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Queer Latinx Regeneration:

Boyle Heights and the Geographies of Gentrification

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements of the degree Doctor of Philosophy in

Chicana & Chicano Studies

by

Vicente Carrillo Jr.

2022

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ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

Queer Latinx Regeneration: Boyle Heights and the Geographies of Gentrification

by

Vicente Carrillo Jr.

Doctor of Philosophy in Chicana & Chicano Studies

University of California, Los Angeles, 2022

Professor Alicia Gaspar de Alba, Chair

Queer Latinx Regeneration: Boyle Heights and the Geographies of Gentrification traces the contestations that arise from gentrification and the queer racialized bodies at the core of these debates. *Queer Latinx Regeneration* asks: What is possible when we center queer Latinx bodies in understanding processes of gentrification? What does queers-of-color place-making look like in the gentrifying barrio? This dissertation explores these inquires in Boyle Heights, a low-income immigrant Latinx neighborhood that has made national headlines for anti-gentrification community actions. Drawing from four years of ethnographic field work, qualitative interviews, and community-engaged anti-gentrification collaborations, this dissertation provides a critical textual analysis of contemporary cultural works and places – queer bars, queer performance art, mainstream television, and muralism – in order to capture the complex ways queerness is mobilized in Boyle Heights. From queers of color banished from the neighborhood as gentrifying threats, to Latinx entrepreneurs creating new spaces to party and play, and brown queer artists straddling the contested terrains of artwashing, *Queer Latinx Regeneration* points to the

relationship between urban renewal and queer-of-color mobility as a contested terrain of spatial belonging.

The dissertation of Vicente Carrillo Jr. is approved.

Genevieve Gonzalez Carpio

Sherene H. Razack

Joshua J. Guzmán

Alicia Gaspar de Alba, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles, 2022

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ha dado. Y, por fin, gracias tambien a Santi por el cariño imenso que me regala. This dissertation is dedicated to all of you.

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"Brown Feelings in the Callejones: rafa esparza's 'De La Calle'" Panel: Queer Brown Sonics and Spaces, National Women's Studies Association, San Francisco, CA. 2019.

"Queer Affective Imaginaries" Panel: Continuing a Critical Engagement with the work of José Esteban Muñoz: Transgressive Utopias and Disidentifying Performances as Ephemeral World-Making, National Women's Studies Association, Atlanta, GA. 2018.

"'Fuck That Fag Shit, Take That To The Castro': The Politics of Space and Place in Paul Manuel's Queer Latinx Mural, *Por Vida.* Association of Joteria Arts, Activism, and Scholarship, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis. 2017.

"Digital Queer Muralism: Claiming Space and Place through Queer of Color Representation," Panel: Chicana/o/x Murals: Queer Representation, Peace & Restoration, National Association of Chicana and Chicano Studies, Hotel Irvine, Irvine, CA. 2017.

"Performance as Ultimate Vulnerability: Queer Identites in Boyle Heights," Queer Graduate Student Conference, University of California Los Angeles. 2015

Introduction

Queer Latinx Regeneration: Boyle Heights and the Geographies of Gentrification traces the contestations that arise from gentrification and the queer racialized bodies at the core of these debates. Scholarship on queer gentrification has primarily focused on the formation of gayborhoods, white gay male gentrification, and the rural-to-city narrative in which queers leave the "hostile" rural environment for the "progressive" and "queer-friendly" urban life. However, little attention has been paid to how queers of color navigate geographies of gentrification within barrio urban landscapes, a gap that interrogates the "gentrifying queer" and "displaced queer" binary.[1] Through a cultural ethnographic analysis, this dissertation explores queer of color ascendancies, mobilities, intracommunal negotiations and representations within the barrio landscape. *Queer Latinx Regeneration* argues that queer of color place-making is intimately tied to the revitalization of the barrio, a relationship that uplifts what Alfredo Huante calls "Latinx whiteness."[2]

I spatially situate my research in the barrio of Boyle Heights and the broader East Los Angeles region, a low-income immigrant Latinx neighborhood that has made national headlines for anti-gentrification community actions in recent years (2014-2020). Drawing from four years of field work, discourse analysis, qualitative interviews, and community-engaged anti-gentrification collaborations in Boyle Heights, I provide a critical textual analysis of contemporary cultural works and places –murals, bars, public performance art, and pride festivals. Offering a unique entry point into the politics of queer of color emplacement, I argue that queer Latinx gentrification in Boyle Heights operates alongside Latinidad, a place-based

[1] Haritaworn, Jin. *Queer Lovers and Hateful Others: Regenerating Violent Times and Places*. Pluto Press, 2015.

[2] Alfredo Huante, "A Lighter Shade of Brown? Racial Formation and Gentrification in Latino Los Angeles," *Social Problems,* Volume 68, Issue 1, February 2021, Pages 63–79.

cultural market of authenticity. Thus, my dissertation helps us understand queer Latinidad as both an identity as well as a spatial project through which gentrification securely advances. The gathered cultural stories from queer artists, entrepreneurs, housing justice activists, and writers complicate the queer gentrifier/displaced binary, but they more importantly highlight queer of color belonging in the gentrifying barrio as a site of continuous negotiation.

The gathered cultural works at times directly speak to the ongoing gentrification affecting the community of Boyle Heights. In some instances, the cultural work plays a central role in anti-gentrification organizing efforts. In other scenarios, the cultural work itself becomes the very central object in question – the site of contestation around what is or is not advancing gentrification in the barrio, such as the case of *Por Vida*, a queer Latinx mural violently defaced in the historic Mission District barrio of San Francisco, and the site where this dissertation*,* first established its theoretical inquires.

I began my research study in the hopes of writing a story about queer of color cultural work. However, my research agenda took a different direction when I learned that *Por Vida* was defaced. *Por Vida* was a digital mural by East LA based queer Chicano artist Paul Manuel. His mural was displayed in San Francisco's Mission District barrio publicly depicting queer Latinx intimacies. The mural presents the viewer with a tryptic: two queer chola/o couples in a tender embrace, and a trangender cholx/o man depicted with top-surgery scars. *Por Vida* was curated and installed along a public wall attached to Galería de La Raza; a long-standing community gallery dedicated to supporting Chicanx/Latinx arts. Excited about Manuel' mural, I decided to follow *Por Vida's* story. Interviews with residents and community leaders revealed that anti-gentrification activists in the Mission District considered *Por Vida's* public representation of queer chola/o/x intimacy as a gentrifying threat. After its installment alongside Galeria de la

Raza's wall in June 2015, *Por Vida* was defaced multiple times with spray paint. Even after restoration efforts, the queer mural was continuously vandalized. The final and most violent defacement reached local news outlets: "Mural set on fire, unity needed."[3] I explore the case of *Por Vida* mural in Chapter 1.

The timing of *Por Vida's* defacement and Boyle Heights' anti-gentrification efforts – the years between 2014 and 2016 – marked two important moments for my research. First, Boyle Heights, as a leading housing justice movement, community, and geographic landscape, entered mainstream conversations on gentrification. Boyle Heights activists made headlines for resisting multiple gentrifying threats – new coffee shops, speculative real estate agents, and art galleries. Today, this national spotlight has resulted in various forms of mainstream queer Latinx visibility. For example, two mainstream television shows about Boyle Heights' fight against gentrification emerged – Starz's *Vida* (2018) and Netflix's *Gentefied* (2020). Other forms of queer Latinx visibility also emerged in the built environment. On November 5, 2020, a new Latinx gay bar opened in Boyle Heights – Noa Noa Place. This popular gay Latinx bar brought other major changes into the barrio: Orgullo Fest, Boyle Heights' inaugural pride festival. I explore the emergence of Noa Noa Place in Chapter 2 and Orgullo Fest in the Conclusion.

The second pivotal shift in this study also includes my own personal return to my home neighborhood. As a graduate student from Boyle Heights studying queer Chicanx culture at UCLA, I found myself at a political conjuncture having to confront the contested conversations around gentrification and urban renewal unfolding back home. A few months before the violent defacement of *Por Vida,* Boyle Heights residents were in the midst of an active community mobilization effort against multiple gentrifying threats. In May 2014 realtor Bana Haffar

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[3] Lara, Frank, "Mural set on fire, unity needed," Liberation Newspaper for Socialism and Liberation, June 30, 2015, https://develop.liberationnews.org/la-galeria-mural-is-set-on-fire-unity-is-needed-2/.

distributed a flyer inviting home buyers on a bike ride tour of Boyle Heights. The flyer began to circulate throughout local Boyle Heights activist, resident, and social media circles. In large red capitalized font, the flyer read: "Why Rent in Downtown When You Can Own in Boyle Heights?" Haffar's meet-up offered a free bike tour of Boyle Heights followed by a conversation over drinks and artisanal snacks. After receiving immense push-back from community residents, Haffar eventually canceled the tour and offered an apology where she described the community's concerns as "a very sensitive nerve."[4] She wrote, "People need to realize that Boyle Heights is inevitably going to change due to [its] proximity to Downtown and regardless of my little flyer."[5] Alongside community activists, researchers were also looking to this moment in Boyle Heights. In his important article "A Lighter Shade of Brown?," ethnographer and critical race scholar Alfredo Huante describes Haffar's apology as an ahistorical and victim-blaming response. By "dismissing the historical disinvestment that produced and maintained a deteriorating housing stock as well as the impact of the housing crisis on barrio communities, allows the realtor to reposition herself and her clients' role in supporting existing inequality."[6]

After the 2014 "gentri-flyer" and many more resistance efforts in between, a year later Boyle Heights community members found themselves up against another threat: a new arts district. In 2015, residents and activists began actively denouncing the art-oriented development project bordering the barrio. I quote at length the article born directly from these resistance efforts:

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[4] Haffar, Bana. 2014. "All Roads Lead to Boyle Heights." Online Facebook comment. Retrieved August 23, 2017.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Alfredo Huante, "A Lighter Shade of Brown? Racial Formation and Gentrification in Latino Los Angeles," Social Problems, Volume 68, Issue 1, February 2021, p. 7.

> This project of aggressive arts-oriented development in Boyle Heights began with a $36 million "revitalization" project for the Sixth Street Bridge, started in 2015, which would connect the "new arts district" in Boyle Heights with the existing Arts District in Downtown Los Angeles, itself once a thriving multiethnic community that was turned into a gentrified "arts district" through arts-oriented development. The redevelopment has also included an expansion of the Metro public transit line, and the arrival of more than a dozen new art galleries, which took over factories and warehouses that closed after struggling to pay their increasing rents. These galleries were promoted and supported by local politicians, speculated on by investors, and rightly understood by the community to be an advance offense of gentrification. The community saw that Boyle Heights had been slated for specifically arts-oriented gentrification, and therefore an interruption in the arrival of outsider art, artists, and speculators was critical if the community was to stand a chance at protecting the neighborhood against successive waves of gentrification, like real estate development.[7]

Responding to these threats, a new coalitional organization was formed by already existing anti-gentrification organizations. Union de Vecinos, Defend Boyle Heights, Los Angeles Tenants Union, School of Echoes, and multiple groups of Los Angeles artists came together to form the Boyle Heights Alliance Against Artwashing & Displacement (BHAAAD). Dedicated to questioning the role of culture and art in gentrification processes, BHAAAD mobilized against the emerging art galleries. According to BHAAAD, the rapidly emerging art galleries were "art washing" the local region. "Art washing" is a form of gentrification that calls into play the artist and creative class. According to Urban sociologist David Ley, artists are used as the "advancing

[7] O'Brien, Kean, et al. "Boyle Heights and the Fight against Gentrification as State Violence." American Quarterly, vol. 71 no. 2, 2019, p.390.

or colonizing arm" by politicians, landlords, investors, and other speculative forces to beautify neighborhoods and thus secure maximum profit from the regions elevated cost of living.[8] Through art washing, creative amenities emerge which in turn attract in new, wealthier populations. Consequently, surrounding property value increases resulting in the displacement of vulnerable long-standing tenants (Mathews, 2010: 665).[9] By the end of 2018, BHAAAD shut down 12 art galleries in the bordering "new" Arts District. Amongst those was PSSST, an art gallery which originally set out to center queer artists of color. Despite these efforts, BHAAAD stated that "queer" as an identity category did not absolve the gallery from its complicity in advancing gentrification.[10] "Queer Real Estate is Not Queer Safety," they declared.[11] According to Union de Vecinos, a long-standing community organization, over the last twenty years more than $3 billion dollars have been invested into Boyle Heights, resulting in the displacement of twenty-five hundred families. [12]

Informed by these various grassroot anti-gentrification efforts, *Queer Latinx Regeneration* sets out to explore the contested terrains of queer belonging within the geographies of gentrification. Little attention has been paid to how queers of color become spatially situated within processes of urban renewal. However, in recent years more nuanced research addressing queer gentrification has emerged, addressing queer belonging through a critical racial and

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[8] Ley, David. "Artists, Aestheticisation and the Field of Gentrification." *Urban Studies*. 2003; p 2533.

[9] Mathews, V. (2010), Aestheticizing Space: Art, Gentrification and the City. Geography Compass, 4: 660-675. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1749-8198.2010.00331.x

[10] Boyle Heights Alliance Against Artwashing and Displacement. "QUEER REAL ESTATE IS NOT QUEER SAFETY," 2017, http://alianzacontraartwashing.org/en/coalition-statements/queer-real-estate-is-not-queer-safety/.

[11] Ibid.

[12] O'Brien, Kean, et al. "Boyle Heights and the Fight against Gentrification as State Violence." American Quarterly, vol. 71 no. 2, 2019, p.389

colonial lens. *Queer Latinx Regeneration* builds from Jin Haritaworn's notion of "queer regeneration," a framework theorized from their generative text, *Queer Lovers and Hateful Others: Regenerating Violent Times and Places* (2015). In their text, Haritaworn defines "queer regeneration" as a process in which queer racialized subjects with distinct racial and class privileges emerge alongside the gentrifying neighborhood landscape. "Queer Latinx regeneration," as framework of analysis, examines the nexus of power located between processes of urban renewal, queer Latinx visibility, and Latinx whiteness. I apply this analytic framework onto multi-scale contemporary cultural works and spaces – public performance art, queer bars, murals, and pride festivals – that have emerged beside anti-gentrification conversations in the barrio of Boyle Heights. Borrowing from radical geographies, I frame the gathered multi-scale cultural works as "place-based imaginaries," as defined by Thomas who reminds us that studies interested in exploring radical geographies must remember the role of radical imagination as both a theoretical task and methodology. For Thomas, radical imagination is a utopian thinking that frames geographies as a process instead of a static future. Taking Thomas lead, I frame the gathered cultural works in my dissertation as radical imaginaries or rather "place-based imaginaries." [13] In doing so I center creativity instead of static understandings of neighborhood change that usually measure the violence of gentrification through economics. I understand the gathered cultural works instead as geographic specific cultural imaginaries that articulate distinct yet interconnected stories of queer belonging. Said differently, *Queer Latinx Regeneration* positions these place-based imaginaries as a point of entry into an analytical discussion around queer Chicanx/Latinx politics of emplacement. I trace the various ways queer racialized bodies make claims to a neighborhood that has been at one time deemed dangerous but now revitalized

[13] See Thomas, Amanda. "Imagination" in *Keywords in Radical Geography: Antipode at 50*. Wiley Blackwell, 2019.

as popular and up-and-coming. Collectively, these imaginaries tell us a story about the violence of gentrification, while also revealing how queer Chicanx/Latinx subjects are re-imagined and re-emplaced alongside the shifting racial terrains of the barrio landscape. I position this study in conversation with scholarship exploring the contested terrains of queer gentrification, urban renewal, queer of color studies, and coloniality. I ask: How are queer bodies of color being spatially positioned as gentrification impacts the barrio landscape? If *Por Vida* was marked as a gentrifying threat in the Mission District barrio, how are queer bodies of color imagined within the contested barrio terrain of Boyle Heights?

A Brief History of Boyle Heights

The spatial history of this United States barrio is a history of settler colonialism and structural racism: colonization, Indigenous dispossession, urban renewal, redlining, forced migration, segregation, white flight, criminalization, and displacement.[14] Before the arrival of Spanish settlers, the Los Angeles lands were cared for by the Tongva people.[15] Around 1770 the Portola Expedition arrived, considered the first Spanish expedition to enter California. The Portola Expedition resulted in the formation of Alta California – established as a territory of New Spain in 1804.[16] In April 1822 Alta California became a territory of Mexico after the Mexican Independence War.[17] In 1848, Alta California officially became United States territory after the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo was signed, ending the two-year Mexican-American War. As

[14] Originally in Villa, Raúl Homero. Barrio Logos: Space and Place in Urban Chicano Literature and Culture. From Gina M. Pérez's "Barrio," in *Keywords for Latina/o Studies*, NYU Press, 2017, p 19.

[15] Miller, Bruce W. The Gabrielino. Sand River Press, 1991.

[16] Mary Floyd Williams; Mission, Presidio and Pueblo: Notes on California Local Institutions under Spain and Mexico. California Historical Society Quarterly 1 July 1922; 1 (1): 23–35. doi: https://doi.org/10.2307/25613566

[17] Ibid.

critical race scholars and historians have reminded us before, the formation of settler countries like the United States and Mexico, formed alongside the myth that Indigenous peoples were a disappearing population:

> Indigenous peoples did not cede their lands willingly, but insofar as they were constituted as the objects of colonial and then national gazes, they became unwilling participants in historical, discursive, and geographical constructions that facilitated the conquest of their territories and continues to facilitate their ongoing dispossession.[18]

Today, the Tongva people remain the original inhabitants of what is now considered Los Angeles and East Los Angeles. Today around 2,000 Tongva people live in Los Angeles.[19]

Enclaves of usually low-socioeconomic families, barrios sit as "legacies of spatialized inequalities in urban America."[20] Grisworld del Castillo describes barrios as places that provide "some security in the midst of the city's social and economic turmoil."[21] The barrio of Boyle Heights is indeed no different – also a product of spatialized inequalities and home to many low income working class Latinx families who, day to day, navigate the violence thrown by the neoliberal city. In her article "An Archeology of Environmental Racism in Los Angeles," critical geographer Laura Pulido traces the environmental racism that produced the barrio landscape of East Los Angeles:

> The combination of a subordinated racial group and a dirty industrialized landscape served to characterize East Los Angeles as a highly undesirable place. Moreover, it

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[18] Saldaña-Portillo María Josefina. *Indian given: Racial Geographies across Mexico and the United States*. Duke University Press, 2016, p 14.

[19] Hamel, Jenny. "LA's Tongva descendants: 'We originated here'", KCRW, July 17, 2018.

[20] See Gina M. Pérez's "Barrio," in *Keywords for Latina/o Studies*, NYU Press, 2017, p 20.

[21] Griswold del Castillo, Richard. *The Los Angeles Barrio, 1850-1890: A Social History.* Berkley: University of California Press, 1979, p 150.

should be clear that this landscape – its industrial nature in particular – developed partly because of the role of Chicanos/Mexicanos as low-wage manufacturing workers.[22]

Mexicanos began to move into Boyle Heights in high numbers during the 1920s into what was considered the original central Mexican immigrant barrio known as La Plaza or el pueblo – located just west of what is now considered Downtown Los Angeles – a segregated barrio that functioned as the first site of industrial labor in Los Angeles.[23] As La Plaza became overcrowded and urbanized, Mexican immigrants began to find homes and jobs east of the LA river. Consequently, European immigrants began to leave these inner-city neighborhoods, like Boyle Heights, in search of a suburban family homes.[24] As a result, "new group of immigrants, in many cases, Mexicans, took the old immigrant's places in communities such as Boyle Heights, Lincoln Heights, and the adjacent community of Hollenbeck Park."[25] Indeed, before becoming a Mexican/Latino barrio, Boyle Heights was home to a large Jewish, Russian, and Armenian families during the 1900s.[26] In 1908 there were only 30 Jewish households but by 1910 the number increased to 1,842.[27] By 1930 there were about 10,000 Jewish households in Boyle Heights.[28] By the 1940s and 1950s Boyle Heights and the larger East Los Angeles region solidified itself as a Latino community.

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[22] Laura Pulido, Steve Sidawi & Robert O. Vos. "An Archeology of Environmental Racism in Los Angeles," Urban Geography, 1996, 17:5, 419-439.

[23] Griswold del Castillo, Richard. *The Los Angeles Barrio, 1850-1890: A Social History.* Berkley: University of California Press, 1979.

[24] Ibid, p 67.

[25] Ibid, p 67.

[26] See Pulido et al. "An Archeology of Environmental Racism," p 431.

[27] Griswold del Castillo, Richard. *The Los Angeles Barrio, 1850-1890: A Social History.* Berkley: University of California Press, 1979.

[28] Ibd. p 65

Today, Boyle Heights is one of Los Angeles' historically remembered barrios, associated especially within Chicana/o movement history of the 1950s and 1960s. In 1968, the Chicano Moratorium took place on Whittier Boulevard where more than 30,000 demonstrators took the streets to protest the Vietnam War and the alarming number of dying enlisted Latino and Chicano men. On this same location and day Rueben Salazar, Chicano reporter for the Los Angeles Times, was murdered by police. From this site of violence Salazar became a prominent figure for the Chicano Movement. Boyle Heights is also known for the student blowouts of 1968 where high school students walked out and took the streets to protest racist and low-quality educational environments. Filled with histories of police violence, racialized eviction, redlining, alongside a long genealogy of resistance and cultural production, Boyle Heights stands today as an iconic barrio within the East Los Angeles imaginary. The cultural producers in this dissertation are from the barrio of Boyle Heights or have entered the neighborhood through a personal cultural affiliation with the region. The racialized histories and material realities of Boyle Heights inform the artists' work, some of them speaking directly to the socio-spatial changes caused by gentrification.

An Auto-Ethnography – A Boyle Heights Cultural Landscape

In this section I provide an auto-ethnographic exploration of Boyle Height's barrio cultural landscape that explores the terrain of culture. This auto-ethnography surveys important cultural markers of Boyle Heights that hold personal meaning to me both as researcher and a Boyle Heights community member. At the same time, this auto-ethnography also centers the important conversations that shifted my research agenda – conversations around art galleries and art washing that critically interrogated the role of culture in the gentrifying barrio.

The expression “la cultura cura” is a popular sentiment among Chicanx/Latinx communities. “La cultura cura” translates to “culture cures” or “culture heals.” Latinx/Chicanx community organizations, activists, teachers, academics alike use this expression as a teaching tool to challenge assimilationist ideologies (whiteness). “La cultura cura” recognizes similarities across difference by valuing the micro and macro affective registers of belonging shared across Chicanx and Latinx peoples. Also deployed as a healing praxis ideology, “la cultura cura” centers shared histories of racial domination while working towards transformative social practices. While culture has been discussed through these positivist forms – as a transformative discursive space for Chicanx/Latinx people – in this project I keep in mind that under racial capitalism culture is also appropriated, commodified, and objectified. Cultural anthropologist Arlene Davila reminds us that culture “works” within “cultural economies” informed by neoliberal logics of value and extraction. The work of artists, cultural workers, writers, and other cultural creatives are circulated and valued by institutions like art galleries, museums, realtors, and speculative forces. Davila posits that this circulation of cultural works – a social, digital and material movement – has a direct impact on processes of urban development and neighborhood change:

> Culture’s capacity for illusion and for symbolically remaking spaces and institutions and products explains its predominance in neoliberal urban developments, reliant as they are on symbolic economies of spectacle, advertising, consumerism, architecture, heritage, and branding and on other placed-based, image-centered industries such as tourism and real estate (Cronin and Hetherington 2008; Greenberg 2008). These symbolic industries and strategies have been shown to be highly effective, not only in culturally remaking spaces but also in symbolically ‘softening’ the aggression of displacement and

gentrification through developments wrapped in cultural offerings and choices that seem edgy, democratic, alternative, and even 'authentic.'[29]

Davila explores the different ways culture is called to do work in our world. Critiquing the neoliberal frames that relegate understandings of culture as an economic venture, *Culture Works* reminds us about the racial, economic and social structures cultural workers encounter in creative industries like museums and art galleries. Moreover, Dávila takes into account culture industries' participation in the advancement of gentrification, an important analysis that considers how space, value and mobility contribute to regional cultural politics. I keep Davila's work in mind as I gather and move through the various cultural works in this study. I also take the lead of Boyle Heights activists and residents, such as BHAAAD, who urge us to critically interrogate the role of art and culture by questioning investors and politicians' use of the "artist as pioneer" in revitalizations efforts.[30] In other words, the cultural works in this study are not independent cultural stories created in a vacuum but rather are intricately tied to the demands of production (art galleries, television production, local businesses, an imagined Latinx art market). I begin this cultural auto-ethnography with *El Corrido de Boyle Heights* by the East Los Streetscapers (Figure 1, below).

The East Los Streetscaper's mural, *El Corrido de Boyle Heights* (1983) stands on the corner of Cesar E. Chavez Ave. and Soto St., one of Boyle Height's busiest shopping avenues. *El Corrido de Boyle Heights* transforms the popular folkloric song-form into a monumental visual representation of *la familia*. Corridos are popular folkloric sonic narratives sang through an oral

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[29] Dávila, Arlene. *Culture Works: Space, Value and Mobility across the Neoliberal Americas.* New York University Press, 2012, p 10.

[30] O'Brien, Kean, et al. "Boyle Heights and the Fight against Gentrification as State Violence." American Quarterly, vol. 71 no. 2, 2019, p.390.

history fashion. The singer narrates a personal story usually about poverty, migration, love, labor and familial values. In the center of this visual corrido, the groom and bride dance the traditional wedding vals. To the left, the mariachi plays music as the invited guests celebrate the happy couple. In the far right, we see an assemblage of bodies in motion: mother and daughter embrace as the mother puts on her heels, a father helps his son put on his shoes. We also see a shoe polisher is hard at work as a toddler rides along the sidewalk in a stroller with the United Farm Worker's symbol. This assemblage reflects the very same landscape it inhabits, the Cesar Chavez Avenue where local families go to shop for, affordable shoes, school supplies, groceries, money transfers, and other essential goods. In the far distance of the mural, we see what can be perceived as the married couple, now with their child. Completing the visual narrative, the three of them cheerfully walk down the barrio street alongside the family's car and house.

Figure 1. El Corrido de Boyle Heights, 1983, East Los Streetscapers (David Botello, Wayne Healy, George Yepes. Assisted by Paul Botello, David Morin, and Ismael Cazarez), acrylic mural. Photo by Mural Conservancy of Los Angeles.

Figure 2. Close-up, El Corrido de Boyle Heights, 1983, acrylic mural. Photo by Mural Conservancy of Los Angeles.

A five-minute drive down Soto St., in the Ramona Gardens projects, stands Wayne Healey's mural, *Ghosts of the Barrio* (1974) (Figure 4 below). Healey's visual also presents us with an early depiction of Chicanidad but this time through a historical visualization of *la raza*. In the mural, four homeboys relax on a front porch alongside three ghostly historical male figures — an Aztec warrior, a Mexican revolutionary, and a Spanish conquistador. *Ghosts* is a picturesque visualization of Chicanidad's cultural ancestry that imagines the modern Chicano man as the amalgamation of the three historical male figures. The mural recalls the space-making histories of colonization, criminalization and urbanization that haunt the present barrio landscape.

I was born and raised in Boyle Heights, surrounded by the vast visual landscape filled by traditional Chicano murals like *Ghosts of the Barrio* and *El Corrido de Boyle Heights*. Depicting important stories of Chicano history and culture, these public visuals have stood as symbols of Chicanidad and as markers of *home* for many residents. However, this public cultural memory I grew up seeing has been deeply grounded in a masculinist and male-centered narrative reflective

of the Chicano movement's hetero-patriarchal values. As many queer and feminist Chicanx scholars have reminded us (Moraga, Rodriguez, Anzaldúa, Gaspar de Alba), the repeating ideologies of *la raza* and *la familia* functioned as a "crucial symbol and organizing principle" behind early conceptualizations of Chicanidad.[31] These traditional heteronormative Chicano visuals are reflected in the public cultural memory of Boyle Heights and in turn have deeply informed my understanding of Chicano culture as a heteronormative, masculinist structure. For these reasons Paul Manuel's *Por Vida* became a pivotal image for me as it captured my attention for its depiction of queer Chicanidad/Latinidad. However, the visual became even more pivotal when I learned about its "true form," if you will. Paul Manuel's visual was not simply another image among social media timelines. *Por Vida* was mural, a public visualization depicting cisgender and transgender queer Chicanx/Latinx intimacies. *Por Vida* shattered the hetero-patriarchal Chicano muralist narrative I had grown up seeing in the Boyle Heights cultural landscape. Excited about Paul Manuel's queer Chicanx mural, I dedicated my research for my master thesis to *Por Vida.* Throughout the completion of my master's thesis, I was also inspired to create my own queer mural in Boyle Heights. I made this possible in Chicana muralist Judy Baca's New Social Media class at the Social and Public Art Resource Center's Digital Mural Lab. It was here that I created my own *digital* mural, *Queers of the Barrio* (2019).

