing to the gentrification of the Mission District by allowing someone from Southern California to create it instead of a local resident. The residents of the district are all too familiar with the displacing and profiteering that draw from the Mission's cultural identity.

Conversations about the mural reflect a historical anxiety, which is where "know-your-place aggression" sharpens an analysis of the mural's placement within an ongoing pattern of cultural appropriation and displacement. While commenters turn to anti-gentrification as their reason for opposing the mural while defending the district, they also target the presence of queer Chicanx identities.²⁴ For example, the mural places queer cholas into the light, directly challenging the belief that barrio culture is always heterosexual. The presence of a single mural can challenge these beliefs, leading some viewers to treat it as a threat to their very way of life. These conversations imply that the queer bodies of the mural are intruding on the space despite the long presence of queer people within Chicanx communities. The narrative recasts queer individuals as outsiders and agitators by comparing them to straight men who objectify women, isolating them from the rest of the Latinx community in the district despite being a part of it through intersectional means. These anti-queer comments in the thread mirror attempts to monitor

²³ Cordova, "The Heart of the Mission," 9.

²⁴ Carrillo, "The Politics of Space and Place," 4.

queer visibility, questioning its legitimacy and pushing it away from the public space.

Mitchell's framework is clear in this case: this marginalized group is facing backlash not for failing, but for asserting themselves in a place they belong. The mural is claiming space for queer Chicanx people in the Mission District rather than confining them elsewhere in San Francisco.

Communities Respond

The tension in these responses draws on those who oppose and those who agree with them. Though some comments criticized the gallery and artists for causing cultural harm in the Instagram post, many queer, trans, and allies of the Latinx community saw the mural in a positive light, especially in the Mission District and beyond. The blend of comments reflects the “know-your-place” success of the mural's ability to make tensions visible of this marginalized group, as commenters praised Manuel Paul and *Por Vida* for highlighting the presence of queer people within Chicanx imagery and aesthetics. The act of supportive commenters coming forward in support draws lines around who counts as part of that culture, raising further awareness of these groups' existence. When they describe queer representation as appropriation or harm, it transforms into a foreign threat to the barrio. Even when queer people come directly from within lowrider spaces, this form of claiming space is made to protect their community, thus excluding by turning concerns into a way to regulate queerness.

At the same time, these conflicting reactions reflect broader tensions within some Latinx communities, where traditional heteronormative values can shape how the public perceives gender and sexuality. For example, in some Latinx households, especially those

that turn to more traditional heteronormative views, people may turn away from open conversations on gender and sexuality. These beliefs lead household members to view the public piece as bold to both those who support its message and oppose it. The mural's strong impact is evident in the comments of those who saw themselves represented in it. Responses, such as one from a commenter, show that the mural allows queer and trans Chicanx and Latinx viewers to see themselves and assert their own presence. In contrast, others attempt to limit where they can and exist and appear within the visual landscape of the Mission District and possibly more heavily Latinx neighborhoods throughout California:

“is this a transboy vato? Im literally crying. Never seen a mural like this. Its fucking beautiful. Thank you. People are ugly with their hate. Support the arts, support love, support creation in all its forms.”²⁵

This comment shows the surprise and intense emotion when seeing a trans person represented in the mural. The commenter is in disbelief, not expecting to see a trans Chicanx figure in a public artwork. Given the context that murals shape how communities view themselves in public spaces, the commenter notices that the mural breaks away from straight, gender-binary figures. The commenter also connects trans identity with Chicanx cultural language when coining the term “transboy vato” when placing it in a visual tradition. The last sentence that supports art frames the mural as an act of care and resistance, not merely as an image, but also as actively creating space for queer and trans Chicanx individuals to be seen and known in the public eye. Viewers who see themselves in this work push back the know-your-place aggression that is constantly

²⁵ Online comment from Instagram, user kept anonymous, accessed 2025.

pushing queerness out of the Mission District and into spaces where it feels less disruptive. The range or responsiveness, whether hostile or supportive, articulates the mural's effectiveness despite the limiting factors of moral panic; it succeeds by compelling recognition.

Art historian Gilda Posada explains the impact of placing artworks in high-traffic areas by using Dylan Miner's concept of "lowriding through Aztlán."²⁶ Posada contends that *Por Vida* applies a decolonizing practice that transcends the boundaries of a Chicano identity and into a more inclusive "Xicanx" framework that recognizes queer and trans people.²⁷ This decolonizing practice destabilizes the commenters who express hostility drawn from heteropatriarchal ideas around masculinity that straight cisgender Chicano men frequently use towards the mural. These Chicano men use their heteropatriarchal ideas to police who and what belongs in their culture.²⁸ As a style, lowriding is often read as hypermasculine yet shows a way of moving through space to reclaim land and identity outside colonial and nationalist constraints. The mural makes queer bodies visible within lowrider imagery, reworking visual cues from within. The reworking of the visual cues shows that they have always held more complexity than dominant narratives allow in these spaces.

The debate over Instagram reveals an ongoing struggle over who defines Chicano identity and whose bodies can openly appear within the public spaces of the Mission

²⁶ Carrillo, Vicente. "The Riddle," 697.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

District. The vandalism shows know-your-place aggression as it manifests in various ways, in this case, graffiti and arson, but ranges from microaggressions and can escalate to assault or murder. The underlying message remains consistent: some individuals of intersectionality are undeserving of belonging. They should feel fortunate if the community tolerates them but should never assume that respectful treatment is a right to belong.²⁹ In this case know-your-place aggression works as a spatial policing and forces boundaries around who is visible, legitimate, and allowed to claim cultural space. The debate over the mural did not remain solely on the digital platform for long; conflicts soon left the screen and came to the physical realm of the Mission District at the start of the mural's material life. As debates over queer belonging in Chicanx and Latinx spaces heated up online, the *Por Vida* mural became a site of vandalism.

Lifetime of *Por Vida* in A Physical Space

The mural was vandalized multiple times throughout June. Galería de la Raza installed the physical vinyl mural along the outside gallery walls in June 2015, and it was meant to be on display for about a month.³⁰ The same month and year, the U.S. Supreme Court legalized same-sex marriage, leading to an increase in rainbow flag appearances across the country, including on government buildings and landmarks.³¹ This mural

²⁹ Mitchell, "Identifying White Mediocrity and Know-Your-Place Aggression," 258.

³⁰ Khaled Sayed, "'Por Vida' Mural Vandalism Is Only Latest Attack on Latino LGBT Community," Bay News Rising, September 7, 2015, <https://baynewsrising.org/2015/08/13/por-vida-mural-vandalism-is-only-latest-attack/>.

³¹ Wolowic, Heston, Saewyc, Porta, and Eisenberg, "Chasing the Rainbow," 558.

served as a powerful acknowledgment of queer bodies in the Chicanx and Latinx communities in the Mission District.

The first incident occurred on June 16, three days after being put up, when the vandals used blue and red spray paint and threats of assault against the artist Manuel Paul (FIGURE 3).³² Although the original reason for choosing these colors remains unclear, they can be interpreted as blue for males and red or pink for females, aligning closely with the binary. The second incident involving spray paint follows two days later, on June 18th. The third time, on the morning of June 21st, when gallery attendees saw the black spray paint streaking across the faces of the figures on the mural and the words “Por Vida” (FIGURE 4). The defacing of the mural prompted the gallery staff to find ways to deter further attacks. The gallery’s solution was to reprint it on vinyl to lessen the impact of the vandalism, making it easier to wash off the spray paint. The gallery’s goal to reprint the vinyl was no easy feat, as they had to raise \$3,000 to do so.³³ Galería de la Raza resurrected the mural on a new vinyl and reinstalled it along the outside of the building.³⁴ The gallery staff held a strong belief that this would be an effective way to fight the spray paint, but neither the gallery nor the artist imagined that it would prompt vandals to escalate the level of violence on the mural.

³² Khaled Sayed, “‘Por Vida’ Mural Vandalism Is Only Latest Attack on Latino LGBT Community,” Bay News Rising, September 7, 2015, <https://baynewsrising.org/2015/08/13/por-vida-mural-vandalism-is-only-latest-attack/>.

³³ Jessica Placzek, “Mission Residents Unite over Defaced LGBTQ Mural,” KQED, July 2, 2015, <https://www.kqed.org/arts/10813798/mission-residents-unite-over-defaced-lgbtq-mural>.

³⁴ I use Figure 2 as the original image; it is the reprint of the mural. I chose this figure as the first image because it is identical to the original.

This time, the defacing of *Por Vida* became far more severe than the spray paint, as it was set on fire on the night of June 29th, marking the fourth physical attack on the mural (FIGURE 5).³⁵ Officials saw the damage to the mural as a crime scene, encasing it in yellow police tape and closing it off to the public. The authorities classified this crime as arson after finding that the vandal used lighter fluid to set the mural on fire. A surveillance camera at the gallery captured the lone arson.³⁶

The act of torching the mural would not only have burned it down but could also have brought down the building itself and the six apartments within it. One can imagine that the vandal did not have the residents' or the community's safety in mind when setting the vinyl on fire. A third of the vinyl mural melted and charred into the wall, specifically the left side, with the figures of cholo men embracing within a chained halo on a blue backdrop. This mural endured many shifts in medium and setting through these hate crimes, reflecting that this object was not only the artist's response to the Supreme Court's ruling on the legalization of gay marriage but also symbolizes an ongoing dialogue within San Francisco's Mission District.

The Iconoclasm

The iconoclasm adds another layer of meaning to *Por Vida*, as acts of damage acknowledge how inner-cultural control operates within barrio public space while contributing to the "know-your-place" framework. Queer visual artists understand that

³⁵ Kilian Meloy, "Gay Mural Arson Shocks Artist," The Bay Area Reporter, August 1, 2015, <https://www.ebar.com/story/11966>.

³⁶ Ibid. The suspect is described as a six-foot-tall man weighing around 190 pounds, wearing a black hooded sweater with white stripes on the shoulders, black pants, and contrasting white tennis shoes and gloves, pouring lighter fluid and setting it on fire for around a minute and a half.

murals cannot exist outside social scrutiny, as neighbors, institutions, and critics uphold the status quo of their contexts because they are in public spaces. Robb Hernández argues, “with their intimate knowledge of iconoclasm and its ramifications, queer visual artists confront the limits of barrio publics, test the cutting edge of queer ethnic visibility, and challenge an oppressive regime of heterosexual sight—often with explosive ends.”³⁷ The act of vandalism by a local does not simply diminish the mural’s impact but becomes part of its meaning-making process. The violent act of erasure exposes the power structures it challenges. The violence, whether hostile comments or physical vandalism, works to mark who belongs and does not in these spaces, reminding marginalized individuals to remember their “proper” place.³⁸ The direct encounter with explosives on the mural is resentful and punitive rather than celebratory, making *Por Vida* a space to disrupt power relations in the barrio.

The context of the iconoclasm with *Por Vida* does more than destroy the mural; it deepens the piece by revealing the cavernous dialogue about the systems of observing, regulating, and disciplining queer visibility in both internal and external public spaces. The public space in the Mission District that *Por Vida* inhabits transforms into a site that contests traditional beliefs through imagery. Hernández turns to Chicanx artworks with techniques that embrace destruction by stating that art has a “function as a revolutionary weapon” through the use of Chicanx political imagery.³⁹ The act of embracing

³⁷ Hernández, “The Iconoclasts of Queer Aztlán”, 44-46.

