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“Fuck That Fag Shit, Take That To The Castro”:

The Politics of Space and Place in Manuel Paul’s Queer Latinx Mural—“Por Vida”

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree Master of Arts
in Chicana and Chicano Studies

by

Vicente Carrillo Jr.

2018

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2018

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

“Fuck That Fag Shit, Take That To The Castro”: The Politics of Space and Place in Manuel Paul’s Queer Latinx Mural—“Por Vida”

by

Vicente Carrillo Jr.

Master of Arts in Chicana and Chicano Studies

University of California, Los Angeles, 2018

Professor Alicia Gaspar de Alba, Chair

Across the US, Chicana/o and Latina/o murals have served as artistic landmarks commemorating Chicana/o and Latina/o culture, history and identity. These murals, however, are predominantly heteronormative representations of Chicana/o culture and history. What happens, therefore, when queer Latinx and Chicanx artists use muralism to express their intersectional identities? This project focuses on the digital queer mural, *Por Vida*, designed by Los Angeles based artist Paul Manuel, installed June 13, 2015 on 24th and Bryant Street in San Francisco’s Mission District in celebration of Pride Month. Just days after its installation, the mural was defaced multiple times, three times spray-painted, the fourth time incinerated. After the defacements, community tensions rose among local and non-local Mission District residents. To this day, the identity of individual(s) behind the violent vandalism are still unknown.

In this project, I explore what I identify as the “contested conversations” regarding *Por Vida*’s defacements between local and non-local residents. From over 230 Instagram comments, I identify five different types of arguments within these online conversations which include, 1)

Cultural Gatekeepers of "The Cholo" 2) Spatial Entitlement 3) Gentrification Activism 4) Pro-LGBTQ and 5) Latinx Pro-LGBTQ. Drawing from queer of color critique, spatial theory, whiteness studies, and women of color feminism, I explore these contested debates, along with the Mission District's cultural and spatial relationship to *Por Vida's* installation. Using this analytics lens, I highlight and challenge the pervasive forms of whiteness in mainstream LGBTQ representation that, I argue, ultimately erase queer of color identities or "brown" pride (Muñoz). Rainbow capitalism is a racial social project that informs spatial imaginations, producing territorial boundaries (cultural and spatial) that intentionally exclude queer of color bodies. I argue that the censorship of the *Por Vida* mural reinforces rainbow capitalism's project of erasure—a project reaffirming queerness as a social identity belonging only to that of white, wealthier queer subjects. Indeed, I aim to question the "gentrification argument," pointing to instead the white gay subject's universal or dominant socio-spatial relationship to queer of color bodies and claims to safe spaces such as "gayborhoods."

Through a *queer of color spatial critique*, I discovered that the anti-gentrification sentiments from local Mission District residents, while they openly resist against the displacement of low-income families of color, also simultaneously observe *Por Vida's* representation of queer of color intimacy as a symptom of gentrification. Interviews revealed that these sentiments are rooted in homophobic and transphobic attitudes but also territorial entitlements that continuously marginalize queer and trans bodies of color. I argue that *Por Vida's* representation of queer Latinx intimacy is an active disruption to public space's heteronormative social values of respectability and domesticity, that also render visible the pervasive homophobic and transphobic attitudes still informing Latina/o communities even as they support anti-racist, anti-displacement activism.

The thesis of Vicente Carrillo is approved.

Juliet A. Williams

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Alicia Gaspar de Alba, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2018

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Chapter 1: Introduction

What Happened to the Por Vida Mural?

Galería De La Raza, a non-profit community based organization in San Francisco's Mission district, installed a mural entitled "Por Vida" along the side of its public wall on Saturday June 13, 2015. "Por Vida" was conceptualized and illustrated by artist Manuel Paul, member of the Maricón Collective- a Chicana and Latina DJ/Artist group based in Los Angeles. The mural is organized as a triptych: on the left hand side of the triptych, two gay cholo men are intimately embracing; in the middle section, a Latino transgender man stares up with two scars on his chest, depicting his breast-removal surgery; in the far right, two lesbian Latinas tenderly gaze at each other, while one caresses her lover's face. Each panel, individually, depicts a lifetime partnership, signified by the title of the piece, *Por Vida*, for life. The two couples could be interpreted as marrying each other, and the trans Latina in the middle panel is in process of transitioning.

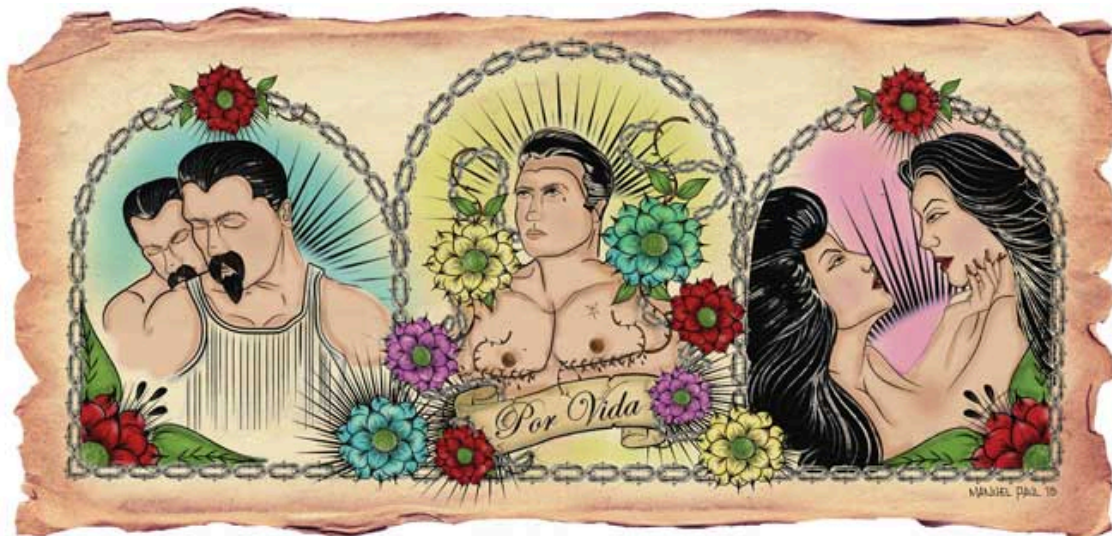


Figure 1. Manuel Paul, *Por Vida*, 2015, digital mural.

Despite its tender subject matter, the mural was defaced three days later with red and blue spray paint — scribbling out the faces of both couples and striking out the words “Por Vida” in the mural’s center. Because *Por Vida* is a digital print, the mural was quickly re-installed. The gallery placed cameras around the mural for extra security measures after the first attack. Two days later, “Por Vida” was spray-painted once again. Fighting back against the homophobic 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 vandalism, the organizers re-printed and installed the mural for a fourth time. Shortly after, around 11pm on June 29th, video footage from the security cameras shows a hooded figure pouring flammable liquid over the image of the two queer cholo lovers. The hooded figure then sets the mural on fire with a match and quickly runs away.¹



Figure 2. Photography of burned *Por Vida* mural, Photo by San Francisco News, “Video Released: Man Burns LGBT Mural.”

¹ El Tecolote. (July 31, 2015). Video footage retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m9zdPXQ8Se0>.

Why such a violent response? Has other queer art been similarly defaced? Are these homophobic attacks at all common in San Francisco's Mission District? Or was this an isolated event, not at all contextualized and framed around a larger history of violence against queer and trans bodies of color? The news of the attacks on "Por Vida" quickly circulated throughout local news media outlets and online social media accounts. Articles and news media outlets tracked the four consecutive defacements the mural endured. Bays News Rising—an online news source reported the last fiery attack on the mural and gathered online Instagram comments concerning the final defacement of "Por Vida." One Instagram commenter—@valleyqueen— writes, "Mannnn fuck that gay shit. It gonna keep getting vandalized. You guys wanna call some gay guyz from LA to make this shit in northern califaz. Mannn keep that gay s**t down south." Similarly, Instagram user @jun._.99 also comments: "This mural ain't lasting in the mission it don't belong there take that to Castro and don't use cholos smh." The second commenter demands to "take that [*Por Vida*] to the Castro." I am interested in these sentiments and perspectives represented because they highlight local Mission District resident's relationship to queerness, their barrio, and Latina/o representations, such as the cholo.

I wonder: Why was *Por Vida* defaced in an area well known for its murals, a Latino/a neighborhood that sits adjacent to the queer Castro district? Do the defacements of the mural signify an especially fraught relationship between Latino/as and queers in San Francisco? Could it be that by tagging and ultimately burning the mural, the individual committed a hate crime, or were they, perhaps simply seeking to reclaim a space in a community that is predominantly heteronormative and Latino/a? Why did this mural, depicting love and transformation, ignite such a homophobic and transphobic backlash in a time of post-marriage equality, and especially in a place known historically as a "gay- positive" city? This thesis sets out to begin answering, at

least in part, these questions by focusing on the *Por Vida* mural as a way of analyzing the contesting relationships and power dynamics between queer of color representation, and gentrification.

Galeria de la Raza, The Maricon Collective, and Local Residents

During the height of the defacement's media coverage, Galería de la Raza's role as a community art organization was questioned by many local residents. Many expressed a deep sense of disappointment from, what many comments describe as, Galería de la Raza's unwillingness to first hear Mission District resident's opinions over *Por Vida's* initial installation. For example, Instagram user @barrio2barrio comments:

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 townner 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.

Directly addressing Galería de la Raza, many opinions like the one above, questioned both the art non-profit's political allegiances and their commitment to the larger Mission District community. Should Galería de la Raza have consulted with local residents before installing *Por Vida*? Many voices like @barrio2barrio's strongly believe a discussion should have occurred before the installation.

Galeria de la Raza's historical contributions to Mission District and artists at large has been significant. Galería de la Raza is as a "non-profit community-based arts organization" that has

served as a central site fostering the growth of Chicano and Latino artists.² Founded in 1970, Galería de la Raza's mission is to "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. To implement our mission, the Galería supports Latino artists in the visual, literary, media and performing art fields whose works explore new aesthetic possibilities for socially committed art."³ Galería was founded by a community of Chicano artists and activists, including Rupert García, Peter Rodríguez, Francisco X. Camplis, Graciela Carrillo, Jerry Concha, Gustavo Ramos Rivera, Carlos Loarca, Manuel Villamor, Robert González, Luis Cervantes, Chuy Campusano, Rolando Castellón, Ralph Maradiaga, and René Yañez.⁴ Residing in the Mission District for almost 50 years, Galería de la Raza has been an integral space of cultural production for local and non-local artists and activists alike.⁵

The Maricón Collective's personal background—in particular artist Paul Manuel's positionality—also rose many concerns and questions among local and non-local Mission District residents, consequently contributing to the debates regarding *Por Vida's* installation. As Los Angeles based artists, many people specifically questioned *Por Vida's* geographical occupation, questioning Paul Manuel's and the larger Maricón Collective's willingness to display a public mural in the Mission District. User @leo_r89 states, "[Take] that shit back down to l.a Where the artist is from. It's probably good in your hood but this hood. #khy #keephoodsyours." Similarly,

² Galería de la Raza. Retrieved from <http://www.galeriadelaraza.org/eng/about/index.php>.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

user @lady_vampz_ comments:

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."

The Instagram user's questioning of the artists' neighborhood of origin is indicative of various other types of claims over spaces and territorial boundaries that surfaced throughout this project. Crucial to this project is the Maricon Collective's strong personal claims to Los Angeles as a site and source of inspiration for their artistic collaboration. In their Instagram profile, Maricon Collective describe themselves as "A Queer Chicano/Latino DJ and artist collective." Their goal, they say, is to "bring people together through art and celebration."⁶ The group's popularity grew after they began organizing parties throughout the East side of Los Angeles. "L.A. is a huge influence in what I choose to play at our parties," says Carlos, the Collective's DJ. "Growing up," he continues, "I was exposed to a lot of music by my sister's friends, DJs and radio stations like MARS FM, POWER 106, and KRLA. A lot of what I play is reminiscent of the old parties I use to go to in the 90s."⁷

Rudy, another member of the Maricón Collective, also explains the significance of Los Angeles's influence on the collective's artistic vision. "L.A. inspires the collective in every aspect of what we do," Rudy says. "We are inspired by the neighborhoods we grew up in, swap meets, vintage Lowrider, Teen Angel, and Street Beat magazines, by other artist creating work around us."⁸ As a group openly and proudly influenced by Los Angeles, many Mission District

⁶ Valez, Jennifer. (February 27, 2015). "Locals Only: the Maricón Collective Shares Their L.A. Picks." Retrieved from <http://remezcla.com/features/culture/locals-only-the-maricon-collective-los-angeles-picks/>

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

locals like @ladyvampz took a critical stance against *Por Vida*'s installation for, what they argued, appeared as a lack in personal connections to the Mission District barrio and larger Bay Area. In this project, I explore contested notions of spatial entitlements such as the ones expressed by user @lady_vampz_ and others alike. What does it mean to claim space and territory? In claiming such a space who gets excluded and included?

On Using “Latinx” and “Latina/o”

The use of gender inclusive terminology is crucial within queer communities of color. Gender is usually understood through a heteronormative, binary lens in which only two “types” of people exist— male and female. A binary approach to understanding gender imposes restrictive limitations that fail to recognize different embodied gender expressions outside normative (binary) understandings. Queer communities of color do not fully embrace the gender binary-frame because of the restrictive limitations it imposes along the lines of gender expression. As queer and feminist women of color scholars have shown us, gender is not a binary but rather a fluid spectrum that is anchored, not on a person’s genitalia, but rather on a persons’ *material expression*. By *material* I refer to physical objects people use to present themselves as who they are (clothes, make up, shoes, earrings, hair, and other forms of material expression). By *material* I also refer to a person’s *bodily or corporeal* expressions. This refers to the ways in which a person moves, speaks, reacts, eats, breathes, sings, laughs, talks, walks—*exists* in time and space. These material and corporeal markers is what is then referred to as *gender expression*.

