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Find Yourself Here: Neighborhood Logics in Twenty-First Century Chicano and Latino
Literature

DISSERTATION

submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements

for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in English

by

Cristina Rodriguez

Dissertation Committee:

Professor Rodrigo Lazo, Chair

Professor Arlene Keizer

Professor James Kyung Lee

Professor Alejandro Morales

2015

DEDICATION

For my mother

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
LIST OF FIGURES	iv
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	v
CURRICULUM VITAE	vi
ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION	vii-viii
PREFACE	1
INTRODUCTION	4
CHAPTER 1: “The El Monte of Warfare and Lead Houses”: Local Logics in Salvador Plascencia’s <i>The People of Paper</i>	18
CHAPTER 2: “No Promises Can Survive That Sea”: Diasporic Dominican Identity in Junot Díaz’s <i>This Is How You Lose Her</i>	58
CHAPTER 3: “Earthquakes or earthmovers”: Los Angeles’ Eastside Barrio and Helena María Viramontes’ <i>Their Dogs Came With Them</i>	118
CHAPTER 4: “The Language of Knots and Rosettes”: The Narrative Migrant Fringe of Sandra Cisneros’ <i>Caramelo</i>	179
CONCLUSION	218
BIBLIOGRAPHY	234

LIST OF FIGURES

		Page
Figure 1	<i>The People of Paper's</i> Unorthodox Layout	18
Figure 2	The El Monte Museum	28
Figure 3	Examples of <i>Con Safos</i> Graffiti	36
Figure 4	Saturn Crosses Out EMF	39
Figure 5	<i>The People of Paper</i> Gets Crowded	43
Figure 6	The Edge of London Terrace	70
Figure 7	London Terrace's Closeness	71
Figure 8	The Taverns of Easton Street	82
Figure 9	Modern-Day First Street	128
Figure 10	Evergreen Cemetery Graffiti	151
Figure 11	The Serbian Cemetery	157
Figure 12	The Chinese Cemetery	160
Figure 13	Scenes from First Street	163
Figure 14	The "Ancient Chapel"	164

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CURRICULUM VITAE

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Latino Literature

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Find Yourself Here: Neighborhood Logics in Twenty-First Century Chicano and Latino
Literature

By

Cristina Rodriguez

Doctor of Philosophy in English

University of California, Irvine, 2015

Professor Rodrigo Lazo, Chair

My dissertation argues that since transmigrants often form profound connections to place, we can develop a nuanced account of transmigrant subjectivity through innovative fiction by migrants who describe their own neighborhoods. The authors studied use their own hometowns as both setting and stylistic inspiration, deploying various formal techniques to mirror the fictional location to the real one, thus literarily enacting the neighborhood. I construct a neighborhood geography from each work, by traveling on foot, interviewing the neighbors and local historians, mapping the text's fictional setting upon the actual spaces it references, and teasing out connections between place, narrative form, and migrancy, to demonstrate how excavating the locale illuminates the text. My methodology is interdisciplinary: it incorporates recent sociological studies of transnationalism by Linda Basch, Patricia Pessar, and Jorge Duany, tenets of Human Geography, and the work of Latino literary theorists including Raúl Homero

Villa and Mary Pat Bray on space in narrative. My literary neighborhood geographies—of Salvador Plascencia’s El Monte barrio, Junot Díaz’s New Jersey housing development, Sandra Cisneros’ Westside Chicago, and Helena María Viramontes’ East Los Angeles—sharpen Latino literary criticism’s long-standing focus on urban and regional spaces in narrative by zooming in on neighborhood streets, while building on contemporary theories of transnationalism to analyze the broader cultural implications of local migrancy. By grounding the effects of transmigrancy in concrete locations, “Find Yourself Here” presents a comprehensive vision of the US Latino immigrant experience without generalizing from its myriad versions and numerous sites.

PREFACE

In the neighborhood I grew up in, everybody seemed to be from somewhere else. My best friends in grade school had parents from the Philippines, Ethiopia, Nigeria, and Ireland. Our corner of metropolitan Silver Spring, Maryland, was increasingly Salvadoran, as well as Jamaican, Haitian, and Ethiopian. The local dollar theater turned into a Spanish Pentecostal church when I was a kid, and the main drag of my neighborhood, Flower Avenue, increasingly boasted predominantly Latin American stores and restaurants. Of course I also had neighbors whose parents were from Indiana, or Virginia, who I'm sure could trace their time in this country at least a few generations back. Yet in general I felt I never had to explain my mother's accent, or the (harrowing, scarring) experience of Saturday Argentine school, or the occasional strangely-pronounced word. I would go to my friend's houses and hear their parents and relatives speaking in Tagalog or looking over what goods a family friend had brought them from Ethiopia, and the awkwardness my friends felt walking through the scene, dodging questions in that other language, matched my own when I was a host.

As I grew up the schools and neighborhoods I became part of grew more and more monochromatic. By high school my white friends teased me about my idiosyncratic expressions and the norms of my household (so much hugging and kissing!, was the general consensus). Applying to college, the idea that I, the middle-class daughter of an international civil servant who was once told by a disgruntled immigration officer at JFK airport, "lady, you speak English better than I do," would be considered a "diverse" student seemed absurd. Yet at Reed College I was the only one of my friends from an immigrant family. For my friends in New England after college I was the token "ethnic friend," if only in name and in jest. I largely embraced my own personal *blanqueamiento*, since I never felt really Latina enough, or Hispanic enough, to use the

term we used back then and there, to claim it as an identity anyway. Only my mom was a Hispanic immigrant. While my dad's surname and his father are both Puerto Rican, my father was more from Long Island than anywhere else. Speaking Spanish in public was a hardship of bruised pride. I looked white. I *was* white. Better to not self-identify. Somebody might call me out. Say I didn't speak Spanish well enough. Or worse, that my Spanish was learned rather than innate. Or that I didn't look Hispanic enough. Or that I wasn't really "ethnic" enough. I'm not sure who I thought was policing the border of identity claims, but I feared them for exposing me as a fraud.

It was only much, much later that I realized my particular experience of identity might be shared. I had never read any Latino Literature before graduate school. I enrolled at UC Irvine to study Pynchon and DeLillo and the other canonical (largely white) writers of the 20th century. Yet the question of identity kept cropping up for me. What does it mean to feel between identities? How does it happen? What does it look like? For me, my identity was affected by every new community I became a part of, and it went accumulating nuance as I accumulated new experiences against which to reiterate myself. Surely, in this era of globalization and widespread immigration, I was not alone in feeling this way. Indeed, I knew from childhood that there were whole neighborhoods of kids like me, who weren't quite of the place their parents were from and weren't quite fully of here either. I saw in my undergraduate students too, whose parents were from Mexico, Vietnam, the Philippines, Japan, that these questions of where to belong and how to belong were relevant. Investigating my family tree further I found that each of my parents had undergone a similar self-fashioning: my mother, a multi-generational Anglo Argentine, recounted how as a child she and her siblings would avoid the kitchen during awkward visits from her English-speaking relatives in Buenos Aires, before she learned the language from her

Scotch-Argentine grandmother; my father, going to Puerto Rico with his father, would bluff and blunder his way through a family and country largely foreign to him. I had in fact inherited identity awkwardness. And I started to believe that *this* experience of identity was totally underrepresented in US culture. Surely writers were talking about this, and as the world was only getting smaller and more interconnected, surely we all needed to be talking about this. I wanted to find the fiction that spoke to this way of being in the world.

In that body of fiction, I discovered that, in the face of uncertainty over who they were, authors tightened their grip on *where* they were. They claimed their neighborhoods all the more fiercely because of the ambivalence with which they claimed other aspects of themselves. As someone whose sense of self still gains strength from where I grew up, who still references that locally shared immigrant identity I felt as a kid, this discovery rang true. How writers describe that process, and what it can tell us about new forms of identity construction in the late 20th and early 21st century, is the focus of this dissertation. For me, this project taught me that my own experience growing up in the US was far from unique. That, to put it mawkishly, I am not alone.

INTRODUCTION

In Jorge Luis Borges' short story "The Garden of Forking Paths," a Chinese spy for the Germans during World War I devises an ingenious plan to get crucial information to his chief in Germany before being captured in England by the British. The spy, Dr. Yu Tsun, travels to the house of a man named Stephen Albert. "Albert" is the new location of the British artillery and thus the city the Germans must attack; by killing Albert, Tsun knows that his own name will be associated with the name Albert in the newspapers, which his chief pours over daily. Thus by killing Albert Tsun can communicate the artillery location to his German chief. The twist in the story is that Stephen Albert is a Sinologist who incidentally has been studying Yu Tsun's great-grandfather, Ts'ui Pên. Pên was a renowned governor of Yunnan who renounced power "in order to write a novel that might be more populous than the *Hung Lu Meng* and to construct a labyrinth in which all men would become lost" (22). Tsun recalls that "thirteen years he dedicated to these heterogeneous tasks," but upon Pên's death at the hands of a stranger "his novel was incoherent and no one found the labyrinth" (23). The manuscripts of the novel formed "an indeterminate heap of incoherent drafts" (24). Yet Stephen Albert tells Tsun he has unraveled the riddle left by Ts'ui Pên: "Ts'ui Pên must have said once: *I am withdrawing to write a book*. And another time: *I am withdrawing to construct a labyrinth*. Every one imagined two works; to no one did it occur that the book and the maze were one and the same thing" (25). This labyrinth, "the garden of forking paths," bifurcates in time, rather than space, as the novel simultaneously imagines all possible futures for its protagonists. Albert discovers that the novel *is* the labyrinth.

And then Tsun murders him, but that's not the point. The point is that in the story, this riddle was left unsolved for a century. The difficulty of cracking the code, of being able to view the novel *as* the maze, is a result of readers' general difficulty conceptualizing books as places.

We think of labyrinths and mazes as occupying concrete space, places you can visit and literally get lost in. Borges' *Ts'ui Pên*, however, conceived of a book as also occupying space, and by extension, the ability of an author to build a place within its pages. A "garden of forking paths" sounds as if it describes a labyrinth, which sounds absolutely physical and spatially formidable, but of course literature also exists in space and creates space. This dissertation is an attempt to see those places in literature, to discover the concrete spaces laid out for us in certain works of fiction, for us to find, as Albert does.

This project developed while I was researching what is now the first chapter. Reading criticism of Salvador Plascencia's 2005 debut novel *The People of Paper*—what little there is—became extremely frustrating, because I found that critics largely ignored the radical experimentation of the novel, quite a feat for a text with such an unorthodox layout, including black spaces and vertically separated paragraphs, not to mention the revolt of its characters against their author. Other critics took the experimental aspects into account, but only just barely, enough to cozily tuck the novel into a tradition of Latin American magical realism or metafiction. The text was primarily claimed as a kind of Chicano protest novel, held up for its social commentary rather than its formal innovation.

I wanted to deal explicitly with the many experimental aspects of the text, and resist the urge to reach immediately towards wider literary categories to do so. Considering the novel's obsession with its setting in Southern California's El Monte barrio, I asked myself whether the text's formatting and narration might be an enactment in some way of the neighborhood it was so eager to depict. And I wondered if Plascencia's intimate relationship to his adopted barrio was a result of his own dislocation, as an immigrant from Gaudalajara, Mexico, to Southern California.

What I found was that the novel was doing something very specific with its self-conscious narration, something tied to the cultural norms of the neighborhood, and something that could not be seen unless you anchored yourself in the city's history, walked the streets, saw the local layout, heard the local debates, and sought out the regional sources for the innovations of the narrative. As I continued to research, I encountered a cadre of 21st century fiction, written by immigrants and transmigrants about their own childhood neighborhoods, which share an intense investment in describing real-life places as narrative setting, and the utilization of non-standard, experimental, or innovative literary forms, to make the text reflective of those places. I discovered that, as Ts'ui Pên's novel *is the labyrinth*, in each of these texts, the novel *is the neighborhood*.

This dissertation, then, examines contemporary texts written by Chicano and Latino authors who are writing about their own neighborhood, and who deploy strategies that make the form of their text mimetic of that place. How do immigrants, or transmigrants, who oscillate between two or more homes, transform their adopted homes? How do their adopted homes transform them as authors? Can we see these effects in the way spaces are designed and utilized, and how might literature describe or express those specific strategies for transforming space? Have these strategies, and thus this literature, changed in the face of contemporary transnationalism? Can we begin to delineate the traits of what appears to be an emergent transmigrant subjectivity by analyzing the narrative style and form of writers who describe their personal experience of moving from place to place?

Transmigrancy and Transnationalism

I follow contemporary sociologists in utilizing the term “transmigrant” to refer to “immigrants who develop and maintain multiple relationships—familial, economic, social,

organizational, religious, and political—that span borders” (Basch et al 7). The writers in *Find Yourself Here* are either themselves immigrants to the US, or are raised by immigrants to the US, yet this migration is not linear. Salvador Plascencia, Junot Díaz, Helena María Viramontes, and Sandra Cisneros describe travel to and from the home and host countries of their families, inscribing a more fluid, oscillating relationship between nations than the traditional model of immigration, where a family moves from one country to another without return for the purpose of permanent settlement, will allow. These authors live in the midst of what one sociologist calls “binational social fields.”¹ I argue that the lived experience of transmigrancy for these authors leave aesthetic marks upon their artistic production; the contemporary phenomenon of transmigrancy, in turn, can be illuminated by theories of transnationalism.

In the past thirty years, transnationalism has come to prominence as a promising theoretical mode for grappling with the social, cultural, and political effects of contemporary globalization, with its concomitant increase in the movement of persons, goods, and capital between countries. The term “transnationalism” comes from social studies, particularly the fields of sociology and anthropology. In their book *Nations Unbound*, the trio of scholars largely responsible for the development of transnationalism as a field of study, Linda Basch, Nina Glick Schiller, and Cristina Szanton Blanc, offer a theory of transnationalism based on case studies involving the immigrations of St. Vincentians, Grenadians, Haitians, and Filipinos to the New York City area. *Nations Unbound* grounds us in the general strategies entailed by transnational immigration patterns:

¹ Luis Eduardo Guarnizo coins this term, to refer to how Dominicans in the diaspora adjust their identities to navigate the cultures of both the island and the US (40); however, the phrase can be used to describe individuals living in any transnational community, or who themselves form part of transnational networks.

[C]ommon trends among the four countries had become clear: (1) the development of postcolonial states that have become direct agents of extraction of wealth from the majority of their populations; (2) the intensive penetration of global capital in the form of both loans and investment by multinational corporations; (3) the domination of all four countries by the United States; (4) a resultant deterioration of the standard of living for all but the dominant classes; and (5) a vast emigration, from all classes, including broad sections of the middle strata, who could only maintain their class position by migrating. (228-9).

Based on these “common trends,” we can relate the findings of Basch et al to several Caribbean and Latin American countries that share these socio-economic traits.

The simplest definition of transnationalism is “the living of personal and political lives across geographic boundaries” (52). Basch et al. go on to describe transnationalism as “the processes by which immigrants forge and sustain multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement. We call these processes transnational to emphasize that many immigrants today build social fields that cross geographic, cultural, and political borders” (7). The chief premises of the study are both economic and social. They argue that transnational migration is inextricably linked to global capitalism and must be understood within the context of global relations between capital and labor. They also claim that these migrations entail cultural shifts: “Transnationalism is a process by which migrants, through their daily life activities and social, economic, and political relations, create social fields that cross national boundaries.” Politically this results in citizens of multiple nations: “By living their lives across borders, transmigrants find themselves confronted with and engaged in the nation building processes of two or more nation-states. Their identities and practices are configured by

hegemonic categories, such as race and ethnicity, that are deeply embedded in the nation building processes of these nation-states” (22).

While many observers have pointed to advances in technology, such as low fare air travel, telephones, fax machines, and money transfer companies, as a primary explanation for what appear to be more “intimate and enduring relations” between immigrants and their home countries (23), made possible by the shrinking of time and space possible in the contemporary era, the authors counter that these innovations “explain[s] neither why immigrants invest so much time, energy, and resources in maintaining home ties, nor why transportation and communication systems bridge distances between particular geographic locations and not others. Technological explanations for the emergence of more transnational patterns of migration prove to be incomplete when divorced from an analysis of the social relations of production” (24). Others argue that transnationalism is not a new phenomenon. However, although the authors acknowledge that the assimilationist narrative of 19th and 20th century immigration is oversimplified and requires revision, they still claim that “current transnationalism marks a new type of migrant experience, reflecting an increased and more pervasive global penetration of capital” (24). They tie its growth to the worldwide economic crises of the past twenty years, the deindustrialization of the US in an era of post-Fordism, changes to immigration law in 1987, and global restructurings of capital that have disrupted local economies throughout the third world (25). These economic dislocations in both core and periphery countries have increased immigration to capitalist core nations, yet as the economies of *those* have declined, it has become more difficult for immigrants to build secure economic bases in their new host countries: “The current conjuncture of global capitalism contributes to the insecurity of international migrants, because global economic dislocations, long-term economic retrenchment and recession, and the

restructuring of production processes throughout the world have either reduced or unexpectedly altered demands for labor” (26). Thus, while a more nuanced history of 19th and early 20th century immigration, which moves beyond a simple assimilationist paradigm, is necessary, genuine transnational migration is largely limited to the late 20th and 21st centuries.

The authors go on to describe various transnational strategies used by Caribbean and Filipino kinship networks that have at least one node in the New York area. The pattern that crops up time and again in the case studies of *Nations Unbound* is of families extending their economic bases over two or more countries, splitting up childcare and labor, in order to benefit from transnationalism by accumulating property and savings. A typical transnational family might include a daughter who comes to the US from the Caribbean to secure domestic work while staying with an aunt or more distant relative, sending money back to help her brothers build a home on the island, and leaving her children in the care of her parents or in-laws. Her children may eventually join her in the US, or she might return to the island, after securing employment in the States for other family members. Examples of these strategies abound in the fiction delineated in *Find Yourself Here*. *The People of Paper*'s protagonists, many Mexican immigrants, return to Mexico often, to secure materials to build their economy back in East Los Angeles, or to reunite with family; in *This is How You Lose Her*, Díaz recounts his father leaving the Dominican Republic for over a decade to establish a career in the US, and then sending for his family, as well as households of female Dominicans who are sent to the US to make more money for their families back on the island; In *Their Dogs Came With Them*, Mexican cousins and mothers either stay with relatives, or strike out on their own in the US, to make gains they can then send back to their relatives across the border; *Caramelo*'s Reyes family oscillates

between Mexico and the US in order to maintain social ties and translate economic gains in the US into cultural cache back in Mexico City.

While these practices result in the downside of extended separation, transnational networks also allow its practitioners “to resist specific state policies aimed at controlling and exploiting their labor and also to challenge the terms of their subordinated insertion into structures of global capital” (82). Such strategies entail complicity with the instability of present socio-economic conditions and perpetuate the need for ongoing migration, yet they largely result in financial and status gains in one or both countries, and allow “the immigrants to resist their subjugation in host and home societies” (92). The subjugation to which the authors refer is mainly racial, and refers specifically to migrants of color who enter the US: “the continuing racial ordering of the United States, which places people of color on the lower rungs of the social hierarchy, consistently contributes to the development of transnationalism. In response to U.S. racial constructions, transmigrants perceive themselves as full-fledged citizens of their “home” nation-states” (261). The endemic racism at work in the US, combined with increasingly meager opportunities for economic advancement, deters Caribbean, Filipino, and potentially Latin American immigrants to the US from fully severing ties to their nation of origin. The authors quote a Haitian who had lived on remittances from his family in the US for 40 years: “You can become a citizen of the United States, but you will always be Haitian because they will continue to see you as Haitian” (234). The members of the populations studied “found, although they don’t always openly acknowledge it, that no matter what their citizenship or place of birth, U.S. racial constructions continue to see them as outside of the ‘real America.’ Consequently, and despite the impoverishment of their home countries, Caribbean and Filipino migrants, although they have physically moved away, have felt constrained to produce and maintain multiple layers

of transnational social connections” (234). We hear an echo of this resistance to US racial stratification in *This is How you Lose Her* when the Dominican-American Yunion describes a girl from his neighborhood: “She was from Trinidad, a cocoa pañyol, and she had a phony-as-hell English accent. It was the way we all were back then. None of us wanted to be niggers. Not for nothing” (39). Thus, transnationalism becomes not only an economic strategy, but also a cultural strategy, as transnational identity signifies maintaining ties to the home nation at least in part to evade oppressive racism in the US.

This dissertation pursues the *literary* implications of these momentous contemporary social and political shifts in migrancy, which remain undertheorized. *Nations Unbound* asserts that while social scientists may use the term “transnationalism,” few transnational persons will self-identify as such, except in the case of literary representations:

While we speak a great deal in this book about transnationalism as processes and of the construction of identities that reflect transnational experience, individuals, communities, or states rarely identify themselves as transnational. It is only in contemporary fiction (see Anzaldúa [sic] 1987; Ghosh 1988; Marshall 1991; Rushdie 1988) that this state of ‘in-betweenness’ has been fully voiced. Living in a world in which discourse about identity continues to be framed in terms of loyalty to nations and nation-states, most transmigrants have neither fully conceptualized nor articulated a form of transnational identity. (8)

I agree with Basch et al that it is “only in contemporary fiction” that “this state of ‘in-betweenness’ has been fully voiced.” In *Find Yourself Here* I argue that the writers included in my study are articulating versions of this heretofore largely unarticulated “transnational identity.” Even second and third generation transmigrants become inscribed in a transnational social field,

still subject to the same forces of colonization and globalization, oppressive US racial and xenophobic paradigms, and the economic impetus for splitting families and dividing homelands that fueled transmigration in the first place. The tightness of my chronological scope—the works in the dissertation hail from the last fifteen years—enables me to examine how the recent increase in transnational social networks influences transmigrant literature.

A key strategy the dissertation identifies for writers grappling with transnational dislocation is an intensified attachment to place. Transnational subjects, perhaps compelled by the loss of a homeland, or the loss of a sense of belonging that follows from migration, tie themselves more securely to the places they experience, stitching their sense of self to their new community or neighborhood. Curiously, then, theories of transnationalism bring us back to the local, and require us to consider the effects of these transnational social fields as they are experienced on the ground in discrete locations.

Latino Literary Theories of Space

I focus on Chicano and Latino authors because Latino letters has a rich history of theories of space in narrative that can be brought to bear on this question of how to see the new spaces transnationalism is creating in literature. Chicano literary criticism in particular has been at the forefront of conceptualizing the role of space in narrative.² Juan Bruce-Novoa, a Chicano theorist writing during the Chicano movement of the 1970s, asserts that Chicanos occupy “the intercultural possibilities” of a space neither fully Mexican nor fully American; Bruce-Novoa analyzes the ways in which Chicano art and literature “opens a space for itself,” specifically how it might use the unity of literary space to combat the chaos of discontinuity and rupture in

² Mary Pat Brady gestures to the underutilization of this discourse in contemporary postmodern geography: “Yet the work of critical geography has largely emerged without reference to the spatial epistemologies of Chicana literature. That is indeed unfortunate, since so many of its spatial claims and discoveries had been anticipated, theorized, and illustrated by Chicanas” (204).

everyday life (98-99). Gloria Anzaldúa's groundbreaking *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987), itself an experimental hybrid of memoir, poetry, and theory, levied this salvo, which opens up a new area of inquiry, the study of Borderlands, for Latino Literature: "The psychological borderlands, the sexual borderlands and the spiritual borderlands are not particular to the Southwest. In fact, the Borderlands are physically present wherever two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory, where under, lower, middle and upper classes touch, where the space between two individuals shrinks with intimacy" (1). As an area of study, "Borderlands" refers both to the geographic region incorporating the southwestern US-Mexico border, and the particular cultural productions—generally characterized by experimental and hybrid forms—that arguably result from the socio-political interactions endemic to such contested terrain. The concept of the borderlands not just as a physical, geographic space, but as an abstract space, was taken up and pursued by critics interested in exploring its manifestations in literature. In the 1990s and into the 2000s, Chicano literary critics like Ramón Saldivar, Mary Pat Brady, and Raúl Homero Villa have interpreted fiction and poetry in terms of its spatial reasoning and its potential production of a literary borderlands.

