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Spatialized Violence in Chicana Literature and Art

By

DAVID BARRERA
DISSERTATION

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of the

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2023

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Abstract

This dissertation examines how Chicana literature and art from the 1970s to the end of the twentieth-century responds to various spatial regimes. I argue that Chicana cultural producers in this historical period deploy a range of aesthetic strategies that often contradict one another but that nevertheless express resistance, subjection, and at times complicity towards the reproduction of spatial violence across racial geographies. My dissertation traces these contradictory aesthetic strategies through a materialist methodology that attends to the historical and material sites of production in which Chicana writers, artists, and activists have utilized poetry, performance, literary fiction, and photography as aesthetic forms that can directly respond to spatial regimes, such as policing, gentrification, environmental risk, and geographical displacement. With a particular focus on California, I interrogate how spatialized violence works across urban, carceral, rural, and transnational geographies within the state as interconnected spaces that are both real and imagined, shaping the everyday of Chicana communities while manifesting in the content and form of Chicana literature and art.

I begin my dissertation with an analysis of Raúl Salinas' poetry and activism, examining how the production and circulation of his work destabilize carceral space within and beyond the prison space proper. I then move to the works of Asco, situating their performances as material responses to the Chicano Moratorium demonstrations and their legacies. From there, I examine the fictional works of Chicana feminist writer Helena María Viramontes, expressing how her literature interrogates the ways that violence is spatialized on a transnational scale. My dissertation then concludes with a consideration of Harry Gamboa Jr.'s photography and the ways his images produce spatial networks and bonds that interrogate race, gender, and sexuality across photographic frames.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	ii
Abstract	v
List of Figures	vii
Introduction	1
Chicanx Aesthetics, Spatialized Violence	
Chapter I	32
The Space of the Prison in Raúl Salinas' Writing and Activism	
Chapter II	79
Asco's Material and Performative Responses to Spatial Violence	
Chapter III	120
Urban and Rural Geographies of Spatialized Violence in Helena María Viramontes' Fiction	
Chapter IV	164
The Spatial Networks of Harry Gamboa Jr.'s Photography	
Works Cited	209

List of Figures

Figure 1.1: *Aztlán de Leavenworth*, 1970

Figure 1.2: Raúl Salinas, “A Trip through the Mind Jail,” 1970

Figure 1.3: Juan Bruce-Novoa, paradigm chart, 1982

Figure 2.1: Asco, *Stations of the Cross*, 1971

Figure 2.2: UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center, *CSRC Minute: Gronk: Day 3 (April 23, 2010)*, 2010

Figure 4.1: Harry Gamboa Jr., *Gregory Bojorquez, Photographer*, from *Chicano Male Unbonded* series, 2010

Figure 4.2: Harry Gamboa Jr., *Humberto Sandoval, Actor*, from *Chicano Male Unbonded* series, 1991

Figure 4.3: Harry Gamboa Jr., *El Mundo L.A.: Humberto Sandoval, Actor*, 1992

Figure 4.4: Harry Gamboa Jr., *Roberto Bedoya, Poet/Performer*, from *Chicano Male Unbonded* series, 1991

Figure 4.5: Harry Gamboa Jr., *Gerardo Velazquez, Synthesized Music Composer*, from *Chicano Male Unbonded* series, 1991

Figure 4.6: Nervous Gender, “Confessions,” 1980

Figure 4.7: Harry Gamboa Jr., *Jack Vargas, Librarian*, from *Chicano Male Unbonded* series, 1995

Introduction

Chicanx Aesthetics, Spatialized Violence

In 2020, over a Fourth of July weekend, the words “NO CAGES NO JAULAS” were typed with water vapor in the sky above Downtown Los Angeles as an act of protest calling for the abolition of immigrant detention in the U.S. and across the globe. By playing with the notion of looking up at the sky for fireworks, a celebratory practice in the U.S. during the Fourth, Salvadoran artist Beatriz Cortez, with her sky typed words, reclaims the sky’s space to announce to the LA public that U.S. independence, the very term that the Fourth is celebrated for, is dependent upon a centuries-long history of incarceration and detention of racialized subjects. This history endures well into the present, made all the more visible with circulated images, across media outlets during the Trump administration, of immigrant children separated from their families and confined into cages. Cortez describes this phenomenon of family separation as “one of the most despicable acts,” since “our children are being held in refrigerated cages surrounded by chain link...feeling abandoned, without being able to satisfy their most basic needs physically and spiritually.”¹ Her words, “NO CAGES NO JAULAS,” call for an end to the physical and spiritual deprivation that immigrant detention and its spatial confinement produces for incarcerated immigrant youth, not only affecting them as individual human beings but as relational subjects who are severed from their communities within and beyond detention centers in Los Angeles. “[Immigrant children] need to be released to their families who love them...and to their communities so that we can be made whole again and so that they may heal,”² says Cortez, addressing how the violence of immigrant detention exceeds the spatial bounds of the

¹ Cortez, Beatriz. “Beatriz Cortez.” *Beatriz Cortez - #XMAP: In Plain Sight*, 2022, <https://xmap.us/artists/beatriz-cortez/>.

² Ibid.

detention center space, violently breaking apart kinship ties necessary for human survival that require rebuilding and healing not only in Los Angeles but across the globe.

For historian Kelly Lytle Hernández, “Los Angeles, the City of Angels, is, in fact, the City of Inmates, the carceral capital of the world” (1).³ According to Hernández, “Los Angeles is a hub of incarceration, imprisoning more people than any other city in the United States, which incarcerates more than any other nation on earth” (1).⁴ Cortez’s words brings this historical reality into plain view over the LA skyline during the summer of 2020, a season where a global health pandemic and international protests for police abolition intersected, revealing deeply sedimented racial and economic disparities to public audiences across the globe. Since 2020, precarious essential workers are subject to severe economic injustice by employers while required to work in-person and risk viral exposure to COVID-19 during a global health pandemic, Asian communities are subject to xenophobic racial violence and hate due to the mass circulation of far-right conspiracy theories blaming Chinese immigrants as the sole cause of COVID-19, and the policing of black and brown communities is all the more apparent to global publics with the murder of George Floyd and the emergence of Black Lives Matter protests across the world. For “NO CAGES NO JAULAS” to appear in the sky in “the carceral capital of the world” during a weekend of U.S. patriotism is to resist not only the U.S. rhetoric of exceptionalist individual freedom but is also to embrace a political future that attempts to eliminate the very conditions of possibility for racial and economic violence to emerge as it did in 2020 and continues to in our present moment.

“NO CAGES NO JAULAS” was one of many sky-typed messages during 2020’s Fourth of July as part of a collaborative abolitionist art project entitled *In Plain Sight* (2020-present).

³ Hernández, Kelly Lytle. *City of Inmates: Conquest, Rebellion, and the Rise of Human Caging in Los Angeles, 1771-1965*. The University of North Carolina Press, 2017.

⁴ Ibid.

Spanning nine U.S. states,⁵ *In Plain Sight* was started by LA-based artist-activists Cassils, a transgender Canadian immigrant performance artist, and rafa esparza, a queer U.S. Latinx multidisciplinary artist. *In Plain Sight* is a multi-racial and gender inclusive coalition of 80 artists committed to producing “an artwork dedicated to the abolition of immigrant detention and the United States culture of incarceration.”⁶ While emerging out of “the carceral capital of the world,” Los Angeles is but one of many cities in the U.S. where incarceration and deportation remain ubiquitous as techniques of spatial violence that imprison and confine vulnerable populations, often racialized, queer, and working-class. The coalition puts ‘in plain sight’ the disproportionate levels of imprisoned Black, Brown, indigenous, Latinx, queer, and trans* communities in the U.S., a reality that is made all the more visible through written words projected across the sky. Formally, the messages act as “a precisely orchestrated, moving and poetic elegy on a national scale,”⁷ simultaneously inhabiting the space of activist performance art and elegiac poetry with an airplane determining the length of a poetic line with its trail of water vapor across a given sky. In terms of content, each individual message is conceived by its respective artist, though always in relation to the abolition of immigrant detention. The words often cross between English and Spanish languages, making them legible towards detained multilingual immigrants from Latin America and families affected by immigrant detention as a whole. Along with the art works, the project includes an accompanying online map entitled the #XMAP, which “shows current detention facilities, immigration courts, borders and other sites of historic relevance”⁸ across the U.S. The map identifies how the U.S. is spatialized as a vast

⁵ Slogans were primarily sky-typed across the U.S. Southwest (Arizona, California, New Mexico, Texas) and the U.S. South (Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi), though New York was also among the states.

⁶ “About in Plain Sight!” *About - #XMAP: In Plain Sight*, xmap.us/about. Accessed 5 July 2022.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

carceral geography produced under regimes of incarceration and deportation, especially since the emergence of the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) in 2003. #XMAP also shows the exact locations where airplanes sky-typed artists' words, with most staged above detention centers as an attempt to reclaim space from the carceral state. For the *In Plain Sight* artist coalition, the sky becomes a collective space for remapping the U.S.'s carceral geography, one that reflects how "the liberation of immigrant, LGBTQI+ and Black communities are deeply bound together,"⁹ just as the clouds in the sky, like the sky-typed words, are interconnected across the air. Thus, the artists make use of aerial space for the purposes of art production and remapping as both aesthetic and political strategies that can resist and disrupt the normalization of state-sanctioned violence in the form of immigrant detention and incarceration.

Among the contributors for *In Plain Sight* is Harry Gamboa Jr., a Chicano artist and educator from East Los Angeles whose activism stretches across time, from his earlier days as an organizer for the 1968 Chicano Blowouts to his present-day mentorship of multi-ethnic students as an educator for the Photo/Media program at California Institute of the Arts and the Chicana/o Studies Department at California State University, Northridge. Gamboa assisted in the *In Plain Sight* project, contributing his words "NO ICE NO ICE NO ICE" across the skies of Bakersfield, California above the Mesa Verde Detention Facility, an ICE Processing Center in Downtown Bakersfield. For Gamboa, the words "would read like the setting for a dystopian novel or film...ICE hunts unarmed humans for capture...A heartless agency designed to execute psychological, emotional, economic, physical, and cultural harm. But it is not fiction. It is difficult to witness the truth of ongoing injustice that is carried out against immigrants."¹⁰

Gamboa's words play with the material and symbolic violence of 'hunting' that ICE not only

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Gamboa, Harry. "Harry Gamboa Jr.." *Harry Gamboa Jr. - #XMAP: In Plain Sight*, xmap.us/artists/harry-gamboa-jr. Accessed 5 July 2022.

performs in Bakersfield but also across the U.S. “The truth” of ICE’s violent practices is a reality that must be acknowledged, even if ICE may appear as a ‘fictional’ entity in all of its gratuitousness. ICE’s “dystopian” presence is part of our collective reality. And for Gamboa, art like “NO ICE NO ICE NO ICE” calls attention to ICE’s omnipresence in U.S. civil society, repeating “ICE” across the sky-typed line while simultaneously resisting its “harm” by demanding for their abolition with a repeated “NO.” Appearing across the sky, beginning above Mesa Verde while moving across Downtown Bakersfield, “NO ICE NO ICE NO ICE” is a set of words that are made visible to a collective Bakersfield public looking up at the sky on Fourth of July. According to Gamboa, “As an artist it is important to create ideas, images, objects, performances, and words that counter any and all beliefs that encourage or reward the dehumanization of undocumented people.”¹¹ His sky-typed words produce and circulate an image of justice that resists false narratives and “beliefs” about the undocumented as lesser-than-human.

Produced during the U.S. presidency of far-right reality TV actor Donald J. Trump, whose xenophobic call to build a wall across the U.S.-Mexico border rallied white supremacists and nationalists into mainstream U.S. politics and public spheres, *In Plain Sight* directly challenges Trumpism by means of art, words, and performances. The coalition demonstrates how art and aesthetics can be reclaimed as spaces of resistance to the status quo, which in the case of 2020 was and continues to be white supremacy and the ongoing detention, confinement, and incarceration of vulnerable and racialized communities across the U.S. and the globe. *In Plain Sight* expresses the urgency for art and activism that directly resists immigrant detention and its spatial violence on the undocumented and the communities affected by the very presence of detention centers. As the #XMAP shows, immigrant detention has become a ubiquitous spatial

¹¹ Ibid.

regime throughout the U.S., remapping the country's land and, in the process, producing a vast carceral geography that makes detention centers appear natural to the landscape. *In Plain Sight*, however, resists the normalization of this carceral geography by not only calling attention to the spatial regime's reorganization of land but by reclaiming the sky as a space for projecting words of abolition and spatial justice. While the messages typed in water vapor are ephemeral, the words move across the sky, encouraging not only movement up above but on the ground too, primarily in the form of collective organizing against the U.S. racial carceral state. As the *In Plain Sight* website explicitly states, one of the aims of the project is to provide "accessible actions for the public to join the movement against immigrant detention."¹² Thus, the art collectively encourages grassroots activism beyond the messages' duration in the sky in order to continue disrupting the normalization of immigrant detention and the confinement of the undocumented as natural to U.S. racial geographies.

This dissertation examines art and literature by artists, writers, and activists who have responded to and challenged regimes of spatialized violence across U.S. geographies. My particular focus is on art and literature produced by Chicanxs, a racialized and gendered group, along with Black, indigenous, and other racialized communities, who were and continue to be perceived as material and symbolic threats to U.S. civil society since the nineteenth-century and more pointedly in recent years during Trump's 2016 presidential campaign. Trump's xenophobic far-right rally call to "Build the Wall" creates a spatial imaginary of the U.S. as always-already in opposition to Mexico, projecting immigrants as 'bad hombres' and scapegoats for economic downturn in the U.S. despite the U.S. economy's reliance on low or unwaged labor from undocumented migrants from Mexico and the broader Latin America. Works like Gamboa's "NO ICE NO ICE NO ICE" and the *In Plain Sight* art coalition as a whole show the possibility of art

¹² "About in Plain Sight!" *About - #XMAP: In Plain Sight*, xmap.us/about. Accessed 5 July 2022.

and language to directly counter the state while simultaneously reclaiming and resignifying public space for collective resistance towards spatialized violence. Projects like this also demonstrate both the possibilities and the limits of working within the spatial regime of the U.S. racial carceral state, which this dissertation explores by studying a variety of aesthetic and political strategies employed by Chicanxs that often contradict one another in their cultural politics. My dissertation does not valorize one strategy over another as being more or less revolutionary, though it does critique and reflect upon how particular Chicane aesthetics and cultural politics functioned within specific social spaces and historical contexts which, again, are wholly contradictory.

In Plain Sight, an example from more recent years, embodies several of the aesthetic strategies towards spatialized violence that my dissertation explores. However, for the most part, my dissertation covers a short history of aesthetic responses to spatialized violence from the 1970s to the end of the twentieth-century, a historical period marked by a proliferation of Chicane cultural production in the face of institutional erasure and racist spatial practices. My archive begins in the early 1970s, amidst the Chicano Movement, to demonstrate how Chicanxs have responded to and challenged spatial regimes across time, whether that be the exclusion of Chicanxs from educational institutions or the geographical displacement of Chicane communities across environmentally caustic spaces. My dissertation traces various spatial histories through specific Chicane cultural producers whose works simultaneously resist and make use of material and symbolic spaces in the U.S. I begin with Chicano cultural nationalist Raúl Salinas, whose poetry and political organizing with Black, Indigenous, and Latinx prisoners and activists, during and after his own imprisonment, shows the permeability of the carceral state beyond the prison space, mapping out everyday social spaces as always-already carceral. Like

poststructuralist thinker Michel Foucault, Salinas perceives Western social space within his poetry and activism as a ‘carceral archipelago,’¹³ where the punitive logics of the carceral state exceed the prison space proper and police racialized and politically radical subjects like himself and his comrades. My dissertation then moves to the experimental Chicana/o art group Asco, who made direct use of East Los Angeles’ public spaces in the 1970s & 1980s as immediate materials for art production and creative expression amidst policing and surveillance. Often conceptual, Asco’s works draw attention to racial and gendered violence inflicted on Chicanxs by the police, mainstream media, and their own Chicano barrio community, with their earlier works reflecting upon the 1970 Chicano Moratorium in East Los Angeles and Chicano deaths from the Vietnam War. However, Asco rejected the political tenets of Chicano cultural nationalism, particularly the mytho-poetic construction of the Chicano subject as always-already male and revolutionary (i.e. Rodolfo ‘Corky’ Gonzales’ ‘Joaquin’) and its emphasis on land reclamation from an indigenous past (i.e. Aztlán). Rather, Asco was hyper-attuned to their present day circumstances in East Los Angeles as alienated Chicanas/os routinely subject to racism, sexism, and homophobia within their own Chicano communities and beyond, as they were a group of cultural producers composed of male, female, straight, and queer artists. Shifting aesthetic registers from conceptual to realist, I look at Chicana feminist writer Helena María Viramontes and how her fiction directly contends with the violence of deportation and environmental injustice on Latinx and Central American women across the Americas. Through a transnational Chicana feminist framework, Viramontes interrogates the techniques of spatial violence as always-already gendered across urban, rural, and carceral geographies within California and Central America, in works such as “The Cariboo Cafe” and *Under the Feet of Jesus*. Across her fictional writings, whether in the

¹³ Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. 1st American ed., Pantheon Books, 1977.

form of a short story or a novel, policing is narrated as a spatial regime that informs racial and gendered perceptions of vulnerable populations, namely undocumented and migrant farm worker communities across the Americas. Rather than just mimetically representing spatialized violence and its techniques, Viramontes produces narrative spaces that depict Chicana women contending with the U.S. carceral state and racial capitalism, and how they produce caustic spaces for the uneven valuation of Chicana bodies, whether in the economically precarious and policed spaces of Downtown Los Angeles or in the Central Valley's geographies of environmental risk and slow violence. Following Viramontes, I then end where I began with my Introduction, looking at Chicano artist Harry Gamboa Jr., more particularly at how his photography *Chicano Male Unbonded* (1992-present) attempts to supplant the ongoing criminalization of Chicano men and the erasure of Chicana social space in U.S. civil society and mainstream culture. While adjacent to his contributions to Asco, Gamboa's individual portrait photographs of Chicano men takes on a different cultural politic, the mass media representation of the Chicano male body as always-already threatening to U.S. civil society and its underlying white supremacy and heteropatriarchy. His photographs create alternative kinship ties between a diverse host of Chicano men that, while corporally different, are directly connected through urban geographies. By queering the racial perception and desire for the Chicano male body, whether the spectator be straight, queer, a cop, or an art critic, Gamboa interrogates the libidinal drive underpinning the criminalization of Chicano men. While containing some obvious limitations, particularly in his exclusion of non-binary and trans* bodies, Gamboa's photographs nonetheless utilize the (cisgendered) Chicano male body as a subject that can remap desire across Los Angeles' urban spaces, circumventing the policing and surveillance of brownness and queerness simultaneously.

In examining these works from Chicane cultural producers, my archive shows how many Chicane have resisted a number of regimes of spatialized violence including, but not limited to, the imprisonment of racialized people, the policing and killing of Chicane, the deportation of the undocumented, the confinement of racialized communities in environmentally caustic spaces, and the criminalization of brown bodies. Ranging from Chicane activist Raúl Salinas and his poetry, which produce an internationalist spatial imaginary where prison abolition and indigenous solidarities are required for collective liberation, to the Chicane/o experimental art group Asco, who physically used their bodies to perform conceptual meditations on racial violence while blockading street blocks and pathways, the Chicane cultural productions in this dissertation demonstrate a wide range of aesthetic strategies and spatial tactics that Chicane have taken as a response to *spatialized violence* directed towards themselves and neighboring communities.

My dissertation theorizes *spatialized violence* as a term that encompasses the U.S. racial capitalist state's range of spatial practices that perform violence upon, within, and between vulnerable populations, rendering not only the spatial practices themselves as isolated incidents but as interwoven and reproduced within everyday social relations. Rather than look at Chicane as subjugated subjects occupying space where violence is produced and inflicted upon their bodies, my research looks at the material ways that Chicane cultural producers and activists have within themselves spatial practices that can change the very material and symbolic spaces that they occupy. This shift from Chicane as subjects within space towards subjects being producers of spaces in themselves is a significant shift in how we might discuss space in Chicane literature and art, whether we perceive the Chicane body as a space or whether we consider Chicane poetry and fiction as symbolic spaces that derive their politics from the lived Chicane body (i.e.

what Chicana feminists call a ‘theory of the flesh’). As cultural objects, literature and art can call attention to, try to resist, or even become complicit with *spatialized violence*, since within a settler-colonial context, like the U.S., culture can replicate the state’s logics in its content and form. Yet, as I’m arguing, culture can directly produce and change spaces, as is evident through the works by Chicaxs that I analyze here.

While there are myriad ways to identify and discuss *how* Chicax cultural production produces space, my dissertation couples violence with the spatial as always-already a part of understanding Chicax spatiality and the production of space under U.S. racial capitalism. While drawing inspiration from theorists of state and colonial violence, from Hannah Arendt¹⁴ to Frantz Fanon,¹⁵ this dissertation takes up Ben Olgúin’s more recent call to recenter violence in Latinx Studies, since merely identifying a spatial turn in Chicax art and literature often reproduces a myopic view of Chicax spatial practices, which are far from innocent from colonial, racial, and gendered violence. For Olgúin, “violence is central to the proliferation of Latinidades,”¹⁶ even though Latinx Spatial Studies, the field within Latinx Studies that my dissertation is directly in conversation with and situated within, has often overlooked violence’s centrality in spatial processes (15).¹⁷ As Olgúin argues:

Violence in its multiple iterations is an ever-present variable in what we have come to understand as spatial ontologies, including within Chicana/o and Latina/o contexts. Indeed, the idea of *violence as history* and *history as violence* forms the

¹⁴ Arendt, Hannah. *On Violence*. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1970.

¹⁵ In *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), Fanon famously claims that “the colonized man liberates himself in and through violence” (44). His words have widely informed the emergence of Afro-Pessimist thought and its takes on structural violence and anti-blackness. Fanon, Frantz, et al. *The Wretched of the Earth*. Translated by Richard Philcox, Grove Press, 2004.

¹⁶ Olgúin, B. V. *Violentologies: Violence, Identity, and Ideology in Latina/o Literature*. First edition, Oxford University Press, 2021.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

basis of the most provocative Latina/o Spatial Studies work, even though the constitutive nature of violence is not always acknowledged as central to specific Latina/o spatial poetics and place-based identities (24).¹⁸

Olguín notes exceptions within Latinx Studies, primarily Gloria Anzaldúa, who in *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987) theorizes violence as inextricable from Chicanx subject formation within the borderlands, a space which Anzaldúa has famously described as “una herida abierta” (‘an open wound’). Olguín also notes key scholars of Latinx spatial thinking, such as Mary Pat Brady, Roberto D. Hernández, and Raúl Homero-Villa, who all engage with theories of violence within their studies of Chicanx and Latinx spatialities. Though beyond some few exceptions within Latinx Studies scholarship, the spatial is often isolated from violence despite its omnipresence in the formation of *latinidades* in the first place. As a term, *latinidades* attempts to speak to diasporic regions of geographical space across the Americas, whose formations as bordering nation-states were constructed by European colonization and settler-colonialism. The cartographic force of these violent spatial regimes remapped, renamed, and erased indigenous lands across the Western hemisphere for centuries and continues to do so, haunting *latinidades* as a complicit body in *spatialized violence*. Thus, to speak about the spatial in *latinidades*, or in this case within Chicanx cultural production, invokes the violent histories of colonization that underpin their spatial formations. The Chicanx cultural producers and activists I examine work within and against these spatial prisms, though their works do not offer a clear outside of the totality of the spatial regimes of settler-colonialism and racial capitalism across the Americas. That is, much of their work, with the exception of Salinas’, are not wholly what one would identify as *decolonial*, though they challenge coloniality and its power across the Americas. But more specifically, the aesthetic and political works redirect the force and direction of *spatialized*

¹⁸ Ibid.

violence by acknowledging its material reality and including it within aesthetic strategies and expressions, whether in the form of Asco's performances of the brown body as always-already violent and nausea-inducing or in the case of Salinas who reclaims his imprisoned body from the carceral state's discipline and control through his poetic resignification of brownness.

My overall research utilizes historical materialist methodologies informed by the fields of spatial studies and Latinx studies, two disciplines that directly engage with spatial theories, thought, and practices. In particular, my project is indebted to two works at the crossroads of these fields: Raúl Homero Villa's *Barrio-Logos: Space and Place in Urban Chicano Literature and Culture* (2000) and Mary Pat Brady's *Extinct Lands, Temporal Geographies: Chicana Literature and the Urgency of Space* (2002). Villa and Brady show how Chicana cultural production and Latinx studies as a whole have always-already been places where space is contested, theorized, represented, imagined, and produced across racial and gendered axes. Their work also provides a framework for interdisciplinary research that engages with the material processes of spatialization and cultural production within Chicana communities during the latter half of the twentieth century, the historical period of my research.

For Villa, Chicano barrios, primarily in Los Angeles and other cities in California "have been real and rhetorical locations from which, and about which, to enact ideologically expressive critiques of domination, whether this comes from within or outside their social spaces" (15).¹⁹

Through a spatial studies framework informed by Michel de Certeau and his theorization of spatial tactics,²⁰ Villa observes within the Chicana cultural production he studies as showing how

¹⁹ Villa, Raúl Homero. *Barrio-Logos: Space and Place in Urban Chicano Literature and Culture*. 1st ed., University of Texas Press, 2000.

²⁰ Particularly in his work *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984), where de Certeau argues that city residents, which Villa reads synonymously with barrio residents, "[establish] a kind of reliability within the situations imposed on...[them]...making it possible to live in them by reintroduction into them the plural mobility of goals and desires" (xxii). de Certeau, thus, argues for a possible sense of living outside, though still within, spatial domination by way of 'spatial

“the collective Chicano communities, past and present...are, in varying balance, intervening in this intimate social space while interrogating the larger landscapes of power through the political culture of their expressive works” (15).²¹ That is, that Chicax cultural production is simultaneously attuned to intimate sites of production (barrios) while challenging spatial regimes of power. This Chicax spatial dialectic theorized by Villa is fundamental to my understanding of the ways that Chicax cultural production has responded, over centuries, to *spatialized violence* by simultaneously drawing from their particular sites of production while critiquing the general structure of dominant spatial regimes, whether they be policing, gentrification, or geographical displacement. Though, drawing from Villa, I see this political and aesthetic practice extending well beyond Chicax barrios and urban environments, manifesting in the ways that Chicax cultural producers respond to, challenge, and work within not only urban contexts but across rural and carceral geographies, “landscapes of power” in themselves that, while often compartmentalized or obfuscated within an urban-rural divide, are deeply interconnected. Compartmentalizing these spaces, which I don’t imagine Villa was intending, is in line with how coloniality operates spatially on a material level. As Frantz Fanon argues:

The colonial world is a compartmentalized world... Yet if we penetrate inside this compartmentalization we shall at least bring to light some of its key aspects. By penetrating its geographical configuration and classification we shall be able to delineate the backbone on which the decolonized society is reorganized (3).²²

tactics’ that operate through rhetorics of movement, which he analogizes to language and its endless chain of resignifications. Certeau, Michel de., and Steven Rendall. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Translated by Steven Rendall, University of California Press, 1984.

²¹ Villa, Raúl Homero. *Barrio-Logos: Space and Place in Urban Chicano Literature and Culture*. 1st ed., University of Texas Press, 2000.

²² Fanon, Frantz, et al. *The Wretched of the Earth*. Translated by Richard Philcox, Grove Press, 2004.

In these lines from his essay on colonial violence and decolonization, “On Violence” (1963), Fanon couples the spatial organization of European and African social spaces through the prism of colonial violence, arguing that for a decolonial political praxis to emerge, the colonized must “blow the colonial world to smithereens,” including the compartmentalization of ‘landscapes of power’ within a colonial context (6).²³ Through a Fanonian revision of Villa’s study of Chicana social space, my dissertation expands Villa’s materialist study beyond the barrio in order to consider how Chicana cultural producers and activists have responded towards a totalizing colonial context (i.e. the U.S.) where the urban is but one spatial node within a vast geographic network.

Perhaps the most important work that my dissertation takes its scholarly inspiration from is Mary Pat Brady’s *Extinct Lands, Temporal Geographies: Chicana Literature and the Urgency of Space* (2002), a foundational work in Chicana spatial and literary studies that articulates how Chicana literature challenges dominant spatial practices by creating a set of its own spatializing techniques that produce Chicana social space, even when such is continuously infringed upon. In *Extinct Lands*, Brady provides “a study of how Chicana literature has, from its inception, contested the terms of capitalist spatial formation, including the attempts to regulate the meanings and uses of spaces, especially the use of space to naturalize violent racial, gender, sexual, and class ideologies” (6).²⁴ Like my dissertation, *Extinct Lands* couples an examination of “capitalist spatial formation” with violence in order to understand the various ways that the production of space, primarily in the U.S., has been used to naturalize violent ideologies that, in tandem with U.S. racial capitalism, act as an anti-relational spatial regime that exploits bodies across diverse social axes (e.g. race, gender, sexuality, class). For Brady, “Chicana authors of

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Brady, Mary Pat. *Extinct Lands, Temporal Geographies: Chicana Literature and the Urgency of Space*. Duke University Press, 2002.

poetry, prose, and drama have critiqued the production of space, have assessed its effects, have ungrounded its status as inert and transparent” (6).²⁵ Her research of Chicana literature reveals various aesthetic strategies employed by Chicana writers to represent the dynamism of Chicana social spaces, countering the U.S. state’s abstract view of racialized spaces as inert, allowing for the erasure of Chicana social spaces through techniques of spatial violence, whether in the form of urban renewal, geographical displacement, or gentrification. Thus, Brady embraces the political possibilities of Chicana literature as a body of works that can directly counter the U.S.’s material and symbolic production of space that violently displaces and, at times, completely erases and destroys racialized social spaces across real and imagined geographies.

While opening up alternative political possibilities for living across heterogenous spaces, spatial studies can often overlook the vital role that aesthetics plays in the production of space, even when the object of study is literature itself. Often enough, social forces are reduced as sole determinants of the content and form of an aesthetic object rather than being framed as a dialectical relationship between the literary object and its socio-political context. Brady avoids this reductive view of spatiality when examining Chicana literature as a product of Chicana culture that theorizes spaces across both aesthetic *and* political planes. As Brady argues:

Chicana literature offers an important theoretic of space, one that, like many critical space studies, implicates the production of space in the everyday, in the social, but that unlike many space theories suggests the relevance of aesthetics...for understanding the intermeshing of the spatial and the social. And Chicana literature argues for and examines the relevance of race, gender, and sexuality—as well as class—to the making of space (6).²⁶

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

While largely influenced by Marxist spatial thinkers Henri Lefebvre and Edward Soja, feminist geographer Doreen Massey, and hemispheric studies scholar José David Saldívar, Brady's study of Chicana literature, in her emphasis on the aesthetic and the social, has been profoundly influential on not only my dissertation but countless academic works since *Extinct Lands'* publication by situating Chicana literature as invaluable in understanding challenges towards the production of space as a racialized and gendered regime. These include formative works such as Katherine McKittrick's *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* (2006) and Mishuana Goeman's *Mark My Words: Native Women Mapping Our Nations* (2013), which examine the complex ways that black and native women have remapped dominant racial cartographies through their material presence, cultural production, and aesthetic strategies. While Brady advances a particular study of Chicana women's intervention into spatial practices, I see her work in direct relation with McKittrick and Goeman, as the more recent call towards the 'x' in Latinx Studies not only asks us as scholars to practice gender-inclusivity in our research but also to draw attention to the erasure of black and native communities in historical accounts of *latinidades*, erasures that are addressed in my dissertation.

Where I depart from Brady is in my understanding of racial and gendered spatiality exceeding a particular identity (i.e. Chicana) while even moving beyond literature itself, whether in visual art or performance. Groups such as Asco, for instance, demonstrate a decidedly feminist and queer production of Chicana social space while staunchly moving against identity politics, embodying the affects of racial and gendered alienation through their performative bodies. The bodily language in Asco's performances positions the brown Chicana body itself as a social, political, aesthetic, and literary text that embodies and congeals meaning expressed through racialized gesture in relation to their material environments in East Los Angeles and Gamboa's

camera, which documents their performances in his photographic images. The Chicax body as an aesthetic medium in itself is also interwoven into Salinas' poem "A Trip through the Mind Jail," which features Chicano *placas* as a stanza that, as Olguín argues, demonstrates the poem's relation to "Salinas's other forms of 'writing,' his *tatuajes*," since the *placa* bears resemblance to a tattoo on Salinas' left hand (134).²⁷ Thus, Olguín reads the poem as one form of a larger visual vernacular produced by Salinas wherein the Chicano brown body acts as a visual signifier that is inseparable from the written text of the poem. Both Asco and Salinas' work demonstrate the need to expand the reach of understanding Chicax spatiality and its aesthetics beyond conventional forms of literature while not losing sight of the specific formal conventions of a given aesthetic medium. For this reason, my dissertation is interdisciplinary, utilizing performance studies methods from José Esteban Muñoz and Peggy Phelan in examining Asco's work, carceral studies frameworks from Ruth Wilson Gilmore and Dylan Rodríguez in analyzing Salinas' poetics, visual studies strategies from Richard T. Rodríguez and Shawn Michelle Smith in tracing Gamboa's photographic interventions, and Chicax literary studies approaches from Ana Patricia Rodríguez and Dennis López in considering Viramontes' fiction. The consistent disciplinary throughlines, however, are spatial studies and Latinx studies, two fields that require the kind of interdisciplinarity that I engage with in discussing Chicax cultural production and its responses towards spatialized violence.

Given the two decades' distance from Villa and Brady's publications and this dissertation, my research puts into dialogue academic works published within the last decade that directly engage with spatial violence and *latinidades*. These works include Nicole M. Guidotti-Hernández's *Unspeakable Violence: Remapping U.S. and Mexican National*

²⁷ Olguín, B. V. *La Pinta: Chicana/o Prisoner Literature, Culture, and Politics*. University of Texas Press, 2010.

Imaginaries (2011), María Josefina Saldaña-Portillo's *Indian Given: Racial Geographies across Mexico and the United States* (2016), and as quoted from earlier, Olguín's *Violentologies: Violence, Identity, and Ideology in Latina/o Literature* (2021). In addition, my dissertation puts into dialogue more recent essays and works in racial capitalism, carceral studies, queer of color critique, decolonial theory, critical ethnic studies, and critical indigenous studies, all recent fields of studies that use space as an analytic for understanding race and gender across real and imagined geographies. These fields also directly address complicity with structures of power, even from the position of Chicax and Latinx studies scholarship. As Olgúin describes, in addressing the shortcomings of Villa's spatial thinking, "Barriology and radical regionalism scholars overwhelmingly ignore how localized and regionalized subjects are defined by violences enacted against them—and by them—in wildly diverging ideological variations that, despite their pretensions, do not always challenge power" (202).²⁸ Thus, my dissertation is not wholly about resistance to structures of power but, in its indebtedness to historical materialist methodologies, is attendant to contradictions in Chicax spatial thought where resistance and complicity can coexist and even operate dialectically, rather than canceling out one another and leading to a defeatist attitude towards the university's continued cooptation of radical thought. Rather than dwell in defeatism, I chose to write this dissertation, even if the knowledge produced here is instrumentalized by the university for its own spatialized violence. That is beyond my control.

Of the works listed above, two of them, in addition to Olgúin, are central to how I frame Chicax cultural production, in relation to spatialized violence, as a contradictory space that is not immune to performing the very techniques of the U.S. racial capitalist state used to inflict

²⁸ Olgúin, B. V. *Violentologies: Violence, Identity, and Ideology in Latina/o Literature*. First edition, Oxford University Press, 2021.

violence upon Chicanxs and vulnerable communities as a whole. These works are Guidotti-Hernández's *Unspeakable Violence* and Saldaña-Portillo's *Indian Given*, two heavily cited studies concerning the place of Chicane subjectivity in relation to *mestizaje*, the very term that *chicanidad* has been entangled with since the wake of the Chicano Movement and its incessant drive towards Aztlán, a real and imagined racial geography of indigenous pasts, presents, and futures for Chicanxs. The two scholars trace across nineteenth and twentieth century U.S. and Mexican histories networks of Latinx violence and erasure across Chicane spatialities, turning the idealized image of Chicano self-determination and geographic location on its head by positioning *chicanidad* as a project complicit in racial, gendered, and indigenous violence. In other words, both Guidotti-Hernández and Saldaña-Portillo, in their historical research on the material and discursive spaces of *chicanidad*, express how Chicane spatialities are not innocent practices immune to what critical indigenous scholars describe as *settler innocence*. Guidotti-Hernández, whose research on space and violence “[attempts] to gain access to the cultural politics of violence that developed through overlapping colonial systems of the U.S.-Mexico borderlands,” argues:

When violence leaves its ineffaceable mark, it does not create merely a self-other relationship between violator and violated: rather everyone involved, spectators, enactors of violence, and the recipients of violence, is differentiated through her or his role in these processes. Violence is an underlying social process of differentiation for all involved (8).²⁹

Violence produces social differentiation across the borderlands, affecting subject formation across racialized geographies and spaces, regardless of one's individual social identity. However,

²⁹ Guidotti-Hernández, Nicole Marie. *Unspeakable Violence: Remapping U.S. and Mexican National Imaginaries*. Duke University Press, 2011.

violence is asymmetrical across social axes, particularly in terms of gender and race. So while there are no presumably innocent (settler) subjects in places like the U.S.-Mexico borderlands, those who are often subject to racial and spatial violence are either women, indigenous, or both. Thus, narratives of Chicana subject formation that celebrate the emergence of *mestizaje*, particularly Gloria Anzaldúa's theory of *mestiza consciousness*, are questioned by Guidotti-Hernández as complicit in settler-colonialism and its spatialized violence across the borderlands. This is where I see Saldaña-Portillo's work as providing a useful counter to thinking about the contradictory historical and spatial relations produced through regimes of *mestizaje* that much of Chicana cultural production included in my dissertation are dependent upon. In a more recent dossier in the Chicana Studies journal *Aztlan*, Saldaña-Portillo, co-authoring with Simón Ventura Trujillo, writes:

If *mestizaje*, in its misnaming of unity, enabled this severing of relations among Indigenous peoples and among their kin, it also created a space for generations of Chicana subjects, artists, activists, and intellectuals to think about all that has been lost through colonization, especially colonization by US sovereignty in the Southwest... The gravity of the historical loss, and its psychic toll, cannot simply be discounted or dismissed (156).³⁰

My definition of *spatialized violence* as a term for the various spatial practices that the U.S. racial capitalist state uses to manage and regulate racialized and gendered bodies across real and imagined geographies (practices that can simultaneously be assimilated into and resisted by Chicana cultural producers), is largely informed by Saldaña-Portillo's studies of the vexed relationships between space and indigeneity in Chicana cultural politics, which I directly address

³⁰Saldaña-Portillo, María Josefina, and Simón Ventura Trujillo. "Introduction: What Does Mestizaje Name?" *Aztlan: A Journal of Chicano Studies*, Volume 46, Number 2, Fall 2021, pp. 149-159.

in my chapter on Salinas and in my chapter on Gamboa's photography project, which includes a portrait that parodies the indigenous Aztec warrior archetype through the lens of queer Chicano masculinity. The "loss" that *mestizaje* names, thus, is connected to the loss that is always-already a part of Latinx subject formation across Latinx diasporas, as Lacanian Latinx scholar Antonio Viego theorizes.³¹

Thus, inspired by Latinx Studies scholarship, my dissertation does not try to valorize Chicano social spaces as exceptional from spatialized violence, whether in the form of indigenous erasure or colonial spatial violence. Rather, my dissertation attends to the historical and material realities of lived Chicano social spaces with their attendant contradictions that are often misaligned with how Latinx and Chicano Studies may idealize *latinidades* as always-already progressive and revolutionary. Olguín's call for a more rigorous examination of violence in *latinidades*, as his research shows, allows for an account of a multitude of Latinx subjects often forgotten about in Latinx Studies due to ideological misalignments and objectionable politics from the perspective of an idealized *latinidad*, even if such subjects are often indicative of actual Latinx communities in the everyday. In my chapter on Salinas, for instance, I discuss how his strategic use of Chicano cultural nationalism, with all of its gendered contradictions, became a powerful tool for racial solidarity between incarcerated Latinx, Latin American, Black, indigenous, and working-class people to politically educate prisoners and mobilize them for prison strikes. Across his poems, Salinas openly speaks of his indigenous identity as a 'Xicanindio' and even adopts Black vernacular in his writing and readings of poems, actions that might be perceived as problematic for present-day audiences. Yet, for working-class communities in his time, these were contradictory enactments of Salinas'

³¹ Viego, Antonio. *Dead Subjects: Toward a Politics of Loss in Latino Studies*. Duke University Press, 2007.

internationalist solidarity with oppressed communities near and far, given his years-long political activism with and alongside indigenous and black communities. Or in the case of Asco, they are an experimental art group that has been more recently embraced by the mainstream art world and even the film industry, with the major exhibition at LACMA, *Asco: Elite of the Obscure, A Retrospective, 1972-1987* (2011), and an in-the-works documentary film called *ASCO: Without Permission*, co-produced by Mexican celebrities Gael Garcia Bernal and Diego Luna. Both the art gallery and the film industry were the very institutions that Asco critiqued as barring them from entry, so their appearances into these worlds contradicts some of the revolutionary potential of their works experienced in decades past, making them, in a sense, complicit in the very regimes that their works express innocence from. For both Salinas and Asco, these political inconsistencies do not mean that we should look away from them because of ideological misalignments but rather should draw our attention to *how* they are expressions caught within regimes of spatialized violence. Positioning an incarcerated internationalist communist revolutionary *veterano* like Salinas alongside an experimental conceptual art group like Asco, with radically different aesthetic strategies and politics, is how my dissertation traces the contradictory spaces produced by spatialized violence that Chicax cultural production is situated within, whether it attempts to resist, remain complicit, or do both, however contradictory it may appear.

One of the primary ways that my dissertation departs from previous studies of space in Chicax cultural production and spatial violence is in its consideration of various aesthetic media and strategies beyond a rigid urban and rural divide that often pervades Chicax studies. The primary geographical space in which my archive draws from is California, a vastly heterogenous place with geographies ranging from urban, rural, transnational, and carceral. While often

accused of being overstudied, California houses one of the largest Chicane populations in the U.S., predominantly in Los Angeles, which as Hernández argues is the carceral capital of the world. As abolitionist geographer Ruth Wilson Gilmore asserts in her work *Golden Gulag*, prison-building across California's geographies is what links together the rural and the urban within the Golden State. For these facts alone, my research attempts to represent a large demographic of Chicane wrestling with various spatial regimes throughout the historical period of my research in the geographical area often called the U.S. Southwest and the U.S. borderlands. However, with this choice in area specificity, I acknowledge that there are significant gaps in my chosen forms of Chicane representation, leaving out the Chicane Midwest and Global South, areas just as affected by the forces of spatialized violence that I study in my dissertation. Yet, by observing California's real and imagined geographies, there are overlaps that express various communities across regions beyond California. For example, in my study of Helena María Viramontes' transnational feminist short story "The Cariboo Cafe," Chicane feminist solidarity in Los Angeles is imagined between U.S. Chicanas and Central Americans, though at the expense of recentering the U.S. nation-state over actual Central Americans. Viramontes' transnational gesture destabilizes the hermetic and discrete categorization of Villa's 'urban Chicane literature and culture,' showing how understanding the Chicane spatialities of the urban barrios requires a recognition of the city's ties to Central America's geographies, which as Viramontes represents, are spatialized by the U.S. carceral, military, and racial capitalist states. Thus, my dissertation analyzes the distinct overlap between Chicane geographies and the ways that spatial regimes, like carcerality, produce spatial flows and restrictions for Chicane bodies across transnational borders and physical boundaries.

The spaces that Chicana cultural production represents and responds to are, thus, inherently heterogeneous and hybridized. As postcolonial scholars like Homi Bhabha have argued,³² hybridity can be utilized as a mode of resistance to colonial regimes, however, it can also be yet another form of commodification and reification under regimes of racial capitalism, diversifying the forms of extractable value by producing additional markets for generating surplus-value. As previously mentioned, within Chicana, Latina, and Latin American contexts, *mestizaje* is the term to describe racial hybridity and its deeply vexed histories of racial hierarchies and colonial violence, particularly towards mestizo and indigenous communities. Yet, as Saldaña-Portillo and Trujillo have argued, *mestizaje* has also, simultaneously, been used critically and in productively useful ways for Chicanas, Latinas, and Latin Americans towards political self-determination and empowerment across Mexico and the U.S., despite *mestizaje*'s colonial histories of upholding racial hierarchies since the eighteenth-century. As they write, "Chicana reclaiming of *mestizaje* enabled the invention of an attachment to Indigenous ancestry mediated by the anti-Indigenous racisms of the United States and Mexico, even as it also created a space to critically reckon with state racism and the segmented labor forces required by US racial capitalism" (156).³³ Thus, rather than celebrate heterogeneity and hybridity towards revolutionary and progressivist aims, my dissertation attends to the inherent spatial violence within the production of racial hybridities while acknowledging the transformative ways that it has allowed Chicana writers, artists, and activists to produce powerful counters to U.S. coloniality, whether their works are characterized as decolonial or not. Salinas' poetry, for example, weaves together disparate Chicana barrios, prisons, and spatial sites in order to produce

³² Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. Routledge, 1994.