³⁸ Mitchell, “Identifying White Mediocrity and Know-Your-Place Aggression,” 257.

³⁹ Ibid.

destruction only partly explains the appeal of practicing innovative techniques. Some reactions to the mural's imagery show how public spectatorship controls sexuality and gender in the barrio, especially when viewers vandalize by spray painting or burning to censor queer visuals in the dominantly Latinx neighborhood. Thus, queer imagery interrupts what critics describe as the “unifying dictates of nation and family prescribed under a Chicana art liberationist ideology.”⁴⁰ By depicting queer bodies and relationships, the mural encourages viewers to examine their own beliefs within a heterosexual framework that many public murals often reinforce in their households and communities.

The mural's display at Galería de la Raza was temporary, only to celebrate a win for the LGBTQ+ community in June and July. This attack left the staff torn about whether to keep displaying the vinyl mural, given the safety of the residents just above the gallery.⁴¹ Some residents stated that they felt unsafe after the attack, thinking that the attacks would only worsen with each attempt to keep the mural visible on their walls.⁴² The cost of not wanting to be invisible meant risking the gallery and its nearby neighbors. Galería de la Raza strategized to host a town hall to hear the arguments rooted in anti-gentrification and anti-queer sentiments around the mural, placing queers of color as

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ KTVU FOX 2, “Mission District LGBT Mural Vandalized for the Fourth Time,” KTVU FOX 2 San Francisco, June 30, 2015, <https://www.ktvu.com/news/mission-district-lgbt-mural-vandalized-for-the-fourth-time>.

⁴² Ibid.

threats to heteronormative values for Latinx.⁴³ Even if it wasn't a perfect solution, the town hall intended to create conversations to address the concerns of both those supporting and opposing the mural's visibility.

The vandalism and arson of June 2015 left the residents near the gallery rattled for their safety and that of their homes. Someone, or perhaps a group of people, paid close attention to the mural by focusing on the progress of its restoration. Although not in its complete state, Galería de la Raza placed the burned mural inside Studio 16. In 2025, the facility was under construction and was accessible by appointment or during limited hours due to staffing shortages in June 2025. Following an interview with DJ Brown Angel, one of the artists involved in *The Q-Sides* exhibition, they reveal that the suspects involved in the vandalism are identifiable through word-of-mouth within the neighborhood.⁴⁴ DJ Brown Angel, the gallery staff, and participating artists of *The Q-Sides* who experienced the vandalism incidents came to a consensus on how to approach the vandals. They decided not to escalate the situation by not revealing the identities of the perpetrators.⁴⁵ The artists and gallery staff agreed to prioritize the safety of the surrounding community, exhibition artists, and the gallery itself since exposing these individuals would lead to further turmoil for members of the Mission District.

This artwork is a public intervention in the form of a mural that confronts how Chicana identity and belonging are seen and bound in the Mission District. The mural

⁴³ Carrillo, Vicente. "The Riddle," 697.

⁴⁴ Lepe, *Interview with DJ Brown Angel*.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

also turns visibility itself into a site of struggle because it is in a high traffic space, making it vulnerable to how the public interprets and judges it, both by online users and local residents. Paul's *Por Vida* is effective because it disrupts expectations of who belongs in the barrio and what imagery should represent. Even with censorship and physical destruction, the mural continues to produce significance. This public artwork shows that the mural can still do political work even when damaged, and the conflict generated becomes part of the meaning.

A Mural Reborn Through Print

. When walking through Galería de la Raza's space in 2025, for *The Q-Sides: 10th Year Anniversary* exhibition, the charred mural is noticeably absent, however the gallery visitor comes across a 2023 gicleé print on gatorboard by Fred Rowe and House of MORE! In the 40-by-70-inch giclee print of *House of MORE!* four individuals in drag—Princess Panocha, Dulce De Leche, Juanita MORE!, and Voodana—ground themselves in the foreground before Manuel Paul's mural *Por Vida*. The large-scale print on gator board stages the subjects along the mural, containing figures haloed by chains and rays of light. The subjects, all in black evening dresses, form a frontal, unwavering composition. When wearing the black gowns, a sense of uniformity is brought onto the subjects, almost like armor on their bodies. The four individuals evenly spread themselves across the foreground of the industrial concrete interior. Their poses set an assertive tone: facing forward, standing upright, and placing their hands on their hips. They position their heads to direct their gaze into the lens in order to meet the viewer's eyes after taking the snapshot. This direct eye contact conveys a sense of confidence and deliberateness. By

standing in front of the mural, they block the audience's view of the object. This act protects the mural from the viewer's ability to monitor and gaze upon both the performers' identities and the mural behind them. In contrast to the early-twentieth-century policing and spectacle of "pansy" performers, Rowe and MORE!'s staging of the image reframes the relationship among subject, mural, and viewer, allowing Chicana queer performers to become agents of their identities and to interrupt the controlling gaze upon queer bodies of color and their artworks.⁴⁶

The mural continued to exist in a new medium: photography. This print depicts individuals in drag posing before Manuel Paul's *Por Vida* digital mural and further interrogates the right for visibility that accompanied its 2015 launch (FIGURE 6). The photograph foregrounds queer Chicana life by using the public artwork to resist the neighborhood's policing of bodies. The analysis of the photograph requires an additional framework by Roland Barthes: his idea that images produce layers of meaning and blur the boundaries between "natural" documentation and the rhetorical constructs embedded in this print.⁴⁷ For this print, I observe the exchange of visual strategies and site-specific intermediating that MORE! and Manuel Paul make to ensure visibility of queer Chicana existence resists a disciplining gaze from inner cultural control of representation. These artists and their works reimagine the mural as a form that embodies the testimonies and collective self-determination of LGBTQ+ Chicana existence as seen in this photograph.

⁴⁶ Gonzales-Day, "Photography and the Queer Imaginary," 82. "Pansy" or drag performers popularized gay nightlife in Los Angeles, New York, and San Francisco during the Pansy Craze of the mid-1920s to the early 1930s. After Prohibition, Los Angeles officials cracked down on these spaces, and in 1937 Mayor Frank Shaw created the Sex Bureau to target queer communities, fueling a citywide "gay panic."

⁴⁷ Barthes, "Rhetoric of the Image," 46.

The revival of the mural through the photographic print invites the viewer to understand the photograph's layers. Though the photograph shows bodies posing together, they are standing before the mural through the means of reproducibility. The camera captures people in drag posing in front of *Por Vida*. The photographer then reproduces the photograph as a print for viewers to encounter in a gallery or public setting. Barthes's concept of photographs containing layers of meaning works by obscuring the lines between what the photographic print is and what it is not: documentary and creative practice.⁴⁸ The print records a community while also staging and idealizing the individuals that represent it, challenging what queer Chicanx individuals in lowrider spaces may look like. Rowe and MORE!'s photograph stages its figures as symbolic stand-ins, presenting them as self-aware participants in their own representation of identity.

The practice of photography has made queer and Chicanx lives more visible and known to the public eye. Photos have not only served a crucial role in documenting Latinx subjects but also in shaping the way viewers perceive queer individuals.⁴⁹ Official historical narratives often exclude the narratives within queer and Latinx photographs, yet preserve some of the lives and communities that did and still exist. Photography's role in recording bodies engaging with spaces constructs visibility for the memory of those who identify as queer among Latinx people. In making these identities more known, it operates in both documentary and creative registers as a medium. Rowe and MORE!'s

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Linkof and Martineau, "Queer Lens: An Introduction," 2.

photograph navigates the complex political stakes of providing agency as a contemporary queer Chicanx object in San Francisco.

Drawing on Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, the print *House of MORE!* explores the various ways in which queer Chicanx/Latinx photography and murals intersect histories. The photograph can act as both a personal and collective document through theory and visual analysis. Visual codes in this photograph intertwine with Anzaldúa's theory of what the borderlands entail in the queer Chicanx community. Anzaldúa describes the concept of borderlands as a liminal space, "inhabited by all of those who cross over the confines of the normal (atravezados/as)" or one who occupies both sides of a boundary.⁵⁰ The *atravezados/as* can understand one another because they know what it is like to be in both spaces, yet not fully belong to or confine to either side. The theory around the overlapping experience builds community among those who reside on its margins and aligns with intersectionality.

Consciousness Across Multimedia

Queer Chicanx artists from the twentieth century are subject to invisibility because they do not fit the mold that institutions use to perceive objects and artworks. The years of neglect unravel a deeper visual understanding of contexts within *House of MORE!* Institutions previously ignored queer, ethnic, and feminist accounts, which provoked artists in these communities to develop other ways to preserve their histories through personal photographs and documentation.⁵¹ Photographs like *House of MORE!*

⁵⁰ Medina referencing Anzaldúa in "Complex Communication and Decolonial Struggles," 21.

⁵¹ Hernández, "Introduction," 4.

serve as living proof for the community by documenting queer Latinx presence in Galería de la Raza's Studio 16, outside large institutional settings.

The visibility of Latinx drag queens, and their collective stance, aim to protect the mural's narrative, ensuring it is part of the resistance to the disappearance of works by and of queer artists of color. For example, Latinx literary and visual culture scholar Robb Hernández sheds light on how queer Chicanx and Latinx works became lost to the archives during the height of the AIDS crisis in the 1980s.⁵² The histories of these artists and their works were either broken apart or lost because of said neglect. Seemingly trivial on the surface, the photograph preserves the histories of these subjects by presenting a group of identifiable individuals who can acknowledge the viewer's gaze; it also preserves a moment of queer Latinx life by asserting that these identities are deserving of recognition and remembrance like their lost predecessors. This understanding shows that *House of MORE!* works not only as an artwork but also as a live document circulating within the local community and in the places where its reproductions land after its disregard by traditional institutions.

In order to further understand the mural's presence in *House of MORE!*, I will provide a short overview of how Chicanx and Latinx artists used photography as a powerful medium to document cultural identity as a form of political resistance to promote the visibility of communities in the margins. Chicanx and Latinx artists build on the political legacy of the Chicano Movement of the late 1960s. The First National Chicano Liberation Youth Conference in Denver, 1969, brought on The Plan Espiritual

⁵² Ibid.

de Aztlán to call on communities to reclaim land, culture, and self-determination, which artists and photographers then transform images to reflect a collective strength.⁵³

Building on this ideology, queer Chicana feminist Cherría Moraga envisions Queer Aztlán.⁵⁴ The symbolic homeland that represents a liminal space for queer Chicana individuals serving as “a Chicano homeland that . . . embrace[s] *all* its people, including its *jotería*.”⁵⁵ In *House of MORE!*, the subjects use the mural as a platform to perform and experiment on provocative topics that stake the queer Chicana identity across both urban and sociopolitical spheres.

Queer individuals use vernacular photography to document intimacy and construct their own forms of representing themselves in secrecy despite facing threats of losing employment, institutionalization, or imprisonment.⁵⁶ The broader history of resistance in both Chicana and queer photography amplifies the subjects' control of the gaze in *House of MORE!*. The subjects control the narrative by confidently looking into the camera's lens. The viewer's understanding of the scene is in command of the

⁵³ Ferrer, *Latinx Photography in the United States*, 134.