My methodology shares similarities with the work of both Brady and Villa, who also personally visit the spaces—towns, regions, cities—whose literary production they are examining in order to interrogate the relationship between actual place identity and fictional representation. Brady in particular, in her *Extinct Lands, Temporal Geographies* (2002), expertly teases out the relations between the form of the narrative in question and the locale to which it refers. Yet Brady, Saldivar, Anzaldúa, and others working in Borderlands theory focus on regional literatures of the southwest. Villa turns to the city, and his knowledge of the cultural practices and place memory of Chicanos in Los Angeles in *Barrio-Logos* (2000) illuminates his

interpretation of the spaces of poetry and fiction created by Latinos in urban spaces. My work, however, narrows the scope. *Find Yourself Here* applies theories of space in narrative at the level of the individual barrio. This specificity matches the specificity of the texts I study, which detail houses and streets of a particular neighborhood, and thus allows me to focus on making direct connections between each narrative innovation of the text and its potential analog in the real-life setting it evokes.

This wealth of Latino literary criticism arguably arises because the literature itself is rich in place detail.³ The canon of Chicano and Latino literature has given us so many evocative neighborhoods, from Piri Thomas' Spanish Harlem to Sandra Cisneros' *Mango Street*. However, an interpretive model for literary uses of local geography has yet to emerge. Recent Latino literary criticism has instead widened its geographic scope, turning towards transnationalism, with its focus on the effects of international movements and changing immigration patterns upon US ethnic communities.⁴ However, the need for both a more localized analysis and the crucial intervention of transnationalist theory do not have to be antithetical. My work restores the emphasis on place identity and space that was so crucial to earlier Chicano/Latino literary theory, in order to capture manifestations of 21st century transnational flows in specific locales. I agree that contemporary texts reflect the permeability of borders, but transnationalist readings of literature tend towards generalizations, moving away from the text to delineate broader international movements rather than working inductively from the aesthetics of a particular

³ Place detail is not unique to Chicano and Latino Literature, and in the Conclusion I suggest other potential literary traditions that benefit from my methodological model. However, I want to intervene in Latino literary criticism's particular turn from space-oriented theories to transnational theories, because Latino Studies boasts a noteworthy canon of *both* barrio fiction and literary borderlands theory.

⁴ See for instance George Yúdice's *The Expediency of Culture* (2003), Juan Poblete's introduction for and edition of *Critical Latin American and Latino Studies* (2003), and Juan Flores' *The Diaspora Strikes Back* (2009).

work; such modes of reading neglect the novel as its own concrete space, and thus, like Ts'ui Pên's undiscovered literary labyrinth, the spatial significance of the text's form is overlooked. *Find Yourself Here* takes its cue from the place-detailed, experimental aesthetics⁵ of transmigrant writers, by grounding its literary discussions of transnationalism in distinct locations and returning Latino literary criticism to the role of form.

By analyzing the role of individual immigrant neighborhoods in Chicano and Latino fiction from the past fifteen years, *Find Yourself Here* crafts a model for a literary neighborhood geography, developing a portable methodology for reading transmigrant fiction. My project sharpens Latino literary criticism's long-standing focus on urban and regional spaces in narrative by zooming in on neighborhood streets, while building on contemporary theories of transnationalism to interpret the broader social and cultural implications of local migrancy. This dissertation offers a new interpretive model fashioned to deal with a new brand of literature: 21st century multi-ethnic literature is expressing current processes of transnationalism, place memory, and identity formation, and by grounding my readings in specific sites and focusing on form, I can account for this current narrative moment.

Find Yourself Here

Since the intent of my project is to provide concrete instances, in these pages I will present to you a series of examples of this kind of local reading, demonstrating what it looks like to use political geography, history, and even some journalistic reportage to read an experimental Latino novel from the ground up. Each dissertation chapter takes on a different neighborhood and a distinct set of narrative strategies; all are linked by an expressed relationship between literary form, setting, and transmigration. Chapter One claims that the Mexican-American

⁵ I use "experimental" to refer to various innovative or metafictional literary techniques, including non-linear narration, multiple narrators, generic invention (e.g. the combination of autobiography and fiction), non-standard language use (e.g. code switching), and unorthodox formatting or layout.

aesthetics of El Monte's barrio, the setting for Salvador Plascencia's novel *The People of Paper* (2005), inform the novel's aesthetics, as the regional Chicano practices of *con safos* and *rasquachismo*—which dictate the rules of graffiti tags and landscape décor, respectively—account for the unorthodox physical layout of the text as well as the mutiny of Plascencia's characters against him in the narrative. Chapter Two reads Junot Díaz's excessive place detailing and critique of Dominican gender norms in *This Is How You Lose Her* (2012) as embodying a conflicted diasporic writer authenticating himself through reference to his childhood apartment projects in New Jersey. In Chapter Three, I use Helena María Viramontes' *Their Dogs Came With Them* (2007) as an East LA barrio map, illustrating how the text's structure mimics the neighborhood's layout. Using findings gleaned from my California Studies Consortium funded research on Helena María Viramontes' papers, I demonstrate that the novel is preserving on paper a barrio in danger of destruction from the forces of shortsighted urban planning. Chapter Four explores the particular aptness of the *rebozo* or shawl as both symbol and stylistic model for the migrant Mexican-American community of Chicago that Sandra Cisneros describes in *Caramelo* (2002), arguing that the shawl's versatility and above all mobility figure here for a Chicano neighborhood defined by its community's history of farm labor and migrancy based on growing season. Ultimately, *Find Yourself Here* resists generalizing a single "Latino experience" from the literary production of various Latino communities, each marked by unique intersections of place, migrancy, and culture, by delivering an overall vision of contemporary US Latino immigrant identity grounded in its myriad versions and numerous sites.

CHAPTER 1

“The El Monte of Warfare and Lead Houses”: Local Logics in Salvador

Plascencia’s *The People of Paper*

Perhaps the most striking feature of Salvador Plascencia’s debut novel, *The People of Paper* (2005), is its formal experimentation. The text boasts chapters with multiple columns offering different perspectives on the same events, the insertion of the author as a character in his own story, and markings on the printed page—black blocks and circles, crossed out names and lines, tarot cards and graffiti and tattoos (see figure 1). My reading seeks specific neighborhood sources for Plascencia’s innovative narrative strategies, taking its cue from the vivid presentation of the town of El Monte. I argue that the “real” El Monte’s cultural practices of *con safos* and *rasquachismo* inform the text’s unusual author/character relationship and the unorthodox physical layout of the novel. Interpreting these narrative choices locally elucidates the transnational identity of the author, himself an immigrant from Guadalajara to El Monte, inscribed in the novel; a valence lost when the text is read as part of a generic literary tradition, such as metafiction or magical realism.

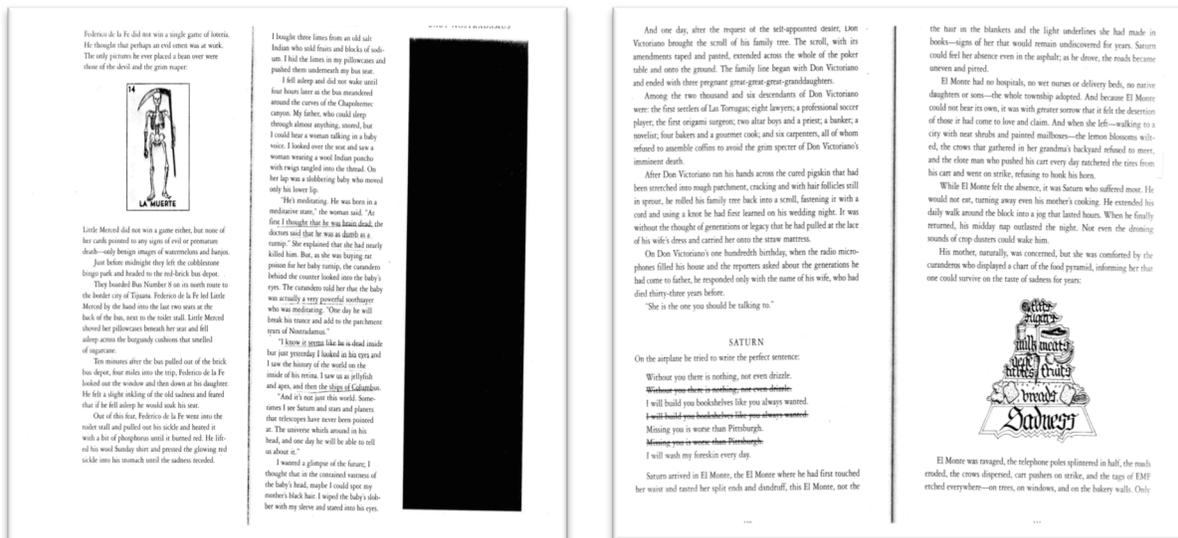


Figure 1. The Unorthodox layout of the novel (Plascencia 22-23 and 110-111).

Considering the explicit references to turf wars and graffiti tags in the text, my local reading proposes to think of the role of writing in the novel as governed by the practice of *con safos*, a Southwestern Chicano mode of understanding public writing as sacred and vulnerable. Viewed in this light, the novel becomes a graffiti tag, and reveals Plascencia's anxiety towards his own textual production by evoking the graffiti tagger's authorial power in proclaiming his or her name publicly, as well as the fear of potential defamation of one's own name that might result. The unorthodox page formatting, when interpreted in terms of the neighborhood, can be understood as operating according to the principles of Chicano *rasquachismo*, an aesthetic sensibility characterized by "a witty, irreverent, and impertinent posture that recodes and moves outside established boundaries" (Ybarra-Frausto 155), which pervades the contemporary décor of the El Monte barrio. The novel enacts the aesthetic practices of El Monte through its *rasquache* production, creating juxtapositions and hybridizations that can stylistically approximate how one might view the world from the vantage point of the neighborhood. This method allows Plascencia to re-appropriate in order to avoid appropriating the character of the place that has inspired his story.

The People of Paper employs experimental formal elements on several levels. The page layout alternates between chapters with multiple columns of independently labeled characters whose thoughts are narrated in third person, chapters with one or three narratives told from a particular character's point of view, and a few chapters with as many as six voices per page crowded into columns. The text itself undergoes stress and interruption: Names are scratched out; text is blacked out, crossed out; and the occasional graffito or diagram or image is placed throughout the novel. The narrative is equally self-conscious—Salvador Plascencia enters the

story as the author, under the pseudonym of Saturn, and is being fought by his characters, who desire freedom from the incursion of omniscient narration into their public and private lives.

Such narrative experimentation clearly implores the reader to think about the formal and stylistic choices of the author. Yet in its public reception, *The People of Paper's* literary strangeness has often been glossed over. Critics either assume that Plascencia, as a Latino writer, is operating in a Latin American tradition, and quickly relegate the novel to the category of magical realism, or they assume that Plascencia, as a Latino writer, is engaged in a literary project of Chicano social justice, and highlight the novel's more straightforward depiction of Mexican and Chicano flower pickers. These dual tendencies are evidenced by reviews of the debut novel, in the *Los Angeles Times*, *Publisher's Weekly*, and *The Guardian* among others, which overwhelmingly referred to *The People of Paper* as magical realist; those that didn't claim the text as magical realist emphasized its Chicano side: for instance *New York Times* reviewer Nathaniel Rich connected *The People of Paper* to *Music of the Mill* (2005), the debut novel by former L.A. gang member and Chicano activist poet Luis J. Rodriguez, calling them both "Cal-Mex."

The literary criticism of the novel—what little there is—largely followed suit. In his chapter on *The People of Paper* and Karen Tei Yamashita's *Tropic of Orange*, Kevin Cooney interprets the experimental formatting of Plascencia's text as an inheritor of the Latin American magical realist tradition, viewing the novel as an act of "postcolonial resistance," engaged in "mapping the city from its racial and geographic margins" (207). In this reading, the use of columns and the crowding of voices on the page function to create the textual geography of a public space such as the Los Angeles Plaza, and to move these voices to the center of a Los Angeles that had pushed communities like El Monte to the periphery (In reality, El Monte was

never part of the city of Los Angeles, peripheral or otherwise, as the El Monte Township was formed in 1866, and the city of El Monte was incorporated in 1912). Cooney rightly argues that these formal elements “raise profound questions about the relationship between literature and place.” However, his claim that this “metafictional mapping” is specifically connected to postcolonial modes of resistance miscategorizes Plascencia’s project as part of a Latin American tradition.

Ramón Saldívar catches the link Cooney and others overlook between Plascencia and what Mark McGurl has called “the Program Era” of American literature fueled by an institutionalized MFA style, and avers that Plascencia’s text “share[s] more with the form and aesthetics” of contemporary postmodernist writers such as Michael Chabon and Mark Z. Danielewski than with those of the Latin American magical realist tradition (576). Describing a “postrace, neo-fantasy, transnational turn in American ethnic fiction,” Saldívar teases out the possibilities of this new “minority metafiction” through his readings of Junot Díaz’ *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* and Salvador Plascencia’s *The People of Paper*. Saldívar expands on this concept in his latest monograph in *Narrative*, where he argues that the 21st century has introduced a “postrace aesthetic” among US ethnic writers: “a hybrid amalgam of realism, magical realism, metafiction, and genre fictions, including science fiction, graphic narrative, and fantasy proper” (13). Yet, while I agree that there has been a shift in contemporary modes of narration in African American, Latino, and Asian American fiction, I disagree that these writers all necessarily share an investment in “reconfiguring the thematics of race,” which Saldívar sees as a chief element of the new style, claiming that these writers are deploying this aesthetic specifically to explore what he sees as a new racial imaginary (5). I hesitate to argue that these writers, from such varied literary traditions, are using similar aesthetics to similar ends. Placing

them in this category of “postrace aesthetic” also gains us very little in terms of analyzing the particular function or aim of experimental form in the case of each work.

As for the subject matter of *The People of Paper*, Saldívar reads Plascencia’s project as a protest for social justice for an underserved Chicano community. At the conclusion of “Historical Fantasy, Speculative Realism, and Postrace Aesthetics in Contemporary American Fiction,” Saldívar claims that both Plascencia and Díaz are “sharing the goal of ethnic writers to imagine a state of achieved social justice,” while telling their “protest stories” (593). Saldívar engages explicitly with the form of the novel, and he refreshingly avoids placing Plascencia’s work in a magical realist tradition out of hand. However, once the experimentation of the novel is explained with this new label of “postrace aesthetics,” Saldívar emerges with a reading that, while perceptive and nuanced, ultimately situates *The People of Paper* in the same category of “Chicano social protest” that critics and reviewers who *didn’t* grapple with the novel’s form utilized.

I am interested in the possibilities of a different interpretive lens, one that does not assume all ethnic writers share the goal of imagining “a state of achieved social justice,” or that they are equally engaged in a specific kind of social protest. What might the experimental form of the novel tell us if we resisted the urge to categorize it as part of a literary tradition, and first considered the text as *sui generis*? *The People of Paper* expresses a unique formal relationship between the author and his neighborhood of El Monte; the text thus insists on a localized analysis, which connects Plascencia’s stylistic choices to the novel’s setting, and deals with those experimental innovations in the terms dictated by the work itself. By walking the streets of the El Monte barrio and understanding its cultural codes, we will arrive at a much more precise hermeneutic for interpreting *The People of Paper*.

The Official El Monte

If we had learned anything from this story it was to be cautious of paper—to be mindful of its fragile construction and sharp edges, but mostly to be cautious of what is written on it.⁶

The danger of paper is palpable in the official history of the non-fictional El Monte. In Plascencia's novel, El Monte appears to be a Mexican-American world unto itself, a town wholly devoted to flower picking and solely occupied by Mexican and Chicano laborers. Yet a visit to the El Monte museum reveals that a very different history is being cultivated and curated. The uncomfortable juxtaposition of these two versions of El Monte's history demonstrates the stakes of *The People of Paper's* wariness of paper, and Plascencia's strategies for re-appropriating the materials of narrative construction.

The official history of El Monte, as purveyed by the El Monte museum in South El Monte, California, is already revisionist. Apparently fed up with assumptions that their town, twelve miles east of Los Angeles, was a mere latecomer outer suburb, the museum insists that El Monte was one of the earliest (Anglo) settlements in Southern California. Donna Crippen, the museum's curator, tells me that El Monte was “the first all-American settlement in Los Angeles County” (Crippen). The phrase “all-American,” aside from its *frisson*-producing implications of who is and is not an American according to this categorization, is meant to not only distinguish the town from the earlier Native American, Spanish, and Mexican settlements in California but also ostensibly to indicate that the whole of this “first” settlement was Anglo in its composition. The first wagon train left from Independence, Missouri in 1849, spurred on by the California gold rush. The self-avowed main attractions of the town's history are Gay's lion farm, former

⁶ Plascencia, 219.

home to the MGM lion, its walnut and flower industries, and one of the first public schools in the state of California, founded in 1852.

The claim of first Anglo settlement in California is belied by the name, “El Monte,” which is of course Spanish in origin. “Monte” in contemporary Spanish means hill or mountain, yet as Plascencia notes, the town of El Monte has neither: “The town was called El Monte, after the hills it did not have. But everything else was named after flowers” (Plascencia 33). In the pamphlet, a “Brief History of El Monte,” free with your free entrance to the museum, Jack Barton explains the discrepancy:

Most non-Hispanic persons with some knowledge of Spanish assume that the name El Monte must pertain to a hill or a mountain of some sort. If this were true, it would belie the physical realities of El Monte as a place, for there are no hills or mountains in any evidence. [...] Rather, one must search for a meaning to the name “El Monte” in the obscure and somewhat archaic definitions which were current in Spanish-usage in the late 18th century. For it was in the 1770s that a group of Spanish soldiers and missionaries first explored this part of Southern California. [...] And, one among their number, first used the term in Spanish which, at that time (1770s) would best describe this beautiful ‘wooded spot’ (1-2).

The Spanish appreciated El Monte’s “precious soil, abundant wood (for fuel), and deep, rich alluvial topsoil” (1), and named the town, yet they are not considered the town’s founders or its original inhabitants. It does seem strange, however, that mere passerby would be so appreciative of the soil quality. Barton calls the Spaniards “journeyers,” referring to a series of decades, including the era of the missions of the 1770s to 1830s and the “land grant” ranchos of the 1830s, where El Monte functioned merely as “a natural resting place for whatever weary

journeyer came its way” (2). Burton notes that even before its naming El Monte was “frequented” by small bands of “nomadic” Indians, which is evidenced by Indian burial sites and “kitchen middens” (2). Familiarity with the topsoil, the establishment of missions, and the inherent land use natural to the economic mode of ranch production all imply some form of residency, as do the earlier burial and kitchen sites. However, the museum avers that it was only the great gold rush of the 1840s and 1850s “that brought the first permanent residents to El Monte” (2).

The strategic qualification of an unavoidable Spanish past here echoes what Raúl Homero Villa calls the “Spanish Romance” version of the history of greater Los Angeles. As a tactic for “the neutralization or erasure of present, lived forms of expression, historical consciousness, and material iconography reflecting the city’s actual Mexican legacy,” a “Spanish Romance” or “fantasy heritage” was manufactured and promoted for the region, which acknowledges and emphasizes the much earlier Spanish presence in order to downplay the more recent, and more importantly, still ongoing Mexican presence in Los Angeles and its environs (55). This history of the area, told through heavily publicized tourist events such as “days of the don” and “mission days,” or the promotion of “authentic” Spanish marketplaces such as the Olvera Street market in downtown L.A., is a ploy for increasing regional tourism that also tries to recast California’s Mexican culture as a quaint, disappearing inheritance of *Los Angeles* culture, now “accessible only in the reified object-form of a pseudo-historical cultural landscape and iconography” (55). El Monte cannot escape its Spanish past, despite a battle in the 1860s to change the town name to “Lexington,” and so its history acknowledges the influence, while mitigating this past by refusing to cede actual prior settlement rights to the Spaniards, or the Native Americans who in turn preceded them.

The “Spanish Romance” telling of El Monte’s history is placed in relief by the artifacts exhibited in the museum itself. Early Spanish artifacts are displayed side by side with older Native American ones, tucked in the back corner of the museum. The only reference to Mexicans or Mexican-Americans is a small sub-section of images, labeled “Mexican-Americans,” showing a dozen black and white photographs from the 1940s and 1950s of community dances at Medina Court, ostensibly the Chicano neighborhood in old El Monte, though it is not explained in the exhibit. Considering that El Monte’s current population, according to the 2010 census, is 61% Mexican, with 70% of the town Hispanic or Latino, the elision of the Mexican history of El Monte is startling. Despite these erasures, however, this history still manages to resurface.

Looking over an El Monte photo album with the curator Donna Crippen, a life-long native of El Monte, we come across a photo of “Hick’s Camp,” and she notes that it was taken before the renovation of the area, which had become a slum. When pressed further, she tells me Hick’s Camp was initially established for the *braceros* (my word, not hers), brought in from Mexico to build the railroads in the early 1940s, and housed in what began as temporary housing. The *braceros* and their families stayed, and eventually housing was renovated to reflect permanent rather than temporary—or perhaps “journeyers”?—settlement. Unbidden, Crippen added that “they were not segregated,” although “they” lived in a different part of town. She explains that El Monte’s second public school was *not* built as a segregated school; it was merely a grammar school so that Spanish-speaking children could learn English. Crippen relates that it was considered an incentive for Mexican and Mexican-American students, who could attend the un-segregated high school if they attained the requisite level of English at their own elementary school.

The Mexican-American presence is felt but left unnamed as Jack Burton goes on to describe the twentieth century history of El Monte. The Bodgers seed company arrived in El Monte in the 1910s, when agriculture formed the town's main economy, and remained in business until recently. The seed company's vast flower fields were famous in the area through the first half of the twentieth century:

During blooming season, these fields of blossoms—precisely laid out in geometric patterns—were visited by people from all over the San Gabriel valley. The farm workers employed to tend these magnificent floral gardens affectionately named the area Las Flores—a name which persists today in designating that part of the 'island' of El Monte. (6).

Much like the “journeyer” versus “permanent settler” rhetoric of the early history of El Monte, the language here refuses inclusion of Mexican residents. The Spanish speakers who named the land are insistently tied to their work rather than the place, with almost absurd redundancy: As “workers” “employed,” “to tend,” their role is strictly economic, as laborers who in this telling appear to be passing through, though the permanence of the name implies they were residents and citizens of the town in addition to its employed labor. The adjective “affectionately” also rings false, as the name “Las Flores” is a noun with no descriptive power in Spanish, signifying, simply, “the flowers.” The modern-day legacy of these workers, and their naming, is El Monte Flores, one of the United States' oldest street gangs, and one begun by Bodgers seed company's flower pickers.

Funded by the WPA, El Monte's museum and its literature chiefly represent archiving and research done only up through the 1930s. While the museum has collected artifacts for the second half of the twentieth century, the bulk of materials are from El Monte's early history until

before World War II. This may account for the seeming dearth of information about El Monte's ethnic communities, not only the Latino population, but also the Japanese American and newer Chinese and Vietnamese communities in the city. Yet even with this caveat, the museum's insistence on a pioneer narrative, reflected in the majority of its exhibits as well as its literature, systematically elides or subsumes the Spanish and then Mexican presence that has been in the town since before its founding (see figure 2).



Figure 2. The El Monte Museum.

With this persistent elision of the Mexican-American presence in El Monte in mind, Plascencia's version of the town's history takes on new valence, as an attempt to revise the "official" narration. Plascencia frames El Monte with a different origin myth from that of the Anglo pioneers, and consistently reiterates the ties between the city and Mexico through a series of cultural practices native to the city, but inherited from or inspired by Mexico.

The *Other* El Monte

In its first pages, *The People of Paper* distinguishes itself as a New World story. Opening with a prologue recounting the Vatican decree to forbid the making of people "from the ground or from the marrow of bones," leaving only the method of creation "from the propulsions and

mounts performed underneath bedsheets,” we track a unit of saddened monks who are forced to close their people factory and march until they forget its coordinates (11). In this march we realize their location, as they “walked south to the Argentine land of fire and back north to the glacial cliffs of Alaska” (11): Plascencia locates his origin myth of fabricated people in the Americas. And when one monk, the rebellious #53, refuses to march any further, he absconds in “the desert basin,” presumably in the area containing parts of California and Chihuahua, Mexico. When the factory is broken into years later, it is by Antonio, the first origami surgeon. Eager to create his first entire person of paper, Antonio finds monk #53 by way of the church gossip mill of Gaudalajara, learns the factory coordinates, and journeys there in a poncho with a wheelbarrow full of construction paper. Our myth begins, then, in an other-worldly Mexico, where the ability to create life (of mud, or ribs, or paper) is limited only by papal decree and the scope of human endeavor.