³³ Saldaña-Portillo, María Josefina, and Simón Ventura Trujillo. "Introduction: What Does Mestizaje Name?" *Aztlan: A Journal of Chicano Studies*, Volume 46, Number 2, Fall 2021, pp. 149-159.

an imagined abolitional geography of Chicanx, Latinx, and BIPOC internationalist solidarity though while, at times, flattening particular racialized and gendered experiences. However, his inchoate imaginary of collective revolution against the U.S. racial carceral state showcases the effectiveness of a hybridized and heterogenous *latinidad* in organizing racialized and incarcerated communities towards abolition, even if *mestizaje* played a historical part in encouraging spatialized violence across the Americas. This is an example of how Chicanx cultural producers have worked within problematic contradictions to imagine otherwise rather than merely reproduce coloniality's racial and gendered logics across time and space.

In my dissertation, heterogeneity and hybridity are additionally reflected in the aesthetic mediums that Chicanx cultural producers use to compose their works, as they cross between genres and forms. For Rafael Pérez-Torres, this aesthetic strategy in Chicanx cultural production correlates to *mestizaje*. As he argues, “The uniquely hybrid nature of Chicano culture is... a correlative to the racial condition of *mestizaje*,” a characteristic that Pérez-Torres draws from Gloria Anzaldúa, whose theory of *mestiza consciousness* in *Borderlands/La Frontera* allows us to view “Chicano culture as racialized, relational, and hybrid” (xi; 22).³⁴ My dissertation traces works from cultural producers that often work between hybrid aesthetic forms to convey their expressions about or within regimes of spatialized violence that are always-already rendered as relational between racial and gendered subjects. For example, Gamboa documents heterogeneous urban spaces in Los Angeles through his camera and his pen, hybridizing the space of photography and poetry to reimagine the place of Chicanx men within dominant cultural imaginaries that devalue Chicanx bodies, masculinities, and sexualities. Gamboa's photography and poetry, along with the works of Asco, produce Chicanx social space across multiple aesthetic

³⁴ Pérez-Torres, Rafael. *Mestizaje: Critical Uses of Race in Chicano Culture*. University of Minnesota Press, 2006.

modes (e.g. performance, mural painting, photography, costume design, mail art) despite the existence of spatial regimes that attempt to erase Chicax life or try to assimilate Chicax into white heteronormative spatialities. While situated within the space of the urban, Gamboa and Asco read Chicax urbanism within a carceral network, directly addressing the policing and killing of brown bodies in their immediate communities though, much like the regime of *mestizaje*, with a notable absence of blackness in their framing of spatialized violence in Los Angeles. These historical realities qualify Los Angeles, as Marxist historian and geographer Mike Davis describes, as a ‘carceral city.’³⁵ Thus, my dissertation examines the multiple overlaps and hybridities of geographies and media to resist the perception of Chicax cultural production as homogenous in its aesthetics and politics. In much simpler terms, this dissertation considers how Chicaxs have produced various kinds of art and literature across different geographical spaces that do not look the same for their audiences.

My dissertation chapters are arranged in chronological order following the dates of production for the literature and art I analyze. However, the aesthetic works, and even their historical contexts, jump temporal registers, whether by reordering past Chicax historical events or imagining a radical future of collective liberation for Chicax, Latinx, BIPOC, and working-class communities. Nevertheless, Chapter I: The Space of the Prison in Raúl Salinas’ Writing and Activism begins in 1969 with activist-poet Salinas and follows into the early 1970s during the height of the Chicano Movement and the production of his poem “A Trip through the Mind Jail” (1969) in Leavenworth Federal Penitentiary. Beginning here helps to set the stage for discussing Chicax cultural production in the latter decades of the twentieth century (1970s-90s), given the Movement’s reigning influence in Chicax cultural politics across spatial scales during

³⁵ Davis, Mike. *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles*. 1st Vintage books ed., Vintage Books, 1992.

this historical period. Salinas' poetry provides a methodology for framing the Movement as not only a historical event but as a contradictory transnational activist project traversing various spaces—prisons, barrios, universities, indigenous lands—while directly addressing how the spatialized violence of incarceration, gentrification, and settler-colonialism affect Chicane senses of place across the U.S. and globe. In looking at both his work written while incarcerated in penitentiaries and after being released, whether written while enrolled in university courses or traveling across the globe for social activism causes, my chapter argues that Salinas' poetry reveals the permeability of the prison space, producing a carceral geography that affects everyday life within and beyond prison walls, predominantly for working-class BIPOC communities. Salinas' poetics and activism allow scholars to analyze how Chicane spatiality, through aesthetic strategies that borrow from Chicano cultural nationalism, the black radical tradition, and indigenous social movements, can potentially unsettle the U.S. racial capitalist state's spatial fixes of Chicane bodies across geographies which, for Salinas, are always-already carceral, arresting Chicanes into reified social identities and psychological prisons (i.e. 'mind jails'). Salinas' poetic imaginaries, in all of their complications and contradictions, create solidarities between distinct Chicane, Latinx, Black, and Indigenous communities.

Chapter II: Asco's Material and Performative Responses to Spatial Violence follows the years after the Chicano Movement, drawing attention to aesthetic responses towards the National Chicano Moratorium demonstration in Los Angeles in 1970. As young Chicanes from East Los Angeles who were witness to the Moratorium events of Chicane death and police violence in their neighborhood, Harry Gamboa Jr., Willie Herrón, Patssi Valdez, and Gronk, assembled an experimental Chicane art group called Asco, blending their social activism with avant-garde, feminist, and queer art practices that helped them to express feelings of disgust and alienation as

Chicanxs living in East Los Angeles during the Vietnam War. Throughout the 1970s, the four Chicanxs staged performances and installed artworks across East Los Angeles' public spaces and circulated their content through mail art exchanges across the globe, often offending audiences with their wildly experimental take on everyday Chicane urban life. Their performance and art provided a counter to Chicanismo, which was often heteronormative in its politics and overtly didactic in its aesthetics. Asco channeled a collective 'brown feeling' of alienation shared by Chicanxs experiencing racial and gendered violence in East Los Angeles, an urban space that itself was, and continues to be, subject to spatial violence, whether in the form of policing or gentrification. Thus, Chapter II considers how throughout the 1970s Asco countered racial and gendered spatial norms by reassembling and resignifying public spaces, thereby producing alternative Chicane social spaces that relished in the violence, disgust, and queerness inherent in Chicane subject formation.

Chapter III: Urban and Rural Geographies of Spatialized Violence in Helena María Viramontes' Fiction thinks about policing and environmental racism in California through two of Helena María Viramontes' fictional works: her short story "The Cariboo Cafe" (1985) and novel *Under the Feet of Jesus* (1994). While set in the early 1990s, the novel inhabits spaces across my historical archive (70s-90s), informed by the decades-long activism of Cesar Chávez and the United Farm Workers (UFW) in Central California. However, Viramontes' work is not a historical novel. Rather, it is a coming-of-age story of a young Chicana farm worker in Central California, Estrella, maturing into womanhood as she becomes politically conscious of the various modes of spatial violence affecting her family and communities. Viramontes' narrative experimentation unsettles any stable sense of time and space, a move that attempts to depict the literal and symbolic violence that environmental racism inflicts upon Chicane migrant farm

workers. This aesthetic strategy, while limited within the bounds of a novel, allows readers to consider how spatial violence works simultaneously across material and metaphorical registers within the imagined geographies of *Under the Feet of Jesus* and the real geographies of Central California. As a work of Chicana feminist literature, *Under the Feet of Jesus* provides an example of how the production of space is always-already intertwined with the social reproduction of gendered relations. My analysis of the novel in the chapter is put into conversation with Viramontes' short story, "The Cariboo Cafe," to reflect her broader transnational feminist project that attempts to draw solidarities between Chicana and Central American women across rural, urban, and carceral spaces. However, the story reflects her shortcomings in depicting authentic solidarity between transnational feminist subjects since the story reproduces the U.S. carceral state's logic in perceiving Central Americans as unidimensional and without their own subjectivities. Thus, the story inadvertently assimilates a hegemonic state vision of Central Americans and the undocumented. However, even in its misfollly as a failed political solidarity, the story provides an abolitionist solution: a recognition that all policing, whether in the U.S. or in Central America, is a violent spatial practice that perceives all brown bodies as objects for state-sanctioned violence and premature death. Placed alongside her novel *Under the Feet of Jesus*, "The Cariboo Cafe" expresses spatialized violence in California as a regime of uneven valuation across racial and gendered logics, one which Viramontes' fiction reflects, resists, and even engages with complicity.

The final chapter, Chapter IV: The Spatial Networks of Harry Gamboa Jr.'s Photography, focuses on Gamboa and his decades-long photography project, *Chicano Male Unbonded* (1991-present). This chapter looks at the ways that Gamboa produces and reorders Chicana social space in relation to the Chicana body. His work, ultimately, disrupts the spatial and

temporal fixing of Chicanxs as static ethnic-racialized subjects, particularly in Los Angeles and mainstream U.S. media, by presenting a series of Chicano male portrait photographs that show a multiplicity of masculinities, gender expressions, and sexualities. *Chicano Male Unbonded* is a response to the 1990-1993 Chicana/o art traveling exhibit *Chicano Art: Resistance and Affirmation (CARA)*, a landmark exhibit in Chicana/x art history as it was the first major museum exhibition of Chicana/x art. However, as Gamboa and his project suggests, violence against Chicanxs continues within and outside the spatial bounds of the art museum, requiring continual resistance towards the U.S. racial capitalist state's perception of Chicanxs as an always-already criminalized demographic. Thus, this chapter considers the aesthetic possibilities of 'unbonding' the Chicana/x (male) body from regimes of racial violence, advocating for spatial justice for Chicanxs through kinship bonds forged between his photographic images.

In summary, my dissertation reconsiders the relationship between Chicana/x cultural politics, spatialized violence, and aesthetic strategies in order to think about the ways that Chicana/x spatialities have been imagined and actualized across particular moments in Chicana/x history. With an attention to the materials of production and circulation used by the Chicana/x writers, artists, and activists that I study, my dissertation provides a study of Chicana/x spatialities that allows scholars to reflect not only on the historical period of my archive but on current political activism and aesthetic practices within Chicana/x, Latinx, and BIPOC communities who remain engaged with struggles towards racial and spatial justice within the U.S. in the twenty-first century.

Chapter I

The Space of the Prison in Raúl Salinas' Writing and Activism

While serving time in Leavenworth Federal Penitentiary, Raúl Salinas³⁶ organized prison strikes and wrote. From 1969-1972, Leavenworth acted as a site where Salinas engaged in activism and writing with radical imprisoned intellectuals, Puerto Rican *independistas*, and prison abolitionists during a period of mass social movements across the U.S. and the globe. In 1969, at the height of the Chicano Movement, Raúl Salinas wrote and published “A Trip through the Mind Jail,” written and published in the inaugural 1969 edition of the Leavenworth prisoner newspaper, *Aztlán de Leavenworth*. In a 1971 letter, Chicano Studies professor José E. Limón³⁷ writes:

Primeramente let me congratulate you on your excellent poem ‘Trip through the Mind Jail’ which usually takes up two to three days of study in our English 342-Life and Literature of the Southwest: The Chicano Experience. In my opinion it is the closest thing we have to an authentic Chicano epic poem surpassing (by far) Corky’s poem which has never really impressed me so much (115).³⁸

Written while at Leavenworth, “A Trip through the Mind Jail” is a work dedicated to Salinas’ hometown, La Loma, Texas. The poem reflects upon La Loma in relation to other Chicano barrios, offering up an elegiac meditation on the role of memory. The poem charts out a network of Chicano barrios and imagines solidarities between Chicano communities. Taking up Limón’s suggestion that “A Trip through the Mind Jail” is “the closest thing we have to an authentic

³⁶ Throughout the chapter, I use both his birth name Raúl Salinas and his name marked on publications, Raúl Salinas.

³⁷ At the time, Limón was the assistant to the Director for the Center for Mexican American Studies at the University of Texas at the time, Americo Paredes.

³⁸ Salinas, Raúl., and Louis G. Mendoza. *Raúl Salinas and the Jail Machine: My Weapon Is My Pen*. 1st ed., University of Texas Press, 2006.

Chicano epic poem,” this chapter reassesses the space of Chicano cultural history by positioning the prison as an invaluable part in understanding the years of the Chicano Movement, decentering the ‘I’ of Rodolfo “Corky” Gonzalez’s “I Am Joaquin” with the ‘I’ of a Chicano prisoner like Salinas.

Here, I am not suggesting that we argue who the central poet of El Movimiento should be nor am I suggesting a reinstatement of Chicanismo, which Raúl Salinas represents in several of his poems. Chicana feminist and queer scholars have been particularly important in addressing these tensions within their revisions of Chicana/o/x histories. For instance, Maylei Blackwell’s *¡Chicana Power! Contested Histories of Feminism in the Chicano Movement* (2011) rewrites Chicano Movement history by focusing on the role of women in community-based organizing and Emma Pérez’s *The Decolonial Imaginary: Writing Chicanas into History* (1999) theorizes the relation between historiography, gender, sexuality, and desire, when providing an alternative historiography for Chicanas altogether. While acknowledging the influence of these works in Chicana and Latinx Studies, I am particularly interested in this chapter in how the prison, as a site of racial and gender difference, reorganizes spatial histories. Thus, I’ve chosen this particular letter between Limón and Salinas to raise questions about how to approach and situate Raúl Salinas’ work as it emerges from a space that resists conventional modes of reading and order, i.e. the prison.

The letters exchanged between Limón are few of the many correspondences that Salinas wrote and circulated within, outside, and between the walls of prison.³⁹ Rather than being called “prison writings,” these correspondences are signified within the prison as “kites,” a slang term

³⁹ Many of these writings are collected in *Raúl Salinas and the Jail Machine: My Weapon is My Pen* (2006) and held at Stanford University Library’s Department of Special Collections, though additional archival materials have been published in *Memoir of Un Ser Humano: The Life and Times of Raúl Salinas* (2018), edited by Louis G. Mendoza.

used to describe written correspondences. “Kites” is a term that also signifies the materiality of the writings and the limited conditions in which they are produced within. As Louis Mendoza describes, “Kites that reach the outside world are one means for a prisoner to send some part of himself over the forty-foot walls surrounding most prisons. The term also signifies a prisoner’s sense of isolation and his tenuous relationship to the outside world, one subject to all manner of whimsical interruptions, be it censorship or getting ‘lost’ in transit” (20).⁴⁰ The correspondences themselves function within a vast network of textual communication utilized by imprisoned writers and radicals. These written materials help to imagine alternative forms of communicative resistance to the carceral state, helping to organize radical political coalitions and to build solidarities between social, racial, gendered, and class struggles.

Thus, “kites” and other writings from prison resist traditional genres and modes of reading produced within the university. In *Barred: Women, Writing, and Political Detention* (1992), Barbara Harlow highlights the tension between the university and the prison in her analysis of writings from women political detainees across the globe. Harlow addresses the need for alternative reading practices, specifically when examining writings produced from prisoners. She shows how writings from prison reveal how terms such as “literature” and “writing” are institutionalized by the university, creating a disjunction from what “literature” and “writing” mean within the prison. Harlow argues:

The literature of prison, composed in prison and from out of the prison experience, is by contrast necessarily partisan, polemical, written as it is against those very structures of a dominant arbitration and a literary historical tradition that have served to legislate the political neutrality of the litterateur and the

⁴⁰ Salinas, Raúl. *raúlsalinas and the Jail Machine: My Weapon is My Pen*. Edited by Louis G. Mendoza, University of Texas Press, 2006.

literary critic alike. Reading prison writing must in turn demand a correspondingly activist counterapproach to that of passivity, aesthetic gratification, and the pleasures of consumption that are traditionally sanctioned by the academic disciplining of literature (4).⁴¹

Harlow reminds scholars that writing produced from prison brings to light the political neutrality and passivity of traditional literary fields and methodologies. She argues that traditional literary critics overlook material conditions that are central to the production and circulation of writings from contested sites like the prison. With Harlow's analysis in mind, I read Limón's correspondence as a site of contradiction that can allow us to interrogate the "academic disciplining of literature," just as disciplines like Ethnic Studies, Chicano Studies, Black Studies, Asian American Studies, and Native American Studies, exist as academic fields that emerge from their radical critiques about the university as a knowledge-production regime while being housed simultaneously within the university and the community. For Raúl Salinas, this critique is emblematic of spatialized violence, connecting the space of the prison with the university. Raúl Salinas' poem "It's Been Two Years Now" (1974) represents his experience as a freshman at the University of Washington-Seattle after his release from prison, as he is still caught within a larger carceral network while on parole. He describes the irony of attending a university where graduate students are writing masters theses and doctoral dissertations about his poetry while he is struggling to readjust to everyday life as a college freshman at the age of forty. This poem draws a direct relation between the university and the prison as two sites that are tied to the U.S. carceral state. While Raúl Salinas' work is often categorized around a particular space (i.e. the prison), his work often complicates any inside-outside prison model in his representation of

⁴¹ Harlow, Barbara. *Barred: Women, Writing, and Political Detention*. Wesleyan University Press, 1992.

carceral space. His writing suggests that the university, the Chicax barrio, and everyday life in U.S. civil society is like a prison, confined by carceral spatial logics.

Like Harlow, abolitionist scholar Dylan Rodríguez directly critiques the ordering principles of the university, specifically in making ‘prison writing’ and ‘prison literature’ institutionalized generic categories. In *Forced Passages: Imprisoned Radical Intellectuals and the U.S. Prison Regime* (2005), Rodríguez underlines the violence that these categories create at a discursive level. Reading from the works of Paul St. John, a writer imprisoned in Eastern New York Correctional Facility, Rodríguez argues, “The persistence of ‘prison writing’ as the categorical designation for incarcerated cultural production...legitimizes and reproduces the discursive-material regime of imprisonment” (84).⁴² According to Rodríguez, ‘prison writing’ and ‘prison literature’ are terms that rearticulate punitive logics. The university acts as a site where these terms are organized, codified, and institutionalized. They reproduce the discursive logics of the prison within university study, especially in the arts and humanities. Echoing Harlow’s analysis, the term ‘literature’ itself becomes a marker of discursive carceral violence. Rodríguez writes:

The academic and cultural fabrication of ‘prison writing’ as a literary genre is...a discursive gesture toward order and coherence where, for the writer, there is generally not. Structuring the alleged order and coherence of imprisonment is the constant disintegration of the writer’s body, psyche, and subjectivity - the fundamental logic of punitive incarceration is the institutionalized killing of the subject...This logic is precisely that which is obscured - and endorsed - by the inscription and incorporation of prison writing as a genre (85).⁴³

⁴² Rodríguez, Dylan. *Forced Passages: Imprisoned Radical Intellectuals and the U.S. Prison Regime*. University of Minnesota Press, 2006.

⁴³ Ibid.

Reading Salinas' writing and activism through the site of the university underlines this tension between order and disorder, obfuscated by the terms "prison literature" and "prison writing." Raúl Salinas is widely anthologized as one of the premier Chicano *pinto* poets of the 1960s-1970s, occupying the category of Chicano *pinta/o* poets that includes Ricardo Sánchez, Judy Lucero, and Jimmy Santiago Baca.⁴⁴ While this grouping of writers helps to make connections between experiences of incarceration, it redeploys spatial confinement and sequesters their works to speaking solely to the prison space. The institutional and power relations of the prison that greatly exceed the prison space proper and affect everyday civil society in the U.S. and across the globe become obscured.

However, this chapter could not exist without previous studies of specific Chicana/o prisoner writings qualified as 'prison literature,' such as Ben Olguín's *La Pinta: Chicana/o Prisoner Literature, Literature, and Politics* (2010). Olguín's materialist readings and Marxist-inflected approach to cultural studies allow for thoughtful analyses of cultural production by Chicanx prisoners, working through the complications and contradictions of the prison's discursive violence when it meets the university's demands. Thus, inspired by both Olguín and Rodríguez, I am suggesting an additional reading and reordering of Salinas' writings, one that gives specific attention to the prison's spatial logics. In this chapter, I argue that Salinas draws connections between various spatial regimes by conceptualizing the prison as a central part within the production of space in the U.S. and beyond. By drawing specific attention to his activism as a materialist practice inseparable from his poetics, I show how Salinas' writings are an extension of his radical political praxis, one that is engaged in remapping carceral spaces and resisting spatial regimes, whether through his prison organizing, activism with indigenous

⁴⁴This grouping is exemplified in Rafael Pérez-Torres' *Movement in Chicano Poetry: Against Myths, Against Margins* (1995).

communities, or resistance to gentrification, all topics addressed in a number of his poems. Here, I am specifically interested in interrogating the particular ways of reading and approaching the archive of Salinas' work with the reality of spatial and carceral regimes in mind as always-already affecting the conditions of material production and circulation for Salinas. Thus, analyzing Salinas' work, I argue, requires a historical materialist methodology that addresses the different forms of violence produced within specific carceral and spatial contexts in which his writing and activism emerge from.

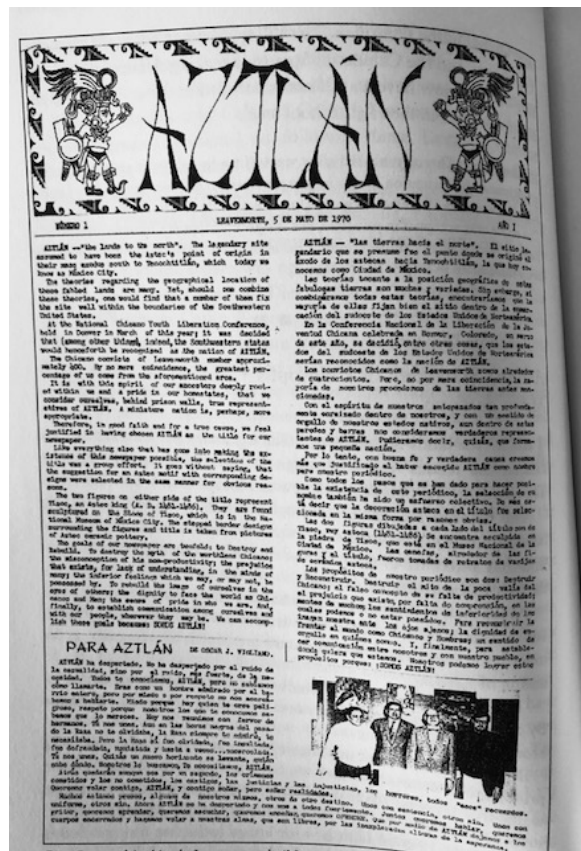
Networks of Activism in *Aztlán de Leavenworth*

“A Trip through the Mind Jail” must be understood in the context of the publication *Aztlán de Leavenworth* and prisoner activism at Leavenworth Federal Penitentiary. *Aztlán de Leavenworth* developed in 1970 out of an Ethnic Studies course taught within the educational department of Leavenworth. Professor Francisco H. Ruiz from Penn Community College instructed a course entitled “Cultural History of the Southwest” at Leavenworth, covering topics in Chicano history, culture, and politics. According to historian Alan Eladio Gómez, the class “created an environment that emphasized collective learning and contributed to creating a counter-hegemonic space behind the walls,” one that led to the emergence of *Aztlán de Leavenworth* and the formation of the activist group Chicanos Organizados Rebeldes de Aztlán (C.O.R.A.) at Leavenworth (78).⁴⁵ Gomez details how C.O.R.A. “pledged to work on self-organization by studying history and researching their own conditions, to prepare themselves for post-incarceration life, and to connect with people on the outside” (84).⁴⁶ The instruction of “Cultural History of the Southwest,” the publication of *Aztlán de Leavenworth*, and the organization of C.O.R.A. collectively happened within the span of a few months in 1970.

⁴⁵ Gómez, Alan E. ““Nuestras Vidas Corren Casi Paralelas”: Chicanos, Independentistas, and the Prison Rebellions in Leavenworth, 1969-1972.” *Latino Studies*, vol. 6, no. 1-2, 2008, pp. 64-96.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

Leavenworth became a site for radical knowledge-production, inspiring prisoner organizing, activism, and writing. While produced within Leavenworth, *Aztlán de Leavenworth's* circulation exceeded the prison space. As Salinas writes in an unpublished essay from 1972, "Our newspaper has been acclaimed *the* best publication in the Chicano Press Association, both in prison and out. We have been quoted in the *Guardian*, *The Village Voice*, *La Raza*, *Con Safos*, *Entrelineas*, and the Cabinet of Spanish Speaking Affairs in Washington, D.C." (50-51).⁴⁷ *Aztlán de Leavenworth* and its reception express the broader networks of communication that prisoners at Leavenworth were assembling through their print. *Aztlán de Leavenworth* can be read as a dynamic textual site where Leavenworth prisoners' activism and knowledge-production converged.



⁴⁷Salinas, Raúl., and Louis G. Mendoza. *Raúl Salinas and the Jail Machine: My Weapon Is My Pen*. 1st ed., University of Texas Press, 2006.

Figure 1.1: First Issue of *Aztlán de Leavenworth*, May 5, 1970, image from *raúlsalinas and the Jail Machine: My Weapon is My Pen*, 2006.

Inspired by Chicano activism and social movements in the late 1960s, the publication served as a space for Leavenworth prisoners to reclaim a sense of cultural identity through the form of Chicano cultural nationalism (Figure 1.1). Acting as Editor of *Aztlán de Leavenworth*, Salinas writes in the first issue's Statement of Philosophy:

The goals of our newspaper are twofold: to Destroy and Rebuild. To destroy the Myth of the worthless Chicano; the misconception of his non-productivity; the prejudice that exists, for lack of understanding, in the minds of many; the inferior feelings which we may, or may not, be possessed by. To rebuild the image of ourselves in the eyes of others; the dignity to face the world as Chicanos and Men; the sense of pride in who we are. And finally, to establish communication among ourselves and with our people, wherever we may be. We accomplish these goals because: SOMOS AZTLAN! (53-54).⁴⁸

Appropriating the rhetoric of Chicano cultural nationalism, Salinas imagines political liberation for Chicanos both within and outside of the prison through the prism of Aztlán popularized during the Chicano Movement as an organizing spatiality. The publication of *Aztlán de Leavenworth* intended to destroy and rebuild the Chicano subject, particularly for Chicano men in prison. Much like the Chicano Movement, the publication figured the Chicano subject as male, despite the presence of Chicanas and queer communities contributing to the social movement's activism.⁴⁹ In the Statement of Philosophy, Salinas reinscribes some of the gendered

⁴⁸ From the publication of *Número I, Año I, 5 de Mayo de 1970* of *Aztlán de Leavenworth*, found in *raúlsalinas and the Jail Machine: My Weapon is My Pen: Selected Writings* (2006).

⁴⁹ This history is recuperated in Maylei Blackwell's *¡Chicana Power! Contested Histories of Feminism in the Chicano Movement* (2011) and *Chicana Movidas: New Narratives of Activism*

and racial problematics of cultural nationalist rhetoric, imagining a Chicano subject that is androcentric and descends from the Aztecs and the Aztecs alone. The myriad indigenous communities across the Americas are out of the frame, though Salinas would later advocate for and collaborate with indigenous communities in the Pacific Northwest and Midwest throughout the 1970s after his release from prison. Thus, Leavenworth prisoners' efforts to destroy and rebuild were inherently contradictory in their reimagining for whom these parts of Chicano culture were being reconfigured. Chicano cultural nationalism became the language for prisoners at Leavenworth in their vocalization of dissent to the U.S. and global carceral states. As Gomez describes, "*Aztlán* was part of a strategy to push at the limits of incarceration, to reclaim a sense of personal and cultural identity, and in the process to create a medium in which to communicate the cultural renaissance and the political organizing, as well as a critical analysis of the mechanisms of control and brutality within the carceral apparatus" (84).⁵⁰ With all of its contradictions, the Statement of Philosophy is an attempt at reclaiming, as Gómez states, a "sense of personal and cultural identity" within a space that routinely controls a prisoners' sense of selfhood whether by renaming a prisoner into a number or by subjecting a prisoner to solitary confinement. The radical politics of Salinas, C.O.R.A., and other prisoners at Leavenworth were not only articulated in print. The events of 1970 culminated into a mass prison strike on March 31st of 1972. This strike was one of an estimated 3-5 strikes organized at Leavenworth by C.O.R.A. during the early 1970s. All in all, Leavenworth became a site for prisoner activism and politics, motivated by the production and circulation of radical knowledge that had been imprisoned.

and Feminism in the Movement Era (2018), edited by Maylei Blackwell, María Eugenia Cotera, and Dionne Espinoza.

⁵⁰ Gómez, Alan E. "'Nuestras Vidas Corren Casi Paralelas': Chicanos, Independentistas, and the Prison Rebellions in Leavenworth, 1969-1972." *Latino Studies*, vol. 6, no. 1-2, 2008, pp. 64-96.

In a 1974 interview published in *Sunfighter* called “Resisting Mindfuck,” Salinas contextualized the Leavenworth strikes in relation to mass prisoner movements across the U.S. He recalls:

After the Attica and the San Quentin tragedies, prisoners were saying who knew when they’re going to shoot us down, and if we’re going to die, we might as well be making a stand. This is what was going down around the country, the mood of the prisons, you know, very much inspired by Brother George Jackson and some of the other prison fighters. We defined ourselves as political prisoners. We were political prisoners because we had started a process of political awareness and because now we’re standing up and saying we’re not just common criminals, man (297).⁵¹

In response to the murder of black prisoner, activist, and writer George Jackson, the Attica uprisings of 1971 served as a direct inspiration for the Leavenworth strikes organized by Salinas and others. In this interview with *Sunfighter*, Salinas describes how his involvement in prison activism helped him to articulate an additional marker of social identity: the political prisoner. Rather than “just common criminals,” Raúl Salinas saw the demonstrations at Leavenworth articulating his status as a political prisoner, an identity which he conceptualizes as a prisoner with a “political awareness” and who has the ability to “[stand] up” against prison authorities.⁵²

⁵¹Salinas, Raúl., and Louis G. Mendoza. *Raúl Salinas and the Jail Machine: My Weapon Is My Pen*. 1st ed., University of Texas Press, 2006.

⁵² In a Fall 1970 issue of the prison publication *New Era*, found in *raúl Salinas and the Jail Machine* (2006), Salinas writes, “Leavenworth today is witnessing the arrival of a new type of prisoner; one who isn’t haunted by the specter of his prodigal predecessors of days gone by. One who doesn’t scurry into the gloomy caverns of idleness and self-defeat at the mere fact that he has arrived at a prison which has the reputation of being the most infamous of all, in this country” (66). Raúl Salinas’ writing in *New Era* shows how his redefinition of the role of “political prisoner” was not exclusive to *Aztlán de Leavenworth*; it resonated across his writings in the early 1970s.

In addition to Chicano cultural nationalism and the Chicano Movement, Salinas perceives his role as a political prisoner as additional inspiration for his ongoing activism. It allowed him to demonstrate solidarity with multiple prisoner movements and imprisoned communities. These political solidarities, however, were perceived by prison authorities as material and social threats. In response to the Leavenworth strikes, prison authorities characterized Salinas and other prisoner activists as politically dangerous. The prison strike organizers, including Salinas, were transferred to Marion Federal Penitentiary in Illinois, a prison site known for its behavior modification programs and units for solitary confinement.⁵³ As Gomez describes, “Prison authorities contended that by isolating them in the same institution and employing a series of behavior-modification techniques, as well as physical and psychological torture, they could control dissent” (59).⁵⁴ Despite the aims of Marion officials to “control dissent,” Salinas and his fellow Marion prisoners would organize another yet prison strike in 1972 in protest to the treatment of prisoners under Marion’s behavior modification programs. As Vern Thogmartin, a Marion prisoner, writes in a 1972 “Call to Action” for the Political Prisoners Liberation Front at Marion, “We Must Fight the Enemy” (291).⁵⁵

I have described this particular history of activism by Salinas and other prisoners in the early 1970s in order to frame Salinas’ poem “A Trip through the Mind Jail” (1969-70) within its historical and material contexts. Originally dedicated to Eldridge Cleaver, a dedication later rescinded in 1980 after Cleaver’s registration into the Republican Party and his conversion into evangelical Christianity, “A Trip through the Mind Jail” was written by Salinas in 1969 and published in the aforementioned inaugural issue of *Aztlán de Leavenworth*. Since the 1970s, the

⁵³ Gómez, Alan E. “Resisting Living Death at Marion Federal Penitentiary, 1972.” *Radical History Review*, vol. 2006, no. 96, 2006, pp. 58–86.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ Salinas, Raúl., and Louis G. Mendoza. *Raúl Salinas and the Jail Machine: My Weapon Is My Pen*. 1st ed., University of Texas Press, 2006.

poem has become Raúl Salinas' most studied piece by scholars of Chicano literature and prison writing such as José Limón, Juan Bruce-Novoa, Cordelia Candelaria, Louis Mendoza, Michael Hames-García, and Ben Olguín. As found in several of these scholar's works, the poem is often read in relation to its historical and material contexts, which as I'm highlighting, include the space of the prison, prisoner activism, and the Chicano Movement. Here, I acknowledge my own use of reading strategies that are informed in part by the university, such as close reading. However, in the structure of my chapter, I try to resist a teleological or unified arc of Salinas' life, writing, and activism, in order to speak to the temporal and spatial disorder central to the prison and the carceral state. My method can be read in what Rodríguez calls a "failure of methodology," which acknowledges an impossibility in representing the incoherence and disorder of the prison through the coherence and organization of scholarly work (38).⁵⁶ I choose to work through this tension when closely analyzing Salinas' writings but I must admit that I am particularly working in line with a historical materialist framework that I believe can account for the contradictions and radical potential of Salinas' works, which I argue exist beyond the university's imaginary of 'objects of study,' let alone an 'academic discipline,' as transparent, legible, or coherent.

Undoing Space and Time

"A Trip through the Mind Jail" addresses La Loma, the hometown Chicano barrio of Salinas. The poem is a remembering of the barrio space during Salinas childhood and adolescence, taking the reader on a 'trip' into his past and present. Chicana scholar Cordelia Candelaria reads the 'trip' in the poem's title as a reference to a journey, a drug-induced state of consciousness, and an accidental fall (109-111).⁵⁷ Structured around the refrain,

⁵⁶ Rodríguez, Dylan. *Forced Passages: Imprisoned Radical Intellectuals and the U.S. Prison Regime*. University of Minnesota Press, 2006.

⁵⁷ Candelaria, Cordelia. *Chicano Poetry: A Critical Introduction*. Greenwood Press, 1986.

“Neighborhood,” the poem describes the barrio in both nostalgic and self-critical terms. For the most part, the poem is situated in the past, in the space of memory. By the poem’s closing stanzas, the speaker shifts into the present, connecting past memories to a present moment of incarceration. The poem draws a parallel between the physical jail (i.e. where the words of the poem are being written) to the ‘mind jail’ (i.e. where these memories have been confined prior to the writing and enunciation of the poem). The term ‘mind jail’ connects the psychological violence of imprisonment with the repression of memory. The ‘mind jail’ acts as an additional jail into which prisoners, like Salinas, are confined. The term itself encapsulates how imprisonment operates across material and psychological registers. For Salinas, it is impossible to separate the material from the psyche. The ‘trip’ into this ‘mind jail’ serves as both a familiar and defamiliarizing process, one that journeys through the spaces of Salinas’ childhood, adolescence, and prison life through a temporally and spatially disorienting manner, like one is ‘tripping’ on hallucinogens. ‘Mind jail’ is a term often associated with Salinas, one that is used by him and others well after the publication of his poem and his time spent in prison.

The opening stanza of the poem begins with La Loma and serves as a reflection on Salinas’ past. The poem begins with the speaker addressing his barrio space:

LA LOMA

Neighborhood of my youth
demolished, erased forever from
the universe.
You live on, captive, in the lonely
cellblocks of my mind.
Neighborhood of endless hills

muddied streets—all chuckhole lined—
that never drank of asphalt.
Kids barefoot/snotty-nosed
playing marbles/munching on bean tacos
(the kind you'll never find in a café)
2 peaceful generations removed from
their abuelos' revolution (55).⁵⁸

In these lines, the La Loma of Salinas' past no longer stands as a material site. Yet, the Chicano barrio continues to “live on” in the speaker's memory. Here, memory is likened to a kind of prison, a ‘mind jail,’ that confines La Loma's past within the speaker's psyche.⁵⁹ The repressed content of the ‘mind jail’ manifests into poetic writing and speech through the act of remembering. The speaker's memory becomes a substitute for the neighborhood's absence. La Loma remains in the speaker's memory, continuing to exist within a symbolic plane. In other words, the poem itself acts as a symbolic substitute for the material absence of the barrio. The lines of this opening stanza, however, are filled with sensory details of that “demolished” past, evoking the neighborhood in affective terms. With “muddied streets” and “snotty-nosed” kids, the poem gives affective presence to the barrio that, while “erased forever from / the universe,” is conjured up in poetic verse with sensory detail. Thus, the poem can be read as a poetic ritual that works with the material absence of a past La Loma through an act of remembering.

Like memory, the poem crosses various temporal registers, destabilizing any fixed sense of time. I argue that the poem is ‘undoing’ time. For the carceral state, time is normalized and fixed when giving prison sentences; prisoners are subjected to ‘doing’ time. The poem's ‘undoing’ of time is

⁵⁸ Salinas, Raúl. *Un Trip through the Mind Jail y Otras Excursions*. Arte Público Press, 1999.

⁵⁹ Memory, the psyche, and the mind are often treated as synonymous terms in the poem by the speaker and Salinas.

demonstrated in the ways that the poem represents multiple pasts and presents, interweaving Salinas' personal history in La Loma with past histories of colonial resistance in the Americas. These pasts share the space with two presents: the present of the poem and the present context of imprisonment in Leavenworth, which the writer, Raúl Salinas, remains during the time of the poem's publication. Throughout the poem, the speaker tries to make sense of these competing temporalities, specifically in the ways that the past is remembered in the present. The speaker underlines these temporal tensions by describing the generational gaps between children and elders in the community, and how this affects the observation of Mexican holidays. The kids in the opening stanza are described as "2 peaceful generations removed from / their abuelos' revolution," characterizing the children's play on the "muddied streets" as only a possibility because of past revolutions against settler-colonialism. The speaker is critical of younger generations not being conscious of past political histories. The second stanza of the poem continues to magnify this historical remove by alluding to Cinco de Mayo and Mexican Independence Day, events that signify past resistance movements in Mexico against France and Spain. However, the political significance of these events are ignored. The poem mentions "Speeches by elders" that tell stories of Pancho Villa during community celebrations which "no one listened" to and "no one seemed to really care" about (55).⁶⁰ Instead, the celebrations often focused on carnal pleasure. The speaker describes images of young boys "making eyes at girls from cleaner neighborhoods" at "Sunday night jamaicas / at Guadalupe Church" and "close bodily contact, thigh & / belly rubbings under shadows of Cristo Rey Church" (56).⁶¹ Pleasure here is seen as a distraction from political consciousness but remains related to class ("cleaner neighborhoods") and ideological institutions, like the church. For the speaker, the pleasures of

⁶⁰ Salinas, Raúl. *Un Trip through the Mind Jail y Otras Excursions*. Arte Público Press, 1999.

⁶¹ Ibid.

food, dance, and sex obscure particular aspects of political pasts, especially under the “shadows” of the church, an institution that often represses and controls desire. These stanzas identify a tension between desire and revolutionary politics, which by the end of the poem is synthesized into a desire for revolution. The two are no longer separate.

From childhood events to the present, “A Trip through the Mind Jail” maps out the life trajectory of Salinas, one that begins in La Loma and is later marked by imprisonment. As an adolescent, Salinas spent time in and out of juvenile correctional facilities before his arrest in 1957 for marijuana sale and possession in California, leading to his incarceration in Soledad State Prison. By 1959, Salinas was released on parole but was arrested again in 1961 in Austin, Texas for marijuana possession, sending him this time to Huntsville State Prison. Released in 1965, he was convicted two years later for a felony drug charge. He was then sent to Leavenworth Federal Penitentiary, where he had written and published “A Trip through the Mind Jail.”⁶² The poem represents Raúl Salinas’ adolescent years, a formative period where drugs were introduced and where he became a young Pachuco in a Chicano gang. The ‘trip’ in the title of the poem can be thought of as an act of defiance to U.S. drug and criminal laws, even if these laws were the grounds for his prison sentences.

For the barrio residents of La Loma, being a Pachuco and joining a Chicano gang can be perceived as conscious acts of defiance to white civil society. While these acts are seen as material threats under U.S. law, they are central to collective identity formations within working-class neighborhoods like La Loma. They provide a sense of belonging in a country founded on exploitative labor and racial exclusion, like the United States. The poem reflects upon gang life and defiance in the barrio with nostalgia and critique. The speaker recounts:

⁶² Marion Federal Penitentiary was the last prison Salinas was sent to.

Neighborhood of groups and clusters

sniffing gas, drinking muscatel

solidarity cement hardening

the clan the family the neighborhood the gang

¡NOMÁS!

Restless innocents tattoo'd crosses on their hands

“just doing things different”

“From now on, all troublemaking mex kids will be

sent to Gatesville for 9 months.”

Henry home from La Corre

khakis worn too low—below the waist

the stomps, the greña with duck-tail

—Pachuco Yo— (58).⁶³

Here, the speaker describes the “groups and clusters” of Chicano adolescents—“the clan,” “the family,” “the neighborhood,” “the gang.” These group affiliations become markers of collective identity for individual members of the community, creating “solidarity” within and beyond the barrio space. The poem is critical, though, of everyday Chicano gang life. It represents the youth as “restless innocents” who presume they are “doing things different” but are actually locked within the confines of another ‘prison’—the barrio. While providing a sense of community, gang life occupies a contradictory space in the poem. In this stanza, for instance, the speaker alludes to Gatesville State School for Boys, a juvenile correctional facility in Gatesville, Texas, and a boy named Henry, ‘on the run’ (“La Corre”) from some unknown place. It is unclear whether Henry is running away from the police or *la migra*. Henry is seen in Pachuco attire, clothes originated

⁶³ Salinas, Raúl. *Un Trip through the Mind Jail y Otras Excursions*. Arte Público Press, 1999.

from young, working-class Mexican American, Black, and Filipino communities during the 1940s in defiance to U.S. civil society. The Pachuco's zoot suit is well-known as a symbol of opposition to the law in Chicano history and culture, later popularized in Luis Valdez's play, *Zoot Suit* (1978). This stanza in "A Trip through the Mind Jail" presents a formative time in Salinas' adolescence, where the conditions of the law and civil society determined his incarceration in adulthood.

In *La Pinta: Chicana/o Prisoner Literature, Culture, and Politics* (2010), Ben Olguín reads the poem as an extension of Salinas' larger corpus of sign systems, one that speaks to the signifying practices of Chicana/o prisoners. Olguín examines *placas* (i.e. graffiti signatures) and *tatuajes* (i.e. tattoos), popular signs used between Chicana/o prisoners, in relation to the imaginary body of the poem and the material body of Salinas himself as imprisoned. Olguín reads Salinas' physical body, his *cuerpo pintao*, as a collective signifier for relations of confinement and incarceration in which his poem makes reference to. Salinas' *cuerpo pintao* is also a literal human canvas where his *tatuajes* are physically inscribed upon, functioning as a kind of poetics through image and word. Olguín describes Chicano prisoners as "[reappropriating] the juridical narrative of abjection mapped onto their encaged brown bodies by 'deforming' them and thus transforming their significance" (123).⁶⁴ Tattooing, for Olguín, "simultaneously preserves[s] and rearticulate[s] their abjection onto the freeworld subjectivities for which they had previously been incarcerated" (123).⁶⁵ By giving consideration to *placas* and *tatuajes*, Olguín underscores the embodied experience of imprisonment. Following his description of the Pachuco, Salinas includes a stanza composed of *placas* and *tatuajes* to represent these alternative symbols (Figure 1.2). The stanza draws attention to the imprisoned

⁶⁴ Olguín, B.V. *La Pinta: Chicana/o Prisoner Literature, Culture, and Politics*. University of Texas Press, 2010.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

brown body as the physical site where *tatuajes* are inscribed and which move outside the space of the poem and the prison. The speaker describes how these signs are drawn by “could-be artists,” functioning as “esoteric symbols of their cult” (58).⁶⁶ These are “the art form of [their] slums / more meaningful & significant / than Egypt’s finest hieroglyphics” (58).⁶⁷ While existing outside the spatial prism of dominant U.S. culture, *placas* and *tatuajes* are situated both within and outside the rubric of normative Western aesthetics, even compared to the likes of Egyptian hieroglyphs. Olguín argues that “the metaphoric iconography of Salinas’s *tatuajes* and other *placas* historicize his corpus by grounding it in the lived experiences and corresponding Chicana/o political unconscious” (134).⁶⁸ Olguín argues that embodiment and particular Chicano sign systems are indispensable parts of the poem that enhance a collective understanding of the poem’s meanings. For instance, embodiment can be read in other instances of the poem, such as in a later stanza in which the speaker describes the “Neighborhood of [his] adolescence / ...that is no more” as “TORN PIECES OF MY FLESH!!!” (59).⁶⁹ Here, Salinas equates the literal body of the page to the human body of the writer. Thus, Olguín’s analysis of the poem provides a materialist reading of Salinas’ work that does not make the fault in representing prisoner bodies as abstract or transcendent of their material conditions. In other words, Olguín’s reading does not reproduce the discursive logics of the prison; instead, it is attentive to the material conditions in which prisoners live and communicate within. As he argues:

Salinas ultimately challenges the containment proposed by the page and the prison, the text and the tower, and, in a broader context, the overall carceral apparatus. “A Trip through the Mind Jail,” then, serves as a blueprint, a

⁶⁶ Salinas, Raúl. *Un Trip through the Mind Jail y Otras Excursions*. Arte Público Press, 1999.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Olguín, B.V. *La Pinta: Chicana/o Prisoner Literature, Culture, and Politics*. University of Texas Press, 2010.