⁵⁴ Vicente Carrillo, “The Riddle: Queer Brown Intimacies and, in the Gentrifying Barrio” in *Latino Studies* (London) 22, no. 4 (2024): 681–704. Carrillo defines Aztlán as a term that describes an imagined Chicano homeland covering the Southwestern United States, specifically the areas ceded by Mexico in the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo of 1848. Popularized during the 1960s and 1970s by Chicano activists, it served as a unifying political symbol. Recently, Indigenous scholars have critiqued Aztlán, highlighting how it reflects settler colonial logic that overlooks the presence of Indigenous communities prior to 1848. There are limits to this framework as Aztlán is specific to Nahuas. I am also referencing this framework because of what the concept stands for in relation to Anzaldúa rather than the name of it. Essentially, Aztlán aims to create a homeland for Chicanos while neglecting the fact that Indigenous peoples already inhabited these territories.

⁵⁵ Robb Hernández. *Archiving an Epidemic : Art, AIDS, and the Queer Chicana Avant-Garde*. New York University Press, 2019, 139. Michael Hames-García observes that the word *jotería* is used “to describe a group of people of Chicana/o or Mexicana/o descent whose lives include dissident practices of gender and sexuality.”

⁵⁶ Gonzales-Day, “Photography and the Queer Imaginary,” 76-78.

subjects, shifting power from an external gaze to themselves. In doing so, the models assert visibility and maintain authority over their narrative in this piece within Chicana and Latina queer visual culture.

Just as the *atravezados/as* occupy the liminal space of duality and resistance, Chicana and Latina photographers use the camera to challenge dominant visual narratives that have previously represented their communities within the realm of Queer Aztlan. By the 1980s, Chicana photographers, still lacking recognition and representation, began experimenting with multiple approaches to the photograph, ready to voice their political concerns and personal experiences within their visual culture.⁵⁷ The documenting of this work provides a visual record of communities that are rarely in the collections of large institutions, making some histories more ephemeral than others, such as queer artists of color. The essence of *House of MORE!* lies in the way Fred Rowe places the camera in this setting and the drag subjects' way of acknowledging it, fostering solidarity within the queer Chicana and broader Latina communities. While Chicana photographers often work outside the mainstream art world, they continue to archive their local communities through documentary techniques. The importance of these photographs lies in their embodiment of emotional resistance, their defiance of cultural erasure, and their fostering of solidarity within queer Latina communities.

Instead of presenting a single identity, the subjects in *House of MORE!* reveal an array of fluid Chicana aesthetics. Anzaldúa's framework explains how some queer Chicana and Latina photographers approach the medium as they navigate overlapping

⁵⁷ Ferrer, *Latina Photography in the United States*, 67.

spaces as *atraversados/as*, sharing experiences within the margins as they defy a homogeneous identity. In United States art history, Chicanx and Latinx artists develop a borderlands consciousness, understanding that earlier artists experienced the margins in photography, excluded from recognition and representation in institutional spaces. Photographs of Mexicans in U.S. visual culture were almost nonexistent before the 1960s, only existing in documentary photography and mass media.⁵⁸ Unlike queer photography, early Chicanx and Latinx photography let its subjects be in the photos but did not depict them in close proximity, allowing the viewer to identify them. The photographs would either glamorize Spanish conquistadores or idealize caballeros and vaqueros, while depicting Latinx and Chicanx workers anonymously as symbols instead of historical actors.⁵⁹ The pattern of selective visibility in earlier photography makes the stakes clear in representing bodies and allowing presence through recognition.

The subjects in Rowe and MORE!'s photograph do not shy away from becoming identifiable to the viewer; rather, they stand in unity demanding their presence to be visible to the viewer. For context, it was not until the civil rights and farmworker movements in the 1960s that the collective of Chicanx artists felt the need to heighten their awareness of their community's visibility, as Rowe and MORE! use in this photograph.⁶⁰ Latinx and Chicanx photographers like Rowe and MORE! then use the camera to depict their own communities with nuance and culture. This newfound agency

⁵⁸ Goldman, *Tradition and Transformation*, 54-55.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

ignites Rowe and MORE! and more *atravesados/as* contemporary artists to use photography as a tool to reclaim control over how outsiders document and perceive them.

The dynamics of photography shift, emphasizing personal, political, and collective struggles against the margins within both Chicanx and queer communities. This embrace plays with the concept of the gaze, as the lens offers an intersecting view of subjectivity that both tests traditional forms of representing queer and Chicanx counterparts and recognizes a diverse selfhood. This image draws attention to its own construction, allowing a visible nature of identity yet grounding the experience of performing to the camera. Queer Chicanx photography actively resists being reduced to a single fixed portrayal and theme by embracing the multiple, fluid, and transversal natures of its subjects' identities and experiences. Chicanx photography presumes a fixed, unified visual in attempts to confine queer Chicanx artists to a narrow representation of identity, however, there are “ various ways in which Chicano identity, culture, and art were all very actively in process (‘called into being’ so to speak) through the activities and activism of the Chicano civil rights movement.”⁶¹ Queer Chicanx photography then reveals that identity is not a fixed, singular condition, but an evolving process shaped through visibility that resists stereotypes.

Rowe's photograph demonstrates what visibility for queer Chicanx identities in photography does in contemporary contexts by foregrounding the subjects. Before the twenty-first century, it was rare for the public eye to encounter photographs depicting queer bodies or acts. Nineteenth- and early twentieth- century portraits were often taken

⁶¹ Ondine Chavoya, “Introduction,” 413.

in private studios or controlled interiors that would allow artists to resist legal and social restrictions, something that *House of MORE!* has less of a challenge in present-day California. For example, in the Western Hemisphere, photographers would find ways to traverse the law when engaging in homoerotic photography by using loopholes like theatrical spaces for their sessions. Photographers like this took photos in defiance of gender during a time when cross-dressing was a crime outside of the theatrical stage.⁶² The setting in Rowe's *House of MORE!* similarly functions as a form of performance while expressing queer codes. This giclée print, though in a staged queer interior, works in a contemporary context. Instead of a hidden studio that defies Victorian-era laws, Rowe's photographic setting is publicly recognizable. This setting becomes a performative site of self-fashioning and excess, allowing identity to be ample rather than hidden away.

Rowe and MORE! counter this history by placing individuals who identify as both queer and Chicanx in the photograph to grant them visibility as they self-represent their gender and sexuality, heightening visibility almost a century later in the same Californian landscape. The subjects redirect the viewer's understanding of who controls the gaze in *House of MORE!*, shifting power from the external gaze to the subjects' gaze, letting the viewer know that they are also part of the process of perception. Since earlier photography did not grant Latinx and Chicanx subjects control over how others perceive them, Chicanx artists in other mediums, such as painters and printmakers in the U.S., began to push the boundaries of their works to address the civil rights movements and

⁶² Linkof and Martineau, "Queer Lens: An Introduction." 5-6.

farmworker strikes of the 1960s.⁶³ The rise of visibility for Chicanx communities contrasts with the lack of documented queer relationships and identities in the twentieth century within the same spheres. Photographs of same-sex couples meant creating visibility, risking the possibility of facing severe consequences in the early twentieth century that would ripple into the second half of the century.⁶⁴ By reclaiming visibility and control over representation, Rowe and MORE! challenge the historical erasure of queer Chicanx identities and affirm the photograph as a space where marginalized subjects can assert their presence to show they too belong within the cultural memory of queer and Chicanx history.

Conclusion

Through *Por Vida*, Manuel Paul challenges the idea that these traditions are solely heteronormative by portraying queer Chicanx bodies as part of lowriding visual culture. Those who criticize the mural saw it as cultural harm, associating queerness with fears of gentrification, while supporters saw the work as a rare affirmation of LGBTQ+ Chicanx existence. The reactions on Instagram and the Mission District reveal that the mural works to expose what Koritha Mitchell calls “know-your-place aggression,” where inclusivity provokes hostility because it challenges existing status quos. These conflicting responses show that the struggle over *Por Vida* was about who has the right to occupy public space and to define cultural authenticity, as it visually shapes intersecting Chicanx identity.

⁶³ Goldman, *Tradition and Transformation*, 54-55.

⁶⁴ Gonzales-Day, “Photography and the Queer Imaginary,” 76-78.

The mural's destruction did not erase its significance but rather increased it. Acts of vandalism made *Por Vida* into an example of how queer Chicanx presence remains vulnerable to both state and community scrutiny. Yet the legacy of their presence manages to survive through photographs and reproductions, ensuring that its political message endures beyond the physical wall. Robb Hernández argues that iconoclasm reveals the oppressive systems attempting to discipline queer visibility. The burned mural became evidence of both the hostility and its success in challenging dominant notions of which families and genders belong within Chicanx visual culture.

The rebirth of *Por Vida* in *House of MORE!* furthers the object by redefining the significance across different mediums. Photography enables queer Chicanx artists to self-document within spaces that exclude them, which leads to these artists preserving a personal collective memory where institutions may fall short. Guided by Roland Barthes, Gloria Anzaldúa, Sumi Cho, Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, and Leslie McCall, the chapter shows how queer Chicanx photography functions as documentation and performance. The camera becomes a tool for *atraversados/as* to negotiate visibility across cultural boundaries while representing their intersectionality with pride.

Ultimately, *Por Vida* and its photographic legacy demonstrate that queer Chicanx visibility is about more than being represented, it is about survival and reclaiming cultural space that an individual has always been a part of. Paul's *Por Vida*, as a mural and photograph, reimagines heteronormative and racial barriers by creating alternative spaces that affirm queer Chicanx existence as central to the histories and futures of the Mission District and broader Latinx visual culture.

DISIDENTIFYING THE LOWRIDER: SELF-FASHIONING PORTRAITS FROM

THE Q-SIDES

From Murals to Photography

The previous chapter highlights that *Por Vida* is more than just a mural, it reframes lowrider visuals and Chicanx mural traditions through the lens of queer and trans Latinx bodies in the Mission District. By analyzing each panel and the reactions it drew, both online and offline, the previous chapter asserts that *Por Vida* challenged prevailing masculine notions of family and sexuality integral to Chicanx identity. The hostility towards the mural seen in Instagram comments, vandalism, and arson illustrates Koritha Mitchell's "know-your-place aggression" in how queer visibility provokes backlash in marginalized Chicanx and Latinx communities. Nonetheless, this concept reaffirms that the mural acknowledges queer and trans Chicanx viewers who surprisingly found themselves in a traditionally exclusive visual culture.

The arson attack on the mural, as a public artwork, shifts its meaning because of the vandalism. Residents' worries about gentrification and cultural ownership in the Mission District emphasize the vulnerability of queer public art in public areas. The significance of the mural endures in the collective memory through the form of documenting and reproducing it on the local news website and social media. This chapter will then explore *The Q-Sides*, a photograph series that was also in Galería de la Raza for the same exhibition, and how it revives through photography and performance. While the previous chapter focuses on the mural's challenges of existing in the Mission District, this chapter examines how photographs reframe queer Chicanx self-fashioning and

community-building in lowrider visual culture and social circles. By moving beyond the politics of public display and destruction, I focus on how queer Chicanx artists use the camera to document presence using self-representation.