Plascencia thus very consciously claims origin myths for the Americas, and Mexico specifically. The Garden of Eden is located not in some Mesopotamian valley, but in Oaxaca, also home to a breed of songbirds that can cure loneliness:

Pío-pío descended from one of the flocks that had willingly left the Garden in pursuit of Eve. Pío-Pío’s ancestors were faithful to the first couple until they bore Cain. Attending to the duties of a new father, Adam neglected the fields, and when the crops wilted he began to caress the plump meat of the songbirds’ wings and bellies. The first bird migration began on the brink of man’s discovery of white meat. The flocks were not seen again until the years of Cortez. At that time the mestizos, who had learned from their colonizers, began to cage the Oaxacan songbirds. (79)

This version of the first man and woman transforms Adam and Eve into native Mexicans, and marks change by the chronology of the Conquest: The birds abandon the Garden, but though they fear being eaten, this indignity pales in comparison to the treatment of birds that come with “the years of Cortez,” when the songbirds are caged for their performance. Pre-history in this text, then, is anchored firmly in Mexico.

The fluidity of these transmigrations, beginning with the early exploration of the Americas as the monks wandered across them, and the terrified songbirds of paradise fleeing the Mexican Adam and Eve, offers a version of history that recognizes the arbitrariness of national lines as well as the absurdity of claiming swaths of the southwest for Anglo pioneers as their first settlement. *The People of Paper's* fictional account of the prehistory of the hemisphere gestures towards the very real history of the original inhabitants of North and South America, who are acknowledged by the official history of a town like El Monte, but denied the role of protagonist or first settler. Yet Plascencia's alternate history counters the history forwarded by the El Monte museum without explicitly condemning it or attempting to supplant it; the author abstains from building just another “official” account, with all its attendant elisions or inevitably biased perspectives. His playful historical account points to the created nature of both his account and of *all* accounts.

After the prologue, *The People of Paper's* narrative speeds forward to the 1950s, arriving in the small town of Las Tortugas, Mexico, where Federico de la Fe is abandoned by his wife Merced. Plagued by heartbreak and sadness, Federico de la Fe travels with his daughter Little Merced to Los Angeles, via Guadalajara and then Tijuana, finally settling in El Monte. As Mexican immigrants Federico de la Fe and Little Merced stand out, even in a town with El Monte's history of imported *braceros* and farm workers. Federico de la Fe's coworkers are

largely Chicanos, and they note that his Spanish is unbroken by English, unlike their own (69). However, in El Monte both father and daughter find a culture seemingly transplanted from their Mexican homeland:

El Monte was one thousand four hundred forty-eight miles north of Las Tortugas and an even fifteen hundred miles from the city of Guadalajara, and while there were no cockfights or wrestling arenas, the curanderos' botanica shops, the menudo stands, and the bell towers of the Catholic churches had also pushed north, settling among the flowers and sprinkler systems. (34)

The phrase “had also pushed north” is ambiguous, but the “also” seems to refer to Little Merced and Frederico de la Fe, implying that it was not only immigrants that had “pushed north” from Mexico. Yoking concrete objects—the *botánica* shops, the menudo stands, the Catholic church towers—to the migration of individuals, complete with these objects’ “settling” in town, reflects the ongoing cultural assimilation of El Monte to its Mexican and Mexican-American citizens. The elements of a Mexican town have pushed north in their entirety, appearing to take over all of the town aside from its flower beds, which of course represent the labor that drew Mexican migrants in the first place. This description indicates the impossibility of immigration occurring on a massive scale without it carrying with it a migration of culture as well. Furthermore, the nature of this carried culture cannot be unbraided from the specificity of the location and its geography. The quote marks the exact distance to Guadalajara and Las Tortugas, drawing in relief the fact that Boston, for example, is twice as far from Los Angeles as a city in the Mexican state of Jalisco. It is this relative proximity of these places that allows the transfer of cultural touchstones to be so complete.

Little Merced's version of El Monte history, in fact, speaks of the exodus rather than the migration of the pioneer settlers, scared off by the cultural assault from Mexico that has come with the flower pickers:

The original settlers of El Monte, people who had come from the east using the path of Santa Fe and the paved route of 66, gradually moved from El Monte to the foothills of Arcadia and Pasadena, towns that did not have the foot traffic of flower pickers or the smell of oregano and lard bubbling from the boiling pots of menudo stands. The only time the pioneers of El Monte returned was in December, when they bought flowers to decorate the motorized carts that floated down the avenues of their newly adopted towns.

(34)

Little Merced has already been educated in the official history of El Monte, which is obvious by her conflation of the town's past to its present, believing the original settlers arrived by highway. Yet she views the pioneers as inhabiting El Monte's past, as *her* El Monte is settled only by flower pickers; in this recasting of the "Spanish Romance" as the "Anglo Romance," Little Merced acknowledges the town's pioneer past but sees little evidence of it in the town's present. Her swift dismissal of Pasadena's annual Rose Bowl parade, defamiliarized here as flowers and carts used to decorate "newly adopted towns," highlights the slight but ostentatious presence of these pioneers. Similarly to the previous quoted passage, the flower pickers and their culture are treated as interchangeable, and the original settlers are equally impelled to relocate by the smell of menudo as the foot traffic of laborers. This version of El Monte leaves the Mexican and Chicano laborers as the permanent inhabitants, and ironically turns the "original settlers" into *migrants*, who live elsewhere and yet return annually based on the growing season. It is to these permanent inhabitants that we now turn.

“The Same to You”: Plascencia’s Literary *Con Safos*

The “real” El Monte is a city of 120,000 inhabitants some twelve miles east of downtown Los Angeles. With a 72% Mexican population, according to the 2000 census, it is an outpost of Mexican culture more than a hundred miles from the southern border of the United States, with a long-standing Chicano presence and a history of Mexican migrant flower picking. The majority of *The People of Paper* takes place in the fictional El Monte envisioned by the author, named Saturn and/or Salvador Plascencia in the text, which is a 1950s town populated by Saturn’s characters, Mexican immigrants and Chicanos laboring together in flower fields; yet the “real” El Monte of the present, where Saturn/Plascencia is a heartbroken and struggling writer, ultimately propels the novel. Plascencia reveals himself to be not only the author, but a character and a tyrant as well, weaving stories of heartache for his fictional characters and looking back to an earlier, more idyllic El Monte from the vantage of its less glamorous present.

The flower-picking gang of El Monte Flores that Federico de la Fe joins is not depicted as a group dedicated to promoting social justice and better labor conditions. The flower pickers, led by El Monte native Froggy, have formed the street gang, El Monte Flores, or EMF, to mark their pride of place and their shared occupation. In later years the gang descends into turf wars and drug sales; yet during Federico’s time they are united, first by flower picking, and then, in one of the novel’s several surreal turns, by the “war for volition and against the commodification of sadness” (53) they wage against the author. Plascencia’s mode when recounting the lives of EMF is largely nostalgic, evidenced by the novel’s chief setting in the 1950s, and Froggy’s wistful narrative looking back to EMF’s early days from the more dimly lit future in Chapter 3. There are no catalogs of labor injuries, of racial epithets being thrown at EMF in the streets; aside from Little Merced’s discomfort attending school as a young immigrant, there is almost no

contact between the gang and the world outside of their self-contained Mexican-American neighborhood of El Monte. The lack of specific descriptions of unjust labor conditions or incidents of racial injustice against the Mexicans and Chicanos in the text make it difficult to claim the work as a Chicano social protest novel.

Plascencia did not invent EMF. The real modern-day city of El Monte is still home to El Monte Flores or EMF, one of the oldest street gangs in the US, which did in fact begin in the 1950s as a group united by their work in El Monte's flower picking industry (Baeder). As of 2009 EMF had about 400 members. In a section of the novel that takes place in the present, Froggy notes the changes to the neighborhood that he sees when he is an old man: "El Monte was no longer a town of flowerbeds and strawberry fields. Stucco houses, paved alleys, and cement riverbanks now covered its soil. And instead of flowers, gasoline pumps and lampposts rose from El Monte, all marked by the EMF tags" (46). While the old EMF also tagged their barrio, Froggy laments a loss of precision in the application of the tags that he sees in present-day El Monte. Froggy laments that EMF had become "one of those pachuco gangs that slung speed and stripped cars, and even the old gang tag had lost some of its formality, now posted haphazardly and sloppily etched" (49). The "old gang tag" was deliberately placed, with attention paid to location and presentation. The new tags betray a lack of pride in the act of claiming territory, "haphazardly and sloppily" applied to mark ownership of a street for drug dealing. Froggy's preoccupation, not with the acts themselves, but with their loss of aesthetic precision, indicates the cultural importance of graffiti tags, and gestures toward a specific relationship between the tagger and his or her tag.

Unlike the ubiquitous "curanderos' botanica shops, the menudo stands, and the bell towers of Catholic churches" (34) of El Monte, graffiti is not a cultural inheritance from Mexico.

The first tags that EMF posts across its city, and the later ones “haphazardly etched,” function as urban territorial markers—something Frederico de la Fe or his rural Mexican compatriots did not need, something born from “a world that was built on cement and not mud” (19) as Little Merced says. Yet while the contemporary resurgence of graffiti is a widespread urban phenomenon, Froggy’s reverence for proper graffiti form hints at the idea of *con safos*, a concept unique to Chicano cultures of the Southwest, and practiced by the gangs of El Monte and greater Los Angeles. *Con safos* operates according to a set of regulations; Plascencia applies these rules to his own writing in the novel.

The term *con safos* defies English translation, but in usage it is “primarily associated with names” (Grider 133). The Los Angeles-based bilingual magazine *Con Safos* explains the term as “protective symbolism used by Chicano graffiti artists appearing usually by a person’s name or the name of his *barrio*, meaning the same to you; ditto, likewise” (Flores 65). Whatever criticism or defacement has been written over the tag then applies to the new tagger. In her essay “Con Safos: Mexican-Americans, Names and Graffiti,” Sylvia Ann Grider argues that “*con safos* is a surrogate for a physical bodyguard which can protect a written name” (134). The danger of placing one’s name in a public location is mitigated by the application of a *con safos*, which allows taggers to proclaim themselves without suffering the humiliation of possible public defacement.

Grider affirms that the phrase *con safos* is unique to Chicano communities and expressive of “Chicano attitudes and values,” chief among these the “penchant for naming” and the importance or sacredness of naming (133). Tagging of course is often about naming, and projecting that name to the public. Yet the addition of the written *con safos*, “C/S,” or equivalent protection so common in Chicano tagging implies a different, more intimate relationship

between the tagger and his or her tag: “The problem that such public presentation of names creates for the individual who writes them is the necessity of protecting these inscriptions from defacement and further insult because the graphic depiction of *the name is regarded as a tangible extension of the person himself* [emphasis mine]” (Grider 133). The insistence that the name be protected, and the power of a *con safos* to do so, suggest that in Chicano tagging culture, in defiance of Ferdinand de Saussure, the name *is* the person, and the signifier is tied to the signified in a meaningful way (see figure 3).

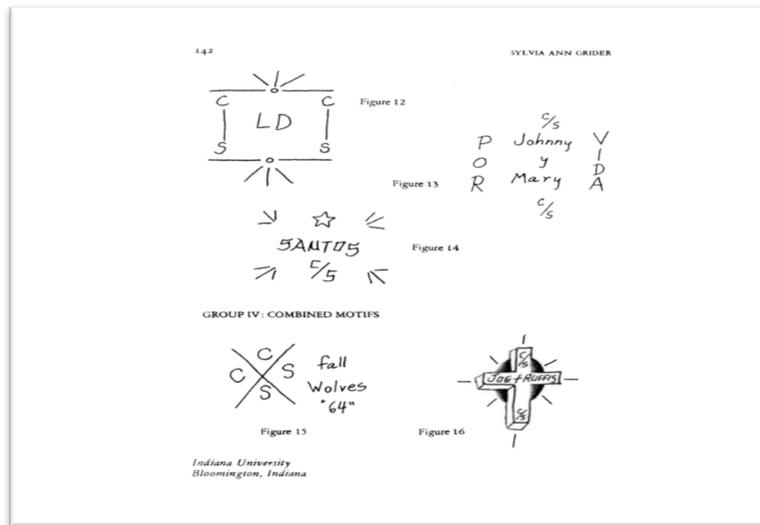


Figure 3. Examples of graffiti utilizing “con safos” (Grider 142).

Users of the *con safos* presume a community that will respect that connection between name and self. For a *con safos* to be effective it must be used where those who see it understand its implications: “the youth write their names for people who know and recognize them, not for hostile strangers or to deface public property as a sign of their contempt for society” (Grider 137). Graffiti serves several functions, as an artistic outlet, social statement, territorial marker, or self-aggrandizement. However, Grider insists that Chicano graffiti protected by a *con safos* is distinct from graffiti motivated by defacing public property as a sign of societal contempt: “it is

instead one aspect of a *communication code* which places extremely high value on personal names [emphasis added]" (139). The application of a *con safos* to a tag thus simultaneously describes the tagger/artist and indicates his or her audience.

Picking up on this community aspect of *con safos*, in his work on Chicano culture and urban spaces, Raúl Homero Villa connects the *con safos* tradition not just to individual identity preservation, but also to the preservation of a neighborhood or *place* identity. Describing "the ubiquitous emblem" "C/S" signed on to Chicano territorial graffiti throughout the city of Los Angeles, Villa writes: "Of uncertain origin and without an exact translation, 'C/S' is generally posted as a challenge or warning by the writer-artist to those who would disrespect the neighborhood by disfiguring the public imprint of place identity" (153). He adds that these tags are "weaving together town shreds of barrio social space" (153). For example, Villa reads the large number of "plaqueasos" (scripted declarations of territory) in the 1960s near the San Gabriel freeway (I-605) that split the Jim Town Hoyo barrio as uniting symbolically what was once a geographically united neighborhood (154).

In contemporary El Monte graffiti the "C/S" has become stylized, represented by small exes on either side of the tag, which Plascencia mimics in his own graffiti in the text (such as Figure 4). We can thus read EMF's tags in *The People of Paper* as announcing the name, and marking off the place, of the El Monte barrio. The main battle of the novel is over the power to create and name; the equation of name to identity in El Monte imply that the act of naming, not naming, or misnaming are actually acts of creation in and of themselves. The fictional denizens of El Monte objected to being written about, especially considering the heartbreaking storylines their heartbroken storyteller forced them to act out for his own catharsis. These characters operate under the assumption of semiotic ipseity indicated by *con safos*, that defiling a name is

identical to defiling the reputation of the person who the name belongs to, thus indicating that name and extension—who the name refers to—are the same. We see this in the habitual substitution of ink for blood in the text. For instance, when Smiley goes to find Saturn, his orders are to slit Saturn's throat, "dragging the blade across the skin and stubble of his neck, letting his ink drip. Because if that is what he wants, to write, let him write his own blood letter on the cloth and foam of his mattress" (105). The characters, aware that they are fictional, recognize that their own blood is ink; and now that Saturn has entered the story as a character, his blood too becomes textualized.

When read in relation to the rules of *con safos*, especially the intimacy between name and named, Saturn's relationship to his novel becomes far more nuanced. After his characters successfully revolt against their author the first time, Salvador Plascencia—who they call Saturn—returns to present-day El Monte, which is in ruins:

El Monte was ravaged, the telephone poles splintered in half, the roads eroded, the crows dispersed, cart pushers on strike, and the tags of EMF etched everywhere—on trees, on windows, and on bakery walls. Only the church of Guadalupe was spared. And every time Saturn came across one of the tags he crossed it out (see figure 4). (111)

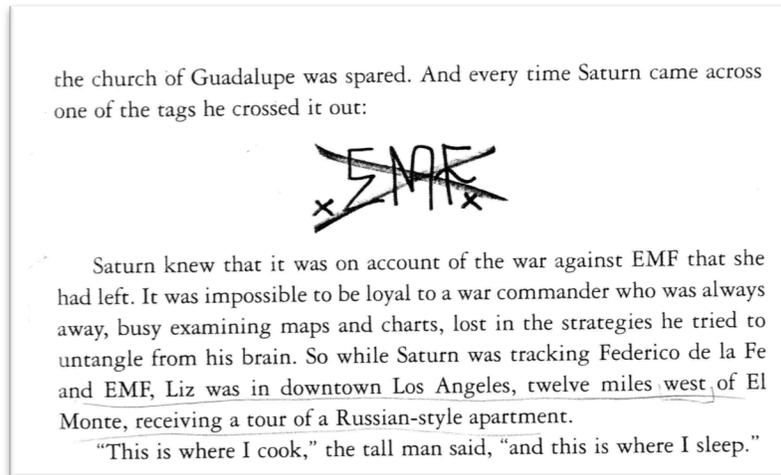


Figure 4. Saturn crosses out EMF tags (Plascencia 112). Note the exes next to the name, evocative of the graffiti imagery Grider describes.

Saturn's act of crossing out is a declaration of war on EMF. It is an insult not just to the tag itself, but to the gang represented by the tag, and a challenge to their claim of ownership of the neighborhood. Grider writes that in Chicano gang culture one way to precipitate a fight with an opposing gang is to write the barrio name *without* the *con safos* bodyguard, wait until the other gang defaces the name, and then use that act as an excuse for retaliation (136). The idea of defiling a tag that *has* a *con safos* is not even mentioned, because it is so profane. Thus, when Saturn exes out every "EMF" tag he sees, even those with the exes protecting them, he is attempting to erase the actual EMF from El Monte.

The main battle of *The People of Paper* has in effect been over the power to create and name. The fictional denizens of El Monte objected to being written about, especially considering the heartbreaking storylines their heartbroken storyteller was forcing them to act out for his own catharsis. These characters operate under the assumption of semiotic ipseity indicated by *con safos*, believing that name and extension are of the same entity. We see this in the habitual substitution of ink for blood in the text. For instance, when Smiley goes to find Saturn, his orders are to slit Saturn's throat, "dragging the blade across the skin and stubble of his neck, letting his

ink drip. Because if that is what he wants, to write, let him write his own blood letter on the cloth and foam of his mattress” (105). The characters, aware that they are fictional, recognize that their own blood is ink; and now that Saturn has entered the story as a character, his blood too becomes textualized.

Though not textualized enough, apparently, as Saturn spares his own ink/blood and appropriates that of his characters instead. This commodification of the stories of others seems innocuous or merely playful in the case of Frederico de la Fe and the early EMF, who do not exist outside Saturn’s story. Yet when Salvador Plascencia’s “real” girlfriend Liz objects to being consistently depicted as a heartless “vendida,” we see Saturn’s abuse of the power to name and create:

So I have moved house and replaced you with a white boy, but that is nothing compared to what you have done, to what you have sold. In a neat pile of paper you have offered up not only your hometown, EMF, and Frederico de la Fe, but also me, your grandparents and generations beyond them, your patria, your friends, even Cami. You have sold everything, save yourself. So you remain but have sold everything else. [...] I have only a request: *You need to remember that I exist beyond the pages of this book.* [...] Sal, if you still love me, please leave me out of this story. Start this book over, without me [emphasis added]. (138)

Liz here distinguishes between people of blood and people of paper, not to forgive one form of commodification and condemn the other, but to condemn them both in varying levels. “Not only” does Salvador Plascencia offer readers a fictionalized version of his own hometown with a fictionalized history of its gang and its citizens, “but also” he puts on the page a fictionalized version of real people, alive and dead. Liz calls it all selling out, but she reserves her strongest

censure for his slander, in ink, against people of blood. In her own version of *con safos*, Liz reaffirms the connection between the written name and its real-world extension, and asks Salvador Plascencia to honor that intimate link.

Saturn's response to the larger question of commodification that Liz addresses will take up the remainder of the novel, and a considerable portion of its metafictional innovation. His response to her personal request, however, is honored immediately, albeit bitterly.⁷ The book starts over on page 141, with a new title page, and excising the previous dedication page, "And to Liz, who taught me that we are all of paper" (138). Liz's name is never uttered again. From now on she is referred to in various ways, such as "her, whose name was once cited on the dedication page" (244). Saturn/Salvador Plascencia still speaks of her often, but he obeys her literary "C/S" by refraining from naming her or defacing her reputation. Liz's new boyfriend suffers a less noble fate, as his name is consistently scratched out throughout the text. To mark the boyfriend in ink but not name him serves as a superlative insult in a world where names have such power.

Based on the logic of *con safos*—with its dictum, "the same now goes for you," if you defile the protected tag—when Saturn crosses out every EMF tag he sees he is also negating himself. Present-day El Monte figures very little in the novel; it is largely overshadowed by the 1950s El Monte of the author's imagination. In both El Montes Saturn is Salvador Plascencia: in one he is the omniscient narrator, unseen by his characters; in the other he is a character who can walk the streets, stay at his mom's house, and go around defacing street tags (111). Therefore, for Saturn as *author* to present the image of a crossed-out EMF tag in the text—using the same image of an EMF tag he has Little Merced introduce earlier in the novel (on page 33)—means he

⁷ Immediately following Liz's request is a page that simply reads, "*cunt*," before the new title page and dedication—this time without her name—appear.

is crossing out his own ink, implying an erasure of himself as author as well as character.

Salvador Plascencia's act of vandalism appears to symbolically erase both versions of Saturn.

But why?

The answer lies in the later stylistic shifts of the novel. EMF's win in the "war on omniscient narration" (218) changes the trajectory of the novel. In Part Two of *The People of Paper*, Saturn, now without characters or a town to narrate, introduces *himself* as a character in the novel, as a writer named Salvador Plascencia. The author, clearly suffering from writer's block, begins cobbling together plotlines taken from his own biography. In this central, disjointed section, he recounts various series of heartbreaks, and his own attempts to find closure. But Liz's final dismissal of him drives him back to El Monte, renewing the war with EMF, seeking to take his wrath out on the "imaginary flower people" who he can exert power over as an authorial tyrant. The first offensive of EMF involved protection of thoughts, refusing to give Saturn any good character development or plotlines that he could commodify. The second offensive against Saturn entails the opposite: EMF members, and other characters from the novel, crowd the page with their thoughts, attempting to push Saturn—who normally occupies at least a third of every page with his omniscient narration—to the margins and eventually off the page entirely. This offensive is rendered graphically by the addition of new vertical columns on each page, and even of stacked columns and horizontally placed ones, to indicate the loss of space (see figure 5).

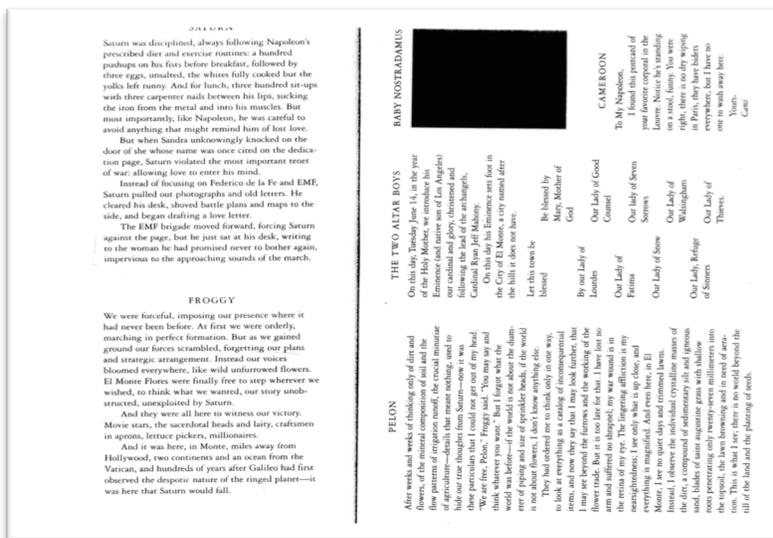


Figure 5. *The People of Paper* gets crowded (Plascencia 212-213).

In Saturn’s battle against the ever-increasing columns he finally acknowledges that the war is indeed one of commodification, not just commodification of sadness, as Frederico de la Fe and EMF assert, but also of a place. Saturn recognizes his urge to colonize, although as an author the form this colonization takes is surreal: the places a writer colonizes are made of ink, and the people of those places are made of paper. Saturn addresses his surrender to his ex-girlfriend Liz:

A whole war for you. To prove that I too am a colonizer, I too am powerful in those ways. I can stand on my tippy toes, I can curl my tongue and talk that perfect untainted English, I can wipe out whole cultures, whole towns of imaginary flower people. I can do that too.

But Saturn was not Cortez; he did not want to trek across the land and stab flags into the dirt and nail royal crests into walls and oaks. Saturn would end the war, tumble all the columns, even if it meant his own destruction. (238)

The book’s insistence on its materiality and its innovative usage of space on the page serve as a cue for interpreting Saturn’s confession as an admission of the motivations of literary creation.