By understanding gender not as a binary but as a spectrum and as an *expression* we also challenge the language we use to name these gender identities. The conditioned “a/o” in the Spanish language and “female/male” in larger social understandings no longer becomes enough

as we begin to see that gender expressions vary from person to person. For these reasons, the “x” has been introduced in the Spanish “a/o” as a new way of acknowledging this infinite and complicated spectrum. In this project, I borrow graduate student Max Greenberg’s operational definition of “Latinx” and “Chicanx” which clearly distinguishes the function of the two terms:

In dialogue and solidarity with many queer activists, academics, and our allies, I use the term Latinx (pronounced “Latin-ex”) to disrupt the masculine-centric umbrella term “Latino,” and well as the more gender inclusive, but binary terms “Latina/o” and “Latin@”. My research, which centers the gender and sexually non-conforming body, benefits from the use of the term Latinx and Chicanx, as the word captures the spectrum of gender identities (rather than a binary) for people of Latin American descent. When my analysis centers the gender, or sexually non-conforming subject, I use the term Latinx. I use the more gender inclusive term, Latina/o to refer more broadly to people of Latin American-origin who reside in the United States. (3)⁹

Greenberg’s definition is helpful because it clearly distinguishes between “Latinx” and “Latina/o.” In their definition Latinx refers to the queer or, more specifically, the “gender, or sexually non-conforming subject.” “Latina/o” on the other end, functions as an indicator of a larger population. I use this definition intentionally to distinguish between the multiple voices and conversations that arise within the *Por Vida* controversy. Greenberg’s definition provides an opportunity to include the multiple voices/subjects I write about by offering a linguistic space which includes both uses of the term rather than privileging one over the other—“Latinx” and “Latina/o.” Also, gender-inclusive “Latinx” and “Chicanx” are crucial because many of the queer subjects in this project self-identify with such terminology.

The “Ethnographic eye/I”: Home, Murals, and Heteronormativity

In this study, I keep in mind the insights of Chicana lesbian feminist Alicia Gaspar de Alba who discusses problematics behind classic ethnography’s analytical approach in her book

⁹ Borrowed from Max Greenbergs M.A Thesis, “Is Yolanda Saldivar Homo La Flor? Revisiting Selena Commodities and the (im)Possibility of Queer Latinx Cultural Citizenship.” 2016.

Chicano Art: Inside Outside the Master's House. She primarily identifies problems with the usage of the word “subculture” when describing community groups. Gaspar de Alba argues that:

Such categorizations pose several problems: by definition, ‘subculture’ implies the presence of a superior culture; and, rather than being analyzed in their own right, ‘subcultures’ are used as filters for analyzing the effects of the messages that the ethnographers’ own culture, the dominating culture, projects onto the so-called subculture (23).

Applying “subculture” as a descriptor to a group replicates colonialist frames of thought, ultimately “othering” and reinforcing hierarchical stratifications. Gaspar de Alba proposes an alternate ethnographic analytical approach, what she calls the “native eye/I,” which combines methods from what cultural anthropologist Renato Rosaldo terms “native ethnography” and the historical and material specificities of the researcher’s “I” and “eye.” This approach values and centers the researcher’s subjectivities and experiential knowledge while at the same time embodying the tensions between insider and outsider positionalities.

Gaspar de Alba employs her native eye/I when she announces her identity as a “first-generation Chicana lesbian feminist from the U.S-Mexico border” and as a “post el Movimiento” academic. This positionality, she argues, provides a unique insider perspective of the CARA¹⁰ Exhibition’s cultural impact (25). “A native ethnographic analysis...can deconstruct the ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ polemics...,” especially when we consider how ethnographers usually attempt to set themselves apart from their subjects and pass judgement (27). Classic ethnographic research reinforces hierarchal power structures of dominance and “lacks introspective quality and positionality” (23). Drawing on these insights, I also employ a native eye/I in this study. Within the *I/eye* native ethnographic approach, the “I” codes for my identity as a cis gender queer

¹⁰ CARA stands for Chicano Art: Resistance and Affirmation. Gaspar de Alba’s book is a cultural analysis of the CARA exhibitions which traveled across the U.S from 1990-1993.

Chicano man born and raised in Boyle Heights. The “eye,” simultaneously signifies the researcher/ethnographer who *cannot* exist separate from the material, historical, political, and cultural reality of their area of study.

As a graduate student in Chicax Studies, and as a “researcher,” I feel it is necessary to recognize and highlight the positionality I hold within academia, but also within the larger queer Chicax community. In conducting this project, I do not wish to reinforce the idea of queer Chicax and Latinx as a “othered” sub-group in need of investigation. Instead, I humbly write this not only as a way of honoring the resilience of queer Latinx and Chicax art, but to also as a means of challenging the violent heteropatriarchal power structures that inform our day to day ways of knowing and loving. I deploy the “native eye/I” methodology to approach this ethnographic project, which not only acknowledges my entry point to this paper but also interrogates my relational positionality to the Mission District.

Thus, I position myself as both an “insider and an “outsider” in this project, in which I engage with subjectivities I identify with—queer Chicax. In other words, I am both the subject and researcher of this project. “The native eye/I” Gaspar discusses, “does not assume only one correct, authentic interpretation (if that even exists), but allows for an interpretive stance framed by the politics of self-representation” (27). While I am not from the Mission District, nor have I ever lived there, the *Por Vida* mural’s visual representation of queer Chicax lives reflects the subjectivities I identify with. By “identify” I refer to my self-identification but I also intentionally point to my experiential knowledge with the realities of homophobia I experienced and witnessed growing up. The “eye” works in conjunction with the “I,” allowing me to provide an informed ethnographic analysis that draws from my personal experiences.

In Summer 2016, I traveled from Los Angeles to the Mission District in order to conduct interviews with Galeria de la Raza and gather data for the project. I recognize that I am indeed an “outsider”—someone who is unfamiliar with the day-to-day experiences/realities of living in or around the Mission District. At the same time, however, I am an “insider” in various degrees. I intentionally center radical women of color’s reminder to recognize and observe my relationship to this particular research project, as both personal and political.¹¹ This project is personal considering my familial, cultural, and historical, relationship with Chicax, queer, histories and lived experiences. My political investment in this project stems from the violence (lack of representation, loss of lives, lack of adequate resources) that continues to erase queer Chicax and Latinx bodies. Indeed, I am writing this project after the 2016 Orlando Pulse shootings that took the lives of 49 queer Latinx in Orlando, Florida. Violence against queer people of color is not only prolific in the 21st century, it continues to be largely normalized in a heteronormative and still, homophobic society. Furthermore, I also write this thesis during the 45th presidential regime of power, in which violence against queer, of color, immigrant, Muslim and Latina/o communities have increased through the 45th’s racist, transphobic, xenophobic policy implementations and speeches. The stakes are clearly high. The violence inflicted onto the *Por Vida* mural provides just one avenue through which to investigate the current state of affairs and their legacies of violence against queer people of color.

Home

¹¹ Here, I’m drawing from radical women of colors political call known widely as “the personal is political.” The phrase acknowledges that the private social domains are intricately informed and affected by larger social structures. The phrase has been figures in pieces such as “A Black Feminist Statement” by the Combahee River Collective and *This Bridge Called by Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* edited by Gloria E. Anzaldúa and Cherrie Moraga.

My home heavily informs my “native eye/I” analytical approach to this project. I grew up in Ramona Gardens, Boyle Heights on the corner of Lancaster and Tremont Street. My parents immigrated from Tepic, Nayarit Mexico in 1988 to Boyle Heights. They still reside in this neighborhood. Both of my grandparent’s and my parent’s house sit on the same block, each house connected with a small lot. My *tia*’s house sits right in between the two. I grew up with my entire family living together on this small block. Family *carne asadas*, birthday parties, Christmas—all celebrations took place on the corner of Lancaster and Tremont St.

As a small boy, I would *borrow* my cousin’s Barbie dolls and sneak away into my Grandmother’s beautiful garden. Surrounded by my grandma’s roses, I would play with the Barbie dolls for hours. Styling their hair was my favorite part but I always had a difficult time putting on their tiny heels. While I would play with these dolls I hid away. Slowly, I became aware of my intentional *hiding*. I understood that, as a boy, this Barbie toy was not for me and the fear of being caught was always looming in my head.

Chicana/o murals have always had a presence in my life. My grandmother’s garden sits across an abandoned small market, or as my abuela would call it, *la marketa*. Painted over the *marketa*’s walls is a large blue mural known as *Raices Indigenas* (see Figure 3), which still stands today. As a young child playing in her garden, *Raices Indigenas* would stand across, intensely radiating its vibrant colors and figures. The mural was painted by the residents of the R6 apartment complex in the Ramona Garden projects during the 1980s (no specific date is available). To the far right of the wall, the title of the mural is painted alongside a small message from the artist collective:

To the people of our culture, to know who we are, where we come from, and who our ancestors were.

In the mural, large brown Aztec bodies are painted over a deep a deep blue background. The dark brown indigenous figures stretch across the wall, green bushes and leaves fill in the spaces between them. In the center of the mural a tall brown indigenous woman stands confidently with two large skulls protruding behind her. Above the skulls, two large white calla lilies flowers sprout from behind. Between the calla lilies, a large blue serpent rises, completing the brown indigenous woman's captivating stance. The Mexican flag is also represented, but rather than the symbolic icons– the eagle, snake and serpent—a brown fist takes up the center space. *Raices Indigenas* has always been present, always part of my geographic surroundings, and even then, it grabbed my attention as a child. Yet, only recently did I clearly *see* the mural in its entirety—its cultural and historical contributions.



Figure 3. M. Lozano and Residents of R-6, *Raices Indigenas*, 1980s. Photo of *Raices Indigenas*, 2015, Photograph by Vicente Carrillo.



Figure 4. M. Lozano and Residents of R-6, 1980s. Photo of *Raices Indigenas*, 2015, Photograph by Vicente Carrillo.

In her book, *Walls of Empowerment*, Guisela Latorre investigates the historical meanings of Chicana/o murals and the cultural impact they have on the Chicana/o and Latina/o community. She explores the repeated presentations of indigenous icons and figures in murals throughout California. Latorre argues that murals “create a compelling and decolonized frame of self-representation,” serving as a radical “metaphor of political consciousness that allowed for innovative articulations of cultural and gendered identity” (3). The indigenous imagery reminds community members of their historical connections to displaced people. They recognize the history of colonization, and highlight Chicana/o and Latina/o’s connection with *mestizaje*. Functioning as cultural memory, Latina/o and Chicana/o murals commemorate *mestizaje*, traditional Mexican cultural practices, and the political Chicana/o movement of the 1960s, preserving the Chicana/o and Latina/o history and identity. These murals are located throughout

East Los Angeles, San Francisco and San Diego.

As a child, sitting in my grandma's garden, covered in dirt and Barbie doll hair, I did not understand the significance behind these images, but they nevertheless captured my attention; unconsciously, they were forming my *conocimiento* of the cultural aesthetics of my surroundings and its built environments. Today, as a graduate student in Chicana/o Studies at UCLA, who has learned the historical meaning of the symbols and images painted on those walls, these murals signify home, culture and family. As Latorre explains, "indigenist imagery in muralism was meant to function as a metaphorical and tangible platform where Chicana/o artists could carve out spaces for the articulation of cultural citizenship and decolonizing creative expressions" (140). Through their imagery and their continuous presence in my daily life, the murals have come to serve, for me, as a self-reflexive tool that remind of my childhood, forcing me to critically interrogate my position as a queer Chicax man and my larger political trajectory within my community. The murals also signify my conflicting relationship with Mexican and Chicana/o culture. These artistic pieces represent a tedious and sometimes frustrating navigation for survival within a homophobic community.

For example, the Chicano murals I grew up seeing mark the heteronormative systems of value within my community. "El Corrido de Boyle Heights," a mural by the East Los Streetscapers, haunted me as a young child incapable of freely expressing his queerness. It was an unexplainable fear sparked by the mural's visual narrative. "El Corrido de Boyle Heights" re-deploys *el corrido*—the sung and performed Mexican diasporic experience—into a monumental and visual representation. The mariachi band, Mexican food, and the woman in the center all symbolize the traditional and shared Mexican culture within Boyle Heights. On the far right of the mural, the groom and bride dance the traditional wedding "vals." In the background, the

mother, father and child happily walk down the street. Back, in the distance, a car, and houses complete the murals visual narrative.