Photographs from *The Q-Sides* Series

The visual culture of lowriding serves as an apparent form of claiming presence not only in Manuel Paul's *Por Vida* mural but also through other media and objects. In *The Q-Sides* series, this case employs a different approach to establish its presence through its photographs. This photographic series takes familiar images from mixtape covers generally known to Latinx communities and reworks them to create a new narrative by portraying queer Latinx subjects. While the photographs maintain the same format and typography, they disrupt the familiar visuals from within. What appears to be an homage at first glance becomes an intervention when these images recontextualize the heteronormative understandings that lie deep within the lowrider canon.

The same exhibition at Galería de la Raza that showcased the *Por Vida* mural also included a series of photographs that gave the exhibition its title. I examine the photograph series of *The Q-Sides*, which foregrounds queer Latinx experiences within lowrider culture. In doing so, the group of artists behind the series and exhibition, Vero Majano, Brown Angel, and Kari Orvik, engage with the elements of queer inclusivity, music, and lowrider aesthetics. The act of engaging with these elements provokes the traditional Chicano cultural canon by asserting the existence of intersecting identities through the queer Latinx models in their photograph installation. Photographs from *The Q-Sides* celebrate queer desire and Chicano pride in spaces constructed by

heteronormative beliefs, underscoring the ongoing struggle for a representation in community. By considering Chicanx culture and the artists behind the exhibition in the twenty-first century, I account for visual modes of activism prompted by inner cultural control.

This photographic series presents the stakes of representing queer Latinx bodies and their right to visibility. Though all twelve photographs in the series communicate similar meanings, the scope of this chapter allows me to examine two photographic prints from *The Q-Sides* series at Galería de la Raza, *Volume 10* and *Volume 3*, to explore how they stage the violence queer Chicanx individuals encounter in intersecting cultural spaces (FIGURES 7 AND 8). By using José Esteban Muñoz's concept of disidentification, I will argue that *The Q-Sides* reframes how viewers perceive lowrider culture through a queer lens by working within the established visual language while also reimagining it. Muñoz describes disidentification as the survival strategies that minority subjects use to navigate a phobic majoritarian public sphere.¹ This sphere often erases or punishes those who do not fit the image of normative citizenship by recycling stereotypes.² He then shows how these stereotypes become compelling versions of self-creation within visual culture. The process is evident in the photograph series, which reworks the imagery of the mixtape format. This concept, in the context of *The Q-Sides*, molds the dominant visual codes into sites of queer self-making while also exposing the

¹ Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 27.

² Ibid.

structures that marginalize queer Chicana identities among the cultural and public spheres.

A Drag Queen with Lowriders

The visual and political groundwork culminates in *The Q-Sides, Vol. 10*, reimagining a scene in which queer identity is no longer on the sidelines but instead materializes in lowrider imagery. The typography of “THE Q-SIDES VOL 10” frames the 71.12 by 71.12 centimeters photograph. The print is a direct reference to the photograph of the mixtape album cover of *East Side Story Volume 10*. The print reuses the same bold red and green rectangular borders to frame the text and photograph, as on the mixtape album cover. As the red and green borders along the white print layer over one another, it alludes to the framing of that in vinyl record covers, while the colors hint at Mexican or Chicano cultural symbolism reminiscent of the Mexican flag. The typography of the title “THE Q-SIDES” breaks away from the careful structure, adopting a graffiti-like, spray-painted, handwritten style, remaining faithful to the typography on the original cover down to the “E” appearing like a backward number three. The title itself hints at a play on words with the term “B-sides,” from vinyl culture, referring to alternative or lesser-known tracks, but instead substitutes it for the letter “Q” in reference to the word “queer.” The reference to the “B-sides” itself parallels the queer community as a branch of Chicano lowrider culture. The subtitle, “VOL. 10,” contrasts with it, as it is neatly placed to the right and remains consistent with the font.

The *Volume 10* mixtape album cover of *East Side Story* pays tribute to lowrider imagery by centering on the automobiles (FIGURE 9). The photograph of Volume 10 of

East Side Story captures seven parked lowrider cars. The composition of this photograph lies in the way the cars are aligned diagonally, drawing the viewer's eye from the closest, lighter-colored car in the lower-right foreground toward the distant left of the photograph, to a smaller, obscured, darker-blue vehicle. The photograph features a repeating motif around the cars' forms, from their round hoods to their circular headlights. This lineage pertains to the sense of communal depth, implying that the vehicles are not just personal objects, but rather members part of a larger community. This photograph shows the community gathering for a celebration, either a car show for lowriders or a car meet. There are no human subjects in the photograph; instead, the focus is on the cars themselves, eliminating any human presence. Through this absence of human subjects, the vehicles become symbols of expression and representation.

Contrary to the subject focus of *East Side Story*, the photograph of *The Q-Sides Vol. 10* depicts a drag queen between two lowrider cars beneath the sunlight. The composition is intentional in its careful symmetry, with the two nearly identical vintage beige lowrider automobiles and the subject posing between them. The subject dresses in a drag ensemble of long black silk trousers, a black, belted long-sleeved blouse with a floral print, and the only jewelry: a pair of large golden hoop earrings. They tilt their head upwards towards the sky so that the viewer can see the high arches of their thin eyebrows, the lengthy black wings on their upper lash lines, and the long eyelashes drawn together by their dark mauve lipstick. The black, wavy curls spill from her high-volume pompadour, lustrous in the sunlight and gracing the subject's sculpted face. The subject anchors the image by confidently posing with their proper left hand on their hip. Their

right arm rests above their right knee, elevating their stance as they place their black high heels on the left car's front bumper. The drag queen's posture projects a certitude and control of the composition in the photograph.

The horizon line is relatively high, further emphasizing the subject with the two cars. The backdrop is an urban landscape of the present, though it may appear to be any other city; there is an element that gives away where in California this is. The steel tower hovering over the hill behind the left car is Sutro Tower in San Francisco, California. The natural, sunny-blue sky scenery features a few rolling hills, creating a green-and-brown palette of dirt and vegetation, including dried grass, wheat, and weeds. At the foot of the hills, dense white and beige urban houses for miles arrive towards the foreground of the image where the subject stands. At their feet, the unkempt, brittle, sun-bleached grass reveals bare patches of earth. The high vantage point from which the camera is gives the viewer an elevated, open view over the city and surrounding hills. There is a sense of harmony created by the cars' curved edges and the hills behind them, which merge the realms of the mechanical and natural landscapes. This photograph blends portraiture and landscape photography into a composed image that represents queerness in lowrider culture.

The use of photography and a drag subject for *The Q-Sides* is essential in intervening gender and sexuality within lowriding. Over the passage of time, heterosexuality deeply embeds itself into these spaces and becomes the default understanding, leading to an unwelcomeness towards queer women. The anecdote reminds us that sexism and homophobia are intersecting forces that force an exclusivity

on those who are not straight men in these spaces. Underlying authoritative structures police the broader Latino community through gender and sexuality, causing spaces with limited inclusivity. As a photographic print, it provides “the perfect arena for the play of gender and sexuality.”³ Concentrating on the historical aspect of photography, subjects would construct and circulate images of themselves that emphasized self-fashioning and individuality. Through the choices of pose, attire, and gesture, the photograph destabilizes assumptions about masculine and authentic cues in lowriding. The drag queen is not for heteronormative viewing pleasure, but an active agent in reshaping the visual language of lowriding and understanding of gender.

Though the photograph deeply roots itself in visually communicating lowrider aesthetics, it consciously challenges the values associated with the culture. The visual terrain of the lowrider is then reframed in *The Q-Sides, Volume 10* because of the conscious choice in centering the drag subject. The subject self-represents feminine traits through their drag-queen getup and emphasizes this through their poised posture. Chappell notes that lowriders typically “adorn their cars with sexualized depictions of female bodies, allowing mainstream norms [of] gender and sexuality to be represented and enforced in and by lowrider culture.”⁴ These feminine elements disturb the heterosexual hypermasculinity identified by Chappell as they occupy the same aesthetic space as the lowriding vehicles. As a result, the photograph reconfigures lowriding as a space that can accommodate queer and feminine forms of self-representation.

³ Blessing, *Rose Is a Rose Is a Rose*, viii.

⁴ Chappell, “Auto Bodies,” 111.

Disidentification and Self-Representation

The use of queer bodies in lowrider spaces in *Volume 10* tackles an issue that tightly wraps around how dominant authorities create a desire for inner-cultural control of the narrative of Chicanx visual culture. In the years following the passage of the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 and into the beginning of the twenty-first century, those in Chicanx and Latinx communities would face increased scrutiny under the law, adding greater weight to the use of spatial reclaiming that *The Q-Sides* series engages in. The rise of the population in Latinx communities led to a public conception in those areas that Latinx elicit criminal and economic risks to the U.S.⁵ These views contribute to the shaping of negative attitudes towards these communities, fueling harsh behaviors in response to fear of harm by low-income Latinx, another group that falls under intersectionality. This interchange of diverse perspectives resonates with the photographic series because it confronts exactly these set assumptions of race by foregrounding queer Chicano subjects who are often the targets of narratives of threats. The works in *The Q-Sides* reclaim visibility for bodies that continually endure being targets of widespread othering narratives that cast them as dangerous or as committing illegal activities.⁶ The gesture of representing subjects with dignity, agency, and cultural specifics destabilizes the logic behind the narrative of the Latinx threat. It challenges visuals that would otherwise be relevant to thoughts of criminality.

⁵ Mirandé, “The United States–Mexico Border,” 82.

⁶ Ibid.

Through *Volume 10*, *The Q-Sides* presents the subject with agency by destabilizing the logic behind the narrative of the “Latino threat.” The photograph does not attempt to assimilate the subject into acceptance within dominant expectations but insists on the visibility of queer Chicanx identity within spaces historically shaped by exclusion and criminal activity. The photograph negotiates these systems of violence by transforming the act of representing a drag queen into a performance of survival and resisting the dominant narrative of criminal activity. In this sense, the viewer can understand the photographic practice of *The Q-Sides* through José Esteban Muñoz’s concept of disidentification, which he describes as “about cultural, material, and psychic survival” and as “a response to state and global power apparatuses that employ systems of racial, sexual, and national subjugation.”⁷ In documenting queer Chicanx subjects within a culturally familiar space in a San Francisco landscape, the photograph strongly visualizes how disidentification maneuvers through previous trauma and systemic violence within culture while creating alternative ways of seeing and existing outside dominant racial narratives.

An underlying tension becomes visible for the queer Chicanx creators of *The Q-Sides* as intimate forms of policing in Latinx communities. In the sphere of overarching inner-cultural control within Latinx communities, Artists Kari Orvik and Vero Majano recount how they obtain the vehicles they use to recreate *East Side Story* in *The Q-Sides*. Vero explains that her cousin Camilo spoke with car clubs and owners to borrow cars for the project; some owners were hesitant to lend their cars to unknown artists. Camilo

⁷ Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 267-268.

ultimately convinced the owner by saying, “It’s [the project] cool, they’re girls, it’s two girls together.”⁸ Kari jumps in and recalls how she and Vero realized that the car owners had misunderstood what Camilo meant; they thought that it was just two straight girls with the cars.⁹ This moment stuck with the artists, showing that men in the lowriding community garner interest in supporting their project when assuming it would feature two women in a way that would fit in their own straight male fantasies instead of queer women. There is an expectation that the presence of women in this space is intended mostly for visual pleasure, depicted half-dressed and posed for the male gaze. The men expect a hypersexual element of the two women in the photoshoot, demonstrating how lowrider culture casts homosexuality aside and how heterosexual expectations dominate their beliefs.