The weight here is given to his own expression, his ability to “curl [his] tongue and talk that

perfect untainted English,” as it is the *telling* that can wipe out whole cultures. The passage highlights the expressive, and minimizes the active, as Saturn turns away from a series of concrete verbs: he does not want to “trek” or “stab” or “nail.” The analogy, first to British imperialists, then to Cortez, functions more abstractly, drawing into relief both the egotistical desire to claim something as one’s own, and the economic impetus to find and cultivate something worth selling. The analogy of the conqueror or colonizer is particularly apt here, as these terms are dependent upon a socio-economic relationship to a concrete land. Saturn confesses his bind, desiring to dramatize El Monte’s “flower people,” but aware that doing so is an exploitative and proprietary act. For him to cease telling the story of El Monte means the end of his story, and thus of his identity as narrator, yet he would rather surrender his authorship than colonize his beloved city. And so he abdicates in a way consistent with the town’s cultural norms: having first declared war by crossing out EMF’s tags, he now concedes that to do so means negating himself as author. After his confession, Saturn “tumbles” all the novel’s columns, and lets his two main protagonists walk off the page (245).

The insertion of graffiti is only one of a number of ways that *The People of Paper* draws attention to the text *as* text: the novel boasts different spatial formations depending on the chapter, the book “restarts,” with front matter, midway through, revealing itself as a work in progress, and there are adulterated (blacked out, crossed out, struck through) sentences and paragraphs throughout. *The People of Paper*’s unorthodox physical layout also questions Plascencia’s role as creator, but its logic is distinct from the rules that obtain in *con safos*. Plascencia manages to create and then decolonize that creation by exposing the materiality of the text itself. These defamiliarizing tactics highlight the created nature of the work and flout the rules of form of both its genre and medium. This mode, which revels in the created and ignores

or even boasts of ones rejection of classic form, reflects a *rasquachismo* that is particular to the neighborhood geography of El Monte. In turn, the barrio's *rasquachismo* is a transnational inheritance, the result of a history of immigration and transmigration, and the economic and cultural exchange that inevitably accompanies them, between El Monte and Mexico.

“Hacer Rendir Las Cosas”: The El Monte Aesthetic

In “Rasquachismo: A Chicano Sensibility,” Tomas Ybarra-Frausto offers us a description and definition of *rasquachismo*:

Propriety and keeping up appearances—el qué dirán—are the codes shattered by the attitude of *rasquachismo*. This outsider viewpoint stems from a funky, irreverent stance that debunks convention and spoofs protocol. To be *rasquache* is to posit a bawdy, spunky consciousness, to seek to subvert and turn ruling paradigms upside down. It is a witty, irreverent, and impertinent posture that recodes and moves outside established boundaries. (155)

Examples of the *rasquache* sensibility range from high art to lawn art, which may combine religious icons with plastic animal statues. It rejects the notion of good taste as being dictated by restraint, and instead offers a paradigm where so-called poor taste—the chintzy, the excessive, the cluttered, the garish—is valued for its very rebelliousness against the norm.

Rasquachismo pervades the historically Chicano sections of contemporary El Monte. A casual walk through El Monte's Mexican-American neighborhoods provides myriad examples, at the level of architecture and landscape: beautifully kept gardens share space with planks of wood, brightly colored homemade sheds, desk chairs, engine parts, trophies; lawns and homes are decorated in a variety of figurines, statues, or *objets d'art*; rose bushes are accented by aesthetically positioned clothes hangers; Summertime finds a “feliz navidad” message written in

neon lights, adjacent to a backyard shaded by draped sheets, full of ready building materials and children's toys. The inclination to an excess of materials, the "filling [of] all available space with bold display," the "playful and elemental" juxtaposition of the useful and artistic, the natural and man-made, the high brow and low brow, and the re-appropriation of objects for new purposes, all evoke a neighborhood *rasquache* sensibility (Ybarra-Frausto 155-7).

The aesthetic of *Rasquachismo* emerges from a working class that is "making do" with what is at hand. Practitioners trump the aesthetic principle of decorum with the more pressing need to collect and salvage materials, for building, decorating, or artistic projects that are still in process. Faced with limited resources and wary to throw out anything that may be of use, *rasquachismo's* operating principle is to mend, fix, alter, and reuse any and all materials. Things are not thrown away: rather they are reused, recycled, and repurposed for different contexts (157): "Resilience and resourcefulness spring from making do with what is at hand (*hacer rendir las cosas*). The use of available resources engenders hybridization, juxtaposition, and integration" (156). As Amalia Mesa-Bains asserts, following Ybarra-Frausto, "the capacity to hold life together with bits of string, old coffee cans, and broken mirrors in a dazzling gesture of aesthetic bravado is at the heart of *rasquachismo*" (Mesa-Bains 158).

Rasquachismo, then, is a sensibility built upon the re-appropriation or "recoding" of objects, taking what one has and changing it into what one needs. As a result of this emphasis on making do and remaking, the *rasquache* sensibility breeds an excess of materials, its "inclination piles pattern on pattern, filling all available space with bold display" (157). Its axiom that "too much is not enough" could be called baroque, except that its tone is "playful and elemental" (155), rather than declaratory or ostentatious. Unlike baroque art, "there is sincerity in its artifice" (155). *Rasquache* art also has a makeshift feel that is alien to the baroque: "Pulling

through and making do are no guarantee of security, so things that are *rasquache* possess an ephemeral quality, a sense of temporality and impermanence” (156). Ybarra-Frausto argues that “A work of art may be *rasquache* in multiple and complex ways. It can be sincere and pay homage to the sensibility by restating its premises. [...] Another strategy is for the artwork to evoke a *rasquache* sensibility through self-conscious manipulation of materials or iconography” (161).

This *rasquache* aesthetic is at work in *The People of Paper* at several levels. In terms of physical layout, the *text*'s “filling of all available space with bold display,” its “playful and elemental” juxtaposition of various graphics, narrators, and formatting, imitates barrio style. The novel's form functions as the literary equivalent of an El Monte front yard. The novel's format is visually arresting, even garish, and its neo-baroque collection of unlike items is undoubtedly *rasquache*. Many of the characters might be called *rasquache*, as they make do with what they can find or afford and reconstitute objects according to their own unique purposes. Antonio, the first origami surgeon, is put out of work by bioengineers; he converts his paper organs into paper animals and sells them on the street (Plascencia 13). Little Merced attempts to pass off a typewriter case (purchased at the Papal Pawn & Loan) as a lunch pail so that she can sit with the proper white kids at her school during lunch (40). Maricela uses fire and screwdrivers to create her own tattoos (59). EMF's chief weapon against Saturn are the shells of defunct mechanical tortoises, which they now use as mental shields (57). Once Frederico de la Fe declares war on Saturn, he develops a plan dependant on importation of Mexican culture to function: the army drives to Tijuana, “the city of invention and discovery” (56), to buy goats and roosters; Frederico personally carries with him to East Los Angeles the commonplaces of the farm he has come from, and yet these are now re-appropriated to different effect.

The most *rasquache* character, however, is the author. If, as Ybarra-Frausto puts it, “the use of available resources engenders hybridization, juxtaposition, and integration” in *rasquachismo*, we can see how *The People of Paper* functions as a *rasquache* text. We’ve seen Plascencia’s playful appropriation of Judeo-Christian elements, with the retelling of the Garden of Eden and the apocryphal story of Vatican decrees and exiled monks. Los Angeles Archbishop Roger Mahoney, as a lovelorn youth, and devotional statues of Mary Magdalene as a “lesser saint,” depicted kneeling in the act of fellatio, both make cameos. However, the text also gleefully strays outside Christian tradition, juxtaposing various myths and dogmas. Plascencia is known to his characters as Saturn, who see him simultaneously as a planet in orbit and as a kind of omniscient god. The Roman god Saturn evokes a series of connotations, all of which are taken up by the novel. As a god of agriculture, Saturn is an apt deity for the flower picking community of El Monte. As a Titan who famously ate his children, Saturn and Plascencia share a tyrannical view of fatherhood; both eventually suffer from overthrow at the hands of their own progeny (Hornblower and Spawforth 1360). The novel also references the planet Saturn’s connection to lead, when all of El Monte falls ill with “saturnism,” or lead poisoning, after lining their homes with lead to protect themselves from the author, who cannot penetrate the metal.

Despite their lead poisoning, El Monte succeeds in shutting Saturn out. When the author’s available resources become limited, as Plascencia’s set of raw materials—the sadness and subsequent coping mechanisms of his characters—is taken away from him, he finds he must “make do” with what he can find left behind: namely, his own personal anecdotes. After EMF wins the first battle against Saturn, defending their personal lives from his omniscient narration, Saturn is forced to invent new plotlines for his novel. The desperate grasping of the author to continue the story is palpable in Part Two, as he is starkly limited by the only materials at hand:

he begins to narrate his own heartbreak, he leans on vignettes about his grandparents and his exes, and he even tries to throw some research on Napoleon into the story to stitch it together.

Yet although Plascencia renders visible the skeleton upon which the story is constructed, demonstrating through transparency one form of a case of writer's block, the novel's tone remains playful. Plascencia writes himself in to the story as an unwitting author, caught sleeping face down and shirtless, at an utter loss to recognize one of the characters he's created, who has scraped away a hole of sky to meet him (105). Saturn hits his head on a lead ceiling fan as he tries to ascend to an omniscient position, and Little Merced notices the plaster falling as a result (84). If one of the strategies of *rasquachismo* is to "pay homage to the sensibility by restating its premises," Plascencia utilizes metafiction here for a *rasquache* feat: inserting himself and stating his own makeshift appropriation of new construction materials.

Ybarra-Frausto tells us that "another strategy is for the artwork to evoke a *rasquache* sensibility through self-conscious manipulation of materials or iconography," and *The People of Paper's* transparency of construction extends from its narrative form to its defamiliarization of its own physical presence. It reminds the reader constantly that it is made of materials. Formally, the departures from the standard form of the printed page—the blacked out circles and squares, the division into columns—along with the restarting of the book, with front matter, midway through the text, recall for the reader that the text is being held and read. In fact, the characters often allude to the text's physicality: Baby Nostradamus, the clairvoyant toddler, "knew the different grips of the readers, how some cradled the open covers" and how others "were intimate with paper" (166); Little Merced "began to feel her own resentment, not only toward Saturn, but also against those who stared down at the page, against those who followed sentences into her father's room and into his bed, watching as he pressed matches to his skin, perhaps even

laughing and saying to themselves, ‘Get over it, old man—it is only a woman’” (186). Ralph and Elisa Landin, who fund the book, treat the text’s physical and emotional import as equal: “The Foundation and its endowment are not liable for any loss or damage, whether it be incidental, direct, punitive, exemplary, or special, resulting from *The People of Paper*, the war on omniscient narrative (a.k.a. the war against the commodification of sadness), or any involvement with this book. This is inclusive of all paper cuts” (218).

These gestures—the self-awareness of the author and the characters, the experimental layout of the text—are certainly metafictional, yet they are not merely working to make the reader self-aware. *The People of Paper*’s layout innovations tie it to a lineage of radical metafiction that includes contemporaries such as Mark Z. Danielewski and predecessors like John Barth, and Plascencia’s insertion of himself as a character is a metafictional move with a long literary pedigree extending back to Miguel de Cervantes. Read as a generic attempt to defamiliarize the reader, to play with form, or to comment on writing as writing, *The People of Paper* might even be considered derivative. Yet in *The People of Paper* these tropes function as an author’s attempt to present, without usurping, his adoptive hometown by imbuing his telling with the aesthetics of the town it describes.

Reading the text’s construction as *rasquache*, imitating at the formal level the everyday aesthetic practices of El Monte, reveals the novel to be mimetic of its particular locality. This homegrown cultural form allows *The People of Paper* to escape its own bind, as Plascencia—the author and the character—navigates his role as an ethnic writer attempting to evoke the particularities of place, identity, and culture without merely commodifying them.

Rasquachismo is the novel’s formal analog to Plascencia’s adoption of the principle of *con safos*, to finally erase his own name, and by extension himself as author, allowing his characters to

walk off the page. Ybarra-Frausto claims that *rasquachismo* is inherently Chicano, “rooted in Chicano structures of thinking, feeling, and aesthetic choice. It is one form of a Chicano vernacular, the verbal-visual codes we use to speak to each other among ourselves” (155). Plascencia’s *rasquache* construction, then, tells a Chicano El Monte story in an El Monte way, using the “verbal-visual codes” of the local Chicano community to reflect the spirit of the neighborhood. This aesthetic choice simultaneously implies that other narrations, with their undisputed omniscient narrator and stock form, are written from the vantage point of the outsider, or colonizer. Through these innovative narrative strategies, Plascencia manages to offer us a critique of authorial appropriation without replicating it. Plascencia writes a text that is *of* a place rather than *about* a place by inserting himself and refusing to edit away the signs of his own construction.

Transnational Migrations

At the same time, the text also points to broader transnationalist currents, which a neighborhood geography allows us to uncover. In her piece on *domesticana*, a Chicana variation of *rasquache* artistic production, Amalia Mesa-Bains asserts that *rasquachismo* is an inheritance from the Chicano community’s ties, both present and past, to Mexico: “Operating as an internally colonized community within the borders of the United States, Chicanos forged a new cultural vocabulary composed of *sustaining elements of Mexican tradition* [emphasis added]” (159). Chicanos draw upon various elements of Mexican culture to “survive,” as Mesa-Bains puts it, “lived encounters in a hostile environment.” Not only the content of this Mexican tradition—corridos, Mexican cinema, *calendario* graphics—but their *form* of integration are crucial to *rasquachismo*, as these are brought together through “fragmentation and recombination” with contemporary iconography that is vaguely understood as “American,” but

might best be understood as transnational or global, such as “images of Walt Disney,” “mass media advertising,” and “Pop Art” (159). Expanding on Mesa-Bains’ description, then, *rasquachismo* reflects the local and the transnational operating at once, as the Chicano community’s artistic production insists on a very particular relationship to Mexico while also reenvisioning that connection from the perspective of an internal “colony” of the US.

Even philologically, the word *rasquache* (or *rascuache*) expresses a relationship between the international and the national, or more specifically, the colonized and the indigenous. The “qua” letter group immediately marks the word off as a loan word into Spanish. Its limited use in Honduras, El Salvador, and Mexico, to mean “[a person or thing] of low quality or value” (according to the *Diccionario de la Lengua Española* of the Real Academia Española),⁸ implies that it derives from an indigenous language native to those regions, though tracing the word’s etymology is tricky, due to the reciprocal influence of Nahuatl and Mayan (Campos 178). However, in an early study, the Spanish philologist Víctor M. Suárez affirms that the “ch” ending of the word *rascuache* indicates that it is Mayan in origin, and as one commentator asserts, “[la palabra] es, sin duda, mexicanismo”⁹ (Campos 177). *Rascuache*’s more contemporary variant, *rasquachismo*, appears to be unique to Caló or Chicano Spanish (as is the orthographic choice of a “q” instead of a “c”). The shift in the word’s connotation, from negative to positive, though it continues to denote “[a person or thing] of low quality or value,” is also specifically Chicano. *Rascuache/rasquache* originates from the encounter of colonial Spanish and indigenous Mayan and Nahuatl languages, and the geographic limits of its usage and the peculiarities of its etymology demonstrate that it could only come out of this region; the term

⁸ According to the *Diccionario de la Lengua Española* of the Real Academia Española. The original definition reads: “adj. coloq. *El Salv., Hond. y Méx.* Dicho de una persona o de una cosa: De mala calidad o de poco valor” (*Diccionario de la Lengua Española*, 22nd edition).

⁹ “[The word] is, without a doubt, a Mexicanism.”

thus offers another instance of how we can see transnational movements at work by analyzing the conditions at the most local level, even at the unit of the single word.

As we have seen, El Monte is indelibly marked by its proximity to Mexico and its history of Mexican immigration. This extends to the names, as Burton tells, and to the *botánicas* and ubiquitous menudo stands, as well as the *rasquachismo* of present-day El Monte and the *rasquache* construction of Plascencia's narrative version of the city. Yet the novel also enacts a series of reverse colonizations that further "Mexicanize" the town. When Frederico de la Fe declares war on Saturn, he develops a battle plan dependent on importation of Mexican culture to function. The EMF army drives to Tijuana to secure goats, roosters, and mechanical tortoises. Upon returning to El Monte, the flower pickers begin a goat dairy, for neighborhood sustenance, and a cockfighting ring, run for profit, to finance the war on Saturn they are preparing to wage. The other major import from Tijuana is lead shells, sold by a mechanic who first created, and has now set out to destroy, a crop of mechanical tortoises. He begins dismantling them when he happens upon one eating a real sea turtle (57), introducing yet another relationship in the novel between creator and created, and the thin line between real and surreal. The mechanic tells Frederico de la Fe that sitting inside the empty leaden mechanical tortoise shells makes him feel a deep calm and sense of privacy. Frederico de la Fe sits in one and discovers that, although Saturn has complete access to the thoughts of his characters, and complete control over their stories, he cannot see or hear through lead. EMF collects as many mechanical tortoise shells as they can fit in their trucks, along with their new goats and roosters, and cross the southern border back to El Monte.

To further cordon off the town of El Monte as an outpost of Mexican culture in the United States, when they return EMF rings the town with fire, first to cover the town with smoke

that Saturn could not see through clearly, and then “to mark the town—a circle of ash and melted tires” (56), to let crop dusters know that the town was at war. Once the fighting ring and dairy are established within the town, which already boasts those menudo stands, church towers, *botánicas*, and its spoken Spanish (broken and not), El Monte becomes a full-fledged colony of Mexico. This extends even to having its own citizens of the state: to enter the war means being “jumped in,” or initiated into, El Monte Flores. The initiation is a “brinca”: “six men against one for a minute” (36). Upon arriving to the United States, Frederico de la Fe first attempted to find work in Los Angeles as a worker in a dress factory, but Little Merced tells us he is turned away, as “they wanted people who carried laminated cards with the stamp of a bald eagle” (33). In a town like El Monte however, Frederico de la Fe earns citizenship of a different kind, as his position as a worker and his background as a Mexican immigrant become part of the qualifications for admission rather than refusal of entry. As with the ironic depiction of the original settlers as migrants, Plascencia’s colony of El Monte flips the script on who is a permanent resident in the town and who isn’t. El Monte’s notion of citizenship highlights the long-standing and ongoing Mexican immigration to and residency in the US, despite the absence of official papers.

Plascencia extends the trope of Mexican colonization in the US through his depictions of the US/Mexico border. This border has already been undermined in the prologue, as the contrite monks cross from southern to northern hemispheres of the Americas multiple times, in an era before territorial markers existed. The arbitrariness of the border is then represented several times in the 1950s present of the novel, as multiple characters cross both into and out of Tijuana to California. When the first crossers of the text, Frederico de la Fe and Little Merced, encounter the border, it is “a white chalk line that ran from the Pacific shore to the Rio Grande [...] When

we felt we were alone we stepped over the chalk line and walked toward a world built on cement” (31). This first time the border is a mere white line in the dirt, surrounded by chaparral, subject to erosion and being rendered obsolete by the elements. A short time later, the next character to cross it is Julieta, who comes from a mountain town two miles north of Las Tortugas. She finds that “what was once a border marked only with a line of chalk had been replaced with watchtowers and steel fences,” lined with oppressive electric lights that force nearby residents to bury their heads “into their black pillowcases” (48-9). The crossing, however, poses no problem for Julieta: she is fleeing her hometown of El Derramadero which, as its name indicates, is plagued by things turning to rubbish. “It was not clear whether Julieta had dragged the disease of El Derramadero, or if it was just a coincidence that she found a gap in the three-hundred-mile-long fence where the steel had corroded, allowing her to pass into the other side” (49). This playful solution to a border control so intense those living by the line bury their heads in “black pillowcases” to sleep under the brightness of the spotlights underlines the fact that, whether it is a chalk line or a three hundred mile long fence, migration will continue undeterred from Mexico, as well as transmigration between the two countries. The characters, both Chicanos and Mexican immigrants, continue to travel between Tijuana and Los Angeles with ease.

In *The People of Paper*, both immigrants and their country of origin’s cultural touchstones migrate and transmigrate across a seemingly permeable border, disputing the now antiquated notion of immigration as a linear process of assimilation. The war against omniscient narration and the colonization it implies would have been impossible to win without the constant importation of goods and cultural practices from Mexico. The text’s aesthetic depends on principles of *rasquachismo* and Chicano graffiti art that are themselves the product of a

neighborhood marked by migrant labor and a blend of generational Mexican-Americans and newly immigrating Mexicans and Central Americans. Chief to this new form of immigration is the ability to return to the land of origin, as globalization offers up a smaller world where family and friends left behind are only a long distance phone call or a plane ride away. Mexican immigration is of course a distinct case, as the shared border between the two nations has always allowed for more cross-pollination than migration from non-neighboring states. Therefore, while *The People of Paper's* construction cannot be understood without reference to its locale, the text is also inscribed in a broader transnational social field.

In an interview, Plascencia says of his El Monte that, “like in all immigrant communities, everybody has some of the old country in their backyards” (Benavidez 26). The “backyard” for *The People of Paper* is the barrio it narrates, one marked by irreverence, resourcefulness, and the refusal to throw anything out that might still be usable, one whose “verbal-visual codes” and relationship to names and places is distinct from any other neighborhood. *The People of Paper* does not simply find inspiration in El Monte’s particular mélange of Mexico and the US, its peculiar gang history, and its Chicano modes of naming: it *depends* on these local traits for its very form and aesthetic. However, Plascencia’s quote also reminds us of the cultural persistence of that old country. The novel describes the unique relationship El Monte’s barrio has to transnational flows, as an outpost of Mexican culture that has also inherited the socio-cultural norms of its long-standing Chicano inhabitants. Starting from the backyard, so to speak, we can see larger hemispheric movements, without losing sight of the particular local conditions that make an experimental work like *The People of Paper* legible.

The People of Paper's transnational attachments are somewhat subtle. The work of Junot Díaz, however, brings questions of transmigration and binational social fields to the fore. While

the focus in Díaz's *This is How You Lose Her* is still the neighborhood, the particularities of the Dominican diaspora compel a different set of narrative strategies, rooted in distinct cultural pressures: if the anxiety of Plascencia's alter ego Salvador Plascencia might be called a fear of being too Mexican—and thus subject to critics and publishers expecting a specific kind of “authentic” ethnic performance from his writing, Díaz's writing revolves around his alter ego Yunior's fear of not being Dominican enough. Like Plascencia, Díaz works from his backyard, but his “old country” of the Dominican Republic presents a new, fascinating cultural paradigm for transmigrants, which informs Díaz's Jersey aesthetic.

CHAPTER 2

“No Promises Can Survive That Sea”: Diasporic Dominican Identity in Junot

Díaz’s *This Is How You Lose Her*

Junot Díaz’s work has always straddled two nations: the Dominican Republic and the United States. From his debut short story collection *Drown* (1996) to his newest *This Is How You Lose Her* (2012), the author moves freely between and among both countries, with his frequent use of untranslated idiomatic Spanish, storylines following families and relationships simultaneously on “the Island” and in the US, and descriptions of the history, culture, and people of the nation where he was born. As an author he simultaneously claims Parlin, New Jersey and Santo Domingo as his home, Dominican Spanish slang and English nerd vernaculars as his native tongue, and Dominican immigrant and Dominican-American as his identities. Throughout his writing career Díaz has also sustained the character “Yunior,” who shares not only a nickname with the author, but also many details of the author’s autobiography.

Díaz’s two career-long trajectories—to depict the Island and the US interchangeably, and to employ a style that both encourages and problematizes the equation of Yunior to Junot—are actually two aspects of one process. The metafictional elision of author with character is one of several stylistic expressions of Díaz’s diasporic Dominican identity. This identity emerges from the social and cultural norms of the transnational neighborhoods that Díaz writes about. *This Is How You Lose Her*, Díaz’s third book and second collection of stories, describes the myriad ways that transmigrancy shapes Dominican immigrant communities, particularly in metropolitan New York and northeastern New Jersey. The transnational strategies of these Latino enclaves, which entail the persistent movement of people, money, and families between the island and the US, create fundamental cultural shifts in the community. These shifts include non-traditional

gender roles, expanded social kinship networks, a heightened awareness of geographic place, increased value for the written, and the perceived intangibility of the unwritten, or indescribable, often symbolized by “the Island” itself. *This Is How You Lose Her* delineates all of these shifts, and also in a sense performs them, as Díaz demonstrates a diasporic Dominican authorial identity on the page. The uncertainties of place, language, nationhood, and gender attendant on being/becoming a diasporic subject are enacted by an author that obsessively demarcates place, code-switches, reveals his unease with claiming either the US or the Island as a homeland, and struggles to overcome Dominican norms of masculinity.