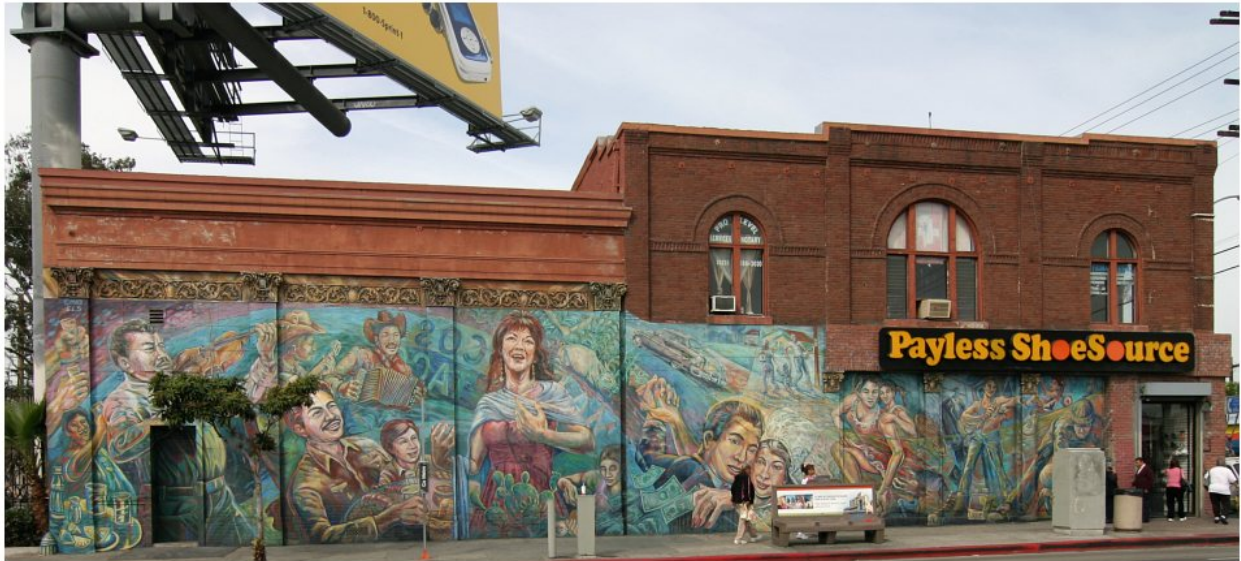


Figure 5. East Los Streetscappers (David Botello, Wayne Healy, George Yepes. Assisted by Paul Botello, David Morin, and Ismael Cazarez), *El Corrido de Boyle Heights*, 1983, acrylic mural.

El Corrido de Boyle Heights sits across the street from the King Taco, painted across the Payless Shoe Store where my mom would frequent to buy me shoes we could afford. During our weekend family dinners to King Taco, I would stare out into the mural. As I bit into my *burro de asada*, I would stare at the man and woman dancing the vals. They appeared so happy, I thought to myself. The woman's long white veil blossoms beautifully above her head. As I would turn to the groom, capturing the murals entire narrative, my internal and unexplainable fears would begin to boil. While I found patterns of familiarity in the visual narrative, at a certain point I could no longer find myself within the visual story.

The heteronormative narrative of *El Corrido*, tied closely to the cultural and familial patterns, represents a familiarity, comfortably welcoming and nurturing. At the same time, a

sense of displacement occurs, an “unsettling of comforts” (19).¹² Jose Esteban Muñoz describes this internal fragmentation as a “disidentification,” a sensibility queers of color deploy in order to navigate through heteronormativity. “These alternative vistas,” Muñoz explains, “are more than simply views or perspectives; they are oppositional ideologies that function as critiques of oppressive regimes of ‘truth’ that subjugate minoritarian people...Disidentification uses the majoritarian culture as raw material to make a new world” (195). Indeed, as a young child, unaware of the mechanisms of power operating at the time, I point to my “unsettling discomforts” as a type of disidentification, a subtle push towards the futurity of my queerness.

The emergence of the *Por Vida* mural in 2015 was, for me, a new and exciting form of representation, one that I had, up until this moment, yet to experience. *Por Vida*’s visual narrative not only intentionally carries queer Latinx intimacies and comforts, it also acknowledges the present existence and future potentialities of queer Latinx lives. The Chicano murals, while representing a familiar cultural narrative, also worked to reinforce heteronormative social expectations. These traditional and heteronormative murals taught me that, in order to be considered a valuable member of society, I had to live a heteronormative life. Upon discovering *Por Vida*, how could this artistic visual representation come to exist as a mural—a form of artistic expression I had come to closely associate with Chicano and Latino heteronormative values?

¹² In her book, *Performing Mexicanidad: Vendidas y Cabareteras on the Transnational Stage*, Laura G. Gutiérrez uses the notion of “unsettling comforts” to explore the heteronormative social expectations within Mexican communities. In spite of my unconventional use of “unsettling” as an adjective applied to the word “comfort,” I employ it as a descriptor that is meant to signal the idea that “unsettled comfort” or dis-comfort may be in fact be a way of life (particularly among the queer artists include in this book or the queer counterpublics that participate in the consumption of these artists’ work) and that is, above all, a politicized and queer *modus vivendi*; that is, that the notion of “unsettling comforts”...has to do with the idea that...heteronormativity is challenged.



Figure 5. East Los Streetscappers (David Botello, Wayne Healy, George Yepes. Assisted by Paul Botello, David Morin, and Ismael Cazarez), Close-up, *El Corrido de Boyle Heights*, 1983, acrylic mural. Photo by Mural Conservancy of Los Angeles.

The contested political conversations surrounding the *Por Vida* controversy are but a small part of a larger conversation regarding the future of queer Latinx and Chicanx within Chicano/Latino communities and the larger U.S nation-state. Through this project I hope to highlight the complicated, violent realities queer Chicanx and Latinx continue to live. I specifically hope to show that the seemingly unstable future for queer Latinx and Chicanx stems from violence that derives from a larger institutional level (prisons, police forces, nation-state economic projects). As I will show in this project, the violence unfortunately also presents itself from local community members who also identify as Chicano and Latino. Queer Latinx and Chicanx bodies have to confront both institutional and “home-based” or “community-based” violence and homophobia which attempt to actively erase their existence. I am using the *Por*

Vida controversy as a key example to show the continuous ways in which queer Latinx and Chicana bodies are erased and excluded from public space.

While this project primarily centers around *Por Vida* and its contributions to larger queer of color discourses, I do not mean to suggest that *Por Vida* is the only case of censorship on queer of color art in the exact location in the Mission District. In December 2000, for example, Chicana artist Alma Lopez's digital mural, *Heaven* (see Figure 6), also installed along Galeria's public wall, was damaged with religiously homophobic rhetoric. The defacement of the mural included biblical references, passages from the bible, marked in black ink. According to reports, "the defacement includes a biblical reference to the book of Galatians and a comment referring to 'colored imitators of white man's infatuations with one's own genitals.'"¹³ Alma Lopez's *Heaven* was part of Galeria de la Raza's inaugural "Digital Mural Art Project—a series of computer-generated murals aimed at allowing artists working with digital imagery and photography access to the public art space."¹⁴ Displayed along the corner street of 24th and Bryant, Alma Lopez's *Heaven* depicts queer Chicana love and the rejection of traditional Catholic expectations. On the left-hand side, a butch woman leaves the comfort of her bed, appearing to start her day. As she awakens, the woman, through her raised hand, firmly and aggressively dismisses the two Catholic figures (a priest and his young acolyte) standing above her bed. The young queer Chicana also faces towards what appears to be her romantic interest—another queer Latina woman. In an archived interview from Galeria de la Raza, Alma Lopez elaborates on the significance behind *Heaven*'s narrative. According to the artist, the imagery

¹³ Galería de la Raza. (December 30, 2000). Interview with Alma Lopez. Retrieved by http://www.galeriadelaraza.org/eng/programs/mural_archive/lopez_heaven.html

¹⁴ Galería de la Raza. From organization's official website. Retrieved from <http://www.galeriadelaraza.org/eng/events/index.php?op=view&id=802>

represents queer of color intimacies and her own personal relationship with sex and religion:

"Spirituality and sexuality both exist within me... to separate them is impossible... The work I do comes from my heart and is not meant to disrespect or offend."¹⁵ On the right-hand side of the mural, the two women romantically gaze into each other's eyes as they sit upon a crescent moon, reminiscent of La Luna card in the Mexican bingo game known as "loteria." This is an excellent example of a visual narrative gesturing towards a potential futurity inclusive of queer women of color intimacies.



Figure 6. Alma Lopez, *Heaven*, 2000, digital mural. Photo by Galeria de la Raza.

Three years earlier, on September 18, 1997, Alex Donis' *My Cathedral* installation is also received with violent attacks, sparking debates between local Mission residents. According to online archival records, rocks and a wooden traffic barrier were thrown into Galeria's windows on two different occasions between a three-week period. Two of Donis' pieces were broken,

¹⁵ Itbsd.

each work of art worth 5000 dollars.¹⁶ In *My Cathedral*, Alex Donis depicts famous icons, pop stars, revolutionary leaders and religious figures in erotic embraces and kisses. For example, in a piece Madonna and Mother Theresa embrace as they tenderly kiss. In another, Cesar Chavez and Che Guevara are paired into a kiss. Another kiss-pairing includes Martin Luther King Jr. and a Kux Kux Klan leader. According to Donis, “the vandalism highlights the gaps that still need to be bridged in the Mission.”¹⁷ By positioning famous figures in erotic and intimate gestures, Donis unsettles heterosexual comforts, forcing viewers to directly engage with their sentiments around queer intimacies. I bring attention to these two historical moments of violence and censorship to not only highlight the repetitive patterns of homophobic violence and censorship but also to demonstrate the larger and longer processes of erasure of queer of color lives and expression. Ultimately, these defacements are indicative of a larger genealogy of violence on queer and trans bodies of color both in the Mission District and in the large US nation. In the following chapter I present the online data collected for this project. This data consists of more than 200 online comments from Instagram. Providing a closer look into the contested debates surrounding *Por Vida's* installation, I am able to identify and consider the various voices from local residents and non-locals alike.

¹⁶ Delgado, Ray of the Examiner Staff. (September 18, 1997). Retrieved from <http://www.alexdonis.com/bibliography-NEWS-cathedral.html>.

¹⁷ Ibid.

Chapter II: The Contested Conversations

Here, I wish to briefly describe the findings of my two-week ethnographic field investigation in the Mission District along with the online data I gathered. The ethnographic field data includes pictures, field notes and two oral histories. The first oral history belongs to Ani Rivera, director of Galeria de la Raza in which she explains her personal navigation surrounding the murals defacement, media press, local community tensions and violent threats. The second oral history I conducted was with Stephen Torres, a Mission District local and community activist. As a member of the Harvey Milk Democratic Club, Torres' oral history provides a glimpse into the political resistance that arose in defense of the *Por Vida* mural. Additionally, I present the online data that I gathered. This data consists of online Instagram comments and local online news articles. Local and non-local community members used Instagram as a platform to participate in the large debate that erupted from *Por Vida's* installation in the Mission District.

The Instagram comments provide a more nuanced understanding of the debate surrounding the mural's installment in the Mission District. The comments were gathered via screenshots. 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 230 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 “contestation”:

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. (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 Chicax socio-spatial, and racial positionalities in relation to heteronormativity but also larger capitalistic structures around queerness (Pride Month). Below I provide categories from the 230 comments to highlight the complex perspectives and arguments regarding, not just the *Por Vida* mural, but also the ways in which the “contestation” perceives and understands queer Latinx and Chicax 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 ways in which 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 in which 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" (108). 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 230 comments:

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

Cultural Gatekeepers comments express anger towards *Por Vida*'s use of the *cholo* and low rider aesthetic. Cultural Gatekeepers, overall, claim *the cholo* as belonging to a particular

group—a non-queer, heteronormative group. The *Spatial Entitlement* category identifies comments that express claim over territorial boundaries on multiple geographical scales (locally, city-based, northern vs. southern California etc.). *Anti-Gentrification Activism* identifies comments that speak on issues of gentrification. They particularly classify *Por Vida* as contributing to gentrification, such as displacement and rental price increase. 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 take 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 used a non-intersectional approach. In other words, they described or touched upon only “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” (user calle415)
- “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."
(19lopez82)

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. @keeplamissionbrown”
- “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!” (user Kenneth_bartholomew_lexington)
- “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.” (lady_vampz_)
- “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” (user @leo_r89)
- “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” (user @christianaltamirano14)
- “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” (chachachapina)
- “@outta_this_world187 nobody is talking war here. And nobody is impeding on anyone's space. If anything, it is carving a little bit of space for queer Latin@ folks.” (user @tookoolraul)

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” (chavez.sal)
- “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!” (user Kenneth_bartholomew_lexington)
- “@rilla_mac 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” (susieq_415)

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.” (user @keeplamissionbrown)

- “@calle415 @rilla_mac of course there are homo cholos in the mission. They are just afraid to come out. Chale.” (user @av_dr)
- “@galeriadelaraza @mariconcollective is this a transboy vato? Im literally crying. Never seen a mural like this. Its fucking beautiful. Thank you.” (user @saakred)
- “@outta_this_world187 nobody is talking war here. And nobody is impeding on anyone’s space. If anything, it is carving a little bit of space for queer Latin@ folks.” (user @tookoolraul)
- “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.” (user @saakred)

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” (user @unitedstatesoferica_)
- “@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.” (user @s.f.v.lgbt)
- “People are ugly with their hate. Support the arts, support love, support creation in all its forms” (user @cuhsandra)

What do these “contested conversations” tell us about the ways in which 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 Chapter 3 I begin with a brief review of gentrification where I aim to contextualize *Por Vida*’s installation in relation to the Mission Districts detrimental history with gentrification. I also identify what I call the “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. In Chapter 4, founded on a theoretical approach that I call a “queer of color spatial critique,” I argue for a reimagining of public space, one that moves away from

notions of heteronormative and respectable social expectations and instead welcomes queer and trans lives. Lastly, in Chapter 5 I argue against the “gentrification argument,” which I identify earlier in Chapter 3, via an exploration of rainbow capitalism, Pride and Pride Month. I observe Pride Month and Pride as sites inherent to the formation of the white middle class gay subject. I also consider the ways in which whiteness and processes of racialization manifest (spatially) discursively in the “contested conversations” around the *Por Vida* mural’s violent defacement. I argue that this racial and socio-spatial landscape can be described as an in-between space, a state of “nepantla” in which the queer and trans body of color is unable to claim space as “unrespectable” non-white queer bodies. In this utterance of “here nor there,” I intentionally gesture towards a spatial understanding, one that aims to disturb the heteropatriarchal social order governing the productions of respectability and whiteness.