[31] Rodríguez, Richard T. *Next of Kin: The Family in Chicano/a Cultural Politics*. Duke University Press, 2009.

Figure 3. Vicente Carrillo, Queers of the Barrio, 2017, digital mural created at the Social and Public Art Resource Center, Venice, California.

Figure 4. Wayne Healy, Ghosts of the Barrio, 1974, mural located in Ramona Gardens, East Los Angeles, California.

A re-imagining of Healey's *Ghosts of the Barrio* (1974), *Queers of the Barrio* (2017) de-centers the Chicano masculinist narrative by replacing all the men with queer bodies of color. In doing so, the mural reminds us of the fact that queer of color bodies not only exist but are an intricate part of the barrio socio-spatial history. At the forefront of the mural, I place Gloria Anzaldúa and Audrey Lorde as way of paying homage to their important radical lesbian feminist writings which have influenced many scholars and activists inside and outside the academy. Anzaldúa and Lorde's work on liminalities, healing and radical love have deeply informed conversations around queer of color theory and queer of color critique, frameworks that have in turned informed my own politics. To the left of the digital mural, San Francisco's drag queen, Per Sia, glamorously poses for the camera (intentionally replacing the Spanish conquistador). In the center of the porch, three small children sit together, all of them uniformly crossing their legs; a body posture usually associated with high femmeness. Above them, a child flamboyantly and unapologetically struts down the porch steps with his fan, demanding the viewer's attention. Together, the children symbolize queer roots; the experience of being marked as a queer during childhood and the multiple embodied experiences that exist within that moment in time (terror, empowerment, joy, shame, confusion). Queer roots are summoned when close friends and family echo repeating sentiments such as, "we always knew you were" or "you could always tell since you were small." Such sentiments reflect what Juana Maria Rodriguez identifies as "queer gestures." For Rodriguez, queer gestures "…can be so small or quotidian as to escape notice. They can be large, definitive, and demanding. They are inflected by the scent and sense of cultures marked by time, yet they also traverse borders and resist temporal categorization."[32] To the far right of the image, a young queer smiles as they flip of the viewer, *gesturing* a resistance

[32] Rodríguez, Juana María. *Sexual Futures, Queer Gestures, and Other Latina Longings,* New York University Press, 2014, p 4.

against the anti-queer erasure and violence that many queer bodies of color experience within their own community.

I include *Queers of the Barrio* within this introduction to serve as a reminder that queers of color have always been present spatial subjects in the barrio landscape, particularly within the spatial histories of Boyle Heights. *Queers of the Barrio* echoes Jin Haritaworn's important inquiry on queer of color mobilities within the gentrified landscape – racial, gendered, classed, and sexual mobilities. Haritaworn asks: "What would it mean to treat queers of color as spatial subjects in their own right, who draw our attention to multiple oppressions, mutli-issue agendas and multiple sites, and who complicate dominant maps of sexuality, race, and place?" [33] Using Hartiworn's inquiry as a point of departure, *Queer Latinx Regeneration* traces the various ascendancies, negotiations, mobilities, and intra-communal contestations that arise alongside the gentrifying barrio terrain. I ask: How are queer Latinx subjectivities being spatially imagined on the gentrifying barrio landscape? How is queerness imagined within stories of anti-gentrification resistance in Boyle Heights? What do the emerging queer Latinx spaces in Boyle Heights say about the future of this barrio landscape?

Queer Latinx Regeneration: A Framework

In this section I review scholarship on queer gentrification and queer urban spaces, tracing the conversations that have offered various avenues to think through queerness alongside gentrification. I also expand and define "queer Latinx regeneration," the analytic framework used to read the gathered cultural texts and spaces. My analytic framework builds directly from Jin Haritaworn's concept of "queer regeneration," a process in which queer racialized subjects

[33] See Haritaworn, Jin. *Queer Lovers and Hateful Others: Regenerating Violent Times and Places*. Pluto Press, 2015, p 43.

ascend within the newly gentrified landscape previously deemed undesirable. Queer regeneration points to the racial and colonial operations that determine which queer subject is now worthy of protection and visibility within the newly revitalized neighborhood. Haritaworn's framework of "queer regeneration" offers a nuanced interrogation of queer gentrification that considers the racial and colonial logics embedded within the settler process of gentrification.[34] By analyzing the gentrifying barrio landscape of Boyle Heights through the concept of "queer regeneration," we can better understand how queers of color mobilize, resist, and ultimately emplace within the region. Moreover, queer regeneration offers an important reminder: a site of innocence is not possible within the geographies of gentrification and emerging queer spaces in revitalizing neighborhoods push up against longstanding residents and spaces.

My aim in this project is not to mark the queer Latinx/Chicanx as a gentrifier (albeit that is an important reminder at the core of this project). Instead, I set out to consider how queer Latinidad operates alongside the shifting terrains of a gentrifying barrio. To do this I keep in mind Beverly Skeggs' understanding of culture as a site in which systems of value are created and maintained:

> What operates as a resource for one person may fix, essentialize, and pathologize another, meaning that access and the relations of entitlement structure present relations of gender and sexuality. This process reveals how the cultural is put to use as an exchange value, as property, accrued and embodied.[35]

Following Skeggs, I trace how queer Latinidad is *put to use* in the gathered cultural texts and spaces. In tracing the various stories of queer belonging in Boyle Heights, I argue that queer

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[34] Ibid. p. 41.

[35] Skeggs, Beverley. *Class, Self, Culture.* Routledge Press, 2004, p 296.

Latinidad emerges as value – as property that is embodied and performed as a mode of resistance against the simultaneous threat of gentrification and heteropatriarchy. The stories gathered in this dissertation reveal that queer Latinx belonging in the gentrifying barrio requires the use of culture – queer Latinidad – as a tool to secure an emplacement. Such an emplacement, I argue, operates through a *queer Latinx regeneration* – a process in which a queer Latinx subject ascends in the revitalized barrio landscape through the cultural.

If gentrification is a process in which racially marginalized peoples are replaced with racially and economically privileged ones, how do queers and queers of color become situated within these shifts? For Haritaworn, queers are entrenched within process of urban renewal through what they coin as *queer regeneration*:

> It is in the shadows of degenerate bodies, and the architectures of formerly degenerate spaces that queer regeneration occurs. As the old trope of the degenerate 'ghetto' converges with the new trope of the 'recovering' inner city, where the properly alive like to live, eat, and party, a recognizable queer subject worthy of protection and visibility comes to life.[36]

Haritaworn's *queer regeneration* asks us to consider the racial and colonial logics that determine who gets to stay and live in the newly revitalized neighborhood. They argue that queer regeneration operates through racial figures and scripts. For example, a common script that emerges alongside queer regeneration is the easily expandable anti-queer immigrant incapable of accepting queerness. Queer regeneration also includes the emergence of the white queer who, in search of an ideal safe space, finds refuge in the formally "dangerous" region now deemed "queer friendly." According to Haritaworn, another figure deeply entrenched within this cast

[36] See Haritaworn, Jin. *Queer Lovers and Hateful Others: Regenerating Violent Times and Places*. Pluto Press, 2015, p 37

includes the queer "with race and class privilege" who actively participates in the neighborhood's transformation.[37] This participation includes but is not limited to the use of legal violence as landlord, transforming the neighborhood through a culturally sensitive lens, or moving into the neighborhood and replacing long standing tenants who could no longer afford raised rents.[38] While queer regeneration points to the ways queers become situated within processes of gentrification Haritaworn also reminds us that queers do not all gentrify equally. Queers, may those positionalities be transgressive or normative, do not participate and experience gentrification in the same way as heterosexual cisgender people (white and non-white). Indeed, queerly visible bodies, particularly trans women of color and gender-nonconforming racialized bodies, are not afforded the same protection as cisgender queers and non-queers. Moreover, queer people (cisgender and transgender) experience homelessness at higher rates than cisgender straight people.[39] As such, queer regeneration points more directly to local investments made my businesses, politicians, real estate agents and other speculative forces that seek out to profit from a distinct regional queerness, one that is digestible and profitable; one that can advance alongside the neighborhood's elevated cost of living through arts and other cultural amenities. While recognizing these important differences, Haritaworn's "queer regeneration" pivots towards the necropolitical question – why is it that certain bodies get to live while others are pushed into a premature death? Queer regeneration specifically asks: What are the social, spatial, and theoretical arrangements that link neighborhood revitalization to the ascendance of the valuable queer subject now deemed worthy of protection and visibility? Who

[37] Ibid, p 26.

[38] See Alfredo Huante's definition of "gente-fication" in "A Lighter Shade of Brown?"

[39] See Williams, Bianca D.M et. al. "Homelessnes Among LGBT Adults in the US," May 2020, https://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/publications/lgbt-homelessness-us/

remains expandable as the queer subject ascends in the revitalized region?

To begin answering these necropolitical questions, Haritawon argues that we must observe queer gentrification beyond an issue of homonormativity or neoliberalism and instead consider the racial and colonial logics embedded within queer urban imaginaries. Indeed, debates around queer gentrification remain deeply contested especially when race, class, gender, and sexuality are tended to beyond analytic checkmarks. Early scholarship on queer urban renewal has primarily focused on the formation of "gayborhoods," placing a large celebratory emphasis of cisgender white gay males as ideal gentrifiers capable of regenerating the city aesthetically, socially, and economically.[40] For example, the famous work of Castells examines gay gentrification in San Francisco during the 1970s and 1980s. However, as previous scholars have pointed, his analysis avoids race and class, casting historically marginalized populations as inhibitors to the city's potential.[41] Scholarship on queer space has also investigated motives for queer "migration," pointing heavily to the political strides for an ideal safe space where queers (primarily cis gays and lesbians) could properly emplace.[42] Kath Weston pushed back against the urban/rural binary, critiquing the way city life was celebrated as a site of tolerance while the rural was framed as inherently anti-queer.[43] Similarly, in 2005, Jack Halberstam identified this repeating narrative within queer migration imaginaries as "metronormativity." Metronormativity

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[40] Castells, Manuel. *The city and the grassroots: a cross-cultural theory of urban social movements.* University of California Press, 1983.

[41] In *Queers Lovers and Hateful Others* by Haritworn critiques early texts on queer urban space for holding "racial and colonial assumptions" (39). Castells' work, while foundational to understanding gay residents' relationship to neighborhood change, relies on race-less and class-less analysis that ultimately suggests neighboring working-class people of color do not contribute to local cultural, social, and financial economies.

[42] See Nash, C. J., & Catungal, J. P. *Introduction: Sexual Landscapes, Lives and Livelihoods in Canada.* ACME: An International Journal for Critical Geographies, 2013, 12(2), 181–192; Rubin, Gayle. "Thinking sex: Notes for a radical theory of the politics of sexuality', *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*, 1984.

[43] Weston, K. (1995) 'Get thee to a big city: Sexual imaginary and the great gay migration', *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies,* 1995.

highlights the pervasive story in which queers leave the perceived backward and intolerable countryside for an imagined progressive and accepting city life. In 2011, Karen Tongson also pushes against the urban/rural binary narrative to instead explore queer suburban life within Los Angeles, highlighting suburbia as a site in which queer imaginaries also come to life.[44] A common narrative within mainstream queer storytelling, the metronormative frame, Hirataworn reminds us, is a generative western myth in that it relies on painting global cities like San Francisco, Los Angeles, New York, Chicago, Toronto as sites of modernity – ideal safe spaces where queerness can thrive through the circuits of citizenship, property, and the respectable rights-bearing queer subject.

Another central conversation within queer gentrification is the push against the racialized hate crime narrative that repeatedly casts working class people of color as violent and anti-queer. Recent scholarship by Christina Hanhardt and Jin Haritaworn critically interrogates queer politics of emplacement beyond the ideal safe space narrative by critiquing the racialized hate crime narrative. For example, Hanhardt's historiography of queer enclaves in San Francisco and New York highlights the neoliberal strategies used to create the ideal safe gay neighborhood.[45] Hanhardt's work helps us understand that gay gentrification relied on a racialized hate crime narrative by pointing to the fact that incoming gays and lesbians depended on police to create their ideal safe space, a process which in turn criminalized working-class residents in the region. Identifying the neoliberal logics operating in queer gentrification are important. However, Haritaworn argues that such an analysis must also center the racial and settler colonial logics that

[44] Tongson, Karen. *Relocations: Queer Suburban Imaginaries*. NYU Press, 2011.

[45] Hanhardt, Christina. *Safe Space: Gay Neighborhood History and the Politics of Violence*, 2013, Duke University Press.

make queer gentrification a "lucrative" process.[46] This entails treating colonialism not as ametaphor but rather as an ongoing "architecture" that informs desires and behaviors which in turn reinforce settler logics of emplacement – relegating Indigenous peoples as disappeared peoples.[47] The spatial operations of gentrification as a process in which racially disposable bodies are banished through the legal circuits of private property must be understood, then, as a process informed by the historical legacies of colonialism.[48]

It is also important to note that Haritaworn's concept of queer regeneration emerges from a specific geographic context. Queer regeneration "has found its most fertile terrain" in two neighborhoods in Berlin, Germany – the working-class migrant district of Kreuzberg and the "gayborhood" of Neukölln. Haritaworn demonstrates how anti-Muslim racism functioned alongside gentrification to pathologize and criminalize migrants as anti-queer – a racialized queerphobia that marked racialized migrant bodies as backwards and dangerous. The regional context through which Haritaworn conceptualizes and theorizes queer regeneration is of importance; I do not wish to suggest that such racial dynamics are also operating in Boyle Heights. My application of queer regeneration onto the cultural landscape of Boyle Heights is one that I wish to conduct with care.

First, I would like to explain my use of "Latinx" within the title of this project: *Queer Latinx Regeneration*. My insertion of "Latinx" into "queer regeneration" is intentional in that it is meant to be reflective of the regional racial dynamics and politics. In a span of 15 years, 2000-

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[46] See Haritaworn's *Queer Lovers and Hateful Othesr*, p 28.

[47] See Tuck, E. and Yang, K.W. "Decolonization is not a metaphor," *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society,* 2012.; See Thobani, Sunera. "Prologue," in Haritaworn, Kuntsman, Posocco, *Queer Necropolitics,* 2014, Routledge Press.

[48] Harris, Cheryl I. "Whiteness as Property." Harvard Law Review 106, no. 8 (1993): 1707–91. https://doi.org/10.2307/1341787.

2015, Boyle Heights has remained a predominantly Latino community (Mexican, Mexican American, Central American) with 96 percent of the population identifying as Latino.[49] With most residents being Latinx/a/o, gentrification in Boyle Heights has become a highly contested issue because neighborhood changes have been advanced by both white in-movers and Latinos. In 2007 the term *gentefication* was coined by Guillermo Uribe to distinguish between white-led gentrification and Latino-led gentrififcation. According to Uribe, local resident and owner of East Side Luv (ESL) bar in Boyle Heights, *gentefication* describes the processes of neighborhood "cultural revitalization" in which upwardly mobile Latinos/Chicanos return to their neighborhood of origin in order to "preserve [the neighborhood's] integrity."[50] A 2019 *Vice* article similarly describes gentefication as a project that allows "Latinx communities, usually low-income, to evolve without having their roots diluted into whiteness" (Hurtado 2019).[51] While entrepreneurs and business owners tend to view gentefication as a positive alternative to the white gentrification, activists like Defend Boyle Heights and BHAAAD argue against such a definition:

> Our analysis has always been that gentrification is class-warfare, that it is capitalism. To fight one, you must fight the other. To try to fight gentrification without fighting capitalism itself will result in short-sightedness and failure, and brown "gentefication"

[49] Sánchez, George J. *Boyle Heights: How a Los Angeles Neighborhood Became the Future of American Democracy*. University of California Press, 2021.

[50] Herbst, Julia. "Guillermo Urbe on the 'Gentefication' of East LA," *Los Angeles Magazine*, September 9, 2014, http://www.lamag.com/citythinkblog/guillermo-uribe-on-the-gentrification-of-east-l-a/

[51]Hurtado, Ludwig, "What Happens When Latinx People Gentrify Latinx Communities," *Vice,* January 31, 2019, https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/mbynkq/what-happens-when-latinx-people-gentrify-latinx-communities

capitalism. In order to fight capitalism, like in any fight, we need numbers and strength. We need the masses.[52]

DBH reminds us that while it may appear culturally relevant, gentefication still results in the local displacement of long-standing residents.

Indeed, gentefication and local ongoing debates have been helpful in describing how Latinos become implicated in processes of neighborhood change. However, gentefication does not fully account for the various ways queers of color re-emplace alongside the shifting terrains of the barrio (may they be educated, normative, transgressive, upwardly mobile, or socially disenfranchised). What I am proposing – queer Latinx regeneration – considers two distinct aspects: 1) The incorporation of queerness and LGBTQ acceptance as a process intimately tied to barrio urban renewal and 2) Heteropatriarchy and cisnormativity as systems of power that continuously regulate queers of color mobilities, may those be public or private. *Queer Latinx regeneration* reveals a different set of power relations, ones that ask us to consider how race, class, gender, and sexuality operate alongside neighborhood change within the Latinx geography of the barrio.

My use of "Latinx" in "queer Latinx regeneration" is also intentional in that it signals to local responses to gentrification, responses that push against the image of Boyle Heights as a politically unified community. In his ethnography study of Boyle Heights, "A Lighter Shade of Brown?" Alfredo Huante argues that local responses to gentrification are reflective of new race and class formations amongst Latinos in the area. Huante names this stratification as the barrio *tri-racial hierarchy*. A three-tier analytic, the *tri-racial hierarchy* is reflective of Boyle Heights community members' competing ideologies around gentrification: 1) Racialization of white in-

[52] Defend Boyle Heights Blogspot, "Destroy the Boyle Heights arts district one gallery at a time, one landlord at a time" April 6, 2018, http://defendboyleheights.blogspot.com/2018/04/destroy-boyle-heights-arts-district-one.html.

movers as innocent, ahistorical subjects. Here, white gentrifiers protect their own power through a white solidarity by disavowing racial inequality and otherizing vocal anti-gentrification Latino activists. Active anti-gentrification activists are framed as disruptive, angry, and unreasonable. 2) Latino residents who view gentefication as economic and racial uplift. These residents, like Uribe and Hurtado's definition, center entrepreneurship and meritocracy. Members of this tier believe that white-led gentrification can be fought by revitalizing the barrio through a culturally sensitive lens. 3) Latinos framing gente-fication as a movement grounded in working class solidarity. These community members are rooted in a housing justice and anti-white supremacy politic that centers vulnerable working-class residents. They also observe gentefication (as defined by Uribe and others alike) as complicit in the displacement of long-standing residents. Huante's barrio tri-racial hierarchy posits that by understanding gentrification as a "racial project," we can also observe gentrification as a "race-making" and a "place-making" process.[53] Therefore, as gentrification and gentefication advance in the barrio of Boyle Heights, Huante argues that a "Latino whiteness" emerges as a racial position.

Latino whiteness, or rather, a "honorary white" status, is a socio-cultural position that highlights a Latino's proximity to whiteness. This proximity is usually measured along the lines of class, where upper- and middle-class Latinos are observed as untrustworthy to an imagined Chicanx/Latinx authenticity grounded in a working-class solidarity. Latino whiteness is also measured along the lines of racial embodiments and colorism. Phenotype and mestiza/o/x racial embodiment (white-skinned, light-skinned, darker phenotypes) plays a pivotal role in the regional political landscape where whiter racial embodiments are afforded more protection,

[53] Alfredo Huante, "A Lighter Shade of Brown? Racial Formation and Gentrification in Latino Los Angeles," *Social Problems,* Volume 68, Issue 1, February 2021, p 13.

mobility, and capital. Discussions around racialized-ethnic subjectivity usually frame race and colorism through a "spectrum-based racial logic" that tends to erase Indigenous peoples and imagines Black bodies outside the category of Latina/o/x.[54] In *Looking Like a Language, Sounding Like a Race*, Jonathan Rosa suggest that we understand Latinx embodiments, or mestiza/o/x racial embodiments, as "a particular coordinate within a broader assemblage - note, not a spectrum! - of racial categories and language varieties."[55] In doing so, we avoid positioning Latina/o/x as a middle position between white and Black and instead observe mestizx embodiments as a relational power dynamic determined by one's proximity to capital – to whiteness. Thus, my insertion of "Latinx" into "queer regeneration" is intentional in that it signals to a Latinx whiteness in the barrio of Boyle Heights. Indeed, as Haritaworn reminds us, we must resist the pull of simply identifying the gentrifier and instead pay attention to the racial and colonial logics of power that determine who is worthy of living in the newly revitalized region:

> If a blunt distinction between 'gentrifying queers' and 'displaced queers' is insufficient, in that no positionality is automatically outside of gentrification, our proximities and distances from the good multicultural subject on the one hand, and the degenerate disposable non-citizen on the other, shape the kind of invitations we get, and the performances we must make, to become or stay part of queer spaces forming in gentrifying areas.[56]

Building from Haritaworn's inquires, I argue that Latino whiteness functions as a marker of the

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[54] Rosa, Jonathan. *Looking like a Language, Sounding like a Race: Raciolinguistic Ideologies and the Learning of Latinidad*, Oxford University Press, 2018; p 3.

[55] Ibid, p 4.

[56] See Haritaworns' *Queer Lovers and Hateful Others,* p 51.

ideal future Boyle Heights resident. That is to say, Latinx whiteness marks the "good multicultural subject" capable of moving, partying and living in the revitalized barrio. In other words, Latinx whiteness functions both as an embodiment and an embodied performance. Said differently, Latinx whiteness is either easily accessible depending on racial embodiments or it requires external markers of legibility and value to successfully approximate towards the Chicanx/Latinx subject worthy of visibility. To re-evoke Kegg's words, Latinx whiteness in the revitalized barrio functions as "exchange value, as property, accrued and embodied." *Queer Latinx Regeneration* sets out to trace the racial contours of Latinx whiteness alongside processes of queer gentrification within the barrio landscape.

To trace the racial contours of Latinx whiteness *Queer Latinx Regeneration* turns to a range of queer stories of belonging that have emerged alongside local anti-gentrification efforts. In *Queer Latinx Regeneration* at times the queer of color is marked as the advancing gentrifying threat, is relegated as the placeless subject, and violently banished from the barrio. In other scenarios, the queer Latinx emerges as the entrepreneur capable of creating new queer spaces for other queer Latinxs to come together. *Queer Latinx Regeneration* also turns to the brown queer artist who emerges to tell stories of local queer nightlife through public performance, and who also straddles the contested terrains of art washing. Alongside queer of color performance art, *Queer Latinx Regeneration* also considers the emergence of Pride in the barrio and the festival's contested geographies with local revitalization efforts.

Collectively, these gathered stories and spaces allow for a mapping of a queer Latinx geography, one that complicates dominant narratives of queer of color belonging that usually includes the queer of color leaving their home in search of a safe queer space. *Queer Latinx Regeneration* asks: What does queers of color place-making look like alongside the geographies

of gentrification? How are queer of color stories told as the barrio revitalizes? I argue that the project of queer place-making becomes intimately tied to regional revitalization efforts. Thus, we can understand *queer Latinx regeneration* as a process in which local queers of color living in the revitalized barrio negotiate with and against the shifting material, political and social terrains.

Chapter 1 explores the case of the *Por Vida* mural by Paul Manuel, a queer Latinx mural in the historic Mission District barrio marked as a gentrifying threat and violently defaced. Two central questions guide this chapter: How does the queer racialized body – a representation of queer of color intimacy and love – become framed and conceptualized as an advancement of white gentrification? What does it mean when an apparently anti-racist and anti-capitalist project, like anti-gentrification, surfaces in the form of anti-queerness? Chapter 2 explores the emergence of a new queer Latinx spaces in Boyle Heights: El Place, a queer Latinx bar. Deploying an ethnographic queer nightlife analytic, this chapter explores local resident's varying responses to the arrival of a new queer space.

While Chapters 1 and 2 consider the processes of queer visibility and place-making, Chapter 3 reorients towards queer art. Chapter 3 considers the work of rafa esparza, a local brown queer artist based in East LA whose work celebrates queer brown belonging through performance art. This chapter closely examines rafa esparza's public performance piece, *de la Calle,* a collaborative public performance piece that took place in the historic Santee Alley, Fashion District – known locally as *los callejones.* The chapter offers a twofold examination. First, I offer a close reading of *de la Calle* as a communal queer of color artistic collaboration celebrating queer nightlife and working-class migrant labor. Second, I consider Rafa Esparza's negotiations to execute *de la Calle*, negotiations that arose from local conversation around art washing, a form of gentrification advanced through art-beautification. I ask: How do queer artists

of color negotiate their artmaking practices as artwashing efforts in the region advance the revitalization of the area? The Conclusion then turns to the emergence of Orgullo Fest, Boyle Height's first annual pride festival. I ask: What does the first annual pride festival of Boyle Heights signal about the future of the barrio? This chapter offers an ethnographic analysis of Orgullo Fest and argues that the arrival of pride in the barrio is deeply entangled with the local histories of revitalization. Moreover, this final chapter demonstrates how local politicians, police and other financial institutions relied on a "colorblind racism" to destabilize local anti-gentrification efforts.

Queer Latinx Regeneration contributes to developing conversations around gentrification studies, Chicanx/Latinx cultural studies, and queer performance studies. I do not offer answers on how to solve the problem of gentrification. Answers on how to resist and mobilize against gentrification around found within the ongoing grassroot housing justice organizations throughout East Los Angeles and beyond. Inspired and deeply informed by these efforts, *Queer Latinx Regeneration* instead helps us understand the neoliberal city's intricate and insidious investment in capital accumulation and the efforts taken to "clean up" regions. Moreover, this dissertation highlights the ways queers of color in the region negotiate with and against the avalanche of change brought on by violent neighborhood changes. What I hope this dissertation offers is a nuanced way of understanding feelings of belonging. In the following pages we see queers of color become implicated within the terrains of gentrification under the political missions of creating "safe spaces" and achieving "visibility." What then unfolds under these political missions, I suggest, helps highlight what it means to take up and make space your own. *Queer Latinx Regeneration* demonstrates that queerness in the gentrifying region becomes commodified into a palpable and respectable aesthetic. At the same time, it shows how that

queerness, may it be sanitized, still offers up spaces of possibility in which queerness can thrive as a political force for change.

Chapter 1

The Case of the Por Vida Mural: Queer Gentrification and the Politics of Barrio Belonging

Figure 5. Manuel Paul, Por Vida, 2015, digital mural. Photo by Galeria de la Raza.