Although it is a collection of short stories, the thematic unity of *This Is How You Lose Her* allows us to interpret it as a whole. The collection largely follows Yunior as he recounts his various girlfriends and how he wronged them, concluding with a story in which Yunior is finally emotionally and psychologically outdone by his own manic infidelity. Indeed, Díaz claims this was his intent: “with this book I also wanted a hybrid pleasure. I wanted, to be precise, a story collection with a novelistic arc. I wanted to give the reader the short story’s standard pleasures. [...] and I wanted to give readers the novel’s standard pleasure: long connection to characters and their world. Like a good immigrant I guess I wanted the best of both worlds” (Barrios). Yunior’s consistent narration—he is the voice for eight of the nine stories—gives the collection a cohesive storyline, and although the work is non-linear and episodic, Yunior does undergo change chronologically; as Díaz remarks of the collection’s opening line, “I’m not a bad guy”: Yunior is incapable of saying such a line by the close of *This Is How You Lose Her*.¹⁰

The collection’s combination of novelistic and short story conventions is one of its many “hybrid pleasures”: another is the deliberate blending of autobiography and fiction. Tying Yunior

¹⁰ “From the first line—‘Oh, I’m not a bad guy’—I knew I was going to smash him by the end. [...] By the end, if I forced him to say that line, he would never be able to. That’s part of the project” (Scarano).

to the places he is associated with, as Díaz does in his oeuvre, allows us to confidently argue that the Yuniór of this collection, who was born in Santo Domingo, raised in New Jersey, attended college in New Brunswick, lived in New York City, and teaches at MIT, is the same Yuniór of *Drown* and *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, and the alter ego, of course, to Junot Díaz, who shares all these biographical details. Here again Díaz claims that is his intention: “My idea, ever since *Drown*, was to write six or seven books about him [Yuniór] that would form one big novel. You connect *This Is How You Lose Her* to *Drown* to *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, and you can read this thing” (Scarano). Yet this collection amplifies the slippage between character and author, as all but one story are narrated either *from* Yuniór’s perspective (using the first person “I”), or addressed *to* Yuniór (using the second person singular “you”). The corpus-spanning sustainment of Yuniór illustrates Díaz’s chief narrative strategy: the deployment of autobiography as a genre that can trouble reader expectations of fiction to produce a more intimate reading experience. In *This Is How You Lose Her*, a work about a writer grappling with his own identity as a Dominican-American man, Díaz’s use of autobiography functions to express and expose the fractures incumbent upon being a diasporic Dominican subject who desires to narrate himself in his work.

To compass the concept of Dominican-American identity, on the Island and in the US communities Díaz describes, we need to consider the context of Dominican immigration, especially to New York and New Jersey, and the ongoing transnationalist strategies at work. In this chapter, I will explain the history and practice of Dominican transnationalism, and then go on to demonstrate several of its effects as depicted in *This Is How You Lose Her*: shifting gender roles, an emphasis on place, a reverence for the written word, and the construction of hybrid identities. I will show how Díaz not only describes, but produces a transnational subjectivity

through his form and style, analyzing the function of *This Is How You Lose Her's* insistent place references, deployment of autobiography, and performance of male Dominicaness as part of Díaz's project of expressing a Dominican diasporic self in writing.

“The one from the other life”: The Particularities of Dominican Transnationalism

The Introduction delineates how transnationalism has been defined and described. However, the Dominican Republic offers a unique case for transnationalism, the historical, legal, and cultural aspects of which are crucial to interpreting Díaz's narrative style. The island is generally held up as the representative example of a transnational nation-state, and of the three Spanish-speaking countries of the Caribbean islands, it has received the most attention from transnational migration scholars (Duany 3). The Dominican Republic “has been deemed a prototype of transnationalism” (169), and in contrast to Puerto Rican, Cuban, and Latin-American immigrants in general, “Dominican migrants exemplify a more institutionalized and habitual engagement with their country of origin, a ‘narrow’ or ‘core’ transnationalism. This ‘narrow’ transnationalism means that, for instance, Dominicans in the New York metropolitan area call home, travel, and especially send money more frequently than all other Latino groups (231). In turn, the level of remittances received by the Dominican Republic is extremely high, compared to other Latin American and Caribbean nations: “In 2009 the Dominican Republic was the sixth-largest remittance destination in the Americas” (212). The Dominican Republic legally acknowledged this economic dependence with its approval of dual citizenship in 1994. Dominicans in the US also have one of the lowest naturalization rates among recent migrants, at 48.2 percent (Duany 183). These trends lead Jorge Duany to assert: “the Dominican Republic is

a full-fledged transnational nation-state, encompassing its diaspora¹¹ to a much larger extent than either Cuba or Puerto Rico” (170).¹²

This narrow transnationalism can be partially explained by the unique history of Dominican immigration to the United States. Trujillo’s dictatorship and fall in the late 1950s and early 1960s contributed to massive waves of immigration from the Dominican Republic to the US. The Dominican Republic pattern of immigration initially followed broader Caribbean trends, joining other diasporas of the Hispanic Caribbean as part of a post-1965 migrant wave to the US from Latin American, Caribbean, and Asian countries, spurred on by an increasing demand for cheap labor in the northeastern US cities, and changes to US Immigration policy such as the 1965 Hart-Cellar act, which amended the US Immigration and Nationality Act and abolished national origin quotas (Duany 38).¹³ However, Dominican immigration *increased* in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, when immigrations from other countries in the Hispanic Caribbean had slowed considerably. Compared to Cubans and Puerto Ricans, Dominican population movements

¹¹ When referring to demographics, I follow Duany in using the terms “diasporic” and “transnational” interchangeably. However, when discussing culture and identification, I follow Peggy Levitt in viewing the two terms as often overlapping but not necessarily coincidental: “Transnational communities are the building blocks of diasporas that may or may not take shape. Diasporas form out of transnational communities spanning sending and receiving countries and out of the real or imagined connections among migrants from a particular homeland” (Levitt 15). My contention is that not all transnational communities result in the formation of diasporic identities, and such identities, when formed, will be unique to the experiences of that transnational community.

¹² Cuba and Puerto Rico each offer up a unique migration pattern, as Cuban immigration or potential *transmigration* is truncated by the embargo, and Puerto Rican immigration is socio-politically distinct since Puerto Ricans are considered US citizens. The disparate immigrant trajectories of Cuba, the Dominican Republic, and Puerto Rico further demonstrate how, despite sharing a language and a history of Spanish colonization, the Hispanic Caribbean cannot be treated as a unified subject, especially when analyzing its transnational movements.

¹³ Jesse Hoffnung-Garskof cautions that US history often overemphasizes the role of 1965 immigration reform in increased international migrations: “The categorization ‘post-65’ erroneously attributes the rise in Latin American immigration (by far the greatest proportion of arrivals since 1965) to the liberalization of national-origins restrictions in the US that year. In fact, after a brief lull in the 1930s, millions of Latin Americans came to the United States beginning in the mid 1940s [...] indeed the authors of the 1965 legislation aimed to reduce the number of Latin Americans coming to the United States” (xiv). Still, immigration reforms did contribute to shifts in trans migratory patterns.

are relatively recent, with more than 98% of Dominicans being admitted to the US after 1961 (174). The Dominican diaspora thus outstripped and outlasted other waves of Caribbean immigration, even despite worsening economic conditions: “Although historically net immigration has often slowed, or even reversed direction, in times of economic distress, the number of documented Dominican immigrants admitted to the United States rose” by almost thirty-five percent from the 1970s to the early 1990s (Hoffnung-Garskof 202). Dominican immigration to the US peaked during the 1990s, and then leveled off during the early twenty-first century. These late waves of immigration mean the majority of Dominicans in the US are still members of the first generation, which presents a different paradigm for the Dominican diaspora and helps explain why they maintain such “strong transnational attachments” (Duany 174).

Immigration laws further strengthened these attachments. The US’s 1965 Immigration reform Act restricted new Latin American immigration, creating a backlog for visas in Santa Domingo, as new immigrants needed sponsorship by employers in the US. However, the restrictions exempted immediate family members of already admitted immigrants: this provision “unintentionally put [Dominicans], with their recent surge in settlement in the United States, in a relatively privileged position to apply for now-scarce Western Hemisphere visas” (Hoffnung-Garskof 91). As a result of their later waves of immigration, Dominicans were in a unique situation to benefit from transnational ties, and the law’s family exemption resulted in transmigrants expanding the definition of family, broadening kinship networks to maximize economic and social gains: “The family exemption also had the effect of magnifying the importance of the family networks that already formed the basis of Dominican international migration” (91). Already inclined to maintain ties to the island as a result of more recent immigration, racial discrimination in the US, and the possibility of pronounced social and

economic advancement back in the Dominican Republic, transmigrants now also had a legislative incentive to build extended kinship networks across national boundaries.

For Caribbean immigrants, the oppressiveness of the US racial paradigm reinforces transnational processes. Patricia Pessar emphasizes this social aspect of Caribbean transnational movement: “new immigrants are ‘people of color’ who have relocated to countries where institutional racism exist. As such, they face the very real prospect of having their educational or economic achievements dismissed or devalued by inhabitants of the host society. Thus, many immigrants retain contacts with a home society” (Pessar 4). The “continuing racial ordering of the United States” often deters Caribbean immigrants from fully severing ties to their nation of origin, as transmigrants are compelled to strengthen their identification with a home nation whose racial paradigm is more conducive to social mobility (Basch et al 234). Hoffnung-Garskof asserts that racial discrimination profoundly influences Dominican migrants’ national identifications, citing as evidence a 1980 New York Times survey showing that five out of every six Dominican New Yorkers considered their ‘home’ to be in the Dominican Republic (195).¹⁴ Key to the social impetus for continued transnational movement among Caribbean immigrants is the desire to evade the US’s xenophobia and racial prejudice. However, cultural shifts on the island would heavily mitigate the social and cultural gains Dominican transmigrants achieved in keeping ties.

¹⁴ Further evidence of this is the US census: “[M]ost Dominicans, like many Mexican Americans, Puerto Ricans, and Cubans, remained profoundly ambivalent toward the prospect that their national or ethnic identities marked a racial difference in the United States. For each of these groups the category Hispanic has sometimes seemed to offer an escape, an ethnicity rather than a race, and a clear alternative to being black. Indeed, although Dominicans generally recognized that many in the United States perceived them as black, on both the 1990 and 200 censuses, nine out of ten Dominicans in the United States reported themselves as either ‘white’ or ‘some other race,’ most frequently Dominican or Hispanic” (Hoffnung-Garskof 114).

The diaspora's close ties to urban New York City, the uncontested center of Dominican immigration (Hoffnung-Garskof 5), creates an additional idiosyncrasy of Dominican transnationalism. While generally Caribbean transmigrants are greeted positively by their community in their country of origin, in the late twentieth century Dominican gains abroad translated back on the island with a loss of *cultura*, lack of patriotism, and even participation in the drug trade: "many Caribbean immigrants must await resettlement in their countries of origin before their economic gains and social advancement are generally acknowledged. The Dominican case, however, diverges from this pattern. [...] Rather than being lauded and welcomed, returnees are frequently stigmatized as un-Dominican, nouveau-riche, and drug dealers" (Pessar 4). The term "Dominicanyork" became a pejorative, insinuating that Dominican migrants to metropolitan New York become more American than Dominican. After the Dominican Republic's severe economic downturn in the 1980s, transmigrants went from being perceived as the plucky and resourceful rural "path breakers" and "quasi-heroes" of the 1970s to becoming stereotyped as explicitly urban—and thus already tainted by US acculturation—Santo Domingo barrio residents who migrated to achieve speedy capital accumulation, abandoning the republic during its economic crises (Guarnizo 46).

As transmigrancy took on negative connotations in the Dominican Republic, Dominican migrants found themselves stigmatized in both places: "[W]hen Dominican New Yorkers turned home seeking refuge from their low social status in New York, they found an ambivalent welcome. Dominican New Yorkers thus faced the question of their belonging in the Dominican Republic simultaneously with the question of their racial and class status in New York" (Hoffnung-Garskof 164). Dominican transmigrants found themselves in between identities, "perceived as foreigners in both societies: Dominican in New York, *dominicanyorks* in Santo

Domingo” (Guarnizo 52). Since Dominican migrants are simultaneously alienated in the US and on the island, Luis Eduardo Guarnizo proposes that they construct a “binational social field,” consisting of “multiple cultural discourses and identities,” in order to cope with the exclusionary practices at work in both settings (Pessar 5). Guarnizo argues that Dominican transnationals develop an “accommodation strategy” to navigate the negative reception of both receiving and returning societies: “when in the United States, their Dominicanness is magnified; upon return, migrants emphasized their Americanness” (40). These hybrid cultural discourses and accommodation strategies become representative of a new Dominican diasporic identity, one marked in part by its very exclusion from both the Dominican Republic and the US. *This Is How You Lose Her* both reflects and enacts the hybrid practices characteristic of this new diasporic selfhood throughout its narration.

As I noted in the Introduction, the ways that transmigrants express their identities as transnational subjects remains under-theorized by transnationalist studies. I argue that we can read *This Is How You Lose Her* as just such a literary expression of a diasporic or transnational identity, something that many transnational scholars believe is still left largely unarticulated. In what follows I will demonstrate through Díaz’ work Duany’s assertion that “hybrid practices and identities may well be the rule rather than the exception in the second generation” (30). These hybrid practices, while reflective of broader transnational movements and general strategies of identity formation in the face of diaspora, transmigration, or exile, are also unique to the particularities of Dominican transmigration, with its shifting gender roles and fraught relationship between Dominicans and “*Dominicanyorks*.”

Yunior’s desire to present himself as Dominican enough not only ties all the stories thematically; it also accounts for the text’s ambivalent rhetorical position, its graphic depictions

of male infidelity, and Díaz's deliberate deployment of autobiographical elements in a work of fiction. What emerges in the collection is a Dominican diasporic identity that is defined by the very uncertainty of its position between Dominican and Dominican-American cultures. Born of Guarnizo's binational social field, this instability creates the counteractive hybrid cultural identity he describes, where transmigrants oscillate among multiple discourses and identities to navigate being foreign in both home and host country. This diasporic identity is characterized by an insecurity about authenticity and authorship, the simultaneous address of two audiences—now being a tour guide for gringos, now showing off island slang for Dominicans, the increased importance of place, and an ambivalence towards typical Dominican gender roles. This chapter will analyze *This Is How You Lose Her* thematically, treating the collection as a whole, interpreting how each of the various effects of transnationalism—place obsession, gender role shifts, mercurial identity fashioning, and reverence for the written word—informs Díaz's construction of himself as a Dominican diasporic writer.

“We were real Jersey, too”: Transnationalism and Place Obsession

Díaz anchors *This Is How You Lose Her* over and over in its US settings. The most pervasive example of the distinct use of setting in the collection is Yunior's descriptions of women, which are often tied to specific places and their respective meanings, known by other Dominican-Americans from the regions Díaz depicts. When describing Magda in “The Sun, the Moon, the Stars,” Yunior leans on the connotation of place: She's “a Bergenline original”; “short with a big mouth and big hips and dark curly hair you could lose a hand in” (5). Bergenline Avenue is a major commercial district of Hudson County, New Jersey; it is also the main street for Union City's largely Cuban-American Latino neighborhood. In characterizing the Cuban-American Magda, Yunior reaches for the shorthand of place to locate her. Later in the story, when Yunior sees a Dominican-American from across the bar, he describes her as “trigueña,

with the most outrageous perm this side of Dyckman”(17), using Dyckman street, which runs through the Dominican-American neighborhood of Washington Heights (or “Quisqueya Heights”) to reflect the inimitable, and apparently ineffable, style of the neighborhood. These obsessive references to place are often unintelligible to both English and Spanish speakers unfamiliar with the local Latino communities of metropolitan New York and New Jersey. Yuniór here thus specifies his audience as those from the neighborhood, announcing his own local allegiances, and asserting his extensive knowledge of the Caribbean diaspora’s urban locales.

Turning to the collection’s extended setting descriptions, introducing the variables of place identity and geography garners a more complete interpretation of Díaz’s site references and subsequently each story. In “Otravida, Otravez,” moving, even short-distance moving, takes on a symbolic significance to Dominican immigrants, who as new diasporic subjects equate movement of any kind with profound change. Reading the plot of the story in terms of the movements of the character within the city New Brunswick reveals the city functioning as a geographic counterweight, and results in a far more bleak reading of the story’s ending than its ambiguous closing lines indicate. In “Invierno,” as well as “Nilda,” the role of place functions in a way consistent with the rest of the collection, as Yuniór uses setting—especially London Terrace apartments—to define his worldview, and anchor his identity: while Yuniór is consistently anxious about claiming status as a Dominican, fearing he is not Dominican enough, he can claim his New Jersey housing projects as his own, and so he does, almost manically.

As recounted in “Invierno,” Yuniór moves from the Dominican Republic to the oft-mentioned London Terrace Apartments of Parlin, New Jersey, when he is nine years old. The stories set there recount Yuniór’s adolescence, his brother’s death, and his family’s strained relationship. My literary neighborhood geography of London Terrace contextualizes Díaz’s site

references to build a more nuanced reading of the stories devoted to the housing development. With only the novel as a guide, I locate Yuniór's high school, apartment, local grocery store and frequented mini malls in present-day Parlin with little difficulty. Going to London Terrace opens up critical possibilities for several of the stories that remain inaccessible without reference to the fictional neighborhood's real-world analog. The landfill figures throughout the London Terrace sections of *This Is How You Lose Her*, and I argue that we can map the progress of the Global Landfill onto our interpretation of Yuniór's narrations of the neighborhood, especially in "Nilda."

I begin my visit to London Terrace and Parkwood Village apartments at the rental office. Stunningly, nobody in the rental office knows what I'm talking about when I mention the landfill, which Díaz mentions multiple times in the collection. A landfill that must have been in operation less than thirty years ago? One less than two miles away, which you could see, and smell, from the apartments (134), or the top of Westminster Boulevard (145)? The rental office's employees Ashley and Aman (who did not want to give me their last names) seem genuinely surprised and benighted when I ask about what Díaz describes in "Invierno" as "a misshapen, shadowy mound that abutted the Raritan," with "rubbish fires burned all over it like sores" with "dump trucks and bulldozers" sleeping "quietly and reverently at its base" (145). However, the empty land just east of the edge of the apartment complexes looks like a likely candidate, though it is now a field with no signs of former toxicity. The apartment complexes end abruptly to the east with a parking lot periphery, then a chain link fence and "no trespassing" signs (see figure 6).



Figure 6. The edge of London Terrace and the former site of Global Landfill.

The rental office gives you a map of the properties, which is lucky, because within seconds of walking around the complex you are likely to get lost. The apartments spread out from Westminster Boulevard, a short road parallel to Route 9 whose main feature is this apartment complex. The apartments' numbering is indifferent to the other side streets the houses intersect, running north to south and left to right in a logic seemingly its own. In between the side streets are small sidewalks, for walking in between the apartment units. This schema means that apartment units face one another across a short distance, approximately 30 feet. I can see what Ashley, a lifelong resident, means when she says that growing up here fosters a sense of community. I can also see it fostering a sense of neighbor surveillance. This closeness adds poignancy to Yunior and Rafa's jealously watching the brother and sister who "lived across in apartment four" (130) playing in the snow in "Invierno"; Units 3 and 4 are only separated by a narrow sidewalk, and essentially share their front lawns. The proximity of the two complexes illuminates how Yunior always knows what the "Parkwood cats" are up to. It also explains how all the neighborhood kids know who Miss Lora is (in "Miss Lora"), and where she lives—Unit 22, which sits at the edge of two parking lots in London Terrace. Such close quarters, and subsequent opportunities for illicit gathering, further justifies what Yunior describes as

immigrant parents' tight vigilance of their daughters: "A lot of the Dominican girls in town were on some serious lockdown—we saw them on the bus and at school and maybe at the Pathmark, but since most families knew exactly what kind of tígueres were roaming the neighborhood these girls weren't allowed to hang out" (32) (see figure 7).



Figure 7. London Terrace's closeness.

I drive to the top of Westminster Boulevard to see the view mentioned in "Invierno," of the river, a sliver of ocean, and a lot of landfill: "From the top of Westminster, our main strip, you could see the thinnest sliver of ocean cresting the horizon to the east. My father had been shown the sight—management showed everyone" (121). However, some forty years later the panorama is obscured by other housing developments. Perhaps this is why the rental office no longer insists on showing the view to new tenants, as they do in the story—my query about the view from Westminster Boulevard was answered by a stare almost as blank as that which met my landfill question. The view appears to be one of the few things that has *not* improved since the 1970s. With the closing or apparent disappearance of the landfill, London Terrace and Parkwood Village are aiming for a firm middle class. The glossy photos and brochures of Garden Communities, which manages London Terrace and adjacent Parkwood Village properties,

itches the housing communities as upscale, preferring rhetoric such as “Town Home residences” and diction like “luxury” and “premium” to refer to the larger two-bedroom units (Garden Communities).

The composition of the neighborhood, while more solidly middle class, is mainly first and second generation immigrants, and Ashley tells me that many of the residents here are shopkeepers at the nearby ethnic stores in the mini malls surrounding London Terrace. But why are these immigrants coming to Parlin, New Jersey? A town at least a forty-five minute drive from New York City, and approximately two hours and two transfers away from Manhattan using public transportation. And those numbers are from the Parlin city center, itself a fair distance from London Terrace, which lies at the intersection of several townships—Sayreville, Old Bridge, and South Amboy—in an exurb at the edges of all of them. I leave Díaz’s hometown apartments intrigued by two questions: why people come here, and where the landfills went.

“Why does *anybody* come here?” Kate Philbrick says in a sarcastic stage whisper, when I ask about the twentieth and twenty-first century migration to the area. Philbrick is the curator of the Thomas Warne museum, which sits directly across from Díaz’s high school, Old Bridge (formerly Cedar Ridge). Philbrick tells me that the region had several waves of immigration from Hungary, Portugal, and Russia in the last hundred years, but couldn’t speak to the impetus for these and the later Puerto Rican and Dominican migrants. I later learn that the waves of Caribbean immigration to New Jersey are an extension of the same great 1960s influx of Puerto Ricans, Cubans, and Dominicans that affected New York City (Shaw 59). The volunteers at the Thomas Warne museum do however remember the landfills, whose mention brought me only silence from the young employees at the London Terrace rental office. Hans Kernast, a lifelong resident of New Jersey and president of the nearby Village Inn in Englishtown, tells me about

dumps in the region such as the Jackson Township landfill, the latter famous for rendering its watershed toxic and cancer-causing. And he clarifies that dumps near water have been largely filled in; as filled in swamps rather than landfills built above sea level, these types of dumps are now invisible on the landscape.

The State of New Jersey's Department of Environmental Protection maintains a Division of Solid and Hazardous Waste, for keeping track of all dumps, landfills, and toxic waste sites; their database lists 96 different landfills and dumps in Middlesex county, where London Terrace is located, and five of those in the Old Bridge township specifically. The winner, however, is the Global Landfill, whose boundary lies directly next to the apartment complex, in that empty and fenced-off field that marks the northeastern edge of London Terrace. London Terrace apartments even gets a name check in the DEP's landfill fact sheet: "residential areas of Old Bridge Township and the Borough of Sayreville are north and west-northwest of the Site, respectively, and include several apartment complexes, as well as single-family homes, located off of Westminster Boulevard and Ernston Road" ("Global Landfill"). The fact sheet lists developments such as London Terrace and Parkwood Village as a mere "900 to 2400 feet from the Site," with single-family homes even closer, at 200 feet ("Global Landfill"). The privately owned, fifty-eight acre site was operational from 1968 to 1984, and housed four types of solid waste, including "waste materials resulting from manufacturing, industrial and research and development processes and operations, and which are not hazardous" ("New Jersey Landfill Database"). The database lists the landfill's status as not "properly closed," which according to them indicates that this landfill has not been verified as closed in accordance with the department's solid waste regulations and that "all known waste" may not have been removed.

Indeed, Global Landfill closed most improperly. In 1984, after a series of heavy rains, high tides, and too rapid filling of waste, the landfill had a “slope failure,” creating a fissure on its southeastern side that was 60 feet wide, 600 feet long and 40 feet deep (“Global Landfill,” May 2010 Fact Sheet). The landfill collapsed into a large landslide, contaminating the nearby Cheesequake Creek Tidal Marsh. Despite being licensed only for non-hazardous waste, after the slope failure it was discovered that the landfill was in fact housing hazardous waste, when it leached toxic chemicals into the marsh and contaminated the ground water. Global Landfill was promptly closed in light of these findings, though the thin soil covering left waste exposed in areas of the site (“Global Landfill”). Studies in the 1990s revealed that the ground water underneath the landfill was completely contaminated, with pesticides, inorganic compounds, and metals. In 2010 the remediation process began of filling, venting, and capping the landfill to prevent further contamination of the soil, ground water, and nearby wetlands (“Global Landfill”).