Chapter 3: The Cultural and Political Context of “Por Vida”- Gentrification in the Mission District

The “Anti-Gentrification” Argument

Considering the *Por Vida*'s geographic location, I focus primarily on the Mission District and its historical and present fight against gentrification. As media news outlets began covering the *Por Vida* mural's consecutive defacements, online conversations in social media platforms also began to grow with multiple perspectives contributing to the developing discussion. Therefore, I work with online data from Instagram, a mobile social media application in which users upload photographs to share with other Instagram users. Within Instagram's social media platform, users are able to “like” and comment on other users' photos. Galeria de la Raza holds an Instagram account which they actively use to promote events, share art, and keep followers updated on the organization's latest projects. Galeria de la Raza, in their effort to keep local residents and the larger community members informed, uploaded photos to their Instagram account to document *Por Vida*'s initial celebratory installation. Galeria de La Raza also documented the consecutive attacks. As part of the evidence and data for this project, I gather online comments users typed into the photos covering to the *Por Vida* mural. All the photographs and comments can still be found via Galeria de la Raza's Instagram account (user name: @galeriadelaraza).

One of the arguments amongst Instagram users, which I read and identify as the “anti-gentrification argument,” dominates a large portion of the online Instagram conversations. The “anti-gentrification argument” justifies the *Por Vida* mural's defacement by classifying *Por Vida* as a contributor to and symptom of gentrification (displacement, higher rental prices). Instagram user @chavez.sal, for example, expresses his concern regarding the *Por Vida* mural's

defacement in a comment on one of Galeria de la Raza's photos. He states:

[The *Por Vida* mural] 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. (chavez.sal)

Chavez.sal's comment defends the defacement and expresses a strong personal identification to the cholo which he sees as an icon of Latino masculinity. According to chavez.sal, the *Por Vida* mural misrepresents the cholo's social value and significance. In the *Por Vida* mural, the cholo is no longer strong but rather "weakened" (i.e., feminized). *Por Vida* presents the cholo not as representative symbol of masculinity but rather as feminine or what he describes as a "glamorizing" representation of the cholo. Chavez.sal's comment also addresses the mural's role in gentrification, arguing that the mural directly assists in the "advancement" of gentrification in the Mission District.

Keeping this "anti-gentrification argument" in mind, it is important that we ask: How exactly is the *Por Vida* mural a gentrifier? How is the digital mural, as a form of artistic creation, the entity contributing to gentrification? Are the gentrifying forces the queer Latinx subjects (the kissing cholxs and trans cholx figures) visually represented in the mural? Or is something else going on here? Moreover, if we are to accept the "anti-gentrification argument," how does this narrative enable and disable us from understanding the violent defacement? In other words, what might we be missing if we accept the "anti-gentrification argument" in its entirety? I engage closely with the political and social impacts of gentrification through a spatial de-colonial lens as a means of answering these questions. Before entering this discussion, it is important to first understand the political conversations around gentrification as it has become a heavily debated issue in cities across the United States.

The Contested Debates of Gentrification and Future Conversations

The associations and justifications that construct the “gentrification argument” stem from the unique contextual history of gentrification that the residents of Mission District have, and continue to experience. Gentrification and the detrimental displacement of Latina/o families has now left a collective scar in the locals’ communal memory. I do not mean to minimize the severity of the homophobic and transphobic violence enacted on the *Por Vida* mural. Rather, I want to take this moment to highlight the displacement that has effected locals in the Mission District and surrounding areas. I want to contextualize these associations by acknowledging the past. I also do not wish to reduce the collective perspectives from Instagram users— like *chavez.sal*’s contribution—to simply “online comments.” Rather, I observe these Instagram comments as conversations reflective of a community’s entanglement with the structural and economic phenomena of gentrification. I return to the Instagram comments later in this study and provide an in-depth analysis of these online conversations and perspectives which, I argue, are reflective of queer Latinx and Chicanx larger relational positionality to rainbow capitalism.

Gentrification is not yet a clearly defined term as scholars continue to alter and modify the boundaries of its meaning for the purposes of scholarly research. Nonetheless, the primary concern in the study of gentrification is *displacement* and the various degrees by which residents are effected. In the following review, I provide a review of gentrification’s economic effects on local residents and communities. I do not provide, however, a new definition of gentrification or new strategy on how to approach this economic, racial debate. Rather, I review the literature that has successfully argued against the *passive* logic of understanding gentrification, a logic which positions neighborhood changes as natural or inevitable. Issues of displacement and dispossession affecting communities of color have historically been normalized, presenting such

processes as a “natural” part of economic market shifts. Past research reminds us that gentrification and other neighborhood changes are produced by intentional larger financial institutions such as the housing market, banks, real estate, and government city planners, resulting in the displacement of low in-come, working class residents of color.

Scholarship on gentrification has been developing over the past fifty years with debates on its definition and level of impact on community spaces still continuing today. Some researchers focus on the economics behind gentrification, such as urban development projects, housing markets and property value. Others look at demographics, social capital and the racist regimes of power that contribute to this larger phenomenon. Scholar Nancy Raquel Maribal’s ethnographic research article, *Geographies of Displacement*, centers the narratives of displaced Mission District residents and examines the shifting demographics of the district through a racial, gendered, and spatial approach. By centering the testimonies of displaced residents, Maribal’s work provides a useful look into gentrification’s economic, social and cultural impact during the height of the Mission District’s rapid neighborhood change. Throughout this review, I draw from Maribal’s theoretical and ethnographic evidence to further contextualize *Por Vida*’s relational position to the Mission District’s larger history with gentrification.

The term “gentrification” was first coined by sociologist Ruth Glass in 1964. She first uses the term to point towards neighborhood changes in London. Her definition specifically highlights class’s operative (upper, middle, lower) function to create, what she calls, a local district’s “new social character.” Glass defines gentrification as follows:

One by one, many of the working-class quarters of London have been invaded by the middle classes—upper and lower. Shabby, modest mews and cottages—two rooms up and two down—have been taken over, when their leases have expired, and have become elegant, expensive residences. Larger Victorian houses, downgraded in an earlier or recent

period— which were used as lodging houses or were otherwise in multiple occupation— have been upgraded once again.... Once this process of “gentrification” starts in a district it goes on rapidly until all or most of the original working-class occupiers are displaced and the whole social character of the district is changed. (Neil Smith Urban Frontier 31).

The “social character of a district,” which Glass centers as her operative definition, is one of the core logical entry points past literature has attempted to better understand. Glass’ conceptualization of a district’s “social character” reflects a neighborhood in which residents of similar economic standing live amongst one another. According to Glass, particular spatial characteristics parallel local residents’ economic standing –hence her use of words like “elegant,” “expansive” to point towards spaces of higher value and words like “shabby” and “modest” to describe homes of lesser economic value. A district’s “social character” and the degree to which a “social character” can be measured is one of the central complex debates gentrification scholars and activists are still attempting to answer today. When it comes to the “social character” of the Mission District, many elements have transformed, manifesting through a shift in demographics, cultural sensibilities, and physical landscapes which I will further discuss below.

Miriam Zuk et al.’s article, *Gentrification, Displacement and the Role of Public Investment: A Literature Review*, provides a comprehensive review of the vast pool of scholarship on neighborhood change and gentrification over the past 50 years. They identify three general processes that ignite neighborhood changes: movement of people, public policies and investments, and flow of private capital (3). These determinants are not mutually exclusive, but instead “are mediated by conceptions of race, class, place, and scale” (3). Miriam Uk. et al. also underscore not only the multi-dimensional methodological approaches but also the multi-faceted operational definitions of “gentrification” in past research. Taking into consideration the various boundaries each research study deploys to study gentrification and neighborhood

changes, Zuk et al. pose three conclusions regarding gentrification's impact on a district:

Finding 1: Gentrification results from both flows of capital and people. The extent to which gentrification is linked to racial transition differs across neighborhood contexts.

Finding 2: Cultural strategies can transform places, creating new economic value but at the same time displacing existing meanings.

Finding 3: Commercial gentrification can also transform a neighborhood's meaning, but research is mixed on whether it is positive or negative for existing residents and businesses. (46)

Gentrification is an issue of unique characteristics, determined by a community's contextual (economic, demographic, cultural, spatial) reality. Put another way, one neighborhood's gentrification looks different from another's. In the Mission District, gentrification manifested through the high influx of "commercial gentrification" which Maribal specifically identifies as the large inflow of internet companies between 1997-2007. These years, known as "the dot-com boom," describe a period in time when "technology, space, information, economic investments, education, housing, careers, and the future were all subject to re-evaluation and re-definition" (15).¹⁸ According to Peter Plate, "by the year 2000, the Mission must have had something like 200 dot-com companies in a two-mile radius" (144). The high influx of internet companies initiated the drastic transformation of the Mission District, resulting in an economic and social divide between long-time residents and in-movers. "Times were changing," says Maribal, "and those who could not keep up with the fast-paced momentum spurred by technology were sure to be left behind" (15).

Similar to scholarship on gentrification, neighborhood change literature is also concerned with the shifting cultural and spatial realities of a residential district. I do not mean to suggest

¹⁸ Originally cited in Maribal's article, "Geographies of Displacement."

that gentrification and neighborhood change are mutually exclusive subjects. Nor do I wish to imply that research on neighborhood change turns a blind eye on displacement. Instead, these two bodies of literature overlap and inform one another. However, early scholarship on neighborhood change contributes deficit frames and conclusions that further perpetuate racist and xenophobic attitudes towards low income, immigrant communities of color. Urbanization, for instance, has previously been understood to be the cause of “deviant behavior” (Park 1936; Wirth 1938).¹⁹ Similarly, other scholarly research on neighborhood change points to immigrants as the cause for “social disorganization,” and suggests assimilation as an answer to regaining a neighborhood’s social stability.²⁰ More recent literature on neighborhood change and gentrification challenges these earlier frames and provides a much more useful understanding behind the economic and social entities that contribute to neighborhood changes. I turn to literature that instead closely examines the role of income inequalities, demographic shifts, racial/ethnic segregation, and public policies’ effects on a neighborhood to better understand *Por Vida*’s relationship to the economic dimensions of neighborhood change.

Gentrification is as a process and a form of neighborhood change highly linked to resident’s income levels and a district’s income inequalities. Freeman defines *displacement* as the condition in which residents are forced to move out because they are unable to afford to live in their neighborhood of origin (463). In other words, levels of income determine a resident’s ability to stay in a particular neighborhood, impacting the “change” of a district’s “social character.” In their study on low-income communities of color, researchers Reardon and Bischoff find a strong relational pattern between income inequality and income segregation.

¹⁹ Cited in Miriam Zuk Et al. 4-5.

²⁰ Ibid.

Using census data and the rank-order information theory index, Reardon and Benchoff analyze the income levels of 100 U.S large metropolitan areas between 1970-2000.²¹ They find that families of color, particularly black families, experience income inequality which consequently leads to income segregation. Zuk and co-authors further elaborate, stating that “income inequality leads to income segregation because higher incomes, supported by housing policy, allow certain households to sort themselves according to their preferences – and control local political processes that continue exclusion” (7). The Mission district is historically a predominantly working-class, Latina/o, immigrant community, and “despite the piecemeal benefits of public funds at the end of the 1960s, decades of urban renewal, suburbanization, and sustained capital disinvestment had left [the Mission District] with high levels of poverty, dilapidated housing, and inadequate social services.” (Hanhardt 128). Living in a poor neighborhood leaves residents, especially young people of color, at a disadvantage in gaining access to higher education and other resources such as health services (Morenoff, and Gannon-Rowley 2002; Sharkey 2013).²² Ultimately, the prevalent patterns of income inequality and income segregation in the Mission District, left the low-income, working-class residents as the most vulnerable population during the height of the dot-com years.

Along with income inequalities, rental inflation and the rise of property value also play a significant role in determining the stability and livelihood of residents living in a gentrifying neighborhood. In a 2005 investigation, Lance Freeman compares the displacement in poor

²¹Reardon et al (2006) review a number of other measures of income segregation proposed in the literature, concluding that the rank-order information theory measure better isolates the sorting/unevenness dimension of income segregation than other measures, and ensures comparability over time and place, a feature most other measures lack.