Por Vida was installed on June 13, 2015 along a public wall on 24th and Bryant Street attached to Galería de La Raza, a long-standing arts non-profit in the Mission District barrio dedicated to supporting Chicanx/Latinx artists. *Por Vida* was created by Los Angeles based queer Chicano artist Paul Manuel. The mural presents us with a tryptic: two queer chola/o/x couples in a tender embrace, and a transgender cholo man depicted with top-surgery scars. Despite its tender subject matter, the mural was defaced three days later with red and blue spray paint, the marks striking out the faces of both couples. Determined to resist the attacks, Galeria de la Raza quickly re-printed and re-installed the digital image, each re-print costing up towards 3,000 dollars. Taking extra security measures, Galeria de la Raza also placed cameras around the mural. However, these efforts did not stop the defacements that followed. Two days later, *Por Vida* was spray-painted once again. Fighting back against what community activists had now named as an anti-queer hate-crime, Galería de la Raza re-installed the mural a third time only to

discover it was tagged again a few days later. Resisting against the defacements, Galería de la Raza re-printed and installed the mural for a fourth time. Shortly after, around 11pm on June 29th, video footage from the security cameras showed a hooded figure pouring flammable liquid over the two queer cholo lovers. The final and most violent defacement reached local news outlets: "Mural set on fire, unity needed."[57]

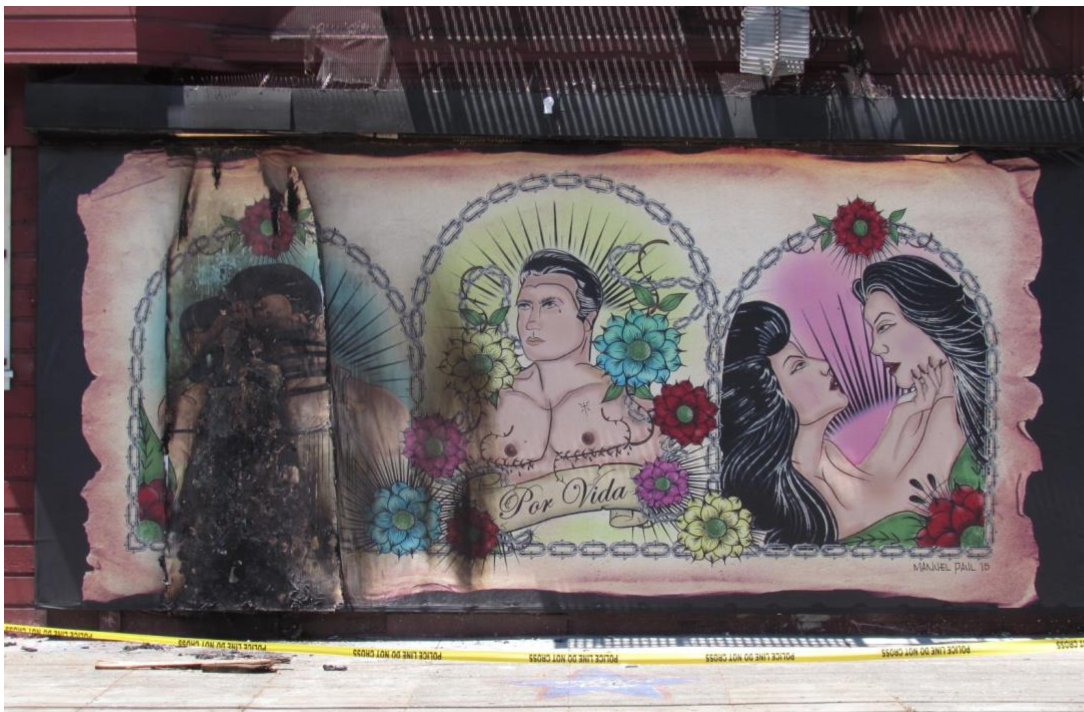

Figure 6. The burned Por Vida mural, Photo by San Francisco News, "Video Released: Man Burns LGBT Mural."

Why was *Por Vida* defaced in an area well known for its murals – the Mission District – a Latinx working class neighborhood which also sits adjacent to the Castro District, a historic gayborhood? Do the defacements of the mural signify an especially fraught relationship between Latinx and queers in San Francisco? Why did this mural, depicting queer cisgender and transgender intimacies, ignite such a homophobic and transphobic backlash, especially in a place

[57] Lara, Frank, "Mural set on fire, unity needed," Liberation Newspaper for Socialism and Liberation, June 30, 2015, https://develop.liberationnews.org/la-galeria-mural-is-set-on-fire-unity-is-needed-2/.

known historically as a gay-friendly city? Online data and interviews with local community leaders revealed that some anti-gentrification activists in the Mission District barrio saw *Por Vida's* public representation of queer chola/o/x intimacy as part of the gentrification they resisted, a cultural intrusion into lowrider culture presumed to be heterosexual. As one online post summed up,

> This is in the talks of being crossed out. All the cholos feel disrespect due to the image of machismo being weakened…also the lack of communication and outreach to people in the mission. This only helps advance gentrification due to glamorizing of the cholo lifestyle. (online comment)[58]

Two central questions guide the analysis of this paper: How does the queer racialized body – a representation of queer of color intimacy and love – become framed and conceptualized as an advancement of white gentrification? More succinctly, what does it mean when an apparently anti-racist and anti-capitalist project, like anti-gentrification, surfaces in the form of anti-queerness?

Drawing from *queer of color critique*, this paper performs an analytic tracing of what Rodrick Ferguson calls "ruptural possibilities."[59] To properly trace these ruptures, I turn to various fields: queer of color studies, Latinx geographies, queer gentrification literature, and Chicanx/Latinx Studies. Said differently, the underpinning inquiries I set out to explore are located at the interstice between *culture* (queer Latinx representation) and *space* (the politics of emplacement in the face of gentrification). The inquires of this project, while they reflect on the politics of representation, are more deeply centered on the meaning of occupying physical space while being both racialized and queer. I suggest that the case of the *Por Vida* mural helps to

[58] Instagram comment. User kept anonymous. Accessed 2017.

[59] Ferguson, Roderick A. *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique*. University of Minnesota Press, 2004.

expand developing conversations on Latinx geographies, a field of inquiry invested in exploring Latinx/Chicanx people's cultural, economic, theoretical, and material processes of place making. It is important to also note that Latinx geographies is deeply informed by the racialized-ethnic category of Latinidad, an entanglement that has continuously understood Blackness as incongruent. As Cahuas reminds us:

> There would be no Latinx geographies without Black geographies. What I mean by this is that Latinx and Black geographies are inextricably linked, because Blackness and Latinidad are not mutually exclusive and because Black thought, experiences, history, and politics, along with the legacy of transatlantic slavery, profoundly shape contemporary social and spatial arrangements in las Americas.[60]

For example, Black feminist geographer Katherine McKittrick has urged us to resist the pull of seeing the built environment as an innocent miscalculation. McKittrick suggests that Geography – both the dominant spatial landscape and the field of study – has been deeply shaped by Black women's theoretical, material, and imaginative space-making practices.[61] In situating this project within developing conversations in Latinx geographies, I frame *Por Vida* as a "place-based imaginary" in an effort to tell a story of queer Latinidad's "racial terrain of struggle."[62] Thus, my goal here is to trace the eruptions of anti-queer violence that arise under the guise of anti-gentrification. Central to these violent eruptions are the psychic dimensions of Latinidad which, I argue, are anxieties governed by heteropatriarchal logics of authenticity that in turn relegate the queer racialized body as a placeless subject.

Critical Urban Theorist (CUT) and geographer David Seitz urges scholars to consider how

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[60] Cahuas, Madeline. "Interrogating Absences in Latinx Theory And Placing Blackness in Latinx Geographical Thought: A Critical Reflection*." Society + Space*, 2019.

[61] McKittrick, Katherine. *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle*. University of Minnesota Press, 2006.

[62] See Thomas, Amanda. "Imagination" in Keywords in Radical Geography: Antipode at 50. Wiley Blackwell, 2019.

queer studies might offer more generative tools to think about people's socio-spatial relationship to the city. According to Seitz, queer studies does not treat sexuality as an analytical checklist alongside race, class and gender. A serious engagement with sexuality offers both a more nuanced understanding of how people experience urban spaces but also "renders problematic any neat analytic distinction between alienation and deprivation." [63] Indeed, when considering how sexuality operates alongside the *Por Vida* case, the task at hand is not to simply mark the queer of color as a gentrifier. Nor is the goal to celebrate the cited anti-gentrification efforts as heroic Chicano/Latino acts of resistance. Instead, when considering sexuality, we can begin to locate the underpinning logics of authenticity that make up Latinidad and Chicanidad, an authenticity invested in cis heteropatriarchy. To do so I turn to queer of color critique which provides fruitful grounding to locate and theorize this article's inquiries of interest – queer of color culture and queer gentrification.

In his widely cited text, *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique*, Rodrick Ferguson calls for a queer of color analysis that interrogates liberal capitalism as a racial project deeply invested in preserving ideologies of nationhood. For Ferguson, the preservation of nationhood – a project of cultural belonging – depends on an investment in heteropatriarchy. Building from Chandan Reddy, Ferguson theorizes the role of culture under liberal capitalism as a "location of antagonism."[64] For Reddy, the home is the location of antagonistic belonging where the queer racialized subject negotiates with/against heteronormative models of sociality – cisgender presentation, heterosexual relations, reproduction, and patriarchal kinship models.[65]

[63] Seitz, D.K. 2015. "The Trouble With Flag Wars: Rethinking Sexuality in Critical Urban Theory." Int J Urban Regional, 39: 251-264.

[64] Chandan Reddy. "Home, Houses, Non-identity: Paris Is Burning." *Burning Down the House: Recycling Domesticity*. Rosemary Marangoly George. Westview Press. 1988.

[65] Ibid.

Reddy's work reminds us that these negotiations – "remembering and rejecting the model of 'home'" – result in a violent banishment.[66] Ferguson then suggests that a queer of color critique needs to interrogate cultural gestures which might appear revolutionary, but in fact reinforce liberal logics of belonging. Said differently, queer of color critique points to liberalisms deep commitment to cis heteropatriarchy:

> As it fosters both identifications and antagonisms, culture becomes a site of material struggle. As the site of identification, culture becomes the terrain in which formations seemingly antagonistic to liberalism, like Marxism and revolutionary nationalism, converge with liberal ideology, precisely through their identification with gender and sexual norms and ideals.[67]

In applying a queer of color critique to case of the *Por Vida* mural I observe the queer and trans Latinx image as a site of material struggle. More specifically, Ferguson's framing of culture as a "location of antagonism" is fruitful as it helps situate *Por Vida* both as a symbol of queer of color representation while also materially situating it within the historical geographies of the Mission District barrio. In other words, this article offers a twofold analysis: 1) the role of culture and aesthetics within the *Por Vida* mural as sites of antagonisms 2) a historical contextualization of queer gentrification in the Mission District barrio alongside *Por Vida's* emergence.

The Contested Conversations

Here, I wish to briefly describe the findings of online-ethnographic investigation. This data consists of online Instagram comments and local online news articles. Local and non-local

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[66] Ibid, p 356.

[67] Ferguson, Roderick A. *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique*. University of Minnesota Press, 2004, p 3.

community members used Instagram as a platform to participate in the large debate that erupted from *Por Vida's* installation in the Mission District. I argue that online comments provide a more nuanced understanding of the debate surrounding the mural's installment in the Mission District. Almost all comments collected were found under Galeria de la Raza's Instagram account page, where they posted photos of multiple event's concerning the *Por Vida* mural, including the celebratory opening on June 13, 2015. Other comments came from Maricón Collective's Instagram account as well.

I gathered approximately 100 Instagram comments and coded them according to the user's position and sentiment towards the *Por Vida* mural's installation. Through this collection of data, I keep in mind Scott Morgensen's notion of "conversations" from his book *Spaces Between Us: Queer Settler Colonialism and Indigenous Colonization.* Morgensen's theoretical tool of "conversations," provides me with a useful method to collectively engaging with the 230 Instagram comments. Rather than observing the comments as singular voices, I observe the comments as complex collective paradigm made up of various perspectives, a paradigm Morgensen identifies as a "conversation":

> The analytic category 'conversations' invokes intersubjective social activity, as would be made apparent by ethnography, oral history, or archival or literary study of texts written and circulated for deliberation. Thinking in these terms invites one to read narratives as relation across differences that become meaningful in the contested spaces of conversation. In turn, interpreting claims in conversation will reveal failures of recognition–as people speak past one another or in mutual ignorance–as well as moments of confrontation, as evidence of interrelationship.[68]

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[68] Morgensen, Scott. *Spaces between Us: Queer Settler Colonialism and Indigenous Decolonization*. University of Minnesota Press, 2011, p xi.

I borrow Morgensen's analytical methodology of "conversation" to engage closely with the "contested" conversations and debates in the Instagram comments over *Por Vida's* initial installation, the re-installations, and various defacements. Differences are meaningful in "contested spaces of conversation." In these comments, I am not in search for a "right" or "wrong" interpretation, but instead, I aim to identify patterns in people's argumentative positions. I am interested in analyzing how these contested conversations collectively position queer of color bodies. I specifically focus on the spatial, racial and gender dynamics around these "conversations." In other words, I observe these comments as a reflection of queer Latinx and Chicanx socio-spatial, and racial positions in relation to heteronormativity but also larger capitalistic structures around queerness (Pride Month). Below I provide categories from the gathered comments to highlight the complex perspectives and arguments regarding, not just the *Por Vida* mural, but also the contested perceptions around understanding queer Latinx and Chicanx identities.

Within Instagram's social media platform, "conversations" flourish when users comment below another user's photograph. Users are also able to read each other's comments and directly respond to another user's comment by using the "@" icon, followed by the user's Instagram account name. I followed these online "conversations," looking at the varying ways users positioned themselves within the developing polemics. Regarding *Por Vida*, the collected conversations/comments were gathered from Galeria de la Raza's Instagram account, specifically below pictures concerning the mural's inauguration, its defacement, and other relevant images. While the theoretical notion of "conversations" is productive in providing a larger discursive space for analysis, I do not support or condone any homophobic, racist, transphobic or any xenophobic comments that do appear. Instead, I wish to interrogate the ways

queerness is observed and positioned (spatially and discursively) throughout these conversations.

To provide more organization I also approached this data analysis by coding/categorizing all the comments using Joseph A. Maxwell's concept of "theoretical categories." [69] Maxwell's "theoretical categories" is a form of organizing qualitative data. The categories, he states, "derive either from prior theory or from an inductively developed theory (in which case the concepts and the theory are usually developed concurrently.)" In other words, the categories derive from the researcher's theoretical concepts while also taking into account the subject's own descriptive positionality to the topic under study. I identified six theoretical categories within the gathered 100 comments:

1) Cultural Gatekeepers of "The Cholo"
2) Spatial Entitlement
3) Anti-Gentrification Activism
4) Pro-LGBTQ Latinx
5) Pro-LGBTQ

Cultural Gatekeepers expressed anger towards Por Vida's use of the *cholo* and low rider aesthetic. Cultural Gatekeepers claim *the cholo* as belonging to an imagined exclusively heterosexual lowrider culture. The *Spatial Entitlement* category identifies comments that express claims over territorial boundaries on multiple geographical scales (locally, city-based, northern vs. southern California etc.). For example, spatial entitlements expressed distrust over a Los Angeles based artist installing a mural in the Bay Area. *Anti-Gentrification Activism* identifies comments that directly addressed issues around gentrification. They particularly classified *Por Vida* as a contributing factor to the local gentrification advancing in the Mission District barrio.

[69] Maxwell, Joseph Alex. *Qualitative Research Design: An Interactive Approach*. SAGE, 2013, p 108.

The *Pro-LGBTQ Latinx* category describes comments that defended the *Por Vida* mural. More specifically they approached this defense of the mural via an intersectional lens. In other words, these comments took into consideration both queer and Latinx identities, defending the mural's presentation of the queer cholx figures. Finally, the *Pro-LGBTQ* category describes comments that also defended the mural but through a non-intersectional approach. In other words, they advanced a support of *Por Vida* mural through a "queer" or "LGBTQ" identity. They described *Por Vida* as an "LGBT" mural, disregarding the intentional Latinx identity presented in the visual narrative. Below are a few of the comments from each of the 5 categories.

Cultural Gatekeepers Comments

- I didn't say there weren't lgbt in the mission I said that there isn't any gay 'cholos'…there's a big difference...I'm also not homophobic but that gay homeboy shit ain't part of the missions culture…Have you ever once seen any gay homeboys or cholos in the mission?? Cause I know I haven't…
- "THIS IS JUT GONNA KEEP GETTING VANDALIZED. I HAVE NOT YET TO SEE A GAY CHOLO IN THE MISSION. U KNOW WHY? CAUSE WE ARE NOT GAY! NOTIN AGAINST HOMOSEXUALS BUT MIS LEADING OUR CULTURE…YALL NEED TO TAKE OUR LIFESTYLE IOUT OF YOURS!!!!!!! SIMPLE RESPETO"
- "There's no such thing as a gay cholo, maybe secretly bi cholos out there. I had a friend who was a cholo in high school, as soon as he came out of the closet, he left the cholo lifestyle behind him and embraced the gay lifestyle. He was a down ass homeboy too. My point is that all chicana/o's share the same cultura and barrios. We are raza! We all have one thing in common, our pride of our rich history. From the

aztecas to the present day chicano we are one. It's the lifestyles that we choose to live that make us different (in a good way) from one another. There's nothing wrong with being gay and there's nothing wrong with being a cholo, but you cant' be both."

Spatial Entitlement Comments

- "Stop confusing the youth and keep your personal lives to yourselves because the natives not feeling that shit…if anything you're separating even more from the community with those type of murals that never ever been a part of the mission since y'all came into town. Ya'll have a lot to learn."
- "We dont condone that gay shit in the mission! Yall need to put that mural up in the castro. But the raza doesn't see the point of this shit! Just saying ur mural will not last long at all in the mission with all the graffiti writers out there! #keephoodsyours #yuppies n hipsters out of the mission!"
- "Question?? Are the artist that put up the mural from the mission??? Are they cholos from the mission??? Im from the mission and I know gays but they sure the fuck aint cholos! Don't make something is nothing. Don't have anything against them but Don't start fucking up the mission like these fucking white tech pp."
- "Take this shit back down to l.a. Where the artist is from. It's probably good in your hood but this hood. #khy #keephoodsyours"
- "You motherfuckers are stupid, you have never seen two cholos in the mission kissing or holding hands. So yes to put that shit in the Mission is disrespectful. Take that bullshit to the Castro"
- "The Castro isn't welcoming to people of color. We've always been here. All kinds. All ways. Even in ancient times. De que tienes miedo"

- “nobody is talking war here. And nobody is impeding on anoyone’s space. If anything, it is carving a little bit of space for queer Latin@ folks.”

Gentrification Activism Comments

- “#keephoodsyours”
- “This is in the talks of being crossed out. All the cholos feel disrespect due to the image of machismo being weakened…also the lack of communication and outreach to people in the mission. This only helps advance gentrification due to glamorizing of the cholo lifestyle”
- “We dont condone that gay shit in the mission! Yall need to put that mural up in the castro. But the raza doesn’t see the point of this shit! Just saying ur mural will not last long at all in the mission with all the graffiti writers out there! #keephoodsyours #yuppies n hipsters out of the mission!”
- “I understand what your coming from! I was born and raised in the mission & I feel this mural is straight disrespectful to our gente in the mission…keep preaching to these bitch ass hipsters that don’t know shit about the Mission”

Pro-LGBTQ Latinx Comments

- “I’m making a donation to @galeriadelaraza in honor of my LBGTQ X/Chican@ brothers and sisters of La Mision who have had to deal with this kind of bullshit all their lives.”
- “of course there are homo cholos in the mission. They are just afraid to come out. Chale.”
- “is this a transboy vato? Im literally crying. Never seen a mural like this. Its fucking beautiful. Thank you.”
- “nobody is talking war here. And nobody is impeding on anoyone’s space. If anything, it is carving a little bit of space for queer Latin@ folks.”

- “As a tranboy xicanx from San Anto, this mural is incredible empowering. Queer, trans people of color have been brutalized, beaten, raped and hidden in the shadows for fear of their lives and just because Maricon Collective and Galeria de la Raza want to help create a visual space for us in the public sphere [people] are up in arms. THAT IS HOMPHOBIA. THAT IS TRANSPHOBIA. You have all the space in the world to create art, walk freely and exist in the public sphere and we have to fucken fight to death just to exist.”

Pro-LGBTQ Comments

- “A bunch of savages. Do yourselves a favor and tie a 5 ton brick to your ankle and throw yourself into the ocean. Love wins, it will always win, and all these comments hating are just proof that the gay/bisexual/trans community will persevere over a bunch of ignorant inbreeds”
- “@galeriadelaraza from the San Fernando Valley LGBT community center we would like to know that you have our support hundred percent whatever you need let us know.”
- “People are ugly with their hate. Support the arts, support love, support creation in all its forms”

What do these “contested conversations” tell us about the ways queer of color bodies navigate public landscapes of desire and representation? I turn to these contested conversations throughout the study as they allow us to further interrogate homophobic and transphobic attitudes, and further explore the racial and socio-spatial landscape queer of color bodies exist in. In what follows I investigate what I have identified as the “anti-gentrification argument,” a point of logic within the contested “conversations” which observers the *Por Vida* mural as a contributor to gentrification in the Mission District.

Culture: The Location of Antagonisms

During the height of media coverage, Galería de la Raza's role as a community art organization became highly questioned. Many expressed a deep sense of disappointment from, what many comments describe as, Galería de la Raza's unwillingness to hear Mission District resident's opinions over *Por Vida's* installation. For example, as one online comment sternly stated:

> I seen [Galería de la Raza's] post about the defacement and so on…the funny thing about it is that [Galería is] claiming to speak for the community without even asking what the lowrider community or the mission has to say about that mural. You did it just as most artist do, for shock value. Well you got what you were looking for. You asked an out of towner to do that mural without even consulting the community. A complete fail! Shame on you galeria de la raza for participating in the sexualization of a culture. If it was straight men sexualizing women it would be picketed and defaced by feminist and activist but because it's the gay community its acceptable. You are no longer helping the mission [District], you are helping to become the problem with gentrification and appropriation of an old culture just because some DJs decided to fantasize about roll play for a culture they are not even apart of.[70]

Many comments like the one above questioned the art non-profit's political allegiances and their commitment to the larger Mission District community. As a "non-profit community-based arts organization," Galería has served as a central site for the growth of Chicanx and Latinx artists since its founding in 1970.[71] According to their website, Galeria de la Raza's mission is to

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[70] Instagram comment. User kept anonymous for privacy purposes. Accessed 2017.

[71] Galería de la Raza. Retrieved from http://www.galeriadelaraza.org/eng/about/index.php. Accessed October 20, 2021.

"foster public awareness and appreciation of Chicano/Latino art and serve as a laboratory where artists can both explore contemporary issues in art, culture and civic society, and advance intercultural dialogue." Galería also supports Latinx artists "whose works explore new aesthetic possibilities for socially committed art."[72] Residing in the Mission District for almost 50 years, Galería de la Raza has been an integral space of cultural production, and social activism for artists and activists alike.[73] However, despite its long standing presence, Galería de la Raza was perceived as a complicit agent advancing gentrification even when the non-profit observed itself (and the *Por Vida* mural) as an important intervention into a heteropatriarchal low rider culture.

While *Por Vida* successfully ruptured perceptions of low rider homeboy culture as exclusively heterosexual, its public emergence also relied on a publicly sanctioned cultural economy governed by the non-profit industrial complex. As a long-standing art non-profit, Galería de la Raza sits within a formal economy of artmaking, one that allows art to formally occupy space through processes of curation. Cultural anthropologist Arlene Davila reminds us that culture "works" in ways beyond the common notion of representation. Davila suggests that culture must be understood as entwined within "cultural economies" informed by liberal capitalist agendas that seek out to circulate and value art with the ends to maximize profit. Davila also posits that the cultural economy of art has a direct impact on processes of urban development, as discussed in the Introduction. Sitting within the formal cultural economy of art, Galería was thus critiqued for advancing gentrification and perceived as an antagonist to the local anti-gentrification movement. Ani Rivera, director of Galeria de la Raza spoke back against the prevalent anti-gentrification arguments rallied against Galería:

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[72] Ibid.

[73] Ibid.

> There is this whole conversation right now of art equals gentrification. I think we need to change that paradigm. I think we need to think about the history of these [art] institutions. They were created because of the disenfranchisement of our spaces and our neighborhoods, and they created these organizations to create opportunities to beautify them to create a visual narrative that was responsive of who we were and how we wanted to see our spaces. There is nothing wrong with that. Beautiful things don't mean that they're white, beautiful things doesn't only belong or come to people with financial and economic access. We created that path.[74]

Here, Ani refers to "art washing" within gentrification processes where artists are paid to beautify neighborhoods. Art washing creates attractive amenities, brings in new wealthier populations, increases surrounding property value and consequently results in the displacement of vulnerable long-standing tenants unable to pay raised rents. However, despite Galería functioning within a sanctioned art economy and despite queers of color operating within this formal cultural industry, it evidently did not warrant protection. Ani Rivera spoke about the direct communal tensions they had to confront after the ant-gentrification argument was rallied online:

> It was really rough. We had people. Groups of people. People walking in saying that we were perverted. Saying that we were teaching the kids perversion. Directly being attacked. It was difficult. It was rough. And then I was trying to hear between the lines, what was it that you're denying. Nobody called you gay. If you're a homie and you're not gay I believe you. And then it became clear that it was about the fragility of the male

[74] Interview with Ani Rivera. Conducted Summer 2016.

ego.[75]

Afraid that another more deadly fire might harm neighboring tenants living above the gallery space, Galería did not re-install the mural. Instead, Galería organized a community forum at City College San Francisco. On July 25, 2015, local activists, artists, and residents met to discuss *Por Vida's* defacement through a restorative justice approach. Around 100 people attended the forum, all in support of Paul Manuel's visual.[76] According to reports, those against the mural were not present.[77] A panel also guided the larger conversation. Amongst the panelists was the artist Paul Manuel himself. "I thought it would be okay to put the mural in that area," Paul Manuel said. "Once it got out in the real world it got really scary."[78] Collectively, the panel addressed what was described as an "anti-gay sentiment within the Latino community."[79] Gay Chicano artist and AIDS activist Joey Terrill spoke about his personal coming-out experience at the age of 15 in which his mom expressed anti-queer sentiments. He remembered his mom's words: "If it wasn't for your sister, I would commit suicide."[80] Panelist Luciano Sagastume, a trans man, pointed to transphobia and antiblackness as main inhibitors to community building.[81] In an online video by Galería advertising the community forum, Sagastume also shares a story about their first encounter with the *Por Vida* mural:

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[75] Ibid.

[76] Contributor. "Galería forum well attended but not by mural's opponents." *El Tecolote*. Online Newspaper, Accessed October 20, 2021. http://eltecolote.org/content/en/galeria-forum-well-attended-but-not-by-murals-opponents/.

[77] Ibid.

[78] Ibid.

[79] Ibid. Words spoken by Carlos Kookie Gonzales

[80] Ibid.

[81] Ibid.

> I noted this man in the middle who has these thorns going across his chest. Really in the same place as my own scars where I have had [top] surgery. And I told one of my friends, isn't that amazing how that could be a trans man up there. The thorns are just in the right place. And my friend was like, Luciano, that is a trans man up there. That is you. You are being depicted there. And it was this moment where I had this huge realization that I've never seen myself up on a poster.[82]

Sagastume's reflection points to the material reality transgender people experience under a cis heteropatriarchal culture as one of erasure, expulsion, and violence. In his book, *Brown Transfigurations,* Francisco J. Galarte points to the fact that the central trans man figure in the *Por Vida* mural was not initially read as trans, an important detail that signals to how trans bodies are read by non-queers. "From the perspective of the vandals, the scars may have simply looked like thorns tattooed across the homeboy's chest," Galarte explains, "but to a trans Chicano man the placement of the thorns just under the pecs resemble the scars on their own chests."[83] Galarte also suggests that although Paul Manuel's visual attempted to claim space in the barrio by making visible Latinx/Chicanx queer and trans lives, the trans figure disrupted these political visibility efforts. Instead, the "placas" or "visual markers" of trans embodiments became "imperceptible to those outside the LGBTQ community" until the central image was publicly declared as trans via social media.[84] These moments of (in)visibility and misrecognition signal to how trans bodies of color are regulated: as raw material for LGBTQ visibility activism and as threats to an imagined ideal heterosexual Latinx/Chicanx barrio citizen.

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[82] Galería de la Raza. 2015. "Galeria de la Raza Community Forum," July Accessed October 20, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ddm6lKYLoKU.

[83] Galarte, Francisco. *Brown Trans Figurations Rethinking Race, Gender, and Sexuality in Chicanx/Latinx Studies*. University of Texas Press, 2021, p. 6.

[84] Ibid, p 8.