In “Nilda,” the landfill serves as a marker of both progress and deterioration, ever lurking in the background. It begins: “Nilda was my brother’s girlfriend. This is how all these stories begin” (29). We learn from this opening and from the close of the story that Yuniór is looking back and speaking from the future. The habitual present tense (“this is how all these stories begin”) refers to a repetitive action that the reader is not aware of, and can only guess at by the end. Yuniór seems to be remembering, as he indicates here that he often does, his failures with girls as an adolescent, and his time in the shadow of his older brother Rafa’s numerous sexual exploits.

The first mention of the landfill in the story comes when Yuniór and his friends, shunned by the girls in their grade at school, attempt to console themselves in the summer: “Me and my pathetic little crew hiked over to Morgan Creek and swam around in water stinking of leachate

from the landfill” (35). Yunior, inured by now to the presence of the landfill, swims in the contaminated waters of the Cheesequake watershed even though they are “stinking of leachate,” a defeatist act indicating that while he knows his environment is toxic, he also knows he cannot escape it. The definition of “leachate” has metaphorical significance here: as water that has taken on the characteristics of its environment—usually negative ones—and in turn “leaks” those new elements into new waters, “leachate” serves as a descriptor for both Yunior and his brother Rafa, who take on the wholly unhealthy elements of their environment in different ways.

Rafa’s contaminated inheritance appears to be literal: in the same paragraph, we have the first mention of his illness. Indeed, until now in the story he has been the over-muscled boxer full of energy and confidence: “Rafa was tired all the time and pale: this happened in a matter of days” (35). Both the landfill and Rafa’s cancer appear out of context, and the coincidence of their first mention ties them together. The juxtaposition compels the reader to read the water so contaminated it stinks of leachate and Rafa’s sudden illness as connected. The thematic correlation is explicit: the landfill for Yunior symbolizes his brother’s sickness and death, and indirectly, Yunior’s difficulties as well. Both brothers feel the diasporic push to stitch themselves to a place now that they have moved to the US; unfortunately, this suturing is unfiltered, and thus includes taking on all elements, contaminated and otherwise, of the new environment.

The next time the landfill is mentioned, it is again linked to Rafa. More time passes in the story: Nilda and Rafa break up, and Yunior begins to do better with girls. Yunior tells us: “I guess two years passed. My brother was gone by then, and I was on my way to becoming a nut. I was out of school most of the time and had no friends and I sat inside and watched Univision or walked down to the dump and smoked the mota I should have been selling until I couldn’t see” (39). The open dump at the edge of the apartments becomes a site of mourning for Yunior,

whose drug use here indicates his difficulty coping with his brother's death. In the span of two sentences, Yuniór's mind travels from Rafa to the landfill at the edge of London Terrace. Here the landfill is also tied once more to Yuniór's "sickness," or emotional instabilities, but with an attenuated connection different in kind from Rafa's relationship to the landfill in the story.

Yuniór deliberately chooses to expose himself more fully to the landfill, as with his swimming in leachate, and here again, his actions metaphorically match those of the landfill: he soaks up the contamination of his setting by swimming in the Creek, he intakes so much marijuana, and so much landfill, that he makes himself ill, and he leaks his contamination unto others for years to come.

When the landfill is closed, years later, it signifies an end of mourning for Yuniór as well, though both the dump and Rafa persist in the present in toxic ways. Yuniór, now twenty-three, still living in London Terrace with his mom, and doing laundry up the street at the mini mall (40), tells himself repeatedly that it's okay to let Rafa go, in an attempt to convince himself: "It was only one summer and she's nobody special, so what's the point of all this? He's gone, he's gone, he's gone" (40). Yet Nilda walks in to the laundromat and brings Rafa back into Yuniór's mind, as they reminisce and confess how they miss him. With Rafa conjured again for them both, they return to the apartments:

We walk back through the old neighborhood, slowed down by the bulk of our clothes.

London Terrace has changed now that the landfill has shut down. Kick-up rents and mad South Asian people and whitefolks, *but it's our kids you see in the streets and hanging from the porches* (emphasis mine). (42)

Yuniór's mind once again jumps from his brother's passing to the landfill. Just as his brother has been gone, gone, gone, for years, so has the landfill, which shuts down before Yuniór graduates

high school. London Terrace management takes advantage of the closure and begins upselling their rentals, changing the composition of the apartments in terms of ethnicity and class.

However, the old neighborhood remains, with “our kids” “in the streets and hanging from the porches.” The Dominican element remains barely contained, “hanging” outside the houses and “in the streets,” phrases associated with slang referring to gang activity; “our kids” thus provide a conspicuous reminder of the apartments’ economically and environmentally downtrodden past.

The known toxicity of the Global Landfill, which the DEP determined did not close properly and which was continuing to contaminate the ground water and surrounding areas, is crucial to this ending. The closure of the landfill ostensibly changes the landscape and improves the neighborhood, but in reality the Dominican community that was there first still lingers on, loitering in the streets or, in Nilda and Yunior’s cases, living in the same apartment units they grew up in. The landfill’s closure also belies its ongoing presence, not just as a symbol for Yunior, but as a real and continuing toxic threat. Its closure very clearly does not equal its erasure, though that is London Terrace management’s goal—one it achieves in real life, as the current rental office employees, life-long residents of the apartments, were completely ignorant of the former landfill less than a mile away.

Analogously, Rafa’s cancer and death, which has been tied to the landfill throughout, is also a real and continuing toxic threat to Yunior. This is evidenced by his opening line, “This is how all these stories begin,” where Yunior indicates his obsession with narrating his brother’s exploits. Yunior himself grapples with this psychological tic, questioning why he’s even telling the story (“what’s the point of all this?”). “Nilda” functions as a glimpse into Yunior’s troubled past, his attempt to begin to explain the causes for his pathological cheating as it unfolds in the collection. Global Landfill, with its history of failure and persisting threat to the present and

future, as well as its role in the development of the London Terrace neighborhood, figures as an ideal real-world analog for Yuniór's traumatic past and subsequent development into a manic philanderer. The landfill's closure, and subsequent gentrification of the neighborhood, also informs Yuniór's anxiety about how London Terrace's ameliorating reputation will affect his reputation—we'll see below how concerned Yuniór is about getting his "ghetto pass" revoked.

"Otravida, Otravez" is less invested in claiming New Jersey allegiances than it is in using the geography of a neighborhood to demonstrate how transnationalism penetrates ostensibly stable local lives in the US. The story is so descriptive of its setting in New Brunswick, New Jersey that a reader familiar with the city can map out the movements of its characters with eerie precision. The story's ambiguous ending can be resolved by engaging in a local reading of the text. Plotting the story on the ground, in New Brunswick, allows us to interpret Yasmin, Ramón, and Ana Iris' relationship to their home and host countries in light of their local residences in the US. New Brunswick's layout, economic composition, and demographics contribute a significant layer of meaning in "Otravida, Otravez": unearthing this socio-cultural context thus clarifies the future trajectories of the characters and offers a more complete hermeneutic for interpreting the text. Such a reading also provides a site-specific literary example of the transnational flows of Dominican families described in sociological terms above.

"Otravida, Otravez" follows the lives of three Dominicans who move to New Brunswick, establish themselves over years and even decades, and yet continue to find their lives inextricably bound to their former lives on the island. The chief protagonist is Yasmin, who dates and then marries Ramón, a hard worker who neglects and eventually, ostensibly, abandons his wife in the Dominican Republic. Until she marries Ramón and moves to Paterson, Yasmin lives with Ana Iris, who left behind her sons on the island many years ago. Ana Iris insists to the other

newer female Dominican immigrants she lives with that they must forget the Dominican Republic to make a new life in the states, and Yasmin eventually adopts this position: “I want to advise them: no promises can survive that sea” (74). By marrying and achieving middle class comforts Yasmin appears to have succeeded in forgetting the island, but a final letter from Ramón’s wife, found by Yasmin and still unopened at the close of the story, troubles how completely new this “other” life is. Ana Iris, the stalwart of US assimilation, receives a phone call from her sons that melts her resolve, and in a surprising change of heart decides to return to the Dominican Republic. Yasmin is left to wonder if Ramón will do the same.

St. Peter’s University Hospital, where Ana Iris and Yasmin work, sits north of town. It lays on Easton Street, which grows cleaner and more well-maintained as it gets farther from the city center. Easton, or route 527, is a main artery, most likely the one Ramón looks out upon when he remarks how a truck is trying to turn onto the road with little success, prompting Yasmin to respond, “it’s a busy street” (51), and it boasts traffic lights such as the one Ana Iris and Yasmin wait at to cross the “highway” to the park (75). In a recent walk through the area, about fifteen years after the short story’s fictional timeframe, I find that the neighborhood seems mixed, though decidedly middle-class. On Huntington Street, the road perpendicular to the hospital, I see not one but two different college-aged men with fraternity stickers on their cars bringing out laundry to do. The large park directly across the street from St. Peter’s and the laundry-doers is called Buccleuch Park, and runs east to west for several blocks and a few blocks deep towards the river. On a Sunday, the only language I hear in the park is Spanish, as young kids play near the dugout of an empty baseball diamond, older kids and adults play soccer on a smaller makeshift field, and a few families are preparing to picnic. Runners use the path that runs

parallel to Easton, and appear to be more diverse in composition, but in terms of those who are using the park facilities such as the fields and tables, everyone is Latino.

According to the 2010 US Census, New Brunswick is majority Latino/Hispanic, at 50% of the city. The Latino percentage of the city, which includes Dominicans, Puerto Ricans, and Central Americans (Shaw 66), increased by ten percent over a decade, since 2000—when a version of “Otravida, Otravez” was first published in *The New Yorker*. Over half the population speaks a language other than English at home, and two-fifths of the population is foreign-born (US Census). A striking 70% of residents live in shared, multi-unit structures, which even allowing for the student population of Rutgers University seems high. The average per capita income is on a par with the average graduate student stipend, and as a result a third of the city lives below the poverty level (US Census).

The houses directly adjacent to the hospital are well-manicured and almost aggressive in projecting their Irish heritage, even though Irish immigration to New Brunswick effectively petered out over 150 years ago (Shaw 33): in one block I see door décor on different houses including Celtic crosses, proclamations such as “Failte! Welcome!” and “Irish blessings!,” and a sign that reads “O’Hara.” Just a few blocks away, the houses start to falter in their pristine presentation, and a few of the homes have clearly been split from single family residencies into two- or more family rentals, as evidenced by multiple mailboxes by the front door, and the conversion of front yard space into expanded driveway space for more residents. One can imagine the scenes Yasmin describes, of sharing a room with Ana Iris in a house where new Dominican girls are always arriving and leaving and cohabitating, within one of these converted homes. One can also surmise, though not outright claim, that the more established residents of the neighborhood are wary of newer residents, and seek to announce their identity as an older,

probably sixth or seventh generation Irish-American community, in the face of the post 1960s wave of more recent Caribbean and Central American immigrants to the area who frequent their closest park and work at the hospital next door (Shaw 58).

I retrace the steps Ana Iris and Yasmin take on their long walk at the close of “Otravida, Otravez.” The women travel from Ana Iris’ house, which I’ve determined lies two blocks northwest on Easton Street, across Easton, into Buccleuch park, down its length and then back across and southeast on Easton towards downtown. I pass the baseball diamonds Yasmin passes with Ana Iris, as she remembers how Ramón and she used to sit here in the park at the end of the work day, slowly, unconsciously plotting their affair, and how one day he asked for a bat from a group of kids playing, and sent them far out in the outfield as he swung and hit a deep ball (75). And then I walk back past the hospital, passing three female hospital workers in scrubs chatting in Spanish, and begin to walk, as Ana Iris and Yasmin do, towards Livingston Street and the municipal center of town, with its courthouse and small plaza. As I walk, I theorize which of the several taverns that boast apartments on the second floor might have been the inspiration for the site Díaz has Yasmin recount, from when she first moved to the states: “When I first reached the States I was like that, alone, living over a bar with nine other women. At night no one could go to bed because of the screams and the exploding bottles from downstairs” (61). Years after her arrival, when Ana Iris and Yasmin are walking home from the movie theater downtown, Yasmin cannot recall which window of the apartment she used to stare out of (71); already her social and economic trajectory has taken her far away from her first years in the United States (see figure 8).



Figure 8. The taverns of Easton Street, heading downtown.

As Easton crawls towards downtown, the houses become increasingly run-down, with trash-ridden, abbreviated front yards and more and more rickety wooden house frames that are peeling for want of paint and look in need of some structural renovations. Liquor stores begin cropping up, and more bars, as well as New Jersey’s seemingly ubiquitous “pizza and grill” shops, which are intent for some reason on yoking oven-based and charcoal-based cuisines. Yasmin’s move from any apartment along this stretch of Easton to the home with Ana Iris further northwest, to a neighborhood boasting larger houses, less dilapidation, cleaner streets, and more tidy yards, is a marked improvement. And her later move with Ramón to “quieter sections of Paterson” (57), with their “bird-filled hedges” (74), further north and west of New York City—fifty minutes away by car and an hour and a half by train and bus (Google Maps)—is another socio-economic transition. Yasmin notes that, “Despite all the trees, the [Paterson] neighborhood is not easy and we have to make sure to keep everything locked all the time” (72), but compared to living in a rented apartment over a bar with nine other women, in another neighborhood that is not safe (71), owning a home in Paterson, for Yasmin, marks an upward climb.

Yet Yasmin's walk with Ana Iris when she returns to New Brunswick reverses her social mobility. She travels back to the city from the suburban Paterson, over an hour commute by car or train, and returns to the old house she lived in with Ana Iris, symbolically descending from home owner to renter. Then she walks past her first American residence, the apartment she shared over the bar, in the less secure neighborhood that she lived in when her employment was also less secure, before her job at the hospital. As Ana Iris and Yasmin walk into the city, they physically mark the downward mobility of the neighborhoods as they travel. By the time they arrive at the courthouse, arguably the city's center, or at least its municipal center, the reversal is complete, as they have moved from distant suburban enclaves into the city's downtown, where their lives in the US as immigrants began. As they sit and talk in front of the courthouse, Yasmin realizes that Ana Iris will either return to the Dominican Republic, or bring her sons over—in the first case, creating a perfect reversal, from immigration, steady upward economic success, and then return migration, or in the latter, a repeating of the process, as new Dominican immigrants will arrive and need to make the social and cultural adjustments necessary to succeed.

Downtown New Brunswick figures as a beginning for both women. In Ana Iris' case, traveling into the city center sparks her nostalgia for her country of origin and reminds her of what she has left behind. The city also reminds Yasmin of what she has left behind, but in her case, it is the noisy bar apartment and uncertain social and economic status that she has consistently been moving away from since she arrived in the US. It's worth noting that this is not a short walk: if we reckon the house they leave from as laying two blocks north of St. Peter's, traveling the length of Easton on foot to get to the courthouse is over a mile, and much further with a digression to "walk the length" of Buccleuch park (75). These two characters are feeling physical distance keenly on this trajectory, allowing them to respectively see how far they've

come, in Yasmin's case in terms of their achievements in the US, and in Ana Iris' in terms of how far they've traveled from their family on the island. This juxtaposition of the perspective each woman has on her progress as an immigrant is less polarized than it seems, however, as the unanswered question of Ramón's first wife and her persisting letter-writing hovers over the women's final scene in the plaza, and begs the reader to wonder how much distance Yasmin has really made between her origins and her new life. Paterson does not seem quite far enough to ensure her new or "other" life can be sustained, as a letter from the Dominican Republic literally brings her back, on foot, to one of her earlier selves.

The philosophy of all three immigrants, Ramón, Yasmin, and Ana Iris, that to move (up) is to start to live in this country, to get a better house further and further from the urban beginnings of one's migration, posits a linear, upward-traveling trajectory, which is impeded, taken off course, and essentially reversed by the circular motions of transmigration. The almost gravitational pull of the island, from those that have been left behind, takes the linear narrative of Ana Iris and evidently also Yasmin and curves it, creating a U-turn, like the path of a boomerang. By plotting their movement, in the physical space of New Brunswick and its environs, we can see how the line they struggle so hard to build out of the city and into an established life is being forced into a circle. This reading also forecloses the possibility, wished for by Yasmin, that Ramón's old life on the island will not impact their new life together. The symbolic import of her walk with Ana Iris indicates that the pull of the island will inevitably affect immigrant trajectories in the US, no matter how far they have come. Ironically, despite Yasmin's hopes, some promises *do* survive that sea.

“Learn to trust your men”: Transnationalism and Gender

Although Dominican and Dominican-American women appear throughout *This Is How You Lose Her*, only “Otravida, Otravez” is narrated by a woman. When read through the lens of literary neighborhood geography, the story reveals the almost inevitable cyclical nature of contemporary Dominican transmigration; yet Yasmin’s story also provides interiority for the other side of the incessant cheating narrated by the novel, exploring the motivations for infidelity and the effects of building new romantic relationships in the States for both Dominican men and women. Place obsession is only one effect of Dominican transnationalism demonstrated in Díaz’s work: another crucial cultural adjustment Dominicans immigrants to the US must make is in response to shifting gender roles. *This Is How You Lose Her* depicts how these undergo stress and adaptation for transmigrant families, and the effects of these changes upon romantic relationships. A few of the stories, including “Otravida, Otravez” and “Invierno,” offer insight into the female responses to their new status, as female transmigrants enter the US workforce, often becoming the only economic earner in their family, whether they are single and sending money home or earning for a single-parent household. The majority of the collection, however, is narrated from the male perspective. As female Dominican immigrants achieve greater economic and social autonomy, male Dominican immigrants must often cede some control of the household. The key to Dominican male identity, according to *This Is How You Lose Her*, is the performance of hyper-masculinity, with a concomitant, often lurid, objectification of women; I argue that this paradigm of hyper-masculinity is a response to the altered gender norms attendant on Dominican transnationalism.

Transnationalism produces unique effects upon gender norms for Dominicans in the United States, which Díaz both delineates and critiques in his collection. Hoffnung-Garskof has argued that migration to the United States shifted the dynamics of gender relations in Dominican

homes, as “migrant women often had the freedom to work, travel unescorted, and make household and financial decisions for the first time” (168). In his case studies of Hispanic Caribbean households in New York City, Jorge Duany found that, while Dominican women were more likely to fulfill traditional gender roles such as the “emotional, caring, and ritual work required to maintain kinship bonds between home and diaspora communities,” this entailed less traditionally female activities such as frequent travel unescorted to the island, incorporation into a paid labor force, and increased individual autonomy to make decisions on behalf of the family, often as the head of a single-person household. In the US, Dominican female authority was greatly amplified: In Duany’s 1987 and 2006 samples, Dominican women headed 56 percent of all households, with or without husbands present, and barely half of all Dominican households were nuclear families; the rest were extended families or single-person households (205). In many cases, wives and mothers were temporarily separated from their husbands and children. In 2009, Dominicans had the highest proportion of female-headed households in New York City, at 39.1 percent, or close to half all households. This percentage well outstripped All Hispanics (28.7), Non-Hispanic Whites (7.2), and non-Hispanic Blacks (32.5) (Duany, Table 8.2, 178).

The perception of the shift in Dominican family structure in the US divides fairly cleanly along gender lines, and can be seen in male and female Dominican transmigrants’ differing stance on repatriation. Multiple studies find that Dominican women are far less likely to desire to return permanently to the island, whereas Dominican men are generally in favor of return. Hoffnung-Garskof argues that for many migrant men “the loss of status in the family was part of the nostalgia for home, the return to a ‘Dominican family,’” whereas “migrant women told researchers in the 1980s that they resisted their husbands’ plans to return to Santa Domingo because they did not relish a return to a traditional home life” (Hoffnung-Garskof 168). In his

1991 study on reverse migration from the US to the Dominican Republic, Luis Eduardo Guarnizo found that a full one-quarter of women, compared to just one-seventh of men, reported that they would have preferred to stay abroad rather than resettle in the Dominican Republic (Guarnizo 27). Milagros Ricourt's research shows that while the majority of Dominican immigrants who identified as either fully Dominican or fully transmigratory are men, only five women out of twenty-five considered themselves to be only temporary residents in the United States (22). In decisions to repatriate, "more than nine of every ten males took the initiative themselves to go back to the island, compared to fewer than half of females" (Guarnizo 28).

This resistance to return on the part of women is generally interpreted as their desire to maintain the increased freedoms and the "more egalitarian relations between men and women" (Duany 205) they achieved in the US. Sociologists universally agree that men are more likely than women to plan to return to the Dominican Republic to reestablish conventional patterns of male authority, whereas women are loathe to relinquish the social and economic gains made by immigrating to the US.¹⁵ Upon return to the Dominican Republic, traditional household structures are often implemented, which points to the primary male impetus for repatriation. In his study, Guarnizo sees a "stark contrast" in the way household economies function in the US and at home, finding that even though the chief strategy for Dominican households abroad was resource pooling, when transmigrant families returned to the republic, "husbands recuperated their primacy as the dominant breadwinners in migrants' households (54.2%) and resource pooling became the second most common practice (31.3%)" (Guarnizo 38). When women *did* decide in favor of repatriation, the reasons for their return were markedly different from that of men: "In contrast to those of men, women's perceptions were more family-oriented and less individually based. Indeed, 23.6 percent of women found family obligations to be the principle

¹⁵ See Guarnizo 1991, Pessar and Grasmuck 1991, Ricourt 2002, Hoffnung-Garskof 2008, Duany 2011.

factor affecting their decision, whereas half that proportion of men did so. Conversely, whereas 43.2 percent of men felt driven primarily to their own personal preference in their resolve to return, only 25.5 percent of women did so” (Guarnizo 28).

In the stories “Otravida, Otravez” and “Invierno” Díaz narrates the effects of transnational strategies upon gender roles, exploring the implications of oscillating yet semi-permanent settlement in two places on male/female heteronormative relationships, as well as familial ties. The instability of these relationships, in the text, is predicated on conditions particular to Caribbean transnational immigration. As we’ve seen, in the Hispanic Caribbean the Dominican Republic offers its own paradigm of “narrow” transnationalism, as Cuba disallows return and Puerto Rico’s status as a protectorate of the US makes it a distinct case politically. These stories, then, speak to the particularities of the Dominican-American experience, especially for first-generation migrants to the US from the island. In “The Cheater’s Guide to Love” we see the effects upon the second generation: Yuniór’s preoccupation with the role of infidelity in performing Dominican male identity peaks in this final story about obsessive cheating in the Dominican-American community and its consequences.

In “Otravida, Otravez,” Yasmin finds herself in the midst of a transnationalist social field, which encompasses both transmigrants and permanent settlers within its sphere. Hoffnung-Garskof found in his study of Dominicans in Santo Domingo and New York City that the effects of transnationalism in both cities was felt throughout the population: “Not everyone in the Dominican Republic or Dominican New York regularly participated in transactions across the national boundaries. Yet even those who never moved across a national border, or rarely left their barrios, lived within a world of shared relationships and expectations that spanned the border” (Hoffnung-Garskof 198). The story’s title, “Otravida, Otravez,” evokes this liminal

social field between nations: “Otro/a” can mean either “other” or “another” in Spanish; “Otravida” is a neologism, a portmanteau of “an/other” and “life,” juxtaposed here to “otravez,” which means “again” or literally “another time.” The title bifurcates its meaning, and can be read as either “another life, another time,” or “an *other* life, an other time.” “Another” unfolds in time, indicating a new beginning; “Other” unfolds spatially, allowing for two or more lives to exist at once. The uncertainty of what the title signifies emulates Yasmin’s ambiguous position, unsure if her life in the US with Ramón is part of a new, different life, or just a portion of the other life he already has back on the island. When she refers to Ramón’s Dominican wife Virta as “the one from the other life” we hear her fear that she and Virta are in fact sharing the same life; the field of transnational ties Yasmin is inscribed within terminally undermines the possibility of beginning “another,” different life.

Yasmin immigrates to New Jersey from Santo Domingo when she is twenty-three years old, leaving behind her mother, but no husband or children. Yasmin shares an apartment with Ana Iris, a slighter older woman, also an immigrant who left three sons on the island seven years ago. Several younger female Dominican immigrants stay in the apartment temporarily while looking for more long-term lodging. Yasmin lives with, and works with, young girls who are “sent to the States by their parents. The same age I was when I arrived; they see me now, twenty-eight, five years here, as a veteran, a rock, but back then, in those first days, I was so alone that every day was like eating my own heart” (55). The transnational strategy of splitting the family to make financial gains continues, with parents sending their children abroad to secure employment and send back remittances. Yasmin’s roommate and her lover reflect the prevalence of the reverse of this process, in which parents leave the island, and often their spouses and children, behind.