²² Retrieved from Mirium zuk et. all A Lit Review

gentrifying neighborhoods to poor neighborhoods not experiencing gentrification. In his study Freeman addresses one of the major complications around the debate of gentrification: a productive definition. “Although there is no one consensual definition of gentrification,” he says, “certain dimensions appear consistently among the different definitions” (469). “Researchers”, Freeman suggests, “must consider the types of neighborhoods with the potential to be gentrified.” He goes on to list the operational characteristics he uses in his study:

Characteristics of such neighborhoods would include (1) central city neighborhoods (2) populated by low-income households that have previously experienced (3) disinvestment. Next, consider the actual process of gentrification. The definitions listed above point to an (4) influx of the relatively affluent or gentry, and (5) an increase in investment. (469)

Through this operational definition Freeman finds that rental inflation signifies displacement in gentrifying versus non-gentrifying neighborhoods. According to Freeman, new residents moving into a gentrifying neighborhood also had less poverty rates and higher education levels. Finally, Freeman shows that residents moving out of a gentrifying neighborhood were most likely to end up living outside of their neighborhood of origin. Ultimately, Freeman’s study concludes that “the more typical engine of neighborhood change is the altering of the characteristics of in-movers and the lower rates of intra-neighborhood mobility in gentrifying neighborhoods” (488). In other words, the larger “imprint” or impact of gentrification, in addition to the displacement of residents, is the change of characteristics in local residents, or as Ruth Glass would suggest, “the social character” of a district. Indeed, the eviction and eventual displacement of low-income Latina/o residents living in the Mission District was a result caused by the unwarranted rent increases. Maribal’s study provides us with the following numbers, reflective of rental increases occurring during the dot-com-boom years:

The number of rental evictions almost tripled from 965 in 1993 to 2,730 in 2000. Owner 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. (Maribal 13)

Ultimately, rental evictions, owner move-in evictions and unwarranted rent increases lead to the displacement of more than 1,000 Latina/o families by early 2000. These numbers are important to understand in relation to *Por Vida's* contextual relationship to the large Mission District, as they critically inform the various ways in which political resistance against gentrification is now organized.

The Mission District contains a history of local political activism against gentrification that still persists today. Keep Hoods Yours (KHY) is one of the many and arguably the most well-known anti-gentrification activist group in the Mission District. The group describes itself as a “decentralized creative network rooted in challenging oppression/exploitation & developing solidarity from hood to hood.”²³ Self-identified as a street graffiti gang, KHY uses street painting/tagging as a form of resistance against gentrification. During my first visit to the Mission District, I encountered a mural signed by the Keep Hoods Yours activists:

²³ 1312 Press. “Keep Hoods Yours: An Interview.” Retrieved from https://itsgoingdown.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/KHY_imposed.pdf



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

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



In the mural large graffiti words cover the surface. In between the large words a small police man raises a baton. Text below him reads, "...But the criminals have changed," reflecting upon the violent police brutality in the US. According to a KHY's member they are an "anti-authoritarian, anti-gentrification, anti-sexist, anti-racist and so forth, graffiti crew based in the San Francisco Bay Area."²⁴ Their goal is to "develop an antagonistic, decentralized, popular culture of resistance that can hopefully develop our capacity to identify and attack the various forces which exploit poor and working-class spaces, including gentrification, police violence, rape culture and local white supremacist and fascist efforts."²⁵ I bring attention to this activist group as they possess a large political influence in the local Mission District neighborhood and large Bay Area. Consequently, KHY also had a large influence in the conversations surrounding *Por Vida's* installation as a public mural. Many of the "gentrification argument" Instagram comments I identified earlier reference Keep Hoods Yours in their messages to clearly present an anti-gentrification stance against the mural. Until this day, it is only rumored that a Keep Hoods Yours affiliate was indeed the figure captured incinerating the mural in the security footage. Whether or not a KHY's member was responsible for the violent defacement is not of high importance in this project. Nonetheless, KHY played a pivotal role in directing the conversations and sentiments towards *Por Vida's* installation as perceived by the various Instagram comments referencing the activist group via various hashtags (i.e #KeepHoodsYours #Yuppies #KHY).

More often, gentrification and neighborhood changes are also observed as a naturally occurring phenomenon but it is crucial to move away from this apolitical perspective as it tends to present agents of gentrification as innocent participants. Zuk and Bierbaum find that early

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

arguments and observations of neighborhood changes “present processes of succession and segregation as inevitable, underemphasizing the role of the state” (Miram Zuk et al 7). Other scholarship has pushed against the “natural phenomenon” logic. Instead, recent research highlights the masqueraded intentionality attempting to present itself as innocent or apolitical. Geographer Neil Smith, for example, highlights financial institutions active and intentional participation in the gentrification of New York’s Lower East side during the 1980’s. Smith describes the “economic geography of gentrification” as “not random” but rather as organized plans of investment, closed-door meetings centering the goal of profit-making (21). Smith’s research findings indicate that “areas that were once sharply redlined by banks and other financial institutions were sharply ‘greenlined’ in the 1980s” (22). Redlined neighborhoods were considered spaces unworthy of economic investment, due to the large amount of “othered” groups living in these districts. Greenlined zone residents, on the other end, were granted access to loans and larger companies and business invested in these areas as they were deemed “worthy” or “capable” spaces for economic fruition. “Loan officers,” Smith continues, “[were] instructed to take down their old maps with red lines around working-class and minority neighborhoods and replace them with new maps sporting green lines: make every possible loan within the greenlined neighborhood (22).” Evidently, gentrification is not a natural phenomenon but rather an economic plan organized to intentionally benefit investors and larger capitalistic institutions, resulting in the displacement of local residents. “Developers,” Smith elaborates, “do not just plunge into the heart of slum opportunity, but tend to take it piece by piece” (21). During the dot-com boom in the Mission District, the demand for living spaces increased as the new internet companies moved into the district. Consequently, 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” (Maribal 26). These unique and “alternative” living spaces became central to marketers, real estate agencies and new in-movers as they conveniently provide internet company owners with the flexibility of living in their home while also attending to the day-to-day work. While convenient in its designs, the lofts were not designed for larger families or for Mission District residents already living in the surrounding area. “Instead,” Maribal emphasizes, “they were intended for a population that developers expected would eventually move into the area: single, wealthy, highly educated tech workers” (27).

As previously noted, the level of gentrification’s effects and its definition are highly debated between scholars. Nonetheless, despite this contested debate, gentrification’s effect on people’s material realities is evident. Scholar Klux and co-authors conclude that although questions, approaches, results and questions vary among researches, “one consistent finding across these studies is that in-movers to gentrifying neighborhoods are wealthier, whiter and of higher educational attainment and out-movers are more likely to be renters, poorer and people of color” (Miram Zuk et al. 34) Gentrification negatively effects the livelihood of low-income people of color, particularly single parent households and immigrant families.

My purpose here is not to provide answers towards a solution for gentrification. Instead, I wish to examine the association of observing queerness as a force or sign of gentrification. I use *Por Vida* and the Mission District’s spatial and historical realities as an entry point to examining this association, as scholars have yet to analyze the particular intersection between gentrification and queerness. Recognizing the Mission District historical reality with gentrification, what does it mean to observe queerness (in this case queer Latinx and Chicanx subjects) as a representation of gentrification?

Conversations about gentrification continue to expand but little has been written about how queerness, as a social identity, fits into this larger discourse. I analyze the *Por Vida* mural and its contextual controversy to better understand how queer identities—specifically queer Latinx/Chicanx subjectivities—play a role in the larger debate against gentrification. In this project, I argue against the idea of observing queer Latinx and Chicanx subjectivities as forces of gentrification. Instead, I argue that the *Por Vida* mural is an artistic form of queer Latinx subjectivity that challenges the public domains’ (The Mission District) dominant heteropatriarchal social values. Associating queer Latinx and Chicanx subjectivities to gentrification is to apply a hegemonic whiteness over queer Latinx and Chicanx communities that positions their livelihood and existence within the modern commercialization of white queer pride or “rainbow-capitalism”. I will expand on these arguments further as I present gathered evidence and oral histories further below.

I highlight the intersection between the economics of gentrification and queer Latinx identities as it pertains to the Mission District. Considering this particular intersection, I aim to identify the ways in which capital, as defined by Rodrick Ferguson, reflects in the *Por Vida* defacement. Solutions on how to best resist and resolve gentrification still remains a highly contested conversation as local community activists in cities across the U.S continue to fight against the resulting evictions, displacements and homelessness. In the following chapter I explore *Por Vida*’s spatial potentiality, arguing that racialized and heteropatriarchal notions of respectability inform the logic behind the “gentrification argument” imposed upon *Por Vida*.

Chapter 4: A Queer of Color Spatial Critique

Considering gentrification's detrimental effects on the Mission District, it is important to understand the *landscape*²⁶ of the community by paying close attention to the geographic and material realities of the neighborhood. In this section I present an approach I call a *queer of color spatial critique*, which, at its core, allows for an exploration of *Por Vida's* spatial potentiality. Considering *Por Vida's* artist medium as a public mural, it is critical we not only consider the role of public space but pinpoint the structures of power within public landscapes that assist in the facilitation of violent acts, such as rape, assault, verbal assault etc. In other words, I am interested in exploring *Por Vida's* socio-spatial positionality within the context of the Mission District's public space. In grounding this analysis of *Por Vida* in public space, I specifically keep in mind gentrification's past and present impact on the local neighborhood.

A queer of color spatial critique draws its initial theoretical gesture from Rodrick Ferguson's "queer of color critique." Applying a queer of color critique to *Por Vida* and its communal effect in the Mission District, allows me to identify and engage with what Ferguson points to as the "liberal ideology" that "occludes the intersecting saliency of race, gender, sexuality, and class in forming social practices" (4). Here, I specifically identify this "liberal ideology" as the "gentrification argument" which observes *Por Vida* as threatening to larger US values of productivity, family, domesticity and respectability (185). In other words, a "queer of color critique" is necessary to further investigate the spatial potentiality of *Por Vida's* artistic visual narrative while also considering the reactions and opinions "from" local Mission District residents. Who are the subjects in the mural and what do the voices from Instagram tell us about queer of color bodies existing in the U.S nation-state? *A queer of color critique*, as Ferguson

²⁶ See Lefebvre's *The Right to the City*.

further explains, “extends women of color feminism by investigating how intersecting racial, gender and sexual practices antagonize and/or conspire with the normative investments of nation-states and capital” (4). In order to critically engage with what Ferguson identifies as the “normative investments of nation-states and capital,” a *queer of color spatial critique* extends its theoretical boundaries by drawing from spatial theorists and geographers such as, Gloria Anzaldúa, Sherene Razack, Edward Soja, Henri Lefebvre, Genevieve Carpio etc. Again, I suggest a turn towards spatial theorist for this analysis in order to fully consider the role of gentrification and the “liberal ideologies” informing the “gentrification argument.” Attending to Ferguson’s reminder that “heteronormativity is racialized,” I ultimately argue that the “gentrification argument” pinned against *Por Vida* relies upon racist notions of respectability, whiteness, and capital.

By simultaneously centering *space*²⁷ and *place*²⁸ this theoretical framework specifically aims to better understand the association of observing *Por Vida* as a signifier of gentrification. In other words, a queer of color spatial critique aims to challenge the “gentrification argument” identified earlier as the logic which observers queer of color bodies and artistic representations as signifiers of gentrification. I analyze the mural’s visual narrative, considering, specifically the role of *queer intimacies*. Here, I am specifically referring to the intimacies artistically presented on the mural itself via the two queer Cholo couples and the trans Latinx figure. Keeping in mind the political role of public queer intimacies, a *queer of color spatial critique* interrogates and,

²⁷ To define space, I draw from Lefebvre’s notions of abstract space, social space, perceived space and conceived space. Abstract space is “commodified and bureaucratized space arranged in the interests of capital and produced as a concerted attempt to define the appropriate meaning of public space and what citizens can do in it.” To read more on this refer to *Sherene Razack’s Race, Space and the Law: Unramping a White Settler Society*, 8-10

²⁸ According to spatial theorists, place refers to a location. It is a space that has meaning. For example, Disneyland or “home.” Place is a destination; a space with significance.

more importantly, reimagines the use of public space as a landscape inclusive of queer of color lives. Furthermore, I observe *space* in the Mission District not as a passive background but rather as an active agent in the production of social hierarchies, and as a facilitator of the violent defacement. I argue that the violent defacement on *Por Vida* is indicative of the hetero-patriarchal logics of respectability that govern public space and push the queer of color body into spaces of social and spatial marginality.

In my deployment of a *queer of color spatial critique* I also aim to reimagine public space as a stage of possibility in which heteronormative, hyper masculinities, and patriarchal social orders are rendered as unproductive modalities of knowing, navigating and existing. Jose Esteban Munoz's theoretical framings of "queer utopia" dance in the midst of this *re-imagination*. In his book *Cruising Utopia*, Muñoz re-claims the use of the word "stage" by disintegrating the homophobic undertones commonly associating queerness under the breadth of "it is only a stage" (98). Instead, Muñoz observes *stage* as a space of potential, one that allows access to a future without heteronormative expectations. In my deployment of a *queer of color spatial critique* I also aim to reimagine public space as a stage of possibility in which heteronormative, hyper masculinities, and patriarchal social orders are rendered as unproductive modalities of knowing, navigating and existing. Munoz presents to us a frame of "possibility" which he calls a "queer utopia." He defines *utopia* as follows:

Utopia is an ideal, something that should mobilize us, push us forward. Utopia is not prescriptive; it renders potential blueprints of a world not quite here, a horizon of possibility, not a fixed scheme. It is productive to think about utopia as flux, a temporal disorganization, as a moment when the here and the now is transcended by a then and there that could be and indeed should be. (97)

The "possibility" of utopic liberation in which public space freely centers queer of color bodies can begin to manifest into tangible social change through the *re-imagination* of public space—

through a *queer of color spatial critique*. Munoz's notion of a queer utopia is helpful as it allows us to consider current conditions of *being* and *knowing* that structure public space. In other words, a *queer utopia* posits a moment of critical self-reflection that captures both a potential future of liberation while also exposing the unproductive heteropatriarchal social expectations that currently govern the present. Maribal points to some of these expectations, directly identifying them as "patriarchy, heteronormativity, ...masculinity" and "masculinist, heterosexual discourse." Munoz's *utopia* presents instead "potential blueprints," fleeting moments of joy and liberation that serve as tools useful for the dismantling of hetero patriarchal social orders governing public space. Therefore, a *queer of color spatial critique* pushes the use of public space *forward*, by *using* blueprints of queer of color liberation. These *blueprints* de-centralize profit-making, property value, commodification and other capitalistic systems. Ultimately, a *queer of color spatial critique*, is a *blueprint* to re-imagine public space as a *stage* belonging to trans and queer of color bodies.