⁶⁹ Salinas, Raúl. *Un Trip through the Mind Jail y Otras Excursions*. Arte Público Press, 1999.

prescriptive methodology, that enables us to access his complex corpus in which his *tatuajes* and other *placa* formats are central (134).⁷⁰

Olguín's study of the poem allows for a reading that isn't solely motivated by the rubrics of the university. Rather, his analysis looks to the prison as an alternative site of knowledge and cultural production, providing a materialist methodology that approaches Salinas' writing in sync with his activism and political praxis within and beyond the body of the poem and the pages of *Aztlán de Leavenworth*.

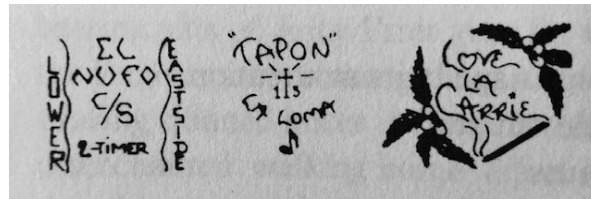


Figure 1.2: Raúl Salinas, *placas* and *tatuajes* stanza from “A Trip through the Mind Jail,” 1970, image from *Un Trip through the Mind Jail y Otras Excursions*, 1999.

In the second-half of the poem, Salinas shifts the focus from the past into the present. The poem also shifts from an individual's perspective (i.e. Salinas') in a particular barrio (i.e. La Loma) towards addressing a larger collectivity (i.e. Chicanos) in a broader context (i.e. the U.S. Southwest). Reflecting again on the neighborhood of his childhood “that no longer exists” and the neighborhood of his adolescence “that is no more,” the speaker thinks of memory's role within the present and its relation to other Chicanos (59).⁷¹ “Some died young—fortunate—some rot in prisons / the rest drifted away to be conjured up / in minds of others like them,” describes the speaker (59).⁷² Memory is only one part of why the neighborhood “is no more.” Premature death (“Some died young”) and incarceration (“some rot in prisons”) are further reasons for the

⁷⁰ Olguín, B.V. *La Pinta: Chicana/o Prisoner Literature, Culture, and Politics*. University of Texas Press, 2010.

⁷¹ Salinas, Raúl. *Un Trip through the Mind Jail y Otras Excursions*. Arte Público Press, 1999.

⁷² *Ibid.*

neighborhood no longer existing. With its barrio population declining, La Loma is literally becoming “no more.” Memory, however, can “[conjure] up” the past, just as the poem itself does in its preceding stanzas. The second-half of the poem shifts towards a collective memory, arguing that these pasts can be “conjured up / in the minds of others like them.” What began as an individual’s ‘trip’ through the ‘mind jail’ becomes a ‘trip’ through the mind jails of “others like them” in the present. In the closing line of the stanza, the speaker announces, “For me: only the NOW of THIS journey is REAL!” (59).⁷³ A collective memory of the past, however lost that past may be, is the only “REAL” of this ‘trip’ for the speaker, perceived as the only part of La Loma that can be recuperated from the ephemerality of time and the violence of the carceral state.

In its closing stanzas, the poem represents memory as a necessary tool for individual and community survival. The speaker shows how journeying through the ‘mind jail’ allows for psychological survival under conditions of imprisonment. The poem reads:

LA LOMA—AUSTIN—MI BARRIO—

i bear you no grudge

i needed you then...identity...a sense of belonging

i need you now.

so essential to adult days of imprisonment,

you keep me away from INSANITY’S hungry jaws;

Smiling/Laughing/Crying (59).⁷⁴

In the past (“then”), La Loma functioned as a source of “identity” and “belonging” that helped the speaker in a social world that always-already criminalized his abject brown body. Within the

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

present (“now”), memory has become “essential” to psychological survival, keeping “INSANITY’s hungry jaws” at bay while also providing smiles, laughs, and cries within a prison space that routinely disciplines and punishes criminalized bodies. As much as he was critical of the past, the speaker longs for a sense of individual identity and collective belonging that was once satisfied by his Pachuco days in La Loma. In the closing stanza of the poem, the speaker connects individual survival to the collective survival of Chicano barrios. The poem maps out Chicano communities across the U.S. Southwest, representing solidarities between these communities in their struggles against erasure. The poem ends with the following lines:

i respect you having been:
my Loma of Austin
my Rose Hill of Los Angeles
my West Side of San Anto
my Quinto of Houston
.....
Magnolia, Buena Vista, Mateo, La Seis, Chiquis,
El Sur, and all Chicano neighborhoods that
now exist and once existed;
somewhere... someone remembers... (60).⁷⁵

These last lines envision alliances between Chicano barrios. The speaker imagines the possibility for reclaiming identity and belonging through Chicano unity. La Loma is connected to Chicano barrios from past (“once existed”) and present (“now exist”). These once disparate places in the U.S. Southwest are brought into closer proximity within the space of the poem. Referring to “A Trip through the Mind Jail,” Michael Hames-García describes how “raúlrsalinas’ poetry...serves

⁷⁵ Ibid.

to connect various communities of oppression and struggle, not by abstracting from the particular, but by understanding the shared implications of particulars in a structure of complex ‘diversality’” (26).⁷⁶ While unique to a particular experience in a particular barrio (raúlrsalinas’ upbringing in La Loma, Texas), “A Trip through the Mind Jail” represents struggles that are not solely contained to La Loma or the poem itself. Imprisonment and loss, as well as individual and community survival, are shared characteristics across barrio communities, acting as the “shared implications of particulars.” Their particularity is not locked in a dialectical relation to some abstract notion of a universal Chicano subject. Rather, the poem imagines a range of Chicano barrios where their particularities are not subsumed. In this poem, there is no gesture towards ‘the people,’ ‘the worker,’ or even ‘La Raza’; instead, its subjects are “all Chicano neighborhoods. This call for solidarity at the end of the poem draws attention to the poem’s materiality, especially to its publication in *Aztlán de Leavenworth* and circulation between activists, writers, academics, and artists from the early 1970s to the present. It connects back to the material site of production, Leavenworth Federal Penitentiary, a penal institution where prisoners educated themselves, built solidarities, and organized strikes against the carceral state. As Gómez describes, “These activists were beginning to theorize an inter-ethnic approach to organizing based on shared histories of repression, while recovering the memories of resistance” (79).⁷⁷ While “A Trip through the Mind Jail” is heavily localized on La Loma and gestures towards Chicano barrios as a collective, the work of Leavenworth activists was international in its scope, described by Gómez as a “localized internationalism” (79).⁷⁸ In addition to prisoner movements, their activism expressed solidarity with Puerto Rican Independence, the American

⁷⁶ Hames-García, Michael. *Fugitive Thought: Prison Movements, Race, and the Meaning of Justice*. University of Minnesota Press, 2004.

⁷⁷ Gómez, Alan E. ““Nuestras Vidas Corren Casi Paralelas”: Chicanos, Independentistas, and the Prison Rebellions in Leavenworth, 1969-1972.” *Latino Studies*, vol. 6, no. 1-2, 2008, pp. 64-96.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

Indian Movement, and the Black Power Movement. If we are to consider the poem as an extension of Leavenworth prisoner activism, this reach beyond La Loma in the last lines of the poem is one that positions Chicano barrios amidst national and global struggles for liberation. Overall, the poem acts as an invaluable instrument used by Leavenworth prisoners in their organizing and activism.

In one of the first analyses of “A Trip through the Mind jail,” Chicano literary critic Juan Bruce-Novoa describes the poem as “not the simple recuperation of the barrio, but a type of jailbreak and reintegration into community life” (45).⁷⁹ Reading the relationship between the barrio and the prison in the poem, Bruce-Novoa argues, “Through this symbiosis—or mutual synecdoche—the poet escapes his isolated cell by locating himself outside the prison’s limits. In addition, the poem defines him as its author, a legitimate artist in contrast to the could-be artists of stanza 11; his potential has been realized in the work, and, therefore, he has escaped the barrio’s limitations as well” (45).⁸⁰ In addition to his reading, Bruce-Novoa provides a Paradigm Chart to substantiate these claims, interpreting the poem as a kind of ‘jail break’ that eliminates the jail as a symbolic threat to the poem’s speaker (Figure 1.3). While attentive to the textual space of the poem, his reading, though, is confined to the page. It overlooks the material conditions of its production and does not mention the poem’s publication in *Aztlán de Leavenworth*. Through its New Critical approach of close reading, divorced from historical and material contexts, Bruce-Novoa’s reading limits the spatial reach of Salinas’ poetics beyond the text itself.

⁷⁹ Bruce-Novoa, Juan. *Chicano Poetry: A Response to Chaos*. 1st ed., University of Texas Press, 1982.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

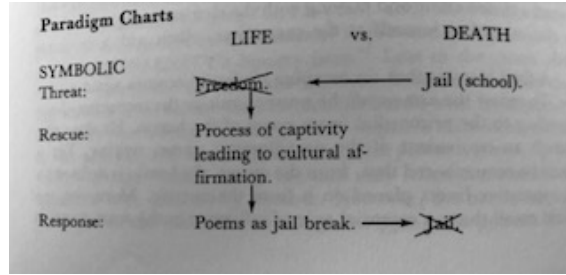


Figure 1.3: Juan Bruce-Novoa, paradigm chart of “A Trip Through the Mind Jail,” image taken from *Chicano Poetry: A Response to Chaos*, 1982.

However, despite its limitations, I draw attention to Bruce-Novoa’s reading here because it helps to address a set of problematics that the production and circulation of the poem raises. From my reading of the poem, in lieu of Olguín and Hames-García’s approaches to Salinas’ work, it would be difficult to separate Salinas’ writings from their historical and material conditions of production, especially in how they literally *and* symbolically relate to the carceral state. Reading the poem as a kind of “jailbreak and reintegration into community life,” especially when “community life” itself is marked by traces of the carceral state, is contradicted by the fact that Salinas literally remained in prison during the initial writing and publication of the work, as he was later sent to Marion after Leavenworth, and then remained in the Pacific Northwest after his release due to parole restrictions that did not allow him to travel to Texas, his home state. These realities directly trouble Bruce-Novoa’s notion of a “jail break,” whether this “break” is read as symbolic, material, or both. In its ‘trip’ through multiple spaces and times, the poem destabilizes a clear inside-outside model of the prison, placing it in close proximity to the barrio space. Thus, if scholars are to confine Raúl Salinas to solely the written lines within “A Trip through the Mind Trip,” then the political possibilities of the poem are greatly minimized. The poem’s call for solidarities beyond the text is obscured. The material aspects of the poem as well—its publication and circulation—are also mystified if we read the poem only within the

confines of the text. The poem is not autonomous nor does it require specific hermeneutics of literary theory, though I am consciously situating the work within a historical materialist framework.⁸¹ While Bruce-Novoa's study is invaluable in drawing attention to the discursive and symbolic complexities of Salinas' poetics, I argue that "A Trip through the Mind Jail" is simultaneously a representation and articulation of Salinas' political defiance that is both manifested on the page *and* on the bodies of the prisoners orchestrating resistance to incarceration across local, national, and global scales.

No Outside: States of (Partial) Freedom

In 1972, Salinas was released from prison. With the help of graduate students and faculty from the University of Washington-Seattle, most notably Joseph Sommers, a professor of Spanish and Latin American Literature, Salinas was granted parole in Seattle, Washington. While in prison, Salinas was in communication with faculty from UW, such as Antonia Castañeda-Shalur, Sommers, and Tomás Ybarra-Frausto through "kite" (letter) exchanges. Since Salinas was not allowed to live in Texas or California, the states where he was previously arrested, Seattle became Salinas' place of residence. He would soon attend UW, teach Chicano literature classes as an adjunct, help to develop the social justice center El Centro de la Raza, and take an active role in the Nisqually and Puyallup people's struggles for fishing rights in the Seattle-Tacoma region. The Pacific Northwest became a place where Salinas continued his activism, study, and writing. As Olgún notes, "His process of transformation did not end with his release from prison; it has merely arrived at another synthesis in his continued and sustained

⁸¹ Here, I am reminded of Barbara Harlow's suggestion in *Barred: Women, Writing, and Political Detention* (1992) that one does not need to use the vocabulary of poststructuralism or psychoanalysis, the Derridian trace and the Oedipal complex for example, in order to understand particular writings produced within the context of the carceral state (248).

work toward resolving contradictions” (147).⁸² While a graduate student at Stanford in the 1990s, Ben Olguín helped to archive many of Salinas’ papers from this period of Salinas’ life and beyond in Stanford University Libraries’ Department of Special Collections. In Louis G. Mendoza’s collection of Raúl Salinas’ writings, *Raúl Salinas and the Jail Machine: My Weapon is My Pen* (2006), Salinas’ Seattle years are marked as “Outside the Prison Machine” (11).⁸³

While I am indebted to the archival work of Mendoza and Olguín, and this dissertation chapter simply could not exist without their years of labor in studying and archiving Salinas’ work, a pursuit which continues into the present for Mendoza, I want to challenge this notion of the “outside” in how these years of Salinas’ life, activism, and writing, are categorized. As “A Trip through the Mind Jail” suggests to its readers, there is never a clear “outside” of the prison space. This is not to make equivalences between prison spaces and non-prison spaces or to make claims about a space’s relative *likeness* to prison, claims which Salinas actually makes in a number of his poems about non-prison spaces (e.g. the university is like a prison, the barrio is like a prison, the U.S. is like a prison). Rather, my questioning of whether or not there is an “outside” is to draw attention to how the carceral state’s spatial practices extend beyond the prison space proper. As Ruth Wilson Gilmore argues in *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California* (2007):

The government-organized and -funded dispersal of marginalized people from urban to rural locations suggests both that problems stretch across space in a connected way and that arenas for activism are less segregated than they seem.

⁸² Olguín, B.V. *La Pinta: Chicana/o Prisoner Literature, Culture, and Politics*. University of Texas Press, 2010.

⁸³ Salinas, Raúl., and Louis G. Mendoza. *Raúl Salinas and the Jail Machine: My Weapon Is My Pen*. 1st ed., University of Texas Press, 2006.

Viewed in this way, we can see how ‘prison’ is actually in the middle of the middle (26).⁸⁴

Prisons themselves are not built within a clear inside-outside paradigm. As Gilmore argues, carceral structures stretch and often exist in “outside” regions, whether we look at the rural geographies of the Central Valley in which many federal prisons in California are built on or urban places where county jails blend into the city’s architectural design.⁸⁵ In addition, questioning an inside-outside prison model also helps to trace Salinas’ decades-long history of activism, continuing well after his release from prison. As Salinas once noted, “leaving the cage” didn’t mark an end to his years of confinement, as the U.S. itself remains a “larger cage...a prison in and of itself” (184).⁸⁶ His work after prison release continued to challenge spatial regimes that create the conditions of possibility for prison building, from settler-colonialism, racial capitalism, to white supremacy. Salinas recognizes how, with technologies of surveillance, the carceral state continues to fulfill its insatiable desire for black, brown, and indigenous flesh through policing. As guards of a white supremacist carceral state, the police are trained and armed to maintain racial, class, and gendered differences in its maintenance of the whiteness and civility of “white civil society.” As Salinas acknowledges in his poetics and activism, the carceral state produces what feels like a prison outside of the prison space proper, a “larger cage” that for Salinas is the U.S. social space itself, one which his collective work aims to challenge and resist.

Salinas’ 1973 poem “Crash Landing” is a poetic interrogation of the inside-outside model of carceral space. The poem represents Seattle after his release from prison, describing how there

⁸⁴ Gilmore, Ruth Wilson. *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California*. University of California Press, 2007.

⁸⁵ In *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles* (1990), Mike Davis describes this architectural phenomenon in his chapter “Fortress L.A.,” characterizing LA as a ‘carceral city.’

⁸⁶ Gómez, Alan E. "'Troubadour of Justice': An Interview with Raúl Salinas." *Latino Studies*, vol. 6, no. 1-2, 2008, pp. 181-191.

is no clear division between life within and outside of prison for the formerly incarcerated. The poem conceptualizes this lack of an outside as “(partial) freedom.” The term “(partial) freedom” questions the grounds for individual liberalist freedom for the formerly incarcerated, especially in their readjustment to everyday civil life in the U.S. The poem expresses the overall partialness of freedom in the Pacific Northwest region with communities of the formerly incarcerated in mind. Psychological trauma, posttraumatic stress disorder, social death, and limited employment opportunities are a few realities that underline the material degrees of partialness. This partialness, however, is contained within parentheses for Salinas because there are definite freedoms that one has while no longer imprisoned, such as physical movement in the space of quotidian life, though it is still surveilled by the carceral state and is ableist, gendered, and racialized. “Crash Landing” represents the grounds of this contradictory space for individuals and communities released from prison.

Much like “A Trip through the Mind Jail,” the poem jumps between space and time while referring back to one specific site: Seattle. The poem is structured around a refrain, “And this is Seattle,” in a free verse structure with no clear stanza separations, making for a spatially and temporally disorienting reading. This poetic structure plays on the ‘freedom’ of the speaker while also representing the adjustments to post-prison life. Notions of ‘freedom’ are interrogated throughout Salinas’ poetry. In several of his earlier poems, such as “Lamento” (1959) and “Jazz: A Nascence” (1964), Salinas appropriates the “freedom” of jazz form and free verse as a play on the *unfreedom* of racialized subjects. Similarly, the use of free verse in “Crash Landing” continues this critique of freedom at the level of poetic form. The first lines of the poem describe the poem’s composition:

...by way of fragments, first impressions, momentary madness, waves of warmth,
solid good-feeling flashes, and plain old sofocadas... (93).⁸⁷

The poem likens Salinas' entry into Seattle as a 'crash landing' that can only be collected in "fragments" and "first impressions." The poem pays particular attention to the sensory impressions of this 'crash landing,' especially in how they are affected by time in prison.⁸⁸ This affects the speaker's sensory experiences outside of the prison walls, though the outside is unclear in everyday life. The speaker says:

Prison-deadened senses
(latent touch)
respond
dancing & prancing
merrily along
to the tune of
(partial)
FREEDOM.
.....
Image of HERE
Are
skittered-scattered
throughout my total being.

⁸⁷ Salinas, Raúl. *Un Trip through the Mind Jail y Otras Excursions*. Arte Público Press, 1999.

⁸⁸ An earlier poem entitled "The Pisser (solitary confinement)" (1964) depicts similar sensory disturbances, namely for those subjected to solitary confinement. Much like "Crash Landing," "The Pisser (solitary confinement)" represents a speaker whose senses are very much "prison-deadened." It would be difficult to distinguish if the poem was written while in prison which, again, destabilizes a clear inside/outside prison model.

Like so many scrambled marbles? (93).⁸⁹

Here, the speaker describes his senses as “prison-deadened.” While “dancing & prancing” to the sounds of “(partial) / FREEDOM,” the poem brings to focus the speaker’s relative freedom and unfreedom. The speaker’s body may have more mobility outside of a federal prison, but the psychological effects of imprisonment keep the speaker locked up in his own ‘mind jail’ with “so many scrambled marbles.” This psychological violence is made apparent in his adjustment from prison life to the “FREEDOM” of “HERE” in Seattle. All in all in the space of the poem, the speaker is represented as a partially free subject. While having “prison-deadened senses,” the speaker describes their freedom in observing nature, interacting with locals, smoking weed, listening to jazz, and experiencing sexual pleasure in a “lost/lust jungle” (95).⁹⁰ As the speaker describes:

Yea! The poet functions

for the 1st time

in the

WORLD! (95).⁹¹

Yet, even in the streets of Seattle, there is a “constant bombardment of Pintos,” described as “(integral links on [his] shackles)” (95).⁹² With its collective freedoms and unfreedoms, life in Seattle is not seen as completely outside of the prison. Rather, Seattle becomes a site where the speaker reflects upon “(partial) freedom” in U.S. civil society for the formerly incarcerated.

⁸⁹ Salinas, Raúl. *Un Trip through the Mind Jail y Otras Excursions*. Arte Público Press, 1999.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ibid.

Much like “A Trip through the Mind Jail,” “Crash Landing” evokes an incredible sense of loss regarding social identity, community, and belonging. Within these “skitter-scattered” lines, the speaker confesses:

Mi alma yearns for Austin,
My Cora burns for India
therefore, my psyche
reads Aztlán (95).⁹³

La Loma remains a distant memory in the “mind jail” of the speaker as the speaker yearns for a sense of community that C.O.R.A. at Leavenworth once provided. In these lines, Aztlán is a figure that signifies the speaker’s desire for home and community. Aztlán acts as a symbol for cultural, social, and political identity. The poem describes the speaker’s loneliness without activism in his life as he lays in his “lonely, aged, mid-Victorian / hotel / (mi celda solitaria)” amidst a “Hash-Grass enshrouded atmosphere” (95-96).⁹⁴ High and lonely in his hotel room, likened to a prison cell, the speaker sits with insects that “gambol / through poems long neglected” while Chicano activism continues on (“y lucha continúa”) (96).⁹⁵ The speaker describes himself as “so incapacitated/crippled / porque me falta aquel...aquello / necesario pa’ que vibre el corazón” (96).⁹⁶ These lines reveal the feelings of loss within his own heart, leaving him immobile and unable to join in the “lucha.” For the speaker, there is something missing without the political exigency of prison strikes and prisoner activism.

In the latter lines of the poem, the speaker represents political solidarity as a possibility for freedom in an unfree social space. The poem shifts in its emphasis from the speaker’s

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

experience of the Pacific Northwest to a representation of El Centro de la Raza, a social justice center that Salinas helped to organize and that continues to provide services to this day. El Centro began as a site for organizing and building multi-racial solidarities, namely between Chicano and indigenous communities. The speaker describes El Centro as a place where “tri-ethnic vibes” help to create “class-consciousness / among the poor” and where “Revolutionary Sisters” and “Dedicated Daughters” teach daily “lessons in LIFE” (97).⁹⁷ This radical working-class environment fosters a sense of belonging for communities of color, helping to build political solidarities and alliances throughout the Pacific Northwest region. The poem constructs a dialectical relationship between the local and the global, linking the coalitional building at El Centro with global solidarities against settler-colonialism, racial capitalism, and the U.S. nation-state. The speaker describes El Centro as a place:

Where 3rd world fuerzas

se unen

& deal with:

Nicaraguan disasters

Indian genocide (of modern-day
massacres)

Plantation life of campesinos

Movimiento Estudiantil

Black Construction slaves

Presos Políticos (y sociales)

Y raza Raza RAZA

⁹⁷ Ibid.

in unyielding solidarity (97).⁹⁸

The speaker represents Chicano struggles (“raza Raza RAZA”) and students of the Chicano Movement (“Movimiento”) as always-already transnational, drawing spatial connections between El Centro and processes of capital accumulation, racialization, and state building across the Americas (“3rd world fuerzas”). These connections “unen” (unite) specific places across geographical borders and racial differences. The line “plantation life of campesinos,” for instance, draws comparisons between “Black Construction slaves” and “campesinos,” bodies that have historically been used to produce surplus-value and are exploited as surplus populations under U.S. racial capitalism and the carceral state. These lines are juxtaposed with allusions to Latin American revolutions (the Sandinistas’ “Nicaraguan disasters”), social movements (the Mexican Student Movement of 1968, “Movimiento Estudiantil”), histories of settler-colonialism (“Indian genocide”), and prisoners (“políticos” and “sociales,” ‘political’ and ‘social’). What may seem spatially disparate are the very “3rd world fuerzas” that El Centro bridges together and embodies in its radical imaginaries for global leftist activism and “unyielding solidarity.” What began the poem as an individual’s experience of “(partial) freedom” becomes connected to a global state of “(partial) freedom.” Thus, “(partial) freedom” is articulated across spatial scales and settler-colonial histories under the reign of U.S. racial capitalism. In this stanza, the speaker provides hope through a utopian political imaginary that articulates an alternative spatiality to the abstracting regimes of racial capitalism, settler-colonialism, and the U.S. nation-state.

This political imaginary, however, is complicated by incarceration. The closing stanza of the poem draws attention to imprisonment and the contingency between the so-called ‘free’ space of civil society with the ‘unfree’ space of the prison. As the speaker details:

And this is Seattle...

⁹⁸ Ibid.

But somewhere beyond
Majestic Mount Rainier
in dungeons built by evil men
are brothers/sisters (prisoners)
who are still not free
As i am still not free ...
though i walk Seattle's streets (98).⁹⁹

This stanza represents how imprisonment undermines the possibility for collective liberation. Prisons continue to withhold freedom for those within and outside prison walls, or those caught within a network of carceral relations across space and time, whether on parole or under surveillance. The poem ends by suggesting that prisons are primary sites of unfreedom, though their existence is contingent upon the supposedly “free” space of civil society. That is, the space outside of prison walls is dependent upon the “unfree” spaces of prisons, spaces of captivity where police confine those who are seen as material and symbolic threats to public space.

For Salinas, no space is ever “free.” The carceral state’s relations of power, which exceed the physical boundaries of the prison, are what produce the *partiality* of “(partial) freedom” and render the speaker “still not free.” According to Hames-García, the question of freedom is at the center of writings by prisoners of color. In analyzing the works of Assata Shakur, Hames-García reads freedom not only as a liberal concept but as a material practice. He argues that prison “affords [prisoners] the opportunity to assess and evaluate the meanings and possibilities of ethical concepts like justice and freedom” through their “active struggles against injustice and struggle for freedom and humanity” (XLIV).¹⁰⁰ Thus, “freedom...must be understood ultimately

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Hames-García, Michael. *Fugitive Thought: Prison Movements, Race, and the Meaning of Justice*. University of Minnesota Press, 2004.

as a practice, rather than a possession or a state of being” (L).¹⁰¹ While speaking particularly about Shakur and the black radical tradition, Hames-García’s reading draws attention to the *partialness* of freedom, especially in liberalist political philosophy. For the liberal subject, “being” and “possession” are the very attributes that the prison deprives prisoners of. Exclusion from liberal subjecthood is what defines the liberal subject and its status as “free.” The liberal subject is always-already contingent upon excluding freedom from others. Thus, a liberal concept of “freedom” is always-already partial. Hames-García, however, tries to recuperate a sense of “freedom” beyond property possession or “a state of being.” Overall, conceptualizing freedom as a material practice helps audiences to understand freedom’s partialness within liberalism’s logics while also highlighting prisoners’ resignification of freedom through a radical lens.¹⁰²

Salinas’ writings after his release from prison question whether there is ever any “outside” of the prison. During these years in Seattle, Salinas continued activism with El Centro de La Raza and was heavily involved in the American Indian Movement. Salinas helped build solidarities between Chicano and indigenous communities in the Pacific Northwest, specifically with the Nisqually and Puyallup people of the Seattle-Tacoma region and through El Centro’s Indian-Chicano Education Project. Salinas contributed to the organization of the Trail of Self-Determination, which Louis Mendoza describes as “a seven-month cross-country educational caravan led by the Survival of American Indians Association, whose purpose was to offer an alternative perspective on the U.S. bicentennial” (12).¹⁰³ Along this Trail, Salinas

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² In *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* (2002), Robin D.G. Kelley thinks through alternative forms of freedom conceptualized through writing, art, and activism from the black radical tradition, which Hames-García’s work on prison writing and Salinas’ poetry are heavily informed by.

¹⁰³ Salinas, Raúl., and Louis G. Mendoza. *Raúlrsalinas and the Jail Machine: My Weapon Is My Pen*. 1st ed., University of Texas Press, 2006.

advocated for the release of Leonard Peltier, an incarcerated Native American activist of the Lakota and Dakota communities.¹⁰⁴ In addition to his activism for the abolition of the carceral state, Salinas advocated for resistance towards spatial regimes like the geographical dispossession of indigenous communities. His solidarity building between Chicanos and indigenous communities contributes to what Salinas calls his ‘Xicanindio’ identity. Mendoza describes ‘Xicanindio’ identity as helping Salinas “to acquire a knowledge of politics, [find] individual and collective fulfillment, and [struggle] to advance human liberation” (58).¹⁰⁵ For Olguín, who traces Salinas’ international solidarities across Latin America, from Nicaragua, Puerto Rico, and Cuba, he describes how “Salinas forged a revolutionary internationalist XicanIndio vision out of a long history of collaborations that bear out his transracial, international, and supranational politics” (76).¹⁰⁶ Thus, Salinas’ activism and writing during these years draw connections between spatial regimes simultaneously governed by the carceral state and settler-colonial logics in order to imagine alternative forms of “freedom” within spaces that destabilize an inside-outside prison model of space. While these material relations between prisons and other spaces are often obscured by the abstraction of U.S. racial capitalism, Salinas’ symbolic remapping through poetry helps to demystify these particular forms of spatiality and spatial connections..

Barrio Confinement

¹⁰⁴ His poems during this period of time are mainly collected in *Indio Trails: A Xicano Odyssey through Indian Country* (2007), though several also appear throughout his other collections, *Un trip Through the Mind Jail y Otra Excursions* (1999) and *East of the Freeway* (1995). Two poems, “Peltier I” (1978) and “Peltier II” (1979), are specifically dedicated to Leonard Peltier.

¹⁰⁵ Mendoza, Louis. "The Re-Education of a Xicanindio: Raúl Salinas and the Poetics of Pinto Transformation." *MELUS: The Journal of the Society for the Study of the Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States*, vol. 28, no. 1, 2003, pp. 39-60.

¹⁰⁶ Olguín, B.V. *Violentologies: Violence, Identity, and Ideology in Latina/o Literature*. First edition., Oxford University Press, 2021.

Throughout Salinas' poetry, the barrio represents a central site where different spatial regimes and Chicana spatial practices converge. Poems like "A Trip through the Mind Jail," for example, situate the La Loma barrio into what Olguín calls "both a product of U.S. hegemony and the site of counterhegemonic signifying practices" (133).¹⁰⁷ Barrio spaces are directly affected by late capitalist urban planning strategies predicated on differentials of race, class, and gender. On the other end, barrios are places where radical politics can be produced. After finishing his parole sentence by the Texas Department of Corrections in 1981, Salinas returned to Austin, Texas. As Mendoza describes, "'Coming home' [...] presented numerous challenges to Salinas because within the dynamics of a society predicated on social difference he [...] found that mediation within and outside of the *barrio* is an ever-present necessity" (104).¹⁰⁸ The barrio acts as a primary site of spatial contradictions informed by capital on one end and the Chicana barrio community on the other. Within this context, Salinas continued his activism in the form of promoting local cultural arts. In 1983, Salinas opened Resistencia Books, a place in Austin, Texas that promotes Chicana, Latina, black, and indigenous literatures. The bookstore also hosted local chapters for activist and social justice groups, similar to El Centro de la Raza in Seattle, Washington. In that same year, Raúl Salinas founded Red Salmon Arts, a Native American, Chicana/o/x, and Latina/o/x cultural arts organization. Under its literary house, Red Salmon Press, Salinas published *East of the Freeway* (1994), a collection of poems written throughout his years in Austin after his return. These poems confront several spatial regimes, such as policing, gentrification, and urban renewal, with a particular attention on their material effects on Chicana barrio life. Mendoza argues, "Though this collection is a tribute to particulars it should not be read only as testimony to East and South Austin. Ultimately, this collection of

¹⁰⁷ Olguín, B.V. *La Pinta: Chicana/o Prisoner Literature, Culture, and Politics*. University of Texas Press, 2010.

¹⁰⁸ Salinas, Raúl. *East of the Freeway: Reflections de Mi Pueblo*. Red Salmon Press, 1995.

poems is about a process of survival and change that occurs wherever politically and economically disenfranchised peoples live” (103-104).¹⁰⁹ As Mendoza’s reading suggests, Salinas’ representations of Austin barrios are both particular and general. They act as both testimony to barrio life caught between structures of inequality and representations of survival under conditions of disenfranchisement.

The poem “Al Fin Llegaron las Luvias” (1984) from *East of the Freeway* foregrounds the effects of policing, gentrification, and urban renewal in Austin barrios. Here, Salinas links the prison’s spatial logics with the structuring of the urban cityscape, representing the barrio as a site of spatial confinement. The speaker describes:

Llego del exilio buscando
no esperando encontrar
city of infant dreams
in devastation.
No more Woolworth’s 5 & 10
of way back when
skyscrapers never stuck straight up
when screeching copcars
didn’t mar the atmosphere
when no one feared the vigilant patrols (41).¹¹⁰

Much like “Crash Landing,” “Al Fin Llegaron la Lluvias” depicts a racialized social space where the community is partially free. The “city of infant dreams,” longed for in “A Trip through the Mind Jail,” is seen “in devastation” again. In this barrio, cops routinely police the brown

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Salinas, Raúl. *East of the Freeway: Reflections de Mi Pueblo*. Red Salmon Press, 1995.

working-class in their “screeching copcars” during “vigilant patrols.” City planners replace local convenience stores, like Woolworth’s, with skyscrapers. And the barrio is affected by wide-scale deindustrialization and deregulation, turning it into a location of gentrification and urban renewal. The speaker represents this in the poem through images of “art re-veuers,” “city/council corruption,” and “disruptions by the culture/vulture mobs,” showing how middle-class tastes for art and culture operate as guises for geographical dispossession (42-43).¹¹¹ In *The New Urban Frontier: Gentrification and the Revanchist City* (1996), Marxist geographer Neil Smith historicizes gentrification within the context of late capitalism, tracing various gentrification projects across multiple urban sites across the globe. Smith defines gentrification as “the process...by which poor and working-class neighborhoods in the inner city are refurbished via an influx of private capital and middle-class homebuyers and renters” (32).¹¹² Salinas underscores the violence found within the structural logics of gentrification. As a spatial regime, gentrification largely displaces working-class communities, vacuating any sense of “home” or place towards the ends of capital accumulation. Gentrification also encourages increased policing to secure space for gentrifiers and to exclude those who are dispossessed in the gentrification process. In a later stanza, the speaker describes these effects in relation to policing:

Guns blare
as burger joint becomes on a Saturday night
battle station/ tac squads cruisin’
break the eerie, silent stillness
of an Edward Hooper 1930s diner (42-43).¹¹³

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Smith, Neil. *The New Urban Frontier: Gentrification and the Revanchist City*. Routledge, 1996.

¹¹³ Salinas, Raúl. *East of the Freeway: Reflections de Mi Pueblo*. Red Salmon Press, 1995.

In everyday Austin life, a local restaurant is transformed into a “battle station” for the police. The ‘still’ cityscape represented in Edward Hopper’s painting, where white patrons dine without the threat of “tac squads,” does not correspond with the actual Austin barrio scene. Like the prison, the barrio is produced under logics of spatial confinement. “Al Fin Llegaron las Lluvias” presents a social space that is anything but still. As Salinas’ poetic representation demonstrates, the barrio is marked by the movement of police, buildings, bodies, and capital.

In “Más Alla” (1988), Salinas imagines possibilities for community survival amidst uneven development and urban renewal. The poem begins with the image of “Ghost Town / developed in madness / and greed,” alluding to city development in Austin motivated by capital (79).¹¹⁴ The expansion of the city is observed by the speaker and described as “Surrealistic streets that lead / to traffic/neon/signs / of yuppie junkfood jungles” (79).¹¹⁵ These sights are described as “Fantasmagoria,” connecting the ways that commodification and consumption within social spaces produce a phantasmatic scene that obscures a city’s material conditions. These “new” developments mystify the city’s means and relations of production. Thus, “Más Alla” presents these changes within the city as unnatural occurrences, despite capital’s logic to naturalize these processes. For instance, the poem describes uneven development and urban renewal as anthropogenic “pollution” that is unnatural to the land. The speaker characterizes these processes as:

pollution of senses

pollution of sound

pollution of wind space

pollution of earth

¹¹⁴Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

pollution of spirit

pollution of soul (79).¹¹⁶

The city's structural shifts not only affect human subjects; they pose a risk to the land and all living and nonliving beings within the environment. Here, the speaker is conceptualizing land from an indigenous form of relationality, one that considers the land as an ontological place rather than a settler or migrant emplacement. The poem honors the "wind space" and the "earth," drawing out indigenous relations between the human and the non-human. Land is not treated as an object or an inert space. Rather, it is this relation to land, one that privileges land as an ontological place, that opens the possibility for collective survival from the various pollutants depicted in the poem. In the closing lines, the speaker says:

But East of the Freeway,
past fast-eroding farms,
vast ancestral communities
remain
In-tact! (79).¹¹⁷

Shifting from the polluted cityscape, the poem concludes with this idyllic scene of "ancestral communities," characterizing Chicano barrios in Austin as indigenous to the land. The possibility for resilient communities that can "remain" is imagined through this relation to the city and the land. However, the community's survival is imagined as a possibility and not a definite certainty. This is represented syntactically in the last line's syllabic break ("in-tact"), showing how the communities' condition and 'intactness' is broken. Like "Al Fin Llegaron las Lluvias," the ending of this poem reminds the reader how violence enforced by the state is yet to be resolved.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

As Mendoza states in regards to *East of the Freeway*, “Reality refuses to allow [Raúl Salinas] any romantic notion about his home territory” (103).¹¹⁸ While a poem like “Más Alla” presents a possibility for survival under spatial regimes, settler-colonialism and uneven development unsettle any sense of community ‘intactness,’ one which the poem addresses through its radical poetic imaginary.

East of the Freeway represents various spatial regimes—gentrification, policing, urban renewal, uneven development—that produce confinement and dispossession. These regimes are predicated on similar logics by the carceral state, namely in their desire for capital accumulation. “Al Fin Llegaron las Lluvias” and “Más Alla” are two poems that represent the lived, material conditions of Austin barrios, spaces which largely consist of economically disadvantaged communities of color that are vulnerable to these spatial regimes. Salinas’ writings in *East of the Freeway* can be seen as an act of resistance and an extension of his activism that began in prison. As Salinas once described, “The homeland has been bombarded, but there are still pockets of resistance: new languages, new issues, related still to land” (188).¹¹⁹ His poetry in this collection develops radical Chicana imaginaries for living and survival in spaces of confinement. These poems provide “new languages” to describe the connections between various spaces and geographies. Despite the “(partial) freedom” within Austin’s barrios, Red Salmon Press and Resistencia Books act as representative sites of resistance towards dominant spatial regimes. Salinas’ centers for writing, art, and culture encourage “new languages” of radical poetics and political praxis as powerful forms of activism and collective liberation.

Concluding Remarks: “where does it all lead to?”

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Gómez, Alan E. "'Troubadour of Justice': An Interview with Raúl Salinas." *Latino Studies*, vol. 6, no. 1-2, 2008, pp. 181-191.

Throughout his lifetime, Salinas continually questioned the ends of his politics, always rethinking where the boundaries of the prison exist and how his work should be read. In “Pregúntome” (1970), Salinas reflects upon his time at Leavenworth while trying to imagine new possibilities for political organizing. The poem opens with the following lines:

where does it all lead to?
i mean, like where are we going?
and where did we come from?
where did it all began?
and who started it? (67).¹²⁰

The questions do not end here. The speaker asks if the source of the “problem” is either social, cultural, political, or economic (67).¹²¹ Revolution itself is called into question (“is revolution a sole solution? / or what?”) and Chicano cultural nationalism is also critiqued (“does aztlán mean utopia? / do we sacrifice our leaders?”) (67).¹²² The poem is not suggesting that social movements are unable to enact change; rather, the poem is a reflection on how to build upon previous social movements to create a future that simultaneously acknowledges and resists spatial regimes. The radical poetics and politics produced by Salinas are not fixed. As Manuel Luis Martínez suggests, “Pregúntome” is a poem where “Raúl Salinas openly questions the construction of resistance, of social injustice, and of how best to achieve social transformation,” making “social injustice and its material effects on the community...complex and open to interpretation” (219).¹²³ Thus, the questions which open “Pregúntome” represent radical

¹²⁰ Salinas, Raúl. *Un Trip through the Mind Jail y Otras Excursions*. Arte Público Press, 1999.

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Martínez, Manuel L. *Countering the Counterculture: Rereading Postwar American Dissent from Jack Kerouac to Tomás Rivera*. University of Wisconsin Press, 2003.

possibilities for new forms of social justice. The poem cannot be separated from the political exigencies that inform its production, as is the case for most of Salinas' poetry.

In *Forced Passages: Imprisoned Radical Intellectuals and the U.S. Prison Regime* (2006), Dylan Rodríguez uses the opening lines of “Pregúntome” as an epigraph to his Introduction. Rodríguez argues in this chapter that “imprisoned radical intellectuals are practitioners of a qualitatively different ‘politics,’ precisely because their field of engagement is defined through a relation of direct violence with the state” (37).¹²⁴ It is “this condition of confrontation [that] constitutes a discrete modality of praxis that is incommensurable with the myriad forms of political practice in civil society” (37).¹²⁵ Rodríguez later argues that:

To understand the prison as a *regime*—that is, to conceptualize it as a dynamic state-mediated practice of domination and control, rather than as a reified ‘institution’ or ‘apparatus’—suggests the significance of radical prison praxis as a critical, paradigm shaping political lineage. It is also to imply the possibility—even the necessity—of decentering or drastically altering extant political practices that are based in civil society or the putative ‘free world’ (40).¹²⁶

Rodríguez's study of imprisoned radical intellectuals unsettles traditional methodologies for understanding radical politics and praxis like Salinas'. Through my analysis of Salinas' work through a historical materialist framework, which contextualizes his poetry and activism, this chapter recuperates Salinas' direct engagements and resistances towards various spatial regimes.

I argue that Salinas should be read in the context of the carceral state within and beyond the

¹²⁴ Rodríguez, Dylan. *Forced Passages: Imprisoned Radical Intellectuals and the U.S. Prison Regime*. University of Minnesota Press, 2006.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

prison space proper, without a romanticization of his persona as solely a prisoner as this functions as but one part of his various social identities as a writer and an activist.

Chapter II

Asco's Material and Performative Responses to Spatial Violence

The story of the LA-based Chicano art group Asco often goes as follows: Harry Gamboa Jr., Willie Herrón, Glugio “Gronk” Nicandro, and Patssi Valdez met in the late 1960s at Garfield High School in East Los Angeles at the height of the Chicano Movement. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, they produced iconoclastic experimental art under the group name “Asco,” a Spanish word for ‘disgust.’ During the 1970s, in specific, Asco collaborated on a range of performance-based art works that made direct use of East Los Angeles’ urbanscape, employing aesthetic strategies and modes of activism that simultaneously embraced and rejected the Chicano Movement and its cultural politics. Asco made experimental works that refused social realism as a dominant aesthetic mode for radical art, the group challenged Chicanismo’s heteronormative and homophobic ideologies, and lastly, they directed attention away from Aztlán’s mythic pasts towards the present-day material conditions of urban life in East Los Angeles. As Gronk notes in a 1986 interview with Linda Burnham, “We didn’t want to go back, we wanted to stay in the present and find our imagery as urban artists and produce a body of work out of our sense of displacement” (57).¹²⁷ Since the late 1990s and onward, Asco’s approach to conveying a “sense of displacement” has taken the attention of the academy, primarily art historians and performance studies scholars interested in Chicanx arts. In 1998, Chicano film scholar Chon Noriega edited and published *Urban Exile: Collected Writings of Harry Gamboa Jr.*, an anthology of Asco’s art and performances represented through the prism of Gamboa’s photography and writing. A decade later, Asco’s works were embraced by the mainstream art world with two major exhibitions at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA): *Phantom Sightings: Art After the Chicano Movement* (2008) and *Asco: Elite of the*

¹²⁷ Burnham, Linda. “Gronk,” *High Performance* 9.3, 1986.

Obscure, A Retrospective, 1972-1987 (2011). Since their mainstream entry into the modern art museum space, Asco has become an art group synonymous with the Chicane avant-garde, placed as an exception to the identity-based practices of community level Chicane art.