This anecdote captures a hostility within Chicana lowrider culture where women and queer people are welcome under the condition that they will comply with heterosexual male expectations. Willingness to support *The Q-Sides* and lend their vehicles is only when men assume two women will serve as objects of desire, hinting at sexism and a closer understanding of how lowrider culture has been an instrument for imposing gender identities into categories in common Chicana interactions.¹⁰ In this sense, women exist in this scene to be on display for the male gaze, and queer women are even less of value unless they mold themselves into the sexual fantasies of these men.

⁸ Campos, “Cruising The Borderlands,” 68.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Campos, “Cruising The Borderlands,” 100.

The artists challenge heterosexual norms in lowriding by presenting their own vision, even at the risk of being misunderstood or unseen. Photographic prints in this series with feminine bodies, especially *Volume 10*, reframe queer Chicanx bodies through portraits that foreground intimacy and autonomy, allowing the drag queen to exist outside restrictive visual under patriarchal expectations.

This subject's access to autonomy in this photograph allows them to express themselves in drag within the print publicly. About drag, as a form of queer performance, it enriches the photograph's content through the lens of disidentification. Muñoz elaborates that “not all performances are equal,” highlighting how bodies marked by race, gender, sexuality, and class have felt compelled to perform for dominant audiences rather than simply exist on their own terms.¹¹ Moreover, the print in *Volume 10* challenges this unequal visibility by using photography as a tool to represent a subject existing on their own terms. Instead of portraying queer Chicanx subjects as hyper visible objects of fantasy for a heteronormative audience, the series creates evidence for self-defining bodies. The print then situates feminine bodies and experiences within larger narratives of Chicanx culture, in this case, lowriding history. This approach closely aligns with José Esteban Muñoz's ideas on performance and visibility, engaging with Elin Diamond's argument that “women, especially lesbians and women of color, have struggled to appear, to speak, be heard, be seen.”¹² Diamond also observes that within Western metaphysics,

¹¹ Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 308.

¹² Ibid.

“the female body is represented as both crude materiality and irreparable lack.”¹³

Through this photographic print, the artists move beyond the limits and spectacle that Muñoz criticizes, affirming queer Chicanx presence as persistent and evident in lowriding.

By integrating a queer individual expressing themselves in lowrider spaces into this print, the artists push against the historical standards that have overtaken the culture’s visual language. Chappell indicates that the history of lowrider imagery portrays images of women in sexual scenes on their vehicles to uphold a heteronormative performance of masculinity. These images of women in erotic contexts appear on car hoods, magazines, and across promotional materials such as *Lowrider Magazine*; in doing so, they embed a clear hierarchy of gender and sexuality within Chicanx culture.¹⁴ The drag subject defies the hierarchy of gender and sexuality in the photographic print by being at the center of what lowriding embodies.

The overarching visual archive of lowriders largely leaves out any traces of queer and trans Chicanx individuals, as prevailing imagery catering to straight male identities overshadows these aspects. Considering these elements, the subject in drag in *Volume 10* becomes more than a stylistic alternative and a persistent break with the beliefs about what lowriding should look like, including bodies that are often invisible in these accounts. They conquer the space that once hid them, this act demonstrates Muñoz’s concept by resisting the social matrix of publicity and exposing the rhetorical/ideological

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Chappell, “Cruising Spaces,” 33-4.

context of dominant structures.¹⁵ The drag subject defies the norms of the culture through this exposure. The photographic print of *Volume 10* reclaims visual space that omits queer presence by creating an unapologetic alternative framework of images within the broader heteronormative community.

Combining the art of drag with that of lowriders in itself makes a significant link between the two. The artists make use of both these worlds and bring out how they have the strength to create a new narrative. While lowrider culture remains a symbol of Chicana pride and resistance, as do queer art and performers like drag artists who celebrate defiance through fashion, this work introduces a new narrative. The narrative is visible in *Volume 10*, where the subject is pictured with two old cars in a new San Francisco setting, signifying a space in which identity defies policing and intersects with one another. The visual reclaiming of the lowrider iconography unsettles heteronormative masculine regimes and transforms the space into a site where open-mindedness and multiplicity can thrive from a once-narrow and exclusively male-dominant history. This work contributes to a broader effort to challenge the constraints on the variety of Latinx identities, whether through traditional concepts or internal community struggles. The photographic print, *The Q-Sides, Volume 10*, asserts a keen sense of belonging that can acknowledge queer presence within overarching accounts of culture.

How *The Q-Sides* Came to Be

In January 2024, a policy shift in California took place that many believed would never come to pass, lifting a ban on lowriders. Lowriders — vehicles aesthetically

¹⁵ Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 279.

customized and driven at low heights and slow speeds, and also the name of those who engage with them— iconize Chicanx culture, as they are a staple of Mexican American culture. When Governor Gavin Newsom of California signed Assembly Bill 436, he repealed the long-standing provision that allowed local jurisdictions in California to forbid this style of automobile.¹⁶ This repeal became widely celebrated by the lowriders as a cultural victory because of how much the vehicles serve as a deep connection to Chicanx communities.

Emerging in the mid-twentieth century as a defining symbol of Chicanx identity, lowriding is woven into the narratives of car customizing, cruising the streets, and visual culture among Mexican American communities in California. The authorities began to observe the rise in popularity of lowrider vehicles among the public, especially among the Mexican American youth. Authorities and the local public saw the phenomenon as a form of rebellion or delinquency in the 1970s and 1980s.¹⁷ Law enforcement put a halt to the cruising of these vehicles by adjusting and reinforcing Section 24008 of the California Vehicle Code, which had been in effect since the late 1950s.¹⁸ The local authorities within these areas brought a ban to regulate “cruising” and “lowriding.”¹⁹ With the bans put in place, people in these communities never took a break in

¹⁶ Hernandez, Joe. “Once Harassed by Police, Lowriders Can Cruise across California under a New Law.” Law. *NPR*, October 17, 2023. <https://www.npr.org/2023/10/17/1206625366/lowrider-cruising-california-end-ban>.

¹⁷ Chavez, “Los de Abajo,” 81.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Assembly Bill 436 (Alvarez), *Vehicles*, 2023–2024 Reg. Sess., ch. 803 (Cal. 2023).

customizing their vehicles and engaging in lowriding. Although it is a significant aspect of Chicanx culture, narratives around lowriding often focus on heteronormative expressions of masculinity, which obscure queer Latinx experiences from its history.

In *The Q-Sides*, lowrider culture is the main visual concept, only involving an additional element of the intersecting queer lens. In the Mission District of San Francisco, Galería de la Raza showcased *The Q-Sides* (2015), a series of photographic portrait prints by Vero Majano, Brown Angel, and Kari Orvik, in an exhibition of the same title that first opened on June 5, 2015. These works dive into ways of exploring queerness when combining it with lowrider imagery within Chicanx culture.²⁰ The specific reference to lowrider imagery pertains to the covers of unofficial mixtapes known as *The East Side Story*, a twelve-volume collection of slow, old-school soul and doo-wop tracks made by Anthony Boosalis in the late 1970s as a marketing tactic.²¹ Black musicians such as The Shirelles, Etta James, and The Delfonics made most of the tracks, yet the mixtape became meaningful through cross-cultural connections as these covers grew to be iconic and nostalgic to the cultural identity of lowriders in East LA's Chicano communities and beyond with their classic cars.²² Ten years later, Galería de la Raza presented *The Q-Sides* again during the summer of 2025 to commemorate its Tenth Anniversary.

The origins of the project reveal how deeply personal the need to intervene is for the artists of *The Q-Sides*. One of the artists, DJ Brown Angel, retells how the photograph

²⁰ *The Q-Sides* (2015).

²¹ Ariza, "Vero Majano, Brown Amy, and Kari Orvik, *The Q-Sides*, 2015," 222.

²² *Ibid.*

series came to be by bumping into Vero Majano on 24th Street when recollecting their memories around growing up with the *East Side Story* albums.²³ This conversation would spark the reimagining of the covers of these iconic records by featuring queer individuals from the Latino community instead. This exhibition makes room for both to coexist by exploring the possibilities of a lowrider culture that is versatile rather than restrictive for queer members. The origins of this project grew out of the deep affection for the artists' own culture and the music they grew up with, and their pride in being queer. The artists occupy what Chicana feminist scholar Gloria Anzaldúa calls the "third space," a complex and invisible site where queer Latinx individuals can navigate their cultural heritage and queer identity without forcing a decision between the two.²⁴ Although blending queerness with lowrider culture may seem unconventional and contrary to the scene, it allows queer Chicanx to embrace intersecting parts of themselves fully.

Instead of rejecting the visual culture behind the lowrider mixtape covers, this series of photographs reuses their visual elements to foster inclusivity. This series of photographs dapples with bridging the past and present of policing to express Chicano culture, serving as visual instruments. Projects like *The Q-Sides* intervene in the "double margin" of intersectionality that silences queer individuals in lowrider culture by asserting the presence of queer life in a hypermasculine space; the works personify the vaster battle against the structures that condense Chicanx and Latinx as "foreign" or

²³ Campos, "Cruising The Borderlands," 61.

²⁴ Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*. Gloria Anzaldúa's concept of the "borderlands" consists of a physical and psychological space where different cultures, identities, and languages meet and combine to create new ways of being. This concept primarily applied to those who exist in a Mexican American space but can apply to those who can exist in various places yet do not fully belong to either.

criminal. The concept of disidentification becomes critical within the “double margin.” The “double margin” turns into a site where queer subjects must navigate racial exclusivity while under heteronormative status quos. The use of visual cues for visibility in lowrider culture parallels the community’s central struggle against state authority, which aims to discipline and dominate Chicanx identity itself.

Out in the Open

Identically framed and sized as the last object, *The Q-Sides, Volume 3* tells a different story than that of *The Q-Sides, Volume 10*. This object is behind the same plexiglass and frames the image with the same green and red borders and typography; the photograph homes in on the subjects who partake in lowrider culture. Unlike the mixtape cover of *East Side Story, Volume 3*, this photograph clearly captures the subjects' faces, making them identifiable (FIGURE 10). The subjects in *The Q-Sides, Volume 3*, serve as vehicles in their own photonarratives.

Also in contrast to the shirtless male subjects posing on the cover of *East Side Story, Volume 3*, the print behind the transparent plexiglass captures a group of six non-binary and transgender male subjects arranged on the black asphalt in a casual yet intentional composition, set outdoors in a sunlit public park. A short chain-link fence borders the park between the figures and the tall, muted-silvery green eucalyptus trees behind them. The subjects inhabit the foreground and midground; their poses and gestures emanate naturalness and a feeling of collectivity. The three subjects in the front express confidence through their eye contact with the camera as they squat down to form

the base of a triangle. The knees of the two figures on the left point to open Modelo cans placed on the floor as they clasp hands in a gesture evoking solidarity and kinship.