Public Space– the Heteronormative Stage

In her article, "Geographies of Displacement," Maribal makes a critical links between queerness and space which I too keep in mind during this theoretical analysis. According to Maribal, the power structures of gentrification are linked and informed by heteronormativity. In other words, public space currently functions as a stage operating to grant safety and mobility only to normative performances. Maribal elaborates on these social values that organize public space:

Spaces have meaning, and how they are used, controlled, and accessed reveals a set of power relationships that are always in dialogue with patriarchy, heteronormativity, and masculinity. Questions of ownership, privilege, and development echo a larger patriarchal discourse where gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered communities must

negotiate different landscapes of power. As Horacio Roque Ramirez has documented, how gay and lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered communities operate spatially, whether through movement, use, or ownership, is often dictated by a masculinist, heterosexist discourse that expects these communities to reside in certain neighborhoods, move spatially with purpose, consume (i.e. no loitering), avoid going out late at night alone, dress in a certain way, avoid public displays of affection, and so forth. The belief that space operates without meaning and outside of market forces that are not affected by social, political, and cultural conditions belies the fact that space not only invokes meaning, it reinvents it. (19)

The link between queerness and space is important here as it begins to address the “power relationships” that organize *public space* and also thus determines the extent to which queer of color bodies can move spatially, romantically, and artistically. Ultimately, public space privileges a white, cisgender, masculine presenting, heterosexual normative subject.

Additionally, as previously noted, public space is also controlled by income inequalities, rental markets, and commodities. Along with access to public space, a *normative* subject is relationally granted both the luxuries of consumerist culture and comforts of public such as safety, security—a sense of belonging that does not target or threaten its existence in public space.

As a digital public mural, *Por Vida's* geographic position, although temporary, was situated within public space, on the corner of 24th and Mission Street. A busy intersection, locals walk through these streets to catch busses, walk to work, eat, visit coffee shops etc. I aim to center the relational power dynamics between the queer of color body and public space. In the “gentrification argument” we see reproductions of violent forms of white supremacy via the exclusion of queer Latinx and Chicanx from cultural, spatial, “territorial, communal and imaginary spaces of community. The “gentrification argument” specifically anchors its exclusion by re-asserting heteropatriarchal values as normative standards of being.

As previously stated, a queer of color spatial critique aims to reimagine public space as a stage of queer utopic liberation. However, I do not wish to simply present a *re-imagining* as the

solution. A *queer of color spatial critique* is just the beginning of transforming public space. The fuel of a utopic future is not enough to build upon and push *forward a queer of color spatial critique*. We must also consider decolonial frameworks for it is not enough to simply capture the fleeting blueprints of potentiality. A process of *unlearning* and *undoing* must also begin. We must unlearn historical forms of violence enacted upon our bodies, minds and the land. How do we being *undoing* through a *queer of color spatial critique*? I turn here to scholar of racial violence Sherene H. Razack's decolonial framing of *unmapping*:

Just as mapping colonized lands enabled Europeans to imagine and legally claim that they had discovered and therefore owned the lands of the "New World," unmapping is intended to undermine the idea of white settler innocence (the notion that European settlers merely settled and developed the land) and to uncover the ideologies and practices of conquest and domination. (5)

To "unmap" is to "undermine." It is an act of decolonization, a rejection of seeing spaces as property. Sherene H. Razack argues that the "Cartesian or the mapping subject achieves his sense of self through keeping at bay and in place any who would threaten his sense of mastery" (12). In the Mission District, we see these patterns of settler exploration and colonization occurring through tourism.



Figure 9. Tourists observing Balmy Alley murals. August 29, 2016. Photo by Vicente Carrillo.



Figure 10. Tourists exploring the Mission District. August 29, 2016. Photo by Vicente Carrillo

The Mission District, its streets, murals, food and material reality has become a “hotspot” for tourists traveling to San Francisco. Above are images I captured during my trip to the Mission District. These tourist groups are led, almost always, by an older white men or women. The tour groups range in size—some being as small as four while the largest being a group of 10. Gentrification transforms the local neighborhood into an exotic destination, a trip to study the “other.” These tours take visitors in and around the Mission District, trips through various different restaurants, and local “hot spots” such as the Balmy Alley (Figure 9). “For the settler,” Razack reminds us, “it is through movement from European to non-European space that he

comes to know himself, a journey that materially and symbolically secures his dominance” (13). As gentrification transforms the barrio, now into a commodity and attraction, we see the white subject using the Mission District as a site of adventure and exploration, reminding them of their status as white. Indeed, for white tourists visiting the gentrified community, these tours function as processes of reinforcing racial dominance through a settler colonial gaze.

Queer of color spatial critique acknowledges the ways in which particular bodies and particular genders are allowed to thrive and survive within open and public space. Here, I wish to highlight once again the unique order and characteristics of the *Por Vida* mural’s defacements. As previously noted before, the *Por Vida* mural was defaced a total of four times. The first time, the two cholo men were spray painted. News media circulated and conversations around the mural grew. As these discussions garnered more attention, the central figure of the triptych was later identified to be a trans cholx man. In an interview with Ani Rivera—director of the Galeria de la Raza—she explains how the central cholx image was received:

I don’t think they realized that was a trans person. I just don’ think that they had even an awareness and then when it became public that it was a trans man. They came back that same night and finished covering it. We replaced it four times.

Despite the neighboring “gayborhood” and despite San Francisco’s title of the “gay mecca” of the world, we see the ways in which queer/trans Latinx and Chicanx bodies are still highly marginalized within the use of public space. Through a *queer of color spatial critique* I interrogates the violent heteronormative attitudes that thrive within public space. Within the Mission District I am particularly pointing to the artistic representation of the *Por Vida* visual which is a public mural. Murals take up public space and have been historically used to send political messages. In the *Por Vida* mural, it is important to highlight the visual narrative that is taking up public space. We see two Latino men intimately embracing one another and two Latina

women softly caressing. It is intimacy—*queer intimacy*— that is being visually presented to the public’s eyes. Queer intimacies have been repeatedly pushed to exist only within *private spaces* (within the home, behind closed doors, inside the “closet”). *The Por Vida* murals public display of queer intimacy, unapologetically disrupts the hetero-patriarchal social order of public space. As residents walk by in their day to day trips to work or school, they encounter a narrative that has always been spoken about as belonging behind closed doors. Residents see, perhaps for the first time, a type of intimacy that has continuously been pushed into the “private” but never the “public.”

Spatial Potentiality

In considering a turn towards a spatial understanding, I ask: What does *Por Vida* do, *spatially*? What is *Por Vida*’s spatial potentiality? Past literature and theories on spatiality present various frameworks that describe the social and political role of space, i.e., the city, urban life, suburbia, ghettos, the countryside. “The spatial dimension,” Soja states, “has traditionally been treated as a kind of fixed background, a physically formed environment that, to be sure, has some influence on our lives but remains external to the social world...”²⁹ Soja asks us to interrogate space by questioning the role it plays within our organization as “modern” society. Considering Soja’s call, a *queer of color spatial critique* not only interrogates but, more importantly, reimagines the use of public space. McCann states that “subjective identity and material urban spaces exist in a mutually constitutive relationship.”³⁰ The urban space, therefore, contributes to the many ways in which people negotiate with and against social stereotypes and

²⁹ Edward J. Soja. *Seeking Spatial Justice*, 2.

³⁰ McCann, “Race, Protest, and Public Space: Contextualizing Lefebvre in the U.S. City,” 168.

identities. McKittrick and Woods also argue that “physical geographies are bound up to social and environmental processes” and that the “materiality of the environment is racialized by contemporary demographic patterns as shaped by historic precedents.”³¹ In other words we must consider racism’s pervasive influence on the ways in which public space is organized, used and accessed. “Subjects,” Sherene H. Razack tells us, “come to know themselves in and through space and within multiple systems of domination” (17). Collectively, these scholars remind us that space is not innocent; it is not a bystander filling up our backgrounds but rather an active participant in the construction of our social values and racial hierarchies.

During my ethnographic field work I took notice of local establishments within the Mission District. Local mom and pop shops managed by Latinos were still standing. Indeed, many new restaurants and cafes had opened upon as well. I took notice of these new establishments, noting their choice of colors, words, and other marketing techniques. Walking through the streets I took notice Wise Sons Delicatessen, an establishment on 24th and Shotwell St (see figure 11).



Figure 11. Google Maps View of Wise Sons Delicatessen. January 26, 2018.
Courtesy of Google Maps.

³¹ McKittrick and Woods. *Black Geographies and the Politics of Place*, 3.

Before Wise Sons and the crippling effects of gentrification made their way into the Mission, a Mexican restaurant known as Toyanense Taqueria stood in its place (see Figure 12). What struck me from Wise Sons Delicatessen was its usage of marketing and advertising. Above the establishment’s entrance three words capture the pedestrians sight. The words read: “quality. cleanliness. service.” (See figure 13).



Figure 12. Google Maps View of Tonayense Taqueria in 2012. Screenshot taken January 26, 2018. Courtesy of Google Maps.



Figure 13. “Quality, Cleanliness. Service”-Entrance to Wise Sons Delicatessen. August 29, 2016. Photo by Vicente Carrillo

What is a place like Wise Sons Delicatessen trying to communicate when advertising itself as a place with “quality. cleanliness. service?” Do other establishments in the Mission not have “quality” or “service?” Are other places not “clean?” Here, I’m reminded of Linda Peak’s words. “Whiteness” she tells us, “is also a deeply embedded aspect of understanding landscape, as a complex expression of human action, including its dominant values, mores aesthetic tastes, and cultural practices” (52). Here, we see the physical and material manifestation of gentrification protruding through the physicality of the environment, or to use Lefebvre’s words, through “conceived space.” The word choices perpetuate a racist logic that rely upon a universalization of whiteness. Recalling George Lipsitz, the restaurant is working itself through a type of “white spatial imaginary.” The cursive writing indicates a type of “aesthetic taste” meant to signal elegance. Indeed, here it is important to also remember, as previously noted, that the Mission District is a historically Latina/o community in which the majority of the population is from a low-income immigrant household. Ultimately, the three words are meant to further “otherize” the population that has already been living there.

The *Por Vida* mural challenges the pervasive forms of heteropatriarchy that organize the use of public space. Heteropatriarchy and heterosexism allows those of a normative presentation and normative sexuality to use public space. David Delaney’s analysis of space’s relationship to race helps us to further understand *Por Vida*’s impact in the Mission District. He states that:

space [is] an enabling technology through race is produced...The territorial division of continuous social space into dichotomous ‘insides’ and ‘outsides’ facilitates the polarization of a continuous range of colors (browns, beiges, tans, and pinks) into ‘white and black’ and hence the freezing of identities into ‘we’ and ‘they.’”³²

Space produces an “in/out” dichotomy in which queerness is automatically considered

³² David Delaney quoted in *Making the San Fernando Valley*. See Barraclough 15.

something that should be kept “in.” In other words, queer of color bodies are repeatedly pushed out of public space, never fully allowed to participate in the same ways in which their heteronormative counterparts do. Recounting the attempts to re-install *Por Vida* in the Mission District, Ani Rivera speaks on the “polarizing” moments of tensions she encountered with locals:

And we were told so many times. Go back to the Castro. You don’t belong here. And actually, quite frankly we don’t belong in the Castro either. We were told and people threw shit it at us as we were fixing the mural. They were really cynical to us. Treated us really bad.

The drawing of territorial and spatial lines is of critical importance in Ani River’s words. Recalling Delany’s words above, we clearly see the “freezing of identities into ‘we’ and ‘they.’” Local’s violent and “cynical” urge to relocate to the Castro is indicative of larger mechanisms of power embedded within space. I suggest that the violence enacted upon the *Por Vida* mural, while indeed homophobic, is linked to the spatial and territorial entitlements amplified by the threats of gentrification.

The territorial and spatial boundaries, as expressed by Ani Rivera, are continuously (re)drawn and re-emphasized– in particular between the Mission District and the gayborhood known as the Castro District–to identify the queer Latinx subject as the “intruding” force. For example, Instagram user [Kenneth_bartholomew_lexington](#) writes:

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!

@Kenneth’s comment, informed by the “gentrification argument,” argues that *Por Vida*’s proper geographic location is that of the Castro District, the “gay friendly” neighborhood. The comment specifically highlights *Por Vida*’s contrasting longevity between occupying public space in the

Mission versus the Castro district. According to @Kenneth, *Por Vida* would be much more secure if it were to be installed in the Castro District. Ultimately, an imminent and inescapable danger awaits *Por Vida* by inhabiting public space within the Mission District. Another Instagram comment from user @christianaltamirano14 offers a similar argument:

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” (user @christianaltamirano14)

As the comment suggests, they observe *Por Vida* and the Latinx subjects visually represented as unworthy of inhabiting public space within the Mission. Once again, the Castro District suffices as proper geographic space in which the *Por Vida* mural can be displayed. Here, I want to take a moment and closely focus on the commenter’s use of the word “disrespectful” alongside their urge to territorially re-position *Por Vida* in the Castro. The notion of respect is also of interest to me for it allows us to observe the mechanisms behind the *gaze* observing *Por Vida*. I turn to Lisa Cacho who, summarizing Ferguson’s argument, states “diverse gender and sexual practices within communities of color are produced by the needs of a capitalist economy, yet these same practices are pathologized and criminalized because they diverge from US ideals of domesticity and respectability” (185).³³ Indeed, *Por Vida*’s visual representation of queer and trans cholx engaging in intimacy, are not deemed respectable subjects under US values. Instead, they are rendered as counterproductive, “othered” subjects unworthy of occupying public space. To say differently, queer and trans cholx engaging in intimacy are a disruption to public space’s primary function to produce commodities for mass consumption.