Not only was *Por Vida* not afforded protection through the formal art economy of the non-profit industrial complex, Galería de la Raza, as a tenant, also stood vulnerable to the regeneration of the barrio. Ani Rivera spoke to this:

> We have been in this space for 40 years on a month-to-month lease. There is nothing right now supporting us. We don't own that space and there is nothing to force the landlord to keep us there. Nothing. Under commercial real estate law, we are the least protected.[85]

Indeed, as gentrification continued to advance and rental prices increase, Galeria also found itself up against difficult negotiations with their landlord. Two years later, on October 12, 2018, Galería de la Raza released an announcement explaining their forced removal:

> Unfortunately, in June 2018 we received notice of a 100% rent increase effective August 2018 for the space we are currently occupying. Through the summer we were able to negotiate with the property manager to maintain our tenancy at our current rental rates but moving forward have to forgo the 2857 main gallery space. (public statement by Galería de la Raza)[86]

Galería de la Raza has been a foundational pillar for Chicanx and Latinx art both regionally and internationally. During the 1980s, Galería served as a critical resource for the growing Chicano art movement, providing a space for social organizing, community building and artistic expression. To keep Galería's legacy alive, the gallery partnered with the Mission Economic Development Agency (MEDA) and the Tenderloin Neighborhood Development Corporation

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[85] Interview with Ani Rivera. Conducted Summer 2016.

[86] Galería de la Raza. "News from Galería: Update on Location," Galeria de la Raza Website, October 12, 2018. Accessed October 20, 2021, http://galeriadelaraza.org/eng/events/index.php?op=view&id=7351.

(TNDC) to secure a "long-term multiyear lease, with an option to buy."[87] Today Galería is operating through a temporary space nearby on 1470 Valencia St. as they secure a new location on 1990 Folsom Street. By securing a multi-year lease Galeria would have a more stable environment to continue their mission as a Chicanx/Latinx cultural hub.

In addition to Galería de la Raza finding itself located within the contested terrains of gentrification as an arts non-profit, it was also *Por Vida's* aesthetic narrative that arose as a location of antagonisms. Paul Manuels' visual style is known as *paño art*, a style of artmaking that originates from Chicanx/Latinx prisoners and prison culture. *Paño art* is a form of *pinto* art. According to Ben Olguín, *pinto* refers to *la pinta* which is an abbreviation of the Spanish term "penitencia."[88] A form of Chicana/o slang known as *Caló, la pinta* is an intentional re-claiming of the English term "penitentiary" that signals to a "counterhegemonic Chicana/o prisoner linguistic system, culture, and worldview that arises from a unique racialized incarceration experience." [89] *Paño art* consists of ink drawings, usually done with a ballpoint pen on handkerchiefs. Alvaro Ibarra explains that:

> the fantasies portrayed in [paño] drawings are informed by cisgender, heteronormative perspectives that tend to preponderate in Latino communities. However, dismissing paños because of their content ignores their important artistic contribution. And viewing paños only through the lens of the context in which they were produced disregards their artistic merit and demotes them to the status of objects of fetishistic interest rather than objects of

[87] Ibid.

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

[89] Ibid, p 24.

art.[90]

Ibarra argues for a re-framing of paños beyond a racialized fantasy that objectifies both the art and the artist. Keeping Ibarra's thinking in mind I wonder: How can we understand the aesthetic narrative of the *Por Vida* mural, a paño styled visual created by a cisgender gay Chicano who grew up around lowrider culture and whose political mission was to make visible queer and trans Latinx/Chicanx lives? Should *Por Vida* be read as an object of art or is it a racialized fantasy that emerged through a formal art economy? For non-queer Chicanos involved in lowrider culture, Por Vida was clearly a racialized fantasy operating through the circuits of gentrification. For queers of color, Por Vida was an object of art, a powerful political gesture that recognized the existence of queer and trans lives in Chicanx/Latinx communities. Evidently, the Por Vida mural, as a location of antagonisms, required two groups to recognize one another. Queer urban space scholar Jin Haritaworn best describes these moments of ruptures as "the drama of queer lovers and hateful others," a spatial struggle that occurs when queers ascend in the newly revitalized neighborhood:

> The drama of queer lovers and hateful others is crucial in the conversion of queer intimacy from perversion into love. The queer lover requires the simultaneous emergence of a hateful other who is already disposable to the neoliberal multicultural community (Melamed 2011). In this, straight people of colour – always already homophobic – are not the only affect aliens forced to bear the residue of gender violence in the newly gay-friendly context. Queers of colour, too, emerge as unrecognisable – and threatening – to queer structures of love and happiness.[91]

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[90] Ibarra, Alvaro. 2021. "Sueño en paño: Texas Chicano prison inmate art in the Nora Eccles Harrison Museum of Art Collection, Utah State University, and the Leplat-Torti Collection," Latino Studies Journal, 2011, 19: 17-26.

[91] See Haritaworn's *Queer Lovers and Hateful Others*, p. 95.

Haritaworn suggests that at the crux of this drama both the queer of color and the hateful Other are inextricably linked, both burdened by processes of gentrification. Here we can turn to the aesthetic narrative of paño art as the crux of the *drama*. Indeed, aesthetics function as markers of revitalization during processes of gentrification. Through re-branding strategies advanced by local politicians, policies, real estate agents and other speculative forces, gentrification reframes historically redlined and disinvested neighborhoods as "new" and "up and coming" investments. Such a re-branding demands the use of aesthetics – racially charged markers that spatially distinguish the "new" from the "old," the "modern" from the "past." Said differently, these "new" aesthetics give way to the *making* of race and place by disguising dispossession of personhood behind the project of culture and authenticity. Gentrification requires historically marginalized poor working-class tenants of color to *make space* (materially, theoretically and culturally) for those economically capable of participating in the regions' elevated cost of living – educated, middle- and upper-class newcomers (which include both white and non-white people). Richard T. Rodriguez explains that artistic strategies like Paul Manuel's can be better understood as a *queer homeboy aesthetic*.[92] The queer homeboy aesthetic "refers to a style, circulating within Chicano/Latino gay male spaces, whose visibility emanates from the interplay of materiality and fantasy" (128).[93] While the homeboy aesthetic is one that relies of presenting a tough, straight, masculine, cholo figure, the queer homeboy aesthetic removes the tough cholo from the landscape of heteronormativity and into a realm of queer desire and pleasure. Considering this, the aesthetic style of paño alongside the queer homeboy aesthetic, signaled two distinct relationships to the larger barrio landscape. For queers of color, the *Por Vida* mural was

[92] Rodríguez. Richard T. "Queering the Homeboy Aesthetic." Aztlan: A Journal of Chicano Studies, 2006, v31: 127-137.

[93] Ibid, p 128.

a powerful image, a representation of empowerment and belonging. For non-queers, or "the hateful others," *Por Vida* became an intrusion into a space filled with histories of criminalization, an intrusion that could only be recognized as a white advancement of gentrification. What once served as an authentic marker of Chicanx/Latinx identity and spatial belonging, had now been ruptured by a queer imaginary. To visually cast the homeboy as gay, lesbian, and transgender ruptured the heteropatriarchal logics of authenticity undergirding the barrio landscape. As a mural, *Por Vida's* public display of a queer homeboy also ruptured an imagined spatial ordering of the barrio in which queerness was to exist within the domain of the private.

Site of Material Struggle: Queer Gentrification in the Mission District Barrio

> *And it was difficult because at the same time there was also a group of young folks that started showing up and try to intimidate use. They were like gangsters, and they would show up and flock to the corner…You know, the cops got involved because there was a fire involved…. The neighbors upstairs were the ones who were calling the cops because they were saying that we were instigating violence and that that is why the homies were coming out to fight us. And I said "No were not. These young folks are just hanging out." And basically I had to call youth organizers to do a lot of outreach street violence prevention. I was like "I need you guys to come out here and talk to these young folks because at this point its not that, the problem isn't that they're hanging out, but we have a gang injunction. If they get here and get pulled over they are going to get added to the list… The young folks are getting ready to leave and cops are sent in on them. It was really rough and we had to intervene and be like "Leave them alone. They're not doing anything. They're just hanging out." They weren't the ones causing the problem. They were being manipulated/influenced by a street conversation that they themselves did not understand what the fuck was going on. (Ani Rivera)*[94]

Ani Rivera captures the burden placed on queers of color. As a queer Chicana herself, Rivera and her staff (all women) had to tend to the contestations that arose from the anti-gentrification argument rallied against the Por Vida mural. Ani Rivera and her staff understood that in order to tend to the anti-queer violence, something else altogether had to occur. In the

[94] Interview with Ani Rivera. Conducted Summer 2016.

Mission District there are gang injunctions in place which function as tools of policing that further criminalize people of color, in particular men of color. Ani Rivera and her staff understood that police and other forms of nation-state intervention would only result in further criminalization and incarceration. Grace Hong describes these acts of care as an "impossible politic of difference."[95] Hong builds this theoretical contribution from Audrey Lorde's *Sister Outsider* in which she asks us: "In what ways do I contribute to the subjugation of any part of those who I call my people?" According to Hong, Lorde's question is a practice of this "impossible politic of difference" in which the goal is not a direct resolution but rather a continuous "suspension" of "the conflicting goals of preservation or protection." Hong's use of "impossible" must not be read to signify a lack of possibility or a detrimental productivity. Rather, the use of "impossible" references the vast oppositional strategies (subjectivities, visions) "that fall outside the developmental narratives of colonialism, bourgeois nationalism, mainstream liberal feminism, and mainstream gay and lesbian politics and theory." [96] Ani Rivera's strategy recognized that the anti-gentrification argument was rooted in a distorted anti-queer sentiment that positioned queers of color as threats to heteronormative values. At the same time Rivera and her staff recognized that a new strategy was required, one that did not involve the use of police but instead one that required a restorative approach.

Rivera and Galería de la Raza's use of oppositional strategies to hold space, conversation and eventually build across differences is no easy task. Such efforts are tedious. In their exploration of queer gentrification in Berlin, Germany Jin Haritaworn points to the burden queers of color carry as they fight against the racial violence targeting poor working-class

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[95] Hong, Grace. *Death Beyond Disavowal: The Impossible Politics of Difference.* University of Minnesota Press, 2015.

[96] Ibid, p 15.

migrants brought by white queers. Haritaworn describes these acts as "taking care of the mess left behind by white queers."[97] As Haritaworn explains, *the drama of queer lovers and hateful others* involves the queer of color being burdened with the task of care and solidarity building across differences:

> This naturally involves support and solidarity for people of colour who may or may not be queer or even queer friendly. Queer of colour investments thus follow a different calculus, which enables different acts and objects to surface as worthy of investment (see also Lamble 2014). In this instance, queers of colour take care of the neighbourhood in ways that could not be further removed from the 'cleaning up' logic of urban regeneration. While frequently dismissed as "identitarian," these intimate performances are external to the rules of queer identity politics. They are hard to document or enumerate and rarely rise to the status of a social movement (see Kuumba 2001). Their success cannot be counted through measures of publicity or visibility. On the contrary, in a context of embodiment where visibility regularly attracts further violence, these acts are often successful precisely because they occur behind the scenes.[98]

While white queers were not actively advancing the anti-gentrification argument against Por Vida mural, the historical residue of white queer gentrification did inform the site of material struggle that become the case of the *Por Vida* mural. In this section I position the *Por Vida* mural within the contested histories of queer gentrification. The case of the *Por Vida* mural should be taken seriously in developing conversations around queer gentrification as it brings to the forefront questions about how queers of color become entangled within processes of urban

[97] See Haritaworn's *Queer Lovers and Hateful Others*, p 96.

[98] Ibid, p 96.

renewal, a conversation that has continuously celebrated white gay males as ideal gentrifiers alongside the formation of gayborhoods.[99] To do so, I first begin this section by periodizing the *Por Vida* mural within the historical formation of the Mission District barrio. I turn to the Mission District's local histories of gentrification as well as the racial dynamics between white queers and queers of color. The historical formation between the Castro District, the famous gayborhood, and the Mission District barrio holds rich histories that provide insight into how queer bodies of color are and continue to be spatially situated. I turn to two periods in time. The first is the advancement of gay gentrification during the late 1970s and early 1980s. The second time-period pertinent to my analysis is the advancement of gentrification during late 1990s known as the dot-com boom. I turn to these two "waves" of gentrification as a way of tending to the Mission District's racial formation as they both have and continue to inform the racial, gendered, sexual, and classed arrangements of this barrio landscape.

Histories of gay gentrification make up the racial geographies of Mission District barrio. San Francisco's famous gayborhood, the Castro District, developed through gay gentrification which resulted in the displacement of long-standing Latino residents of the Mission District. During the early 1970s, San Francisco began to advertise the Castro district as a gay safe space amidst the rise of the Gay Liberation Movement. A rhetoric of safety emerged as a response to local and state-level anti-queer violence: police raids in queer bars and the three-article rule which criminalized queer bodies that deviated away from cisgender heteronormative public presentations. Through mainstream advertising and local political campaigning, the Castro

[99] Castells, Manuel."Cultural identity, sexual liberation and urban structure: The gay community in San Francisco." In *The City and the Grassroots: A Cross-cultural Theory of Urban Social Movements*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983.

quickly became a "gay-spending zone.[100] However, the areas economic boom came with material consequences to the neighboring regions. The Mission District barrio, bordering the Castro, also began to see the effects as new incoming upper- and middle-class white gays and lesbians who, at the time, were in search for the ideal gay "safe" neighborhood. Ultimately, the Castro District's formation as a gay safe space – a liberal gay tourist destination – depended on the displacement of long-standing working poor Latino residents. Due to its proximity to the Castro District, the Mission's long standing Latino working class residents began to see the shift in its population. In *Safe Space: Gay Neighborhood History*, Christina Hanhardt provides us with a helpful historical tracing of local grassroot efforts that resisted gay gentrification in the Mission District during the Castro District's economic boom of the 1980s. Middle- and upper-class white gays and lesbians who began to move into the Mission District barrio began defining the regional meanings of safety for an imagined mainstream LGBT community during the height of the Gay Liberation Movement. In her extensive archival research, Hanhardt identifies this mainstream approach to queer safety as "militant gay liberalism."[101] This mainstream LGBT political agenda became invested in securing safety and citizenship-belonging through respectably legible avenues such as homonormativity or the diversification of institutions. Militant gay liberalism included the work of homophile activists who, for example, believed that the solution to anti-queer police brutality was to incorporate gays and lesbians into the police force. Christina Hanhardt's work also sheds light on grassroot organizations that mobilized against neoliberal gay movements, many of them directly addressing the issue of gay gentrification in the Mission

[100] Boyd, N.A. "San Francisco's Castro district: from gay liberation to tourist destination." Journal of Tourism and Cultural Change, 2011; 9:3, 237-248.

[101] Hanhardt, Christina B., *Safe Space: Gay Neighborhood History and the Politics of Violence*. Duke Press, 2018; p 120.

District:

> New white gay residents had begun purchasing and renovating property [in the Mission District], and reports of violence supposedly committed by Latino residents were mounting. Also visible was a large community of new lesbian and gay renters, many of them white: people who were not buying property but who were changing the cultural landscape of the neighborhood and sometimes are paying higher rents than long-standing tenants.[102]

Groups like Lesbians Against Police Violence believed that the solution to gentrification was to "educate fellow white lesbians about their place in neighborhoods like the Mission and to reach out across racial and sexual identity divides." [103] These local active grassroot organizations critiqued gay participation in gentrification and used various forms of community educational tools – skits, cartoons, public performances, direct action strategies – to bring awareness about the impact of gentrification on working-class long-standing Mission District residents.[104] Indeed, anti-gentrification efforts required a critical integration that moved beyond gay and lesbian as a singular site of identification and instead asked how race, class and gender produced unequal terrains of belonging.

In the late 1990s the Mission District barrio came up against another gentrifying threat: the dot-com boom (1997-2007). During these years, the internet began to shift the economic landscape. Businesses, old and new, were turning their attention to the internet and other advancing technologies to maximize profits. According to oral historian Nancy Raquel Maribal,

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[102] Ibid, p 134.

[103] Ibid, p 135.

[104] Hanhardt, Christina. *Safe Space: Gay Neighborhood History and the Politics of Violence,* 2013 Duke University Press.

the dot-com boom was a time in which:

> Technology, space, information, economic investments, education, housing, careers, and the future were all subject to re-evaluation and re-definition. The times were changing, and those who could not keep up with the fast-paced momentum spurred by technology were sure to be left behind.[105]

The myth of meritocracy, modernity, and progress ran rampant. Local anti-gentrification activist came up against city efforts that promoted gentrification as a positive turn. Despite the rising rents and displacements, the city ignored the clear signs. According to Peter Plate, "by the year 2000, the Mission must have had something like 200 dot-com companies in a two-mile radius."[106] The high influx of internet companies increased the demand for living spaces and thus resulted in a drastic transformation in the local housing market. For example, real estate marketers began investing in the construction of work/live lofts, expensive and alternative living spaces "designed to appeal to the lifestyle of dot-com and technical workers moving into the Mission District, Potrero Hill, and South of Market."[107] The prevalent patterns of income inequality and income segregation in the Mission District left low-income working-class residents as the most vulnerable population during the height of the dot-com years. Maribal's important ethnographic research on gentrification in the Mission District provides us with important data that captures the dot-com boom's violent impact on vulnerable long standing Latinx residents:

> The number of rental evictions almost tripled from 965 in 1993 to 2,730 in 2000. Owner

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[105] Maribal, N.R. 2009. "Geographies of Displacement: Latina/os, Oral History, and The Politics of Gentrification in San Francisco's Mission District." *The Public Historian*, Vol. 31, No. 2, 2009, p 15.

[106] Ibid, p 144.

[107] Ibid, p 16.

> move -in evictions rose from 433 in 1996 to 1,253 just two years later in 1998. From 1994 to 1998 the median rent for a vacant, one-bedroom apartment in San Francisco increased more than 56 percent, from $800 to $1245. In June of 1998, the Bay Guardian reported that 73 percent of all low-income renters in San Francisco and Oakland were spending more than 50 percent of their income on housing. On Valencia Street, 50 percent of the businesses that existed in 1990, mostly local operations that catered to the low-income Latino community, were gone by 1998.[108]

Rental evictions, owner move-in evictions and unjust rent increases resulted in the displacement of more than 1,000 Latina/o families by early 2000. Local anti-gentrification organizations worked diligently to mobilize against what seemed was an unstoppable force. Keep Hoods Yours (KHY), arguably one of the most well-known anti-gentrification activist groups in the Mission District, actively mobilized against what many described were overnight changes.

Figure 7. Keep Hoods Your Mural. August 29, 2016. Photo by Vicente Carrillo.

[108] Ibid, p 13.

Figure 8. Keep Hoods Yours Mural (close-up). August 29, 2016. Photo by Vicente Carrillo.

KHY describes itself as a "decentralized creative network rooted in challenging oppression/exploitation & developing solidarity from hood to hood."[109] Self-identified as a street graffiti gang, KHY uses street painting/tagging as a form of resistance against gentrification. Today, murals signed by Keep Hoods Yours activists fill up the barrio landscape: Keep Hoods Yours supporters were also vocal about their perspective on *Por Vida's* appearance in the Mission District. As one commenter stated:

> We dont condone that gay shit in the mission! Yall need to put that mural up in the castro. But the raza doesn't see the point of this shit! Just saying ur mural will not last long at all in the mission with all the graffiti writers out there! #keephoodsyours #yuppies n hipsters out of the mission! (online comment)[110]

These anti-gentrification comments relegated *Por Vida* to an imagined designated space for queer bodies, that space being the Castro District gayborhood. Moreover, we cannot be certain that the actions to deface the mural originate solely as an anti-gentrification gesture. My question

[109] 1312 Press. "Keep Hoods Yours: An Interview." Retrieved from https://itsgoingdown.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/KHY_imposed.pdf

[110] Online comment by anonymous user. Accessed 2017.

bears repeating: What does it mean when an apparently anti-racist and anti-capitalist project, like anti-gentrification, emerges in the form of anti-queerness? The anti-gentrification argument rallied against *Por Vida* relied heavily on anti-queer sentiments informed by heteropatriarchal logics of Latinx/Chicanx authenticity. Here, queerness is spatially imagined as a white geography, the Castro District gayborhood. This spatial designation emplaces queer Latinidad/Chicanidad out of sight, a relegation of queerness to the gayborhood, a designated area where queerness can exist. While comments like the one above designates the queer racialized body to a space, this spatial imaginary relies on the myth that queerness operates through whiteness. Said differently, queer Latinx/Chicanx bodies disrupt an imagined heteronormative spatial arrangement despite a long-standing queer Chicanx/Latinx presence in the barrio landscape.

Por Vida emerges as a "non-heternormative racial formation" within the Mission District barrio landscape.[111] More specifically, we see the queer and trans cholx/a/o figure stand as the antithesis to an imagined heteronormative Chicanidad and Latinidad. Paul Manuel's rendering of a queer trans, gay and lesbian homeboy through a public mural disrupted the "citizen-ideal of the state" – the citizen ideal of Latinidad and Chicanidad. Paul Manuel's mural reminds us of Latinidad and Chicanidad's deep investment in heteropatriarchy, an investment that, in this case, extends into the spatial imaginaries of anti-gentrification activism. Within the Latinx geographies of the Mission District barrio, queers of color were to remain within private domain. However, to become visible within the barrio ultimately necessitated another landscape altogether. Indeed, when we resist capitalism's destruction of Latinx communities, we cannot do so by relying on anti-queerness, we cannot do so by investing in heteropatriarchy. We must contend with

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[111] Ferguson, Roderick A. *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique*. University of Minnesota Press, 2004.

heteropatriarchal logics of belonging that easily slip into anti-gentrification efforts within Latinx communities, while they openly present an anti-racist and anti-capitalist agenda. To uncouple queerness from anti-gentrification activism results in a racial banishment of queer bodies of color, an eviction that such activism purported to stop in the first place.

Conclusion: Queer Cholxs & Hateful Chicanos

In this paper I have applied a queer of color critique to analyze the case of the Por Vida mural as a *location of antagonisms* and a *site of material struggle.* In doing so I demonstrated how competing aesthetic narratives of belonging and regional histories of struggle resurfaced through the ascendancy of queer Latinx/Chicanx in the revitalized barrio landscape. The paño art style clashed against Paul Manuel's queer homeboy aesthetic, revealing two distinct narratives of belonging in the barrio landscape. Filled with histories of criminalization and incarceration, the queering of the homeboy aesthetic registered for non-queer Chicanos/Latinos as an advancement of white gentrification. For queers of color in the area, the Por Vida mural and its queering of the homeboy aesthetic read as a political gesture of empowerment and visibility for queer Latinx/Chicanx lives. Galeria de la Raza, as an arts non-profit, become entrenched within the geographies of gentrification as it was perceived as a complicit agent advancing gentrification. Through the process of curation, *Por Vida* was able to be re-printed after each defacement, locating it within a formal art economy. However, I demonstrate that despite Galeria de la Raza's institutional power as arts non-profit and *Por Vida's* emergence through a sanctioned art economy, both the gallery space and the queer Latinx image were not granted protection. Instead, these political efforts of visibility were met with anti-queer violence.

In the second section of the paper, I examine the *Por Vida* case as a site of material

struggle by historically contextualizing the queer Latinx image alongside the regional histories of queer gentrification. I also demonstrate that the antagonisms of the *Por Vida* mural are informed by the "drama of queer lovers and hateful others." This drama places the burden on queers of color to build solidarity amongst queers, non-queers and non-queer friendly people. I demonstrate that Galeria de la Raza and Ani Rivera practiced a "radical politics of suspension" by building across differences despite the violent acts inflicted upon them as queer women of color. In doing so I suggest that the regional histories of revitalization and white queer gentrification emerged as historical residue through the *Por Vida* mural. The historical residue emerged as the anti-gentrification argument that framed queerness as inherently white, a myth used to imagine queer people of color as placeless.

The fiery defacement of *Por Vida* and the emergence of the anti-gentrification argument rallied against the queer Latinx visual must be understood as an eviction. If we are to take a lesson away from the case of the Por Vida mural it is that anti-gentrification activism – an anti-racist and anti-capitalist project – must also interrogate its investments in heteropatriarchy. In other words, the violent defacements alongside the projected framing of the mural as a gentrifying threat must be understood as a symptom of liberal capitalism's continued relegation of queer bodies of color as placeless subjects.

Chapter 2

Vamos al Noa Noa: Queer Nightlife in the Gentrifying Barrio

> *One's ability to secure rights in and to the neoliberal city has as much to do with financial resources as with the ability to effectively perform the embodied and affective characteristics of "good" neoliberal citizenship; the two coalesce in nightlife scenes where the question of rights is waged in financial terms (that one can afford the cost of entry or buying food and drink once inside) and in one's performance of the scripts of leisure and pleasure that these scenes are organized around.*
>
> - Kemi Adeyemi, "The Practice of Slowness: Black Queer Women and the Right to the City"

> *If a blunt distinction between 'gentrifying queers' and 'displaced queers' is insufficient, in that no positionality is automatically outside of gentrification, our proximities and distances from the good multicultural subject on the one hand, and the degenerate disposable non-citizen on the other, shape the kind of invitations we get, and the performances we must make, to become or stay part of queer spaces forming in gentrifying areas"* (51).
>
> - Jin Haritaworn, "Setting the Scene," *Queer Lovers and Hateful Others: Regenerating Violent Times and Places*

It was the first weekend of December 2020 when I stepped into Noa Noa Place, Boyle Height's new queer Latinx bar. The pandemic was still a very real and lingering threat (it continues to be). That opening weekend the bar was only conducting to-go orders. Amidst the fears and sadness from the many losses we had experienced, my friends and I felt hopeful about Noa Noa Place, hopeful about what it could offer our terrifying present and unfolding future – especially a very nearing future where people could potentially congregate once again. At the time, we wondered what this space would transform into once queer nightlife returned. We arrived, and the once pizza, wings, and beer sports bar had now been completely revamped. Neon lights now emanated from the building, a small detail signaling big change. Once inside you were greeted by glittering pink and blue confetti string covered walls. Infront of the glittering blue wall stood El Resplandor, a corn husk sculpture resembling the Virgen de

Guadalupe's iconic sunrays. A photo-op stage, customers could capture pictures of themselves as saints by standing in front of the sculpture. El Resplandor was piece by artist Edwin Soto Saucedo created in collaboration for Noa Noa Place's opening. That weekend, social media timelines on Instagram became flooded with images of Saucedo's sculpture alongside excited attendees showing their support for Noa Noa Place's arrival in Boyle Heights.

Figure 9. Outside of Noa Noa Place, Photo by Chava Sanchez from LAist.

Figure 10. Inside Noa Noa Place, Phot by Laura Tejada from L.A. Taco.

Figure 11. Noa Noa Place owners pose infront of El Resplandor, photo by David Lopez.

In this chapter I am interested in the intimate process of seeking, finding, returning-to, and remembering queer nightlife; that favorite bar or party that offers potentiality and comfort amidst the demands of labor under capitalism. The ceremony of getting ready, pre-gaming and attending a bar with close friends is one that requires close attention as it offers us insight into how queers of color negotiate with the neoliberal city. As I move through this ethnographic analysis, I also keep in mind that queer nightlife is also deeply tied to the political economies of racial capitalism. From the bartender quickly serving drinks, to the drag queen producing a show, to the cooks in the kitchen preparing food, as well as the DJ creating a musical soundscape, labor is what makes queer nightlife go 'round. In *Queer Nightlife* anthology, authors Adeyemi, Khubchandani and Rivera-Servera's remind us that queer nightlife is a site of both pleasure and violence: "But for all of the ways that queer nightlife spaces can provide refuge and play, they can also be sites of alienation that are circumscribed by normative modes of exclusion."[112] In

[112] Adeyemi, Kemi; Khubchandani, Kareem; Rivera-Servera, Ramon. *Queer Nightlife (Triangulations: Lesbian/Gay/Queer Theater/Drama/Performance),* University of Michigan Press, 2021; p 2.

keeping with Haritaworn's "queer regeneration," new queer nightlife spaces emerging in gentrifying areas are intimately tied to processes of revitalization. In this chapter I trace the relationships between gentrification, queer of color nightlife, and identity-formations.