In contrast, the third subject to the right sits beside them, relaxed in their black overalls yet attentive towards the viewer. Three more subjects move into the distance of the photograph as they stand shirtless behind them; two of them kneel on a green bench, away from the viewer. Their backs and torsos display tattoos; the most striking among the two subjects is the one on the left, with the top of the subject's overalls unbuttoned to reveal the Virgin of Guadalupe on their back. The figure at the top of the green bench in this triangular composition faces the viewer confidently and sternly, content with his surroundings.

Lowriding serves as a cultural and spatial expression of identity and ties to the concept of belonging. The park space in this photograph creates a self-defining site for queer Chicana subjects to be visible and claim cultural agency; the urban greenery intermeshing with the chain-link fence extends this sentiment, as the natural objects overcome the barrier of keeping things in or out of a space. In *The Q-Sides, Volume 3*, the queer lens renders lowriding as a “product of space” by reconfiguring bodies, gestures, and social relationships. Lowrider cars, often referred to as “cathedrals on wheels” for their role as sites of creativity and craftsmanship, can also be compared to the human body because artisans also contribute to their decoration and alteration.²⁵ Ethnographer and interdisciplinary scholar Chappell argues that lowriding is a material practice, actively creating and defining space that then reveals both political dimensions and how

²⁵ Tatum, “Art,” 81.

lowriders deeply and personally connect to their own culture.²⁶ In this regard, “lowrider significance” is the emotional and political force that lowriding sets in motion, extending into queer embodiment and reimagining what it means to express oneself within the lowrider community, unveiling another facet of intersectional identities.

The presence of the Virgin of Guadalupe enriches the photograph with culture and spirituality. Interestingly, the subject with this tattoo is not at the top or centered in the photograph, thereby introducing a tilted geometry and breaking away from the presumed strict organizing of the composition. Her iconography, permanently etched into the subject's flesh, evokes themes of heritage and faith while also paying homage to the dead, owing to her skeletal form rather than a lively, fleshed-out one. The Virgin of Guadalupe or the Sacred Heart ties back to traditions of pachucos in the 1940s; at the time, it was an expression of identity, faith, and resistance through these icons.²⁷ Even into the 1960s, lowrider clubs steadily grew with businesses offering a variety of services like “hydraulics, interiors, body work, and painting and decorative embellishments such as pinstriping and traditional figures (e.g., Aztec warriors and maidens, the Virgin of Guadalupe).”²⁸ The tattoo on this individual symbolizes that body art has varying cultural implications depending on the wearer. Tattoos in the Western world are markers of marginality, but in Chicana culture, they hold deep historical and spiritual meaning to the individuals who adorn them.

²⁶ Chappell, “Introduction,” 3.

²⁷ Perez, “Body, Dress,” 81-2.

²⁸ Tatum, “The History and Evolution of Lowrider Culture,” 14.

The photograph uses pride and solidarity to depict the subjects through artistic and cultural themes that challenge conventional portrayals. The documentary photography integrates imagery and queerness into its representation of the many aspects of Chicanx identity. In altering spiritual icons, such as the skeletal Virgin of Guadalupe, the image repositions the photograph's narrative and its subjects in ways that resist mainstream narratives, given how mainstream narratives label tattoos and bodies. With the thoughtful placement of the figures amid a conventional urban landscape, the distance between them and everyday life closes in, highlighting the visibility of figures who have often remained in the shadows. In the act of both recognizing and honoring its subjects, the work celebrates the figures' visibility in a defiant exhibition of self.

With this understanding of visibility and belonging in space, the cultural politics of space place greater emphasis on Chicanx forms of self-representation when considering lowriding. Chappell proclaims that day-to-day lowriding is a “space-making practice... illuminat[ing] the politics and personal attachment that lowriders feel for their idiom.”²⁹ Lowriding is inseparable from the terrain of urban barrios and the place-identity that builds the space where Chicanx life flourishes. The practice renders layers of personal and cultural meanings among political forces and emotional resonances while altering the physical and social aspects of the spaces lowriding occupies. The act of claiming the space mirrors the dynamics shown in *The Q-Sides, Volume 3*, through asserting presence in a landscape that repeats acts of marginalizing and racializing bodies. The backdrop of greater issues of immigration and racial policing in the country

²⁹ Chappell, “Introduction,” 4.

charges the act of reclaiming the space through lowriding because of the present desires of belonging and occupying spaces where bodies experience negotiating and policing. This view opens a new way of understanding how lowriding provides an insight into the crafting of visibility and agency in immigrant and Chicanx communities when grander powers use law to exclude.

Queer Chicanx Bodies as Documentary

The artists behind the series set out to test aspects of heteronormative lowrider culture by revealing that queer identities exist within it, using their casting choices to do so. One of the artists, DJ Brown Angel, shares that the models were primarily friends and community members selected through the artist's deep involvement in the queer, trans, and QTBIPOC communities in the Bay Area.³⁰ For example, the drag queen in *Volume 10* is a born-and-raised San Franciscan who goes by Juanita MORE! They connect with the project's mixtape cover theme by being an avid lover of music, including soul, R&B, rock and roll, country, salsa, and jazz.³¹ As a drag queen, MORE! uses entertainment such as hosting parties and DJing to support the city by raising money for non-profit organizations. The photographs not only engage with resistance on a visual level in the medium, but also interpersonally through direct community engagement.

The twelve photographic prints shown in the exhibition are the same size and frame, they encompass the same format, hanging side by side along the white walls of the gallery, not following a numerological order to reflect their corresponding works from

³⁰ Lepe, *Interview with DJ Brown Angel*. QTBIPOC is the abbreviation for Queer, Trans, Black, Indigenous, and People of Color.

³¹ "Juanita More! · Biography," Resident Advisor, 2022, <https://ra.co/dj/juanitamore!/biography>.

the original covers of *East Side Story*. The artists aim to pay homage to while also reinventing the album covers, each of which contains a photograph depicting different subjects and vehicles in different locations and at different times of day. Instead of using a title like a B-side, musical singles consisting of songs not expected to be as commercially successful as the A-side, the artists use the letter “Q” to refer to the term “queer.” Like the B-side, the title of the exhibit hints at reconfiguring the cultural canon of Chicanx communities by exerting a queer Latinx existence. The proven existence of queer Latinx unveils an overwhelming “pride in jota/o/é homies, their rides, and their loves.”³² The artists' reimagining of *East Side Story* challenges heteronormative narratives within Chicanx culture by centering queer Latinx visibility, transforming the exhibition into both a cultural preservation act and a declaration of pride and desire through the display of belonging.

In *The Q-Sides Volume 10*, the artists challenge photography's neutrality by centering the drag performer MORE! whose presence uplifts both the city and queer Chicanx and Latinx communities. Juanita MORE!'s flamboyant makeup, hair, nails, and fashion crystallize into a photograph that solidifies their acts of resistance and documents their stance against the traditional status quo values that have long policed both gender expression and Chicanx appearance. This sense of documentary becomes a nod to Chicanx photography's early days. The portrait in *Volume 10* resists the visual regime by presenting drag not as spectacle or caricature, but as a subject capable of self-defining

³² *The Q-Sides* (2015). The exhibition curators use “Latiné” but I changed it to Latinx to remain consistent throughout the thesis. The term “Latiné” originates from the LGBTQIA+, gender non-binary, and feminist communities in Spanish-speaking countries.

themselves outside of the stereotypes around both Chicanx and queer individuals.

Jennifer A. González explains that photography has always existed in tension between representing the “singular” subject and reducing people into stereotyped “types,” especially within Euro-American traditions that historically produced racist imagery of Chicanx communities.³³ Artists Orvik, Majano, and DJ Brown Angel transform MORE! into a vehicle to reclaim portraiture as a space where the individual can uplift themselves and the community, communicating that queer Chicanx identity can exist powerfully on their own terms in this photograph series.

The policing of queer Chicanx self-fashioning in *Volume 10* does not emerge out of nowhere, nor are Chicanx drag queens the first within their communities to face scrutiny for striking appearances. The fashion in the Chicanx community has long been framed as a threat to dominant American culture and, at times, members within the community itself. The history of the zoot suit during the 1940s demonstrates how Chicanx and Mexican American, more so pachucha/o styles, became targets of moral panic precisely because they were highly visible and expressive.³⁴ A pachuca/o refers to young Mexican Americans from the working class living in urban barrios of the Southwest from the late 1930s through the 1950s.³⁵ Not all Mexican American youth in barrios identified as pachuca/o, and not all pachucas/o were exclusively from working-class or barrio neighborhoods. The scrutiny of the pachuca/o style shows the long history

³³ González, “Face-Off,” 82.

³⁴ Tatum, “2: Pachucas/os, Zoot Suiters, and Cholas/os in Lowrider Culture,” 30-35.

³⁵ Ibid.

of fashion choices, such as the zoot suit, that become political symbols of resistance and later reverberate into performative styling, as shown in *The Q-Sides* photographic series.

Juanita MORE!'s presence in the photograph demonstrates an unapologetic prominence in lowrider attire that resembles that of the pachuca/o. For men, the zoot suit, or "drape," consists of silhouettes that exaggerate long coats with padded shoulders, high-waisted ballooning trousers tapered at the ankle, long watch chains, feathered hats, and thick-soled pointed shoes.³⁶ This style transformed fashion into a performance, as demonstrated by the drag queen in *Volume 10* when MORE! takes on a style more reflective of the pachuca.

In *Volume 10*, MORE!'s styles their hair into a large pompadour similar to the way pachucas would tease their hair into high bouffants.³⁷ MORE! and pachucas also wore excessive makeup, except in MORE!'s case, it takes on a more performative role. Muñoz describes portrait photography disidentification as a "two-sided performance," where the photographer can manipulate the models, props, and backgrounds behind the lens, and the model can perform the "self" uniquely for the camera.³⁸ By blending the visual elements of pachuca/o style with the expressive potential of drag performance, MORE!'s self-fashioning in the photography of *Volume 10* reasserts a historically policed Chicanx visual culture into a queer method for expressing visibility through resistance by being captured in front of the camera.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 123-124.

This historical scrutiny creates an important lineage for understanding the reception of queer Chicanx aesthetics in *The Q-Sides, Volume 10*. For example, during World War II, newspapers like the *Los Angeles Times* criticized pachucos and pachucas for wearing large amounts of fabric, even though the War Production Board limited textile use with Orders L-224 and L-85.³⁹ Instead of viewing zoot suits as a form of cultural expression, the media portrayed their flamboyance as un-American, wasteful, and possibly traitorous.⁴⁰ This history of policing Chicanx dress shows that people of color often became suspicious if they appeared too visible, stylish, or refused to conform to mainstream standards of respectability and patriotism. Muñoz stresses how disidentification is “about cultural, material, and psychic survival,” it directly responds to state and global power systems that use racial, sexual, and national subjugation.⁴¹ The pressure to manage and negotiate historical trauma and systemic violence by suppressing flamboyance within some Chicanx and Latinx communities is seen not simply as a way to reject certain styles but also as a response to the historical experiences of racial profiling and criminalization by authorities that led to the public humiliating fashion statements of their own culture.