Public display of queer of color intimacies, like that of *Por Vida* disrupt, even

³³ Lisa’s statement is a summary of Ferguson’s argument in *Aberrations in Black: Towards a Queer of Color Critique*

momentarily, the production of “capital.” Here, I draw from Ferguson, who describes “capital” as a social order “based on a logic of reproduction that fundamentally overrides and often violates heteropatriarchy’s logic.” “Subsequently,” he adds, “capital often goes against the state’s universalization and normalization of heteropatriarchy” (16).³⁴ To clarify, capital depends upon the production of an overflowing, disposable work force despite the limitations of a reproductive population. To use Marx’s words, “capitalist production can by no means content itself with the quantity of disposable labor-power which the natural increase of population yields. It requires for its unrestricted activity an industrial reserve army which is independent of these natural limits” (788). Through a *queer of color spatial critique*, I argue, we are able to observe *Por Vida* not as a passive artistic expression of queer Latinx subjectivity but rather as a direct spatial disturbance to larger heteropatriarchal power relationships that govern the social order of public space. But, despite *Por Vida*’s momentary “disruption of capital,” Ferguson reminds us that “while capital can only reproduce itself by ultimately transgressing the boundaries of neighborhood, home, and region, the state positions itself as the protector of those boundaries.” These boundaries being “the sanctity of ‘community,’ ‘family,’ and ‘nation’” (17). Hence, the “gentrification argument,” which renders *Por Vida*, along with queer Latinx and Chicana subjects, as violators to the dogmatic social order of heteronormative Chicano and Latino expectations.

Considering the various comments’ desire to re-locate *Por Vida* to the Castro District, while also keeping in mind US ideals of respectability and capital, I am reminded of Lefebvre’s call, known widely as the “Right to the City,” –a frame of spatial theory that considers both the accessibility of public space and the layers of commodification governing the use of public space. The Right to the City asks us to notice both people’s use of public space and its

³⁴ Ferguson draws from Marx.

geographic organization. In “The Right to the Suburb,” Carpio et al. elaborates on Lefebvre’s framework by pointing to the capitalistic structures that currently govern public space.

According to Carpio:

Lefebvre sees [the right to the city] as the struggle between industrialization and urbanization, and what he refers to as the tension between exchange value and use value, i.e., the stresses and injustices brought about by the capitalist commodification of things in the urban realm and their concomitant value in monetary terms rather than on their usefulness and contribution to the well-being of residents. (187)

Profit-making and commodification serve as the blueprint behind public space’s social order. We see the “stresses and injustices” play out in the Mission District via the gentrification that has drastically impacted resident’s livelihood and ultimately resulting in the displacement of more than 1000 Latina/o families. “The city:, he states, “historically constructed is no longer lived and is no longer understood practically. It is only an object of cultural consumption for tourists, for a aestheticism, avid for spectacles and the picturesque. Even for those who seek to understand it with warm, it is gone” (148). “The right to the city,” Lefebvre continues, “can be formulated as a transformed and renewed right to urban life” (153). Repeatedly censored and eventually disintegrated with flammables, the *Por Vida* mural—and queer Latinx and Chicanx bodies in the Mission District—are excluded from using public space- their existence violently erased.

Por Vida uncovers what has culturally and historically been placed into the domain of the “private,” a place of secrecy and shame. To present queerness through art is to present intimacy.

Chicana lesbian feminist, Gloria Anzaldua reminds us:

The psychological borderlands, the sexual borderlands and the spiritual borderlands are not particular to the Southwest. In fact, the borderlands are physically present whenever two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory, where under middle & upper classes touch, where the space between two individuals shrink with intimacy.

Intimacy and *space* are key here. Anzaldúa brings attention to the ways in which space, place and intimacy interact with each other. Intimacy, she says, is a form of *reducing* space between people. Space “shrinks.” The physical, sexual, emotional, romantic touch of queer people of color in itself destabilizes normative spatial organizations in which queer bodies are expected never to touch under the nation-state gaze. They must not use public space to move closer. Instead, they must remain apart, according to heteropatriarchal social expectations. Anzaldúa’s critical point asks us to further question how these spatial limitations were constructed in the first place. As Ferguson suggests, it is racialized heteronormativity alongside the nation-states relentless need to guard and uphold notions of community, family and respectability. In the following chapter I explore these heteronormative nation-state values while considering the socio-spatial position of the white gay subject. How does the white gay subject, alongside its public territory known as the “gayborhood,” work under notion of capital? Why is the “anti-gentrification argument” necessary?

Chapter 5: Universality, Particularity and White Queer Innocence

In order to address the attacks on *Por Vida*, it is not enough to address heteronormativity or homophobic attitudes alone. The controversy around *Por Vida* is not simply an issue of homophobia. In order to further investigate the role of the “gentrification argument” set against the *Por Vida* mural, I continue with Ferguson’s argument where he tells us that “heteronormativity is racialized” (17). A turn towards describing the violence enacted upon *Por Vida* as “homophobic” is indeed productive, but we must also ask ourselves: what unique insights does the violent defacement of *Por Vida* provide us with? Why do we so often resort to explaining such violence as simply, and only, the consequence of “homophobia”? Is there, really, nothing else going on here? What remains unaccounted for when deploying “homophobia” as a category of violence? What else remains unnamed, and in failing to name other agents of power, what processes remain unchallenged?

I do not mean to suggest that “homophobia” as a term is not useful or unnecessary, instead I wish to interrogate its deployment by theoretically centering the violence enacted on *Por Vida*. Again, I wish to remind the reader that this theoretical interrogation does not dismiss the precise and radical productivity of “homophobia” itself. I also do not mean to subsume transphobia under “homophobia” and want to take this moment to acknowledge the transphobic attitudes that were also enacted upon the mural for it was only after news spread about the central figure’s trans identity that it was directly defaced. With this said, the central question guiding this theoretical framework is: How might we begin to understand the nexus of between whiteness, queerness, gentrification/property and larger processes of racialization?

I propose a theoretical exploration of *Por Vida*’s installation as a moment of contestation

between multiple avenues of power: the violence itself (the act of burning and also censoring), race and racism, processes of criminalization, and cultural claims to spatial regions/neighborhoods. Frantz Fanon reminds us that the body should not fall out of the logic of racism and so I aim to center the queer of color body's *universal* proximity to whiteness as a means of understanding the violence enacted on the mural.³⁵ In particular, I am interested in the construction of the white gay subject and its spatial entitlement to the Mission District neighboring "gayborhood," the Castro District. The violence enacted upon the *Por Vida* mural, I argue, is beyond a "homophobic" attack, for a mere reading of this violence as "homophobic" disavows other entities of power's participation in the production of this violent defacement.

The violence enacted on the *Por Vida* mural reflects the socio-spatial positionality queer of color bodies hold under regimes of capitalism and larger processes of racialization. A deployment of "homophobia" does not suffice, for in its discursive deployment, "homophobia" describes a violence informed by an individual's "attitude" towards a queer subject. If not carefully interrogated, the deployment of "homophobia" upholds a type of innocence granted to white gay subjects' participation in (in)visible violence and also reinforces, to various degrees, the notion that Latina/o and other communities of color are an inherently homophobic and violent group.

I argue that the violence enacted on the *Por Vida* mural is indicative of the interconnected political landscapes queer of color bodies exist on, extending far beyond homophobia, and instead hinge upon notions of respectability, economic productivity and social adaptation into neoliberal ideological frameworks. The white gay cis-male subject, a respectable active

³⁵ Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*, Grove Press, 1952.

participant in consumerist culture, is the universal representation of queerness in which the queer of color body is measured against. The violence enacted on *Por Vida*, while indeed homophobic, is also reflective of larger and longer processes of erasure of queer of color lives and expressions. In this chapter, I explore on the processes of *whiteness*, *respectability*, and what Lipsitz calls, “white spatial imaginaries,” as subject (in)forming ideologies tied closely to *Por Vida*’s defacement. I turn towards these theoretical concepts as they open a broader discursive space that allow me to consider the queer of color’s socio-racial positionality to dominant representations of queerness such as Pride and the rainbow flag/signifier.

The Nexus of White Queer Innocence

I begin this theoretical journey with Yegenoglu’s explorations of the *universal* and the *particular*, engaging specifically with the hierarchical racial engines that assist the productivity of constructing a dominant (white gay) subject. First, we must ask, how does a subject become dominant and in what ways is the white gay subject dominant? In *Colonial Fantasies*, Yegenoglu addresses dominant subjects’ *universality* and *particularity*, along with the processes which continuously uphold those statuses. Yegenoglu specifically addresses western feminist’s political tendencies to center their privileged realities as universal conditions of liberty and freedom, tendencies which legitimize western feminism discourse as an “act of generosity.” The universalization of western feminism, Yegenoglu continues, erases the *difference* of Middle Eastern women, “othering” Middle Eastern women as trapped and passive victims. “The assertion of the universal norm,” she states, “could not have been possible without designating the achievements of Western women as the yardstick against which one can measure and define the goal other woman can achieve” (102). Indeed, the *universal* and *particular* depend upon one another, working simultaneously to uphold colonial fantasies’ continuous painting of western-

first-world conditions as sites of freedom while at the same time allowing, in this case, white women the freedom of individuality. “To be western here,” Yegenoglu continues, “implies feeling that one is entitled to universalize one’s particular achievements and interests.”

Yegenoglu points to the power-play between the *particular* and *universal* arguing that the *particularity* of Western women is temporarily dismissed in the name of the *universality*.

Here, I also consider Joan Scott words, cited by Yogenoglu, which provides us with another useful approach to understanding *universality* and *particularity*. According to Scott, the power-play between *particularity* and *universality* is a “process that establishes the superiority or the typicality or the universality of some in terms of the inferiority or the atypicality of others” (103). This process produces what Yogenoglu describes as a “sovereign status,” a positionality of dominant representation that continuously reminds populations of the “Other.” A subject with a sovereign status, David Lloyd explains, is “without properties,” “undetermined,” and ultimately “representative in consequence of being able to take anyone’s place, of occupying any place, of pure exchangeability,” constructed by “the public sphere” (Yogenoglu 103).

Considering *universality* and *particularity* along *Por Vida*’s defacement, we are able to observe beyond “homophobia” and instead begin an interrogation of the “sovereign” subject (the white gay subject) and processes of racialization that condition the queer of color body as an “Other” in both communities of color and within the universal “sovereign” space.

Thinking through Yegenoglu’s words and the various theorists she engages with, I suggest we also observe white gay subject as holding a type of “sovereign status,” a universal conditioning continuously represented via signifiers and processes of white queerness—Pride and the rainbow flag. Now, we must ask: What processes occurred before hand in order for the white gay subject to hold a sovereign dominant status within the queer community? To address this

question, I turn to Christina B Handhardt's *Safe Space: Gay Neighborhood History and the Politics of Violence*. Handhardt provides a useful historical "tracing" of gay rights politics, the construction of the "gayborhoods," and historical gay-rights political organizations' participation in development of the, now common, notion of a gay "safe space." Handart argues that the rhetoric of safety, risk and protection deployed by predominantly white gay men in San Francisco and New York ultimately "reinforced the race and class stratification of postwar urban space" (9). For example, homophile activists in the 1960s adopted a "like race model" during the height of the civil rights movements as a means of "understanding their marginalization."³⁶ The "like race" model justified gay white subject's political fight for state recognition, an argument that disregarded differences but instead relied on establishing white gay marginalization as a universal oppression or all queer subjects. In order to better understand historical processes of racialization, like the "race model" Hanhardt identifies, I turn to studies of whiteness.

What is whiteness and how does innocence inform the white gay subject? Robyn Wiegman's article, "Whiteness Studies and the Paradox of Particularity," engages with discursive arguments around *whiteness* and the mechanisms between *universalism* and *particularity*. Wiegman warns us, insisting we be careful on how we use history as a foundational text to mark/identify whiteness. Indeed, whiteness is a project linked to historical realities of oppression, while also malleable in various different historical contexts. Nonetheless, to understand whiteness in our modern contextual reality we must also see it as shifting, always upholding itself through various institutions (banks, academia, government, policies, laws) and

³⁶ For homophile activists, the main predicament was how to publicly acknowledge and protect homosexual practice and identity (what would later become known as coming out or becoming visible), rather than negotiating embodied displays of difference or multiple marginalized identities (*Safe Space: Gay Neighborhood History and the Politics of Violence*, 39).

knowledge production. According to Wiegman, whiteness and the white social subject functions through a “liberal” framework that is born/produced out of the white subjects’ rejection/disassociation from white supremacist ideology that, during the 1960s, became easily a group to disavow from. The white subject detaches themselves from a “dated,” “old,” “past” white supremacist ideology and reattaches themselves to a politic of inclusivity (civil rights), without questioning/challenging the pervasive power and benefits they possess. To understand whiteness, we must engage with the “universal” and “particular” mechanisms that governs whiteness and the privileges it grants its beneficiaries. White particularity or what Wiegman calls “liberal whiteness” is a required contradiction that upholds the privileges and power of being white in the U.S. Gloria Wekker’s *White Innocence* also explores the concept of innocence within the context of the dominant Dutch representation in the Netherlands. White innocence, she states is a “double-edged sword: it contains not-knowing, but also not wanting to know, capturing what philosopher Charles W. Mills (1997, 2007) has described as the epistemology of ignorance.” In this innocence is a disavowal of historical racism and legacies of violence the nation has and continuous to participates in.