Feminist and queer of color approaches to Asco's work, however, resist the common narrative of Asco's ascendancy into the academy and art world, challenging Asco's role as the sole Chicane avant-garde art group during the 1970s. Visual and performance studies scholar Leticia Alvarado questions the exclusive academic focus on Gamboa as the primary author of all-things-Asco, which she argues is a heteronormative account of the group's history. For Alvarado, Asco was always-already queer.¹²⁸ "Asco conjured affective communities through an ambivalent embrace of a decidedly queer abject aesthetics," writes Alvarado, who understands Asco's group structure as queer in its focus on abjection as an inherent kinship bond between racialized and gendered brown subjects, embodied by Asco's queer artist, Gronk, and Chicane collaborator, Valdez (59). In thinking about the archive of the queer Chicane avant-garde in Los Angeles, Robb Hernández critiques how heteronormative historiographical practices have made Asco exceptional as *the* Chicane avant-garde progenitors at the great expense of *actual* queer Chicane artists producing their own Chicane avant-garde art at the same time as Asco. "Only a few provocative exceptions disrupt the institutionally-sanctioned accounts of Asco, which did in fact have collaborations with...more brazen and unapologetically queer actors,"¹²⁹ writes Hernández (5). His account and critique of Asco is primarily focused on the erasure of queer artist Robert "Cyclona" Legoretta in Asco history, even though Legoretta was a primary influence on the group's aesthetics. Through feminist and queer of color critiques, both Alvarado

¹²⁸ Alvarado, Leticia. *Abject Performances: Aesthetic Strategies in Latino Cultural Production*. Duke University Press, 2018.

¹²⁹ Hernández, Robb. *Archiving an Epidemic: Art, AIDS, and the Queer Chicane Avant-Garde*. New York University Press, 2019.

and Hernández provide necessary correctives to the common Asco story that often presents them as transcendent from the material realities of Chicana life in East Los Angeles. Both scholars question the spaces of the academy and the art gallery as inherently upholding heteronormative matrices that privilege some ethnic-racialized subjects over others depending on their gender and sexuality.

This essay is a reassessment and critique of Asco's work, particularly looking at how the group's performative practices simultaneously resist and remain complicit in various forms of spatial violence in the 1970s to the present across differences in race, gender, and sexuality. Here, I return to the materiality of Asco's aesthetic strategies, grounded in their racialized and gendered brown bodies, in order to revive their radical roots in the early 1970s as an art group committed to challenging the Vietnam War and its disproportionate premature deaths of Chicanas. By analyzing their performances *Stations of the Cross* (1971) and *First Supper (After a Major Riot)* (1974) in direct relation to the National Chicano Moratorium Against the Vietnam War demonstrations in Los Angeles, I argue that Asco produces a transnational critique of spatial struggle, always-already racialized and gendered, across colonized regions and carceral geographies. In addition, by situating their performances of *Walking Mural* (1972) and *Instant Mural* (1974) in relation to LA's spatial histories, I read Asco's work as producing Chicana temporalities that move and generate new flows of Chicana bodies within and outside the panoptic gaze of spatial regimes. Inspired by Alvarado's interventions, I reconsider how Asco's performances utilize the locality of East Los Angeles and their racialized and gendered bodies to enact resistance through works that borrow from queer performative strategies. Yet, in order to better understand *how* Asco's aesthetic strategies came to be embraced by wider audiences in later years, I look at how photographic images of Asco's performances, like *First Supper*, were

circulated in the 1970s through mail correspondences. By considering the performances and photographs of *Decoy Gang War Victim* (1974), *Scissors I & II* (1972), and *À La Mode* (1976), I argue that Asco's circulation of photographs produces an alternative media economy that circumvents racial and gendered exclusion, producing Chicana social space within the totality of Los Angeles' spatializing violence. By looking at this particular mode of circulation, we can begin to grapple with how Asco's entry into the academy and the mainstream art world produces a set of questions concerning the group's radical art practices when regimes of racial capitalism potentially subsume contemporary art spaces, minoritized or not. Thus, in my conclusion section, I discuss the material consequences of the group's current status since spatial struggles between art gallery spaces and anti-gentrification activists in Los Angeles continue well into the present-day, adding pressure to Asco's shifting aesthetic strategies and cultural politics then and now. At the same time, the range of queer and brown artists in Los Angeles inspired by Asco's legacy and producing radical art in the 2020s cannot be overlooked and must be considered in tandem with the complicated spatialities that contemporary art is situated within.

The Chicano Moratorium, Transnational Gestures

Asco's performances draw attention to the materiality of the brown Chicana body, one inscribed upon by the U.S. racial capitalist state as abject and abhorrent across racial and gendered differences. It should come as no surprise then that the group's name literally means *disgust* in Spanish, embodying the feeling of nausea experienced as an alienated minoritized subject living, navigating, and attempting to survive amidst the spatial prisms of racism, sexism, and homophobia. But rather than exist as powerless and voiceless subjects, Asco reconfigured their *asco* and redeployed their bodily violence in the 1970s by repositioning their racialized and gendered bodies as art materials that could directly resist normative aesthetic regimes. As

Alvarado writes, “By harnessing asco, Asco reveals an aesthetic collectivity that dwells in and amplifies a sense of displacement, discomfort, and disease, cohering around and validating feelings of disenchantment through embodied public responses to social situations throughout Los Angeles” (60).¹³⁰ Throughout the 1970s, the group’s embodied practices and responses were directed at the white dominant mass media world and the local spaces of Los Angeles, producing an alternative sense of place that foregrounds what Sianne Ngai calls ‘ugly feelings,’¹³¹ that is, negative affects that minoritized subjects always-already feel within a racial capitalist market, like the U.S., due to their lack of social agency.

Asco refashions *disgust* not only as a negative affect but as a model for everyday Chicana life, one that reclaims *asco* as central to Chicana subject formation. They often perform this by expressing the pain of racialized subjects experiencing spatial violence locally and globally. *Stations of the Cross* (1971), for instance, is a performance that embodies the local and global registers of spatialized violence on Chicanas both in the urban space of East Los Angeles and the transnational imperial space of Vietnam. *Stations of the Cross* was set on Whittier Boulevard in East Los Angeles and reenacts the Catholic devotional practice of commemorating Jesus’ day of crucifixion through fourteen ‘stations’ and prayers, often during Lent. While this scene is widely depicted in Western art, painting, sculpture, and altars, Asco moves the stations from being static visual images into *moving* Chicana bodies. Their performance translates the Judeo-Christian narrative and Catholic faith practice into a Chicana Passion Play, where Jesus’ stations are set across Whittier Boulevard, with one of them being a literal military recruiting station that sends Chicanas to Vietnam.

¹³⁰ Alvarado, Leticia. *Abject Performances: Aesthetic Strategies in Latino Cultural Production*. Duke University Press, 2018.

¹³¹ Ngai, Sianne. *Ugly Feelings*. Harvard University Press, 2005.

Stations of the Cross is one of several Asco performances that acts as a direct response to the National Chicano Moratorium Committee Against the Vietnam War and their specific march in East Los Angeles on August 29, 1970. While drawing crowds of Chicana activists calling for the end of the Vietnam War, the Moratorium was met with carceral violence. The LAPD beat Chicana protestors and murdered three of them, including Chicano journalist Ruben Salazar. As Chicano historian Edward Escobar has argued, the repression of Chicana protestors by the police did not stall Chicana activism. “While police were using violence and intimidation against the movement, Chicanos were using the issues of political harassment and police brutality to *increase* participation in their movement. Police repression not only invigorated the Chicano movement but also helped politicize and empower the Mexican-American community,” writes Escobar (1488, emphasis added).¹³² Within the historical context of policing in LA, *Stations of the Cross* is a performative expression of Chicana politicization and empowerment. Asco reconfigures the religious ceremony and practice of the Stations as not only a performance of Christ’s death but as a mourning of Chicana death from across the Pacific in Vietnam and nearby in East Los Angeles. The performance recognizes the Moratorium marches themselves as performances that organize brown bodies across Whittier Boulevard and decounce the predatory strategies of military recruiters in working-class communities of color. As Gronk remembers, “A lot of our friends were coming back in body bags and were dying...And in a sense that gave us nausea.”¹³³ Asco’s performance channels their social alienation and bodily nausea (their *asco*) into a work that calls for the end of the Vietnam War.

¹³² Escobar, Edward. “The Dialectics of Repression: The Los Angeles Police Department and the Chicano Movement, 1968–1971.” *The Journal of American History*, vol. 79, no. 4, 1993, pp. 1483–514.

¹³³ From an oral history interview held in Los Angeles on Jan 20 & 23 of 1997, found in the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC, online (<http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/oralhistories/transcripts/gronk97.htm>).

In *Stations of the Cross*, Asco utilizes costume, makeup, and stage props as visual and tactile signifiers of racialized alienation. The performance took place a year after the Moratorium march on Christmas Eve, the day before Christ's commemorative birth. Gamboa, Gronk, and Herrón appeared as individual characters restaging Christ's walk to crucifixion within the everyday quotidian life of East Los Angeles, transforming their immediate urban geography in Whittier Boulevard into a theatrical Chicana social space for brown performance. Herrón plays Jesus, wearing a long white robe and red sash while dragging a fifteen-foot cardboard cross along the sidewalk throughout the performance's duration. Herrón paints his face with *calavera* makeup in the tradition of Día de los Muertos, making a statement that just as Jesus' death lingers throughout Chicana culture, Chicana death exceeds well beyond November 1st and 2nd, haunting East Los Angeles with the premature deaths of Chicanas in the Vietnam War. Thus, Herrón's performance asks spectators to rethink premature death as a transnational phenomenon, linking together Vietnam's imperial space with East Los Angeles' urban space, both sites of Chicana death caused by the War's immediate and attritional violence. The cardboard cross that Herrón carries over his shoulders, with the help of Gamboa carrying the bottom of the cross, appears larger in scale than the performers themselves, bringing attention to the hypervisual nature of Asco's public performances. The cross's horizontal tilt, when perceived from the side, appears as a visual 'x' mark. I read the 'x'¹³⁴ here, and its unevenness, as an embodiment of the collective wound of disproportionate Chicana deaths felt by the East Los Angeles community, carried on the shoulders of Chicanas like Herrón. Carrying the 'x' through Whittier Boulevard

¹³⁴ Asco's cross preempts future conversations surrounding the 'x' turn in Latinx which, as queer scholars have identified, acts as a visual signifier for the gendered exclusion of trans and nonbinary Latinx subjects, as well as regimes of anti-blackness and settler-colonial violence that are inherent to the emergence of the Americas and *latinidades*. For more, see the special issue of *Cultural Dynamics* 29.3 (2017), entitled "Theorizing LatinX," edited by Claudia Milan.

acts as both a visual and tactile symbol that embodies the material and psychological wounds produced by the Vietnam War and the predatory recruiting of working-class Chicanxs.

Stations of the Cross was anything but a performance with one actor; rather, the roles played by Gamboa and the East Los Angeles community help to extend the performance's critique of the War on a collective level. The performance engages with Chicanx audiences as co-producers in the art. During the performance, Asco walked in a straight line, with Gamboa directly behind Herrón, assisting in carrying the cardboard cross. Gamboa joins Jesus/Herrón on his pilgrimage, playing the role of an altar boy wearing a traditional surplice while appearing as a zombie in bell bottom pants and platform heels. His costume embodies what Latinx studies scholar Desirée Martín calls "secular sanctity," that is "practices of popular spirituality...[that] fuse with cultural production to exemplify the contradictions between high culture and popular culture, between the humans the divine, the secular and the sacred" (7-8).¹³⁵ As an altar boy in zombie makeup and heels, Gamboa queers the altar boy aesthetic with '70s era fashion, bringing the sacred outside of the religiosity of the Catholic church and into the everyday public spaces of East Los Angeles. On his head, Gamboa wears an animal skull headpiece intended to "ward off unsolicited communion" (Benavidez, 41).¹³⁶ However, this did not prove to be materially effective. In photographs of the performance by Seymour Rosen, they show young Chicano boys joining in the performance, walking alongside Herrón and looking directly into Rosen's camera. In one photograph, a Chicanx child looks in curiosity at Gamboa from behind a bus station bench, a white store owner stares, and a pair of Chicanas briskly walk past the performance and carry on along the sidewalk (Figure 2.1). What began as a performance of three artists became a communal activity orchestrated by Asco.

¹³⁵Martín, Desirée A. *Borderlands Saints: Secular Sanctity in Chicano/a and Mexican Culture*. Rutgers University Press, 2014.

¹³⁶Benavidez, Max., et al. *Gronk*. UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center, 2007.



Figure 2.1: Asco, *Stations of the Cross*, 1971, performance documentation, black and white photograph by Seymour Rosen.

Trailing at the end of the line is the sole queer artist of the group, Gronk, whose exclusion from carrying the phallic cross signifies his exclusion from Chicana heteronormativity and his disidentification across material and symbolic spaces. According to José Esteban Muñoz, disidentification is a queer creative process for minoritarian subjects to resist and refashion racial and gendered meanings. Muñoz describes:

Disidentification is about recycling and rethinking encoded meaning. The process of disidentification scrambles and reconstructs the encoded message of a cultural text in a fashion that both exposes the encoded message's universalizing and exclusionary machinations and recircuits its workings to account for, include, and empower minority identities and identifications (31).¹³⁷

Gronk employs disidentificatory performance practices throughout the duration of *Stations of the Cross*. While Gronk is assigned the role of Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor who ordered the

¹³⁷ Muñoz, José Esteban. *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*. University of Minnesota Press, 1999.

crucifixion of Jesus, he physically appears nothing like his assigned role. This demonstrates Gronk's disidentification from both Catholicism and Chicana culture, two social spaces guilty of homophobia. Gronk self-fashions and assumes a completely different identity: a character named Popcorn. Popcorn is one of Gronk's personas that "recycles" content from French cinema, particularly Marcel Carné's 1945 film, *Les enfants du paradis (Children of Paradise)* (1945), filmed during the World War II years of German military occupation in France. Popcorn draws its primary inspiration from a mime character in the film, Baptiste Debureau, played by French mime artist Jean-Louis Barrault. Gronk's "[scrambling and reconstructing]" of French cinema is a performance of queer disidentification, one that not only opens up the queer possibilities of Asco's repertoire but also produces global linkages beyond East Los Angeles. Gronk's persona articulates war's transnational spatial violence, linking military occupations between Germany in France and the U.S. in Vietnam. Additionally, as the mime in *Children of Paradise* performs within a German occupied zone during World War II, Gronk walks East Los Angeles' streets surveilled by the LAPD in the 1970s, expressing war's violence across both space and time. He wears a long black cloak, a bowler hat with a bow, and white gloves that are emblematic of his mime character, accentuated by his white makeup and blush. Over his left shoulder, Gronk carries a long white bag, where, playing on his name Popcorn, he carries actual popcorn which he uses to bless the sidewalk. One of the stations along Whittier Boulevard was the Silver Dollar Bar and Cafe, where Chicano journalist Ruben Salazar was shot and killed by a LAPD officer during the Chicano Moratorium demonstrations. Gronk spreads popcorn across the Silver Dollar entrance as a blessing to Salazar and a commemoration of the Moratorium. His physical and symbolic acts are reminders of ongoing Chicana death near and afar. All in all, Gronk's self-fashioned persona, while disidentifying from the dominant prism of heteronormative

Chicanx and Catholic cultures, expresses solidarity with immediate Chicanx activism against the Vietnam War through his symbolic refashioning of French moving pictures.

Asco's *Stations of the Cross* resists spatial and temporal confinement placed upon Chicanxs following the Chicano Moratorium marches. Following the LAPD's beating and killing of Chicanxs during the anti-war demonstrations, city ordinances were implemented and codified in East Los Angeles, restricting public assembly in East Los Angeles, instating time curfews, and canceling annual Christmas events like Las Posadas. Thus, Asco's choice to publicly assemble on Christmas Eve is a direct resistance to the city's carceral geography. The group's disruption of time and space was furthered in their performance's final gesture: the placement of Herrón's cross at the entrance of a Marine recruiting station. As the final 'station,' the recruiting station is both the physical and symbolic site for producing mass Chicanx death. By blocking the entrance with the cardboard cross, Asco literally attempted to stop the flow of Chicanxs recruited into the Vietnam War while providing a symbolic end, an 'x,' to the Vietnam War. As Gamboa remembers, "The Vietnam War ensured that a disproportionate large number of Chicano young men would die in combat while the remaining Chicana/o population would be subjected to various levels of discrimination, unemployment, poor educational services, and tremendous police violence involving numerous injuries" (337).¹³⁸ Taken as a whole, *Stations of the Cross* reclaims East Los Angeles' public spaces amidst vast racial inequalities during the years of the Vietnam War, producing Chicanx social space that had been encroached upon and redefined by the U.S. police, military, and carceral states in the U.S. and Vietnam. Art historian C. Ondine Chavoya describes, borrowing from Marxist literary scholar Frederic Jameson, how "Asco's (early) performance actions cognitively map the absence of Chicano public space by inventing it:

¹³⁸ Dockx, Nico, and Pascal Gielen. *Commonism: A New Aesthetics of the Real*. Edited by Nico Dockx et al., Valiz, 2018.

reversing the terms of exclusion, even when unable to reverse the conditions of exclusion” (202).¹³⁹ As Chavoya argues, Asco’s performances respond directly to spatial exclusion by inventing Chicana social space and reclaiming the production of space in East Los Angeles to the Chicana community.

Asco’s performances demonstrate the particular ways that both space and temporality are inseparable terms across Los Angeles’ geographies and histories. The Moratorium marches in themselves were attempts to disrupt the temporality of the Vietnam War, calling for a literal stop in time during the draft. Held four years after the Moratorium demonstrations, Asco’s 1974 performance *First Supper (After a Major Riot)* acts as a temporal disruption. The performance was a collective reminder of the Moratorium events, calling attention to how they continue to haunt East Los Angeles in the forms of policing and urban redevelopment. *First Supper*, in its title, performance, and photographic documentation by Gamboa, expresses a reordering of normative time as linear and progressive, since the continued policing and displacement of Chicanas merely repeats the carceral violence that ensued the Moratorium marches. On a traffic median at the intersection of Arizona Street and Whittier Boulevard, a physical site of protest during the demonstrations, Asco, with the addition of Humberto Sandoval, occupied the traffic site and restaged a Chicana interpretation of Jesus’ Last Supper in Jerusalem. *First Supper* reorganized the urban space to resist, in protest, the collective forgetting of the Moratorium, i.e. the ‘major riot.’ Jumping between temporal scales, calling this the ‘first supper’ following the Moratorium versus the ‘last’ that marked Jesus’, the performance resists the homogenization and linearity of racial capitalist time. *First Supper* is a collective ritual that conjures up the past within the present through theatrical spectacle and, to use André Bazin’s term, becomes a

¹³⁹ Chavoya, C. Ondine. “Internal Exiles: The Interventionist Public and Performance Art of Asco.” *Space, Site, Intervention: Situating Installation Art*, edited by Erika Suderburg. University of Minnesota Press, 2000, pp. 189-208.

mummified object through Gamboa's photograph, exceeding the duration of the Moratorium events. As Chavoya describes, "Beyond identifying the site as a spatial symbol of subordination. *First Supper* enacts a counterspectacle to mitigate its transformation into a nonplace and spectacle of historical amnesia" (196).¹⁴⁰ Chavoya underlines Asco's resistance to "historical amnesia" by demonstrating how Whittier Boulevard remains a place with a history of violence that must be remembered, just as the Last Supper itself is commemorated annually in Christian and Catholic traditions and ceremonies, performances in themselves. The Asco performers in *First Supper*, thus, act as the undead figures of the past resurfaced into the present, a performance that Asco borrows from Catholic ceremony, where the Eucharist invokes the past life of Jesus and congeals his literal and figurative body into an object that exceeds his corporeal life on Earth. Rather than reify the hegemonic and coercive acts of obedience that the Catholic Church demands through the Eucharist practice, Asco's performance is explicitly an act of spatial and temporal disobedience as it commemorates the Moratorium demonstrations well past its occurrence within a public space reclaimed for revolt by brown minoritized Chicanxs.

During *First Supper*, Asco occupied the traffic median with stage props, a painting, and their brown bodies, resignifying the public space as a stage for Chicanx ceremony and a site of collective struggle. The performance, like much of Asco's creative works, borrows from popular culture, film, experimental art, religion, Hollywood film, and the Chicanx community. The group sits around a table with a bowl of fruit, shot glasses, and barbed wire. They are accompanied by a series of stage props and art objects, including a giant head figurine, a mannequin torso painted as a skeleton, a baby doll lying on the floor next to a mirror leaning on the table's side, and one half of Gronk's diptych painting, *The Truth about the Terror in Chile* (1973), hanging underneath a Whittier Boulevard traffic sign. Valdez interprets the *First Supper* stage as a scene from Lewis

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

Carroll's fantastical children's tale, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865), seeing Asco's 'supper' as a 'mad-tea party.' She appears as a Mad Hatter figure with a top hat and blazer, though decidedly through a Chicana punk inflection signified by her pale makeup and eyebrow erasure. Sitting to her left, Sandoval wears a bowler hat, a white mask that covers half of his face, and black suspenders, an outfit reminiscent, though not identical to, the character Alex DeLarge and his droogs in Stanley Kubrick's 1971 film *A Clockwork Orange*. As both Valdez and Herrón's costumes borrow widely from popular culture and Hollywood film, Asco produces an alternative form of Chicana activism and art practice. Herrón sits alongside Sandoval, wearing a red t-shirt and a *calavera* mask that completely covers his face, appearing as the least theatrical of the group in his casual wear, minus the mask. Herrón raises his head to Sandoval's red cup, attempting to drink at the supper scene as though he is one of Jesus' apostles celebrating his last. Gronk sits at the edge of the table directly across from Valdez, wearing blue jeans and a long brown coat that hangs close to the traffic island asphalt. Wearing white face makeup and heavy black eyeshadow, Gronk raises a tea cup while sitting in front of his painting.

As one half of a diptych, *The Truth*, for Gronk, is an aesthetic response to Augusto Pinochet's dictatorship in Chile which began a year before the *First Supper* performance. Gronk's pan-Latin American spatial links continue his activist aim to connect colonized spaces through conceptual art and performance. Upon a white space, *The Truth* depicts a gray colored human body with visible ribs on its musculature and several laces across its thighs and pelvis. In effect, these visual images depict the painted subject as castrated, expressing both the physical and symbolic dismemberment of colonized Latin American subjects under dictatorial rule. This is furthered by the painting's composition, with the edges of the frame physically cutting off the subject's limbs including their head. According to Jez Flores García, the body is crucified. "Its

pose calls to mind crucifixion, and the modeling of the figure resonates with the similarly crucified figure at the center of Siqueiros' mural, *América Tropical* (1932), located on Olvera Street in Los Angeles,"García writes (54).¹⁴¹ Siqueiros' crucified body, however, is visibly whole, and is one of an indigenous man. Thus, the uncanny resemblance of the body in *The Terror* to Siquieros' mural not only expresses compositional similarities; it produces transnational links between state-sanctioned violence towards colonized subjects in South America, Mexico, and the U.S. Gronk's still painting becomes a performative object that connects the locality of East Los Angeles with Chile, creating solidarities beyond the U.S. nation-state and its arbitrary national borders. Gronk's work argues how the conditions of possibility for police violence in East Los Angeles are always-already transnational and expressive of spatial regimes that affect Chicax, Latinx, and Latin American communities across the Western hemisphere. The painting invites audiences to remember the Chicano Moratorium as a global struggle for social space that is not solely confined to East Los Angeles. Rather, it signifies a broader resistance to policing, carceral violence, and militarized occupation. The traffic median, then, becomes a metonymic stage for resisting transnational colonial violence undergirding the production and organization of space across the Americas in the 1970s.

While Gronk's visual art opens up radical spatial possibilities, it is Gamboa's photograph that has routinely functioned as the primary visual referent for *First Supper* within art museums and academic scholarship. Gamboa's photograph of *First Supper* both broadens and limits Asco's spatial and temporal interventions, acting as a visual supplement to the performance amid Asco's extensive archive, repertoire, and aesthetic strategies. Gamboa's photographs, in general,

¹⁴¹ Flores-Garcia, Jez. *Camp as a Weapon: Chicano Identity and Asco's Aesthetics of Resistance*. eScholarship, University of California, 2020.

act as the primary index and referent for Asco, exhibited in art exhibitions as either Asco or Gamboa. According to Alvarado, Gamboa:

As the self-designated archivist and primary documentarian and photographer ...cataloged and disseminated documentation of Asco actions ‘to as many art world luminaries as he could think of,’¹⁴² creating an invaluable archive while enacting an aggressive delimiting curatorial practice within a collective whose boundaries seem to have always been in question (61-62).¹⁴³

Gamboa’s archival direction of Asco’s work, as Alvarado argues, presents a particular version of Asco that can at times overlook the group’s queerness, namely embodied by Gronk and Valdez’s performances. This kind of uneven valuation of Asco’s archive through the prism of Gamboa produces what Alvarado calls “Gamboa’s Asco archive,” one where “existing accounts of Asco’s formation and unifying ethos...rely heavily on Gamboa’s expansive, personal, and artistic archive,”¹⁴⁴ specifically through Chon Noriega’s academic anthology, *Urban Exile: Collected Writings of Harry Gamboa Jr.* (1998) (62). While a foundational work in Asco criticism, Noriega’s anthology tends to conflate Asco’s collaborative work with Gamboa’s solo works, even though Gronk and Valdez appear on the cover of *Urban Exile* and interviews with Gronk and Herrón are housed within the collection. As a consequence, Gamboa’s photographs of Asco’s performances are often read as a signature on all things Asco, overlooking some of the major contributions of Gronk, Herrón, Valdez, and others throughout Asco’s history.

Here, I do not intend to replicate Gamboa’s “curatorial practice” in my reading of *First Supper*. However, I would argue that a closer examination of Gamboa’s photographs is necessary

¹⁴² Hinch, Jim. “Walking Mural: Asco and the Ends of Chicano Art.” *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 23 August 2012.

¹⁴³ Alvarado, Leticia. *Abject Performances: Aesthetic Strategies in Latino Cultural Production*. Duke University Press, 2018.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

in considering the spatial and temporal interventions that the performance and its documentation are producing. I, too, agree with Alvarado that the “boundaries” of Asco have always-already been in question, which is why I read *First Supper* as *both* photographic *and* performative, inhabiting a space between the aesthetic mediums that makes either inseparable. Thus, we can acknowledge how Gamboa’s photographs have some limits in how Asco criticism is generated, all while addressing how the photographs themselves produced by Gamboa are crucial parts within the totality of Asco’s aesthetic strategies.

Gamboa’s *First Supper* photograph embodies the inseparability of aesthetic forms in Asco’s repertoire. His framing of Asco in relation to the traffic median, for example, repeats the formal composition of the body in Gronk’s painting. In the photograph, Gronk’s head appears between the painted body’s legs, framing the upper half of his torso as a part of the painting surface. Herrón’s torso covers the subject’s right thigh, making the painting a material art object that is inseparable from Asco’s physical bodies. The same v-shaped framing of Gronk’s torso is built in the urban environment in the shape of the traffic median lines framing Asco’s bodies. Gamboa’s photograph shows cars moving on both sides of the Asco performance, expressing the movement of vehicles and bodies that the photograph makes still in time. The color red matches across both the urban geography and the Asco performers’ attire, with a vehicle, tail lights, stop lights, and a liquor store sign matching the red color of Herrón’s shirt, Valdez’s scarf and makeup, as well as the faint red tint on Sandoval’s shirt. The matching reds contrast with the muted gray of the urban geography and the negative white space of the sky above. The colors and composition of Gamboa’s photograph demonstrate how Asco is literally consumed by the city space but nevertheless in the process of making a new Chicana social space amidst social

unrest, policing, and city redevelopment. Gamboa's photograph documents Asco's material and symbolic remaking of the traffic median space on Whittier Boulevard.

The photograph and performance are produced under what Gamboa calls 'spatial denial,'¹⁴⁵ a hegemonic spatial strategy that delimits accessible public space in the urban cityscape of Los Angeles. This often occurs in the form of policing, gentrification, and deportation. According to Gamboa:

In the period of 1970 through 1974, East L.A. was subjected to something akin to Martial Law that disallowed the gathering of small groups of young people at any time of day. My experience of defiance in making certain that I would gather young people to perform and pose for photographs under such conditions instilled in me a clear sense of rejecting [the] denial of public access to public space (337).¹⁴⁶

Gamboa sees the production process of his photography as a material resistance to the spatial denial and policing of Chicanxs. His photographs, like *First Supper*, require the public assembly of brown bodies in public spaces in order for the photographs themselves to appear as documents exceeding the time he shoots his photographed subjects. His *First Supper* photograph rejects the spatial expectations of LA's built environment by congregating Asco's brown bodies together on a public traffic space. Throughout his photographs, Gamboa sees his work as allowing "all people...to realize the shared value of free common space" (339).¹⁴⁷ In that egalitarian spirit, however, *First Supper* must be read not only as an extension of Gamboa's aesthetic vision but as a part of Asco's whole. As performance studies scholar Peggy Phelan has argued, photography

¹⁴⁵ Dockx, Nico, and Pascal Gielen. *Commonism: A New Aesthetics of the Real*. Edited by Nico Dockx et al., Valiz, 2018.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

and performance are not synonymous mediums. For Phelan, performance “implicates the real through the presence of real bodies” (148).¹⁴⁸ “Performance cannot be saved, recorded, documented, or otherwise participate in the circulation of representations of representations: once it does so, it becomes something other than performance,”¹⁴⁹ Phelan argues, calling for a materialist understanding of performance and its attention to the ontological register of meaning generated by real bodies in a performance space (146). Asco’s work, when privileged through Gamboa’s photographic documents, obscures some of the ontological dimensions of “real” brown bodies commemorating “real” historical events, such as Gronk’s queer body and Valdez’s female presence literally occupying space during the performance. Gronk and Valdez are not only still subjects locked into Gamboa’s photographic male gaze; they are co-producers of Chicana social space as they dine on a public traffic median. Thus, Gronk and Valdez exceed Gamboa’s field of vision as performers rather than still photographic subjects. *First Supper* can be read as *both* performance *and* photograph, exploring the limits and possibilities of each medium in producing Chicana social space outside, within, and between Asco’s respective aesthetic mediums.

Producing Chicana Spatiality and Temporality

A year after their rendition of *Stations of the Cross*, Asco performed *Walking Mural* (1972). Here, Asco walked down Whittier Boulevard on Christmas Eve. One distinctive difference, however, was the appearance of Patssi Valdez, the only Chicana artist in Asco. For her costume, Valdez refashioned the popular Chicana cultural figure La Virgen de Guadalupe by wearing all black and attaching a *calavera* behind her head. Valdez’s reimagined La Virgen exists within a genealogy of Chicana feminist artists that refigure La Virgen as an empowered woman

¹⁴⁸ Phelan, Peggy. *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*. Routledge, 1993.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

rather than a passive subject. *Walking Mural* precedes the influential work of Chicana artist Yolanda Lopez in the late 1970s, the Guadalupe series,¹⁵⁰ where Lopez depicts La Virgen as an agential subject running, sewing, and cutting a snake. Like Lopez, Valdez performs La Virgen as a woman who is anything but passive. As Tere Romo describes, “Valdez asserted her right to *become* the Virgen” (280).¹⁵¹ But unlike Lopez, Valdez’s performance presents La Virgen as a death symbol rather than an empowered subject, though both versions of La Virgen speak to gendered oppression. Valdez’s presence as the only Chicana artist in *Asco* and a Chicana woman living in East Los Angeles during the early 1970s, the stage of *Walking Mural*, calls attention to the abjection of Chicana women, figured through Valdez’s embodiment of La Virgen walking in public space all in black.

With that said, Valdez must be read in relation to the two other artists in *Walking Mural*, Gronk and Herrón.¹⁵² On Whittier Boulevard, Gronk walks alongside Valdez as a Christmas tree in drag. Wearing makeup, high heel boots, green chiffon, and ornaments dangling from his fabrics’ edges, Gronk queers the Christmas tree within a heteronormative public space. His performance, along with Valdez, defies the heteromascularity and heterosexism found in Chicano culture and politics at the height of the Chicano Movement, projected in figures like Rodolfo “Corky” Gonzales’ ‘Joaquin’ and the Chicano homeland itself, Aztlán. It would take close to two decades for Chicana lesbian writer and theorist Cherrie Moraga to publish “Queer Aztlán: the Re-formation of Chicano Tribe” (1993) for a definitive revision of the Chicano Movement’s heteronormativity, though the work of Chicana women and queer women of color in the 1970s

¹⁵⁰ These include *Portrait of the Artist as the Virgen of Guadalupe*; Margaret F. Stewart: *Our Lady of Guadalupe*; *Guadalupe: Victoria F. Franco*.

¹⁵¹ From Romo’s essay “Conceptually Divine: Patssi Valdez’s Virgen de Guadalupe Walking the Mural” in *Asco: Elite of the Obscure* (2011).

¹⁵² Gamboa photographed the performance and was not in costume. *Walking Mural* is often studied in relation to Gamboa’s photographs, since they are the only existing documents of the performance.

onward, manifested in landmark anthologies such as *This Bridge Called My Back* in 1981, has always-already been doing the work of queering Chicano culture, politics, and space.¹⁵³ Gronk's performance in *Walking Mural* exists within this genealogy of queer of color critique, producing, as Alvarado describes, "an affront to the heteronormative, patriarchal ideal upheld by the Chicano nationalist project focused on affirming representation, defended by East Los Angeles's inhabitants" (59).¹⁵⁴ Gronk's Christmas drag challenges Chicano cultural nationalism's implicit heteropatriarchy, acting as a strategy of disidentification within the Chicano community of East Los Angeles and the Chicano Movement at large. As Muñoz argues, disidentification includes "the strategies the minority subject practices in order to negotiate a phobic majoritarian public sphere that continuously elides or punishes the existence of subjects who do not conform to the phantasm of normative citizenship" (4).¹⁵⁵ Gronk's Christmas drag is an important strategy that calls attention to queer Chicanxs as unassimilable subjects within the Chicano Movement's political imaginary.¹⁵⁶ Thus, Gronk brings the presence of queer *chicanidad* through a strategy of disidentification and what Muñoz also calls "brown feelings." Drawing from Hortense Spillers' notion of 'displaceable attentiveness,' Muñoz writes, "Brown feelings are not individualized affective particularity; they more nearly express this 'displaceable attentiveness,' which is to say a larger collective mapping of self and other" (679).¹⁵⁷ Understanding Gronk through the lens of

¹⁵³ For instance, the recent shift from Chican@ to Chicanx, with the "x" gesturing beyond a gender binary, derives from queer Chicana/o/x interventions, as does the @ in its initial attempt to disrupt the a/o binary and gendered signification in language.

¹⁵⁴ Alvarado, Leticia. *Abject Performances: Aesthetic Strategies in Latino Cultural Production*. Duke University Press, 2018.

¹⁵⁵ Muñoz, José Esteban. *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*. University of Minnesota Press, 1999.

¹⁵⁶ In addition to queerness, the status of citizenship within Chicanx political imaginaries is directly tied to questions of accessibility and disability. For more, see Julie Avril Minich, *Accessible Citizenships: Disability, Nation, and the Cultural Politics of Greater Mexico* (2013).

¹⁵⁷ Muñoz, José Esteban. "Feeling Brown, Feeling Down: Latina Affect, the Performativity of Race, and the Depressive Position." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, vol. 31, no. 3, 2006, pp. 675–688.

brown feelings and disidentification helps to situate his performance as less of an individual expression of agency and more of an articulation of a “larger collective mapping.” Read alongside Valdez’s *La Virgen*, Gronk’s performance in *Walking Mural* produces a form of Chicana spatiality that disrupts the regulation of gender and sexuality within East Los Angeles, the Chicano Movement, and the Chicana community.

With Gronk and Valdez, Herrón walks with a three-dimensional mural atop his shoulders, acting as a human embodiment of a mural painting. Herrón becomes a literal mural, inserting his head into the painting alongside three still faces. Unlike the painted images, Herrón can freely move. As Max Benavidez describes, *Walking Mural* “[tells] the viewer that this work is alive, it walks, it can move” (42).¹⁵⁸ His performance underlines the ‘walking’ in *Walking Mural* as a way to underline the formal limitations of mural paintings. As a practicing muralist himself, along with Gronk,¹⁵⁹ Herrón shows skepticism towards mural paintings, especially their role in social movements. At the time of the performance, murals acted as important cultural supplements to the Chicano Movement, intended to mobilize political activism and instruct viewers about the value of Chicano culture. For Chicano audiences and political activists, murals were to represent accessible content to viewers across different levels of textual and visual literacy. Given limited access to higher education in working-class Chicana communities like East Los Angeles during this historical period, a mural’s accessibility was considered tantamount.

Walking Mural questions whether the Chicano Movement’s aspirations for the mural painting as an effective medium for social movement was ever fulfilled. As Chavoya and Gonzalez observe, “In [the performance], Asco performed as characters in a mural who had

¹⁵⁸ Benavidez, Max., et al. *Gronk*. UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center, 2007.

¹⁵⁹ Herrón and Gronk’s collaboration on *Black and White Mural* (1973), a work that mediates the Chicano Moratorium demonstrations through images ranging from the death of Ruben Salazar, *A Clockwork Orange* (1971), French cinema, and Chicano activism, speaks to their direct engagement with the mural form during the aftermath of the Chicano Moratorium.

become so bored with the solemn subject matter that they extricated themselves from the wall and took off down the street” (52).¹⁶⁰ For Asco, murals were seen as limiting art mediums for physical, aesthetic, and social movement, though they were also embraced by the group, acting as the direct inspiration for *Walking Mural* and a number of other works. Thus, Herrón’s performance literalizes the group’s shared critique and embrace of the mural. By walking with and *as* a mural, Herrón links Chicano Movement art with the Chicax body, addressing the importance of movement across physical, political, and aesthetic registers while walking down Whittier Boulevard. As Alvarado argues, “The piece serves as a critique of the inactivity and resulting political ineffectuality of the mural form despite the permanent presence of murals on urban walls” (83).¹⁶¹ Asco’s performance of *Walking Mural* embodies these formal contradictions at the center of the Chicano Movement and Chicax art, situating the mural painting beyond physical walls and still imagery. The performance calls attention to the Chicax body and the ways that performance can alter the visual perception of murals. Asco imagines what is possible if a mural can move beyond a wall by turning the Chicax body itself into a mural.¹⁶² Gamboa’s photographic documentation of the performance depicts Valdez, Gronk, and Herrón in still image as they walk down Whittier Boulevard on Christmas Eve. Yet, the performance was anything *but* still. What the photograph captures is a visual instance of a performance in movement, a performance that produces Chicax spatiality as it reorganizes and reclaims public space within East Los Angeles, the very site of political and social movement for Chicaxs.

¹⁶⁰ Chavoya, C. Ondine, et. al. *Asco: Elite of the Obscure: A Retrospective, 1972-1987*. Williams College Museum of Art: Los Angeles County Museum of Art: Haiti Cantz, 2011.

¹⁶¹ Alvarado, Leticia. *Abject Performances: Aesthetic Strategies in Latino Cultural Production*. Duke University Press, 2018.

¹⁶² Within Asco’s creative logic, a mural does not always need a wall. This is depicted in *Asshole Mural* (1975), a set of photographs where Asco poses around a sewage pipe (the ‘asshole mural’) that rests at the center of the image.

In tandem with creating Chicana spatiality, Asco produces alternative temporalities by way of its performative works. This is best embodied by their play with the ephemeral in *Instant Mural* (1974). Immediately after their *First Supper* performance, Asco took to a nearby liquor store wall to put into practice a theory that Gronk had about the production of mural paintings. Like many of Asco's performances, *Instant Mural* channelled the group's frustrations surrounding the material fixity and static image of the mural painting. While *Walking Mural* highlights a mural's immobility, challenging the efficacy of static art forms within urban spaces, *Instant Mural* simultaneously acts as a still and moving image across time. In the performance, Gronk shortens the duration of time needed to produce a mural, using tape, Chicana bodies, and a liquor store wall. After *First Supper*, Sandoval got rid of his *calavera* mask and Valdez discarded her Mad Hatter outfit, dressing in Chicana punk attire. Valdez and Sandoval's bodies, which were taped onto the wall by Gronk, became the content and form of *Instant Mural*, one which has been preserved in still photographs by Gamboa. But like most Asco's performances, this was not a sole creation of Gamboa's imagination, though the photograph itself, and its compositional qualities, should be recognized as an achievement in Gamboa's photography and in Chicana photography at large.¹⁶³ The photographic document, however, should not erase Gronk's theory of art production, Valdez & Sandoval's performances, the liquor store wall's presence in an ephemeral LA urban space, and the adhesive tape roll itself as one of the primary materials for Asco's art.

After being bound to the wall, Valdez and Sandoval freed themselves from the tape, showing that their bodies can break away from spatial confinement. The image of Valdez bound

¹⁶³ Gamboa's photograph of Valdez bound to the wall by Gronk has become an image at times synonymous with Asco, gracing the cover of Gamboa's work in *Urban Exile: Collected Writings of Harry Gamboa Jr.* (1998), one of the first texts to introduce Asco's work to the broader academic public.

to the wall by a man unsettled some Chicana feminists, who saw the act as restricting Valdez's agency as a Chicana woman living within a patriarchal and sexist social space. However, this critique seems more directed at the photograph of Valdez, which to some viewers can neutralize the performance's radical critique of time, space, race, and gender for Chicanos like Sandoval, Chicana women like Valdez, and gay Chicano men like Gronk. As Chavoya and Gonzalez describe, Valdez, in particular, is "the embodiment of self-awareness as a mutable and transgressive image in the urban landscape," not a passive subject bound to a wall by a patriarchal system (52).¹⁶⁴ This is further evident in Valdez solo work. Her paintings in the 1990s, in particular, depict domestic spaces as a way to challenge Chicana confinement and patriarchal violence. But much like the mural characters in *Walking Mural* who got bored of being stuck on a wall and decided to walk, *Instant Mural* shows how the painting can detach itself from material confinement and can move within the urban space it has always-already been present within. In other words, much like *Stations of the Cross*, *Instant Mural* shows the ways that art and performance can directly interact with the very people that the work is meant to address—East LA Chicanas/os/xs.

Unique to *Instant Mural* is the way that it works with ephemerality. For Gronk in particular, ephemerality represents the material conditions for all art production in Los Angeles' public spaces, given the vast demolition of buildings, dispossession of communities, and erasure of public murals throughout Los Angeles.¹⁶⁵ Urban space is always-already ephemeral, making

¹⁶⁴ Chavoya, C. Ondine, et. al. *Asco: Elite of the Obscure: A Retrospective, 1972-1987*. Williams College Museum of Art: Los Angeles County Museum of Art: Haiti Cantz, 2011.

¹⁶⁵ The history of public murals in Los Angeles is contentious, especially in recent years. From 2003 to 2013, public murals were banned, and in 2019, Judy Baca's *Hitting the Wall* mural, commissioned by the International Olympic Committee for the 1984 Olympic Games, was painted over by the Metropolitan Transportation Authority. Asco's *Instant Mural* can be seen as a meditation on murals as always-already ephemeral, especially within Los Angeles' public spaces.

the material conditions for art in LA public spaces subject to erasure. In the face of spatial destruction and reorganization, Gronk sees the ephemerality of space as a generative model for working within these contradictions internal to the production of urban space. Gronk articulates the ephemeral as both spatial and temporal. For instance, *Instant Mural* makes an argument for Chicax art making through its qualification as ‘instant.’ Thus, in a matter of seconds, any Chicax can become an artist and a mural, condensing art training to an ‘instant’ on a street side wall, just as smartphones in the twenty-first century allow one to become a photographer or videographer in an ‘instant.’ This kind of aesthetic training exists outside of the space of an art school, an institution with histories of gatekeeping, racial exclusion, and the ghettoizing of ethnic art. With a roll of paper, a wall, and a human body, anyone can create or become an *instant mural*, opening up the possibilities for Chicax art making within an urbanscape subject to the ephemeral nature of time. Asco’s *Instant Mural* performance makes the argument that neither time nor space can be transcended within East Los Angeles, yet normative temporalities can be broken and refigured through a materialistic practice of performance.

Instant Mural provides a model for examining the Chicax body in relation to urban and public space by calling attention to the material presence of Chicax bodies producing space and time in East Los Angeles. *Instant Mural* generates a broader critique on material confinement and the production of race and gender under U.S. racial capitalism. The Chicax body is always-already marked and read as a visual signifier for race and gender, differences which are organized under the U.S. racial capitalist state and measured as “good/bad” or “suitable/unsuitable” for absorption into a multicultural mold. *Instant Mural* resists these forms of inclusion in its own defiance of neoliberal practices, utilizing the ephemeral as a spatial and temporal tactic which resists assimilation through its constant disruption of measurement in time

and space. As the valuation of brown bodies is produced racial capitalism and liberal multiculturalism, *Instant Mural* inaugurates an aesthetic strategy that resists these forms of value making, rejecting identification and recognition within these spatial and epistemic regimes. The Chicax body's break from its material constraint—the adhesive tape, in this case—signifying the Chicax body as unlocatable and unknowable. In conversation with Marxist geographer Edward Soja, Chavoya notes how “*Instant Mural* can be interpreted as challenging the fragility of social controls while ‘actualizing the adhesive relations between society and space, history and geography’ with specific attention to the locations and functions of cultural identity and gender within the paradigm” (196).¹⁶⁶

I would extend Chavoya's remark on Soja by noting that the “adhesive relations” are signified by the adhesive tape used by Gronk. This is made clear in Gronk's 2010 reenactment of *Instant Mural*, a performance in itself that embodies Gronk's art theory and practice. Performed in a hallway at the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center, Gronk permitted an undergraduate student to become an instant muralist themselves, handing them adhesive tape to bind his body to the hallway wall (Figure 2.2). After being bound to the wall under lines of tape, Gronk breaks himself free, saying, “With all instant murals, you can always break free of any oppression that comes along.”¹⁶⁷ Here, Gronk challenges the formal limits to social, cultural, aesthetic, and bodily movement imposed upon Chicaxs. To be able to “break free of any oppression” is a radical political act that *Instant Mural* instantiates through an aesthetic strategy and concept that redefines space and time through the Chicax body. Its radicalness comes in part with its wrestling with spatial and temporal contradictions. The university itself, in which the 2010

¹⁶⁶ Chavoya, C. Ondine. “Internal Exiles: The Interventionist Public and Performance Art of Asco.” *Space, Site, Intervention: Situating Installation Art*, edited by Erika Suderburg. University of Minnesota Press, 2000, pp. 189-208.