Rather than relying on outsiders or professional models, the series drew directly on existing relationships and networks within the local community. The artist also underscores the importance of representing a range of bodies and gender identities that

³⁹ Tatum, “2: Pachucas/os, Zoot Suiters, and Cholas/os in Lowrider Culture,” 36.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 267-268.

acknowledge lived experiences of these evolving identities. This approach helped represent queer as something presently diverse and fluid, found in real community connections rather than as an artificial inclusion. The use of local LGBTQ+ models who identify as Latinx within these photographs singlehandedly shows that queer individuals have always been authentic and alive in lowrider spaces.

The emphasis on documenting authentic queer Chicanx and Latinx individuals in *The Q-Sides, Volume 10 and Volume 3*, also reflects a broader shift within Chicanx photography that began in the 1980s. This shift is significant when considering *The Q-Sides, Volume 10*, because the photograph similarly rejects older traditions that reduced Chicanx bodies to stereotypes or symbols when referring to *East Side Story*. Instead, the artists center Juanita MORE! as a self-fashioned queer Chicanx subject whose visibility carries a political weight.

The rise of Chicana photographers, influenced by feminism and conceptual photography, reimagines the medium by turning the camera toward individuals on the margins who had previously existed outside dominant forms of representation, such as Juanita MORE! The portrait of MORE! does not frame queer identity as secondary or invisible within lowrider culture but instead documents it as inseparable from Chicanx cultural expression itself. As art historian Jennifer A. González explains, early Chicanx visual culture often prioritized “representational types” over individualized portraiture to make the community visible as a collective rather than on singular subjects.⁴² In doing so, the photograph continues the documentary legacy of Chicanx photography while

⁴² Villaseñor Black, “The Arc of Chicanx Photography in Los Angeles,” 62.

expanding it to include queer and gender-nonconforming bodies excluded from both the mainstream history of portraiture and Chicanx visual traditions.

Strategies in *The Q-Sides* are consistent with broader shifts in Chicanx photographic traditions during periods of social and political upheaval. Images in *Volumes 10* and *Volume 3* depict these shifts through their reassessment of the tradition, portraying lowriders and queerness within Chicanx culture. Rather than reproducing the heteronormative and masculine ideals traditionally associated with lowrider culture, Orvik, Majano, and DJ Brown Angel expand the visual language of Chicanx documentary photography to include queer, trans, and gender-nonconforming individuals as central subjects rather than marginal figures. The artists' choice to include performers such as Juanita MORE! demonstrates how they transcend cultural visual traditions by documenting queer Chicanx existence not as an exception to the culture, but as an integral part of it. Scholar Colin Gunckel argues that photography operates within the larger framework of social movement politics, explaining that "moments of social upheaval often force revealing ruptures or reevaluations of conventions and categories" through artistic practice.⁴³ In doing so, the series fulfills photography's ability to expose and move beyond cultural boundaries when using portraiture as a form of social practice that reimagines a more inclusive future for queer Chicanx identity.

Conclusion

In conclusion, *The Q-Sides* emphasizes the role of photography in serving as both a method of documentation and a form of cultural activism among Chicanx communities.

⁴³ Gunckel, "The Chicano/a Photographic," 406.

Through the reinterpretation of the *East Side Story* mixtape covers by featuring queer and trans Latinx people, the artists seek to redefine the visual legacy of Chicanx, which was influenced by status quo values, by foregrounding intersectional identity. While the photographs do not exclude the community of lowrider enthusiasts, they use the existing visual cues and combine them with the history of the lowrider culture to demonstrate the exclusions and create room for the possibility of inclusion.

Both *Volume 10* and *Volume 3* illustrate how queer Chicanx individuals deal with being perceived based on their race and gender while simultaneously claiming their space within those environments. By capturing them confidently within the presence of lowriders or between multiple tattooed bodies in a park setting, the camera serves as a medium of self-representation, allowing the subjects to present themselves as people rather than objects. Queer visibility here serves not only to mark its importance in wider narratives of Chicanx resistance to inner-cultural control.

With the context of lowriders policed by anti-cruising laws and stereotypes around the Mexican American community, *The Q-Sides* takes on new relevance when queer figures are a part of this cultural narrative. The photographic series argues that queer Chicanx and Latinx people have not merely been incidental in the development of Chicanx culture but have been central to its formation. Using techniques of portraiture and performance, the photographic series documents an archive of queer visibility that refuses to be erased and asserts the community's sense of belonging together.

CONCLUSION

This thesis explores how queer Chicanx and Latinx individuals use art to re-envision familiar visual spaces within their own cultural traditions that have set them aside by excluding them from their own histories. The mural *Por Vida* and the photographic series *The Q-Sides* show queer Chicanx artists engaging with lowrider imagery by using various mediums such as muralism and photography to assert that queer and trans Latinx individuals have always been part of these communities. Rather than viewing Chicanx and queerness as separate entities, the artists emphasize the possibilities for the future of intersectional self-representation, interwoven with their own cultural histories and visual practices.

In examining the visibility of those who identify as both Chicanx and LGBTQ+ in public spaces, I ask, who can be present and under what conditions? At the heart of the Mission District, Manuel Paul's *Por Vida* reconstructs familiar imagery of lowriding into a work that recognizes queer people by depicting same-sex intimacy and representing transgender bodies in a neighborhood with a legacy of murals. As a mural, it challenges the patriarchal idea that lowrider culture is heterosexual by experimenting with visual culture. Hostile responses, including Instagram comments, vandalism, and arson, reveal that the conflict extends beyond visuals and into a battle over who controls the right to occupy cultural and physical space within the barrio while at the same time receiving support.

The first chapter examines Koritha Mitchell's concept of "know-your-place aggression," and explains why queer presence faces strong opposition in marginalized

communities. The backlash against *Por Vida* is because of the mural's success in making queer Chicanx existence visible in a place where they thought they had no place at all. The mural in this space made the public rethink mainstream discourses on gender and family structures among Chicanx. Yet, in doing so, the violence also functions to confirm its importance in being there. The efforts to censor or destroy the mural only mark the anxieties around queer presence in public Chicanx space. The act of destroying the mural became part of its meaning, exposing the systems that police the community internally and externally.

However, these responses go beyond mere acceptance of queer portrayals, revealing how the dynamics of public space operate by regulating and excluding visuals. For the heteronormative public, the queer Chicanx body is hidden from the world by confining only to LGBTQ+ friendly spaces where their intersectional identities are already tolerable; on the other hand, barrio imagery belongs to heterosexual masculinity. By placing the queer and trans figures into *Por Vida*, the artist turns the mural into a vehicle for confronting the collective memory that denies queer Chicanx people and vocalizing that they serve as active agents in barrio culture.

The photographic series *The Q-Sides* continues to intervene in the heteronormative structures through portraiture and performance that simultaneously work as documentation. While *Por Vida* focused on visibility by being on a public wall, *The Q-Sides* uses photography to address queer individuals in the lowrider culture using documentary-like methods. By reimagining the mixtape covers of *East Side Story* with queer Latinx subjects, artists Vero Majano, DJ Brown Angel, and Kari Orvik show how

lowrider visual traditions excluded these bodies over the years and invite artists of similar identity to create new opportunities for belonging. The series does not reject lowrider culture; instead, it incorporates its visual codes along with queer ones. José Esteban Muñoz's theory of disidentification helps the viewer understand the photographs more deeply. These photographs neither assimilate nor completely abandon Chicana visual traditions; instead, they transform these traditions into spaces of queer self-representation.

Subjects in *The Q-Sides* photographs refuse invisibility. In *Volume 10*, Juanita MORE! boldly stands between two lowriders, occupying a space usually shown by heterosexual masculine subjects and objects. In *Volume 3*, queer Chicana individuals who bear tattoos claim a public space by uplifting one another through showing up and expressing themselves. Queer Chicana subjects appear not as marginal, but as active participants in lowrider culture and Chicana history. The camera becomes a tool that empowers subjects to represent themselves as something more than a criminal stereotype made by racial and cultural policing.

Photography plays an important role in this project as both a documentary tool and a means of surviving erasure through traces. Although the burning of *Por Vida* signifies the vulnerability of queer art, its traces remain permanent in social media photographs, and exhibitions ensure the mural's memory exists beyond its physical form. Similarly, *The Q-Sides* documents queer Chicana individuals and works as its own archive of identities typically left out of dominant narratives. These works are part of a broader tradition of Chicana and queer photography that uses the camera to document lives ignored by mainstream archives.

This thesis focuses on queer Chicanx visibility within lowrider visual culture and is limited to the artworks of the exhibition in San Francisco's Mission District and Galería de la Raza. The case studies of *Por Vida* and *The Q-Sides* offer a close look at how these specific queer Chicanx artists navigate visibility and belonging within a single regional setting. I feel the need to acknowledge that the thesis's limited scope does not delve into the *House of MORE!* photograph as much as I would like to, which is why I emphasize the mural's story alone to keep the timeline as clear and concise as I can in this project. Future papers could explore in depth the conversations between the Mission and Castro Districts regarding LGBTQ+. Still, many aspects of lowrider culture and queer Latinx visual practices extend beyond the Bay Area and Southern California. The use of visual practices by queer and Latinx artists also extends beyond photography and murals and can be explored in many other media. Future research could explore how queer and Chicanx or Latinx visual culture manifests in other U.S. cities, such as Los Angeles, Chicago, and Houston, as well as in other parts of the Southwest, where lowriding is huge, perhaps even in other Chicanx cultural expressions.

This reclamation is deeply rooted in a painful history from the last century. For generations, Chicanx and Latinx people have been subjected to racial profiling, criminalization, and spatial policing through anti-cruising laws, immigration legislation, and discrimination against lowriders and barrios. At the same time, LGBTQ+ individuals within these communities have experienced limited access and acceptance within their own cultural traditions. The artworks discussed in this thesis show how queer Chicanx artists live in an intersectional realm, negotiating both racial profiling from mainstream

society and heteronormative policing within their own communities. Through murals and photography, these artists develop alternative solutions, resisting erasure and affirming queer belonging.