Yasmin has been dating Ramón for three years. Back “home” on the island, Ramón has his wife Virta, a house in Villa Juana, Santo Domingo, and a son who died young. Ramón wants to buy a house with Yasmin, as for him “to own a house in this country is to begin to live” (69). Ana Iris tells her “to learn to trust your men” (54), but Yasmin is concerned that at any point he will leave her and return to his wife on the island. They look for a house in the quieter sections of Paterson, dressed like they’re “interviewing for a visa” (57), but she goes only to find fault with the houses, convinced that even if he does find the right place, “you know you’ll never move me there” (58). Yasmin reads the letters Ramón’s wife sends him—he claims he stopped writing to her, but Yasmin sees new letters under his bed every month when she drops his laundry off—and knows that he hasn’t told her about their relationship. Virta asks Ramón in her letters, “*Please, please, mi querido husband, tell me what it is. How long did it take before your wife stopped mattering?*” (59). The letters from the island, kept on a shelf in the closet or in a jar with photos under the bed, continue to come and persist as reminders to Yasmin that Ramón has a fully formed life already in the Dominican Republic. Ramón tells her to not be stubborn and to “let go” and “leave alone” his wife and dead child, but Yasmin admits to herself, “I have not stopped watching for signs that he misses her” (67).

Describing her state of uncertainty, unable to fully “trust her men,” but also wanting to believe in the possibility of starting a new life, Yasmin employs an anecdote taken from her life in Santo Domingo: “Ana Iris once asked me if I loved him and I told her about the lights in my old home in the capital, how they flickered and you never knew if they would go out or not. You put down your things and you waited and couldn’t do anything really until the lights decided. This, I told her, is how I feel” (66). Yasmin uses the instability of the island, with its sudden interruptions of things like electricity, a luxury taken for granted in the States, to serve as a

metaphor for her love for Ramón, because the uncertainty she feels for him is also tied to the island. Ramón continues to carry on one life here and another there, and she doesn't know which he will settle with. Her imagery points to the very persistence of the island in memory that is troubling her current situation. She sees the effects of the same damning recollections of the island upon her new employees, when the young girls she hires struggle upon first immigrating: "It is probably her son she misses, or her father. Or our whole country, which you never think of until it's gone, which you never love until it's no longer there" (60). Ana Iris advises Yasmin to forget, especially whoever is still in the Dominican Republic: "Keep them out of your mind. You do not want to go crazy from them. This is how Ana Iris survives here, how she keeps from losing her mind over her children. How in part we all survive here" (67). Yet the letters and photos from Ramón's Dominican wife leave Yasmin waiting for the lights to decide.

Ramón and Ana Iris, however, both think of a new house as a new life. When the couple does find a house and Yasmin agrees to move in, Ana Iris tells her, "you are on your way to another life. You won't have time to miss me" (70). And when Ramón finally closes on the house, he asserts: "Now we can begin" (71). The same paradigm of immigration—that to travel to a new place means building a new life—bleeds into any important physical move, as securing a job, having an intimate relationship, and even building one's own business for Ramón do not indicate "a new life." To "begin," to all three immigrants, means to move. Ramón and Ana Iris' logic seems borne out, as an unspecified amount of time goes by where the new life sticks. Some nights Yasmin reads "the old letters," and thinks "of course of her, the one from the other life" (74), but she lives happily with Ramon and soon they are expecting a first child together. However, months or years into their new life, a new letter arrives from Virta.

Despite her fear of the new letter, and her trip to visit Ana Iris and their old apartment to discuss what it might mean, Yasmin has finally become confident in the new life she and Ramon share. Seeing the “new girls from the Island” now in transit in the house, who “shuffle in and out, barely look at me, exhausted by the promises they’ve made,” she wishes to advise them, as Ana Iris always had, to forget the island and whoever has been left there (74). Yet in an unexpected turn, it is Ana Iris’ resolve that has softened. As they talk, Ana Iris breaks into sobs, remarking on how much her sons’ voices have changed on the phone. Yasmin sees Ana Iris, the most veteran of the group, most dedicated to making a new life in the US and to forgetting her family back home in order “to keep from losing her mind,” reach a breaking point. “She will bring them or she will go,” Yasmin realizes; “That much has changed” (76). Ana Iris’ reversal, after over eight years, shakes Yasmin’s newfound certainty, and Virta’s unopened letter questions Ramón’s. The story ends in uncertainty: “That night I give Ramón the letter and I try to smile while he reads it” (74).

The ending of “Otravida, Otravez” demonstrates that this Dominican-American community is never fully free from the island, as the transnational strategies being used entail keeping close family members in two places. The projected permanent duration of a Dominican’s stay in the United States allows him or her to find a new spouse, have more children, and become a home owner in two places, but the relative access of the Dominican Republic makes returning, and never coming back to the US, an ongoing option. The possibility of return, and the need to maintain two lives, affects everyone in the community, even if their own return is unlikely: Yasmin left the Dominican Republic and has no plans to repatriate, having built her life in the States, but she is still at the mercy of others in her community who

have left someone behind. This state of instability can take a character like Yasmin, described as a steady worker and a pragmatic, moral, rational person, and place her in the role of mistress.

“Invierno” presents both the female and male perspective on being in a transnational marriage. The story is told from Yuniór’s point of view as a young child who has just moved to New Jersey from the Dominican Republic with his brother and mother. His father’s prior presence in the US for several years leads to his policing of the boundary between his newly arrived family and their new country, enforcing a virtual imprisonment that affects each family member. Díaz utilizes the unifying metaphor of the glass window—where Yuniór, his brother Rafa, and his mother can see out to the United States but the man of the house forbids their entry into it—to portray how the family’s immigration pattern has fundamentally shifted the structure of their interpersonal relationships.

The story begins when a young Yuniór, his brother Rafa, and their mother are driven by their father to their new home in London Terrace apartments:

From the top of Westminster, our main strip, you could see the thinnest sliver of ocean cresting the horizon to the east. My father had been shown the sight—the management showed everyone—but as he drives us in from JFK he didn’t stop to point it out. The ocean might have made us feel better, considering what else there was to see. London Terrace itself was a mess [...] I was watching the snow sift over itself, terrified, and my brother was cracking his knuckles. This was our first day in the States. The world was frozen solid. [...]

We didn’t stop shivering until Dad set the apartment temperature to about eighty. Beads of water gathered on the window like bees and we had to wipe the glass to see outside. (121)

From the moment of arrival, “Papi” curates his family’s experience of the United States, as he refuses them the comfort of seeing the sea when confronted with a landscape so alien to their former home. The cold seems to actively block and menace the Caribbean children. Yunior is terrified watching the “snow sift over itself,” a strange description that gives the snow agency, and suggests discrimination, as if the snow were sifting its own stock for purity. “The world was frozen solid” refers to the literal and metaphorical inaccessibility of the States so far; their new home feels completely opaque, and their new guide does not render it more transparent for them. To stop shivering they must heat the apartment until their view of the outside is blocked, as the condensation of the water on the windows becomes an outward sign of their physical and mental adaptation. The glass figures throughout the story for the foreign world outside: the kids want to touch it but are forbidden to; they wave to neighborhood kids through it; when Rafa thinks they might leave the States, “he ran a finger glumly over our window; he didn’t want to go” (131).

Papi doesn’t allow them to go outside: “it’s too cold, Papi said once but really there was no reason other than that’s what he wanted” (123). He goes to work and returns home late, habitually, while not only his sons but also his wife is forbidden to leave the house. Asserting that “you’ll go out when I say you’re ready” (123), Papi claims the family is not prepared yet to encounter Americans, or even to host them. Mami asks Papi to bring his friends over, since she can’t go out, but is met with censure: “None of you are ready for guests, Papi said. Look at this house. Look at your children. Me da vergüenza to see them slouching around like that” (139). Papi has told them that London Terrace is not “a slum,” like what they are used to, and tells them they must learn to behave accordingly. However, psychologically he traps them between not having access to America, and not being American enough. The father, who has already been in the States five years while they waited for him to send for them in Santo Domingo, consciously

keeps them from assimilating to the outside world. Even *wanting* to go outside is grounds for punishment in the household. When the children are sent to their room for misbehaving, “if he burst in and caught us at the window, staring out at the beautiful snow, he would pull our ears and smack us [. . .] Now you’ll be quiet, he’d say, satisfied, and we’d lay in bed, our knees burning with iodine, and wait for him to go to work so we could put our hands against the cold glass” (130). The children, and their mother, are desperate to engage with the outside world.

Mami, “who had been our authority on the Island, was dwindling” (131). When Dominican women immigrate to the US alone or with their husbands, they are generally able to enter the workforce and to achieve greater autonomy than they had in the Dominican Republic. However, as Mami was left behind on the island, she arrives to the US with no social network, no one to teach her English, and no one to talk to, finding herself cut off from both the outside world and her husband who is already embedded there. “She cooked our food and then sat there, waiting to wash the dishes. She had no friends, no neighbors to visit. You should talk to me, she said, but we told her to wait for Papi to get home. He’ll talk to you, I guaranteed” (132). In the Dominican Republic, her role as matriarch was uncontested; and for five years she became the only “authority” in the house, while the children’s father was in the US. Her “dwindling” thus reflects a dramatic shift: “My mother was not a woman easily cowed, but in the States she let my father roll over her” (139). Papi is able to exact such control largely because the family’s social network has been circumscribed to just the mother and her two sons, allowing Mami no outlet and forcing further dependence on her husband to replace the extended kinship network she left on the island. Recognizing this new lack, Mami reaches out to her family and to her husband, unsuccessfully: “She was depressed and sad and missed her father and her friends, our neighbors

[...] She wrote letter after letter home, begging her sisters to come as soon as possible. This neighborhood is empty and friendless” (139).

Mami attempts to remedy her isolation through learning English, but is once again stymied by her husband:

It’s best if I take care of the English.

How do you expect me to learn?

You don’t have to learn, he said. Besides, the average woman can’t learn English.

It’s a difficult language to master, he said, first in Spanish and then in English.

Mami didn’t say another word. (124)

This short exchange over dinner reveals the tension Yuniór’s family is navigating between a “traditional” Dominican-American home where the father “takes care” of even the language and patriarchy is the norm, and the dynamic created by transnational movements, where the father’s migrancy to the US left the mother as “the authority” for her household in the Dominican Republic. Papi’s retrenchment in an outdated *macho* family structure reflects his unease with the shift in family dynamics his US job has caused. His reasons for not teaching her, that she does not need to learn English since she is not earning money, and she can’t be taught because she’s female, are based in an insistence that the United States is his, not hers. Her role in the States is to maintain a Dominican domestic life Papi can come home to. Papi’s objections effectively silence Mami, who doesn’t say another word, in English or in Spanish. Yet she increasingly senses the disparity between her role on the island and in the States as the story unfolds.

The glass window into the neighborhood continues to figure for separation and adaptation. “We watched the neighborhood children building snowmen and igloos, having snowball fights. [...] A brother and sister lived across in apartment four, and when they were out

we would wave to them. They waved to us and motioned for us to come out but we shook our heads: We can't" (130). When Yuniór disobeys his father and heads out, Rafa watches him jealously: "I could tell that my boldness made him miserable; from our windows he watched me packing snow" (137). Then one night Yuniór dreams of home, wakes abruptly and fights insomnia: "I washed my face in the sink, then sat next to our window, my brother asleep, and watched the pebbles of ice falling and freezing into a shell over the cars and the snow and the pavement" (135). He finds his mom in the living room in a similar state, unable to sleep, and they *both* turn to look out the glass and think about what the outside world might bring to them:

I heard someone walking around in the living room and when I went out I found my mother standing in front of the patio door.

You can't sleep? she asked, her face smooth and perfect in the glare of the halogens.

I shook my head.

We've always been alike that way, she said. That won't make your life any easier.

I put my arms around her waist. That morning we'd seen three moving trucks from our patio door. I'm going to pray for Dominicans, she had said, *her face against the glass*, but what we would end up getting were Puerto Ricans (my emphasis). (135)

Rebellion in this household means going outside. In an altercation with her husband, who tells her he's going back in to work late, after dinner, Mami suggests he find himself a job with more regular hours. In response he shrugs: "If you think jobs are easy to find, you go get one" (141). Faced by the likelihood of her husband's infidelity, and insulted by the very helplessness that her husband has imposed upon her by not allowing her to learn English, Mami finally revolts. A blizzard comes and Papi is stranded at work. He calls to tell Mami that they need to "just keep indoors" (143), as they always do. Defiant, she goes out alone for a walk, and when

they realize she's left Rafa and Yunior go after her. They walk together to keep from falling, and finally see the ocean view their father chose not to show them. All three defy their father's will to keep them from settling on their own in the States, making their own connections to the neighborhood and beyond without him. The story is written from Yunior's perspective, so Mami's interior is unavailable in this final scene. She does regain control, however, deciding which direction they will walk ("Go straight, Mami said. That way we don't get lost" (145)). At the top of Westminster, looking at the ocean, Mami begins to cry, though Yunior and Rafa pretend not to notice. Considering the view, these tears might signify the identity Mami has lost, the authority she left behind in the Dominican Republic. The walk vents her frustration with the isolation, loss of control, and lack of comprehension she now feels as both an immigrant to the US, and the *wife* of one.

Every story in *This Is How You Lose Her* presents men being unfaithful to their wives: "The Sun, the Moon, the Stars" describes Yunior's attempt to get his girlfriend back after being caught cheating; "Nilda" describes a neighborhood girl Yunior's brother Rafa treats as just another "sucia"; "Alma" relates how Yunior gets caught cheating and the fallout that results; "The Pura Principle" and "Miss Lora" recount the sexual infidelities of Rafa and Yunior; In "Flaca," Yunior is in love with a woman, but still trawling dance clubs for phone numbers on the weekends (81). "Invierno" and "Otravida, Otravez" are the only two stories not specifically about Yunior's own sexual relationship to women, but they both depict Dominican immigrant men to the US who are carrying on simultaneous romantic relationships, with varying levels of deceit. In "The Cheater's Guide to Love," Díaz presents the wrenching emotional effects of this paradigm of the hyper-sexualized Dominican man by way of critique.

“The Cheater’s Guide to Love” can be read as not only the culminating story, but also the prelude to the collection we are currently reading: this final story describes the genesis of *This Is How You Lose Her*, and the collection as a whole easily takes on the name, and the significance, of a “cheater’s guide” to love. Reading *This Is How You Lose Her* in light of this last story recasts the collection as the written evidence of a lifetime of infidelity, and of Yuniór’s slow process of untangling the cultural pressures of hyper-masculinity and aggressive infidelity he believed expressed Dominican manhood from his own desires to identify more completely as a Dominican. Indeed, while the collection’s title refers to a story in which Yuniór loses a girl, the “Her” could figuratively refer to losing the Island itself. “The Cheater’s Guide to Love” is told in second person, as Yuniór talks to himself, and is divided by sections labeled by the year, counting from the discovery of his infidelity (labeled as “Year 0”). The story delineates the psychological consequences of this kind of performance of masculine identity, and offers the most sustained interiority into Yuniór’s insistence on cheating, despite the pain he inflicts upon himself as a result.

Yuniór is consistently characterized as unfaithful, and as constantly getting caught, far more often than the other Dominican and Dominican-American men in the text (such as Rafa, Yuniór’s father, and Yuniór’s best friend Elvis). In “The Cheater’s Guide to Love,” his fiancée finally catches him: “She could have caught you with one sucia, she could have caught you with two, but as you’re a totally batshit cuero who didn’t ever empty his e-mail trash can, she caught you with fifty! Sure, over a six-year period, but still. Fifty fucking girls? *Goddamn*” (177). Lest the reader believe Yuniór was consciously sabotaging the relationship, a paragraph constituting a single anaphoric series describes all the ways he tries to get her to stay: “You try every trick in the book to keep her. You write her letters. You drive her to work. You quote Neruda. You

compose a mass e-mail disowning all your sucias. You block their e-mails. You change your phone number. You stop drinking. You stop smoking. [...] You try it all” (176).

Once she’s gone, Yunior picks up his old habits, despite finding no comfort in them: “you drop the therapist and the sex addict groups and you run around with the sluts like it’s the good old days, like nothing has happened. [...] You’re good for like a week. Then your moods become erratic. One minute you have to stop yourself from jumping in the car and driving to see her and the next you’re calling a sucia and saying, You’re the one I always wanted” (178). As he enters “Year 2” of the break up, he stops pursuing “sucias.” Yet the fixation remains on women as the potential solution for his depression. His friend Elvis, a Dominican-American from Boston, urges him to “find yourself another girl,” arguing that “clavo saca clavo” (nail removes nail), and a “good Dominican girl” (182) will resolve his heartache. Elvis’ use of a common Spanish idiomatic expression implies he may be speaking from the position of male Dominican cultural norms. His own marriage to a Dominican-American, and his decision to stay in Boston’s Jamaica Plain neighborhood, in the *Banilejo* community where he grew up, further suggest that Elvis represents traditional male Dominican-American values.

Reading Elvis as representative of a standard male Dominican-American identity illuminates the pressures placed on Yunior to conform to these norms. Yunior follows Elvis’ advice and finds Noemi, a “good Dominican girl,” from the island, and describes her as attractive, nice, and responsible. However, after the “first sleepover,” Elvis asks Yunior “how sweet was that toto?,” seemingly contradicting his earlier argument for dating a “good girl” and pointing to his own relationship to sex and women: Over the course of the story Elvis continually cheats on his wife with new women, including one in the Dominican Republic that he is convinced is the mother of his child. Immediately asking Yunior how the sex was introduces the

confusion of how to treat the “good Dominican girl” as opposed to the “sucias,” and in this case conflates the mode of behaving towards two supposedly antithetical groups. Yuniór has not had sex with Noemi, and she goes on to refuse for three more weeks. He complains to Elvis about it—who is “shocked” there is still “no toto”—whining, “what am I, in sixth grade?” (184). Ultimately he refuses to see her again unless she agrees to have sex with him, telling her their next date is dependent on whether she is “planning to give me ass anytime soon” (185). She immediately ends the relationship. Yet Yuniór’s motivation to badger Noemi to submit sexually comes from having to admit his failure to have sex to Elvis, whose shock at the lack of intercourse, and insistence on knowing about Yuniór’s sexual prowess, encourage him to place excessive pressure on a woman he wants to date seriously.

Yuniór suffers from this need for approval from other male Dominican-Americans elsewhere in the work. In “Miss Lora,” he questions his motivations for pursuing the older woman in his tenements, even though he has a “good” Puerto Rican girlfriend (who is “prude”):

Years later you would wonder if it hadn’t been for your brother would you have done it? You remember how all the other guys had hated on her—how skinny she was, no culo, no titties, come un palito but your brother didn’t care. I’d fuck her.

You’d fuck anything, someone jeered.

And he had given that someone the eye. You make that sound like it’s a bad thing.

(149)

This remembrance says nothing about Yuniór’s own impression of Miss Lora, but rather consults the opinions of the other Dominican-American boys in his neighborhood (who we can assume are Latino due to their use of Spanish slang). Wondering if he would have acted differently if “it hadn’t been for your brother” reveals that Yuniór’s own sexual interest in Miss Lora was

irrelevant, that only the approval of the group, or fear of censure from the group for sleeping with someone the boys “hated on,” was Yuniór’s motivation. That Yuniór’s brother Rafa’s proudly asserts that wanting to “fuck anything” is a positive, not negative, characteristic, is in keeping with the sexual values expressed by the majority of male characters in the book.

Elvis insists that sex is the answer to Yuniór’s depression, advising him to attend yoga classes to meet women—“Mad fuckin’ ho’s in there, he says. I’m talking ho’s by the ton” (188)—and then to “bone the shit out of” a “blanquita” he meets there (189). Meanwhile he tells Yuniór stories of the women he’s sleeping with. Yuniór cautions Elvis to be careful about getting caught and being left by his wife, but Elvis retorts, “Shit, no one could ever end up like you, Yuniór. You’re a DR original” (191). Considering the similarities in their sexual histories—both cheat on their long-term partners, both are told they are a baby’s father when they aren’t, both consider sex the cure for depression despite its low success rate—we must assume that what makes Yuniór “a DR original” here is not being sexually promiscuous, but rather, keeping damning evidence and getting caught.

The former fiancée collected all the emails and photos of Yuniór’s infidelities, and collated them into what he calls “The Doomsday book”: A bound collection—“(yes, she put covers on it)”—of every piece of evidence from his “cheating days” (212). Yuniór finally reads the book, which he has kept unread under his bed for five years, and is astounded by his own cowardice and mendacity (212). The fiancée’s inscription, “*Dear Yuniór, for your next book*” (212), reiterates Yuniór’s dangerous fixation with archiving written materials, which has led to the book itself, and also reproaches Yuniór for his use of his own biographical details in his creative writing. After a second time reading through the Doomsday book, and realizing that his ex girlfriend did the right thing (212), Yuniór inexplicably shares the book with Elvis:

She's right; this would make a killer book, Elvis says. [...] Hands you back the book. You really should write the cheater's guide to love.

You think?

I do. (212)

Eventually Yuniór begins writing again (213). He doesn't describe the new writing, but after both his ex-fiancée's and Elvis' insistence that his conquests would make a "killer book," we're left wondering if what he's writing is, in fact, *This Is How You Lose Her*. Elvis, whose advice he's followed throughout, and whose romantic trajectory mirrors his own in many ways, has suggested he write a "cheater's guide to love," the eponymous story we currently read. The collection as a whole narrates multiple instances of cheating and being caught. Reading the text as a "cheater's guide" explains the inclusion of the two stories not directly concerning Yuniór's romantic life, but both concerned with infidelity ("Invierno" and "Otravida, Otravez"). It also accounts for the repetitive motif of being caught by writing, or being caught cheating at all.

That the final directive to write a cheater's guide comes from Elvis is not arbitrary. Yuniór's questioning response to him, "you do?," reveals that he still seeks approval from his male Dominican-American friend, despite the destructive results of following Elvis' advice and imitating his way of life. I argue that Yuniór continues to seek Elvis' approbation because Elvis represents a stereotypical Dominican male identity that Yuniór aspires to but seems unable to fully commit to. In his chasing of *sucias*, his illegitimate child scare, his search for a "good Dominican girl" while not getting caught having affairs with "ho's," Yuniór meets the norms for Dominican-American maleness purported by Elvis (and by other Dominican and Dominican-American males in the book such as Rafa, Yuniór's father, and to a lesser extent, Ramón); but in his insistence on keeping evidence, collecting letters, and especially in narrating these exploits,

Yunior is “a DR original.” It is the very uneasiness with the traditional model of Dominican masculinity that Yunior’s “cheater’s guide” exhibits and addresses.

“I-had-a-lousy-Third-World-childhood-and-all-I-got-was-this-attitude”: Transnationalism and Self-Fashioning

Underlying Yunior’s authorial relationship to the written word is a diasporic understanding of letter writing, marked by a reverence for the word and the possibility of constructing oneself or performing oneself through letters. Letters and photographs appear frequently, if not excessively, throughout *This Is How You Lose Her*, as they do in all of Junot Díaz’s oeuvre. Their function is multiple. At the most basic level, letters are being written between the US to the Dominican Republic to keep transnational families close; where working hours and finances make consistent international phone calls less practical, the relatively low expense of postage makes letters an ideal option. We see most of the first generation of Dominican immigrants writing and receiving letters in Díaz’ work. The international phone call, in contrast, is a rare event: for example, Ana Iris’ phone call to her children, after many years, is what finally catalyzes her desire to return to her sons. New immigrants can use letters to project an image of themselves to their families back on the island. Yasmin has Ana Iris take pictures of her to send home when she first arrives in the US. The pictures are in front of a McDonald’s, where she does not eat, at a bookstore pretending to read in English, which she does not understand, and in front of Rutgers University, which she does not go to (62-63). Yasmin starts fabricating with photos and letters a version of the life she’s living. But in reality she is thin, exhausted, and homesick (63).¹⁶

¹⁶ The use of written and visual communication to project one’s status as a successful immigrant appears to be a classic method of the Dominican diaspora. Jesse Hoffnung-Garskof cites a study on the letter-writing culture at work between New York City and a small Dominican town outside Santo Domingo from 1968 to 1970: “These letters first complained about the cold, the harsh work regime, and other distasteful aspects of city living. But within a few months, [...] migrants generally shifted their tales to celebrations of the opportunities to work in New York,

Yet the subtle effects of a letter-writing culture influence relationships more broadly in *This Is How You Lose Her*. The role of letter writing for a diasporic community infiltrates even non-diasporic or transnational relationships, as the younger generation continues to hold letters and photographs in high regard, and to associate them with both intimacy and identity-formation. The written word results in Yunior's undoing in several of the vignettes in the book, and the other side of the written—the ineffable—comes to stand in for the island, which evades Yunior's powers of description. What can and cannot be narrated becomes an urgent question in relationships dominated by writing. Furthermore, the ability to use writing to construct oneself ultimately fuels Díaz's text, as Yunior resolves his uncertain status as "Dominican enough" by writing himself.