¹⁶⁷ “CSRC Minute with Crystal: Gronk: Day 3 (April 23, 2010).” *YouTube*, 23 Apr. 2010, www.youtube.com/watch?v=33lgSWGLMbQ.

performance is being held, can be read as an extension of “any oppression,” given the university’s encroachment on indigenous land and knowledge. The fact that this performance takes place within the Chicano Studies Research Center at UCLA, an institution that emerged out of radical social movements in the late 1960s in order to challenge the university’s hegemony on knowledge-production, which depended and continues to depend upon exclusion and dispossession, foregrounds the contradictory space that Gronk’s 2010 iteration of *Instant Mural* is performed within. The 1974 photograph of *Instant Mural* produces the illusion that the performance can only occur once. However, as Gronk’s 2010 performance shows, *Instant Mural* defies a normative sense of time and space, crossing temporal registers of time from past, present, & future, and public spaces, ranging from an East Los Angeles liquor store wall to a hallway in the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center.



Figure 2.2: UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center, *CSRC Minute: Gronk: Day 3 (April 23, 2010)*, 2010, performance documentation, video stills from YouTube.

What carries throughout every ‘instant mural’ is the material presence of the Chicancx body, often forgotten within the abstraction of space and time. Both *Instant Mural* and *Walking Mural* foreground how Asco produces both a Chicancx sense of spatiality and temporality. In the following section, I continue to consider Asco’s unique spatial and temporal strategies. with an

emphasis on their alternative modes of circulation. This, I argue, is primarily figured through their No Movies and their methods of circulation.

Alternative Forms of Circulation in Asco's No Movies

Many of Asco's art works and performances produce an incisive critique of Chicana exclusion in privileged art spaces, primarily modern art museums and the Hollywood film industry. Asco saw Chicana 'spatial denial' from LA's art and entertainment worlds as the primary inspiration for their conceptual multimedia art project, the No Movies. Produced across the 1970s, Asco's No Movies were a set of photographs that documented a series of staged performances throughout Los Angeles, circulated in correspondences and mail art as film stills for fake Hollywood film productions. Gamboa's *First Supper* photograph, for instance, was promoted by Asco as one of their coveted No Movies. The project operated under the premise that the Hollywood film world would never change its racial exclusion of BIPOC actors, let alone include Chicana from East Los Angeles as a film's on-screen leads. Thus, it was through Asco's material circulation of No Movies in mail circuits that the group produced the illusion of Chicana occupying the spaces of Hollywood cinema.

For Asco, Chicana are always-already Hollywood stars since they are a primary demographic working within the spaces where Hollywood films are produced: Los Angeles. Much of Los Angeles' geographies are used, to this day, as prime locations for U.S. and global film productions. Asco's No Movies position LA as a site of labor routinely used by the entertainment industry to produce, circulate, and exchange global commodities in the form of Hollywood films, creating transnational networks and flows. Valdez and Sandoval's costumes in *First Supper*, for example, make direct allusions to Hollywood's transnational spaces by alluding to Disney in Valdez's Mad Hatter outfit, Stanley Kubrick through Sandoval's droog outfit,

Chilean dictatorship in Gronk's painting, and Chicana history in referring to the 'Major Riot' in the title. Yet, Asco's aesthetic approaches are hyper-localized. On the traffic median space, Asco simultaneously appears as Hollywood movie stars and Chicana protestors. Like Hollywood, Asco saw the circulation of photographic stills, promotions, and advertisements, as producing an image of Los Angeles that does not correspond with the everyday lives of Angelenos, especially Chicanas. As Gronk describes, the No Movies are "projecting the real by rejecting the reel."¹⁶⁸ In other words, the No Movies are representing the 'reality' of Chicanas living, moving, and performing in the spaces of Hollywood filming sites while rejecting the Hollywood 'film reel' as the privileged site of brown representation. Asco's material production and circulation of their No Movies furthers their critique of the Hollywood film system by literally embodying the materials and strategies of mainstream filmmaking. In making his photographs, Gamboa used actual film stock intended for motion pictures, giving the actual appearance of a Hollywood aesthetic in his No Movie images.¹⁶⁹ As Chavoya and Gonzalez describe, "[The] No Movies appropriated the spectacle of Hollywood even as they critiqued the absence of Chicanos in mass media" (56-57).¹⁷⁰ Viewers' perception of the *First Supper* image, then, is through a photographic surface identical to Hollywood film, mediating Asco's performance and protest through the literal materials of mass media. Through this process, Gamboa relinquishes the very means of production barred from Chicanas in the mainstream Hollywood film world.

In addition to the production process, Asco mimicked the circulation of Hollywood films as transnational commodities exchanged across global film industries, though through a

¹⁶⁸Gamboa, Harry, and Chon A. Noriega. *Urban Exile: Collected Writings of Harry Gamboa, Jr.* University of Minnesota Press. 1998.

¹⁶⁹ Carrillo, Sean, et al. "¡Tenemos ASCO!: An Oral History of the Chicano Art Group." *Frieze*, <https://www.frieze.com/article/tenemos-asco-oral-history-chicano-art-group>.

¹⁷⁰ Chavoya, C. Ondine, et. al. *Asco: Elite of the Obscure: A Retrospective, 1972-1987*. Williams College Museum of Art: Los Angeles County Museum of Art: Haiti Cantz, 2011.

decidedly queer aesthetic strategy informed by Gronk. Asco used mail correspondences across the globe as their primary way of circulating No Movies. Their images were distributed beyond East Los Angeles and the U.S. to Canada, Cuba, France, Italy, Mexico, and Uruguay. Photographs of several performances, like *First Supper*, were framed as No Movies, translating their performances into faux Hollywood film promotions. As a primary vehicle for No Movie circulation, the mail circuit was in major part Gronk's concept, informed by his queer artist friend, Jerry Dreva. Throughout their personal and artistic relationship, Dreva and Gronk would exchange mail art and correspondences with one another,¹⁷¹ a kind of queer circulation practice that was replicated in the distribution of No Movie content through mail-male circuits. Thus, Gronk played on the queerness embodied in the sound of 'mail' art by inserting a queer 'male' influence into Asco's repertoire. The No Movies, then, became a transnational queer art form, circulated beyond both the boundaries of heteronormativity and Asco itself.

Hernández, similar to Alvarado, has critiqued the ways that Asco's institutionalization in the academy and art world obscures the existence of queer Chicano avant-garde movements preceding, exceeding, and existing alongside Asco. "The consequence of these historiographic decisions for Chicano art and performance are canon defining, while omitting a more complex picture of Chicano avant-gardisms in Los Angeles,"¹⁷² writes Hernández (5). His research focuses on queer Chicano artist Robert "Cyclona" Legoretta and the ways that the attention on Asco as the progenitor of the Chicano avant-garde dismisses the histories of queer artists and groups during the 1970s in Los Angeles, the same time and place as Asco. Thus, Gronk's mail art concept, taken from his own personal relationships with queer artists like Dreva, positions Asco's No Movies as visual *supplements* to the queer Chicano avant garde, exceeding both the

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

¹⁷² Hernández, Robb. *Archiving an Epidemic: Art, AIDS, and the Queer Chicano Avant-Garde*. New York University Press, 2019.

heteronormative framing of dominant Asco histories and the locality of Los Angeles as the primary site of Chicanx art circulation.

In addition, Asco's strategy of circulation addresses the role of mass media in producing and circulating misinformation. Asco presented their No Movies as hoaxes to critique how mass media circulates misinformation, a phenomenon with a recent resurgence in the U.S. with the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and right-wing responses dismissing its realities and consequences, disproportionately affecting black and brown communities. Asco's manipulation, however, did not take the form of ideological misinformation of the far-right type, nor was it intended for capital gains. Rather, Asco took mass media's representational practices as speculative tools to challenge the ways that misinformation has material and ideological effects in everyday life, particularly for racialized subjects. In their No Movie entitled *Decoy Gang War Victim* (1974), Asco blocked off a road in East Los Angeles with red flare flights. At the center of the staged crime scene, Gronk laid down on the asphalt, pretending to be killed at the crosshairs of a Chicano gang fight as a 'gang war victim.' Gronk is a 'decoy,' imitating a dead Chicanx gang member. His body is surrounded by the darkness in the image, enveloped in shades of blue. *Decoy Gang War Victim* presents the death of a queer Chicano male, performing the role of a gang member, as a spectacle for television media outlets to broadcast as yet another act of internecine gang violence. These images are often used and weaponized to produce a stereotype about Chicano males as inherently violent or, in recent Trumpian rhetoric, as 'bad hombres.'¹⁷³ Gamboa circulated images of the No Movie to television outlets, proclaiming that the image was a document of the last Chicanx gang war victim *ever*, as an effort to stop television broadcasts of gang violence as the only visual representation of the Chicanx

¹⁷³ Gamboa continues to explore and counter the criminalization of Chicanx men in his photography project *Chicano Male Unbonded* (1991-present).

community in U.S. mass media. In the photograph, Gronk is positioned as a decoy to bring an end to the media's spectacularization of racialized gang violence.

Whether Asco were materially effective at ending racist television broadcasts, *Decoy Gang War Victim*, in its production and circulation, shows the radical potential of the No Movies to disrupt the flow of information within mass media, mail, and transnational circuits. As Chavoya writes, "Whether the decoy restored peace to the barrio or was effective in canceling out the media's representation of an actual death is highly unlikely; however, the process exposed the possibility of media manipulation to artists" (6).¹⁷⁴ In line with Chavoya, I would argue that it is in the process of creating No Movies that audiences can better grapple with Asco's resistance to 'spatial denial.' Asco takes the reins of mass media's means and relations of production by creating a decidedly Chicana spatiality through *Decoy Gang War Victim*.

The No Movies' exploration of violence not only took the form of internecine racial violence but also explored gendered violence, primarily in the erasure of Chicana women and Chicana femininity within mass media. Throughout the No Movie performances, Valdez instrumentalized her racialized and gendered body, costume, makeup, and fashion, to critique dominant aesthetic judgments in the Hollywood film industry premised on whiteness as the pinnacle of beauty. Valdez's performances rejected assimilation into white femininity, emblemized in Hollywood film history by Mexican-American film actress Margarita Carmen Cansino, otherwise known as Rita Hayworth. Unlike Hayworth, Valdez self-fashions and assembles a Chicana femininity that rejects whiteness while simultaneously embracing the spectacle of Hollywood glamour. One of Valdez's noteworthy performances was in Asco's *À La Mode* (1976), a performance shot at Philippe's, a Downtown Los Angeles restaurant frequented

¹⁷⁴ Chavoya, C. Ondine. "Pseudographic Cinema: Asco's No-Movies." *Performance Research* 3.1, 1998, pp. 1-14.

by Asco. In Gamboa's photograph of the No Movie, Valdez poses at the center of the image atop a diner table, mimicking the modeling gestures of Mexican film actress Dolores Del Rio. Gronk rests at her side, looking away to his right with closed eyes, indifferent to heteronormative desires for Valdez as an aestheticized feminine object. Gamboa appears from behind, looking at the backside of Valdez, though his image fades into the photographic depth, becoming further distanced from Valdez as the unachievable object of desire in the photograph and performance. Wearing black gloves, a white dress, hoop earrings, and silver high heels, Valdez appears fashionable and literally *à la mode* as she gives a downward stare at her viewer. The image's triangulation of Valdez, Gronk, and Gamboa interweaves Valdez's body, Gronk's queer rejection, and Gamboa's fading male gaze. As feminist scholar Marci McMahon argues, "Even though Valdez is the object of the gaze in many Asco performances, she resists and exploits that gaze through self-fashioning" (132).¹⁷⁵ In *À La Mode*, Valdez becomes both an unattainable object and subject of desire as a self-fashioned Chicana celebrity resisting exclusion in the Hollywood film world.

For Amelia Jones, *À La Mode* can be described as an image that inhabits an in-between space in relation to race and gender. Jones describes how in the image "Valdez's sly gaze into the camera, glamorously made-up face, and plunging neckline position the image not as absolute negation but, rather, as stimulating the simultaneous affirmation and resistance that is at play in the best of Asco's works" (126).¹⁷⁶ *À La Mode* operates within an in-between space, embracing Hollywood glamour while resisting white femininity. Consequently, this produces paradoxes which, according to Chon Noriega, exist at the center of Asco's No Movies. He writes:

¹⁷⁵ McMahon, Marci R. *Domestic Negotiations: Gender, Nation, and Self-Fashioning in US Mexicana and Chicana Literature and Art*. Rutgers UP, 2013.

¹⁷⁶ Chavoya, C. Ondine, et. al. *Asco: Elite of the Obscure: A Retrospective, 1972-1987*. Williams College Museum of Art: Los Angeles County Museum of Art: Haiti Cantz, 2011.

The No Movies suggest the paradoxical nature of Chicano resistance to Hollywood and the mass media. There are no easy ‘messages’ here that take for granted the existence of a value-free medium. And yet, as Gamboa’s work testifies, there remains an urgent need to communicate both within and across communities. Gamboa shifts the analysis of minority representation away from its usual focus on textual content and toward the structure of exclusion itself (201).¹⁷⁷

Noriega’s commentary on Gamboa can be extended to Asco as a whole, given that the No Movies were just as much Gronk and Valdez’s creation. Noriega’s heteromasculinist retelling of Asco, in his exclusive focus on Gamboa, neglects to account for the “structure of exclusion” as a *gendering* practice, barring Chicanas like Valdez to appear as central actors in both the Asco story and Hollywood screen. None of these are “easy messages” since they continue to wrestle with the in-between spaces that Jones identifies and that No Movies, like *À La Mode* further by articulating a resistant Chicana femininity.

In *Scissors I & II* (1974), a series of black and white No Movie photographs shot by Gamboa, Valdez presents an alternative image of Chicana femininity through the form of a Hollywood headshot. Across the photographs, Valdez refashions La Virgen again, though instead with a decidedly chola and proto-punk fashion, wearing a transparent sequined cloth over her head and pale makeup accented by dark eyeshadow and lipstick. Looking directly at the viewer, Valdez holds a pair of scissors with a raised hand, ready to direct a stab at the viewer’s gaze (*Scissors I*). While one image shows Valdez still, the other photograph captures Valdez striking her scissors into the viewer’s field of vision, producing a visual blur within the space of the photograph while face remains in clear focus (*Scissors II*). Valdez’s self-fashioning of

¹⁷⁷ Noriega, Chon A. *Shot in America: Television, the State, and the Rise of Chicano Cinema*. University of Minnesota, 2000.

Hollywood glamor through Chicana presence, beauty, fashion, and action, much like in *À La Mode*, unsettles two normative ideals: a heteropatriarchal imaginary within the Chicano community of the Chicana being confined to the domestic space in the service of Chicano men, and a second-wave white feminist equation of the female body as a passive object for male viewing consumption. In the image, Valdez disrupts Chicana passivity and subverts the phallocentrism of film and photographic images that feminist scholars such as Laura Mulvey argue is inherent to film form.¹⁷⁸ Valdez's scissors cut away at the grain of female objectification projected by the male gaze in Hollywood cinema. Both *Scissors* images were circulated and printed as the cover for *Regeneración*, an underground magazine founded by Chicana activist Francisca Flores in 1963 that covered Chicano culture, politics, and art at the height of the Chicano Movement. Originally entitled *Carta Editorial*, the magazine name was changed in 1970 during the Movement as a direct homage to a Mexican anarchist newspaper by Ricardo and Enrique Flores Magón in 1900 with the same name, *Regeneración*. Gamboa was recruited as an editor of the magazine by Flores. Herrón, Gronk, and Valdez contributed their art for several issues, presenting Asco's work in print form to Chicanx and radical audiences. The physical appearance of *Scissors* on the front (I) and back cover (II) of a *Regeneración* issue materializes its gendered critique of white feminism and the Hollywood industry in print form, entering into alternative circuits and networks of radical art for audiences, readers, and activists.

Thus, the No Movies are more than representations of Chicanxs that supplement the absence of Chicanx images in dominant media. The radical critique that the No Movie inaugurates is a commentary on the economies of race and gender that institutions, such as the Hollywood film industry, accumulate capital from. Through their attention to circulation, the No

¹⁷⁸ Mulvey, Laura. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen*, Volume 16, Issue 3, Autumn 1975, Pages 6–18, 1975.

Movies show how some bodies are perceived as more valuable and exchangeable than others (i.e. Rita Hayworth not Patssi Valdez, a dead white man not a dead Chicano male), and that routes of circulation are open to some and closed to others (i.e. Hollywood film is closed to Chicanxs, yet mail and photography are available to most). Value, circulation, and exchange are marked by race and gender, making Asco's unmarketability in the art gallery and Hollywood film industry a radical protest against U.S. racial capitalism and its abstraction of space and time along racial and gendered social axes.

All in all, Asco's performances are material engagements with urban space that resist normative spatial and temporal logics. *Stations of the Cross* and *First Supper (After a Major Riot)* disrupt the flow of quotidian life in East Los Angeles by conjuring the Chicano Moratorium into the present while calling attention to the lived presence of Chicanxs as always-already racialized and gendered subjects. *Walking Mural* and *Instant Mural* work with and against the mural painting form through performance as an aesthetic strategy that can circumvent the abstraction and homogenization of time and space. Asco's *No Movies*, however, challenge the circulation of transnational commodities and the normalizing power that these cultural goods have in naturalizing gendered and racial ideologies, whether through Valdez's self-fashioned Chicana femininity in *À La Mode* and *Scissors I & II* or in Gronk's staged death in *Decoy Gang War Victim*.

Conclusion

The legacy of Asco in the twenty-first century provides a complicated and at times contradictory historical account, one that heroizes the group in the Chicano art world while absorbing them into modern art institutions that they critiqued in their 1970s works. In 1972, Asco's hit-and-run performance *Spray Paint LACMA* included Gamboa, Gronk, and Herrón

graffiting their names on an exterior wall of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA), with Valdez standing beside the spray painted names for Gamboa's photographic documentation. For Asco, *Spray Paint LACMA* literally became the first work of Chicano art exhibited on LACMA's physical premises. Fast forward decades later to 2011, and Asco holds their first major art exhibition at LACMA entitled *Asco: Elite of the Obscure, A Retrospective, 1972-1987*, accompanied by an academic monograph that compiles a wealth of primary documents and scholarly essays that, for the past decade, has become the main source for Asco scholars and art historians interested in Chicano art and its avant-garde routes. Some may argue that Asco's inclusion into the modern art museum began just a few years earlier in 2008 with *Phantom Sightings: Art after the Chicano Movement*, considered "the largest exhibition of cutting-edge Chicano art ever presented at LACMA," one that "explores the more experimental tendencies within the Chicano art movement," with Asco figuring as its prime example.¹⁷⁹ For Asco scholars, including myself, the LACMA art exhibitions are major events in the history of the group, given their years of exclusion from the art gallery institution for being too brown for the white modern art world or too experimental for Chicano arts.

However, I choose not to read Asco's LACMA exhibitions through a teleological lens, as though the exhibitions themselves are the ultimate horizon for Asco's work, even if some of the artists desired for recognition and inclusion into the mainstream modern art world. Asco's current mainstream appeal positions the group in a rather contradictory space in relation to present-day Chicano activism. For one, art gallery and museum spaces are at times considered by working-class Chicanos in Los Angeles as major gentrifying projects, often built in communities of color to displace them and refine the aesthetic tastes of white affluent consumers. Since 2017,

¹⁷⁹ LACMA. "Phantom Sightings: Art after the Chicano Movement." *LACMA*, <https://www.lacma.org/art/exhibition/phantom-sightings-art-after-chicano-movement>.

the revolutionary anti-gentrification grassroots organization Defend Boyle Heights (DBH) has, according to their Twitter account @DefendBoyleHts, “KICKED OUT FIVE GENTRY ART GALLERIES AND MORE HAVE FALLEN - LET’S STRIKE THE FINAL BLOW.”¹⁸⁰ The group is committed to “fighting gentrification principally through direct action.”¹⁸¹ According to their “Points of Unity,” “Gentrification is class warfare...[it] is an expression of capitalism’s ever-expanding search for profit,”¹⁸² one that art gallery spaces embody and that, for DBH members, requires physical resistance through direct action. DBH’s radical politics and activism reminds the LA community that gentrification has no identity; anyone, including Chicanxs, can gentrify and displace racialized social spaces. This isn’t only a conversation within the radical politics of DBH; it is a broader conversation in the field of Latinx Studies, where anti-indigenous thought and indigenous erasure is repeated through Chicana/x claims to indigeneity that erase actual indigenous communities and spaces. This practice recenters Chicana/o hegemony, a kind of spatial colonial violence that Nicole Guidotti-Hernández dates back to the late-nineteenth century with the attempted genocide of Yaqui communities by Mexican and Mexican Americans.¹⁸³ Within the context of these contemporary conversations concerning real-life Chicana/x communities, Asco occupies a contradictory space between on-the-ground activist communities and the spatial histories of art museums and galleries in Los Angeles.

With that said, Asco’s aesthetic and political interventions in Chicana/x art, culture, and activism in the 1970s remain a body of work with an influence that cannot be understated, primarily for brown and queer artists working and living in Los Angeles. This has been recently

¹⁸⁰ @defendboylehts, *Twitter*, <https://twitter.com/defendboylehts?lang=en>.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁸² Defend Boyle Heights. “Points of Unity.” *Defend Boyle Heights*, <http://defendboyleheights.blogspot.com/p/points-of-unity.html>.

¹⁸³ Guidotti-Hernández, Nicole Marie. *Unspeakable Violence: Remapping U.S. and Mexican National Imaginaries*. Duke University Press, 2011.

expressed in a pop up exhibition in Downtown Los Angeles' Arts District on April 22, 2023, entitled *ASCO and the Next Gen: An Intergenerational Celebration of Latinx Art*. Pieces of Asco's works from the 1970s and 1980s were exhibited alongside works by contemporary artists San Cha, rafa esparza, Ruben Ulises Rodriguez Montoya, Maria Maea, Guadalupe Rosales, and Dorian Wood. The exhibit simultaneously traced the legacy of Asco in the contemporary art world for brown and queer artists, while promoting a documentary film in the works entitled *Asco: Without Permission*, directed by Travis Gutiérrez Senger and executive produced by well-known Mexican actors, Gael García Bernal and Diego Luna. The mass circulation and appeal of Asco in 2023 comes as no surprise as their works express a radical sense of Chicana spatiality that greatly exceeds the identitarian forms of Chicana/o/x subjectivity that often becomes abstracted within neoliberal markets and regimes of racial capitalism. As Matt Stromberg characterizes, Asco has left behind a "rebel legacy."¹⁸⁴

Thus, in this chapter, I have argued that approaching Asco's work through the Chicano Moratorium yields a radical spatial imaginary that is transnational and resistant to the premature death of Chicanxs in the 1970s. I also read the ways that Asco's performances literally and figuratively engage with space and time to produce a sense of Chicana spatiality and temporality that exceed homogenization. In addition, Asco's No Movies express an alternative form of circulation that upends the possibilities of Chicana erasure within dominant representational spaces. In historically situating Asco's aesthetic and political interventions in this manner, I have argued that Asco's performances gesture towards a kind of spatial justice that challenges the 'spatial denial' of Chicanxs. These are some of the lessons that Asco can teach us by revisiting

¹⁸⁴ Stromberg, Matt. "The Rebel Legacy of LA's Asco Chicano Art Group." *Hyperallergic*, 28 Apr. 2023, <https://hyperallergic.com/817810/the-rebel-legacy-of-los-angeles-asco-chicano-art-group/>.

their radical roots in Chicana activism, which not only inform my understanding of Chicana LA in the 1970s but have inspired the works of brown and queer artists and scholars in the present and to come.

Chapter III

Urban and Rural Geographies of Spatialized Violence in Helena María Viramontes'

Fiction

In a 2013 interview with literary scholar Gabriella Gutiérrez y Muhs, Chicana feminist writer Helena María Viramontes describes writing as “resuscitative and empowering in the light of political struggles” (242).¹⁸⁵ “To be able to sit down and write and to get in touch with your own mind, to get in touch with the limitless, *limitless*, space that’s called your imagination where you find you can envision different worlds, different political views, different solutions. To have that power is incredible,” says Viramontes (242).¹⁸⁶ As a writer, editor, and professor, Viramontes has expressed her distinctive literary “power” in the form of short stories, literary criticism, and novels from the 1970s to the present. Beginning as a literary editor for the Chicano culture magazine *ChismeArte* during the 1970s, and now currently a Distinguished Professor of Arts and Sciences in English at Cornell University, Viramontes has demonstrated a long-standing commitment to literary practice, one that is simultaneously expressive of her political advocacy for Chicanx and Latinx life.

The content of Viramontes’ work often focuses on the living conditions of Chicanxs in California and her home region, East Los Angeles, during the latter half of the twentieth century. For Viramontes, fiction acts as an imaginative space where Chicanx characters are given “different worlds, different political views, [and] different solutions” that are otherwise foreclosed. Her fiction attempts to counter the ‘limited’ spaces that vulnerable Chicanxs are routinely subject to in everyday life. Viramontes’ Chicanx characters are often depicted in relation to spatial restrictions connected to race, class, gender, sexuality, and ability, often

¹⁸⁵ Gutiérrez y Muhs, Gabriella. *Rebozos de Palabras: An Helena María Viramontes Critical Reader*. 1st ed., University of Arizona Press, 2013.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

represented by their subjection, evasion, and resistance to racial capitalism and the carceral state. Viramontes' fictional worlds rearrange and show how criminalization towards Chicanxs, for instance, is enforced and spatialized in material places like the rural fields of Central California and the urban worlds of East Los Angeles. In no way, however, does her fiction liberate her characters from their material conditions, despite her belief in fiction's "limitless" space for imagining otherwise. Often enough, by the end of her narratives, Chicanxs die.

My chapter analyzes the ways that Viramontes narrates the effects of spatialized violence on Chicana life. This focus provides scholars with an analytic to understand the multitude of ways that technologies of power and state-sanctioned violence under racial capitalism are imagined and materialized within, outside, and between Chicana communities. Viramontes' fiction, in particular, allows readers to inhabit contrasting subjectivities, whether perceiving the brown body through the view of the carceral state or a Chicana character. These contrasting perceptions provide a lens onto how the brown body is subject to and resistant towards modes of spatialized violence that affect generations of Chicana bodies, subjectivities, and psyches across time. By attesting to these material realities, Viramontes participates within a genealogy of Chicana feminist writers whose works explicitly counter racial capitalism's abstraction of the brown body by foregrounding alternative modes of Chicana spatiality that reject the abstraction of Chicana life. As Mary Pat Brady writes:

Chicana literature has consistently offered alternative methods of conceptualizing space not only by noting how social change must be spatialized but also by seeing and feeling space as performative and participatory, that is, by refusing too-rigid binary between the material and the discursive (6).¹⁸⁷

¹⁸⁷ Brady, Mary Pat. *Extinct Lands, Temporal Geographies : Chicana Literature and the Urgency of Space*. Duke University Press, 2002.

For Brady, Chicana literature rejects the abstraction of Chicanx social space by rendering space as sensory and affective, two qualities that are often deprived under regimes of racial capitalism. Brady also characterizes the work of Chicana literature, in intervening in the production of space, as refusing the “binary between the material and the discursive,” one that Viramontes often destabilizes by materializing spatial abstractions into metaphoric language.

In this chapter, I read Viramontes’ short story “The Cariboo Cafe” and her novel *Under the Feet of Jesus* as distinct articulations of both literal and metaphoric registers of spatialized violence across Chicanx communities, namely in California. “The Cariboo Cafe,” for instance, offers a narrative with contrasting perceptions of how policing and deportation remap Los Angeles’ urban geographies. The story narrates the ways that undocumented Latin Americans cognitively map urban spaces to survive and evade deportation, while racist property owners assist in the policing and surveillance of vulnerable racialized communities, like the undocumented. While primarily set in Los Angeles, the story alludes to Central America, producing a metaphoric link between policing in Los Angeles with state terror in Central America. Thus, the story’s narration of policing across national borders demonstrates the spatial reach of state-sanctioned violence both literally and metaphorically. Viramontes’ novel *Under the Feet of Jesus*, on the other hand, depicts how California’s rural geographies are marked by environmental racism. The novel, much like “The Cariboo Cafe,” relies upon both literal and metaphoric registers of spatialized violence. California’s rural geographies confine Viramontes’ characters into environmentally caustic spaces where they are denied access to basic life necessities and healthcare, rendering the characters socially dead while simultaneously threatened by literal death, given environmental risks that mark the rural geographies. While represented literally throughout the novel, these environmental threats are expressed

metaphorically as well, often with Viramontes using metaphors (and metonymies) to articulate the threat of literal and social death that looms in the everyday for Chicana migrant farm workers.

Viramontes' exploration of both literal and metaphoric registers of spatial violence allows readers to perceive how violence is spatialized across real and imagined geographies.

Viramontes' fictional works are representational spaces that challenge the state's representations of racialized spaces as static and inert, ultimately perceived by the state as abstract space and, thus, usable and exchangeable for surplus-value without any due consideration of the real, living communities. While the state attempts to foreclose the possibility of imagining spatiality otherwise, Viramontes' writings are real examples of how Chicana fictional writing can intervene in the production of space. As literature and cultural production has revealed across centuries, spatiality *can* be reordered. Viramontes' use of the literal and the metaphoric is an example of how Chicana literature can intervene in the production of space by disrupting the state's impulse to cement spatial practices that aim towards reification and surplus-value. While different in their modes of representation, both "The Cariboo Cafe" and *Under the Feet of Jesus* provide "different worlds," "views," and "solutions" to ongoing spatial crises produced by racial capitalism, crises which we continue to witness in an ongoing global health pandemic where liberal governments' economic fixes do little, if anything, to resolve real systemic issues that make racialized communities all the more vulnerable to spatialized violence, whether literal or metaphoric.

Policing and Deportation as Spatialized Violence in "The Cariboo Cafe"

"The Cariboo Cafe" presents contradictory perceptions of policing as a form of spatialized violence, particularly towards undocumented Latin American immigrants. The

undocumented are a group always-already regarded as criminalized under U.S. law since their status as ‘illegal’ renders them, as Lisa Marie Cacho notes, “*ineligible for personhood*” (6).¹⁸⁸ That is, “as populations subjected to laws but refused the legal means to contest those laws as well as denied both the political legitimacy and moral credibility necessary to question them” (6).¹⁸⁹ Viramontes represents undocumented Latin Americans whose very existence renders them “*ineligible for personhood,*” while also representing the dominant U.S. perception of the undocumented as always-already criminalized. As Cacho argues, “U.S law targets their being and their bodies, not their behavior” (6).¹⁹⁰ Viramontes interweaves three narratives that reflect criminalization and the normalization of spatialized violence onto Chicax bodies across global and local scales. All tied to Los Angeles, Viramontes’ fictional narratives include the following: the story of an undocumented brother & sister from Mexico (Sonya & Macky), a first-person account from a divorced non-Latino working-class cafe owner grieving the loss of his son (JoJo) to the Vietnam War, and lastly, a narration of an undocumented & unnamed Central American washerwoman coping with the trauma of losing her son (Geraldo) to Central American death squads. “The Cariboo Cafe” explores the heterogeneous urban spaces of Latinx Los Angeles, representing different subjectivities and perceptions of racialized and gendered subjects. Yet, with the unnamed washerwoman’s narrative, her flashbacks to Central America collapse the spatial and temporal differences between Chicax Los Angeles and Central America during the 1980s. This is embodied throughout the unnamed washerwoman’s narration of her experiences witnessing state terror in Central America and policing in Los Angeles. Her narration comes to a climax after a cafe owner calls the cops on her and other undocumented characters who occupy

¹⁸⁸ Cacho, Lisa Marie. *Social Death: Racialized Rightlessness and the Criminalization of the Unprotected*. New York University Press, 2012.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid.

the owner's property. The unnamed washerwoman protects Macky from *la migra*, imagining that Macky is her dead son, Geraldo. The unnamed washerwoman is killed by what she believes to be U.S.-backed military troops in Central America when, in reality, her death is at the hands of either INS agents or LAPD officers. While militarized forces literally stand before the unnamed washerwoman, they metaphorically substitute Central American military with LA law enforcement. Within the unnamed washerwoman's psyche, the distinction between the police as either literal or metaphoric is obfuscated.

Scholarly studies of "The Cariboo Cafe" often center their readings on the unnamed washerwoman since her character embodies Viramontes' attempted transnational solidarity between Chicana feminists and Central American women during the 1980s. This transnational reach across national borders and spaces has been praised by Chicana feminist scholars such as Roberta Fernández (1989)¹⁹¹ and Ana María Carbonell (1999)¹⁹² in their reading of the unnamed washerwoman as a La Llorona figure, representing Chicana feminist resistance to global state-sanctioned violence. Yet, as Central American scholar Ana Patricia Rodríguez observes, "The Cariboo Cafe," along with other *transfronterista* narratives, produce a 'fiction of solidarity' where "Central American women, men, and children almost always recede into the historical backdrop, the emotional plot, and the personal drama of Chicana subjects" (222).¹⁹³ Viramontes' story, for instance, explicitly refers to Contras—the U.S.-backed right-wing Armed Forces of El Salvador in opposition to the leftist Nicaraguan revolutionaries, the Sandinista National

¹⁹¹ Fernández, Roberta. "'The Cariboo Cafe': Helena Maria Viramontes Discourses with Her Social and Cultural Contexts." *Women's Studies*, vol. 17, no. 1-2, Taylor & Francis Group, 1989, pp. 71–85.

¹⁹² Carbonell, Ana María. "From Llorona to Gritona: Coatlicue in Feminist Tales by Viramontes and Cisneros." *MELUS*, vol. 24, no. 2, Society for the Study of the Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States, 1999, pp. 53–74.

¹⁹³ Rodríguez, Ana Patricia. "The Fiction of Solidarity: Transfronterista Feminisms and Anti-Imperialist Struggles in Central American Transnational Narratives." *Feminist Studies*, vol. 34, no. 1/2, 2008, pp. 199–226.

Liberation Front (FSLN)—suggesting that the unnamed washerwoman’s country of origin is Nicaragua. However, in interviews, Viramontes specifies El Salvador as the washerwoman’s home country; El Salvador is even identified as the unnamed washerwoman’s home in Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano’s introduction to *The Moths and Other Stories* (20), the story collection in which “The Cariboo Cafe” was published.¹⁹⁴ Yet, the story itself makes no explicit mention of El Salvador. Rather, Central America is referred to in its vague reference to the Contras, a group that is also misidentified as the Sandinistas, erasing the historical, material, and ideological differences between Central American revolutionaries and counter-revolutionaries. Ellen McCracken has attempted to explain these misidentifications, noting how Viramontes “intended the term to refer generically to a political group against any government” (208).¹⁹⁵ Yet, “The Cariboo Cafe” remains incoherent in its references to Central American politics, geographies, and spaces, displacing where the unnamed washerwoman actually stands in relation to her own Central American nationality.

The homogenization of Central Americanness and Central American space is what Rodríguez refers to as the “undifferentiated” presence of Central Americans in Chicana feminist fiction, like “The Cariboo Cafe.” According to Rodríguez, Central American specificity is disregarded within the project of Chicana feminist *transfronterista* since it is in the interests of U.S. Mexican-American women to build a ‘fiction of solidarity’ where Central American women are included as afterthoughts (223).¹⁹⁶ Even within its gesture towards hemispheric solidarity, the Chicana feminist *transfronterista* narrative unconsciously participates in measuring and

¹⁹⁴ Viramontes, Helena María. *The Moths and Other Stories*. Arte Publico Press, 1985.

¹⁹⁵ McCracken, Ellen. *New Latina Narrative: The Feminine Space of Postmodern Ethnicity*. University of Arizona Press, 1999.

¹⁹⁶ Rodríguez, Ana Patricia. “The Fiction of Solidarity: Transfronterista Feminisms and Anti-Imperialist Struggles in Central American Transnational Narratives.” *Feminist Studies*, vol. 34, no. 1/2, 2008, pp. 199–226.

hierarchizing the social value of particular kinds of Latinx subjects for U.S. reading markets. As Claudia Milian has noted, “Despite Helena María Viramontes’s allegiance with U.S. Central Americans, the complexities of revolutionary processes are simplified and commodified for U.S. readers” (253).¹⁹⁷ Thus, Viramontes privileges the subjectivities, experiences, and representations of Mexican lives over Central Americans’.

According to Central American literary scholar Karina Alma, the unnamed washerwoman’s death at the end of “The Cariboo Cafe” is a ‘representational annihilation’ of Central Americans in fictional prose. For Alma, Viramontes’ representational violence contributes to the social deaths of Central Americans. Alma writes:

While her killing by the Los Angeles police creates a correlative link between local violence and US sponsored military violence in Nicaragua (El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Panama), the end result nonetheless is a *representational annihilation* of the Central American woman from beginning in a Chicana/o and Latina/o imaginary. The utopian dream or striving to reach beyond borders re-allegorizes exteriorities, and materializes (in a fictionalized sense) the nameless Central American woman’s death (82-83, emphasis added).¹⁹⁸

Alma’s reading refocuses attention on the ways that Central American death produces “representational annihilation” within Chicana political and social imaginaries. Within this discursive process, Central American women are rendered nameless and “undifferentiated,” making Central Americans, as Cacho argues, “*ineligible for personhood.*” As already criminalized within the U.S., the Central American body undergoes representational violence, or

¹⁹⁷Milian, Claudia. *Latinizing America Black-Brown Passages and the Coloring of Latino/a Studies*. University of Georgia Press, 2013.

¹⁹⁸ Alvarado, Karina Oliva. “The Boo of Viramontes’s Cafe: Retelling Ghost Stories, Central American Representing Social Death.” *Studies in 20th & 21st Century Literature*, vol. 37, no. 2, 2013, pp. Studies in 20th & 21st century literature, 01 June 2013, Vol.37(2).

to use Alma's words, *annihilation* and social death within "The Cariboo Cafe." Thus, Viramontes' story, as Alma's argument suggests, is one whose politics are contradictory and complicit with the very forms of spatialized violence it attempts to resist.

While scholars' reassessment of the unnamed washerwoman's relation to Central America produces a necessary critique of Chicana transnational feminism, I am more interested in this chapter in the ways that policing itself conflates the differences between Chicanas and Central Americans. While Viramontes' misunderstandings of semantic differences between Nicaragua and El Salvador produces an erasure of Central American specificity, these differences are further reduced within a carceral state. Under the U.S. carceral state, for instance, gendered brown bodies are perceived as threats to public space and U.S. civil society. Since the Chicana-Central American linkage fails in producing a robust sense of solidarity between Chicanas and Central Americans, one thing is certain, even within a sometimes incoherent fictional narrative: the police in the story surveil Latinx and Latin American social space and kill brown people, regardless of national difference, identity, or history. In addition to the carceral state's reductive view of Chicanx, Latinx, Latin American, and Central American bodies, the police are constantly present in the psyches of undocumented children, like Sonya and Macky, while also seen as a 'fix' for issues in city infrastructure. Rather than solely focus on the unnamed washerwoman as the target of spatialized violence, the story builds multiple relations to policing through its whole cast of characters. Seeing this vast carceral network in the story helps to address and identify the very conditions of possibility that allow for the unnamed washerwoman's "representational annihilation" to occur in the first place, given the logics of criminalization at play within and beyond the text.

In line with Chicana feminist thought, “The Cariboo Cafe” examines how Latinx women navigate multiple forms of spatialized violence due to the social asymmetries of gender and race. The first narrative follows an undocumented Mexican girl, Sonya, taking care of her brother Macky as “displaced people” (65).¹⁹⁹ A set of rules from their absent father (“Popi”) becomes a blueprint for their shared survival for navigating the streets and spaces of Los Angeles. As the narrator describes:

Rule one: never talk to strangers, not even the neighbor who paced up and down the hallways talking to himself. Rule two: the police, or ‘polie’ as Sonya’s popi pronounced the word, was La Migra in disguise and thus should always be avoided. Rule three: keep your key with you at all times--the four walls of the apartment were the only protection against the streets until Popi returned home (65).²⁰⁰

While Sonya reveres the key as “a guardian saint,” the third rule is broken without her consent when Sonya is sexually harassed by her school peer, Lalo, during a lunch break. Viramontes describes, “She considered how to explain the missing key without having to reveal what Lalo had seen, for she wasn’t quite sure which offense carried the worse penalty” (65).²⁰¹ Here, Viramontes brings to focus how her father, while advising her on how to navigate working-class urban life, falls short in teaching Sonya how to navigate gendered violence as a Chicana within a heteromasculinist urban space. In the story’s narrative world, Sonya’s schoolmates commit harm where protection in the form of “the four walls” is no longer accessible, let alone possible. Sonya lives between multiple forms of spatialized violence, displacement, and alienation: she is distant from her home country (Mexico), locked away from her apartment, marginalized because of her

¹⁹⁹ Viramontes, Helena María. *The Moths and Other Stories*. Arte Publico Press, 1985.

²⁰⁰ Ibid.

²⁰¹ Ibid.

gender, and estranged from her role as sister to Macky in having to take on the responsibilities of motherhood. Thus, Viramontes opens her story with a perception of spatialized violence through the narrative lens of an undocumented Mexican girl in Los Angeles.

Sonya cognitively maps out her social world to evade possible deportation by *la migra*. While navigating the streets of Los Angeles, Sonya comes to the realization that she and Macky can stay at their neighbor Mrs. Avila's place. "She'd probably have a stack of flour tortillas, fresh off the comal, ready to eat with butter and salt. She grabbed [Mackey's] hand. 'Mrs. Avila has Coke,'" writes Viramontes (66).²⁰² Mrs. Avila's place is desirable not only for its abundance of Chicana food and beverage (i.e. flour tortillas and Coke) but for its promise of shelter. On their trip to Mrs. Avila's, however, Sonya and Macky witness an arrest of an undocumented (brown) immigrant. The two see a "tall, lank dark man" who appears to be the father of Raoul, "a dark boy in [Sonya's] class that she felt sorry for because everyone called him spongehead" (67).²⁰³ Both Sonya and Macky are lost and intend to ask Raoul's father for directions to Mrs. Avila's place. However, they are unable to "think it all out" as "red sirens [flash] in their faces" as the police arrive (67).²⁰⁴ While Raoul's father is arrested, Sonya remembers her father's words concerning law enforcement: "The police are men in black who get kids and send them to Tijuana... Whenever you see them, run, because they hate you" (67).²⁰⁵ Raoul's father is not a kid though he is a brown body targeted by the carceral state and deemed criminal by law enforcement due to his immigration status under U.S. law. The words of Sonya's father are actualized before her eyes as she witnesses the arrest and deportation of Raoul's father: "It's true, they're putting him in the car and taking him to Tijuana. Popi, she murmured to herself." (67).²⁰⁶

²⁰² Ibid.

²⁰³ Ibid.

²⁰⁴ Ibid.

²⁰⁵ Ibid.

²⁰⁶ Ibid.

This scene marks the continual threat of policing and deportation that not only affects Sonya & Macky but continually (re)traumatizes the undocumented. Without the physical presence of their parents, Sonya and Macky are forced to maneuver through Los Angeles' urban spaces, where (dark) brown bodies like Raoul's father are surveilled and arrested.

As Sonya & Macky make way to the Cariboo Cafe, their narrative intersects with the cafe owner's. Switching from third- to first-person, this narrative presents an emotionally wounded non-Latinx man²⁰⁷ who projects his class alienation, racial anxieties, and familial losses onto vulnerable populations. As Yvonne Yarbrow-Bejarano describes, "The cook in 'The Cariboo Cafe' is particularly well-characterized through his speech," since his narration becomes the material to understand the story's contradictory politics towards spatial violence (21).²⁰⁸ In the story, Sonya & Macky retreat to the cafe to avoid the police that arrested Raoul's father, though they are never protected from the threat of deportation. The cafe owner possesses the power to deport with a single phone call to the police (68).²⁰⁹ Grieving a divorce with his ex-wife Nella and the loss of his son JoJo in the Vietnam War, the cafe owner tries to run a business where "you got some regulars, but most of them are on the move," with those 'moving' patrons being transients, addicts, unhoused, or undocumented (70).²¹⁰ While the cafe owner shares conflicting views on cops in his narration, the police often figure as a spatial fix that regularly assists in the clearing out of his cafe space by arresting or deporting unwelcome patrons. His contradictory views on the police follow, as he states on one end, "If Nell was here, she'd know what to do: call the

²⁰⁷ This is signified by his suspicion of Latinx folks who enter his cafe and his lack of understanding Spanish, though this is the case for many millennial and Gen-Z Latinxs, whether white-passing or not. However, it is suggested in his first-person narration that he is working-class, though his race is never given. Scholars have either coined him as non-Latino or white.