To do so I deploy a performance study analytic to read the vast ways queers of color work, party, and play to sustain nightlife spaces – may that be the bar, café, the nightclub, a house party, or a local cruising park bathroom. Understanding queer nightlife through a performance analysis asks us to pause and consider how value circulates through the realm of sound, ornamentation, aesthetics, the corporeal and, of course, the monetary:

> Indeed, performance has been a critical optic to studies of nightlife that depend on the aesthetics and sensorial data of the night—from the music played to the lighting to the ways that people move together and apart, reading bodies as they perform against the visual, sonic, and kinesthetic landscapes that surround them—to make sense of the ways that individual and collective identities are felt and negotiated.[113]

Inspired by *Queer Nightlife's* analytic, I read Noa Noa Place's *performance* – the bar's aesthetic narrative and repertoire. I examine the bar's musical choreographies, drag performances, spatial arrangement, and special events (Orgullo Fest, Boyle Height's 1st annual Pride Festival). Queer nightlife is as a place-making process which entails the meticulous task of creating and sustaining an environment that can potentially offer a sense of belonging. As such, identities play an important role in determining how spaces *perform*, and vice versa – queer nightlife spaces also become the location of failure where identities come alive, fall apart, or hide away.

Spatially situated in the gentrifying barrio landscape of Boyle Heights, I argue that Noa Noa Place performs a *queer Latinidad* as an aesthetic of multicultural celebration signaling to a

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[113] Ibid, p 7.

larger *queer Latinx regeneration* in the region. Articulating a politic of Latinx inclusivity, acceptance, and empowerment, the queer Latinidad performed by Noa Noa Place functions as the "embodied and affective characteristics of the 'good' neoliberal citizenship".[114] As such the identity-categories of "Chicana/o/x," "Latina/o/x," "Mexican," "Central American," and "Latin American" at times are welcomed; these various identity-categories come to live through musical genres, drag performances and place-based aesthetics. In other moments, the very attempt to create a queer pan-Latinidad falls short for other attendees – the same aesthetic narrative failing to produce the imagined inclusivity it promised.

Moreover, I suggest that Noa Noa Place's queer Latinidad is reflective of the barrio's entanglement with gentefication, a process of neighborhood changes advanced by other Latinx people. Noa Noa Place's emergence in Boyle Heights, a historically immigrant working-class Latinx barrio currently undergoing gentrification, is of importance to understanding the bar's articulation of a queer Latinidad. As such, I bridge queer gentrification and queer nightlife scholarship into this analysis to consider how Noa Noa Place, its attendees, and performers, navigate the shifting terrains of the neoliberal city – terrains which work to displace people incapable of participating in gentrifying areas. Said differently, I trace the affective contours of Noa Noa Place's queer nightlife – I weave together joyous memories and political achievements alongside critiques and disappointments to tell a story about Boyle Height's new queer Latinx bar, a task I conduct to better understand the relationship between queer of color mobility and the neoliberal city. I ask: If queer nightlife contexts shed light to racial capitalism's regulation of bodies – as the very mechanism that determines who is worthy of participation – who then gets to participate in emerging new queer spaces? How does Noa Noa Place articulate its relationship

[114] Kemi Adeyemi; The Practice of Slowness: Black Queer Women and the Right to the City." GLQ 1 October 2019.

to the gentrifying barrio of Boyle Heights? What can we learn by reading Noa Noa Place, not simply as a queer bar, but rather as a performance? And lastly, what insights can Noa Noa Place attendees offer us about the relationship between queer of color belonging and the neoliberal city?

In this analysis and ethnographic work, I hold all the complexities, ambivalences and contradictions that come with the arrival of Noa Noa Place. Many of the attendees (including myself) participate in the gentrification of the area. My access into Noa Noa Place is reflective of the socio-economic position I hold as a cisgender queer Chicanx man in graduate school. Jin Haritaworn reminds us that once a region is gentrified, or "prepared for proper middle-class habitation," a new queer subject can also properly emerge – one that is legible and worthy of protection. Noa Noa Place, as a space, aesthetic, and business, sits within processes of a *queer Latinx regeneration*. Considering this, I linger in the tensions that arise within Noa Noa Place: the formation of queer night life as a site of communal gathering and the relationship queer night life holds to the gentrifying city as a site of continuous negotiations.

Noa Noa Place Arrives!

The emergence of Noa Noa Place sits within a distinct local history of regional regeneration. Throughout the past 8 years Boyle Heights has reached national headlines for local anti-gentrification efforts, many of which protested art galleries, coffee shops and other speculative forces like real estate agents. Boyle Heights is also the place where the now well circulated term "gentefication," originally emerged. The term was coined in 2014 by local business owner Guillermo Uribe, owner of Eastside Luv bar. For Uribe, "gentefication" is a project of cultural preservation:

> I started to see the potential of improving the community from the inside out. If gentrification is happening, it might as well be from people who care about the existing culture. In the case of Boyle Heights, it would be best if the *gente* decide to invest in improvements because they are more likely to preserve its integrity.[115]

Many agree with Uribe's definition, celebrating the politic of representation and cultural authenticity. However, local activists point to the dangers behind Uribe's definition, identifying the inevitable displacement of long-standing residents regardless of whether the advancing gentrification is white or brown/Latinx/Chicanx. Sociologist Alfredo Huante suggests that the conflicting definitions of gentefication – on one the hand a gentrification process that is culturally sensitive, and on the other, a gentrification that is culturally sensitive but nonetheless contributes to the displacement of residents – are reflective of conflicting racial, economic, and social differences that make up the barrio demography. The barrio, as a place-based identity and imagined community, is repeatedly scripted as a politically unified region. While this remains true in various other sites of solidarity-building, local racial and class stratifications still inform how residents (long-standing and incoming) make claim to the neighborhood. Indeed, the legal relationship between landlord and tenant remains a central site where the violence of gentefication continues to proliferate. Local anti-gentrification organizations continue to resist against both large corporate landlords and local Latinx/Chicanx/Hispanic landlords who seeks to replace longstanding residents with new incoming residents capable of participating in the elevated cost of living.

Noa Noa Place's arrival is also amongst the many new Latinx businesses that have emerged in Boyle Heights and the larger East Los Angeles area. In 2018, Xelas, a beer bar

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[115] Herbst, Julia. "Guillermo Urbe on the 'Gentefication' of East LA," *Los Angeles Magazine*, September 9, 2014, http://www.lamag.com/citythinkblog/guillermo-uribe-on-the-gentrification-of-east-l-a/

catering specifically to a younger Latinx customer, opened in Mariachi Plaza – the area many consider to be the heart of Boyle Heights. Similarly, in 2018 Andi Xoch opened up Latinx With Plants, a shop dedicated to selling plants. Before occupying a physical space, the shop began as a plant-themed Instagram account. Xoch opened their first store on Cesar E. Chavez Avenue. Once open, Latinx with Plants began to attract a younger Latinx/Chicanx crowd who could afford the elevated cost of plants attached to the shop's brand. Since its successful opening, Xoch has opened a second shop, also in Boyle Heights. Many locals hold varying relationships to these new Latinx businesses. While some long-standing residents categorize these businesses as proper examples of gentefication contributing to the political economies of gentrification, others view them as exciting and culturally relevant changes that preserve a Latinx/Chicanx authenticity.

Considering the evolving and contradicting definitions of "gente-fication," I wonder: Where do we locate Noa Noa Place amongst the discourse of gente-fication? Is such a task possible? I suggest that Noa Noa Place is part of the rise in gentefication businesses like Xelas and Latinx With Plants who articulate a legible and inclusive Latinidad. However, Noa Noa Place is unique in that it intentionally centers a *queer Latinidad*. I suggest that "gente-fication," while helpful in pointing to the complicities Latinx/Chicanx residents hold in advancing gentrification, the term does not fully capture Noa Noa Place's relationship to Boyle Heights as it fails to consider how queer minoritarian subjects articulate their sense of belonging. That is not to say queer nightlife sits outside processes of gentefication. Rather, gente-fication, as a term that describes neighborhood change advanced by other Latinxs, does not consider how queers of color negotiate the changing city as the term operates with an underlying compulsory heterosexuality. Therefore, to best understand the emergence of Noa Noa Place I suggest that we observe the bar as part of a regional *queer Latinx regeneration,* a process in which a distinct

queer Latinx subject emerges alongside the newly revitalized area. *Queer Latinx regeneration* considers that queers of color, while not positioned outside the economies of gentrification, still navigate the city in distinct ways that push against what Rodrick Ferguson describes as "racialized emblem of heteronormativity whose universality exists at the expense of particularities of race, gender, and sexuality."[116] This universality as such is sustained through an investment in the nuclear family, normative gender/sexual expressions, and binary gender roles. The question remains, however, as to whether queerness achieved on neo-liberal ground and through gentrification, sustains compulsory heterosexuality through a limiting of queerness only to those who can afford its entanglement in racial capitalism. Can this be simply the securing of a "toehold on respectability" as Fellows and Razack describe?[117] A multicultural 'difference' to be tolerated?

Queer spaces in East Los Angeles are ephemeral, constantly pushing against mainstream LGBTQ narratives in which the queer of color leaves the perceived anti-queer area (the barrio) to be openly queer in (West Hollywood). *Queer latinx regeneration* challenges these mainstream narratives of queer mobility and empowerment as they rely on racist scripts that perceive areas like East Los Angeles as dangerous to queer people while presenting the gayborhood like West Hollywood as a utopian space of queer acceptance. Aware of the racist scripts operating in spaces like West Hollywood, Luis Octavio imagined Noa Noa Place as a safer queer destination to party and play:

> Our sole purpose to be in Boyle Heights is to make sure that those that identify as queer or any of the letters in LGBTQ spectrum know that we no longer have to leave our

[116] See Rodrick Ferguson's *Aberrations in Black*, p 12.

[117] Fellows, Mary Louise and Sherene H. Razack. "The Race to Innocence: Confronting Hierarchical Relations among Women," 1998.

> communities, we no longer have to put ourselves at risk by driving outside of our communities and potentially getting pulled over, harassed or whatever. Not to say that we shouldn't take up space everywhere else, because we should. But at least you have your local bar that will accept you. You can come in chanclas, you can come in huaraches, you can come in your Sunday best. You can come in drag, you can come however you want, as long as you are respectful, this is the place for you.[118]

Noa Noa Place's arrival activates an alternative vision of queer belonging in which the queer of color does not leave home to be queer but instead stays to create affirming and local queer spaces. For Luis, creating local queer spaces that do not require traveling far from the barrio can reduce the risk of encountering the state.

Upon its arrival Noa Noa Place quickly became popular. Once Covid restrictions lifted, both residents and famous stars alike stopped by to enjoy the bar's drag shows and brunch specials hosted by drag queen Melissa Befierce and the Haus of Befierce. The bar also attracted famous names like actress and reality-TV star Niurka Marcos and pop-singer Lana del Rey. Noa Noa Place also offered exciting new events like ASSasda Sundays and Orgullo Fest. ASSada Sundays transformed the bar's backyard parking area into a sunny day-drinking experience with drag performances and food by local street vendors. Orgullo Fest was perhaps Noa Noa Place's biggest event and accomplishment. Orgullo Fest was Boyle Height's first annual pride festival which took over Soto and 1st Street with stages, queer performers, vendors, and other queer entertainment. I explore Orgullo Fest in Chapter 3.

The bar's undoubtedly quick popularity also resulted in its unforeseen name change. In August 2021 the bar announced its name change to El Place (The Place). It is speculated

[118] Interview with Luis Octavio. Conducted August 31, 2021.

amongst locals that Juan Gabriel's estate requested that the bar no longer use "Noa Noa" in its advertisement. I asked owner Luis Octavio about the name change. Unable to confirm for legal reasons, he simply stated that the bar had "made a lot of noise." While attendees tried to re-adjust to the new name, many agreed it was quite difficult to simply let the original name go. Many continued to refer to the space as Noa Noa. I do the same in this essay.

Performing Queer Latinidad

To help in the construction of the bar's ambiance, owners Luis, Daysi and Donaji called upon late Mexican singer Juan Gabriel. Widely celebrated amongst the queer Latinx community, Juan Gabriel is now considered an icon both as a famous Mexican singer and a queer figure. However, this was not always the case. Throughout his career, Juan Gabriel's queerness was a site of scrutiny by both mainstream media and fans alike. On stage, Juan Gabriel was known for his femme performance and voice, a style traditional heteropatriarchal Mexican values would repeatedly deem as "joto" – a word used to demean queer men, usually feminine in gender expressions. Despite these anti-queer sentiments, Juan Gabriel's music was enjoyed by both queer people and homophobes alike; his queerness a conversation simultaneously avoided and confronted. Musical scholar Alejandro M. Madrid suggests that the "…construction of the singer's public persona [was] as a complex negotiation between often contradictory personal and collective desires and anxieties." [119] He argues that Juan Gabriel's style and voice could be best understood as a performance of *joteria* – an "excessive" queer dialectic that disrupted heteronormative expectations and lay bare anti-queer anxieties within his Latinx fanbase (93). A

[119] Madrid, Alejandro L. "Secreto a Voces: Excess, Performance, and Jotería in Juan Gabriel's Vocality." *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies 24*, no. 1 (2018): p 88.

famous 2003 interview with Spanish news show *Primer Impacto* is repeatedly revisited now as a prime example of the homophobia Juan Gabriel experienced throughout his career:

> Interviewer, Fernando del Rincón: Dicen que eres gay. Juan Gabriel es gay?
>
> (They say that you are gay. Is Juan Gabriel gay?)
>
> Juan Gabriel: Lo que se ve, no se pregunta, mijo.[120]

Responding with an idiom, a strict English translation is not helpful in capturing Juan Gabriel's sentiments. Perhaps a clearer translation is "one should not ask questions for things they already hold answers for." This interview is considered one of Juan Gabriel's career highlights. Today, his response is quoted in a vast array of merchandise and art. What makes this moment so memorable is the refusal of his answer. Neither denying nor confirming, Juan Gabriel delivers an ambiguous answer. Jaun Gabriel reframes the very question – fueled by anti-queer anxieties – as an unnecessary nuisance: a waste of time.

Noa Noa Place is named after one of Juan Gabriel's famous songs, "El Noa Noa." Naming the bar after a Juan Gabriel song is a performative gesture central to Noa Noa Place's "kinesthetic landscape." In the song, Juan Gabriel sings about a nightclub located in the City of Juarez where he first began his career. In the lyrics, Juan Gabriel celebrates the bar, describing the space as a unique environment of endless possibilities:

> Este es un lugar de ambiente donde todo es diferente
>
> Donde siempre alegremente bailarás toda la noche ahí
>
> Este es un lugar de ambiente donde todo es diferente
>
> Donde siempre alegremente bailarás toda la noche ahí

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[120] Primer Impacto, "JUAN GABRIEL lo que se ve no se pregunta," August 30, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZdCM021ApC0

Translation:
This is an ambient place where everything is different

Where you will always happily dance the night away

This is an ambient place where everything is different

Where you will always happily dance the night away.[121]

While not explicit in its lyrical meaning, cultural studies scholars and fans alike have repeatedly pointed to the queer-coded messages in Juan Gabriel's songs. According to Rodrigo Laguardia, the usage of the word "diferente" (different) signals to a queerness in which "daily certainties" – like heteronormative gender and sexual expressions – are disrupted (Laguardia). The word "ambiente" (ambient) also serves a similar purpose. In its colloquial usage of Mexican Spanish during the mid 1960s and beyond, the expression "son personas de ambiente" (they are people of ambiance) was used to reference queer people. Many of Juan Gabriel's songs also repeatedly relied on a gender ambiguity, a staple of his queer performance style. Therefore, by positioning "Place" at the end of "Noa Noa," important meanings surface. Noa Noa "Place" denotes an imbued meaning crafted by memories, stories, and senses of belonging. A repertoire is intentionally conjured – a queer Latinidad styled alongside Juan Gabriel's "excessive" joteria performance style and the contradictory desires his queerness arose in both queer and anti-queer fans. A place-making gesture, naming the bar after Juan Gabriel's song, "El Noa Noa," intentionally centers a queer Latinidad that "excessively" celebrates the same *joteria* for which Juan Gabriel was heavily scrutinized for.

The intention to center a queer Latinidad was also deeply informed by personal queer "coming-out" narratives tied to the physical space. During contract negotiations and visits to the building, Luis came to an important personal realization: He had been here before. Luis had

[121] Aguilera Valdez, Alberto. "El Noa Noa," Track 3 in *Recuerdos*, 1980, Universal Public Publishing Group.

visited this exact spot years ago before it became a Pizza, Beer, and Wings spot (2017-2020). At the time, Luis had attended Tano Sushi (roughly 2012-2016). More importantly, he went on a blind date to Tano Sushi as a closeted gay man. For Luis, his return to this once sushi restaurant not only reminded him of a time of his life when he was struggling with his sexual identity, it also was a clear indication that he had to move forward with contract negotiations to create the new Boyle Heights queer Latinx bar. During these negotiations, another queer coming out narrative made its way to the surface:

> And the person that was going to say 'yay or nay,' his brother had just passed, and while cleaning his brother's things he found out that he was queer. And as an homage to his brother, he said 'You all have the space.' I don't know how to explain it. I just know that we're meant to be there and to have this space. This place signifies so many things for so many people. And so, we struck a deal in October. By November we were in there cleaning and prepping. And we opened in December.[122]

Luis' vision to center a queer Latinidad styled alongside by Juan Gabriel's "excessive" joteria style is both a personal and political project informed by the ongoing violence queer people experience. The "closet" remains a site of violence and internalized shame for queer people. Therefore, for Luis, Noa Noa Place's mission was to actively push against anti-queer anxieties and form a space of queer empowerment. Luis' vision enacted what Jose Esteban describes as a "feeling brown, feeling down" politic, a racialized affective position practiced by queer Latinx bodies that actively transforms the site of depression – the closet – into the raw material for liberatory transformation.

Noa Noa Place performed its queer Latinidad through drag, decoration, and

[122] Interview with Luis Octavio. Conducted August 31, 2021.

ornamentation. The outside patio, which also functions as the main entrance, is illuminated with papel picado, brightly colored tissue paper cut with intricate shapes and used for a range of Mexican festivities like quinceañeras, holidays, weddings, and Dia de los Muertos. The bar also held special theme nights to define its queer Latinidad such as their "Cholo Party" night where drag queens performed in cholo drag; flannel shirts, bandanas; baggy clothes. The bar also hosted a "Viva la Latinidad" event during the 2021 Mexican Independence Day weekend (Figure 12). To avoid overly centering Mexico, the bar instead used a pan-Latinidad in its advertisement. The online flyer read: "Celebrando la independecia de (Celebrating the independence of) Costa Rica/El Salvador/Guatemala/Honduras/ Nicaragua/Mexico/Chile." Perhaps the bar's performance of a queer Latinidad is best congealed in its bejeweled Jarrito bottle (Figure 13), a brand of soft drink based in Mexico and widely distributed throughout all of U.S. Used both as party favors and in the bar's online branding, the bejeweled Jarrito became a Noa Noa Place signature. I argue that the bejeweled Jarrito best presents the bar's joteria or as Madrid states, a "performative surplus." The bejweled Jarrito, also closely expresses what Cheng describes as "ornamental personhood:"

> For me, then, the ornament resonates on multiple registers: as racialized material artifacts, as a linchpin in modernism's primal aesthetic crisis (itself also raced and gendered), as a struggle over the superfluity of person's and things, and as a problem about prosthetic humanness." [123]

Noa Noa Place re-imagines the Jarrito as a symbol of queer Latinidad – the bejeweled stones signaling to a queer utopic vision informed by the material conditions of working-class Latinx livelihoods. In the U.S., the Jarrito is commonly sold by Latinx mom and pop shops and local

[123] Cheng, Anne Anlin. *Ornamentalism.* Oxford University Press, 2019, p 16.

street vendors. Standing in opposition to mainstream U.S. soda companies like Coca Cola or Sprite, Jarrito instead echoes a working-class sensibility. By bejeweling the Jarrito, the bar transforms the common Mexican soft drink into a decoration, an accessory imbued with meanings intimately tied to a working-class Mexican/Latinx food culture. A racialized ornament, the bejeweled Jarrito functions as a congealment of working-class Latinx labor re-fashioned through a queer imaginary. Synthesized through the cultural economies of a *queer Latinx regeneration*, the bejeweled Jarrito properly emerges onto the gentrifying barrio landscape.

Figure 12. Online public flyers for Noa Noa Place's Viva La Latinidad Event and Cholo Party.

Figure 13.Bejeweled Jarritos Bottles, Photo and object by Noa Noa Place

In addition to Juan Gabriel's joteria, Luis Octavio also turned to the quinceñera to create the space's "kinesthetic landscapes."[124] Born in Mexico and raised in the U.S., Luis grew up attending quinceñeras, the traditional 15th birthday celebration that mark a girl's transition from childhood into adulthood or "womanhood." Popular in various Latin American communities, quinceñeras consist of a church ceremony followed by a large party attended by the young woman's family and friends. In the party, the quinceñera, usually wearing a hoop dress, participates in a range of traditions like the walts and the father/daughter dance. For Luis, the quinceñera was Noa Noa Place's musical blueprint:

> When you go to any quinceñera, regardless of the socioeconomic background, regardless of what city, or what part of the world they're from, right, Latino America, if you go to a Salvadorean quinceñera, the one thing that always happens at quinceñeras is that the music brings the people together. And there is a huge difference in genres being played at quinceñeras. Because you have the music for the abuelos because they want to dance, you have the music for the tias and tios, you have the music for the padrinos, you have the music for the quinceñera herself, which is probably the Top 40 and what is in the now. So that's what we like to think of Noa Noa or, now El Place.[125]

The quinceñera blueprint allowed for an intergenerational musical communion in Noa Noa Place. During my visits I saw a clear presence of both a younger (mid 20s-30s) and older (40-60) crowd, the music intentionally catering to a large age range. In Noa Noa Place you could hear the swift raps of Black American rapper Meghan thee Stallion, followed immediately by the popular

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[124] Adeyemi, Kemi; Khubchandani, Kareem; Rivera-Servera, Ramon. *Queer Nightlife (Triangulations: Lesbian/Gay/Queer Theater/Drama/Performance),* University of Michigan Press, p 7.

[125] Interview with Luis Octavio. Conducted August 31, 2021.

cumbia sounds of La Sonora Dinamita, a Mexican and Columbian musical group – a staple of Latinx family parties. Luis' use of the quinceñera as the musical blueprint for Noa Noa Place gestures to what Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner describe as a "queer world-making." At Noa Noa Place the quinceñera was a site of queer potentiality, a model from which to build the space's ambiance.

The Excess of Gentrification

As I made my way through various Noa Noa Place events, speaking to attendees, watching drag performances, it became clear that the bar's queer Latinidad was a site of contestation reflective of competing ideologies of belonging. In what follows I trace Noa Noa Place attendees' responses to the bar's performance of jotería – its musical choreographies and aesthetics. I consider the role of "excess" within Noa Noa Place. For Alejandro M. Madrid, Juan Gabriel's performance style was an articulation of jotería – an "excessive" performance that ruptured notions of respectability upheld by cisgender heteronormative masculinities. The "excess" Madrid points to is one in which power is disrupted and as such it retaliates back with *fear* or more precisely, anti-queer violence. Madrid makes this distinction to suggest that jotería's excessiveness should not be defined as the embodied femininity or gay-performativity but rather be marked more efficiently by the very fear used to stabilize cis-gender heteronormativity. Building from Madrid's work, my exploration of "excess" in Noa Noa Place also follows Jillian Hernandez's inquiries on the "aesthetics of excess." For Hernandez, the "aesthetics of excess play a major role in defining what becomes legible as Blackness and Latinidad through varied processes of inscription, assumption, and disavowal."[126] Hernandez argues that different gendered embodiments of Latinidad are able to "gain cultural and material

[126] Hernandez, Jillian. *Aesthetics of Excess: The Art and Politics of Black and Latina Embodiment*. Duke University Press, 2020, p 7.

value" while others are "mocked, reviled, and considered dangerous." For Hernandez, this dangerous Latinidad is scripted on Latina and Black women's bodies where they are then marked as indecent, non-white, non-respectable. While I keep in mind Madrid and Hernadez's framing, I suggest that within the context of the new queer Latinx space in the gentrifying barrio, joteria's "excess" took on another meaning molded through a *queer Latinx regeneration*. At Noa Noa, the "excess" that surfaced for attendees was the excess of heteronormativity, a disruptive presence that pushed against the possibility of a more fully imagined queer space. For other attendees, the "excess" was in the aesthetic strategies used by the bar, its use of mainstream Latinx symbols. As Madrid and Hernandez point out, to understand "excess" we must understand how race, class and gender mold affects (emotions) surrounding cultural artifacts. Here I wonder: What are the affects lingering within emerging queer Latinx spaces in the gentrifying barrio? Scholars and activists have reminded us that gentrification is a social, economic, and material process spearheaded by the neoliberal's city's investment in capital accumulation. Within this violent process also lies a less explored territory: the affective realm of gentrification. Here, I consider Seitz and Proudfoot's important question: "What can we learn about gentrification by attending to its psychic life?" They remind us that affect like anger, dignified anger to be more precise, is usually expressed by those most directly impacted by violent neighborhood changes – marginally housed residents pushed out to make way for "proper" new inhabitants. Gentrifiers' liberal guilt and racist hostility is also deeply present within the affective economies of gentrification. Seitz and Proudfoot also remind us of more complicated affective realms such as "the desire for the other" and even "the attraction to the gentrifier."[127] To advance affective investigations of gentrification they offer "ambivalence" as a site to hold multiple truths:

[127] Seitz DK, Proudfoot J. "The psychic life of gentrification: mapping desire and resentment in the gentrifying city. cultural geographies," 2021; p 3.

> Ambivalence describes the ways that love and hate, desire, and repulsion, can operate simultaneously: for example, how gentrifiers can at the same moment love and desire the culture of the people they are displacing and resent and despise it.[128]

Considering the task of ambivalence, I wonder what are the affective economies that contour new queer Latinx spaces in gentrifying areas? What physic life does queer Latinx regeneration possess? I also take of lead of Clare Forstie who centers ambivalence when exploring queer nightlife:

> We benefit from an analysis of ambivalence in queer nightlife spaces because such work enables a richer understanding of queer nightlife spaces of the past, fosters a recognition of the inequalities re-created within these spaces, maintains a necessary sense of instability in ongoing community-making processes, and facilitates a framework for planning for queer nightlife spaces of the future.[129]

I turn to ambivalence here to hold the multiple meanings that surfaced alongside the bar's "excessive" jotería – its own articulation of queer Latinidad. I suggest that to better understand *queer Latinx regeneration* we can turn to the psychic life of the gentrifying barrio – Noa Noa Place and its attendees. As such, ambivalence is required as a range of competing affective economies surfaced through late night conversation, post-party reflections, and Zoom interviews.

For some attendees, Noa Noa Place's performance of queer Latinidad signaled a politic of Latinx empowerment in which multiple Latinx identities could come together to party and play, as presented in the "Viva la Latinidad" theme night. Culturally specific elements like the

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[128] Ibid, p 32.

[129] Adeyemi, Kemi; Khubchandani, Kareem; Rivera-Servera, Ramon. *Queer Nightlife (Triangulations: Lesbian/Gay/Queer Theater/Drama/Performance),* University of Michigan Press, p 132.

quinceañera musical landscape also offered what many called an "authentic Latinx" experience. Jose, a young gay cisgender Latinx man enjoyed what Noa Noa Place offered:

> It is so rare for there to be a gay space on the east side of Los Angeles, and this one felt like it catered to my generation of mid 20s gay Latino, very closely. It felt like a space that was built very intentionally to bring people together and have a cute time while celebrating our culture in an authentic way.[130]

Indeed, for many attendees that bar's presence in Boyle Heights signaled a positive turn, one that centered and celebrated queers of color living specifically in landscapes of East Los Angeles. Said differently, many attendees felt that the bar pushed against white mainstream LGBT geographies in Los Angeles such as West Hollywood and even Silverlake, now widely known as another white gay male neighborhood. At the same time others were brought right back to West Hollywood, some describing the space as a "Latinx theme night at Rage."