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ILLUSTRATIONS

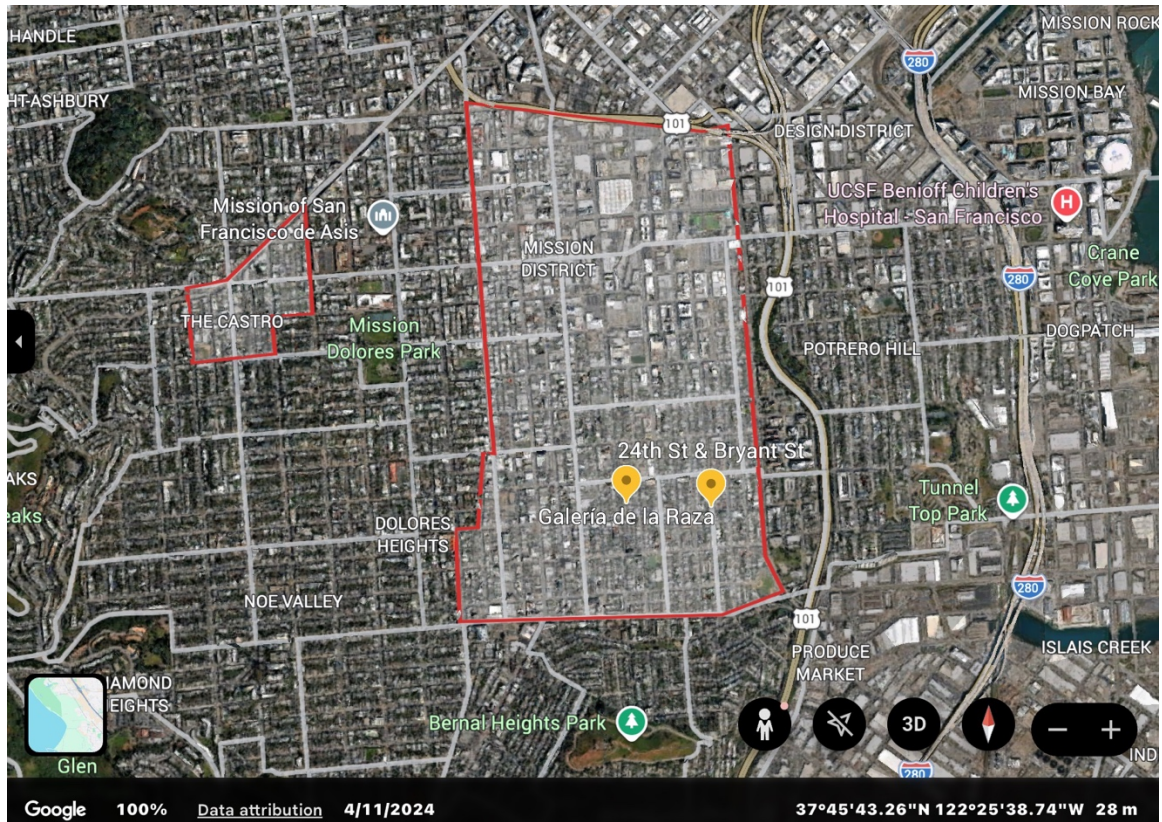


FIGURE 1: Satellite map of the Mission District and Castro District within San Francisco. The two yellow pins in the Mission District show Galería de la Raza on the left, with the former 2015 location on the right, made on Google Earth for educational purposes.



FIGURE 2: Reprint of Manuel Paul's *Por Vida*, vinyl mural after the first rounds of vandalism, the first print was identical to this one, at Galería de la Raza, 2015. Photo taken by Lydia Chavez and uploaded by Mission Local, June 28, 2015, for educational purposes.



FIGURE 3: *Por Vida*, after being vandalized by blue and red spray paint, leaving the center figure untouched. Photo from Advocate journal website, June 19, 2015, for educational purposes.

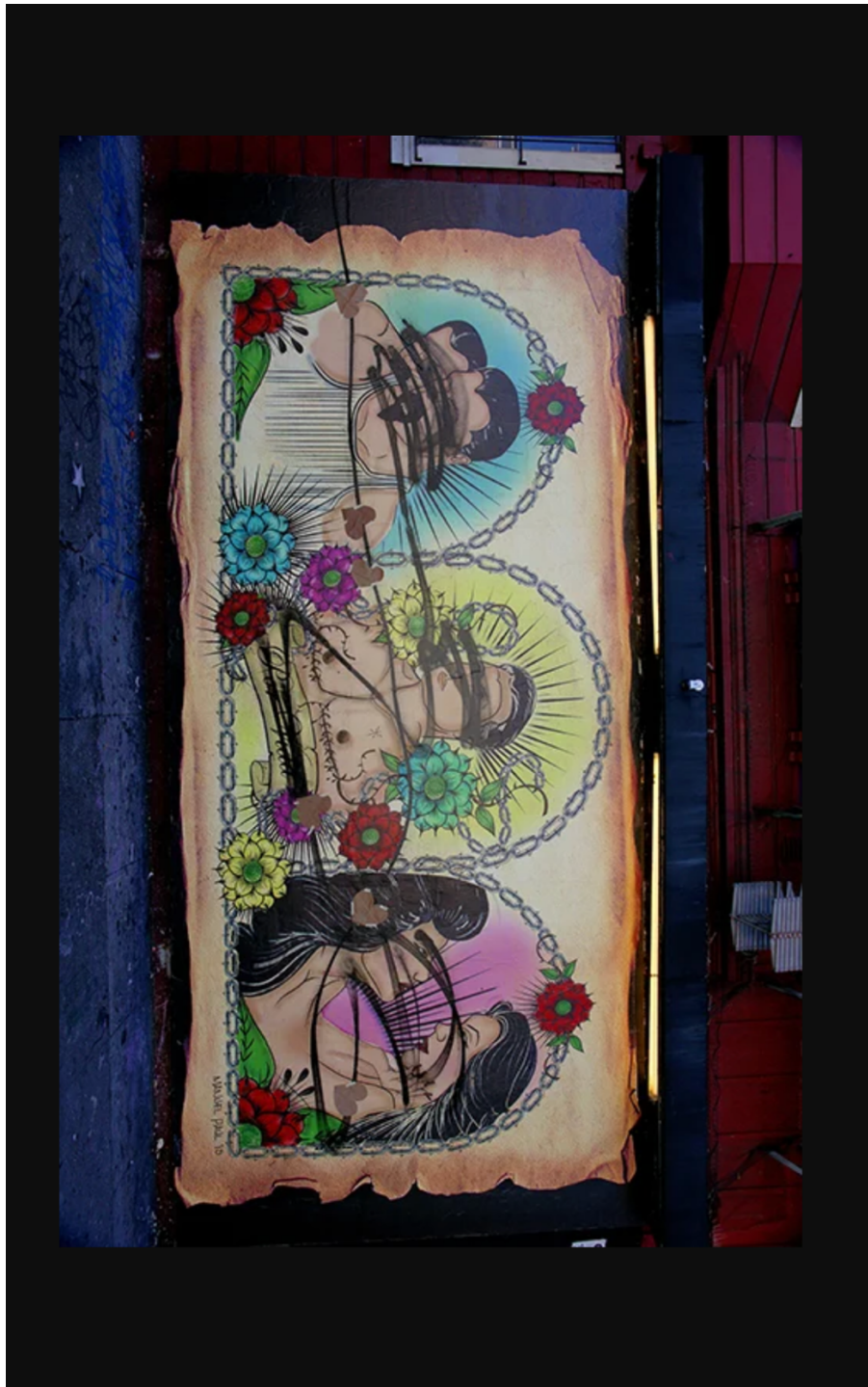


FIGURE 4: *Por Vida*, after being vandalized by black spray paint, vandalized the center figure this time after discovering the transgender representation. Photo from Dick Evans on Mission Book SF, June 22, 2015, for educational purposes.



FIGURE 5: Reprint of Manuel Paul's *Por Vida*, behind yellow police tape after it was set on fire by a vandal, Galería de la Raza, 2015. Photo uploaded by KQED, vandalized at 11 PM on June 29, 2015, for educational purposes.



FIGURE 6: Fred Rowe Foto, *House of MORE!*, 2023 Gicleé print on gatorboard 40" x 70" From Left to Right: Princess Panocha, Dulce De Leche, Juanita MORE!, and Voodana

Object Behind Subjects: Manuel Paul of the Maricón Collective, *Por Vida*, Digital mural, Galería de la Raza, 2015. Photograph by Breana Lepe. This mural still exists and has been moved into one of Galería de la Raza's studio locations.



FIGURE 7: Vero Majano, Brown Angel, Kari Orvik, *The Q-Sides, Volume 10*, 2015/2025, Pigment print, 71.12 cm x 71.12 cm, Galería de la Raza.
Models: Juanita MORE!
Photograph by Breana Lepe.



FIGURE 8: Vero Majano, Brown Angel, Kari Orvik, *The Q-Sides, Volume 3*, 2015/2025, Pigment print, 71.12 cm x 71.12 cm, Galería de la Raza.
 Models: Esteban Rodriguez, Al Lujan, Manuel Rodrigues, Yelz Gochez, Prado Gomez, Jess Vu
 Photograph by Breana Lepe.

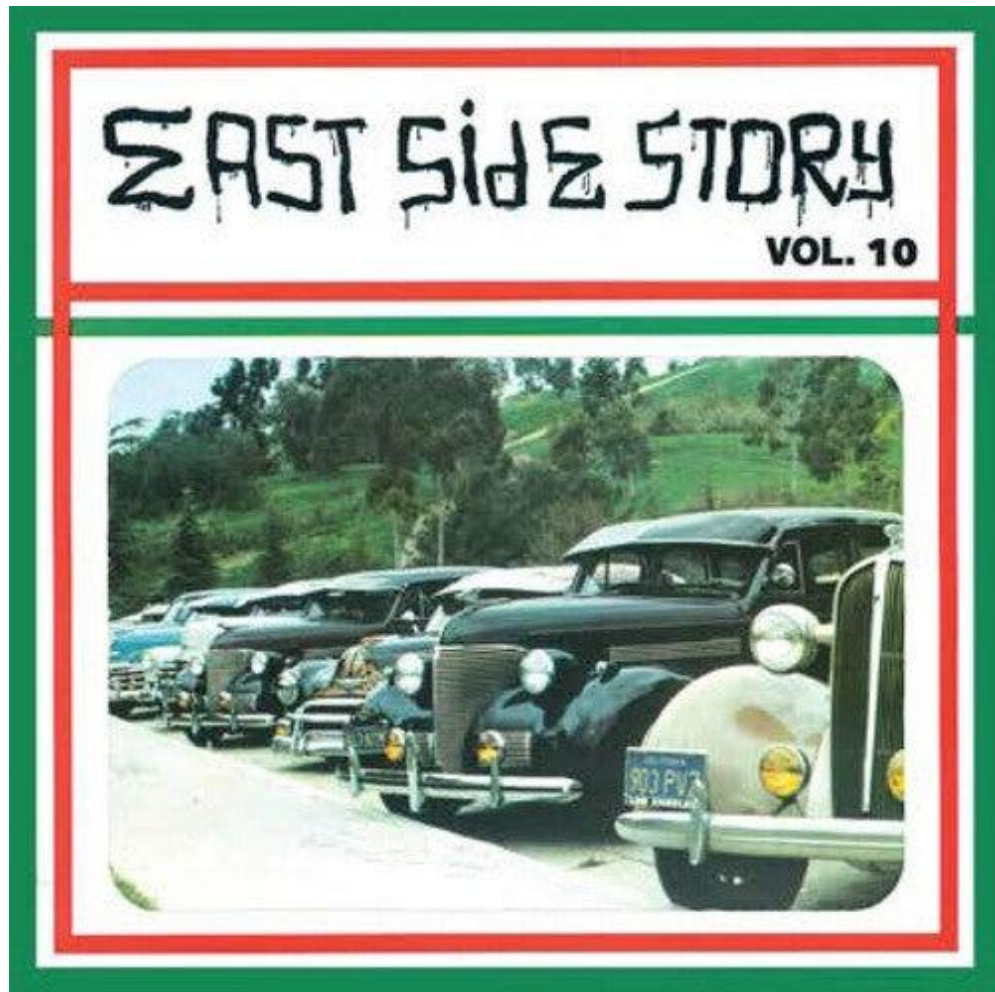


FIGURE 9: Anthony Boorlis, Mixtape cover for *East Side Story, Volume 10*, 1997/1998. Photo from Del Bravo Record Shop website, for educational purposes.



FIGURE 10: Anthony Boorlis, Mixtape cover for *East Side Story, Volume 3*, May 1998. Photo from Was Trax Records website, for educational purposes.