²⁰⁸ Viramontes, Helena María. *The Moths and Other Stories*. Arte Publico Press, 1985.

²⁰⁹ Ibid.

²¹⁰ Ibid.

cops. But I don't know. Cops ain't exactly my friends" (71).²¹¹ On the other end, as he justifies his compliance with the police in locating three undocumented men in his cafe's restroom, he says the following:

Now look, I'm a nice guy, but I don't like to be used, you know? Just 'cause they're regulars don't mean jackshit. I run an honest business. And that's what I told them agents. See, by that time, my stomach being all dizzy, and the cops all over the place, and the three illegals running in here, I was all confused, you know. That's how it was, and well, I haven't seen Nell for years, and I guess that's why I pointed to the bathroom. I don't know. I didn't expect handcuffs and them agents putting their hands up and down their thighs (71-72).²¹²

The cafe owner's narration is marked by profound ambivalences concerning the policing of the undocumented as a spatial fix, though the actions of "agents" to "[put] their hands up and down" brown bodies are *not* ambivalent; this is quotidian practice. The cafe owner's confusion, sickness, and denial become alibis for the immigration agents' violence despite the reality that brutalization is a part of their vocation. Viramontes' depiction of the cafe owner is not to sympathize with the police but rather to present the unevenness of violence in having the power to deport and inflict gratuitous violence upon the undocumented.

The cafe owner's loss and alienation shape his perception of the police as a necessary solution for continuing his business in a working-class urban space. With the losses of Nella and JoJo, the cafe owner projects his grief onto the undocumented patrons, utilizing the police as a channel for his alienation. As Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano describes:

²¹¹ Ibid.

²¹² Ibid.

The cook of the Cariboo Cafe emerges as a fragmented consciousness from the shipwreck of his life, shot through with the loneliness of losing wife and son. He betrays the undocumented workers who seek refuge from La Migra in his bathroom out of rage and frustration at his own miserable existence...He also betrays the woman and the two children to the police (21).²¹³

Like the three undocumented men, Sonya, Macky, and the unnamed washerwoman become subject to *la migra's* violence, as the cafe owner perceives undocumented bodies as racial threats to his material and psychological spaces. "Cops. I'm supposed to call the cops," says the cafe owner to himself prior to the deportations, arrests, and killings that occur in the story (21).²¹⁴ This reveals the cafe owner's internalization of the police as a force that is "supposed" to be called upon for any perceived encroachment on his building or psyche. Yet, his compulsion is noted by Yarbrow-Bejarano as a "betrayal" since there appears to be an ethical assumption that the cafe owner's supposed connection to Macky, in resembling his son, *ought* to make his cafe a sanctuary space for the undocumented. Though, as the narrative reveals, this is far from the case. During the cafe owner's "betrayal," he begins to cry and grieve for his son's loss and his divorce. While cooking, the narrator describes:

For the first time since JoJo's death, he's crying. He becomes angry at the lady for returning. At JoJo. At Nell for leaving him. He wishes Nell here, but doesn't know where she's at or what part of Vietnam JoJo is all crumbled up in. Children gotta be with their parents, family gotta be together, he thinks. It's only right. The emergency line is ringing (77).²¹⁵

²¹³Ibid.

²¹⁴ Ibid.

²¹⁵ Ibid.

The cafe owner's desire to call the police arises from his grief for JoJo and Nell. While he concludes that "family gotta be together," the cafe owner has a distorted perception of how the police and immigration agents work and the violence they inflict upon others. Thus, I disagree with Yarbrow-Bejarano's reading and see this scene as less of a betrayal and more of a reality that any reasoning that compels compliance with the carceral state inevitably produces violence. The cafe owner's "fragmented consciousness" is not an individuated perception internalized by people who support the police force; rather, his "fragmented consciousness" is symptomatic of a broad cultural ideology located across the political spectrum—from left-wing liberalism to far-right fascism—that places faith in police and immigration agents as protectors of national borders and public spaces under the name of domestic security, i.e. state-sanctioned violence and white supremacy.

The cafe owner's projection of his own anxieties onto the undocumented is additionally symptomatic of his own white male resentment, wherein white male fragility, and the white male's displacement as the central subject within a pluralistic multi-racial world, is transmuted into violence towards women, people of color, and queer communities. This resentment, however, is not exclusive to white men. As the age of Trump has demonstrated, white male resentment can be multicultural, in the case of right-wing coalitions like Latinos for Trump or hate groups like the Proud Boys; it can include women too, given white women's overwhelming percentage of voting in favor for Trump; and it can be very LGBTQ-friendly, as is the case with gay alt-right provocateur Milo Yiannopoulos advocating for white nationalism and white supremacy online and across liberal universities in the U.S. Thus, the cafe owner articulates white male resentment towards minoritized communities in his complicity with the police. He projects his racial and gendered anxieties towards the multiracial social space of Los Angeles,

one that supposedly intrudes upon his own privacy, bearing similarity to the justification for right-wing policy when held under the banner of freedom from government encroachment upon (white male) citizen's personal liberties.

Within a carceral state like the U.S., the cafe owner is not an anomaly to the compulsory desire for an immediate carceral fix. As I've suggested, the logics of white supremacy are not attached to a particular social identity; anyone can call the police for a perceived threat to public space, despite histories of policing as always-already being a brutalizing, dehumanizing, and deadly spatial practice that does little to actually protect & serve communities. As abolitionist scholar Dylan Rodríguez argues, in a 2017 video interview with grassroots prison abolitionist group Critical Resistance:

It's not police brutality if the state sanctions the violence. At that point, you move from calling it 'police brutality' to calling it 'policing.' And if your problem is no longer that the police are exceeding the alleged constrictions on their power but are actually fulfilling it...It's not police brutality; it's police practice.²¹⁶

Viramontes' short story echoes with ongoing discussions of abolitionary praxis in the twenty-first century with the emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement in 2013 and its increased public visibility after the murder of George Floyd on May 25, 2020 by Minnesota Police Department officers. Rodríguez's argument to take out the 'brutality' in the phrase in order to name policing for what it is and has been for centuries—a spatial practice that allows for gratuitous violence, murder, and torture, to be performed and directed towards bodies rendered subjectless due to social constructions of race, gender, sexuality, religion, and ability—frames the exercises of power by the police as *central* to their practice rather than an *excess* of it. The cafe

²¹⁶ Critical Resistance. "Dylan Rodriguez, 'It's Not Police Brutality.'" *YouTube*, commentary by Dylan Rodríguez, 13 Sep 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y1EUT2BvvtM&t=104s>.

owner in “The Cariboo Cafe,” then, is caught between the myth of ‘police brutality’ and the reality of policing. Thus, the story contains a potential abolitionary imaginary in its disparate though interconnected narratives of characters caught within a vast carceral network, whether characters are evading, resisting, or complying with the police, as is the case with the cafe owner.

The story’s politics, however, are not without its failures in regards to *who* is granted freedom. The narrative of the unnamed Central American washerwoman, for instance, acts as a ‘fiction of solidarity’ that fails to include actual Central American subjectivities. The unnamed washerwoman is presented as a character that attempts to synthesize the local with the global, connecting the gendered struggles of Chicanas in Los Angeles with Central American women living under Latin American dictatorships in the 1980s. This synthesis work, however, results in an erasure of the actual subjectivities of Central American women in the service of localized Chicana feminist politics in the U.S. Southwest. While I acknowledge the problematic representation of the unnamed washerwoman, and the productive critiques by Central American women scholars (Ana Patricia Rodríguez & Karina Alma’s, in particular), the unnamed washerwoman’s relationship to the other characters, narratives, and subjectivities in “The Cariboo Cafe” provides an alternative reading for the story, one where different relations to the carceral state are remapped within the real and imagined spaces of Viramontes’ fiction. As readers, we can collectively acknowledge the failure of the unnamed washerwoman’s character bearing the weight of actual political solidarity, in its attempt to hold onto these disparate narratives and subject positions. As Rodríguez accounts for us, Viramontes is not alone in being complicit to Central American erasure; the framework of transnational Chicana feminism itself is dependent on this repeated ‘fiction.’ My intention is not to act as a barometer of essentialism in terms of who can tell the stories of Central Americans nor is it offering a corrective to the story’s

uneven politics. Rather, this failure should be acknowledged without it neutralizing the potentially radical imaginary towards policing as a spatial practice that Viramontes analyzes in her short story. Like most all cultural works produced within regimes of racial capitalism, Viramontes' fiction is contradictory, and it is through these contradictions, in how they are synthesized in her narrative, that we, as readers, can reimagine the material reality that the story contends with: policing as a form of spatialized violence that reproduces itself and circulates across heterogenous localities, whether in Los Angeles or Central America.

One of the primary contradictions within the text is the unnamed washerwoman's characterization. A reassessment of her, with and beyond Viramontes' representational failures, allows for a reading of the narrative's carceral remapping. Despite the violent omission of the unnamed washerwoman's Central American specificity, the story depicts the character as a revolutionary Chicana feminist figure who challenges the carceral state and stands in solidarity with subaltern women's struggles across borders. In the story's final scene, the cafe owner calls the police on the unnamed washerwoman, who has taken Sonya & Macky under her wing since she perceives Macky as her lost son, Geraldo. While directly confronting the police, the unnamed washerwoman throws hot coffee at police officers' faces while "screaming enough for all the women of murdered children, screaming, pleading for help from the people outside" (78).²¹⁷ After physically pushing an officer's nose, she is met with an officer's gun to her face, leading to her eventual death. Viramontes depicts her death as a sacrifice for Chicanx women's struggles against the carceral state both within the U.S. and Central America. The last paragraph of the story frames the unnamed washerwoman's actions and thoughts, during the end of her life, as an act of resistance and solidarity. Viramontes writes:

²¹⁷ Viramontes, Helena María. *The Moths and Other Stories*. Arte Publico Press, 1985.

And I laugh at his ignorance. How stupid of him to think that I will let them take my Geraldo away just because he waves that gun like a flag. Well, to hell with you, you pieces of shit, do you hear me? Stupid, cruel pigs. To hell with you all, because you can no longer frighten me. I will fight you for my son until I have no hands left to hold a knife...I am laughing, howling at their stupidity because they should know by now that I will never let my son go. And then I hear something crunching like broken glass against my forehead and I am blinded by the liquid darkness. But I hold onto his hand. That I can feel, you see, I'll never let go. Because we are going home. My son and I (79).²¹⁸

“The Cariboo Cafe” ends with the unnamed washerwoman’s death alongside Macky/Geraldo. Her insults to the “cruel pigs” are written as an internal monologue, though she laughs in the face of the police’s threats and eventual killing of her mortal life. The unnamed washerwoman’s premature death is represented as a sacrifice for political struggle, though whether Macky survives or not is left undisclosed. In the passage, the unnamed Central American woman is killed in order to champion a Chicana feminist imaginary rather than linking the narrative to actual women from El Salvador, women who were active in political resistance, composing 60 percent of the logistical support and 30 percent of the armed combatants for the Farabundo Martí Front for National Liberation (FMLN) in El Salvador.²¹⁹ While reinscribing violence against the very group it is attempting to align with (i.e. Central American women), the ending of “The Cariboo Cafe” should be read as a failed act of resistance that some scholars, as noted earlier, have been critical of. However, the ending and many parts of the narrative can help readers to see

²¹⁸ Ibid.

²¹⁹ Vázquez, Norma. “Motherhood and Sexuality in Times of War: The Case of Women Militants of the FMLN in El Salvador.” *Reproductive Health Matters*, vol. 5, no. 9, Taylor & Francis, Ltd., 1997, pp. 139–46, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3775146>.

how policing structures the very lives of precarious racialized subjects in urban spaces like Los Angeles. The narrative also allows readers to consider how projections of racial, class, and gendered anxieties upon the brown racialized body assist the carceral state to perform its routine violence, represented by the cafe owner and the police's murder of a Central American woman.

Policing materializes across Viramontes' fiction, notably in her depictions of urban life in East Los Angeles. Viramontes' short story "Neighbors," for example, follows Aura, an elderly Chicana woman who witnesses generational shifts in her neighborhood and is protective of her home to the extent that she becomes complicit with the police. Near the end of the story, Aura calls police to arrest young Chicano gang members who vandalize and commit internecine violence in her neighborhood. The young Chicanos, for Aura, pose a threat to her personal safety amidst her gentrified neighborhood. Her complicity with the police, as a mode of "safety," does little (if anything) to address the forms of structural and spatial violence that exacerbate internecine conflict. "Neighbors" depicts a Chicana character who is caught between a bind of preserving her own, to use Mary Pat Brady's words, "urgency of space,"²²⁰ while depending upon policing for spatial regulation. Also set in a heavily surveilled East Los Angeles neighborhood, Viramontes' novel *Their Dogs Came With Them* (2007) depicts a fictional policing force called the Quarantine Authority. The QA surveys the grounds and skies of the characters' neighborhood, confining them within what is already a carceral city. Much like "The Cariboo Cafe," the ending of *Their Dogs* is marked by a confrontation with the police, as the character Tranquilina, just like the unnamed washerwoman, directly confronts and resists the police. As to whether Tranquilina lives or not is undisclosed. This opens possible readings of her

²²⁰ Brady, Mary Pat. *Extinct Lands, Temporal Geographies: Chicana Literature and the Urgency of Space*. Duke University Press, 2002.

act as either a scene of tragedy, resistance, or empowerment. Tranquilina's scene in *Their Dogs* is similar to the ambiguous ending and lack of closure in her earlier novel, *Under the Feet of Jesus*.

In the next section, I discuss how the production of space in Viramontes' novel *Under the Feet of Jesus* is undergirded by environmental racism and economic exploitation. Although representing material realities, Viramontes develops metaphors that embody and substitute for the means and relations of the crop production process in California's Central Valley. While "The Cariboo Cafe" shifts between literal and metaphoric registers to construct a transnational link between policing in Los Angeles and Central America, metaphor in *Under the Feet of Jesus* is used by Viramontes as an imaginary means to articulate social and economic conditions affecting her migrant farm worker characters, a group who are often forgotten subjects within dominant histories and narratives of California. In emphasizing both the metaphoric and the literal, the force of spatialized violence becomes even more pronounced than in "The Cariboo Cafe." For *Under the Feet of Jesus*, in addition to policing and deportation, agribusiness acts as a totalizing regime across real and imagined spaces, confining Viramontes' characters into a space of toxicity and destitution. However, as the next section will examine, *Under the Feet of Jesus* theorizes modes of resistance and empowerment within the brutal working and living conditions of the Central Valley and its spatialized violence. Similar to "The Cariboo Cafe," the novel articulates how the character's conditions are always-already informed by gender, following how the novel's protagonist, Estrella, experiences her own coming-of-age into womanhood alongside the development of her political consciousness.

Spatialized Violence and Environmental Racism in *Under the Feet of Jesus*

Helena María Viramontes' novel *Under the Feet of Jesus* (1995) is a *bildungsroman* that follows a young Chicana migrant farm laborer, Estrella, and her family in Central California

during the early 1990s. The novel traces Estrella's coming-of-age into womanhood alongside her emergent consciousness as a politicized Chicana literate in reading social, economic, and environmental crises affecting her local rural spaces. Interwoven with representations of California's heterogeneous rural geographies and environmental risks, Estrella's narrative provides a depiction of Chicana life within what Carey McWilliams once described as 'factories in the fields,'²²¹ that is, rural spaces, particularly in Central California, that reproduce and remap the means and relations of capitalist production and its exploitative practices, once thought to have been confined to the factory space under Western capitalism's regime.

In this section, I consider how spatialized violence structures *Under the Feet of Jesus*. Rather than look to literal mentions of the police and/or INS agents, as I've done with my reading of "The Cariboo Cafe," I consider how the force of spatialized violence operates across both literal and metaphoric registers. Instead of relying on social realism and mimesis, Viramontes often articulates the force of spatialized violence through metaphorical substitutions and metonymic associations, revealing how spatialized violence manifests across invisible registers while, nonetheless, subjecting precarious racialized workers to premature death. I trace how the novel expresses the effects of state-sanctioned violence and repression on Chicana agricultural wage laborers via biopolitical control, environmental risk, and the uneven valuation of racialized and gendered bodies. I argue that the novel maps out environmental, economic, and carceral crises across its narrative, representing how multiple forms of violence are spatialized within the novel and enforced within U.S. racial capitalism. By situating the novel in this manner, *Under the Feet of Jesus* can be read as a theoretical and practical guide to understanding the pernicious logics of spatialized violence within California's rural geographies.

²²¹ McWilliams, Carey., and Douglas C. Sackman. *Factories in the Field: The Story of Migratory Farm Labor in California*. 1st ed., University of California Press, 2000.

Viramontes' novel is informed by a history of environmental racism in California's Central Valley, manifesting in the exploitation of racialized migrant farm laborers. 1965 to 1970 marks the years of the Delano Grape Strike, a collaborative activist project between the National Farm Worker Association (NFWA), Filipino migrant farm workers, and Chicano organizer César Chávez. They collectively demanded worker protection in the form of improved labor conditions, labor rights, and minimized pesticide use, namely DDT. Yet despite the historic strike, pesticides remained in use throughout the California fields. Chavez, for instance, staged a 36-day fast in 1988 in opposition to the ongoing pesticide poisoning of farmworkers.²²² Even in the twentieth-first century, it was not until early 2020 that the pesticide chlorpyrifos was banned, despite being known to cause brain damage and health defects in children.

This history of environmental racism and grassroots organizing against it (in the form of the UFW) is briefly mentioned in the novel. While working in the fields with other *piscadores*, Viramontes describes the UFW logo though she does not directly mention the group: "The drivers passed water in paper cups and when the Foreman left, a few passed out white leaflets with black eagles on them. Estrella received one, folded it in half carefully and placed it in her back pocket for later reading. Her eyes hurt too much" (84).²²³ According to David Vázquez, this brief scene shows readers that "Estrella questions the utility of the United Farm Workers union—the very union pioneered by César Chávez" (383).²²⁴ With Vázquez in mind, I also interpret this scene as a dethroning of Chávez from the seat of all-things Chicano farm labor

²²² In no way do I wish to apotheosize Chávez, given his problematic representation as a Christ-like figure in Chicano cultural production, when in reality, his concessions to the liberal reformist state went hand-in-hand with his anticommunism, bullying, misogyny, and union busting. For more on leftist critiques of Chávez from a Chicano activist perspective, see Marez, *Farm Worker Futurism and Technologies of Resistance* (2015).

²²³ Viramontes, Helena María. *Under the Feet of Jesus*. Plume, 1996.

²²⁴ Vázquez, David James. "Their Bones Kept Them Moving: Latinx Studies, Helena María Viramontes's *Under the Feet of Jesus*, and the Crosscurrents of Ecocriticism." *Contemporary Literature*, vol. 58, no. 3, University of Wisconsin Press, 2017, pp. 361–91.

history related. The scene shows how the actual lives of ordinary Chicana farm workers, in particular, are caught within California agribusiness' regime, one which Estrella becomes conscious of throughout the course of the novel though not through the dominant prism of a Chávez-UFW historical narrative.

Thus, the long history of pesticides and their uneven exposure towards racialized communities in Central California frames *Under the Feet of Jesus*' narrative and its representations of spatialized violence. While the UFW and its history are mentioned in passing, the character Alejo, an adolescent boy who labors in the fields and falls in love with Estrella, embodies the history of exploitative pesticide use and the *slow violence*²²⁵ it instills in precarious migrant farm workers. As a character directly affected by pesticide exposure, Alejo embodies the very subject and object of history that migrant farm worker organizing, and the novel, aim to center: the racialized farm worker body exposed to exploitative labor, environmental racism, and premature death. The novel's representation of his illness traces Central California's environmentally caustic spaces and its direct effects on racialized migrant labor bodies. As Vázquez writes, "Alejo's illness points to the social and racial ideologies that render migrant workers invisible and disposable, as well as the means through which such ideologies are justified and reproduced" (380).²²⁶ Thus, Alejo's pesticide exposure and resulting illness provides an example to readers of how laboring Chicana bodies, like Alejo's, can be subject to erasure and disposability as a population within a regime of environmental racism in California and the United States. Their disposability, for Vázquez, makes them "exempt from such basic rights as

²²⁵ Rob Nixon defines *slow violence* as "a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all" (2). Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Harvard University Press, 2011.

²²⁶ Vázquez, David James. "Their Bones Kept Them Moving: Latinx Studies, Helena María Viramontes's *Under the Feet of Jesus*, and the Crosscurrents of Ecocriticism." *Contemporary Literature*, vol. 58, no. 3, University of Wisconsin Press, 2017, pp. 361–91.

clean water and food,” showing how Alejo’s illness has both bodily and social costs, rendering him and the migrant farm laborer community subject to premature and social death (381).²²⁷

In the novel, pesticide exposure is represented via a crop duster biplane that flies above the heads of migrant farm worker communities, fumigating their laboring fields with pesticides within and beyond their working days, indifferent to whether or not workers are subject to exposure. Within and outside of the novel, California’s rural geographies are often subject to pesticide drift, an environmental risk that sociologist Jill Harrison defines as “the airborne movement of agricultural pesticides into residential areas, schools, and other spaces...often far from where they are applied” (2-3).²²⁸ As Harrison has concluded after years of fieldwork in California’s Central Valley, “Pesticide drift is a regular feature of its agricultural landscape” (3).²²⁹ Thus, according to Harrison, pesticide exposure within California’s rural geographies can be purely incidental. While focusing on the pilot of the crop duster biplane itself, Vázquez adds to the environmental dangers of pesticide exposure and pesticide drift. Vázquez describes, “While Viramontes does not provide the pilot’s perspective...it is plausible to infer that the pilot values other concerns (a paycheck, the admonitions of the farm’s overseers) over Alejo’s life. Viramontes thus implies that the pilot views farmworkers (and their labor) as less valuable than other humans” (382).²³⁰ The crop duster and its pilot, whether conscious or not of their direct or incidental harm, act as biopolitical machines, surveilling the sky while determining the life and (premature) death of people on the ground. The crop duster embodies the racial capitalist and carceral state’s perception of racialized migrant farm workers as a disposable and expendable

²²⁷ Ibid.

²²⁸ Harrison, Jill Lindsey. *Pesticide Drift and the Pursuit of Environmental Justice*. MIT Press, 2011.

²²⁹ Ibid.

²³⁰ Vázquez, David James. “Their Bones Kept Them Moving: Latinx Studies, Helena María Viramontes’s *Under the Feet of Jesus*, and the Crosscurrents of Ecocriticism.” *Contemporary Literature*, vol. 58, no. 3, University of Wisconsin Press, 2017, pp. 361–91.

community that appears from a distance for the migrant farm workers, despite them being quite literally near the capital that is accumulated through their labor. For the capitalist farming class that employs migrant farm workers, surplus-value in the fields requires the social and literal death of migrant farm workers through slow violence, manifested in the crop duster's emission of pesticides and pesticide drift onto laborers' bodies during and beyond the hours of their working day, as demonstrated by Alejo's exposure to pesticide while taking a peach outside of work.

Prior to Alejo's pesticide exposure, Viramontes demonstrates how the crop duster biplane embodies the force of white supremacy across racialized geographies. Alejo observes the crop duster biplane fumigating nearby fields with pesticides, which will soon drop onto his own body in a later scene. Viramontes writes:

Alejo trampled through the soft soil of the peach orchard with quick, sure steps. By the time he reached the long line of eucalyptus trees, the morning fog had dissipated and he could see a coil of smoke rising not much farther down the road. He put down the sack he carried and rested, and he took in the scent of seawater salt and burning wood and damp air. Between the rows of trees, Alejo caught sight of the biplane. A few miles east a white biplane zipped over the acres of grapes. Its buzzsaw motor descended, low, straight. The plane dusted the crops with long efficient sprays of white cloudy chemicals, then ascended to dust another row farther away on the horizon. The birds, with their blank and nervous eyes, began to caw (42-43).²³¹

Here, Viramontes describes the Californian field as a site of caustic aerial particles, from smoke ("burning wood") to pesticides ("seawater salt"), dismantling the idyllic pastoral imaginary of

²³¹ Viramontes, Helena María. *Under the Feet of Jesus*. Plume, 1996.

California's rural geographies as pristine and 'golden.' In introducing the crop duster biplane, Viramontes draws attention to the air in describing Alejo and his relationship to his immediate environment, situating him as a character that is subject to air toxicities that are maintained and regulated outside of the control of those living within environmentally caustic spaces like Central California. The trees and acres are described as "rows," making the land into efficient "rows" to maintain and regulate the routine distribution of pesticides from the air to facilitate the crop production process. Much like policing in "The Cariboo Cafe," pesticides in *Under the Feet of Jesus*, and in the real geographies of Central California, function as a spatial fix, attempting (though failing) to resolve economic crises by accelerating the crop production process. Pesticide's spatial fix and organization of air and land is linked with the project of white supremacy, with Viramontes using the descriptor of "white" for both the crop duster and its "cloudy chemicals." The "white biplane" acts as both a literal and symbolic marker of white supremacy and environmental racism, literally facilitating the distribution of "white cloudy chemicals" that are unevenly dispersed onto the bodies of precarious racialized workers within the novel and throughout the history of California agribusiness. White supremacy operates across different scales, near to Alejo's immediate communities. Its force will soon engulf Alejo into its "white cloudy chemicals" when he is directly exposed to pesticides. Ruth Wilson Gilmore has famously defined racism as "the state-sanctioned and/or extra-legal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death" (28).²³² In this scene, Viramontes introduces the crop duster as a literal and symbolic producer of racism, subjecting the novel's Chicana characters to premature death as a state-sanctioned *and* extra-legal process that

²³² Gilmore, Ruth Wilson. *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California*. University of California Press, 2007.

facilitates in the production of surplus-value and renders Chicana migrant farm laborers in Central California's racialized geographies as a surplus population.

To speak to the material conditions of Chicana migrant laborers caught within agribusiness' exploitative means, Viramontes develops an extended metaphor of a tar pit, one that congeals the long history of Western capital accumulation and value formation that affects places like Central California and exploits Chicanas for surplus-value. Her extended metaphor begins to develop during the scene of Alejo's pesticide exposure. Viramontes describes how Alejo "[closes] his eyes and [imagines] sinking into the tar pits" as follows:

He thought first of his feet sinking, sinking to his knee joints, swallowing his waist and torso, the pressure of tar squeezing his chest and crushing his ribs. Engulfing his skin up to his chin, his mouth, his nose, bubbled air. Black bubbles erasing him. Finally the eyes. Blankness. Thousands of bones, the bleached white marrow of bones. Splintered bone pieced together by wire to make a whole, surfaced bone. No fingerprint or history, bone. No lava stone. No story or family, bone (78).²³³

In this scene, Alejo compares the feeling of pesticide exposure to sinking into a tar pit, as it "[engulfs]" his entire body and crushes him with its pressure. Alejo becomes reduced to bone, an object that is repeated throughout the passage as a trace of his human existence but that carries "no fingerprint or history," let alone a "story or family." The tar pits "[erase]" identity, sociality, kinship, and history, as well as any visible semblance of corporeality other than bone. Alejo's sinking into the tar pit expresses a fear of loss not only of mortality but of his individual experience as a human with a "fingerprint," "history," "story," and "family." As Christa Grewe-Volpp argues, "Alejo is reduced to the materiality of his body, his dreams and aspirations

²³³ Viramontes, Helena María. *Under the Feet of Jesus*. Plume, 1996.

of a better future are of no account in the economic system he thought would help him achieve his ambitious goals” (71).²³⁴ While his reduction to bone may be read as a universalizing gesture towards a shared humanity, or even a shared link between the human and the nonhuman,²³⁵ the bone itself, and its symbolization as a trace from “blankness” and “erasure,” speaks to the historical “erasure” and “blankness” of racialized *piscadores* like Alejo within dominant historical annals, particularly of California. As Grewe-Volpp describes, “This kind of merging with Mother Earth does not evoke feelings of a harmonious unity with nature, on the contrary, it threatens to destroy him, to crush his bones like those of the animals and plants that fell to the bottom of the sea millions of years ago and turned into tar oil” (70).²³⁶ While building upon the violence that Alejo experiences, the tar pit acts as an extended metaphor that considers the relationship between the racialized individual (in this case, Alejo) and the historical and social structures at play (here, environmental racism) that have reduced many human, (nonhuman) animal, and plant communities to “thousands of bones.” As Grewe-Volpp argues, “Alejo must go through the devastating experience that he is subject to social and biological forces just as the soil is” (71).²³⁷ The equivalence between the human and soil that Grewe-Volpp draws out speaks to the inner workings of the tar pit metaphor. That is, the metaphor embodies the dialectic between the (racialized) individual and the “social and biological forces.” It acts as the “wire”

²³⁴ Grewe-Volpp, Christa. “‘The Oil Was Made from Their Bones’: Environmental (In)Justice in Helena Maria Viramontes’s *Under the Feet of Jesus*.” *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, vol. 12, no. 1, University of Nevada Press, 2005, pp. 61–78.

²³⁵ Earlier in the novel, Alejo imagines himself becoming a boulder: “he not only became a part of the earth’s history, but would exist as the boulders did for eternity” (Viramontes 52). Like the bone, the boulder acts as an object that, for Alejo, compares the human with the nonhuman.

²³⁶ Grewe-Volpp, Christa. “‘The Oil Was Made from Their Bones’: Environmental (In)Justice in Helena Maria Viramontes’s *Under the Feet of Jesus*.” *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, vol. 12, no. 1, University of Nevada Press, 2005, pp. 61–78.

²³⁷ *Ibid.*

that “[pieces] together” the “splintered” pieces of bone into “a whole, surfaced bone,” one whose latent history is manifest within Viramontes’ extended metaphor.

In addition, Viramontes’ tar pit metaphor speaks to the particular ways that racialized bodies are caught within racial capitalism’s modes of valuation, hierarchizing particular kinds of bodies (i.e. white) over others based on racial differences. According to Dennis López, Viramontes’ representations of value, through the tar pit metaphor, are analogous to Karl Marx’s labor theory of value. For López, commenting upon the scene of Alejo’s pesticide exposure, “The ‘blankness’ that consumes Alejo’s laboring body makes vivid the violence of the value form and its transformation of concrete living labor into abstract dead labor” (326).²³⁸ That is, capitalism’s valuation is inherently violent if what is yielded from Alejo’s “concrete living labor” is his own premature death. This is made all the more clear in a conversation between Alejo and Estrella about tar pits and their relationship to oil, a commodity with a long history of violence in determining its value. “You know where oil comes from?...If we don’t have oil, we don’t have gasoline,” explains Alejo, as he fixes their car to avoid being stuck with an empty tank (86).²³⁹ Alejo continues to explain:

Ever heard of tar pits?...Millions of years ago, the dead animals and plants fell to the bottom of the sea...Imagine bones at the bottom of the sea...Bones and rocks and leaves. Falling. Slowly...The bones lay in the seabed for millions of years. That’s how it was. Makes sense don’t it, bones becoming tar oil? (87).²⁴⁰

Here, without a direct allusion to Marx, Alejo is using the tar pit as a metaphor for describing the commodity form and its congealment of use and exchange value. He explains the conversion of

²³⁸ López, Dennis. “Ghosts in the Barn: Dead Labor and Capital Accumulation in Helena María Viramontes’s *Under the Feet of Jesus*.” *Twentieth Century Literature*, vol. 65, no. 4, Duke University Press, 2019, pp. 307–42.

²³⁹ Viramontes, Helena María. *Under the Feet of Jesus*. Plume, 1996.

²⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

raw materials (bones and tar) into oil that can then be used and exchanged for surplus-value as gasoline for car engine tanks. The “bones” appear again as pieces of matter that bodies are reduced to. But here, Alejo makes the connection that the bones are a key component for the creation of oil, one that has lasted for “millions of years” but that has been accelerated for use and exchange under a capitalist mode of production that Alejo is caught within as a migrant farm worker who figuratively and quite literally ‘works to the bone,’ as the idiom goes.

Thus, the tar pit metaphor speaks to the literal conditions of Alejo’s laboring body. For López, the play between the metaphorical and the literal is used by both Viramontes and Marx in speaking about labor and the violence of valuation. López argues, “While the references to tar oil and tar pits evoke Marx’s metaphoric use of dead labor, Alejo’s deteriorating health again points to how the deaths necessitated by capital are quite literal” (327).²⁴¹ The metaphoric language and theories of both Marx and Viramontes are not meant to solely substitute for the literal; rather, they underline and inform how very literal death is within capitalism’s regime of racialized valuation and exploitative labor practices. Within the novel, Alejo’s articulation of a Marxist labor theory of value is interwoven with a romance narrative between him and Estrella. As Alejo speaks of tar pits while fixing a car, Estrella experiences physical attraction towards Alejo during a 109 degree heat wave. In adolescent naivety, Estrella confuses tar pits with “peach pits,” thinks Alejo just “[likes] to talk,” and even yawns, but is also “[hypnotized]” by his words as she is attracted to Alejo while simultaneously suffering from heat exhaustion (87).²⁴² The attention to her physicality in the form of bodily arousal, both sexual and thermodynamic, helps to materialize the abstract concept and metaphorical language of the commodity form that Alejo is

²⁴¹ López, Dennis. “Ghosts in the Barn: Dead Labor and Capital Accumulation in Helena María Viramontes’s *Under the Feet of Jesus*.” *Twentieth Century Literature*, vol. 65, no. 4, Duke University Press, 2019, pp. 307–42.

²⁴² Viramontes, Helena María. *Under the Feet of Jesus*. Plume, 1996.

sharing. Estrella begins to understand and grows conscious of the processes underlying the commodification of gasoline when she comes into direct physical contact with tar oil and car parts, the very materials that make up commodities:

Estrella tried to distract herself by studying the nuts and grimy bolts and how tightly they screwed onto the tire. She pulled her hand away gently to touch the bolts and rolled the blackened tar between her fingers.

—Tar oil? You say tar oil, huh?

—Once, when I picked peaches, I heard screams. It reminded me of the animals stuck in the tar pits.

—Did people? Did people ever get stuck?

—Only one, Alejo replied, in the La Brea tar pits, they found some human bones.

A young girl (88).²⁴³

Much like Estrella's 'reading' instruction from Perfecto's tools, this conversation is a scene of Estrella's political education about the material conditions of capitalism, commodity exchange, and value. The tar pit metaphor materializes the abstract forces of capital accumulation, piecing together "the nuts and grimy bolts" of the car that are in direct contact with oil, material that is made alien to consumers by commodity fetishism when sold at gas stations. Estrella becomes conscious of this process as she and Alejo share anecdotes about animals and humans getting "stuck" in the La Brea tar pits. While Alejo has already expressed and experienced 'stuckness' during his pesticide exposure, the image of the young girl stuck in the tar pit bridges the gap between the metaphorical and the literal, showing how the bones themselves carry a literal human trace, in this case, the young girl's.

²⁴³Ibid.

Viramontes further articulates the uneven valuation of racialized bodies in a climactic scene wherein Alejo, as his health declines, is taken to a nearby clinic. The clinic is represented as a space that embodies the racist and classist protocols of the U.S. healthcare system, excluding access to racialized working-class communities like Estrella's family, who are more subject to environmental racism and its caustic effects. The clinic carries a distinctive odor, one of "strong disinfectant and bad plumbing," representing the space as poorly maintained, just as the clinic itself provides subpar services for working-class people in need (135).²⁴⁴ Petra observes the clinic itself as a site of racialized valuation, represented through literal scales and measurement tools that assess patients' vitals, in this case, the vitals of Alejo, a working-class Chicano migrant farm worker subjected to environmental racism. The medical items in the clinic, as Petra observes, are not tools for objective valuation; rather, they are encoded with racial meaning. As she notices:

The cotton balls in the jar looked too white, like imitation cotton to Petra. She noticed a scale near the desk much like the one used for measuring the weight of picked cotton. The scale reminded her how she'd wet the cotton or hid handsized rocks in the middle of her sack so that the scale tipped in her favor when the cotton was weighed. The scale predicted what she would be able to eat, the measurement of her work and the thought that she had to cheat for food made her resentful of any scale, including this one (136-137).²⁴⁵

The cotton balls and the scale are items that, for Petra, congeal the racial histories of her own migrant farm labor though with an association to histories of enslavement in the U.S., as the scales themselves are measuring tools for cotton, objects collected by the enslaved across the U.S. This link between racialized labor across space and time acts as an additional metaphor

²⁴⁴ Ibid.

²⁴⁵ Ibid.

wherein Viramontes is arguing that California migrant farm workers are working *like* enslaved black laborers. However, as this scene demonstrates, the metaphor has material costs for Alejo and Estrella's family. Thus, the scale at the clinic embodies racialized histories of subjection, as Petra reflects upon the alienation and resentment towards the scale as an evaluative tool for labor, and ultimately, surplus-value for the capitalist class. Petra draws from her labor experience and is conscious of the racial and economic unevenness at the clinic, also present through the physical appearance of a white nurse who holds biopolitical power over Alejo's life and soon-to-be premature death. As Estrella notices, "She became aware of her own appearance. Dirty face, fingernails lined with mud, her tennis shoes soiled, brown smears like coffee stains on her dress where she had cleaned her hands. The nurse's white uniform and red lipstick and flood of carnations made her even more self-conscious" (137).²⁴⁶ Viramontes makes clear that the clinic is not a neutral space; it is encoded as a racist and classist space that determines the value of a given patient based on physical markers that express one's social status. As Estrella becomes "aware of her own appearance," the clinic itself, for the reader, acts as not only a material space but a social space that writes upon Alejo's body racial meanings that determine his life and death.

All in all, the clinic is a site of spatial violence that maintains white supremacy and racial capitalism. These structures are embodied and characterized by the nurse. As mentioned prior, Estrella perceives the nurse and her whiteness, though it comes under further scrutiny by her mother Petra, who sees through the nurse's performative white benevolence. Petra sees the nurse's desk as "implied fakery," with pictures of her white children upholding normative heteropatriarchal family relations (in contradistinction to Petra's Chicana feminist kinship) and "cute" ornaments masking the biopolitical control the clinic holds over precarious racialized

²⁴⁶ Ibid.

patients near death. “She wore too much red lipstick, too much perfume and asked too many questions and seemed too clean, too white just like the imitation cotton. She may fool other people but certainly not her,” Viramontes writes (141).²⁴⁷ The nurse’s physical appearance and demeanor can be best described by Petra as “too white,” maintaining its association with “cotton,” the literal object and symbol of chattel slavery or, in this case, migrant farm labor. Petra, again, is conscious of the clinic’s symbolic and material practices, which produce harm for patients in dire need, like Alejo.

The clinic space’s embodiment of white supremacy is further represented by the nurse’s resemblance to both a cop and an immigration agent. In response to the nurse charging the family for their clinic visit ten dollars rather than the full fifteen because the nurse “[knows] times are hard these days,” Estrella physically surrenders to the nurse as though she is being arrested (144).²⁴⁸ Viramontes writes, “Estrella spread open both her hands and held them up for Perfecto to see. Petra saw her do this, and it made her think of when people surrender to the police or La Migra and how they put their hands up when they see the pistols pointed at the bull’s-eye of their bellies” (144).²⁴⁹ In this description, Viramontes connects policing and *la migra* to the nurse’s ten dollar charge for what appeared to be basic measurements of Alejo’s vitals. The clinic’s methods of valuation extend past the realm of medicine and are interrelated to carcerality, in that the racial carceral state, much like the clinic, unevenly measures the value of a given racialized subject based on physical appearance alone. Viramontes creates this link here within the clinic space and through the nurse character by conflating the exploitative economic exchange as a scene of arrest and premature death by the nurse’s own pistol: money.

²⁴⁷ Ibid.

²⁴⁸ Ibid.

²⁴⁹ Ibid.

In this scene, Estrella becomes conscious of the clinic's spatial violence that affects not only Alejo but the broader migrant farm worker community in Central California. This scene is simultaneously a moment of self-actualization, customary to *bildungsroman* narratives, though in this particular case it is Estrella's becoming into a politicized Chicana who is conscious of the spatialized violence she is subjected to as she attempts to resist its force upon her in the clinic. Like the unnamed washerwoman from "The Cariboo Cafe," Estrella articulates a Chicana feminist presence in her momentary resistance. While Perfecto and Petra are "not wanting to transgress the medical protocol of the clinic" out of fear, Estrella demands the return of Perfecto's money through direct action, motivated by her realization of the exploitative racial and economic relations that she is caught within (140).²⁵⁰ As the family exits the clinic space after being charged for the visit, the narrator describes:

She remembered the tar pits. Energy money, the fossilized bones of energy matter. How bones made oil and oil made gasoline. The oil was made from their bones, and it was their bones that kept the nurse's car from not halting on some highway, kept her on her way to Daisyfield to pick up her boys at six. It was their bones that kept the air conditioning in the cars humming, that kept them moving on the long dotted line on the map. Their bones. Why couldn't the nurse see that? Estrella had figured it out: the nurse owed *them* as much as they owed her (148).²⁵¹

Here, the clinic and the tar pit metaphor intersect within Estrella's consciousness, elucidating how "energy money" is dependent upon not only the material labor of racialized migrant farm workers but also upon their literal bodies, which as the tar pit metaphor articulates, reduces

²⁵⁰ Ibid.

²⁵¹ Ibid.

human bodies to bones. These bones—“their bones”— are the very materials necessary for the production of gasoline as a commodity, which according to Estrella traces the production of gasoline to the conversion of bones to oil, similar to Marx’s example of the coat commodity and its material composition (though qualitatively different use-value) from linen. That is, within this analogy to Marx, bones are to linen as oil is to the coat, with the latter being commodities that are both used and exchanged for the production and accumulation of surplus-value

However, Estrella not only understands the logic of the commodity form in isolation or as a metaphor; rather, she extends it to the literal formation of global racial capitalism, as she recognizes how “their bones” fuel other commodities like the nurse’s car and car air conditioning in general. As López argues, “The scene rehearses Marx’s labor theory of value and his notion of commodity fetishism, with the ‘energy money’ embodying the abstract labor expropriated from the working classes during the process of production” (62).²⁵² According to López, this scene, in addition to Estrella’s overall coming-of-age in the novel, is emblematic of the characters’ growing ability to read what Marx calls ‘the social hieroglyphic of value,’ that is, how capital and its logic “[transform] every product of labour into a hieroglyphic” (167).²⁵³ For López, “the social hieroglyphic of value can be deciphered, the gleaming surfaces of the commodity, on which value inscribes its name, made transparent and forced to reveal capital’s buried truths” (319).²⁵⁴ While attempting to conceal its violent valuation of racialized bodies, the clinic space is deciphered by Estrella through her understanding of the tar pit metaphor and its literalization in

²⁵² López, Dennis. “‘You Talk ‘Merican?’: Class, Value, and the Social Reproduction of Difference in Helena María Viramontes’s *Under the Feet of Jesus*” *College Literature*, vol. 41, no. 4, West Chester University, 2014, pp. 41–70.

²⁵³ Marx, Karl. *Volume 1 of Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*. 3 vols. Translated by Ben Fowkes. New York: Vintage. (1867) 1977.

²⁵⁴ López, Dennis. “Ghosts in the Barn: Dead Labor and Capital Accumulation in Helena María Viramontes’s *Under the Feet of Jesus*.” *Twentieth Century Literature*, vol. 65, no. 4, Duke University Press, 2019, pp. 307–42.

the exploitative money exchange for Alejo's health check. For Estrella, the social hieroglyphics of value are "made transparent" within "the gleaming surfaces of the commodity" that compose the clinic space.

Estrella's recognition of both the abstract and material processes of capitalist exploitation, always-already embedded within the commodity form, motivates Estrella to retrieve the money. Estrella employs direct action by utilizing Perfecto's crowbar to destroy the nurse's desk and retrieve the family's money, marking a moment in Estrella's coming-of-age as a politicized Chicana. Viramontes writes, "[Estrella] did not feel like herself holding the money. She felt like two Estrellas. One was a silent phantom who obediently marked a circle with a stick around the bungalow as the mother had requested, while the other held the crowbar and the money. The money felt wet and ugly and sweaty like the swamp between her legs" (150).²⁵⁵ Here, Estrella is depicted as a split subject, "[feeling] like two" as both an obedient "silent phantom" and a resistant heroine whose use of the crowbar and retrieval of "the money" are emblematic of her development as a woman experiencing puberty, i.e. feeling "the swamp between her legs." This moment marks Estrella's becoming into her potential agency as a politicized subject, one that enters into the realm of revolutionary violence in order to demand justice. As Vázquez describes, "Estrella's brandishing of the crowbar might recall theorists like Frantz Fanon, who advocate violence as a remedy for exploitation" (386).²⁵⁶ Alejo asks Estrella if her use of violence hurt anyone in the process, in which she responds, "They make you that way," acknowledging that her act of violence is a justifiable response to the clinic and its exploitation of the very patients they supposedly care for. "You talk and talk and talk to them and they ignore you. But you pick

²⁵⁵ Viramontes, Helena María. *Under the Feet of Jesus*. Plume, 1996.