Other attendees measured the bar's Latinx authenticity along the lines of class. More specifically, attendees spoke of the bar's queer Latinidad as reflective of Boyle Height's gentrification. For example, attendees compared Noa Noa Place to another local gay bar, Nuevo Jalisco (The New Jalisco Bar), a long-standing working-class queer Latinx bar in downtown Los Angeles just a 7-minute drive away. Marcos, 29, a non-profit local community organizer explains it as follows:

> I just remember like the people that we were with at our table. And then that like reporter guy. I don't know, he's like a reporter. He works for like Univision or something like that. Oh, actually he works for ABC Seven! Because he was standing next to me when we they pulled us up on stage, or actually it was the center of the room (Marcos laughs

[130] Interview with Jose. Conducted December 2021.

> because there is no stage in the bar. Instead, the floor room was used for performances). So yeah, the crowd there was young and cute and like middle income. I mean this is the same kind of crowd as like Que Perra (a gay Latinx theme night hosted in Precinct, a mainstream gay club located in downtown Los Angeles) except with the difference of like all of L.A. versus like specifically Boyle Heights East L.A. In that, like when I when I go to New Jalisco, it's like 'Oh y'all are fucken working class. You guys look like you just came here from like painting houses or like gardening or something.' Whereas like Que Perra and like Noa Noa Place it's more like oh you grew up here, but like probably like half of you are college educated. You probably have jobs, like being a reporter for ABC Seven. I don't know shit like that.[131]

When I spoke to attendees Nuevo Jalisco repeatedly surfaced in conversations as a marker from which to measure Noa Noa Place's performance. Historically, Nuevo Jalisco bar is working class queer Latinx bar. Amongst first-generation queer Latinxs Nuevo Jalisco is described as "the place where your gay tio (uncle) goes." A dive-bar located in the heart of Downtown Los Angeles; Nuevo Jalisco's brown queer sensibilities stood in opposition to Noa Noa Place's affective performance. For Marcos these distinctions became clear by the people who inhabited the space and more specifically their occupations – the Latinx immigrant working class gardener versus the first-generation college educated Latinx news network reporter.

Attendees' ambivalence of Noa Noa Place also surfaced along the degree to which queerness was felt. I spoke to Lola, a young mid-twenties queer Latinx woman, college student, and a long-standing East Los Angeles resident. She heard of Noa Noa Place's through social media. Feeling nostalgic about returning to queer spaces after the quarantine, Lola expressed

[131] Interview with Marcos. Conducted December 2021.

some disappointment in what she described as a very present straight crowd:

> It was cute and I was curious, like, okay there's possibilities. There's going to be drag shows here and I miss going to those too. But then going back for the second time I felt that it wasn't what I had expected in that, idk, edginess or that vibe. I thought they're going to play some type of different music too, like the spooky darks [Lola refers here to dark wave music]. Something else. But it just seemed very straight cuz you had like very visibly presenting cis, what I'm assuming to be, straight women. And, you know, that changes the vibe. Not that I was totally unwelcoming of it or that I want to be divisive but, you know like, my intention and my understanding, it's like you're guna go there to a queer bar, you know, to foster that energy and it seemed like it was still catering to heteronormativity. And to be honest I wasn't really digging the music. The DJing wasn't really what I expected. And I think for me that just was like it. If it's not it then it's just not happening.[132]

Lola's feelings of disappointment were not unique as other attendees also pointed to a present heteronormative crowd which, for example, became more easily detectible through the bachelorette. Freddy, a gay Latino man, mid-twenties echoed Lola's sentiments:

> There was a good number of like straight people, and it was like a bachelorette party or like a wedding or something. Yeah, it was like I mean I guess it's also weird because it's such a small place right. Like there weren't that many people. But it was one table of like five people right and it's already like 10% of the bar.[133]

Raul also spoke to the straight presence of the space. I met up with Raul a couple of days after

[132] Interview with Lola. Conducted January 2022.

[133] Interview with Freddy. Conducted January 2022.

attending Noa Noa Place's closing weekend. I asked him what he thought of Noa Noa Place:

> Very Latino, but of all walks of life. It catered itself to be very queer friendly and queer welcoming but I would argue there was still about 30% of straight people there. On their final Saturday as a space, there was a bachelorette party for a straight woman.[134]

These comments are reflective of larger ongoing debates within queer community spaces in which "queerness" is felt ambivalently. For example, in Forstie's exploration of Sisters she points to the bar's ongoing branding as a "butch lesbian space" which in turn left femme queer women and trans men felt excluded. Noa Noa Place attendees' comments, however, specifically were reflective on the contested presence of straight people within queer spaces. Cisgender gay men (white and non-white) usually tend to reject the bachelorette, arguing that queer spaces should exclusively be for queer people. Queer women, however, have also reminded us that gay men tend to participate in exclusionary practices in queer spaces where the category of "queer" within nightlife spaces almost always tends to mean "cisgender gay men."

In addition to the ambivalence around the bar's aesthetic presence, attendees also spoke about Noa Noa Place's physical use of space. I spoke to Ramon, a 35-year-old gay Latino man living in Boyle Heights. I met up with Ramon at Hot Dog Sundays; a Sunday daytime/evening party located in Silverlake's El Cid Bar catering specifically to white cisgender gay men. During our outing Ramon began to compare Hot Dog Sundays to Noa Noa Place's own Sunday daytime party known as ASSada Sundays:

> Honestly this is what Noa Noa tried to do for their Sunday events. But I don't know, honestly, I felt bad for the señoras around probably trying to do their laundry or relax on

[134] Interview with Raul. Conducted December 2021.

their Sunday. I'm sure the music was loud.[135]

"Señoras" is a colloquial term used by first and second generation Latinx/Chicanx that refers to elder Latina/brown women, usually those who migrated from Mexico, Central America or other Latin American countries. Within the context of Boyle Heights, Ramon's use of "señoras" refers to the long-standing working-class immigrant elderly women tenants living in the area. Ramon's statement expresses a concern as a first-generation queer Latino man intimately familiar with area. He worried that the music from the parking lot might have been too disruptive for the nearby families. Spatially, ASSada Sundays took place behind Noa Noa Place's building, in a parking lot area. Neighboring this parking lot area for ASSada Sundays are apartment complexes a few stories high towering over the event. During one of the ASSada Sunday events some long-standing residents who stroll through that street (primarily elder Latino working class men) stood outside the gates and looked inside with curiosity. A couple of hours later police arrived and the owner, Luis, stepped out to speak with them. Some attendees speculated that a noise complaint was filed. Ramon's reflections point the processes of *queer Latinx regeneration,* contestations over the use of one's leisure. While an inclusive event for queers of color, Ramon's comment parallels to Kemi Adeyemi's work on gentrified black queer women's parties in Chicago. Adeyemi reminds us that "…pleasure is the currency with which territory is gained…"[136] Indeed, Ramon and Adeyemi point to one's use of leisure-time is a practice inextricably tied to the creation, sustainment, and use of space. To have pleasure under capitalism – within the settler process of gentrification – requires payment: material space to occupy and labor to fulfill ones desires for pleasure.

[135] Interview with Ramon. Conducted April 2022.

[136] Kemi Adeyemi; The Practice of Slowness: Black Queer Women and the Right to the City." GLQ 1 October 2019, p 546.

The bar's aesthetic performance was reflective of a proper queer, a is legible, inclusive, and digestible Latinidad. This queer Latinidad is positioned and valued within a neoliberal economy, capable of generating economic and social value alongside the place-based barrio Latinx/Chicanx sensibilities. I argue that this "excessive" queer Latinidad offers us further insight into the regional barrio politics of gentefication and are reflective of a regional queer Latinx regeneration. Noa Noa Place attendees and their experience of this queer nightlife environment disrupts common framings of Latinidad as a unifying political category. Said differently, the queer Latinidad performed sheds light to the category's fragility, an impossible project ruptured along the lines of race, class, gender, and sexuality as unfolded along the revitalizing barrio.

Closing Night at Noa Noa Place

During Noa Noa Place's last opening weekend I ran into an unexpectedly familiar face: Roberto. I met Roberto at the Los Angeles Center for Community Law and Action (LACCLA), an anti-gentrification organization dedicated to defending marginally housed tenants facing unjust evictions. Roberto is in his late 50s, a long-standing Boyle Heights resident from Bolivia, raised in the U.S. Roberto joined LACCLA back in 2018 after facing unjust eviction. LACCLA lawyers and organizers came together to help Roberto stay in his home. Since then, Roberto has been an active LACCLA member, participating in a range of housing justice efforts in the greater East Los Angeles area. Admittedly I did not expect to see Roberto at Noa Noa Place. Presumably, he is a straight man in his late 50s. That night I attended Noa Noa Place with another LACCLA member, Alexis, a 29-year-old and openly queer man. We spotted Roberto during the drag show amidst the crowd encircling the room. "Is that Roberto?" Alexis asked me as he covertly nudged me to look across the room. I scoffed and looked in the direction. It was

Roberto. He was wearing a black leather jacket with dark shades. The jacket's collar was pulled up. His gray hair stood out amongst the crowd as he meticulously weaved in and out of crowd watching the drag show. He was incognito.

Living just around the corner from the bar, Roberto kept hearing about the new gay spot. Curious, he unknowingly made his way over to Noa Noa Place's last open weekend. "Ive been wanting to come, and it turns out they're closing." I asked him what he thought of the space. Roberto enjoyed his time but was a bit disappointed that there was no live singing. He also had hoped to see drag queen impersonators like Juan Gabriel or Rocio Dúrcal. My friend explained that if he wanted to see a Juan Gabriel impersonator, he should go check out Nuevo Jalisco bar.

Noa Noa Place's stay in Boyle Heights was temporary yet eventful. The bar remained open for one year. Owners Luis Octavio, Donaji Esparza, and Deysi Serrano announced the bar's closing on Instagram. Many expressed their sadness and shared their experiences with the bar online. A drag queen employee commented, "This makes me genuinely sad! I was the happiest I'd ever been at a job even just standing at the gate. What this place represented in our community is something I hold dear. Thank you El Place." A loyal customer also shared their sentiments about the bar's closing, "Favorite memory: Every time I walked through the arch knowing it was going to be one wild time!"[137] Noa Noa Place officially closed its doors on November 22, 2021. Steve Saldivar, a Los Angeles Times journalist reporting on Noa Noa's closing stated: "There wasn't enough capital. Los Angeles has one less queer Latinx space."[138]

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[137] Online comment. User kept anonymous.

[138] Saldivar, Steve. Twitter Post. November 2021, 4:41pm, https://twitter.com/stevesaldivar/status/1460770015154610181

Chapter 3:
Queering the East LA Imaginary:
Brown Regions in rafa esparza's 'De La Calle'

> *"We can understand the personal and the regional as minor forms of knowledge, and as sites that are marginal to larger historical narratives; they can thus serve as conduits for a different way of conceptualizing both space and time. They function as alternative archives that allow us to apprehend the historical formations that have been cast into shadow by conventional historiography, as well as the imprints they leave on our bodies, desires, and psyches in the present" (26).*
>
> – Gayatri Gopinath in Unruly Visions: The Aesthetic Practices of Queer Diaspora
>
> *"Because everything always trumps queerness in East LA. It's like you have gangs and you have activism and that is the only narrative that the city can have. Even though we have Asco and even though we have Cyclona, those archives exist at UCLA in the Westside. Why isn't there a space that can speak to the queer history of East LA?"*
>
> – rafa esparza, brown queer performance artist based in East Los Angeles[139]

Queer spatial narratives like *metronormativity* and *queer anti-urbanism* have been central to understanding how queer communities continue to negotiate their relationship to the neoliberal city. As Halberstam explains, the metronormative story is about the queer who leaves the perceived "hostile" rural environment for the imagined "progressive" urban life and who arrives at a designated "queer friendly" area in the city like the gayborhood.[140] The metronormative story frames the city as a queer utopia while simultaneously painting rural areas as inherently violent. Moreover, metronormativity also operates through racist logics that demand the queer become a proper citizen through respectability and consumption (whiteness). As such, Herring's important work has also offered us an understanding of "queer anti-urbanism," communal

[139] Artist rafa esparza intentionally uses lowercases to spell out his first and last name. I do the same in this Chapter.

[140] Halberstam, Judith. *In a queer time and place transgender bodies, subcultural lives*. New York: New York University Press, 2005.

formations by queers in rural areas that actively reject queer city life.[141] This dissertation, *Queer Latinx Regeneration,* considers how queer Latinx/Chicanx already living in the neoliberal city negotiate their own mobility as the settler project of gentrification advances, an inquiry Martin M. Manalansan productively describes as "a triangulated exploration of race, space, and queerness."[142] In this final chapter I linger within the concept of the region to consider how local queer of color artists imagine belonging when gentrification promises to erase "home." To do this I take up the task set forth by queer performance studies scholar Gayatri Gopinath: "Thinking queerness through region, and the region through queerness…"[143] I turn to local queer East LA artists whose place-based intimacy with the region helps reveal an alternative queer spatial narrative of East Los Angeles that extends beyond the hegemonic queer narrative of "leaving home." Instead, the political project at hand here is navigating rather than leaving home as a queer racialized body and amidst powerful processes such as gentrification.

Thus far, I have examined queer placemaking within the gentrifying barrio through emerging spaces. As I have demonstrated in the previous chapters, queer Latinx/Chicanx living within gentrifying neighborhoods practice strategies of place-making even as the neoliberal city promises their displacement. At the same time, these same practices of queer emplacement in the gentrifying region have also been deeply entangled with the area's revitalization – a *queer Latinx regeneration* pushing against longstanding residents and spaces. Moreover, queer placemaking in the gentrifying barrio, I have also argued, pushes against the dominant metronormative narrative. Acts of queer placemaking are distinct within the spatial context of the barrio as race and class

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[141] Herring, Scott. *Another Country: Queer Anti-Urbanism*. NYU Press, 2010.

[142] Manalansan IV, Martin F, "Race, Violence, and Neoliberal Spatial Politics in the Global City." *Social Text* 1 December 2005; p 142.

[143] Gopinath, Gayatri. *Unruly Visions: The Aesthetic Practices of Queer Diaspora*. Duke University Press, 2018, p 20.

differences mark this region. A Latinx geography, the barrio has been continuously racialized as dirty, backward, and stuck in time. Consequently, this region has thus been imagined as inherently violent and anti-queer. Therefore, I have suggested that queer place-making in the barrio is an act of finding refuge within the home, a negotiation often overlooked under the (white) mainstream queer narrative of "leaving home." Indeed, if the queer of color is not leaving home to find refuge elsewhere, then we can understand the political act of staying in the region of origin, as Jose Esteban Muñoz articulates, as a praxis of *disidentification*.[144] Therefore, in what follows I think alongside Gayatri Gopinath's notion of a "queer regional imaginary," an analytic coined in her generative text *Unruly Visions: The Aesthetic Practices of Queer Diaspora*. With help offered by Gopinath's language, I trace how queer brown artists from East LA use queer aesthetic strategies to *re-emplace* queerness in the region they call home.

Queer regional imaginaries are aesthetic strategies used to "excavate" regional histories and desires hidden by dominant narratives. Gopinath advances this queer performance analytic alongside the work of queer diasporic artists. Diaspora is a concept that describes the "dispersal of populations from one particular national or geographic location to multiple other sites in such a way that produces a transnational web of affiliation and affect."[145] The aesthetic practices of diasporic queers, she argues, is informed by the spatial relationship to the region of origin. As such, the notion of the "region" becomes a productive analytic site she considers to best understand the politic potential of a queer regional imaginary:

> As my own personal narrative demonstrates, the region is clearly an affect laden category, and the intimate connection between the personal and the regional can have

[144] Muñoz José Esteban. *Disidentifications*: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics. University of Minnesota Press, 1994.
[145] Gopinath, Gayatri. *Unruly Visions: The Aesthetic Practices of Queer Diaspora*. Duke University Press, 2018, p 13.

> both productive and reactionary effects. Claims to the regional belonging, particularly when they originate from the diaspora, are often bound up in nostalgia for lost origins and class/caste privilege, a deeply felt sense of rootedness, a fierce identification with (or, conversely, a rejection of) place. Whether longed for or repudiated, desired, or disavowed, diasporic evocations of the region may serve to buttress or undermine dominant narratives of national cohesion. As such, regional imaginings can easily be the basis for the most virulent forms of chauvinism, where regional identification serves as a kind of complement or counterpart to the diasporic nationalism that in turn undergird religious, sectarian, or state nationalist ideologies.[146]

Gopinath argues that the aesthetic practices of diasporic queers bring to the forefront hidden desires obscured by heteronormative orientations (respectability, success, capital accumulation, reproduction). My application of Gopinath's framework to the region of East LA is not meant to frame queer Chicanx/Latinx/brown experiences as diasporic. Moreover, I do not mean to collapse diasporic experiences as equivalent to displacement caused by gentrification. My use of Gopinath's language in this chapter is helpful to *zone in* on the affective relationship of the region – the barrio undergoing gentrification and the queers of color living in the area grappling with an uncertain queer futurity. At the same time, diasporic experiences fill up the regional histories of East LA. Here the diaspora of migrants from Mexico, Central America, South America, inform the region's past and unfolding future. I am particularly interested in exploring how queers of color whose personal backgrounds as first-generation queer Chicanx/Latinx (or brown) from immigrant working class parents, informs their "sense of rootedness" to the region of East LA. In this chapter I pay particular attention to queers of color whose queerness has been

[146] Ibid, p 27.

intimately shaped by the region of the barrio. As such I understand the region of the barrio as a *queer Latinx geography*, a gesture that knows the region as an "affiliation" – an intimacy and will to understand oneself through space and place.

Framing the region through queerness and, vice versa, queerness through the region, is a twofold task. I take the lead offered by Gopinath:

> I use the term 'queer regions' in its subnational sense then, to name the particularities of gender and sexual logics in spaces that exist in tangential relation to the nation, but are simultaneously and irreducibly marked by complex national and global processes. Framing queerness through the region, and region through queerness, provides us with an alternative mapping of sexual geographies that links disparate transnational locations and allows new models of sexual subjectivity to come into focus.[147]

In what follows I trace East LA through queerness and queerness through East LA. I turn to the regional sexual and gendered frameworks that have governed how we have come to understand East LA. To do this I think alongside local queer brown artist rafa esparza and his 2018 public performance piece *de la Calle*, which I argue *re-emplaces* queerness into East LA. By re-emplacing queerness into the region, I suggest rafa's work accomplishes two things: First, using a queer *brown* regional imaginary, rafa pushes against dominant regional narratives that govern East LA – racist scripts that erase queerness as echoed in rafa's epigraph above – and also regional identitarian frameworks of Chicanidad and Latinidad rooted in heteronormative frameworks (i.e. la raza, la familia). Second, using fashion created by local queer artists of color and a re-imagining of the region – *los callejones* – into a catwalk, *de la Calle* (2018) foregrounds a brown working-class aesthetic that pushes up against the global economy of "high-fashion," an

[147] Ibid, p 30.

industry that has continuously deployed state sanctioned violence (police) to discipline this informal – "counterfeit" – working-class economy. *De la Calle* thus reminds us that global industrial projects like high fashion, while considered the site of "proper" taste and style, depend and function entirely on the exploitation of working-class labor and queer regional imaginaries.

"Of the Street"

rafa's *de la Calle* (2018) activates what Gopinath describes as a "queer regional social vision" – a collaborative aesthetic strategy that brings together fashion, ornamentation, and space to articulate a brown queer futurity. rafa is a Los Angeles-based artist born in East Pasadena whose parents emigrated from Durango, Mexico to the U.S. in the 1970s. In his 2018 work *de la Calle* rafa re-imagines a famous street vending market – known locally as los callejones (or Santee Alley to non-Spanish speaking locals) – into a fashion runway. On Saturday June 16, 2018, rafa and a crew of close friends, artists, nightlife performers, designers and photographers took to the callejones located at the heart of the Los Angele's Fashion District. A colorful assemblage walked into and amongst the crowd of unsuspecting families shopping that Saturday afternoon and the show began.

I first became aware of rafa's public performance days later after striking images by photographer Fabian Guerrero, Dorian Ulysses and Amina Cruz were released online via Instagram, a popular social media platform. The performance was not publicly advertised – neither on the ICA website nor on social media platforms. According to rafa, this was an intentional and political decision to minimize the impact of gentrification that had been unfolding in the region through artwashing:

I made it word-of-mouth because I didn't want to invite a white audience into that space. And that's like the traditional art audience that would have read anything that was

publicized on a website. So, we kept it word of mouth through the artists that participated, and it was all consensus that we weren't going to post on Instagram. And also, because we care about that space. Some of us used to vend there, not only shop there. Some of us have really close relationships to people that vend there. So, we have already seen how the internet is impacting those businesses. Now it's cheaper to buy a page online than to pay for a booth. So, people are starting to close their shops. So, the last thing that we need is this foreign audience to come in. Things are changing fast.[148]

Mec1. Artist rafa esparza stands at the corner of East 9th and Santee Alley Street wearing a garland of mechanical puppies. Photo by Carolina A. Miranda, Los Angeles Times, June 2015.

As such, I first encountered rafa's performance via online pictures, days later after its official enactment. Images of the colorful clothing filled up social media timelines. Bright blues, reds, oranges, pinks, yellows, and other shiny materials caught the eye. Each participating collaborator wore a unique garment. San Cha, a Los Angeles based queer brown musician, was amongst the many performers. San Cha wore a bright red quinceañera gown with a Virgen de Guadalupe symbol on her chest – a garment designed by Olima. San Cha strolled through the alley alongside her *chambelan,* or escort, who wore a button-up top with yellow ostrich feathers

[148] Interview with rafa esparza. Conducted October 2019.

and matching Virgen de Guadalupe image on the backside. rafa himself wore a bright orange sweater, black basketball shorts and a large necklace made entirely out of the small mechanical dog toys sold by the local vendors. The dogs yapped away as he walked amongst the crowd. Queer nightlife performer Kiki Xtrvaganza was also a part of the ensemble. Alongside a shiny sheer fabric dress and a platinum blond wig, Kiki wore her well-known smiling plastic mask. The mask's lips were covered with colorful jewels which she also styled alongside a pair of bejeweled black visors.

Figure 14. San Cha in red quinceañera dress designed by Olima.
Photo by Fabian Guerrero, June 2018.

Online videos also captured dancing between the performers and the onlooking audience. In one of the videos, you can hear the quick beats of "El Beeper" being blasted by a vendor's speaker. "El Beeper" is a famous Latinx song by Oro Solido and a staple amongst Latinx immigrant family parties. In the video, brown trans performance artist Sebastian Hernandez dances to the song's rapid cadence. Sebastian wore striking neon pink hair with a dark red suit-jacket styled as a mini dress with a silver belt at the waist. Sebastian also styled her suit dress

with long shimmering red tinsel that perched on top of her head and cascaded down her back and onto the floor. As Sebastian dances to the song, you also see her holding a kitchen tonsil in one hand and, on the opposite, an aluminum plate full of pan dulce (Mexican sweet bread). She offers onlookers bread as the performance unfolds.

Figure 15. Sebastian Hernandez poses with pan dulce. Photo by Dorian Ulises Lopez, June 2018.

Amongst the crowd also strolled another quinceñera dress, but this time made from mops. Noe Olivas, designer, and performer, was behind the impressive "mop dress" or "blue collar quinceañera." Olivas styled the dress' top with a sleeveless janitor uniform shirt; the in-sewn nametags remained intact. He completed the look with yellow latex cleaning gloves. The "mop gown" also brings us back to the quinceañera, a figure that this time relinquishes the glittery fabric and instead embodies the labor most immigrant working class families enter when living in the US: the janitor, cleaning lady, cook, nanny etc. According to rafa, he invited Olivas to collaborate because he wanted to recognize labor that is often invisible and undervalued under our capitalistic system of value. After vendors shut down their shops and everyone goes home it

is Black and brown immigrant workers that come out to mop, scrub, and prepare *los callejones* for the next day. "Blue collar quincenera/o" reminds us that it is brown and Black working-class labor that keeps the neoliberal city functioning.

Figure 16. Blue collar quinceañera by Noe Olivas. Photo by Carolina A. Miranda, Los Angeles Times, June 2018.

Days later The Los Angeles Times released a report on rafa's work where they describe the public performance as a "surreal art parade." I spoke to rafa about the reception of the performance:

> The response was across the board from people telling us that we were going to go to hell to señoras coming out of their booths and blasting like the cumbia and dancing a long with us. It was an incredible experience of holding and taking public space.[149]

The performance was indeed "surreal," but as I began to examine the photos one thing was clear to me: I recognized the region. *De la Calle* had taken place in *the callejones*, a very familiar

[149] Interview with rafa. Conducted October 2019.

place I had grown up visiting. The term *callejones* translates to *alleys* in English. According to the didactic panel at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (ICA), where *de la Calle* was hosted, we can best understand the callejones as a "thoroughfare in the heart of Downtown Los Angele's Fashion District and a major retail destination for working-class Latinx Angelenos." Just a quick 5-minute drive west of Boyle Heights, *los callejones* is located in downtowns' Fashion District.

I grew up going to *los callejones* with my parents. Vendors stand alongside the corridors with various sized booths filled with merchandise. It was there where we found affordable goods – clothing, shoes, jewelry, makeup, purses, textiles, and food. You might not be able to afford the new Britney Spears perfume at Macy's but in *the callejones* you most definitely could. Perhaps it was the "real" perfume, or perhaps, it was not. It did not quite matter. Counterfeit or not, the packaging looked identical, and the purchase felt just as real. Food also makes up this region's distinct character. The smell of hot dogs, onions, aguas frescas, esquites and fried-food fill the air. Other smells also paint this space; urine, garbage and other "dirty" stenches linger as well. It was always time to visit the callejones when we had an upcoming quinceñera or birthday party. In the callejones we could find affordable table clothes, piñatas, candies, tinsil, confetti, and any other decorative material. An informal economy, the callejones is a region built out of necessity.

De la calle was created in collaboration with the Institute of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (ICA), an art gallery located in the Art District, the border-area between Boyle Heights and Downtown Los Angeles. As explored in previous chapters, the Art District has been home to new art galleries that have been protested by local activists for advancing gentrification into Boyle Heights (see Chapter 1 & Chapter 3). Indeed, we cannot completely understand rafa

esparza's *de la Calle* (2018) if we do not also understand the regional stakes at play – an area understood as home but also rapidly revitalizing and thus displacing long standing vendors who depend on the regional economy to survive. With gentrification comes change spearheaded by the settler city's investment in capital accumulation – in this case accumulation acquired through gentrification. To prepare the once degenerate neighborhood for the proper citizen (white/nonwhite & economically viable), the degenerate bodies (working poor families of color) must first be removed. This "preparation" requires the beautification of the region through art and other cultural amenities. As explained in the Introduction and Chapter 3, to address the role of artists and artwashing, local artists came together and created the Boyle Heights Alliance Against Artwashing and Defacement. As such rafa esparza's work does not sit neatly outside the economies of gentrification. We can understand rafa's *de la Calle* as an artistic project entangled with a *queer Latinx regeneration*: a local brown artist whose work, while deeply inspired by the region he calls home, becoming entwined with the area's development. Aware of these complicated processes with the region's revitalization, rafa made important negotiations as a queer brown artist from the area. rafa's move to keep *de la Calle* (2018) *word of mouth* was a strategic effort that recognized that a site of innocence was not capable – a negotiation he hoped would minimize the unfolding violence. Indeed, today long-standing shops are being replaced with luxurious and modern décor – new boutiques, renovated shopping and strip malls. As such, rents for the shopping booths have also drastically increased.

Moreover, while *de la Calle* did not take place within the city limits of Boyle Heights or East Los Angeles, the performance, I suggest, articulates a distinct affiliation to the region of East LA and the larger Los Angeles city as a first-generation queer brown artist whose material relationship to the region is informed by shared histories of displacement and migration. Through

public performance rafa's work brings to the surface nodes of collaboration that push against idenitarian affiliations with East LA – a queering of the East LA imaginary. We can understand rafa's collaborative public performance a queer celebration of region – home. In *de la Calle* rafa reveals the region of *los callejones* as a nexus – a node of queer possibilities in which queer futurities come together and unfold through various artistic East Los Angeles imaginaries: photography, drag, nightlife performance, formal art, fashion design, music. This site-specific public performance in *los callejones* merges interconnected queer worlds into one piece to reveal a queer regional imaginary – an intimacy with region.