There are various present-day examples that allow us to see the manifestation of white innocence. We see this “liberal whiteness” and the innocent particular white subject manifest in our present context through the media’s portrayal of white terrorists. The media characterizes white male terrorists as the “lone wolf,” acting alone without any larger social, historical or political agendas influencing their actions. The white terrorists, the white innocent subject, is also granted the particularity of “white injury.” We can also see white queer innocence and *particularity* play out, for example, within the realm of desirability politics. The logic of “sexual preference,” I argue, strongly relies on a white “particularity” within queer communities.

Arguments around “sexual preference” anchor themselves into the framework of “individualism,” in which one person’s sexual desire for another body is devoid from historical or political significance. This white particularity around sexual preference plays itself out in many different ways. For example, there are various examples one can find online of white queer men on social dating apps openly stating they are “only into whites.”³⁷ Queer men of color also express the logic of desire— “only into whites”—replicating the white *particular* subject while still upholding a larger *universal* image of the desirable white body. The logic of the “particular” according to Wiegman is “the necessary contradiction that affords to white power its historical and political elasticity” and we must therefore begin “engaging with the ways that being particular will not divest whiteness of its universal epistemological power” (150). In other words, we must understand that whiteness exists at two places at the same time, both at the “ground level” (or in the case of desirability, I would see this as the queer body itself) and in the large cultural hegemonic imagination.

Keeping this in mind I want to return to the “like race” model used by gay white activists during the 1960s that I had previously touched upon. It’s important to note here that the “like race” model runs on engines of *universality* and *particularity*. As white subjects, gay white men are granted the freedom to parallel their marginalization along the lines of race and racism while disregarding the historical legacies of racism and colonial violence. The “like race” model is indicative of the white gay subject access to a type of universalism, whiteness that provides a freedom to associate anti-gay marginalization to historical legacies of colonization and racism. Indeed, this model, functions through a disavow of such legacies. For whiteness, offers white beneficiaries the luxuries of claiming a type of innocence to the larger violent legacies of white

³⁷ See Figure 2

supremacy.

Handhart describes this type of innocence in her work, specifically identifying it as “the ideology of gay liberalism.” Recalling Handhart’s historical tracing of gay-rights movements of the 1960s and 70s, this queer white innocence, she states “does not simply borrow from racial liberalism through metaphor, but it is also an expression of liberalism in general that is ‘always already racial,’ in terms fundamentally shaped by citizenship, labor, and class.” This “political whiteness,” as named by George Lipsitz and elaborated by Handhart, is “an investment in the material and symbolic rewards granted to those designated as white that also ‘disavows its own presence and insists in its own innocence’” (51). Whiteness is relational. Indeed, historically, the white gay subject knows itself as white, first and foremost, because outside its corporeal skin and territorial “gayborhood” exists the other queer racialized body whose conditions of livelihood serve as a reminder, to the white gay subject, of its whiteness and simultaneously its innocence.

In order to critically understand the violence enacted on the *Por Vida* mural we must also closely consider the intentionality behind the mural’s installation. *Por Vida* was installed as a celebration of queer Latinx communities during San Francisco’s Pride month. In addition to challenging the long-held assumption of exclusivity heteronormativity in lowrider culture, the mural was also representing queer of color bodies as a way of challenging the universal white gay subject. Here, I wish to focus on Pride and Pride Month. According to the official San Francisco Pride website, “SF Pride is dedicated to education, to the commemoration of LGBT heritage and to the celebration of LGBT culture and liberation.” I want to suggest that we observe Pride month and the notion of the rainbow as processes inherently necessary for the production of the white gay subject’s formation and anchored in whiteness (*innocence, universality, and particularity*).

Pride, I suggest, is a site of subject formation that first and foremost, at its core, provides a subject with the illusion of acceptance and empowerment. I define Pride as a type of “political whiteness,” a neoliberal LGBTQ imaginary anchored in notions of respectability and a strive towards nation-state legibility. Here, we must consider the white gay subject’s integration into capitalistic markets and economics. So much has the white gay subject been integrated into consumerist culture that signifiers have been deployed onto products meant for white gay consumption. Here I am referring to the engine of rainbow capitalism, which I define as a calculated business strategy large corporations deploy to make profit via “LGBTQ” and rainbow signifiers. A commodification of a universal white queerness, rainbow capitalism and white queerness masks itself behind discourse of empowerment and strives towards progressive ideologies, hence SF Pride websites’ language of “heritage,” “liberation,” “culture,” and “celebration.” Through these processes, along with historical realities, the white gay subject upholds its universal “sovereign” status, capable of occupying any place, undetermined, and without properties. the white gay subject is able to assert a particularity while enjoying the privilege of being universal. In his book *Towards a Queer of Color Critique*, Ferguson argues that heteronormative social values are linked to larger processes of capital production (the overworked worker, a surplus working population). The nation-state, he explains, serves as a gatekeeper to the hegemonic social values of productivity, respectability which include becoming a heteronormative subject. Ferguson states:

As the modern nation-state has historically been organized around an illusory universality particularized in terms of race, gender, sexuality, and class, state formations have worked to protect and guarantee this universality. But in its production of surplus populations unevenly marked by a racialized nonconformity with gender and sexual norms, capital constantly disrupts that universality. As the state and heteronormativity work to guarantee and protect that universality, they do so against the protective needs and social conditions set by capital, conditions that produce non-heteronormative racial formations (17).

Racial, heteronormative spatial and economic structures must all be considered. We have to keep asking ourselves where is the queer of color body within this process? Is the queer of color body also integrated into the process of Pride? Rainbow capitalism deploys its market strategies (advertisements, commodification) to remind larger cultural imaginaries about its marginalized white gay subject. Considering this, I am thinking about the queer of color body and its relational position to the process of Pride and Pride Month. The queer of color body *disidentifies* with the politics of respectability, productivity, marriage and consumerism in order to be read as legible by larger nation-state imaginaries (white normative subjects).³⁸ In other words, the rainbow flag is a signification of white queerness. It is a strive towards a legibility or recognition from nation-state values which arise from respectable ideologies such as marriage, productivity, politeness, conformity, public/private relationality.

Through the universality of rainbow capitalism and Pride, the white gay subject in various ways has been integrated, directly and categorically, into American capitalism. The white gay subject is universal in that it has now been integrated into structures of market and economics. What does the rainbow signifier do? How does Pride Month and “Pride” as a descriptor function? Why do we constantly need to see the Pride parade? Who does it stabilize? As previously mentioned, to only center only homophobia within this discussion as the root cause for the Por Vida’s defacement we fall into the unproductive conclusion that paints communities of color as the most homophobic and violent groups. Indeed, the Castro, home of the respectable *universal* white gay subject, plays a crucial role in Por Vida’s reception to larger Mission District

³⁸ Jose Esteban Muñoz describes “disidentification,” a sensibility queers of color deploy in order to navigate through heteronormativity. “These alternative vistas,” Muñoz explains, “are more than simply views or perspectives; they are oppositional ideologies that function as critiques of oppressive regimes of ‘truth’ that subjugate minoritarian people...Disidentification uses the majoritarian culture as raw material to make a new world” (*Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, 195).

residential population. In turning towards these frameworks of whiteness and universality, we are also able to discuss as previously noted processes of racialization and criminalization of the black and brown queer body. How does a queer cholo in the Por Vida mural function in public space? What does it do, as a public figure, to display queer intimacies? What mechanisms gear these processes that produce otherizing frameworks of power upon the queer of color body? Does the queer of color have access to a particularity that allows for individualization? Here I am thinking about the white gay subject's socio-spatial positionality and stability as a coherent subject relies upon, what Lipsitz refers to as, a "white spatial imaginary" (28). According to Lipsitz:

a white spatial imaginary based on exclusivity and augmented exchange value forms the foundational logic behind prevailing spatial and social policies in cities and suburbs today. This imaginary does not emerge simply or directly from the embodied identities of people who are white. It is inscribed in the physical contours of the places where we live, work, and play, and it is bolstered by financial rewards for whiteness. (28)

Pride Month and the Castro District "gayborhood" are celebrations and territorial boundaries that rely upon a white spatial imaginary for the sake of upholding a universal white gay subject.

Behind white gay subject's political strive towards a "safe space," is a strive towards property ownership and territorial settlement.

Here I wish to return to David Lloyd's words which remind us of the "sovereign status" ability to freely navigate spaces "without properties," "undetermined" and "representative in consequence of being able to take anyone's place, of occupying any place, of pure exchangeability." We might identify this navigation as a "white spatial imaginary." Thinking through the universal white gay subject then, the queer of color body is rendered "atypical" and "inferior," the queer of color body does not possess access to the universal. While processes of Pride month and the rainbow flag does provide the queer of color a promise of a better

tomorrow, an illusion of acceptance and liberation, this trial requires a subscription to notions of respectability and whiteness granted via consumerism (rainbow capitalism). In other words, it requires that one be recognized as a consumer.

In the case of *Por Vida*, the queer Latinx mural was associated with gentrification by local anti-gentrification activists and online commentators. This association, which I have previously identified as the “anti-gentrification argument,” is linked to the queer of color body’s inability to access and type of *particularity*. Instead, the queer of color body is continuously *determined*, their “properties” continuously marked and measured against the universal white gay cis-male subject, rendering them as unrespectable and property-less. Recalling Lloyd’s description, the sovereign status is “able to occupy anyone’s place,” indeed the queer of color body (the queer Latinx body) is rendered placeless, belonging neither here nor there. The violent defacement, in other words, is indicative of larger processes of racialization which positions the queer Latinx body as belonging neither in the Mission District nor in the universal white gay spaces, the “gayborhood.”

Conclusion

As I conclude this study I wish to take these final moments to reflect upon the polemics I found myself navigating as a researcher. As previously noted in Chapter 2, gentrification is not a passive or natural phenomenon but rather a controlled and organized plan orchestrated by investors, real estate agents and financial institutions. Gentrification targets low-income, communities of color through high increases in rental prices, resulting in displacement and, for many, homelessness. While I do recognize the detrimental impacts of gentrification, I also consider the racist and classist logic of the “anti-gentrification” argument positioned against the *Por Vida* mural and I do not agree with the need to reposition the mural, nor do I observe *Por Vida* as a contributor to gentrification. In Chapter 4, I explored *Por Vida*’s spatial potentiality, arguing towards a re-imagining of public space as inclusive of queer of color bodies. Chapter 5’s theoretical exploration analyzed the nexus of whiteness and queerness. In this same chapter, I argued against the “anti-gentrification” argument by highlighting the racist and heteropatriarchal social values of respectability and productivity informing its deployment. With this being said, I want to be explicit in mentioning that I do not mean to excuse or diminish the severity of the homophobic and transphobic attitudes deriving from the Latina/o voices in the study. Indeed, *Por Vida* rendered visible the homophobic and transphobic attitudes still permeating within the Latina/o community in the Mission District.

I conclude that the *Por Vida* mural does not directly contribute to gentrification as the “anti-gentrification” argument positioned against *Por Vida* rests upon racial and heteropatriarchal expectations of respectability and domesticity. While local activist groups, such as Keep Hoods Yours, work to actively fight against gentrification, evidently many of their activist networks support a homophobic and transphobic logic that further positions queer

Latinxs and Chicanxs as othered “Other” bodies belonging outside the Mission District. The unfortunately common narrative of the homeless queer child pushed out of home lingers within this case study as we see, once again, the queer of color subject being forced out of community spaces. The aim of this project is to speak back to this homophobic and transphobic “anti-gentrification” argument. While gentrification does lead to displacement, the queer of color body—the queer cholx—should not be observed as a symptom to gentrification but rather as belonging to the larger Latina/o and Chicana/o community.

The queer cholx, central to *Por Vida*'s visual narrative, represents a disturbance to larger social values upheld by nation-state structures. Racialized and criminalized, the cholo is considered an “illegal” subject unworthy of humanity. The queer cholx, while still criminalized and racialized, is also rendered unworthy of humanity due to its “criminal” status but also devalued because of its nonnormative sexuality and nonconforming gender expression. Here, I'm reminded of Lis Cacho's work, *Social Death Racialized Rightlessness and the Criminalization of the Unprotected*, in which she examines processes of racialization, criminalization via an exploration of what she identifies as “social value.” “Examining how ‘value’ and its normative criteria are naturalized and universalized,” she states, “enables us to uncover and unsettle the heteropatriarchal, legal, and neoliberal investments that dominant and oppositional discourses share in rendering the value of nonnormativity illegible” (149). I find Cacho's words helpful in pushing us to think about the queer cholx visually represented on the *Por Vida* mural. While she urges us to consider processes of racialization and criminalization, Cacho also acknowledges the role of heteropatriarchy and its continuous violent targeting of the queer of color body. The queer cholx visually represented on *Por Vida*, indeed a “criminal” under the gaze of the nation-state, is also “illegible” by local Latina/o and Chicana/o Mission District residents as evidenced by the

homophobic and transphobic Instagram comments. Indeed, the “illegibility” of the “nonnormative” queer cholx figure is violently productive and is indicative of the racial and socio-spatial position queer of color bodies hold as neither “respectable” figures participating in domestic, heterosexual relations or normative gender expressions. Rather, the queer cholx figure stands outside normative boundaries, outside expectations that contribute to directly to upholding values of respectability, domesticity and the heteronormative “family.”

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