²⁵⁶ Vázquez, David James. "Their Bones Kept Them Moving: Latinx Studies, Helena María Viramontes's *Under the Feet of Jesus*, and the Crosscurrents of Ecocriticism." *Contemporary Literature*, vol. 58, no. 3, University of Wisconsin Press, 2017, pp. 361–91.

up a crowbar and break the pictures of their children, and all of a sudden they listen real fast,” says Estrella (151).²⁵⁷ Alejo continues to question Estrella’s use of violence, despite it being for the sake of his own livelihood. Yet, Estrella justifies her use of violence since it has immediate material results, a notion not unique to Estrella but to generations of radical activists.

While the clinic scene can be read as a scene of Chicana empowerment, utilizing the crowbar as an agential tool for direct action, the material conditions of structural and environmental racism remain intact within and beyond the novel. Viramontes’ metaphoric language, as a catalyst for change, comes to its limit when confronted with the stark reality of the family’s material conditions. For instance, the threat of premature death remains in multiple forms, manifested in police and immigration agents that, while not materially present in the novel, act as spectres that influence the movement and psychological interiorities of characters. After Estrella’s resistant act, Petra fears that the nurse “better not call the police...if she knows what’s good for her...She just better not make trouble for us” (153).²⁵⁸ Likewise, Perfecto fears the possibility of the nurse retaliating, even though he agrees with the politics and strategy of Estrella’s material demands: “Remember, the nurse was not hurt, not really. Remember, *they had taken only what belonged to them*. If, in fact, she had called the authorities, they would’ve been hauled off to the police station by now. Of course. Of course” (162, emphasis added).²⁵⁹ Here, Perfecto attempts to rationalize through repetition (“remember,” “of course”) that Estrella’s action is socially and politically just for his family, who stand in collectively for Chicana migrant farm workers exploited for their labor-power and alienated from the literal fruits of their labor. However, the threat of incarceration and deportation interrupts Perfecto’s psyche, having him struggle to “remember” the event while forming a conditional statement (‘if...then’) to logically

²⁵⁷ Viramontes, Helena María. *Under the Feet of Jesus*. Plume, 1996.

²⁵⁸ Ibid.

²⁵⁹ Ibid.

deduce and justify that the family has avoided possible police confrontation in response to Estrella's act. Perfecto's fears are shared with Petra, creating a divide between the ways that resistance and compliance to structures of power are engaged across generations of Chicaxs.

At the end of the novel, Viramontes refuses narrative closure,²⁶⁰ opening the novel's political possibilities towards hope and despair. In the final scene, Estrella climbs atop the barn that Perfecto has demanded she take down in order for the family to acquire money; however, Estrella reclaims the barn as a feminized space, playing a vital part in her development. As Barbara Brison Curiel describes, "Viramontes's barn is associated with symbols of feminine divinity...it is a forbidden space associated with mythic feminine power" (31).²⁶¹ In Estrella's imagination, the barn transforms into a cathedral and Estrella becomes an angelic figure, apotheosized above the edge of the barn's roof. The closing sentences of the novel are as follows: "Estrella remained as immobile as an angel standing on the verge of faith. Like the chiming bells of the great cathedrals, she believed her heart powerful enough to summon home all those who strayed," writes Viramontes (176).²⁶² For many scholars, the ending is a scene of radical hope, signifying the peak of Estrella's politicized development as a radical Chicana woman. As López argues, "Estrella stands transformed—a secular icon 'on the verge' of a politicized 'faith' in collective redemption, radical communal love, and utopian hope...Reclaiming her 'imprisoned body' Estrella sets herself free and stands as a beacon of political confidence, social conviction, and communal love" (334).²⁶³ Vázquez writes that in the

²⁶⁰ This is a narrative move that happens across Viramontes' fiction. Her subsequent novel *Their Dogs Came With Them* (2007), for instance, resists narrative closure as well.

²⁶¹ Gutiérrez y Muhs, Gabriella. *Rebozos de Palabras: An Helena María Viramontes Critical Reader*. 1st ed., University of Arizona Press, 2013.

²⁶² Viramontes, Helena María. *Under the Feet of Jesus*. Plume, 1996.

²⁶³ López, Dennis. "Ghosts in the Barn: Dead Labor and Capital Accumulation in Helena María Viramontes's *Under the Feet of Jesus*." *Twentieth Century Literature*, vol. 65, no. 4, Duke University Press, 2019, pp. 307–42.

ending, “The novel offers hope for a more positive future based on Estrella’s increased ability to comprehend the ideological structures that render her and her family marginal” (387).²⁶⁴ Both López and Vázquez read the ending of the novel as a sign of radical hope for the future, suggesting that the novel’s lack of closure allows for an ‘end’ yet to come; that is, that the novel’s ending is yet to be written. For both scholars, faith, hope, and love, as well as an understanding of ideological structures, help in imagining a better future.

While I agree with the radical hope reading of Viramontes’ ending, the material realities of environmental racism within and beyond the novel remain unresolved. In addition, this reading requires that we have faith that Estrella’s experience in the end is spiritual transcendence rather than an attempt at ending her own life, given that she is at the literal end of the barn’s roof, “standing immobile.” This reading of despair at the end comes from the novel’s realism, since Estrella’s politicized consciousness alone cannot save Alejo or the family from the ongoing regime of environmental racism. I am not suggesting that the novel delves into this direction entirely. Yet, engaging with this possibility underlines that the novel’s lack of closure allows for both to coexist, without one negating the other. Reading Estrella’s end as a potential suicide allows readers to confront the material realities of environmental racism that the novel contends with, while reading the ending as radical hope can provide collective faith necessary for organizing communities that challenge the structures of power represented within the novel.

As a whole though, *Under the Feet of Jesus* provides a framework for understanding how different modes of spatialized violence affect and determine Chicana life within racialized geographies like Central California. Within scenes of violence—from Alejo’s pesticide exposure to Estrella’s resistance towards the clinic space—Viramontes articulates how the production of

²⁶⁴ Vázquez, David James. “Their Bones Kept Them Moving: Latinx Studies, Helena María Viramontes’s *Under the Feet of Jesus*, and the Crosscurrents of Ecocriticism.” *Contemporary Literature*, vol. 58, no. 3, University of Wisconsin Press, 2017, pp. 361–91.

space in her characters' social worlds is dependent upon the uneven valuation of their own racialized bodies. Whether directly inflicted by aerial toxins or refused basic health and economic assistance, the characters in Viramontes' novel are emblematic of Chicax in the everyday who are routinely met with both social and premature death. Through her metaphoric language, primarily her tar pit metaphor, Viramontes gets to the literal root of economic value under racial capitalist regimes, underlining the inherent violence in valuation and the space that value produces. Racial capitalism's valuation and production of space, for Viramontes, renders Chicax bodies across its metrics as disposable objects for surplus-value, indifferent to the lives, families, relationships, and interiorities that each Chicax character possesses. It is in these depictions of Chicax life in *Under the Feet of Jesus* that the novel's end may bring about radical hope beyond the novel or it may force readers to contend with the stark realities of racial capitalist regimes, like California agribusiness, that continue to subsume Chicax life well into the present.

Conclusion

Viramontes' fiction demonstrates how violence is spatialized across California's racialized geographies, whether urban or rural. In "The Cariboo Cafe," the spatial reach of the carceral state connects Central America to Los Angeles, showing the urban world's transnational connection to regimes of state-sanctioned violence that routinely surveil, arrest, deport, and kill brown bodies. Utilizing the cafe space itself as a microcosm for spatial and racial violence, Viramontes expresses contradictory perceptions towards the policing of space by inhabiting disparate though interrelated points of view, ranging from a racist business owner projecting his white male resentment onto vulnerable communities to an undocumented Central American washerwoman experiencing the trauma of losing her son. While the story fails in its solidarity

project, recentering U.S. hegemony over Central American presence in its figuring of the unnamed washerwoman as an undifferentiated Central American, “The Cariboo Cafe” simultaneously expresses the direct effects of spatialized violence on Latinx communities in multiracial and working-class urban spaces in Los Angeles. Viramontes represents how the constant specter and literal presence of police and immigration agents within and beyond the story affects the mapping of Latinx Los Angeles and how undocumented communities navigate the carceral city.

Though set within the rural spaces of Central California, *Under the Feet of Jesus* shows how the racialized Latinx body, under racial capitalism, is continuously caught within a violent regime of valuation that exploits Chicanx life. While emphasizing the force of environmental racism on the racialized migrant farm worker body, the novel is similar to “The Cariboo Cafe” in demonstrating what kinds of bodies are rendered as valuable, and what kinds of value are perceived as useful and exchangeable, across California’s racialized geographies. Seeing the two fictional works as separate, due to one being set in urban Los Angeles and the other set in rural Central California, would overlook how the urban and the rural within California are interconnected in their production of surplus-value. Across its narrative, the characters in *Under the Feet of Jesus*, namely Estrella, become conscious of California’s political economy and how its violence is spatialized across California’s geographies, subjecting Chicanxs to social and premature death.

All in all, Viramontes’ fiction depicts the inherent violence undergirding the production of space in California. Understanding the processes of spatial thinking, according to Brady, helps us to think about Chicanx spatiality within and beyond Viramontes’ works. For Brady, “the processes of producing space, however quotidian or grand, hidden or visible, have an enormous

effect on subject formation—on the choices people can make and how they conceptualize themselves, each other, and the world” (7-8).²⁶⁵ With Brady’s words in mind, Vázquez argues that Viramontes is able to decenter narrative authority through “the spatialization of the narrative” (375).²⁶⁶ That is, “even though [the characters’] world is constrained, the characters focalize their experience of time, space, and location individually” (375).²⁶⁷ Spatialization, for Vázquez, shapes the narrative worlds of each character in Viramontes’ fiction, opening imaginative possibilities which may otherwise be foreclosed within their “constrained” lives.

In this chapter, I have tried to argue that one possibility that Viramontes’ texts opens for readers is that it connects the ways that racial violence is spatialized across real and imagined geographies. This affects how Chicanxs, whether characters in Viramontes’ fictional worlds or real life people living in California, navigate their everyday lives. Across literal and metaphoric registers, Viramontes represents how Chicanxs directly experience their immediate social environments not only through their material engagements in the world but through their imaginations as well, whether in the case of the unnamed washerwoman’s realization of policing as a transnational phenomenon or with Estrella becoming conscious of how California agribusiness is dependent upon environmental racism. All in all, Viramontes’ representational spaces allow readers to perceive the political potential of the literary in remapping urban, transnational, and rural Chicane spaces, whether real or imagined.

²⁶⁵ Brady, Mary Pat. *Extinct Lands, Temporal Geographies : Chicana Literature and the Urgency of Space*. Duke University Press, 2002.

²⁶⁶ Vázquez, David James. “Their Bones Kept Them Moving: Latinx Studies, Helena María Viramontes’s *Under the Feet of Jesus*, and the Crosscurrents of Ecocriticism.” *Contemporary Literature*, vol. 58, no. 3, University of Wisconsin Press, 2017, pp. 361–91.

²⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

Chapter IV

The Spatial Networks of Harry Gamboa Jr.'s Photography

The year is 2010 and the place is Downtown Los Angeles. Walking through the city at night with a camera in hand, Chicano artist Harry Gamboa Jr. finds a sidewalk corner and asks Gregory Bojorquez, a photographer from Boyle Heights, to pose at an intersection. Wearing a pair of Nike Cortez, Bojorquez stands shirtless with a series of black-inked tattoos of flames & women imprinted across his torso. Below the waist, his dark jeans hang, held up by a loose leather belt wrapped around the perimeter of his boxer shorts. As cars zoom by on an adjacent street, Gamboa crouches a short distance away from Bojorquez, who looks down into the upward angle camera as photos are taken. From the shoot, Gamboa produces a portrait photograph of Bojorquez entitled *Gregory Bojorquez, Photographer* (2010) (Figure 4.1). It is one of nearly a hundred black & white portrait photographs of Chicano men for a series called *Chicano Male Unbonded* (1991-present).

Chicano Male Unbonded is a project that questions mass media's racial perception of Chicano men. The project began as a direct response to a radio announcement that Gamboa had heard from his car in LA in 1990: "Be on the lookout for a Chicano male. He is probably armed and very dangerous to society."²⁶⁸ The call was circulated after Gamboa attended a preliminary meeting for *Chicano Art: Resistance and Affirmation (CARA)* (1990-1993), a traveling art exhibit that inspired hope for Chicano representation in the visual arts. As Alicia Gaspar de Alba describes, "CARA was more than an art exhibition. As the first major national art show organized and represented by Chicanos and Chicanas in collaboration with a mainstream art

²⁶⁸ Gamboa, Harry. *Urban Exile: Collected Writings of Harry Gamboa Jr.*, edited by Chon Noriega. University of Minnesota Press, 1998.

institution, it constituted a historic, cultural, and political event.”²⁶⁹ Gamboa recalls, “Everything sounded so positive.”²⁷⁰ However, the juxtaposition between CARA’s hope and the radio’s racism made Gamboa skeptical towards the racial perception of Chicano men in U.S. civil society. Distraught by the racial profiling of Chicano men at a foundational moment in Chicano art history, Gamboa created *Chicano Male Unbonded* as a reparative project that could counter the circulation of negative Chicano stereotypes. Across the years, *Chicano Male Unbonded* provided a space for Gamboa to reflect on cultural imaginaries of Chicano men as “armed” and “dangerous.” Each photograph is a portrait of a male-identified Chicano²⁷¹ who shares some relationship, i.e. a ‘bond,’ with Gamboa. As he expresses, “I thought of all the males I knew who had influenced me: scholars, writers, poets, artists, family members. And I thought it’d be interesting to photograph the men I knew who had influenced me.”²⁷² Every Chicano male is positioned at the center of each shot, standing at an urban sight at night, often somewhere outdoors in Downtown Los Angeles. All images are entitled with the name of the photographed Chicano male followed by their occupation, such as the case in *Gregory Bojorquez* (name), *Photographer* (occupation). While formally identical, each image is dissimilar in its photographed subject and urban site.

²⁶⁹ Gaspar de Alba, Alicia. *Chicano Art inside/Outside the Master's House: Cultural Politics and the CARA Exhibition*. 1st ed., University of Texas Press, 1998.

²⁷⁰ Miranda, Carolina A. “Photographers Harry Gamboa Jr. and Luis Garza on Pushing Back against 'Bad Hombre' Chicano Stereotypes.” *Los Angeles Times*, Los Angeles Times, 23 Mar. 2018.

²⁷¹ Throughout the chapter, I switch between *Chicano* and *Chicanx* when referring to Gamboa’s project since Gamboa’s articulation of *Chicano* in *Chicano Male Unbonded* refers to a variety of gender expressions within its category.

²⁷² Miranda, Carolina A. “Photographers Harry Gamboa Jr. and Luis Garza on Pushing Back against 'Bad Hombre' Chicano Stereotypes.” *Los Angeles Times*, Los Angeles Times, 23 Mar. 2018.

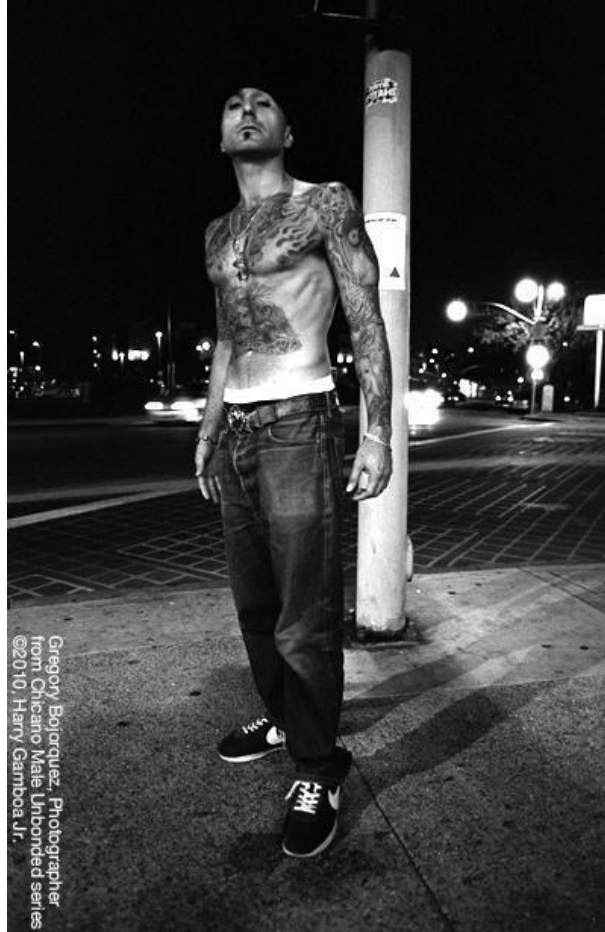


Figure 4.1: Harry Gamboa Jr., *Gregory Bojorquez, Photographer*, from *Chicano Male Unbonded* series, 2010, black and white photograph.

Gregory Bojorquez, Photographer, for instance, is one display of a Chicano male body particular to the East Los Angeles world. Bojorquez's fashion is associated with *cholo* wear, a unique style in Chicano culture that borrows from the loose fits of *pachuco* culture and that simultaneously functions as a marker of civil defiance and cultural belonging. *Cholo* style resonates in Chicano film [Edward James Olmos' *American Me* (1992), Gregory Nava's *Mi Familia/My Family* (1995)] and song [Kid Frost's "La Raza" (1990), Down AKA Kilo's "Lean Like a Cholo" (2007)], and has even become a transnational style, travelling to underground

communities in Japan.²⁷³ According to Richard T. Rodríguez, who was photographed in 2000 for Gamboa's project,²⁷⁴ the *cholo*, along with the *vato* and the *gangster*, are simultaneously cultural figures and actual people whose appearances are identifiable within an aesthetic category unique to Los Angeles Chicano culture—the homeboy aesthetic (130).²⁷⁵ Rodríguez writes:

The homeboy aesthetic is identifiable as an assemblage of key signifiers: clothing (baggy pants and undershirts are perhaps the most significant), hair (or, in the current moment of the aesthetic, lack of hair), bold stance, and distinct language (think *caló* mixed with hip-hop parlance), all combining to form a distinguishable cultural affectation hard to miss on Los Angeles city streets (127-28).²⁷⁶

In the photograph, the homeboy aesthetic is signified by Bojorquez's "bold stance," "baggy pants," and "lack of hair." Bojorquez is literally standing at an intersection of "Los Angeles city streets," subject to the gazes of drivers and pedestrians that may identify him as a *cholo* on his physical appearance alone. "The homeboy aesthetic is at once the subject of admiration and fear," writes Rodríguez, noting the simultaneous threat and mystique of the Chicano body within a collective field of vision that is both heteronormative and queer (128).²⁷⁷ To add to Rodríguez's list of "key signifiers," Bojorquez's shoes, Nike Cortez, are emblematic of *cholo* wear within and beyond East Los Angeles. In an article for Nike News, designer Janae Roubleau remembers, "I was introduced to Cortez by the cholos within the five-block radius I was raised in. They wore

²⁷³ Japanese artist Night-Tha-Funksta, for example, has helped to build an underground Japanese Chicano community through his artwork, documented on his Instagram profile, @nightthafunksta.

²⁷⁴ Gamboa entitles Rodríguez's portrait, *Richard T. Rodriguez, Ph.D, Chicano Studies Professor, CSU Los Angeles* (2000).

²⁷⁵ Rodríguez, Richard T. "Queering the Homeboy Aesthetic." *Aztlán: A Journal of Chicano Studies*, vol. 31, no. 2, 2006, pp. 127–137.

²⁷⁶ Ibid.

²⁷⁷ Ibid.

Cortez until the teeth were completely ran through.”²⁷⁸ For fashion model Alexis Quintero, an East LA native, “When I see Cortez I feel like it’s my shoe and think of home.”²⁷⁹ Nike Cortez shoes embody memories of *cholo* presence, past and present, while signifying East Los Angeles as a Chicana homeland. Worn by individuals and communities across the globe, Nike Cortez shoes are material objects that congeal LA Chicana history and culture.

As Bojorquez’s attire suggests, *Chicano Male Unbonded* is not a set of self-contained images; rather, the project is a collection of relational objects that continually exceed their respective borders. Through a logic of supplementarity, *Gregory Bojorquez, Photographer* becomes an additional object that mediates the real-life Bojorquez while simultaneously substituting for his presence with a photograph. Each photographed subject’s personal history acts as an additional supplement and excess that inform the photographs too. Bojorquez, like Gamboa, is a professional photographer who devotes the majority of his work documenting Los Angeles. For Bojorquez, photography “[is] not a hobby, man...it’s a way of life.”²⁸⁰ He is best known for his *Eastsiders* project (2022), a photography series which documents East LA as a heterogeneous place called ‘home’ for Chicanos, despite the continual policing of brown bodies by the U.S. carceral state. “I wanted to show a whole community. I wanted to show the landscape, young people, old people, regular people, gang people...it’s all part of the community,” says Bojorquez, whose primary intent as a photographer is to humanize East Los Angeles through photographic documentation of the region’s multiplicity.²⁸¹ In an episode of *Art*

²⁷⁸ “An Angelino Story: Talking Cortez.” *Nike News*, 1 June 2017, news.nike.com/news/cortez-los-angeles-history.

²⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁸⁰ Scion AV. “Greg Bojorquez Interview [S3, Ep 7] || All Purpose Show (Scion AV).” *YouTube*, 24 Apr. 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ugea4IPOvLk>.

²⁸¹ Debeij, Joris. “A Full Spectrum in Monochrome.” *I Am Los Angeles*, 2011, <https://www.iamlosangeles.com/videos/a-full-spectrum-in-monochrome>.

in the Streets entitled “Humanizing,”²⁸² Bojorquez visits a *charreada*, a freeway underpass, and a metal show. Bojorquez says, “I like photographing people that haven’t really been photographed a lot. And if I can photograph normal, everyday people, and can make a great portrait out of it that is humanizing and people from other cultures would like, I feel that I am succeeding in a different way.”²⁸³ Bojorquez photographs quotidian life in East Los Angeles to provide authentic depictions of Chicax that are accessible to viewers across cultures. His photography challenges the dehumanization of Chicax through his production and circulation of “great portrait[s]” of Eastsiders existing as “normal, everyday people.” Bojorquez’s life as a photographer and East LA native does not determine the content and form of *Gregory Bojorquez, Photographer* or Bojorquez as a photographed subject. Rather, his personal and professional life supplement the *Chicano Male Unbonded* project, showing how the series is a site where Chicano men have collectively assembled to resist Chicax dehumanization through photography.

Yet, *Chicano Male Unbonded* is a contradictory work that simultaneously embraces and challenges racial meanings. While *Gregory Bojorquez, Photographer* depicts a culturally-specific homeboy/*cholo* aesthetic that is humanizing to select viewers, the photograph does not transcend visual regimes that devalue the sight and presence of brown men. As Gamboa acknowledges:

In some cities, when I’ve shown these photographs, questions arise. What gang is this? And of course, it’s not a gang at all. It’s a group of men, usually they’re fairly influential. There’s been other people that have asked, are they posers?

²⁸² The series, *Art in the Streets*, is sponsored by MOCAtv, a YouTube channel for the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles. The episode “Humanizing” is directed by Steven Andrew Garcia.

²⁸³ MOCA. “HUMANIZING Greg Bojorquez - Art in the Streets - MOCAtv - Ep 21.” *YouTube*, 17 Jan. 2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1PTRWhDL_5M.

They do pose for the photograph, but they pose a question to American society, and in their posing, they provide an answer.²⁸⁴

Chicano Male Unbonded does not imagine a post-racial world where Chicano men are divorced from structures of racism. Rather, his project wrestles with the racist belief that Chicano men are always-already criminalized subjects, a racial ideology that has endured in U.S. culture from the nineteenth-century to the present in the figure of the *bandito* to the *bad hombre*. Gamboa calls attention to particular relationships between image and viewer that retain historical forms of race that create the conditions of possibility for a question like “What gang is this?” to emerge. While Gamboa can provide a corrective to this racist question in an interview (“of course, it’s not a gang at all”), he is not present in the viewer’s direct experience of the series while walking through an art museum space. The photographs become the primary objects that mediate race, relying on the visual to “pose” the Chicano male body for audiences.

Since 1991, Gamboa has continued to photograph portraits of Chicano men, showing how the series has always been temporally and spatially *unbonded*, as the title of his project suggests. Yet, the project, despite its pushback on space and time, has been spatially and temporally fixed at times within art museum spaces. Most notably, in 2017, *Chicano Male Unbonded* was exhibited at the Autry Museum of the American West in Los Angeles, accompanied by *La Raza*, an exhibit of Chicano journalist Luis Garza’s photographs during the Chicano Movement. *Chicano Male Unbonded* was framed and positioned as a project representative of Chicano art, culture, and history, in the U.S. Southwest, promoted and

²⁸⁴ KCETOnline. “Harry Gamboa Jr.: Chicano Male Unbonded.” *YouTube*, 20 Sep. 2017A, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z5PLyNANL8Q>.

advertised throughout liberal media outlets like NPR²⁸⁵ and the LA Times.²⁸⁶ In the museum, the multitude of images, lives, and bodies of Chicano men, depicted in Gamboa's photographs, were displayed into a single square room, with aligned frames in ordered rows and columns that surround the museum spectator.²⁸⁷ The Autry Museum's organization of space and compression of time (i.e. a decades-long project translated into a short museum visit) is one way to showcase Gamboa's work, though it is not the approach that I choose to examine his project.

In this chapter, I generate formal readings of selected photographs²⁸⁸ from the first few shootings of the *Chicano Male Unbonded* project from the early 1990s to show how the project began as a direct conversation with material contexts and histories embedded within and outside selected images. Here, I use biographical information and creative works produced by each individual subject not as a strategy to determine the content of any given photograph but rather as material excesses and supplements that speak to the project's open form. I choose this methodological approach to highlight how Gamboa engages with historical processes of Chicana subject formation that are rendered through the visual, though in relation to other media, such as performance, poetry, and sound. In addition, this chapter navigates through the project's attempts

²⁸⁵ de Los Santos, Brian. "Chicano Males Stare Down Stereotypes." *NPR*, NPR, 25 Apr. 2013, www.npr.org/sections/pictureshow/2013/04/25/178668030/chicano-males-stare-down-stereotype S.

²⁸⁶ Miranda, Carolina A. "Photographers Harry Gamboa Jr. and Luis Garza on Pushing Back against 'Bad Hombre' Chicano Stereotypes." *Los Angeles Times*, Los Angeles Times, 23 Mar. 2018,

²⁸⁷ Reflections from my visit to the *Chicano Male Unbonded* exhibit at the Autry Museum of the American West on January 4, 2018.

²⁸⁸ I examine six photographs from the early years of the *Chicano Male Unbonded* series, which I've selected as images that resonate with major themes in the project and other works by Gamboa, whether functioning on material levels (i.e. Humberto Sandoval acting in several parts in Gamboa's plays and videos, Gerardo Velázquez's sounds included in a range of Gamboa's art works) or on symbolic registers (i.e. Roberto Bedoya's poetry & performance echoing with Gamboa's multimedia artistry, Jack Vargas' redefinition of Gamboa's 'phantom culture' through a queer Chicana lens). The six photographs are only a small piece of a much larger body of images, though I still generate claims about the work as a whole in this chapter, with this photographic selectivity in mind.

to ‘unbond’ itself from social axes of race, gender, and sexuality, with a particular emphasis (in the second half of the chapter) on the project’s relationality to the queer Chicano avant-garde, a term that allows for multiple social identities, aesthetic mediums, and historical archives to connect while revealing some of the limitations of Gamboa’s work. I argue that despite *Chicano Male Unbonded*’s limitations as a project that can wholly liberate and ‘unbond’ Chicanos from caustic stereotypes, the photographs simultaneously generate intimate kinship ‘bonds’ between Chicano men across urban space as a form of disrupting the spatial and temporal fixing of Chicanos as static ethnic-racialized subjects. All in all, I read *Chicano Male Unbonded* as a work that examines the intersection between race and gender on both individual and collective registers—from the individual Chicano male and their subject formation, to the broader heterogeneous Chicano male publics—without falling into an identitarian lens that reproduces the very things that the work is trying to oppose: static, reified identities of Chicano men that solidify into negative stereotypes.

‘Unbonding’ the Chicano Male

Chicano Male Unbonded intervenes into the racial history of photography. In the mid-1820s, photography emerged as a visual medium that extended the carceral state’s field of vision. As Allan Sekula argues, “Photography came to establish and delimit the terrain of the *other*, to define both the *generalized look*—the typology—and the *contingent instance* of deviance and social pathology”²⁸⁹ (7). Any corporeal body that “[deviated]” from the able-bodied, white, and cisgendered body—that is, any corporeal form marked as black, brown, indigenous, disabled, and/or trans*—was pathologized as “*other*” within photography’s visual field. As an emergent technology, photography assisted in the reification of social identities, basing them on visible, corporeal differences, despite the production of race and gender as

²⁸⁹ Sekula, Allan. “The Body and the Archive.” *October*, vol. 39, 1986, pp. 3–64.

socially constructed and historically situated categories across space and time. Sekula argues that criminal identification photographs in the U.S. nineteenth-century, for example, “[were] designed quite literally to facilitate the arrest of their referent” (7).²⁹⁰ In short, photography helped to confine racialized and gendered bodies into referents for criminality, an overall ‘arresting’ vision that exceeds nineteenth-century criminal identification photographs and manifests in twenty-first century smartphones and drones. Commenting on the figure of the Chicano gangster, Rodríguez writes, “Photographs have been used to identify the criminal and to pin-down the alleged suspect/subject of gang activity” (139).²⁹¹ The perception of Chicanxs and gang members as interchangeable has allowed for the carceral state to ensure the incarceration, policing, and murder of Chicanxs. I begin with this short history of photography and its relation to carcerality to situate Gamboa’s work as a project that emerges from a material context where the Chicano male body has routinely been projected upon with anxieties that bolster the carceral state’s regulation and maintenance of white supremacy and heteropatriarchy in the U.S. and the globe.

The photographs in *Chicano Male Unbonded* challenge the visual as a field of racial identification. In *Humberto Sandoval, Actor* (1991) (Figure 4.2), the first images in the series, Gamboa renders the Chicano male as an unknowable subject. Sandoval is fully-clothed in black from neck to toe, wearing a long leather trench coat and a pair of leather shoes. Sandoval’s corporeal body is made invisible with the exception of his face, which stares upward at an unknown object. While refusing to look back into the camera’s eye, Sandoval remains subject to the audience’s gaze and projections. The presence of a Chicano male dressed in all-black within a dark, unknown space, like a scene from a noir film, creates a foreboding presence. As Chon Noriega describes, “The subjects look at the photographer (and, hence, the camera), creating a

²⁹⁰ Ibid.

²⁹¹ Rodríguez, Richard T. “On the Subject of Gang Photography.” *Aztlán*, vol. 25, no. 1, 2000, pp. 109–147.

displacement that often leads viewers to feel that they were being confronted” (215).²⁹² While Sandoval refuses to look at the camera, Gamboa utilizes noir aesthetics and a low angle camera as formal techniques that can accentuate the horror of “[confronting]” one’s own racial prejudices towards Chicano men, whether conscious or repressed. *Humberto Sandoval, Actor* does not transcend the white gaze or the panoptic view of the carceral state. However, the photograph challenges the way that the gaze functions as an interpellative instrument for racial identification by way of the visual, depending upon direct referents that signify the Chicano male as criminal. The photograph depicts Sandoval ‘acting’ out his own interpretation of the Chicano male, one whose body is hidden away behind a coat and whose eyes refuse to look back at the camera’s interpellative eye. *Humberto Sandoval, Actor* presents a Chicano male subject that is caught between a panoptic drive to interpellate Sandoval as a referent for criminality and an individual desire to self-define oneself as a Chicano male.

²⁹² Noriega, Chon. “Talking Heads, Body Politic: The Plural Self of Chicano Experimental Video.” *Resolutions: Contemporary Video Practices*, edited by Michael Renov & Erika Suderburg, University of Minnesota Press, 1996, 207-228.



Figure 4.2: Harry Gamboa Jr., *Humberto Sandoval, Actor*, from *Chicano Male Unbonded Series*, 1991, black and white photograph.

The photographs in *Chicano Male Unbonded* present Chicano men as relational subjects, particular to their immediate material environment, Los Angeles. Within a photographic field of vision inflected by the carceral, whether the carceral can ever be divorced from photography as Sekula argues, Chicano men are made to appear as isolated figures, abstracted from their lived realities. Mugshots, for instance, formally cut off their photographed subject by way of replicable close-up shots with accompanying text for identifying the subject and crime. In *Chicano Male Unbonded*, Gamboa is questioning the mugshot form, as his use of Los Angeles' urban spaces

remaps Chicano presence in Los Angeles while remapping Los Angeles in relation to Chicanos. For Gamboa, Chicanos are an indispensable part of Los Angeles' visual terrain. *Humberto Sandoval, Actor*, for instance, combines the Chicano male body with the textual and visual content of street signs. Just as Chicanos are ubiquitous and hypervisible throughout Los Angeles, so are street signs. Behind Sandoval, there are two: on his left, an END sign sits atop a guardrail with part of its 'N' obscured by Gamboa's flash, and on Sandoval's right, the back of a sign is partially visible in the photograph. In addition, Sandoval's body and the guardrail make a cross, forming a human-nonhuman Cross Road sign. As visual and verbal signifiers, traffic signs communicate to drivers *to be on the lookout*. Gamboa figures Sandoval's body into the vocabulary of traffic signage to extend a notion of *being on the lookout* for road signs and Chicanos as signs of racial threat to white civil society. Referring to infrastructure in Los Angeles, Mike Davis writes, "The social perception of threat becomes a function of...security mobilization," making the visual presence of the Chicano male subject in Los Angeles a symbolic threat to white sociality and an economic justification for policing and surveillance (224).²⁹³ In lieu of Davis' reading, the 'bond' in *Chicano Male Unbonded* not only expresses an intimate 'bond' but also assumes an economic character, given the circulation of city & municipal bonds issued for Los Angeles infrastructure that fund projects ranging from highway construction to prison building. Davis' spatial links between prisons and urban spaces are manifest in Gamboa's use of traffic signs and Chicano bodies in *Humberto Sandoval, Actor*. In the photograph, the 'end' in sight not only signifies an end in the road; the 'end' refers to the mortality of the Chicano male measured within a carceral city where premature death and incarceration have become normalized.

²⁹³ Davis, Mike. *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles*. 1st Vintage Books ed., Vintage Books, 1992.

Humberto Sandoval, Actor is a photograph that situates Los Angeles simultaneously as a carceral city and a Chicana home. As Davis acknowledges, “Latinos are bringing redemptive energies to the neglected, worn-out cores and inner suburbs of many metropolitan areas,”²⁹⁴ including the Greater Los Angeles Area (51). While Gamboa’s photograph conveys to viewers how Chicanos in Los Angeles are divided across material and psychological planes, the image, and the *Chicano Male Unbonded* project as a whole, express how Los Angeles has become a site of Chicana life and cultural production. Referring to LA Chicana/o writers, in a chapter taking direct inspiration from Gamboa,²⁹⁵ Raúl Homero Villa argues how “their textual tactics may help make the reified *spaces* of dominant urban planning into habitable *places* of Chicano individual and collective subject formation and cultural reproduction” (155).²⁹⁶ While referring to writing, Villa’s understanding of “textual tactics” can speak to Gamboa’s photographic practices, which are inextricably linked to his writing. In his poem “Relativity” (1989), Gamboa addresses a Chicana notion, introduced by Chicana feminist Gloria Anzaldúa—*ni de aqui, ni de allá*. In the poem’s opening lines, the speaker says:

I have no sense of time or place

Because

I don’t care

That I don’t belong

Here nor there (531, emphasis added).

²⁹⁴ Davis, Mike. *Magical Urbanism: Latinos Reinvent the US City*. Verso, 2000.

²⁹⁵ Villa writes, “I have purposefully drawn the first part of this chapter’s title, ‘Phantoms in Urban Exile,’ from the work of Harry Gamboa” (113). From *Barrio-Logos: Space and Place in Urban Chicano Literature and Culture*, University of Texas Press, 2000.

²⁹⁶ Villa, Raúl Homero. *Barrio-Logos: Space and Place in Urban Chicano Literature and Culture*, University of Texas Press, 2000.

Part of Chicaxs' "individual and collective subject formation" is *social alienation*.²⁹⁷ The notion of being neither "Here nor there" is manifest in *Humberto Sandoval, Actor* through images of splitness and division. In the image, Sandoval stands between a crack in the road between his feet, creating a vertical split. On the horizontal plane, a guard rail rests behind his body, forming a cut through Sandoval's pelvis, dividing his body into two. Sandoval's divided self is additionally signified by his shadows, which branch out into two symmetrical shapes, forming a v-shaped pattern with his body. In the photograph, Sandoval is anything but whole; he is divided, or what in Lacanian language would be called a *split subject*, always-already alienated from the sight of his image.²⁹⁸ I read the divisions and splits in the photographs as visual manifestations of Chicax subject formation, situating Chicaxs as *ni de aqui, ni de allá*. Through this process, Gamboa remaps Los Angeles as a place that is both a home and alienating site for Chicaxs. Conversely, the Chicano male body is mapped onto Los Angeles, relating the experience of Chicax social alienation as synonymous with living in Los Angeles.

As much as *Chicano Male Unbonded* documents Chicano men in Los Angeles through photography, the project simultaneously functions as performance art. At the level of the title, *Humberto Sandoval, Actor* acknowledges the photograph's connection to performance and its use of Los Angeles as a set to stage Chicano men. This is made all the more clear in Gamboa's video art produced during *Chicano Male Unbonded*'s emergence. From 1992-1993, Gamboa directed *El Mundo L.A.*, a series of short videos that follow Chicano men, who were either

²⁹⁷ While not particular to "Relativity" or *Humberto Sandoval, Actor*, the notion of *ni de aqui, ni de allá*, for Anzaldúa, is grounded in a critique of Chicanismo, refiguring the queer *mestiza* as a subject that is alienated by racial, gendered, and sexual norms across languages and institutions. Anzaldúa, Gloria. *Borderlands: The New Mestiza = La Frontera*. Fourth edition, 25th anniversary. ed., 2012.

²⁹⁸ Here, I am referring specifically to the mirror stage, a process of subject formation theorized by Jacques Lacan in his essay, "The mirror stage as formative of the function of the I as revealed in psychoanalytic experience" (1949). Lacan, Jacques. *Écrits: A Selection*. Norton, 1977.

photographed²⁹⁹ or would eventually be photographed³⁰⁰ for *Chicano Male Unbonded*, performing the role of their self-identified profession. In *El Mundo L.A.*, the photographed subject steps out of the photograph's borders, moving through the space of Gamboa's video art. As Chon Noriega describes, "In the video series *El Mundo L.A.*, Gamboa acts as the interlocutor for a performed subject" (215).³⁰¹ Sandoval's respective video, *El Mundo L.A.: Humberto Sandoval, Actor* (1992),³⁰² is divided into three parts at different locations: a streetside wall, a parking lot, and a graveyard (Figure 4.3). Wearing a blazer over his bare torso, Sandoval plays a paranoid ex-convict who has "just been thinking" about Chicano politics, race relations, and Los Angeles in the early 1990s. He complains about politicians, white people, and the black community for not giving him, a Chicano male, "a piece of the pie"—a phrase that Sandoval repeats throughout to refer to recognition and wealth in the U.S.

²⁹⁹ David Avalos, Humberto Sandoval, Zaragosa Vargas, and Rene Yañez were photographed before *El Mundo L.A.* (1992; 1992; 1993; 1992) for *Chicano Male Unbonded* (1991; 1991; 1991; 1992).

³⁰⁰ Max Benavidez and Raúl Villa are two Chicanos who were photographed after their respective *El Mundo L.A.* videos (1992; 1993) for *Chicano Male Unbonded* (1994; 1998).

³⁰¹ Noriega, Chon. "Talking Heads, Body Politic: The Plural Self of Chicano Experimental Video." *Resolutions: Contemporary Video Practices*, edited by Michael Renov & Erika Suderburg, University of Minnesota Press, 1996, 207-228.

³⁰² Gamboa, Harry., and UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center. *Harry Gamboa Jr. 1990s Video Art*. UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center, 2004.



Figure 4.3: Harry Gamboa Jr., *El Mundo L.A.: Humberto Sandoval, Actor*, 1992, video stills from *Harry Gamboa Jr.: 1990s Video Art*, 2004, DVD.

The video depicts a range of racial, gendered, and class projections that demonstrate the Chicano male subject's inherent contradictions. As Noriega writes, *El Mundo L.A.*:

[attempts] to give voice to the invisible majority of Los Angeles. But rather than do so in the manner of...earlier social documentaries, Gamboa draws attention to how Chicano political discourse locates authority outside the community, *splitting* itself between mythical past and hypothetical future (217, emphasis added).³⁰³

³⁰³Noriega, Chon. "Talking Heads, Body Politic: The Plural Self of Chicano Experimental Video." *Resolutions: Contemporary Video Practices*, edited by Michael Renov & Erika Suderburg, University of Minnesota Press, 1996, 207-228.

Gamboa figures Sandoval as a speaker for “Chicano political discourse.” But rather than follow a documentary mode, Gamboa utilizes experimental video practices to resituate Chicano politics, playing with freeze frames, shutter speeds, and nonlinear narration. In the video, Sandoval embodies the troubled legacy of Chicano cultural nationalism, specifically Aztlán. Since *El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán* (1969), the Chicano nationalist manifesto drafted at the National Youth and Liberation Conference organized by Rodolfo “Corky” Gonzalez in Denver, Colorado, the organizational goals of *El Plan*—Chicanx unity, economy, education, institutions, self-defense, culture, and political liberation—remain in flux. *El Mundo L.A.* situates Sandoval as an actor who embodies the contradictions of Chicano political discourse since the Chicano Movement. In the beginning segment of the video, Sandoval reflects upon his living conditions in Los Angeles versus his time spent in prison, stating, “I reckon I was a lot better off in the fucking pen. At least there, if I was ever going to get fucked, they were nice enough to warn me about it. But here, you don’t know, you don’t know who might be behind you,” likening prison rape to being ‘fucked by the system.’³⁰⁴ Sandoval is distrustful and resentful towards U.S. politicians, particularly liberals who promise Chicano inclusion and recognition by white civil society. For Sandoval, living in Los Angeles is no different, if not worse, than prison. In the second segment, Sandoval reflects upon the failures of Chicano cultural nationalism. “I feel like there’s nothing here for me, but I was told this was Aztlán, the land of the North, where the culture, *la cultura*, could flourish and do what it wanted and continue to do the great things it had done for thousands of years,” says Sandoval, as he talks to himself in a parking lot, repeatedly coughing.³⁰⁵ Sandoval concludes that the primary failure of La Raza was the absence of pyramids in Aztlán, since pyramids would

³⁰⁴ Gamboa, Harry., and UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center. *Harry Gamboa Jr. 1990s Video Art*. UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center, 2004.

³⁰⁵ Ibid.

have acted as visual symbols of power, warranting “a slice of the pie” from others.³⁰⁶ As Sandoval declares, “We’re La Raza and I’m not going to forget about it.”³⁰⁷ Yet, the video does not portray Sandoval as a valiant Aztec warrior, reclaiming Aztlán. Rather, Sandoval is depicted as a transient, walking alone in urban spaces as he blames race relations on a white-black divide, adheres to El Movimiento’s heteropatriarchy, and obsesses over individual financial gain. In short, Sandoval embodies the shattered fantasies of Chicano male inclusion into white liberal society, performing the split subjecthood of his character in *Humberto Sandoval, Actor* through moving pictures.

In his video, Gamboa presents a pessimistic yet affirmative vision of Chicano politics, one that seeks an end to Chicano cultural nationalist pasts to address material conditions affecting Chicanxs in the present. In the final segment of the video, Sandoval stands in a graveyard, calling every day a Día de los Muertos, given disproportionate levels of premature death for Chicanxs in LA. Throughout the video, Sandoval heavily coughs from the smog, “the smell of our lands.”³⁰⁸ Los Angeles has become “a fucking place [that] is rotting,” subjecting his body and community to slow violence. Directly experiencing a world in ecological and economic decline, Sandoval stands atop gravestones, choosing to embrace death instead of Aztlán.³⁰⁹ It is as though Sandoval extends the “END” sign in Gamboa’s photograph as a literal marker of his own mortality and the lives of Chicanxs. Thus, the *El Mundo L.A.* video explores the relation between Los Angeles and the Chicano male subject presented in *Chicano Male Unbonded*. The video series act as visual supplements to *Chicano Male Unbonded*, extending the project across multiple mediums—film, photography, and performance. Across these aesthetic modes, Gamboa

³⁰⁶ Ibid.

³⁰⁷ Ibid.

³⁰⁸ Ibid.