The expression "de la calle" or "of the street" is informed by rafa's queer regional imaginary of East LA. Pushing up against the heteronormative concept of the "home" in which the model of the family is organized and surveilled through cis-heteropatriarchy, in *de la Calle* Rafa instead observes the public street as *home*. "De la calle" gestures to the gendered expression "callejera," a term commonly used amongst Latinx immigrant families but specifically rallied against women of color. To be a called a "callejera" is to be reminded that the public street is a space in which women do not belong, relegating her to the private domain of the home. "Callejera" marks women of color as a transgressor or "bad woman" for abandoning her duties to instead fulfill pleasures outside the home – in the streets (Gaspar de Alba, 2015). As such, by embracing the *street* as home *de la Calle* points attentively to the patriarchal governance of *la familia* – a framework rooted in Chicanidad which has continuously relegated women of color into roles like the caretaker and, moreover, a logic that has also repeatedly banished the queer of color from the home. While traditional Chicano symbolism emerges in the performance, like the Virgen de Guadalupe imagined onto a quinceñera dress, it is done so within the chaotic and unpredictable flow of the city streets. Indeed, rafa sees the street as a site of collaboration – an

embodied relationship to space/place that re-locates queerness into the region. In *de la Calle* the non-respectable livelihoods that live outside the confines of *la familia* – the queers, the promiscuous, the sex worker, the irresponsible unproductive subject who refuses to participate in the formal economies of racial capitalism – come out to play in the re-imagined *callejones.* Through an intentional celebration of *the street*, the performance practices a politic of what Deb Vargas has theorized as "suciedad" – a reclamation of dirtiness, ugliness, and otherness[150].

Brownness – Challenging the White Cube

The *de la Calle* public performance was a culmination of work. Before rafa and the many collaborators took to the street, prep work took place back at the ICA. *De la Calle* was not simply a site-specific public performance. It began within the more traditional space of the art gallery. Practicing a politic of collaboration, rafa funneled resources he was offered by the art institution, the ICA, to help fellow queer artists of color. Using adobe material, rafa transformed the traditional white cube into a work room for all collaborators to use. rafa installed a floor made from adobe, a staple material in rafa's repertoire:

> So, when I started making work I started to think about like adobe as a material that could inform what building a platform could look like. I started using the bricks to build spaces – brown spaces that were intentional spaces where brown artists could show their works in. So, the color was present, it was land, and it was material directly in conflict with the white architectures of land – conceptually the white gallery.[151]

[150] Vargas, Deborah R. "Ruminations on Lo Sucio as a Latino Queer Analytic." *American Quarterly* 66, no. 3 (2014): 715-726.

[151] Interview with rafa eparza. Conducted October 2019.

We can enter into a reading of rafa's use of adobe as a form of *browning*, a "queer gesture" that pushes against the traditional white cube gallery, a sanitized and controlled space meant to primarily be used by white audiences.[152]

Figure 17. Installation view, rafa esparza: de la calle, Institute of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, April 22–July 15, 2018. Photo: Brian Forrest/ICA LA

Chicanx/Latinx studies and queer of color performance studies has, for some time now, theorized on *brownness* in relation to Latinx/Chicanx identity formations. As a verb, *brown* signifies a multiplication of peoples that has historically activated racist white anxieties. For example, in his collection of essays, *Brown*, Richard Rodriguez asserts that "America is browning," pointing to the changing racial dynamics of America.[153] Brown is also a site of analysis, an ontology that Joshua Guzman describes as "an intellectual itch refusing satisfaction."[154] In her close literary hermeneutic reading of Rodriguez's *Brown,* Swati Rana's

[152] Rodriguez, Juana Maria. *Sexual Futures, Queer Gestures, and Other Latina Longings*. NYU Press, 2014.

[153] Rodriguez, Richard, *Brown: The Last Discovery of America*, Penguin Book, 2002, p. xii

[154] Guzmán, Joshua Javier, et al. "Brown." in *Keywords for Latina/o Studies*, NYU Press, 2017, p 27.

works towards what she calls "brownness studies," an investigation that situates brownness as a productive "entropy" within post-racial discourse.[155] Rana states that, "Brownness names not the end of race, but the ground of its contestation."[156] Similarly, for Hiram Perez, brown "designates a kind of constitutive ambiguity within U.S. racial formations – an identity that both complicates and preserves the binary opposition white/other."[157] Moreover, brown also signifies a racialized body's relationship to oppressive regimes, specifically to the violence of colorism. In her essay "La Prieta," Gloria Anzaldúa recalls her experience as a dark, brown-skinned girl. She describes colorism's regulation of her body, a control enacted by her own family that continuously reminded her of the brownness she embodied – *prieta* being the signification that simultaneously fractured and congealed her body. Gloria recalls her mother's cries to avoid the sun, "If you get any darker, they'll mistake you for an Indian. And don't get dirty on your clothes. You don't want people to say you're a dirty Mexican."[158] Under colorism, brownness is undesirable for its approximation to Indigeneity. In *Brown*, Richard Rodriguez similarly describes brownness as an experience of immobility and undesirability. He writes, "Brown was like the skinny or fat kids left over after the team captains chose sides. 'You take the rest' – my cue to wander away to the sidelines, to wander away."[159] For Xicana lesbian feminist Cherrie Moraga, brown is interlinked into queerness as an embodied oppression. In her essay, "La Güera," Moraga states that "lesbianism is a poverty – as is being brown, as is being a woman, as is being just plain

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[155] Rana, Swati. "Reading Brownness: Richard Rodriguez, Race, and Form." American Literary History 27, no. 2 (2015): 285-304.

[156] Ibid, p 301.

[157] Perez, Hiram. "You Can Have My Brown Body and Eat It, Too!" Social Text 23.3–4 (2005): 171–91.

[158] Anzaldua, Gloria, "La Prieta," in *The Gloria Anzaldúa Reader*, Duke University Press, 2009, p. 38.

[159] Rodriguez, Richard, *Brown: The Last Discovery of America*, Penguin Book, 2002, p. 29.

poor…The danger lies in failing to acknowledge the specificity of the oppression."[160] For queer Latina/o performance studies scholar Joshua Javier Guzmán, "Brown is not an identity."[161] Rather, for Guzmán, "brownness exists outside of value, and as a historical forming persisting within the here-and-now, yet radiating – from the inside out something incalculable, like 'art, friendship, love, thought [and minoritarian] knowledge.'"[162] Jose Esteban Muñoz's work has also offered queer of color studies a productive body of work to think through brownness. In "Feeling Brown, Feeling Down," Muñoz frames brownness, similar to Moraga, as an affective position embodied by minoritarian subjects. Jose Esteban Muñoz's work offers us language to think beyond idenitiarian modes of relation and instead into the affective realm of brownness:

> Feeling brown, feeling down imagines a position or narrative of being and becoming that can resist the pull of identitarian models of relationality…the receptors we use to hear each other and the frequencies on which certain subalterns speak and are heard, or, more importantly, felt.[163]

In rafa's work, *brown* is indeed an identity whose affective registers are heard and felt deeply through the region of East LA, a neighborhood whose historical formations are molded by working class migrant labor. rafa's intimate relationship to the region has been particularly molded by his father Ramon Esparza who built houses out of adobe back in Durango, Mexico before emigrating to the U.S. Ramon taught rafa how to create the adobe which is now a present material in his art – performance art, paintings, gallery spaces. Thus, for rafa, brownness is an

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[160] Moraga, Cherríe, Ana Castillo, and Norma Alarcón. "La Güera." *Debate Feminista 24*, 2001, p 29.

[161] Guzmán, Joshua Javier, et al. "Brown." in *Keywords for Latina/o Studies*, NYU Press, 2017, p. 25.

[162] Ibid, p 27.

[163] 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*, 2006, 31:3, 675-688

inheritance – knowledge passed down and whose original source can be cited in the hard manual labor his father conducted.

Brownness in rafa's work, in addition to being an identity, is also a material presence – adobe. As Muñoz explains, "Brownness is already here. Brownness is vast, present, and vital." For rafa, this presence in the "here" materializes in his political use of adobe. By using adobe within the traditionally white gallery space, rafa summons brownness into gallery spaces to banish whiteness – even temporarily. In rafa's work we are reminded that brownness is land. Brownness is calculable – a mixture of dirt, manure, water, and straw that, when heated under the hot sun, becomes hard enough to build infrastructure. While Anzaldúa's mom urged her to avoid the sun out of fear of looking like "an Indian," rafa's brownness embraces the heat and the racial embodiments he carries as a phenotypically brown queer man. Indeed, for it is only through a direct relation to the sun that he can summon brownness (adobe) into the space – the color and material that can stand in opposition to whiteness. We are reminded then that to theorize brownness we must remember it as color and material already here – the colorism that still lingers deeply within the Latinx community. Alfredo Huante's important article, "A Lighter Shade of Brown?," both its title and ethnographic research of gentrification in Boyle Heights, point to a very similar understanding of brownness. For Huante, brown is an embodied experience that stands in opposition to what he calls "Latinx whiteness" – a politic within Latinx/Chicanx communities that privileges white embodiments, economic accumulation, and respectability. Ultimately, we are reminded that to reach what Muñoz calls a "brown commons," colorism and its violence must first be directly addressed – no matter how intense the heat.

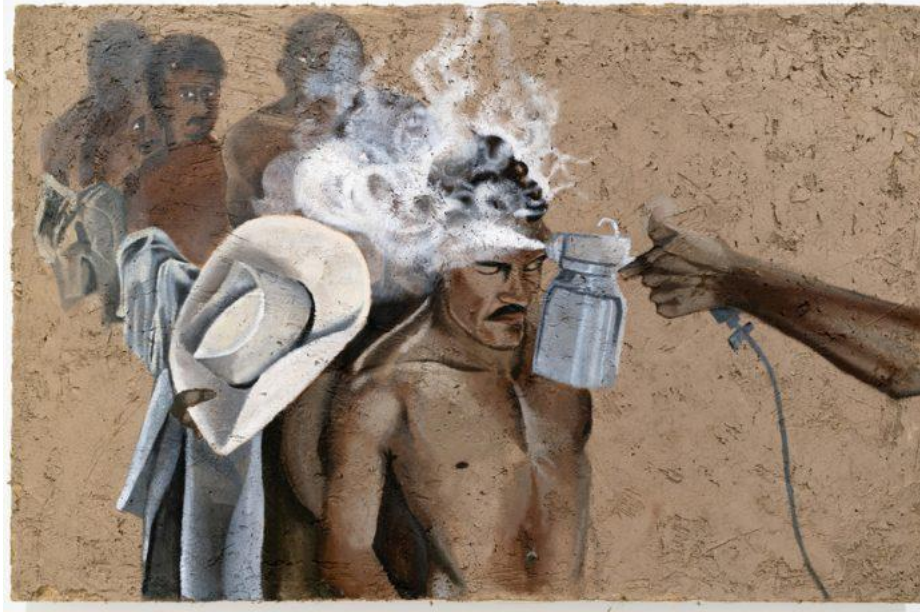

Figure 18. "Border Wash," acrylic painting on adobe by Rafa Esparza; a Mexican immigrant laborer is sprayed with DDT at a processing center in Hidalgo, Texas - After Leonard Nadel, 1956, 2019; photo by Sara Farrell Okamura.

The adobe's unruliness has also been pertinent to challenging the white cube. While congealed into a hard surface under the hot sun, the adobe's dirt still drops and leaves behind particles. As such, some of rafa's adobe work has not always been openly welcomed into museums and other gallery spaces. According to rafa, some museums have been worried the adobe might "contaminate" other pieces. For rafa this unruliness must be situated alongside the histories of white supremacist anxieties around immigration and migrant bodies entering the U.S. and the population's shifting racial make-up. According to the U.S. Census Bureau the "Hispanic" or Latinx population will more than double by 2050. These projections have given rise to racist anti-immigrant sentiments, affects that imagine brownness as a multiplying entity. As Joshua Guzman describes, the Latinx population in the U.S. is imagined through contradictory racial scripts: "(1) always already having been here – from the mythical homelands of Aztlán to pre-encounter narratives of sociability; or (2) an impending doom of immigrant

laborers about to take over…"[164] Indeed, Latinx are figured into the nation's narrative as having been present while at the same time scripted as criminals threatening the US. nation-state's future as a white geography. According to rafa, museums have expressed similar contradictory anxieties around the adobe. Some museums, while inviting rafa's work into their galleries, have also set strict and at times questionable regulations over the adobe. One museum, for example, suggested spraying the adobe with pesticide. For rafa, these anxieties, clearly echoed the violent histories of the 1942 Bracero Program where migrant workers would be sprayed with pesticide before entering U.S. territories.[165] rafa has directly explored these violent anti-immigrant histories in previous work like his 2019 painting "Border Wash" in which he uses adobe to bring into focus brownness. Considering these xenophobic anxieties, we can understand the adobe inside the white traditional gallery space as a queer regional imaginary – a brown unruly aesthetic strategy that insists on claiming space and time despite the restrictive legal confines.

Brown Fashion – Bring it to the Callejones!

In this section I consider rafa's use of the region – los callejones – to think about globalization's impact on East Los Angeles. Here I consider how global processes of racial capitalism (the settler project of gentrification) informs the way the region (los callejones) has been deeply racialized and how rafa esparza's work, through a re-emplacement of queerness, foregrounds a brown working-class aesthetic as a way of pushing up against the globalization of "high-fashion." In this section then, brown, or brownness, also comes to life through fashion –

[164] Joshua Javier Guzmán & Christina A. León. "Cuts and impressions: the aesthetic work of lingering in Latinidad," *Women & Performance: a journal of feminist theory*, 2015; p 264.

[165] See David Dorado Romo's *Ringside Seat to a Revolution: An Underground Cultural History of El Paso and Juarez, 1893-1923.*The practice of spraying Mexican laborers crossing the border was conductd since the 1920s. This was common in El Paso. Chemicals used included Zyklon B.

clothing, ornamentation – alongside the region. I suggest that rafa esparza's *de la Calle* points to the ways fast fashion or high fashion is intricately linked to the region of East LA and *los callejones* – a region repeatedly racialized as "cheap," "fake," or "low fashion." Here the regional takes on multiple scales and meanings: "East Los Angeles," "Boyle Heights," "barrio," "Los Angeles," "los callejones," and "queer." At times these regional names all come together, collapsing onto each other. And in other moments they gain distinct cartographic currency. For *de la Calle* (2018), we are taken to both the local – the regional – and the "supranational," or beyond the state-imposed national borders. It is here in the supranational that we can locate *de la Calle*'s (2018) efforts to link the regional to the global. Rafa accomplishes this by directly speaking to the "fashion world" – a global industry whose exploitative enterprises extend to third-worlds, first worlds and beyond.

Los callejones is a region that has been historically criminalized – marked as an area of cheapness or tackiness. This criminalization has materialized through the state-sanctioned policing of street vendors selling what has been described as "counterfeit" or "bootleg" merchandise. In January 2020 more than $300,000 dollars of beauty products merchandise was confiscated by the Los Angeles Police Department.[166] Cosmetic products by billionaire and reality tv-star Kylie Jenner were amongst the confiscated products. LAPD Captain Lillian Carranza released a statement to the LA Times, stating: "Please purchase from an authorized retailer. Previous tests of counterfeit makeup reveled animal feces and chemicals that can be hazardous to your health." In 2018 a similar confiscation occurred, with more than $700,000 worth of products seized by police. In that same year two vendors were arrested after police

[166] See Shalby, Colleen, "Fake Kylie Cosmetics lip products, other counterfeit makeup seized in L.A. Fashion District," *Los Angeles Times*, March 1, 2022, https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2020-01-13/fake-kylie-cosmetics-lip-products-other-counterfeit-makeup-seized-in-l-a-fashion-district.

confiscated $200,000 worth what was described as "fake Adidas merchandise."[167] More recently, in March 2022, six vendors were fined 3.6 million dollars and 10 years of jail time. According to City Attorney Mike Feuer the selling of "…knockoffs is a source of income for some criminal gangs, who can use that money to fund other illicit activities. Moreover, fakes often are made by victims of labor trafficking." He goes on to describe this matter as a larger issue of "…gang-involved counterfeit rings in L.A."[168]

Indeed, the fight to de-criminalized street vending in Los Angeles has a been a long and difficult battle. In 2014, writer and actress Lejla Hadzimuratovic released a seemingly anti-animal cruelty documentary entitled *The Deadly Secret of Santee Alley.* The documentary attempts to reveal "…the horrors of the illegal animal trade in downtown LA Fashion District and takes one on a ride through the labyrinth of issues ranging from animal cruelty, public safety, child labor, human trafficking, gangs, drugs, counterfeit goods, tax evasion, and more." Similarly, in 2017, Refinery 29, a self-proclaimed "American multinational feminist digital media and entertainment website focused on young women" released an online documentary on beauty products sold by vendors under their "Shady" series entitled, "Why Fake Kylie Jenner Lip Kits Could Be Dangerous." In the documentary, Lexy Lebsack, senior editor of Refinery 29, alongside Estée Lauder's private investigator, set up a "undercover investigation" in which they purchase beauty products from vendors. For "safety" reasons, they also request police officers to be close by in case anything "goes wrong." Both documentaries deploy a white feminist lens to understand street vending in Santee Alley – a racist framework that hinges on discovering illegal

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[167] By ABC & Eyewitness News, "LAPD seizes fake Adidas merchandise worth more than $200K in Santee Alley," July 25, 2018, https://abc7.com/lapd-santee-alley-raid-adidas-counterfeits/3823047.

[168] See Martinez, Christian, "Counterfeiting ring hit with $3.6 million in penalties, barred from downtown Fashion District, *Los Angeles Times*, March 1, 2022, https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2022-03-01/counterfeiting-ring-downtown-los-angeles-fashion-district-santee-alley

activity in the region under the guise of public health. Both documentaries frame the vendors as dangerous and suspicious agents stealing from multi-million-dollar companies. The documentaries also sit within a larger history of criminalization against street vendors. In Los Angeles in particular, street vending has been criminalized through state-sanctioned "legal violence."[169] Since the 1930s, street vending has been classified as a misdemeanor.[170] The anti-vending ordinance has considered any vending on city sidewalks illegal and punishable by 6 months of jail time alongside a $1,000 fine.[171] According to Hidalgo's study on the Los Angeles Street Vendor Campaign, the confiscation of goods should be understood as a violent form of dispossession that directly affects the livelihoods of families who use their merchandise to pay off mortgages, rents, loans, and other vital finances.

Considering the histories of legal violence against street vendor in Los Angeles, *de la Calle* intentionally conjures ideas of tackiness and cheapness. A gesture of honoring the working-class labor and "cheapness" that make up the region's character, *de la Calle's* performance offers an important reminder: despite the "cheap" or "counterfeit" materials found in *los callejones*, the area – its vendors, suppliers, fabrics, clothing, accessories – are an invaluable resource for both working class and upper-class creatives who come to the area to execute artistic projects. Indeed, the Fashion District and *los callejones* has continuously been conjured within mainstream media, cited as an important resource for artists, musicians, and performers. Recently, for example, drag queens from the famous show *Rupual's Drag Race*, have repeatedly cited Santee Alley and the Fashion District as a pivotal stop along their creative

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[169] See Hidalgo, LA. "Show them how they treat us": Legal violence in the everyday lives of street vendors. *Latino Studies*, (2022): 194–218.

[170] Ibid.

[171] Ibid.

journey. It is in the streets of *los callejones* that these now famous drag queens acquire their materials to create the extravagant garments they use for their performances. For example, Bob the Drag Queen, winner of Rupauls Drag Race season 8, took to her YouTube show "BOBBIN Around" in 2019 to describe her experiences in Santee Alley:

> It's a great place for drag queens, and not just drag queens, but for people who want inexpensive stuff that doesn't necessarily look inexpensive. You can buy the new Kylie Jenner lipstick without paying the Kylie Jenner lipstick price. You can buy wigs, you can buy jewelry, shoes, clothes. You can buy those hot dogs wrapped in bacon with chunky pico de gallo.[172]

By imagining *the callejones* as a runway *de la Calle* highlights the global industry of high-fashion and its dependency on local regions like Santee Alley. More specially *de la Calle* brings attention to the dependency of migrant working class labor. Global cities like Paris, New York Los Angeles are cited as sites of high fashion. In *de la Calle* rafa values brown *queer regional imaginary* – in this case the aesthetic strategy here extends beyond the stage and beyond the performance piece. The aesthetic strategy here is in the creativity of vendors – their ability to replicate expensive multibillion dollar products; the aesthetic strategy found in the act of survival against legal violence imposed by both high fashion industries and criminalizing gazes that enter the region with racist suspicions. Indeed, *de la Calle* points to the undervalued labor of street vending and the region of *los callejones* as a site in which many people depend on to build careers. The region here, Santee alley, becomes the zone of intersection – the point where all roads lead. The roads all lead, in other words, to fashion – the clothes, accessories, makeup and

[172] Bob the Drag Queen, "Santee Alley: BOBBIN' AROUND with Bob the Drag Queen and Luis!" June 15, 2022, 3:08-3:33, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WDf-MlE8b6k

ornamentation we put on our bodies to express affiliations and fulfill commitments. In this performance, it is the clothing that becomes the symbol of brownness – one that is contoured by indeed East Los Angeles but more specifically working-class migrant labor that sustains the neoliberal city. We learn then that taste and style are molded through processes of globalization – extraction of value.

Queering the East LA Imaginary

For many local queers of color, claiming affiliation with East Los Angeles is an act of naming oneself through region. Histories of urban renewal, white flight, redlining, and police brutality have molded the material landscape of this Latinx geography. As such, claims or affiliations to East LA push against white supremacy which has structurally and historically understood this region as undesirable. As rafa explains in the epigraph above, the region of East LA is usually scripted through two narratives: 1) hyper-activism and 2) a dangerous region. Hyper-activism narratives understand East LA as a "angry" community always mobilizing against state sanctioned violence. Indeed, East LA is continuously conjured within the field of Chicana/o and Latina/o studies because of the region's deep histories of radical anti-capitalist, anti-war, anti-police movements spearheaded by local working-class Latinx/Chicanx families. As one non-Los Angeles informant stated "How sad. It seems like people there are always fighting."[173] Alongside hyper-activism, rafa also points to the racist sentiments advanced by mainstream American popular culture that have in turn framed the region of East LA as dangerous (i.e. the hood, the ghetto). At the center of these racist sentiments are the bodies tethered to this racial geographic imagination: the immigrant, the poor, the brown/ Latino/Chicano, and as rafa points out, the gangster/cholo. One informant – white cisgender gay

[173] Interview with anonymous informant. Conducted October 2019.

man and 12-year Los Angeles resident living in the West side of Los Angeles – echoed similar sentiments: "Isn't Boyle Heights where things are getting gentrified? Even so, I can't do Boyle Heights or anything past Korea Town honestly. It's just too much. I like to walk my dog out at night, and you can't do that there."[174]

We can locate rafa's artistry alongside the dominant narratives that govern the region of East of LA – "dangerous" or "activist-centric." Using adobe alongside performance, painting, and embodiment, rafa's aesthetic strategy of queer emplacement should not be understood as an act of queer place-making. Rather rafa's queer regional imaginary performs what Gopinath's describes as an "excavation of the past."[175] Through a queer regional imaginary, rafa uses his body and the city alike – as canvas to dispel the dominant regional narratives of East LA and center queer pleasures. Such is the case in *de la Calle* (2018) and other important site-specific performances like his 2018 performance *Corpo Ranfla* and 2014 performance *Dry*: *East Los Sauna*.

In *Corpo Ranfla* (2018) rafa transforms himself into the Gypsy Rose, considered the most popular lowrider car. The Gypsy Rose exterior is a striking bright pink. The roof and hood of the car is painted with roses, pinto style. The interior – seats and ceiling – are a bright red velvet. The owner, Mexican-born and Texas-raised Jesse Valdez, chose pink in honor of famous burlesque dancer Gypsy Rose Lee. Valdez's car rose to fame once it reached the pages of Car Craft magazine in 1972.[176] The Gypsy Rose finally acquired the title as "the most famous lowrider" in 1974 when the sitcom Chico and the Man included the car on its opening title

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[174] Interview with anonymous informant. Conducted April 2022.

[175] See Gopinath's *Unruly Visions*, p 8.

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

sequence. Celebrated throughout lowrider culture, the Gypsy Rose is now housed in the Petersen Automotive Museum.

Figure 19. The Gypsy Rose. Photo by James Mann, 2020.

I argue that in *Corpo Ranfla*, rafa's embodiment of the famous Gyspy Rose practices queering the regional imaginary of East Los Angeles. In collaboration with Mario Ayala and Tanya Melendez rafa gives his body a bright neon pink paint job with an airbrush machine. rafa also has a mural added to his chest of Robert "Cyclona" Legorreta, a queer East LA artist active during the 1960s and known for their "semi-drag" public performances.[177] Sculptor and hair stylist Tanya Melendez also decorated rafa's body with a plaque. Within lowrider culture, plaques are a critical element as they represent both the "club" you pertain to but also reflect the

[177] See "Roberto 'Cyclona' Legorreta" by Alma Lopez, Accessed April 2022, http://almalopez.com/projects/QALA/LegorretaRobert/LegorettaRobert.html

family, community, and values you honor. In this performance, rafa styles his pink decked out body with a plaque that reads “Brown Persuasion,” placed over his matching neon pink velvet underwear. On his back rafa is adorned with another mural. Drawn with a pinto aesthetic, this second mural depicts two queer homeboys in a lustful sexual encounter.

1. Live performance photo of Corpo Ranfla. Photo Rudy Bleu, 2018.

Corpo Ranfla was performed on two sites: 1) the Mayan Theatre and 2) Elysian Park. *Corpo Ranfla* was part of the Pacific Standard Time Festival: Live Art LA/LA in 2018. The festival brought together more than 200 Latinx and Latin American artists to celebrate performance all throughout Los Angeles with more than 25 locations.[178] In *Corpo Ranfla*, rafa took to the entrance of the Mayan Theatre on a black platform behind red velvet ropes where incoming guests would come and gaze onto his now adorned Gypsy Rose body. rafa was also joined on the platform by brown trans artist Sebastian Hernandez who posed next to the “Gyspy

[178] Redcat, Thursday, January 11, 2018 to Sunday, January 21, 2018, https://www.redcat.org/festival

Rose" as a vixen – a model who usually poses alongside lowriders during car shows. In addition to the Mayan theatre, rafa also took *Corpo Ranfla* to Elysian Park, a popular gay cruising site. rafa's embodiment of the Gypsie Rose thus gestures to "cruising" through two registers: 1) lowrider cruising in Chicano culture and 2) queer pleasure – a popular form of finding a sexual encounter amongst gay men. Cruising, amongst cisgender gay men, is usually done within public – yet confined – spaces (bathrooms, parks, bathhouses). The act of cruising is a sexual dance that requires communication through body movement – intentional eye contact, slow approach, touch, and consent. Moreover, lowrider culture has a deep historical presence in the region of East Los Angeles. Such was the presence that the state criminalized these cultural practices by imposing a cruising ordinance in 1982. Mobility studies scholar Genevieve Carpio reminds us that such ordinances "…stripped their drivers of mobility…" and racialized "…Latina/o residents as outsiders whose movements should be viewed with suspicion."[179] By entwining a traditional Chicano cultural landscape (lowriders) with queer sex (cruising), *Corpo Ranfla* conducts an "excavation" of queer pleasure into the region of East Los Angeles. Such an excavation pushes against the regional dominant narratives of Chicanidad that have molded the region around the ontologies of *la familia* and *la raza*. According to scholar Bernadine Hernandez rafa''s "elements of femininity (pink body, lace-up heels, jewelry) stared down the masculinity that is inextricably linked with *carnalismo* ("brotherhood") in lowrider culture."[180] As such, *Corpo Ranfla* points to governance of heteronormativity, its compulsive nature to understand history through the confines of reproduction and normative familial bonds. *Corpo*

[179] Carpio, Genevieve. Collisions at the Crossroads: How Place and Mobility Make Race. 1st ed. University of California Press, 2019; p 5.

[180] Hernandez, Bernadine, "The Next Stage: The Legacy of Latinx Performance Art in L.A. Lives On," December 18, 2018, https://www.artnews.com/art-news/news/next-stage-legacy-latinx-performance-art-l-lives-11559/.

Ranfla thus reminds us, through a re-emplacement of queerness, that queer desires, pleasure, and politics have and continue to inform East Los Angeles' historical formation as a Latinx geography.

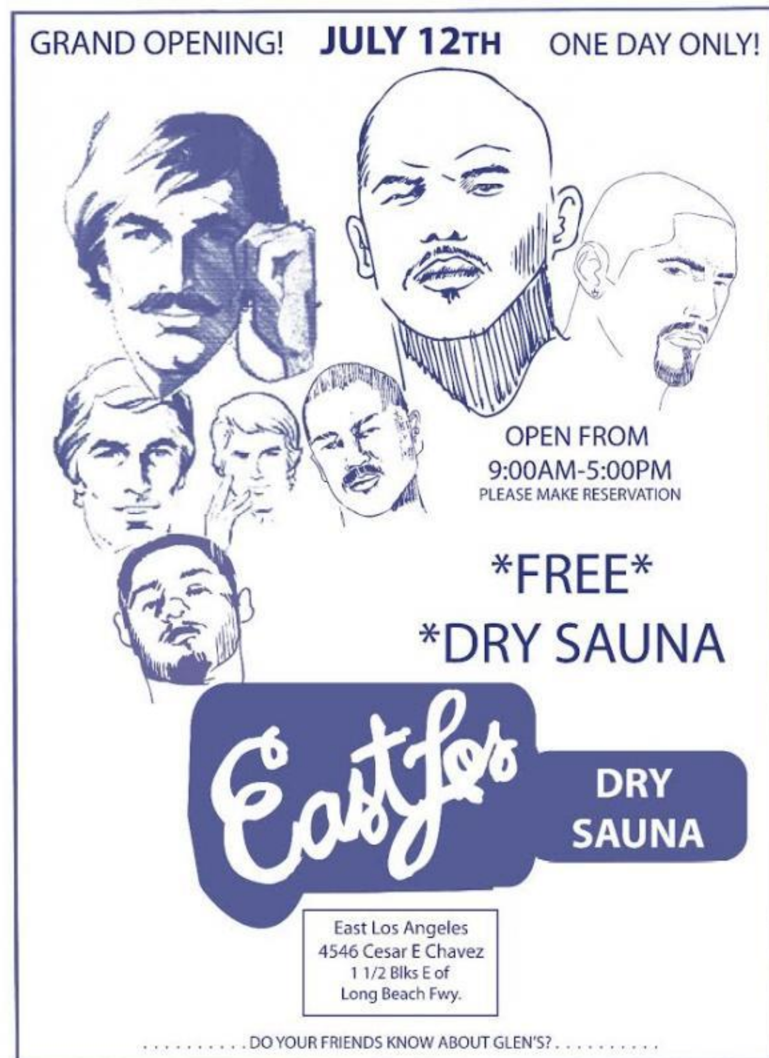

Figure 20. Dry: East Los Sauna. Modified archival flyer by rafa esparza, 2014.

In rafa's 2014 public performance, *Dry: East Los Sauna*, rafa, in similar fashion, re-emplaces queerness into the region of East Los Angeles through an *excavation* of queer history. For rafa, queerness gets "trumped" by the dominant racial narratives of the East LA region. Attempting to disrupt the erasure of queer histories, in *Dry* rafa installs a sauna outside El Gallo

Bakery, a family-owned business dedicated to selling Mexican sweet bread. Before El Gallo Bakery, this location was home to Glen's, a bathhouse frequented by gay men during the 1980s. The bathhouse was part of a chain owned by Glen's Turkish Baths which was then closed during the AIDS crisis after city officials imposed homophobic regulations over gay cruising.[181] I suggest rafa's *Dry: East Los Sauna* practices what Gopinath describes as a "queer archival practice:"

> These aesthetic practices enact an excavation of the past through a queer optic, which allows us to apprehend bodies, desires, and affiliations rendered lost or unthinkable within normative history. This queer excavation of the past does not seek to identity or mourn lost origins; nor do queer visual aesthetic practices necessarily aim at visibility or coherence. Instead, the queer optic instantiated by these practices brings into focus and into the realm of the present the energy of those nonnormative desires, practices, bodies, and affiliations concealed within dominant historical narratives.[182]

Like the lowrider ordinance of 1982, cruising, an act of seeking and finding pleasure, is also criminalized, and erased from the region's cultural memory. The flyer used to advertise the performance is also re-imagined by rafa. Found in archival material, rafa removed some of the white gay males in the original flyer and drew in Latino men, which were the primary customers of Glen's. The flyer also asks a critical question: "DO YOUR FRIENDS KNOW ABOUT GLEN'S?" rafa's *Dry*, its public installation of a functioning sauna, re-centers the very mechanism that once threatened the regional narrative: queer pleasure. Cruising here then

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[181] Organized by the ONE Archives at the USC Libraries. See the event page found at https://one.usc.edu/program/rafa-esparza-dry-east-los-sauna. Interview with rafa esparza. Conducted October 2019.

[182] Gopinath, Gayatri. *Unruly Visions: The Aesthetic Practices of Queer Diaspora*. Duke University Press, 2018, p 8.

extends beyond the dominant cultural reference of lowrider within Chicana/o studies. In *Dry*, rafa intentionally remembers queer pleasure as much as a political strategy that makes up the regional history of East Los Angeles.

A pivotal part of understanding *Dry* are also the negotiations that took place between rafa and El Gallo Bakery owners. According to rafa, the owners were skeptical of what a performance like *Dry* would attract as the performance was made in collaboration with Outfest, the queer film festival. Worried about what might be the beginning of gayborhood gentrification, the owners resisted. After constant and intentional communication with the owners, rafa was able to keep the sauna functioning outside El Gallo Bakery for a full day. Such negotiations remind us of the contested terrains queers of color occupy in barrio revitalization processes. On the one hand, queerness becomes erased in favor of regional dominant narratives that center a compulsory heterosexual ontology (la familia). On the other end, cities commodify queerness for the sake of accumulation which, as I have argued, is accomplished through gentrification.

Personal claims to East LA evoke the histories of Chicanidad which have shaped the regions cultural memory (Chicano Moratorium, Student Blowouts during the 1970s). For example, Chicano histories like the Chicano Moratorium and the Student Blowouts of the 1970s are central to understanding this region. Indeed, claiming East LA reflects Chicanidad's model of self-determination which lingers within these Latinx geographies. More specifically, histories of community resistance against urban renewal have also produced the political affect of East LA as a "angry" region. Indeed, we can look at the histories of urban renewal and the local resistance efforts that now fill up the discourse of Chicana/o Studies. For example, the histories of Chavez Ravine are pivotal to the region of East LA in which working-class Mexican residents of who fought to keep their homes against the installation of Dodger Stadium during the 1950s. The

violent histories of the Los Angeles freeways have a similar narrative in which working poor Latinx families in East LA fought to stay in their homes against the neoliberal city's invest in "keeping up" as a global city[183]. Recent anti-gentrification efforts also sit within these histories of resistance. Organizations like Defend Boyle Heights, Union de Vecinos and the Los Angeles Center for Community Law and Action, just to name a few, sit today as pivotal anti-gentrification local organizations resisting violent neighborhood changes.

rafa esparzas's performance work, its "queer archival practice," advances brownness as a queer political vision – a regional imaginary emplaced within East Los Angeles that pushes beyond idenitarian models of Chicanidad as aforementioned above. While indebted, rafa says, to the contributions of the Chicano activism, scholarship, and art, rafa embraces *brown* as an identity in which his queerness can also claim space. Said differently, rafa's *Dry* (2014), *Corpo Ranfla* (2018), and *de la Calle* (2018) dispels the notion of East LA as a queer-less region. The re-emplacement of queerness through performance-based work centers pleasure, may it be public sex or the reclamation of the public street. These works highlight the limitations of Chicanidad and its compulsory commitment to a heteronormative understanding of race, space, and place. Moreover, rafa's work does not seek to make brownness a coherent identity-category but instead aims to understand brown through region. For rafa, it is the nonnormative sites like the forgotten bathhouse in East LA, the gay cruising park, or the city's informal economies like *los callejones* in which regional affiliations with East LA come to life.

[183] Avila, Eric. The Folklore of the Freeway: Race and Revolt in the Modernist City. University of Minnesota Press, 2014.

Conclusion

Pride Arrives to the Barrio: An Ethnographic Reflection of Boyle Height's Orgullo Fest

How do queer communities of color stake out a territory beyond ghettos and enclaves and beyond demarcated moments such as Pride Days and ethnic celebrations? These questions haunt the struggles, rituals, and practices of African American, Latino, and Asian American queers as they engage with the travails of urban life today.

- *Martin F. Manalansan, "Race, Violence, and Neoliberal Spatial Politics in the Global City"*

Figure 21. Public online flyer for Orgullo Fest, flyer by Noa Noa Place, June 2021.

Rainbow flags filled the barrio landscape of Boyle Heights, a historically low-income working class Latinx immigrant neighborhood just east of downtown Los Angeles. Street vendors, food trucks, drag queens, and residents of all ages came together that sunny Sunday afternoon in celebration of Pride Month. I arrived at Orgullo Fest with my younger sister, 15, and my three younger cousins, ages 14, 17, and 19. The Covid-19 pandemic remained a lingering threat but the vaccines, which had begun to roll out months prior, offered some comfort to congregate once again. I admittedly stepped into Orgullo Fest feeling a bit nervous. Was my

younger sister going to see dildos or other "inappropriate" things? To my surprise Orgullo Fest was very family friendly – as advertised. On the one hand I did not mind the sanitized experience as I avoided having to explain what a gay bear was to young teens. On the other hand, a raunchier sex-positive scene could have probably generated a fruitful conversation on healthy sex practices. Indeed, as queer Latina scholar Juana Maria Rodriguez warned us before, the "normative" queer and "perverse" queer stand at odds within the terrains of the family friendly pride festival.[184] In the end, the only question came from my youngest cousin, Vanessa: "Wait, so is she really singing?" She was referring to Jessy Cruz, a drag queen who performed an incredible lip synch to Thalia's live concert audio of "A Quien Le Importa" while holding a microphone. The drag illusion was a success![185]

Figure 22. Photo of drag queen Vivenne Vida by Carolyn Cole, June 27, 2021, The Los Angeles Times.

[184] Rodriguez, Juana Maria. *Sexual Futures, Queer Gestures, and Other Latina Longings*. NYU Press, 2014.

[185] Jessy Cruz is a drag queen who specializes in impersonating famous Mexican pop singer Thalia. You can contact and book Jessy Cruz here: https://www.instagram.com/jessycruz25/

Orgullo Fest was Boyle Heights inaugural pride festival.[186] The block party took place on June 27, 2021 on the corner of East 1st and Soto. In collaboration with Los Angeles' 14th District Councilmember Kevin de Leon, Orgullo Fest was organized by El Place (formally known as Noa Noa Place), the new queer Latinx bar which opened its doors on November 5, 2020 amidst the Covid-19 pandemic. The bar remained open for one year, officially closing its doors on November 22, 2021. "There wasn't enough capital. Los Angeles has one less queer Latinx space," commented Steve Saldivar, a Los Angeles Times journalist. Despite its short temporary stay in Boyle Heights, El Place offered us Orgullo Fest, which brought together a range of talent: mariachi, banda, baile folklorico, drag queens, drag impersonators, and other queer performers.

During my time at Orgullo Fest, I also came across a familiar face: Ceci. I met Ceci at the Los Angeles Center for Community Law and Action (LACCLA), an anti-gentrification organization dedicated to defending marginally housed tenants facing unjust evictions. Ceci works as a street vendor and sells a range of Mexican food outside her home. She migrated from Mexico 40 years ago and has been living in Boyle Heights for 14 years. Ceci lives on the corner of East 1st Street and Soto. You could see the Orgullo Fest stage from her home. Ceci joined LACCLA back in 2017 after facing violent landlord harassment and an unjust eviction. LACCLA organizers and lawyers came together to help Ceci fight and win her case in court. Since then, Ceci has partaken in many housing justice movements in the larger Los Angeles area as a proud LACCLA member and housing justice activist. I walked up to say hello. It had been a while since I had physically seen Ceci. Once the pandemic hit back in March 2020, LACCLA's communication and organizing efforts now took place over zoom. I spoke to Ceci about her

[186] Reyes-Velarde, Alejandra. "Inaugural Orgullo Fest Brings Gay Pride to Boyle Heights." Los Angeles Times, June 27, 2021. https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2021-06-27/first-ever-orgullo-fest-brings-gay-pride-to-boyle-heights.

thoughts on Orgullo Fest:

> A mi esposo no le gusta salir. Yo me fui. Agare mi silla y me sente a mirar el show. A mi me gusta apoyar. Estaba bien organizado. Escuche que Kevin de Leon fue el padrino del nuevo bar y que van hacer el festival mas grande pal proximo año. A mi me gusto mucho, me gustan los festivales. [187]

Seeing Ceci walk through Boyle Height's first annual pride festival sparked an important reflection I hope to explore further here. After greeting Ceci I could not help but wonder what Orgullo Fest meant for the future of Boyle Heights, a neighborhood who has and continues to mobilize against gentrifying threats. I wonder: Is Orgullo Fest a signal of larger neighborhood changes to come? As many gentrification scholars and activists have reminded us before, queerness came become commodified alongside processes of gentrification (see Manansalan 2005, Hanhardt 2018, Haritaworn 2015, Duggan 2003).[188] For example, Christina Hanhardt's important work on the histories of gay neighborhoods reminds us that the Mission District barrio in San Francisco was directly impacted by gay gentrification back in the 1970s and 1980s during the height of the Gay Liberation Movement.[189] We can also look at the important documentary *Flag Wars* which captures the violence of gay gentrification in the historically Black neighborhood of Old Towne East in Columbus, Ohio. In the documentary we see Old Towne

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[187] Translation from Spanish to English: My husband does not like to go out. I went. I grabbed my chair and sat down to watch the show. I like to show my support. It was well organized. I also heard the Kevin de Leon was the godfather (sponsor) of the new bar and that they were going to make the festival even bigger next year. I really liked it. I like attending festivals.

[188] Hanhardt, Christina B., *Safe Space: Gay Neighborhood History and the Politics of Violence*. Duke Press, 2018; Haritaworn, Jin. *Queer Lovers and Hateful Others: Regenerating Violent Times and Places*, Pluto Press, 2015; Duggan, Lisa. *Twilight of Equality?: Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy*, Beacon Press, 2003

[189] See *Safe Space: Gay Neighborhood History and the Politics of Violence* by Christina B. Hanhardt

East gentrified by incoming white gays and lesbians who rely on legal violence to criminalizeand banish long standing Black residents through housing code standards.[190] As I have suggested, Haritaworn's notion of queer regeneration is also a generative framework to think about the complicated relationship between race, space, capital accumulation and queerness. Ultimately, two important reminders arise from Haritaworn's work: 1) no one sits neatly outside the economies of gentrification and 2) one's ability to successfully embody the respectable citizen determines whether one is welcomed into emerging spaces (queer and non-queer).[191]

Scholars and activists have also pointed to the ways police and media actively advance gentrification through racist policing. Here we can think of Martin F. Manalansan's important research on the queer enclaves of Jackson Heights and Christopher Street piers in New York City post 9/11.[192] To demonstrate how displacement and beautification efforts operate through state-sanctioned racist policing, Manalansan moves away from using "gentrification" as it relies on a dominant narrative in which "outsiders" come into a neighborhood to make changes. Instead, Manalansan deploys the notion of "neoliberal urban governance," a framework that pays particular attention to how "various neoliberal agents and institutions such as mass media, private businesses, and the state (including the police) mediate discourses about changing urban space" (141). Manasalan's approach, which he productively describes as a "triangulated exploration of space, race, and queerness," urgently reminds us that *the call is sometimes coming*

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[190] Goode-Bryant, Linda, and Laura Poitras. Flag Wars. Berkeley, Calif: Berkeley Media, 2003.

[191] In *Queer Loves and Hateful Others* Haritaworn suggests that one's ability to secure proper and respectable citizenship determines who gets to participate in the gentrifying neighborhood: "If a blunt distinction between 'gentrifying queers' and 'displaced queers' is insufficient, in that no positionality is automatically outside of gentrification, our proximities and distances from the good multicultural subject on the one hand, and the degenerate disposable non-citizen on the other, shape the kind of invitations we get, and the performances we must make, to become or stay part of queer spaces forming in gentrifying areas" (51).

[192] Manalansan IV, Martin F, "Race, Violence, and Neoliberal Spatial Politics in the Global City." *Social Text* 1 December 2005; 23 (3-4 (84-85)): 141–155.

from inside the house; the agents advancing urban changes are in the region operating as a "global financial center."[193] Manasalan argues that by advancing a *homonormative* politic, neoliberal institutions "anesthetizes queer communities into passively accepting alternative forms of inequality in return for domestic privacy and the freedom to consume."[194] Thinking alongside Manalansan's work, I wonder: How have media and police in Boyle Heights worked to mediate discourse on local urban changes? Moreover, if urban renewal, queerness, and race have historically held a complicated relationship, what does the arrival of Orgullo Fest – the first pride festival co-signed by a local politician – tell us about the future of Boyle Heights?

Throughout the past 9 years there has been a lot of attention focused on Boyle Heights. Two mainstream television shows about Boyle Heights' fight against gentrification are now streaming online – Starz's *Vida* (2018) and Netflix's *Gentefied* (2020). Vast academic scholarship has also focused on this East L.A. barrio. This hyper focused attention has given rise to a lingering sentiment that insists we *move on* – an urgence to look elsewhere. However, despite this national spotlight, what has remained unexamined are ways queers of color make claims to space within this gentrifying barrio and the negotiations that take place alongside race, class – but also – sexuality, and gender. Thus, the point of my reflection is not to mark the queer Latinx/Chicanx as a gentrifier. I keep in mind Haritaworn's reminder – there is no cite of innocence within processes of gentrification. Rather, I want to consider how Orgullo Fest sits alongside the longer history of revitalization in Boyle Heights. I'm particularly interested in how media and police in Boyle Heights have worked to re-frame local anti-gentrification efforts. In what follows, I suggest that local politicians, police, and media in Boyle Heights relied on a

[193] Ibid, p 142.

[194] Ibid, p 2.

seemingly race-neutral logic to frame local anti-gentrification activism – a movement critical of how race and class operate within gentrification – as incoherent efforts. As such, I argue that Orgullo Fest, while a site of queer Latinx empowerment, must also be observed as a deeply political playground entangled with the barrio's revitalization.

Local neoliberal institutions (media, private businesses, and police) have attempted to re-frame the historically racialized barrio of Boyle Heights as an "up-and-coming" destination (see Introduction for discussion around Haffar's "gentri-flyer" and BHAAAD's efforts against art washing in the Art's District). Media and police in Boyle Heights have also mediated local narratives on neighborhood changes through a seemingly race-neutral language. According to Zacil Pech – a Defend Boyle Heights leader – local organizations and activists have been racialized by media and police as "aggressive angry brown" groups.[195] For example, protesters rallying against the new art galleries spray painted "white art" outside one of the buildings. While such an act critically marked the space as a white gentrifying force, local media and police re-worked the narrative. Detective Parra of the Los Angeles Police Department Hollenbeck station framed the graffiti as "anti-white" vandalism.[196] Similar tactics were used against protesters who rallied against a newly arrived coffee shop. Activists used flyers to re-name the shop – Weird Wave Coffee – into "White Wave Coffee." These efforts were also quickly demonized as hostile and racist. Councilmember José Huizar took to the Los Angeles Times to speak against anti-gentrification activists by offering a response sympathetic to the arrival of the new establishments: "…targeting people solely based on race, that goes against everything Boyle

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[195] Alessandro Negrete, Elizabeth Blaney, Zacil Pech, Nico Avina. Panel Discussion. Public Housing & Activism Series Pt. III: Resisting Displacement in Boyle Heights Streamed live May 9, 2017, UCLA.

[196] Carrol, Rory. "'Anti-white' graffiti in gentrifying LA neighborhood sparks hate crime debate." The Gaurdian, November 4, 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/nov/04/boyle-heights-art-gallery-vandalism-hate-crime-gentrification

Heights stands for."[197] Alfredo Huante best describes this response as a form of "colorblind racism," rhetoric used to disguise whiteness as an innocent and ahistorical agent.[198]

It is also worth noting that on June 23, 2020, Councilmember José Huizar was arrested and indicted for corruption charges. Huizar accepted bribes and campaign donations from real estate developers in exchange for his help in passing regional development projects.[199] Huizar, who advanced the gentrification of Boyle Heights, was then replaced by Councilmember Kevin de Leon, the central supporter of Orgullo Fest. De Leon is also currently running for Mayor of Los Angeles. As such, De Leon's partnership with Orgullo Fest echoes what Manansalan describes as "neoliberal urban governance." In other words, Orgullo Fest, a site of queer Latinx visibility and empowerment, also became a pivotal political playground for De Leon's campaign. Another question surfaces here: What is at stake in queer visibility politics? On the one hand visibility politics promise a future of acceptance and liberation. However, as Duggan reminds us, queer visibility politics tend to rely on "homonormativity" which "rhetorically remaps and recodes freedom and liberation in terms of privacy, domesticity, and consumption."[200] Here, I want to hold two very real realities: 1) Orgullo Fest is deeply entangled with local histories of revitalization that have set forth Boyle Heights' gentrification and 2) The arrival of El Place and Orgullo Fest in Boyle Heights is nothing less than a momentous occasion. When planning Orgullo Fest, Luis Octavio – one of the three co-owners of El Place (alongside Donaji Esparza &

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[197] Vives, Ruben. "Race-based attacks on Boyle Heights businesses prompt this L.A. councilman to take sides," July 29, 2017, https://www.latimes.com/local/lanow/la-me-boyle-heigts-huizar-coffee-20170729-story.html

[198] Alfredo Huante, "A Lighter Shade of Brown? Racial Formation and Gentrification in Latino Los Angeles," Social Problems, Volume 68, Issue 1, February 2021, p 3.

[199] https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2020-06-23/jose-huizar-arrest-corruption-city-hall-fbi-investigation

[200] Manalansan IV, Martin F, "Race, Violence, and Neoliberal Spatial Politics in the Global City." *Social Text* 1 December 2005; p 142.

Deysi Serrano) – set a goal to center and celebrate the queer Latinx community:

> I want Orgullo Fest to be a place where regardless of your economic background, regardless of how much money you have in your bank account, you could still come out, have a good time, dance the day away and for at least that day forget about all your worries and feel like you have a place. We are far more than just a theme night. We are far more than just a Thursday or Sunday night. We are Latino 24/7 and we should have spaces like this in our own community.[201]

Luis points to the racial dynamics in mainstream gay spaces like West Hollywood which often treat Latinx customers as an afterthought. Working against this model, Orgullo Fest intentionally catered to the local community, a predominantly low-income immigrant Latinx neighborhood. Free of charge, Orgullo Fest brought friends, families, queers, and non-queers together. As a cisgender queer Chicanx man born and raised in Boyle Heights, I was thrilled! Walking through the festival I felt a sense of belonging that affirmed both my Chicanx and queer identity. At the same time, I wondered about the implications of Pride in the barrio, an attractive celebration that also welcomes speculative forces. Indeed, I write this personal and political reflection in part to remind us of the dangerous ways neoliberal cities commodify spaces and identities for the sake of profit. However, I also want to observe the arrival of Pride in the barrio as an opportunity – a chance to honor the histories of queer of color spaces in East Los Angeles that often go unrecognized within global city histories. Here I'm thinking specifically of queer working class Latinx/Chicanx spaces that, like Luis explains, de-center white queerness. As such, I want to end this reflection with a brief overview of queer spaces in East Los Angeles as a way of thinking

[201] Interview with Luis Octavio. Conducted August 31, 2021.

about Boyle Height's queer *past* and *futurity*.[202]

Histories of queer spaces in East Los Angeles are histories of struggle; these histories show us that queers of color have always made claims to space, and they will continue to do so. Just 10 minutes away from the Orgullo Fest celebration stood Plush Pony, a historic beer-and-pool bar frequented by working class queer Latina/Chicana women. The bar closed in 2010 due to increasing rents.[203] Today, these histories remain alive through Laura Aguilar's photography, a "brown queer archive" capturing working-class queer women's nightlife adventures through portraiture (Gómez-Barris).[204] Another local long-standing working-class lesbian bar is Redz, formerly known as Redheads and Redz Angelz. Redz opened in Boyle Heights during the 1950s, shut down in 2015 but then re-opened in 2016.[205] Redz also participated in the 2021 inaugural Orgullo Fest alongside El Place. Another important East L.A. queer space is Club Chico, considered the first gay bar of East Los Angeles which opened its doors in 1999. A 2001 Los Angeles Times news report described Club Chico attendees as "gang-banger looking toughs."[206] According to queer Latinx scholar Richard T. Rodriguez, we can better understand Club Chico attendees' style as a "queer homeboy aesthetic."[207] Today Chico has left its original location in

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[202] I borrow Jose Esteban Munoz's notion of "futurity" from his book *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* to think about the relationship between queer placemaking and temporality. Futurity here refers to queerness as unfolding in a nearby future or what he calls the "not yet here." Therefore, the futurity of Boyle Heights and East Los Angeles is a future that while located in "the horizon," is still deeply informed by its histories of queer spaces (parties, bars, enclaves etc.).

[203] Timmons Stuart and Federman Lillian. *Gay LA: A History of Sexual Outlaws, Power Politics, and Lipstick Lesbians*. UC Press, 2006.

[204] Gómez-Barris, Macarena, "The Plush View: Makeshift Sexualities and Laura Aguilar's Forbidden Archives" in *Axis Mundo: Queer Networks in Chicano L.A*, ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archives at the USC Libraries, 2017.

[205] Ibid, 199.

[206] Rodríguez, T. Richard."Queering the Homeboy Aesthetic." Aztlán: A Journal of Chicano Studies 31 (2006): 127-137.

[207] Ibid.

Montebello, East Los Angeles due to the Covid-19 pandemic and is now primarily based in Hollywood.

To the West of Downtown Los Angeles, areas like Silverlake and Echo Park also hold rich queer histories. For example, one of the first actions against anti-queer police brutality began at the Black Cat Tavern, a gay bar located in the famous Sunset Junction. The Black Cat Tavern protest took place on February 11, 1967, two and a half years before the more well-known Stonewall Riots. Moreover, in the 1970s, a combination of gay real estate and affordable housing echoed in an era of queer regeneration, resulting in the displacement of long-standing working-class Latinx families.[208] This queer regeneration gave way to the famous Sunset Junction Street Fair, a neighborhood festival created with the intention of easing tensions between long-standing Latinx working-class residents and incoming gay and lesbian residents.[209]

I began this conclusion with Manalansan's words where he describes the relationship between queers of color and the neoliberal city as a *haunting*. Indeed, as these histories clearly show us, queer of color spaces are ephemeral. Yet despite this continuous struggle for space, queer futures in East Los Angeles continue to emerge. In 2021 – alongside Orgullo Fest and El Place – the barrio also welcomed its "very first queer mercado of East L.A.," a friendly space for LGBTQ businesses to sell merchandise.[210] The *haunting* is clear – holding onto queer of color spaces in the neoliberal city is no easy task. Therefore, as changes in East Los Angeles continue to arrive it is more important than ever to remain vigilant of *ghosts* – queer of color histories and

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[208] Timmons Stuart and Federman Lillian. *Gay LA: A History of Sexual Outlaws, Power Politics, and Lipstick Lesbians*. UC Press, 2006.

[209] Ibid.

[210] Deng, Jireh, "NOT WEHO, BUT EAST L.A: A NEW 'QUEER MERCADO' CREATES AN INCLUSIVE, SAFE SPACE FOR LGBTQ-OWNED SMALL BUSINESSES IN THE BARRIO," *L.A. Taco*, September 20, 2021, https://www.lataco.com/queer-mercado-east-la-lgbtq-small-business/.

ancestors that can offer us guidance as we continue to navigate the neoliberal city so deeply invested in sanitizing, privatizing, and commodifying queerness.

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