³⁰⁹ Ibid.

continually challenges Chicano cultural politics to direct the viewer's attention to literal material conditions that have and continue to shape Chicana life in Los Angeles across space and time.



Figure 4.4: Harry Gamboa Jr., *Roberto Bedoya, Poet/Performer*, from *Chicano Male Unbonded Series*, 1991, black and white photograph.

In *Roberto Bedoya, Poet/Performer* (1991) (Figure 4.4), Gamboa connects Aztlán's mythopoetics with quotidian life in Los Angeles. The photograph positions Bedoya as a refashioned Aztec warrior wearing a cotton sweater, black boots, a serape skirt, and a jester hat. Bedoya stands next to a chain-link fence with a "NO" sign, barring him from passage to the other side of the fence. As mesoamerican cultural figures, Aztec warriors were appropriated throughout the Chicano Movement as embodiments of indigeneity in the U.S. Southwest and

Mexico. The Chicano Movement's strategic uses of the Aztec warrior, and indigeneity in general, allowed artists, writers, and activists to generate decolonial imaginaries that called for the reclamation of land and culture, figured in the mythical homeland, Aztlán. While invested in the recuperation of indigenous cultures that were lost over centuries of settler-colonialism, Aztlán, and the deployment of Chicana indigeneity in Chicana culture, operates as a contradiction that simultaneously gives voice to indigenous cultures while obscuring actual indigenous peoples. As María Josefina Saldaña-Portillo argues, the representational space of Aztlán "was produced through an engagement with lost indigenous identity rather than through an engagement with contemporary indigenous peoples" (232).³¹⁰ For Saldaña-Portillo, Chicana indigeneity, particularly during the Chicano Movement, was less about actual indigenous peoples and more concerned with indigenous identities as part of Chicana culture but lost within the historical violences of *mestizaje* in colonized territories presently known as Mexico and the U.S. In response to Chicana indigeneity's contradictions, Gamboa depicts the Aztec warrior not as a figure liberated from settler-colonialism but rather as an additional 'bond' to fixed identity categories. Gamboa challenges a direct correspondence between the Chicano male and indigenous peoples—particularly, the usage of indigeneity as a social identity—by figuring Bedoya as a "Performer." Bedoya and the photograph as a whole convey how the Chicano male, and his appropriation of Chicana indigeneity, is not a stable social identity or referent but rather a repeated set of performative acts that signify 'the Chicano male.' Bedoya's jester hat, for example, becomes an embodiment of Chicana performativity, signifying how the Chicano male subject has become an entertainer for audiences within and outside of Chicana communities, whether to white audiences viewing Chicanos as criminalized caricatures or to Chicanas who

³¹⁰ Saldaña-Portillo, María Josefina. *Indian Given: Racial Geographies across Mexico and the United States*. 2016.

imagine the ideal Chicano subject as a male Aztec warrior. For Gamboa, the Aztec warrior figure is disconnected from the everyday lives of LA Chicanxs, while simultaneously producing a heteromasculinist imaginary of the Chicano male subject, one which the photograph attempts to undo through its refiguring of courtly and gendered clothing.

Gamboa positions Bedoya as a racialized and gendered subject restricted from dominant social spaces. In the photograph, the urban surroundings convey a sense of spatial restriction for the photographed subject. Bedoya stands next to a chain link fence with a “NO” sign attached to a white pole. Like the “END ” sign in *Humberto Sandoval, Actor*, the “NO” sign in *Roberto Bedoya, Poet/Performer* signals negation to the reader, though an *affirmative* negation, one which can generate possibility rather than mark an end. This is expressed through the positioning of Bedoya’s body in relation to the urban setting. The photograph is composed of numerous diamond shapes that box Bedoya’s body across multiple planes. For instance, vertically, the chain-link fence itself is composed of open diamonds, while on the horizontal plane, a diamond shape is created by the perimeter of the fence and a white line behind his legs. In addition, Bedoya stands between square tiles, tilted and angled in a way that matches the diamond-pattern of the chain-link fence. With this formal composition, Gamboa positions Bedoya’s body as physically enveloped by shapes and patterns produced by the urban environment across multiple axes. Yet, there are visual markers that suggest the possibility of freedom from spatial restriction. Bedoya’s shadow exceeds the white line, breaking from the cement floor’s pattern. And while the “NO” sign may signify restricted access, the fence is permeable, composed of open diamond shapes. Thus, Bedoya is simultaneously restricted and free, though always-already subject to the gaze of the camera and the strict spatial composition of Gamboa’s photograph. With his arms crossed in an oversized sweater, it is as though Bedoya wears a straitjacket, restraining Bedoya’s

body just as urban spaces across Los Angeles restrict Chicax movement and access to social spaces by signaling “NO” to ethnic-racialized communities. *Roberto Bedoya, Poet/Performer* reconfigures the historical tension between Chicax place-making and hegemonic spatial practices by utilizing Bedoya’s body, attire, and stance, in relation to Los Angeles’ urban environment, to theorize alternative spatial strategies.

Roberto Bedoya, Poet/Performer’s meanings are broadened when read in relation to the photographed subject’s work, given that the photograph is always-already a visual supplement substituting and adding to the photographed subject. Similar to Gamboa’s work, Bedoya’s poetry and performance interrogate the material and imaginary processes of Chicax subject formation. In season one of the WYNC-TV’s short film series *Poetry Spots* (1987-1995), Bedoya performs two of his poems: “Pocho-Biography” & “Jack Stallman.” In “Pocho-Biography,”³¹¹ Bedoya’s speaker navigates between languages and cultures that fail to synthesize into a coherent whole. The opening lines follow:

My language is between two sounds
between two hemispheres
producing a tension that rises with the heat of the Valley
and turns not into song
but a knot of questions lodged in my back
questions about place and intimacy
questions that I dissect into slivers of meaning.³¹²

In the performance, Bedoya’s breaths become “slivers of meaning” that create spaces where the speaker’s languages can coexist “between two sounds” and “two hemispheres.” Later in the

³¹¹ Holman, Bob. “Poetry Spots: Roberto Bedoya reads ‘Pocho-Biography.’” *YouTube*, reading by Roberto Bedoya, 9 Jan. 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MqXSvty0xIE>.

³¹² Transcribed from Holman video.

poem, Bedoya switches between English and Spanish to demonstrate sonic and geographical in-betweenness. Rather than celebrate linguistic and cultural diversity in his codeswitching, translating Chicano identity “into song” for white audiences, the speaker senses “a knot of questions” in his body that the poem begins to untangle, questions that are particular to a term in the title: ‘pocho.’ ‘Pocho’ is a word that refers to Mexicans who have assimilated into the U.S. at the loss of their Mexican culture, though this term problematically assumes an essentialized view of people of Mexican ancestry as culturally separate and always-already assimilated into Mexican cultural practices.³¹³ Derived from the Spanish word *pocho*, which denotes an object that has become discolored, faded, and pale, the term originated as a pejorative term. However, it has since been recuperated by Chicanxs as an empowering term that embraces cultural ambiguity inherent to *chicanidad* and *latinidades* as a whole.³¹⁴ During *Poetry Spots*, Bedoya reads “Pocho-Biography” from a close-up shot at an eye-level camera, looking directly at the viewer as he recites the poem from memory. Bedoya is reciting a poem about a ‘pocho’ while embodying a ‘pocho’ persona: he is a Mexican man speaking in English, wearing a blazer, and saying a few Spanish words with a noticeable Californian accent. For *Poetry Spots*, Bedoya is both poet & performer of the ‘pocho.’

In “Jack Stelman,”³¹⁵ Bedoya uses the space of poetry and performance to retell his experience being a caretaker for two men with AIDS, speaking to queer histories in *chicanidad*. For the speaker, poetic language fails to register the pain of mass death, as “the epidemic brings

³¹³ “pocho, n. (and adj.)” *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, June 2020, www.oed.com/view/Entry/146394. Accessed 22 July 2020.

³¹⁴ Since the mid-twentieth century, the word has been recuperated, for example, in the title of José Antonio Villarreal’s novel, *Pocho* (1959) and a popular zine by Lalo Alcaraz and Esteban Luz, *Pocho! Magazine* (1990-present).

³¹⁵ Holman, Bob. “Poetry Spots: Roberto Bedoya reads ‘Jack Stelman.’” *YouTube*, reading by Roberto Bedoya, 9 Jan. 2011, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NWALdx3yW_8.

inventory to life / and the questions of how / then why.”³¹⁶ As Bedoya recites those specific lines on *Poetry Spots*, the camera zooms in from a medium to a close-up shot, drawing the viewer nearer to the urgency of “the epidemic” that Bedoya is intimately connected to. Jack Stellman was Bedoya’s neighbor while living in New York City in the 1980s. Between 1987-1988, Bedoya became a caretaker for Stellman and Danny O’Neil, who Bedoya dated on-and-off again for several years.³¹⁷ Bedoya introduced O’Neil, who worked in the television industry, to U.S. poet Bob Holman for the development of *Poetry Spots*. O’Neill helped to create the television program in its early stages, which Bedoya eventually starred in for the series’ first season. Both O’Neil and Stellman died less than a year after their AIDS diagnoses. Thus, the poem “Jack Stellman” speaks to Bedoya’s personal experience with Stellman in specific, though the death of O’Neil occupies the space of the poem and the *Poetry Spots* series. Bedoya utilizes poetic form and performance to explore the mediation of lived reality through linguistic representation, examining whether poetic language can represent the incommensurable toll that AIDS affected on working-class queer communities during the 1980s. In recounting Stellman’s last words, the speaker says in the final lines of the poem, “The value I place on words to explore, explain, rescue / bottoms out when he says to me / ‘A language is leaving the bank.’”³¹⁸ While attempting to represent Stellman’s fatal condition, language becomes a limited unit of value for the speaker. To have “language...[leave] the bank” inaccurately measures the words used to represent Stellman, devaluing the loss of Stellman and others. Bedoya’s “Jack Stellman” is both poem and performance, one that navigates the impact of AIDS on Bedoya, a poet attempting to use words

³¹⁶ Transcribed from Holman video.

³¹⁷ Tremblay-McGaw, Robin. “‘Doing Civic’ Part 2: An Interview with Roberto Bedoya.” *Blogspot, X Poetics*, <http://xpoetics.blogspot.com/2008/10/doing-civic-part-2-interview-with.html>.

³¹⁸ Transcribed from Holman video.

“to explore, explain, [and] rescue.”³¹⁹ I read Bedoya’s poetry and performance as a body of work that resonates with Gamboa’s interrogation of language as a conduit for meaning and representation. Distinct from Gamboa’s authorship, Bedoya’s appearance on *Poetry Spots* articulates similar representational concerns pertinent to the photograph *Roberto Bedoya, Poet/Performer*.

The photographs of Bedoya and Sandoval both unfix the Chicano male from static referents of race, gender, and sexuality. Gamboa destabilizes photography as a primary mode of racial identification, positioning its visual techniques in relation to video, performance, and poetry. Bedoya’s speakers in “Pocho-Biography” and “Jack Stellman” are much like Sandoval’s character in *El Mundo L.A.*, interrogating themselves on what it means to identify as a Chicano male. Gamboa’s photographs of Sandoval and Bedoya are portals into the works of many other Chicaxs, continually adding to and substituting for the nearly hundred photographs in *Chicano Male Unbonded*. Making a singular claim about *Chicano Male Unbonded* in its totality reduces the project’s materiality, while drawing connections beyond Gamboa can better situate *Chicano Male Unbonded*’s attempt at presenting a broad network of Chicano men as humans with lives, deaths, and intimate kinship bonds that extend outside the photograph, though are placed into closer proximity in the space of Gamboa’s project for viewers to witness in its open form.

‘Phantoms of Phantoms’: Networks of Queer Chicánidad

Chicano Male Unbonded is a work that interrogates gender expressions and masculinities within and outside a Chicax field of vision. The *Male* in the project, while singular and namely cisgendered, signifies a spectrum of gender expressions, from Bojorquez’s hypermasculine homeboy to Bedoya’s jester-meets-Aztec warrior wardrobe. With a title that centers the Chicano male, a privileged gendered category within a Chicax sphere of social identities, the project

³¹⁹ Ibid.

may appear as a reinscription of patriarchal norms and heteronormative masculinities. In addition, there are no women in sight. Yet, as Rodríguez argues, “Although Gamboa largely focuses on men, he does not reinforce patriarchy. In fact, Gamboa refreshingly challenges the heteronormative constitution of Chicano masculinity and kinship relations” (141).³²⁰ While Gamboa’s particular focus are cisgendered men, the project continually destabilizes heteronormative matrices that privilege the cisgendered Chicano male as the central figure of Chicano sociality and cultural politics. Gamboa actively participates in queering the viewer’s field of vision, producing alternative displays of Chicano masculinity that challenge heteronormativity as the default for Chicano men. Gamboa’s portraits confront multiple gazes—male, white, and hetero—in order to manifest homosocial and homoerotic desires for the abject brown male body. Two photographs, in particular, trace Gamboa’s remapping of desire: *Gerardo Velázquez, Synthesized Music Composer* (1991) and *Jack Vargas, Librarian* (1995). Both photographs center gay Chicano men influential within the queer Chicano avant-garde, an art scene that Gamboa produced works in relation to during the 1970s onward. In short, art and writing by gay Chicano men in Los Angeles directly inform Gamboa’s works throughout.

While negotiating the complexities of gender and sexuality in Chicano art, the two images also convey the limitations of *Chicano Male Unbonded* as a liberatory project for Chicanos. As noted by Bedoya’s speaker in “Jack Stellman,” a celebration of Gamboa’s project is complicated by a material reality that haunts Gamboa’s project: the history of AIDS. Like Stellman and O’Neil, both Velázquez and Vargas died of AIDS complications. Expanding on Gamboa’s ascription of ‘phantom culture’³²¹ to Chicanos, a term to describe Chicanos’ social marginality and simultaneous presence & absence within U.S. civil society, Robb Hernández

³²⁰ Rodríguez, Richard T. “Urban Exile: Collected Writings of Harry Gamboa Jr.” *Theatre Journal*, vol. 52, no. 1, 2000, pp. 140–141.

³²¹ Gamboa, Harry. “No Phantoms.” *High Performance*, vol. 4, no. 4, 1981.

describes gay, lesbian, queer, and trans* Chicanxs as ‘phantoms amongst phantoms.’ The AIDS epidemic’s physical erasure of queer Chicanxs, compounded by the structural forces of racial, gendered, and sexual inequality, produced an additional layer of phantasmatic presence. Hernández writes, “The impact of this plague was grave: artist oeuvres, artistic practices, creative communities, discerning aesthetes, and, in particular, material records disappeared” (6).³²² The photographs of Velázquez and Vargas are residual contents from the histories and archives of AIDS losses. When considering *Chicano Male Unbonded*’s relation to the history of AIDS, the Chicano male subject carries a different resonance, one that draws limitations to the ‘unbonding’ that the project seeks to accomplish. The reality of queer Chicancx histories complicates Gamboa’s initial attempt to recuperate the image of the Chicano male subject within a history that excludes the presence and even absence of queer Chicanxs. Thus, I am not positioning Gamboa as a savior of the queer Chicancx avant-garde nor am I reading his photographs of gay Chicano men as celebratory moments of inclusion. These gestures would keep heteromascularity intact. As Hernández writes:

If the prevailing heteromascularity visual discourse of Chicana/o art production is what the archive makes visible, then it is of paramount importance to make the cultural authority of the archive transparent in the present moment by attending to those troubling images it sought to delay, subordinate, or hide: the iconography of the maricón (127).³²³

By focusing on queer presences in the Chicancx avant-garde, the historical archive in which I draw Gamboa’s works from, *Chicano Male Unbonded* can be read as a project that can exceed

³²² Hernández, Robb. *Archiving an Epidemic: Art, AIDS, and the Queer Chicancx Avant-Garde* (2019).

³²³ Hernández, Robb. “Drawing Offensive/Offensive Drawing: Toward a Theory of Mariconography.” *Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States*, vol. 39, no. 2, 2014, pp. 121–152.

Gamboa's vision, decentering any singular artist let alone aesthetic work as the central authority on the Chicano male, 'unbonded' or not. The two photographs articulate queer resonances that inform Chicana subject formation—what is allowed or barred within this process—while offering an alternative way of seeing that can 'unbond' the viewer's attachment to an idealized image of the Chicano male subject as heterosexual.

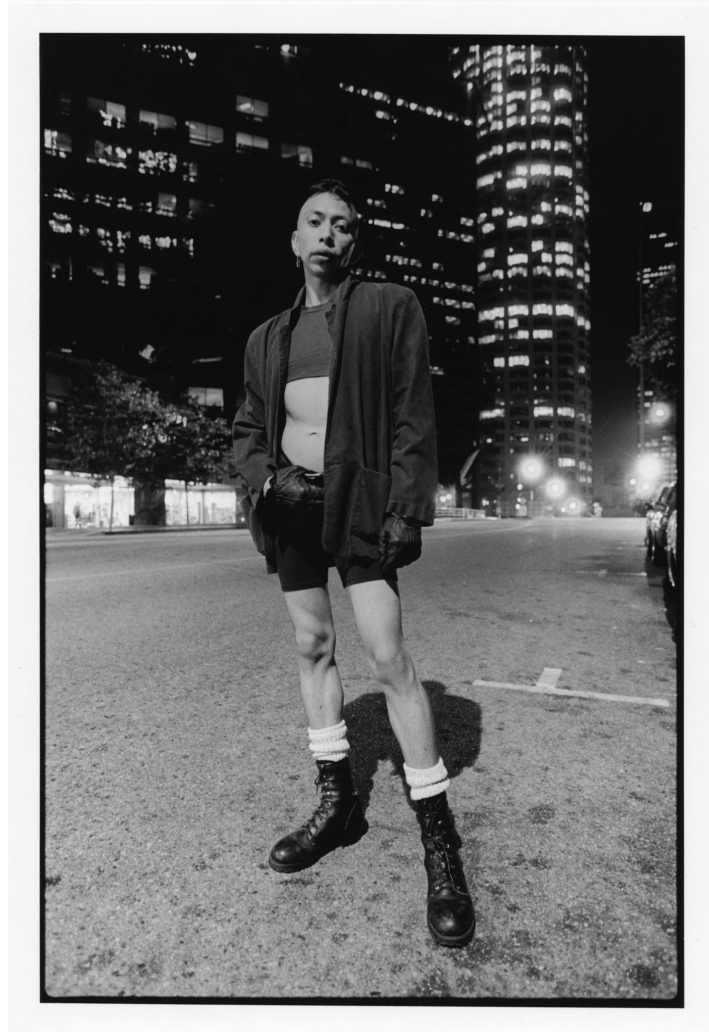


Figure 4.5: Harry Gamboa Jr., *Gerardo Velázquez, Synthesized Music Composer*, from *Chicano Male Unbonded* series, 1991, black and white photograph.

Gerardo Velázquez, Synthesized Music Composer (1991) (Figure 4.5) invites viewers to look and gaze upon the Chicano male as a desirable brown body. In the image, Velázquez

embraces his punk and queer social identities, wearing leather boots, black spandex shorts, black leather gloves, a dark gray crop top, and a long black cardigan, open and showing the skin of his light brown torso. In addition, he has a pierced right ear, an accessory and visual symbol for same-sex male desire. Skyscrapers cover the upper half of the photograph's background, with the U.S. Bank Tower on the right side of the photograph, signaling to the viewer the exact location of the photograph: Downtown Los Angeles. Velázquez stands in the middle of a street with parked cars and street lights illuminating a path towards the Tower. The entire lower half of the photograph is marked by gray cement, which Velázquez's bare legs blend into. While posing with tilted shoulders, Velázquez stands parallel to the U.S. Bank Tower and the parallel parked vehicles. The presence of Velázquez' queer-punk Chicano male body reorients the visual character of Downtown Los Angeles. Like *Humberto Sandoval, Actor*, Velázquez is interwoven into Los Angeles' urbanscape, making Los Angeles an indispensable part of Chicano male subject formation, and in the case of this particular photograph, inseparable from Chicano sexualities and subcultures.

Velázquez's gestures disrupt heteronormativity. In the photograph, Velázquez returns the camera's gaze with a stare that invites viewers to look back, acknowledging the latent homoeroticism embedded within the act of gazing. As viewers of *Chicano Male Unbonded*, we are all voyeurs (regardless of sexual orientation), projecting our repressed and conscious desires for or against the Chicano male body onto Velázquez. The sexual meaning of the photograph is made all the more explicit in Velázquez's suggestive pose—he locks his right thumb behind the beltline of his black spandex shorts, teasing the viewer with potential disrobement. *Gerardo Velazquez, Synthesized Music Composer* challenges the ways that heteronormativity within and outside of Chicano culture become manifest in seeing or, for the most part, in avoiding sight.

Within a social world where nonnormative sexualities are repressed and policed, the queer gaze can function as a communicative instrument to gauge and mutually recognize another's sexual orientation. While a major site for queer expression, culture, and sociality, places like Downtown Los Angeles are continually subject to surveillance in public spaces, making Velázquez's gaze a defiant act to the policing of sexuality and the gaze.

While emphasizing the visual, Velázquez's portrait *synthesizes* sight with sound, forging a relationship between the visual and the sonic. In his essay "Past Imperfecto" (1994), Gamboa remembers meeting and conversing with Velázquez about his interest in sound while taking a bus ride to East Los Angeles in the early 1980s, creating a 'bond' between the two artists in their moment of physical contact. Gamboa writes:

[Velázquez] was explaining how he had been manipulating sounds and composing music. I had heard him perform radicalized poetry in a gallery setting. The information he discussed with me involved the aesthetics and physics of sound. I asked him if he would create several minutes worth of sounds that would match his interpretations of various moods and images. A few days later he provided me with a cassette which contained compelling noises, strange hypnotic audio passages, and humorously taunting buzzes, beeps, and mechanical whispers...His genius was evident in the way he was able to share his auditory sensibility in recorded moments of audio panic (95-96).³²⁴

Gamboa incorporates Velázquez's sounds in a number of his videos, radio dramas, and live performances, as supplements to his visuals.³²⁵ "Past Imperfecto" traces the overall sense of

³²⁴ Gamboa, Harry. *Urban Exile: Collected Writings of Harry Gamboa Jr.*, edited by Chon Noriega. University of Minnesota Press, 1998.

³²⁵ In "Past Imperfecto," Gamboa mentions that he included Velázquez's work in *Blanx* (1984), *Baby Kake* (1984), *Orphans of Modernism: A Radio Play* (1984), *Jetter's Jinx: A Conceptual*

“audio panic” expressed throughout Velázquez’s sound work. In the 1980s, Velázquez was best known within LA’s underground punk scene for playing synthesizers and singing in the band Nervous Gender, a group of self-described “techno-punks” whose sounds blended noise, post-punk, and industrial.³²⁶ As an early influencer of the musical genre “queercore,” Nervous Gender borrowed subcultural aesthetics from the queer and punk counterpublics, performing in venues such as Club A.S.S. in the Silver Lake. Gamboa’s photograph becomes a portal into Velázquez’s auditory world, one that traverses underground spaces across Los Angeles’ urban geographies.

In a 1983 VHS-compilation entitled “Live at the Target,”³²⁷ Nervous Gender’s 1980 performance convey’s Velázquez *synthesis* of multiple mediums that are hinted in Gamboa’s photograph title, *Gerardo Velazquez, Synthesized Music Composer*. In the video, Velázquez wears a red button up shirt reminiscent of the German electronic band Kraftwerk. Instead of the band’s buttoned-up red shirt/black necktie uniform, Velázquez wears a loosened skinny tie around an unbuttoned collar. Across his body are leather and chains, with a black leather corset, bracelets, and a shoulder strap. Velázquez’s provocative attire is accented by a gray armband reminiscent of a Swastika armband, a controversial article of clothing that has graced the punk/post-punk scene across its history, from goth musician Siouxsie Sioux’s Nazi chic wear during the late 1970s to the post-punk revivalist band Interpol and their Latinx-German bassist Carlos D wearing red armbands during live performances in the early 2000s. Velázquez’s fashion is emblematic of a larger history of punk and queer fascination with fascist aesthetics intended

Drama (1985), *Antizona: A Conceptual Performance* (1987), *No Supper* (1987), *Confess/Shun* (year unknown), and *Hasta La Blah Blah* (year unknown).

³²⁶ *Nervous Gender - "A Thorn in the Side of the L.A. Music Scene"*, www.nervousgender.com/contents.htm.

³²⁷ Accessed via YouTube. Xexoxical Endarchy. “Nervous Gender - Live At The Target.” *YouTube*, 15 Mar. 2009, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pWYKeN_wBK0.

for provocation and desirability.³²⁸ The spectacle of Velázquez is all the more exaggerated during Nervous Gender's performance of "Confession," the last song of their set. Here, Velázquez steps away from his keyboard, grabs a microphone, and announces to the audience, "This is a song for Lent" (Figure 4.6). Enraged, Velázquez yells the song's opening lines:

Jesus was a cocksucking Jew from Galilee

Jesus was just like me

A homosexual nymphomaniac (x 4)

Walking the streets of LA

Walking the streets of Galilee

Walking the streets of LA alone

Looking for a place to stay.³²⁹

Velázquez's identification with Jesus bridges the sacred with the profane, likening Jesus to gay men cruising, "looking for a place to stay." The song interprets Jesus' homosociality in the Bible as repressed same-sex desire, challenging popular representations of Jesus as a celibate heterosexual male living on Earth without sexual desires. Velázquez makes direct connections between Los Angeles and Galilee through slant rhyme, matching the sound of 'LA' with 'li-lee.' Through its queer performance of "audio panic," "Confessions" reorganizes and resignifies space through sound. As Josh Kun argues, referring to Henri Lefebvre, "Music is, after all, a spatial practice, evoking, transcending, and organizing places along spatial trajectories" (21).³³⁰ Velázquez's performance of "Confessions" envisions alternative queer spaces that question the

³²⁸ For more, see Susan Sontag's essay "Fascinating Fascism" (originally published in the February 6, 1975 issue of *New York Review of Books*). Sontag, Susan. *Under the Sign of Saturn*. Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1980.

³²⁹ Transcribed from YouTube video. Xexoxical Endarchy. "Nervous Gender - Live At The Target." *YouTube*, 15 Mar. 2009, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pWYKeN_wBK0.

³³⁰ Kun, Josh. *Audiotopia: Music, Race, and America*. University of California Press, 2005.

reification of the Chicano male as always-already heterosexual. As Kun writes, “A song is never just a song, but a connection, a ticket, a pass, an invitation, a node in a complex network” (3).³³¹ As “a homosexual nymphomaniac / walking the streets of LA,” Velázquez signals “a node in a complex network,” where the performance of a queer Chicano male subject emerges from the LA punk underground, “walking” into the frames of Gamboa’s aesthetic works.



Figure 4.6: Nervous Gender, “Confessions,” 1980, performance recording, *Live At Target: A Video Album*, 1983, video stills from YouTube.

While alluding to the sonic, *Gerardo Velazquez, Synthesized Music Composer* highlights some of the limits of *Chicano Male Unbonded*, particularly in its overemphasis of the visual to articulate the racialization and gendering of the Chicano male body. As demonstrated in Nervous Gender’s “Confessions,” meaning is not isolated to one medium; rather, it is produced through an interplay of media, such as the relation between the visual, the performative, the sonic, and the poetic. Neither term can be solely extracted in understanding how Velázquez is embodying and producing Chicano masculinity in Nervous Gender’s performance and Gamboa’s photograph. In short, Velázquez is a “synthesizer” of mediums, a role that extends beyond his musical composition and sound production. Like Gamboa, Velázquez was a multimedia artist, extending

³³¹ Ibid.

his work into the visual arts and, as noted by Gamboa, a “[performer of] radicalized poetry.”³³² Thus, Gamboa’s choice in photography comes to a formal and aesthetic limit in *Chicano Male Unbonded*, even as his project seems limitless in its continual accumulation of photographs. However, this representational limit is not so much an artistic oversight by Gamboa as much as it is a limitation of the photographic medium itself. According to Shawn Michelle Smith, “Photography revolutionized perception, making the invisible visible. But as it enlarged the visual world, bringing new things into sight, it also demonstrated how much ordinarily remains imperceptible...Just as vision is not endlessly expandable, photography has its own limitations” (8).³³³ Photography’s expansion of the visual field does not make all objects perceptible to the human eye. While focusing on photography’s emergence in the early nineteenth-century, Smith aptly describes photography’s formal limitations, which endure well into contemporary photography. For example, Gamboa’s attempt to make Chicano men visible through photography, despite its efforts to redress the erasure and stereotyping of Chicano men in U.S. mass media, is not “endlessly expandable.” Yet, Smith demonstrates photography’s unique relationship to the invisible. As Smith writes, “Photography brushes against the unseen”³³⁴ (8). In 2017, *Gerardo Velazquez, Synthesized Music Composer* was made hypervisible, circulated as the online cover photo for *Chicano Male Unbonded*’s exhibition at the Autry Museum of the American West. Velázquez’s body was visible to the viewer, metonymically functioning as the ‘unbonded’ Chicano male. However, with Smith’s argument in mind, Velázquez, despite his

³³² As of 2017, Velázquez’s works have been archived at the University of Southern California. In addition, Velázquez, along with Gamboa, were both included into one of the largest LA queer art exhibitions, *Axis Mundo: Queer Networks in Chicano L.A.*, held at the Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA) in 2017 as part of the *Pacific Standard Time: LA/LA* (2014) initiative. All in all, Velázquez exceeds the time (1991) and space (*Chicano Male Unbonded*) of Gamboa’s photograph, with his influence enduring in LA’s underground and art scenes in the present.

³³³ Smith, Shawn M. *At the Edge of the Sight: Photography and the Unseen*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2013.

³³⁴ Ibid.

hypervisibility, was simultaneously rendered *invisible* by the museum's curation of his body, cropping his torso to fit within the confines of its online spaces advertising the exhibit. Velázquez was one of the first men photographed for the series in 1991 just months before his death in 1992 from AIDS complications. What is left *unseen* and, to add to Smith's terms, *unheard* in the museum's curation are the connections between the photography project, *chicanidad*, and queer histories. Phantoms that make up *chicanidad* are made invisible and inaudible, erased from sight and sound by way of the museum's curatorial and spatial logics. Within *Chicano Male Unbonded* are the visual and aural remnants of queer Chicanxs, people "just like [him]," Velázquez. It is the scholar's responsibility, then, to see their absent presences and hear their inaudible voices in order to trace both the limits and possibilities of Gamboa's extensive project in *Chicano Male Unbonded*.

Gamboa's play with the unseeable and the inaudible manifests in the photograph *Jack Vargas, Librarian* (1995) (Figure 4.7). Jack Vargas was a conceptual artist in Los Angeles, often collaborating with Joey Terrill, Teddy Sandoval, and Gerardo Velázquez, artists that created LA's emergent queer Chicane avant-garde scene. Often using the pseudonym Le Club for Boys, Vargas and his transgressive art intersected with Gamboa's creative orbits. In particular, Vargas' mixed-media piece *New Language for a New Society—28 Samples* (1975), exhibited at *Chicanarte* (1975),³³⁵ provoked viewers, including Gamboa. The piece's Rolodex, Hernández describes, "interrogated the indexical function of the device by disordering strings of language through sexually suggestive innuendo and jumbles of wordplay" (37).³³⁶ While widely rejected by art critics, the piece made a lasting impression on Gamboa. As Hernández writes, "The force

³³⁵ The exhibit was organized by Al Frente Communications, Inc., and the UCLA Chicano Arts Council at Barnsdall.

³³⁶ Hernandez, Robb. *Archiving an Epidemic: Art, AIDS, and the Queer Chicane Avant-Garde*. 2019.

of Vargas's conceptual piece resonated with Gamboa, whose later photo-text pieces, experimental prose, and public access media broadcasts and video production have jarring traces of Vargas that must not be underestimated" (38).³³⁷ Vargas' artistic presence manifests across a variety of Gamboa's multimedia work, which includes the portrait photograph of Vargas himself, *Jack Vargas, Librarian*. In the photograph, Vargas is presented as a saint-like figure to Gamboa, wearing a long, knee-length black coat reminiscent of a clerical outfit, while standing in front of a brightly lit building that appears to be a cathedral. The building is Los Angeles Public Library's Goodhue Building, where Vargas worked as a library clerk throughout the 1990s. Vargas holds his hands behind his back, posturing his chest up and looking down into the camera's eye. Wearing laced up leather boots, Vargas stands in the Library's tiled courtyard at a slanted angle, aligned with a skyscraper and the Goodhue Building. Like *Humberto Sandoval, Actor*, there are shadows that split the photographed subject, though the shadows here are not symmetrical; rather, they are slanted and partially visible. The top shadow is caught within the frame, though the bottom shadow only shows the reflection of Vargas' calves. Similar to the photograph of Velázquez, Vargas is partially invisible. I interpret Vargas' cut-off shadow as a marker of what is unseen. While the photograph creates a direct correspondence between the text "*Librarian*" with an image of the Public Library, the *Jack Vargas* in the photograph is in some way cut off formally and physically from the Jack Vargas that once was.

³³⁷ Ibid.



Figure 4.7: Harry Gamboa Jr., *Jack Vargas, Librarian*, from *Chicano Male Unbonded* series, 1995, black and white photograph.

Gamboa's description, *Librarian*, for Vargas cuts away at the body of Vargas' work, just as the photograph marks off the body of Vargas' shadow. Part of what is hidden away from the photograph are Vargas' aesthetic and formal innovations in Chicano art. In *The New Bourgeois 'I Want' with Gay Male Suggestiveness* (c. 1976-79),³³⁸ Vargas presents a list of desires that can be read as a poem structured around the anaphora, "I want..." Most of the speaker's wants are luxury goods, wealth, and men. "I want to be select. / I want to be singular. / I want to be pluralistic," says the speaker, in declarative sentences that contradict each other. According to Lucas Hildebrand, "The lengthy piece at times circles in on itself, reflecting the complexity and

³³⁸ Chavoya, C. Ondine, et al. *Axis Mundo: Queer Networks in Chicano L.A.* 2017.

illogics of desire, while, as an open-ended work that spanned several years, suggests that desire can never ultimately be satisfied.”³³⁹ While a part of the queer Chicana/x avant-garde, Vargas came from an economically privileged background, which influenced his interrogation of class politics in Chicana/x art. “His work pushed back at the class and progressive political assumptions of what Chicana/o art should celebrate by offering contradictory pleas for being taken seriously and for shallow material gains,” writes Hildebrand, drawing attention to Vargas’ line, “I want a ‘Chic’-ano,” as an instantiation of his “[push] back” from imagining the Chicano male subject as always-already working-class.³⁴⁰ The play on the term ‘Chicano’ gestures towards the word’s potentially empty signification as a category of resistance once the term has been refashioned in language outside the radical histories and material contexts the term emerged from. However, the Chicano Movement, even in its radicality, largely excluded queer Chicana/xs in its envisioning of the ideal Chicano (male) subject. Thus, the ‘chicness’ of Chicano is always-already contradictory in its enunciation of ‘Chicano’ as a referent for proletarianized hetero Chicano men. Whether conscious of Vargas’ writing or not, gay Chicano artist Gronk shared in a 2012 interview, “I don’t mind the idea of being called a Chicano artist because the word Chicano has the word ‘chic’ at the very beginning.”³⁴¹ Gronk’s words demonstrate how Vargas’ aesthetic contributions travel through the networks of Chicana/x art in Los Angeles.

In many ways, *Chicano Male Unbonded* absorbs Vargas’ aesthetic, linguistic, and poetic interventions. Gamboa’s photographs function like the lists presented in *The New Bourgeois...*, expressing a ‘want’ for Chicano male visibility that is contradictory in its desire for the

³³⁹ Hildebrand, Lucas. “The Worlds Los Angeles Maricóns and Malfloras Made.” *X-Tra Contemporary Art Quarterly*, Summer 2018, Vol. 20, No. 4.

<https://www.x-traonline.org/article/the-worlds-los-angeles-maricons-and-malfloras-made>

³⁴⁰ Ibid.

³⁴¹ Swenson, Eric Minh. “GRONK ON CATHOLICISM AND LATINO ART.” *YouTube*, 2 Jan. 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ijY1nYgP5KY>.

“singular” (i.e. individual attention to a particular Chicano male in each photograph) and the “pluralistic” (i.e. collective images that metonymically stand in for the Chicano male subject). Yet, Gamboa’s absorption of Vargas’ aesthetics has its limits in addressing the material conditions and contexts that largely affected queer Chicano artists. In his essay “Straight Talk, Queer Haunt: The Paranormal Activity of the Chicano Art Movement,” Hernández assesses Gamboa’s influential term ‘phantom culture’ by describing the impact of AIDS history on *Chicano Male Unbonded*.³⁴² According to Hernández, Gamboa’s communication with Vargas for *Chicano Male Unbonded* occurred “after a serendipitous run-in” between the two (196).³⁴³ Gamboa tried to reach Vargas after the shoot but his phone calls were left unreturned; the sound of Vargas’ voice was no longer heard. After approaching a library staff member, Gamboa was informed of Vargas’ death, making Gamboa “[realize] that the image connoted much more because it was taken shortly before his death” (196).³⁴⁴ Hernández examines the surrounding texts and ephemera of *Jack Vargas, Librarian* to speak to the presence of queer *chicanidad* in *Chicano Male Unbonded*. Hernández recounts:

A letter mined from Gamboa’s personal papers at Stanford University Libraries reinforces the portrait’s central importance. In this letter, dated February 9, 1995, Vargas is seeking a copy of the photo print from Gamboa for a librarian’s guide publication. His tone is polite, bordering on flattery. Referencing an earlier phone call with Gamboa about a previous exhibition, he was ‘pleased to hear that my image was in a show in Texas—great!’ Ending his note, ‘hoping to hear from you

³⁴² Stone, Amy L., et al. *Out of the Closet, into the Archives: Researching Sexual Histories*, 2015.

³⁴³ Ibid.

³⁴⁴ Ibid.

soon,' the text is haunting, in retrospect...*The photo is quite literally a phantom sighting*" (196-7, emphasis added).³⁴⁵

Comparing the letter to Gamboa's memory of their meeting,³⁴⁶ Hernández underscores "Vargas' queer obscurity in the history of Chicano avant-gardism" (197).³⁴⁷ Much like Velázquez's portrait, Vargas is of "central importance" to the *Chicano Male Unbonded* project in that it performs the spectral qualities that Gamboa characterizes Chicanx experience as. Thus, Vargas "[becomes] a phantom among phantoms" (197).³⁴⁸ In an interview with Hernández, Chicano artist Joey Terrill speculates, "If being Chicano is like a phantom culture, I think being a queer or lesbian Latina/Latino artist is almost like you're a phantom within a phantom culture" (197).³⁴⁹ For Terrill, Vargas, and Hernández, queerness is an additional valence within Gamboa's 'phantom culture.'

The specters of Velázquez, Vargas, and other queer-identified Chicanxs, are absent presences throughout Gamboa's work. Gamboa dedicates his seminal essay "Light at the End of Tunnel Vision" (1994) to Velázquez and Ray Navarro, a gay Chicano visual artist known for his documentary film *Like a Prayer* (1990) and who died in 1990 from AIDS complications.³⁵⁰ Gamboa's fictional work *The Chosen Fugue* (1996) includes a dedication to "the memory of Teddy Sandoval, Jack Vargas, Gerardo Velazquez, and Mundo Meza," all gay Chicano males who died from AIDS complications (499).³⁵¹ Gamboa's play *Jetter's Jinx: A Conceptual Drama*

³⁴⁵ Ibid.

³⁴⁶ "Oral History Interview with Harry Gamboa, Jr., 1999 Apr. 1-16." *Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution*, 19 Sept. 2002, www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-harry-gamboa-jr-13552#transcript.

³⁴⁷ Ibid.

³⁴⁸ Ibid.

³⁴⁹ Interview by Robb Hernández, video recording, 23 August, 2007, Los Angeles, CA, Stone, quoted in Amy L., et al. *Out of the Closet, into the Archives: Researching Sexual Histories*, 2015.

³⁵⁰ Gamboa, Harry. *Urban Exile: Collected Writings of Harry Gamboa, Jr.*, edited by Chon Noriega. University of Minnesota Press, 1998.

³⁵¹ Ibid.

(1985) centers a queer character Jetter, played by Gronk, soliloquizing at his birthday party about how all of his friends failed to make an appearance due to their own AIDS-related deaths.³⁵² Playing on Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1953), *Jetter's Jinx* includes two actors, Jetter and Nopal (originally performed by Humberto Sandoval), with Jetter awaiting his own end from AIDS while alone on the stage. As mentioned before, "Past Imperfecto" (1994) recounts Gamboa's meeting with Velázquez and his inclusion of Velázquez's music and sounds into a number of his works, including *Jetter's Jinx*.³⁵³ Throughout Gamboa's oeuvre, one can see and hear the ghosts of queer *chicanidad*, phantoms who were always-already phantoms living as Chicanxs in LA. As Jetter wishes at the end of Gamboa's play, "If only this were a nightmare" (240). Grappling with the history of AIDS in Los Angeles and beyond, *Gerardo Velazquez, Synthesized Music Composer* and *Jack Vargas, Librarian* center the tension between Gamboa's authorial signature on *Chicano Male Unbonded* and the realities of Chicano male life beyond the photographs. The queer resonances within *Chicano Male Unbonded* force us to move away from what Michel Foucault calls 'the author function' to adopt what art exhibitions like *Axis Mundo* (2017) propose as *networked* presences (and absences) in the history of LA Chicano art. By reconfiguring Gamboa's relation to the queer Chicano avant-garde, scholars and audiences can better perceive what the project 'unbonds.'

Conclusion

Chicano Male Unbonded represents a convergence between Chicano art, Los Angeles, and multiple aesthetic mediums, bridging together disparate spaces in its attempt to 'unbond' the Chicano male subject from its reified frames. This chapter argues that the photographs are not sealed containers of meaning confined to their visual borders. Rather, I argue that *Chicano Male*

³⁵² Ibid.

³⁵³ Ibid.

Unbonded's visual language speaks beyond the photographic frame, echoing with sonic, performative, and poetic resonances within the worlds of Los Angeles that the photographed subjects live or have lived as Chicano men. In short, the project produces alternative kinship 'bonds' between Chicano men across a network of different histories, spaces, and aesthetic forms.

While I begin my analysis of Gamboa's work with *Gregory Bojorquez, Photographer*, an image from 2010 that plays with the homeboy/cholo aesthetic to confront 'arresting referents' that racially profile Chicano men as criminalized subjects in everyday life, my chapter is primarily interested in the initial set of photographs from the early- and mid-1990s. For instance, in 1991, the Chicano male subject is made illegible in *Humberto Sandoval, Actor*, a photograph which reorganizes the visual as a mode of racial identification. *Roberto Bedoya, Poet/Performer* furthers *Humberto Sandoval, Actor's* work by arguing that the Chicano male subject is a performance, reproducing cultural figures that 'bond' the Chicano male to reified identities produced from within Chicano culture. *Gerardo Velazquez, Synthesized Music Composer* embraces the 'synthesis' of multiple aesthetic mediums while queering the image of the Chicano male "walking the streets of LA." Yet, the series is simultaneously haunted by 'phantoms of phantoms' in the 1995 photograph *Jack Vargas, Librarian*, which honors its photographed subject as a saint while rendering his shadow unseen, signifying the phantasmatic and real presence of AIDS histories that affected Vargas and many other Chicanos during the production of *Chicano Male Unbonded*. All in all, the series produces alternative images of Chicano men that attempt to 'unbond' themselves from static identities while creating alternative kinship 'bonds' that refuse the 'bonds' of reification. By addressing a range of material contexts, I situate

Chicano Male Unbonded as a series that produces an alternative form of Chicana subject formation through its movement across social identities and aesthetic mediums.

While I gesture towards different media throughout, photography and the visual remain paramount to Gamboa's interventions in Chicana cultural production. For instance, in his poem "Azure Seizure (in Idahohopeless)" (1993), written three years after hearing the racist radio announcement that sparked the *Chicano Male Unbonded* project, Gamboa recounts a dining scene with white male critics. The speaker describes:

So many blue eyes
Liquid dyes
Staring
They intimated skepticism as
My words countered their expectations
.....
Their interrogative style smeared
Sticky question marks on the linen napkins
They'd never expected a Chicano to
Redraw the conceptual borders (519).³⁵⁴

Chicano Male Unbonded looks back at those "many blue eyes" while refusing to "[stare]" at them. Sandoval, for one, looks away from the camera's gaze, while several of the photographs encourage viewers to look elsewhere and listen. By interrogating the visual character of *Chicano Male Unbonded*, Gamboa produces an alternative racial perception that rejects the demands from those "blue eyes," refusing to acknowledge their racial and gendered projections onto the

³⁵⁴ Gamboa, Harry. *Urban Exile: Collected Writings of Harry Gamboa Jr.*, edited by Chon Noriega. University of Minnesota Press, 1998.

Chicano male body and what the visual character of the Chicano male, and Chicana art as a whole, ought to be. Gamboa's project has and remains a compelling work that "[redraws]...conceptual borders" through a Chicana lens. But like Sandoval in his portrait photograph, Gamboa's project allows viewers to look elsewhere, 'unbonded' from the sight of "many blue eyes."

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