In "Otravida, Otravez," we've already seen the importance of the written, as letters from Ramón's wife haunt Yasmin. But *This Is How You Lose Her's* opening story, "The Sun, the Moon, the Stars," deals with the function of the written for a diasporic community as a unifying theme. Yunior, our recurring protagonist, is in his twenties, dating a Cuban-American woman named Magda from Bergenline, a Dominican neighborhood in New Jersey not unlike his own. Magda is "the nerd every librarian in town knows" (5), dedicated to the written word. When her relatives are sick, "especially the ones in Cuba, she writes letters to some nuns in Pennsylvania, asks the sisters to pray for her family" (5). While they are dating, even though they see each other often and live close by, Magda writes letters to Yunior in the mail: "Always cutting shit out for me from the newspapers, Dominican shit. I see her like, what, every week, and she still sends me corny little notes in the mail: so you won't forget me" (5). Yunior's short description of Magda tells us that she considers the written to be a more sacred or intimate form, one reserved

describing with special detail the material comforts that their hard work afforded. Visits home served to elaborate these same stories of hard work and material triumph to family, neighbors, and even casual observers" (166).

for loved ones, such as sick relatives, and one that cannot be replaced by physical contact. Even seeing her boyfriend every week, Magda insists on writing so that he “won’t forget her,” implying that letters are more powerful than tangible time together. The content of the letters is unimportant, as Magda cuts out newspaper stories linked by the vague grouping “Dominican shit,” accompanied by “corny little notes”; it is the medium itself that matters. The necessity to write to stay in touch with loved ones, forced by Cuban exile in Magda’s case, has influenced her perspective on writing as a whole. And Yuniór’s decision to prioritize this aspect of Magda in his description reflects how he shares this value as a Dominican immigrant to the US.

Their relationship is, in fact, undone by a letter. Yuniór cheats on Magda with a *Dominicana* named Cassandra, who writes a letter to Magda detailing the affair. Or, as Díaz puts it in his inimitable style: “Magda only found out because homegirl wrote her a fucking *letter*. And the letter had *details*” (1). Note the italics and the implied incredulity that Cassandra would take such an extreme tact: to Yuniór, “a fucking *letter*” is unbelievably personal and particularly damning to his character. The medium is incontrovertible for Magda, not only because it occupies physical space, unlike an oral confession, but also because it is the medium she uses to express intimate familial and romantic attention. Yuniór’s “boys” tell him he should have denied the affair, but the presence of a letter, let alone one with “*details*,” makes denial impossible.

Paper trails from Yuniór’s conquests betray him throughout the collection. It is Yuniór’s inability to discard old emails rather than his lasciviousness that leads to being caught. His desire to hold on to physical evidence of his past “*sucias*” even at great risk reflects the heightened value of letters for him. Much like the photographs Yasmin sends home to project a new self to her island relatives, Yuniór keeps mementos that allow him to project an image of himself as “a totally batshit *cuero*.” His now ex-girlfriend mirrors that very desire when she compiles all the

emails, letters, and photographs she finds of his past affairs and binds them together in a “Doomsday book” that she gives to him when they break up. In “Alma,” a vignette only four pages long, Yunion is again caught cheating via the written, but this time by his own journal.

While in “The Sun, the Moon, the Stars” and “The Cheater’s Guide to Love,” Yunion knows he cannot deny the physical evidence, in “Alma” he takes the tact of “outrageous *sinvergüencería* [...] prevaricating to the end” (48), glancing at the offending passages in his journal, smiling, and telling his girlfriend, “baby, this is part of my novel” (48). The similes he uses to describe the journal brilliantly convey the particular incontrovertibility of the written: “you pick up the journal as one might hold a baby’s beshatted diaper, as one might pinch a recently benutted condom” (48). The concreteness of the journal’s words are doubly emphasized, as diapers and condoms already point to the substances they are built to contain, and Díaz’s filling of each in his image insists on the unavoidable consequences of the written passages. If we follow the similes, a journal, like a condom or diaper, becomes an object that by its very nature implies the containment of something potentially incriminating, that already points to matter one wants to keep quarantined. Both images suggest the urgency of writing, equating it to bodily excretions that Yunion cannot fully control.

Conquests and romantic investments, then, compel writing; despite the dangers of keeping such letters, the letter-writing norms of diasporic culture seem to force written corollaries for all forms of intimacy. However, while love (and lust) are endlessly inscribed in *This Is How You Lose Her*, other intangibles are impossible to render in words. Specifically, the Dominican Republic itself defies written description. This ineffability, I argue, makes Yunion’s need to self-fashion more urgent and more pained, as he feels he cannot convey the Dominican

aspect of himself to those who do not know the island firsthand, thus creating an anxiety about how to project his identity, to both Dominicans and non Dominicans.

In “The Sun, The Moon, the Stars,” Magda and Yuniór have plans, before Cassandra’s letter arrives, to go to Santo Domingo. He thinks of the Dominican Republic as a salve for their relationship: “I thought, Me and her on the Island. What couldn’t this cure?” (8). Magda has never been to the DR, and Yuniór thinks of it as home, so the trip takes on a valence beyond a vacation. As the story progresses it is clear that Yuniór wants to show this part of himself not only to Magda, but also to the reader. He offers a lengthy and telling aside:

Let me confess: I love Santo Domingo. I love coming home to the guys in blazers trying to push little cups of Brugal into my hands. Love the plane landing, everybody clapping when the wheels kiss the runway. Love the fact that I’m the only nigger on board without a Cuban link or a flapjack of makeup on my face. Love the redhead woman on her way to meet the daughter she hasn’t seen in eleven years. The gifts she holds on her lap, like the bones of a saint. M’ija has tetas now, the woman whispers to her neighbor. Last time I saw her, she could barely speak in sentences. Imagine. I love the bags my mother packs, shit for relatives and something for Magda, a gift. You give this to her no matter what happens. (9)

Yuniór adopts the tenor of a love letter, opening with “let me confess.” This introduction casts his love for Santo Domingo as if it were a secret or something best left unsaid. The string of anaphora following, each sentence beginning with “I love,” continues the tone. The things he loves point to the ways he simultaneously is and is not part of the group of Dominicans onboard: he’s the only one without ostentatious jewelry or overdone makeup, and he’s not reuniting with loved ones after many years, but his mother has enlisted him with bringing remittances to

relatives on the island, and he takes pride in carrying the bags she has packed, because it makes him belong more to the Santo Domingo he loves. The list of things he loves, incidentally, have nothing to do with the city of Santo Domingo, and most of the images he relates take place on the plane before landing. His confession appears to actually be his love for Dominicans themselves, rather than the nation's capital. Or perhaps, he's expressing a love for the act of traveling to and from Santo Domingo itself, for his own status as a Dominican-American living in the US who both does and does not consider the Dominican Republic as home.

He goes on to address the capital and landscape directly:

If this was another kind of story, I'd tell you about the sea. What it looks like after it's been forced into the sky through a blowhole. How when I'm driving in from the airport and see it like this, like shredded silver, I know I'm back for real. I'd tell you about how many poor motherfuckers there are. [...] I'd tell you about the shanties and our no-running-water faucets and the sambos on the billboards and the fact that my family house comes with an ever-reliable latrine. I'd tell you about my abuelo and his campo hands, how unhappy he is that I'm not sticking around, and I'd tell you about the street where I was born, Calle XXI, and how it hasn't decided yet if it wants to be a slum or not and how it's been in this state of indecision for years.

But that would make it another kind of story, and I'm having trouble enough with this one as it is. You'll have to take my word for it. Santo Domingo is Santo Domingo.

Let's pretend we all know what goes on there. (10)

Earlier, Yunior distinguishes himself as different, the "only nigger on board" not dressed like or acting like the "real" Dominicans on the plane. Yet the next section reads like a homecoming, as he describes the island's unique sky as his way of knowing he's "back for real." In this continued

direct address to the reader, Yuni6r claims that his story is not about Santo Domingo, or his return to the place he was born. He insists upon this with a series of conditional phrases: “*If this was another kind of story,*” I *would* tell you. The extended use of paralepsis of course does tell the reader about Santo Domingo, as each conditional statement is followed by a description of the very thing he claims he will not describe. This insistence on not narrating, but failure to refrain from it, relates to Yuni6r’s unreliability as a narrator, which we see throughout *This Is How You Lose Her*, but also to his need to relate himself to the Island, which he doesn’t want to acknowledge explicitly. His desire to narrate the island speaks to an insecurity about being able to convey the place accurately and of being worthy, or Dominican enough, to tell it. Hence his *inventio* “let me confess,” which sounds like it will precede a much darker monologue, especially since this is a story about cheating. His love of the Dominican Republic, or rather, his *narration* of that love, reads as a source of secrecy or uncertainty to him.

After an extended description of all the things he *would* tell us, Yuni6r cuts himself short, saying “that would make it another kind of story.” He abandons description, stating finally, “Santo Domingo is Santo Domingo.” The use of a self-referential statement, to use Santo Domingo to describe itself, describes the place as *sui generis*, impossible to explain except through self-identity. The paralepsis echoes this, as the conditional phrases imply the narrator will not be fully capable of describing or defining the place. He insists on tying himself there with biographical detail, and with language, his street, his grandfather, his grandpa’s hands, all related in Spanish. However his mode is one of ambivalence towards his success in proving himself as a spokesperson for the island. He concludes that the only way to define or name the place is with itself. The uncertainty of achieving a full definition is reflected in the follow-up sentence, “let’s pretend we all know what goes on there,” a command given to overlook the

impossibility of knowing the place and instead just acting as if we do. Yuniór's switch to the first person plural here, from "I" to "we," is telling: he admits that he is not fully of the island either and thus equally unaware of "what goes on there."

As the couple travels the island, Yuniór wants to give the place to Magda, by *narrating* it: "There I was. Pointing out all the shit that had changed since the year before. [...] Even kicked the historicals. This is where Trujillo and his Marine pals slaughtered the gavilleros, here's where the Jefe used to take his girls" (11). Yuniór seeks affirmation from Magda towards his birthplace. Taking her to his grandfather's house, then driving her through the interior, he obsessively describes the history of the DR and its cultural touchstones, hoping to elicit a response from her. But she rejects his tour of the island through her own minimal narration. Normally verbose—"she's a talker, a fucking boca" (11)—Magda becomes mute, with little to nothing to add, and finally levies the damning staccato sentence, "I. Don't. Want. To. Be. Here" (12).

Although furious, Yuniór abides, and they leave the interior and head to the beach town of La Romana. Yuniór's frustration at Magda's reaction to his neighborhood and the places he knows from personal experience are compounded by her electing this "inauthentic" experience:

I don't even want to tell you where we're at. We're in Casa de Campo. The Resort That Shame Forgot [...] It's the largest, wealthiest resort on the Island, which means it's a goddamn fortress, walled away from everybody else. [...] Advertises itself in the States as its own country, and it might as well be. Has its own airport, thirty-six holes of golf, beaches so white they ache to be trampled, and the only Island Dominicans you're guaranteed to see are either caked up or changing your sheets. Let's just say my abuelo

has never been there, and neither has yours [...] Chill here too long and you'll be sure to have your ghetto pass revoked, no questions asked. (14)

Yunior's insecurities in being Dominican enough emerge in this aside, as he knows no "real" Dominicans stay at the Casa de Campo, that it is a resort built expressly for Americans—and the *nouveau riche* Dominican-Americans of the diaspora, so stigmatized by Dominican nationalist rhetoric—and keep out native islanders. Yunior has been touting the authentic, personal experience of the island, one marked by the poverty of his family, and the street he grew up on, "Calle XXI," which "hasn't decided yet if it wants to be a slum." Getting "his ghetto pass revoked" is exactly what he fears and has been avoiding by the itinerary he creates for their trip.

If Santo Domingo can only be described tautologically, "Santo Domingo is Santo Domingo," Yunior feels like it needs to be experienced to be understood. You have to go to "the Island" to understand what goes on there, what it is like, because it defies depiction. As a Dominican-American attempting a romantic rapprochement after cheating, Yunior hopes expressing the formerly unexpressed part of himself, his Dominicanness, will win back Magda. He deems the trip a failure when she rejects *his* experience of the Island, and refuses to complete an "authentic" tour. Yunior interprets Magda opting for the resort experience, which he deems bourgeois, as tantamount to ignoring or wanting to hide the Dominican *campo* part of himself: "I feel like you rejected my whole country, Magda" (15). And as the part of Yunior that he can't express in words, rejecting his "whole country" means rejecting the ineffable part of him too.

In "The Sun, the Moon, the Stars," we see Yunior's anxieties about the precariousness of his self-identification as Dominican, especially when his authenticity is questioned or rejected by Magda. Yunior's preoccupation with his own "ghetto pass," as Díaz phrases it, indicates a fundamental ambivalence about his Dominican-American identity that recurs in *This Is How You*

Lose Her. The converse of this insecurity is the over-stated confidence Yuniór expresses in being able to narrate stories of his London Terrace neighborhood, and identifying characteristics of not just his neighborhood, but urban Dominican-American neighborhoods throughout New York and New Jersey. Yuniór's complicated relationship to places in the US brings back to mind Díaz's words when referring to *This Is How You Lose Her* as a narrative: "Like a good immigrant I guess I wanted the best of both worlds" (Barrios). Díaz's unique position as a Dominican immigrant who comes to the US at the young age of seven (Céspedes and Torres-Saillant 893) and subsequently self-identifies as a kind of qualified Dominican,¹⁷ finds expression in the ways Yuniór narrates or fails to narrate the places he encounters. The oscillating, unsteady mode of these place descriptions points to one of several effects transnationalism has upon identity-formation for diasporic subjects in the US.

Crucial to Yuniór's unease with his Dominican identity is the equivalent ambivalence about authorial identity throughout the text. Yuniór is an unreliable narrator, but only inasmuch as the reader finds him lying to himself. Often Yuniór will repeat phrases, convincing himself of the truth of a situation as he is recounting it. For instance, throughout the final story he attempts to persuade himself that he's better off without the fiancée through the use of repetition: "You harbored a lot of grievances against her anyway. Yes you did! [...] For a few weeks you almost believe it" (177); "Every time you think about the ex, every time the loneliness rears up in you [...] you tie on your shoes and hit the paths and that helps; it really does" (187). That Yuniór runs to ameliorate his pain is consistent with the hopeful Dominican transmigrant relationship to movement demonstrated in stories like "Otravida, Otravez," where even short distance moves connote positive change; the act also suggests that he is literally running away from his break-up.

¹⁷ "I definitely would never try to pass for an island person. But I know that I'm Dominican. In this country that's what you're called if you are not called other things first" (Céspedes 896).

The insistence on truthfulness, indicated in the first passage by the use of an exclamation and repetition, and in the second through the anaphora of “every” combined with the wistful, willful “it helps; it really does,” indicate a writer in a process of delusion; but as a result of the intense personal nature of the writing style, and the use of second person in this case, the reader feels she is witnessing a writer who is lying to himself, not to her.

The audience of *This Is How You Lose Her* is also uncertain. The presumed intended reader frequently shifts, demarcating Yunion’s ambivalent rhetorical position as an autobiographer, and his resistance to choosing between the monolingual American reader and the bilingual Dominican one. While he often assumes specific knowledge on the part of his reader, such as asides like “you know how it is when you’re on the Island and your girl’s an octoroon” (16), the narrator will also occasionally assume the ignorance of the reader, especially in terms of his or her knowledge of the Dominican Republic: “You’ll have to take my word for it. Santo Domingo is Santo Domingo. *Let’s pretend we all know what goes on there* (my emphasis)” (10). Towards the end of the text, in “The Cheater’s Guide to Love,” Yunion responds to an insult from a recent Dominican immigrant woman who accuses him of not being *really* Dominican, retorting: “If I’m not Dominican then no one is.” Her response is a laugh and retort: “say that in Spanish, she challenges and of course you can’t” (193). We can read brief moments like these in *This Is How You Lose Her*, where Yunion’s Dominicaness is questioned, particularly by non-diasporic Dominicans, as the motivation for both the insecurity of the author to describe the Island, and his announcement of belonging and insistence on the local norms of the New Jersey Dominican-American neighborhood of his upbringing. Yunion’s oscillation between performing a regional Dominican-American identity for that community and introducing Dominican or

Dominican-American cultural touchstones for an uninitiated reader reflect the narrator's ambivalence about claiming his own Dominican identity.

Díaz, through Yunior, questions Dominican-American identity on a larger scale, by questioning what it means to be a Dominican-American *author*. The collection exposes the contradictions and stresses of feeling at times like one must perform an ethnic identity, and at others like one suffers from attempting to seem Dominican enough, to non-diasporic Dominicans, other Dominican-Americans, and even to a readership expecting a particular type of performance. We've already seen a few examples of how Yunior, as a writer, conflates his biography and his fiction; *This Is How You Lose Her* presents several. The collection's title comes from the third story, "Alma," and references Yunior once again getting caught cheating, when his girlfriend reads his journal. In that story he purports that the real is fictional, and attempts unsuccessfully to claim he is not the narrator of the "stories" in his journal. The story itself, about an author writing about a character who pretends to be an author to avoid losing a girl, troubles the boundaries between reality and fiction, as we find ourselves reading a story about a narrator who pretends that real life details, many identical to the author's, are fiction. Conversely, in "The Cheater's Guide to Love" Yunior is accused of making the real fictional; this allegation becomes true when the Doomsday book from Yunior's own fraught romantic life becomes the "cheater's guide" he eventually writes and we find ourselves reading.

In turn, Díaz troubles the boundaries between *his* authorship and his narrator. Díaz's decision to create Yunior, a narrator who shares most of Díaz's biographical history, including his nickname, places lived, schools attended, jobs held, and family traumas, compels the reader to question the line between autobiography and fiction. In an interview, Díaz admits, "It's true I play with autobiography. I love to play with it. It's like a medium" (Céspedes and Torres-Saillant

906); in *This Is How You Lose Her*, however, autobiography *is* the medium, as Díaz crafts a hybrid genre of writing that combines memoir and fiction in unexpected ways. Díaz has argued that the desire to seek out real-world analogs for a work of fiction is the ultimate proof that the writing works as literature, since it indicates that the reader is so moved and so convinced of the truth of the work that they assume it must be taken from real life: “So every time someone says, ‘This had to be real,’ what I’m hearing is the magic of reading. At that moment, I know that reading is still alive. As long as there is someone out there who makes that kind of solipsistic jump to ‘this is fucking autobiographical,’ I know that we’ve got it. We’ve still got the magic” (Scarano). Díaz deploys his autobiographical details to encourage the very jump he calls solipsistic, manipulating the reader to equate the author and the narrator, and pushing an interpretation that says, “this has to be real,” which Díaz sees as “the magic of reading.”

When asked why he uses the name “Yunior,” his own nickname, for his chief narrator, since using that name encourages “people trying to read these stories autobiographically,” Díaz retorts: “But they will anyway. So the approach is never to distance. It’s that Philip Roth move. If you distance yourself from the reader, it ends up backfiring. But to try to play with people’s expectations—not play in a manipulative way, though you are manipulating, but to productively engage in someone’s expectations about this as biography” (Scarano). The formal decision to make Yunior seem like Junot (just as Nathan Zuckerman feels like Roth), are part of Díaz’s project, stated here explicitly, to manipulate the reader to assume the character is the author. If wanting a real-world index for fictional elements makes the work more powerful for Díaz, his rhetorical strategy attempts to short-circuit the process: making his work read as explicitly autobiographical so that, paradoxically, it will achieve what he views as the intense emotional impact of fiction.

Yet while *This Is How You Lose Her* manipulates genre to make fiction read as autobiography, it also resists a total equation of Yuniors to Junot. Despite the shared biographical details, the collection is not memoir, and embedded in the work is a critique of Dominican machismo and an accounting of its deleterious effects that can only be levied by an author on the outside of the narration. The autobiographical elements make Yuniors's tragedies read as more realistic, but the reader eventually comes up against the discomfort of ignoring the conventions of fiction and assuming the narrator is the author. This unease with making the full "solipsistic jump to 'this is fucking autobiographical'" is by design: "People will want to fuse you to your fiction. But, no matter how much they try, they are uncomfortable with the very act. They are uncomfortable because the more they talk to you the more they realize that they are seeing ruptures" (Céspedes and Torres-Saillant 906). The text's insistence on being read simultaneously as autobiographical and fictional is another of its hybrid practices, as Díaz introduces and defies the reader's expectations of a male Dominican American writer.

Ultimately, *This Is How You Lose Her* does not resolve the battle between narrator and author, between being Dominican or Dominican-American, between writing to one's "own people" or writing to the mainstream. The text's best expression of its Dominican diasporic subjectivity is its refusal to resolve the contradictions it sets forth in its narrative. Unlike the dictatorial grip of Yuniors as narrator in *Oscar Wao*, or the freedom from a unified voice offered by the genre of short story in *Drown*, in *This Is How You Lose Her* the struggles for a coherent authorial identity are expressed but not concluded. The "counteractive hybrid cultural identity" that emerges echoes *Nations Unbound's* claim about transnational identity that "it is only in contemporary fiction that this state of 'in-betweenness,' has been fully voiced." Díaz offers us a fully realized literary rendering of Dominican transnational identity, in all its messy uncertainty.

CHAPTER 3

“Earthquakes or earthmovers”: Los Angeles’ Eastside Barrio and Helena

María Viramontes’ *Their Dogs Came With Them*

While Plascencia’s El Monte enclave and Díaz’s London Terrace seem like neighborhoods victim to neglect or indifference rather than malice, Viramontes’ 1960s East Los Angeles is a barrio at war with the greater city of which it forms part. *Their Dogs Came With Them* describes a neighborhood under siege by earthmovers, freeway construction, the removal of open spaces, and government quarantine. In the face of destruction and erasure, Viramontes offers up her novel as a container for place memories, delineating the irreplaceable yet replaced streets, stores, houses, and neighbors of East Los Angeles as a literary counterspace. *Their Dogs Came With Them*’s literary realism makes the text appear deceptively un-experimental, yet a neighborhood geography of the work reveals the numerous ways that Viramontes’ novel is innovative in its evocation of the aesthetic characteristics and cultural practices of the Eastside barrio. By writing out the streets and journeys of characters on roads and neighborhoods about to be forever changed by the unspooling of six freeways, Viramontes builds a paper version of a barrio that is rapidly disappearing under the concrete. Through her use of multiple interlinking perspectives to imitate events experienced by an entire neighborhood, non-linear narration to mimic oral storytelling and the processes of remembering, and the consistent metaphorical yoking of characters to places and both of these to memory, Viramontes captures a particular intimacy between place and sense of group belonging for Los Angeles Mexican-Americans, preserving the barrio from further destruction.

Ironically, to preserve the barrio in writing Viramontes must use the very medium of its destruction—paper. In the novel, papers prove legality and citizenship, they map the streets,

determine new freeway paths, disrupt traffic flows, track neighbors in and out, and variously alienate many Eastside residents. Yet Viramontes works to literarily extend the limits of the barrio to include non-residents, effectively seeking to ameliorate the barrio's geographic and cultural isolation through written exposure. Desiring to record the barrio on paper, as well as project its stories to a broader audience, Viramontes uses prolepsis and analepsis to transform the reader into a citizen of the Eastside: *Their Dogs Came With Them* incorporates potential outsiders, giving them the communities' memories, anchoring new initiates with extensive place details, so that the reader too becomes a neighbor. Archival work on the novel's manuscript conducted at UC Santa Barbara reveals Viramontes to be in a dialogue with her Anglo editor, attempting to explain the particularities of her Chicano community and to draw the editor, and future readers, literally into the story, as fellow rememberers.

In this chapter, I begin with a look at the history of Los Angeles: how did a Spanish settlement exile its original inhabitants to an eastern barrio? How has the city of LA consistently undermined and jeopardized its Latino communities? What particularities of culture and social knitting have the barrios developed to maintain their communities in the midst of land encroachment, governmental neglect, and transnational shifts in labor and commerce? Then I'll demonstrate the specific consequences of LA's urban planning and construction schemes upon the East LA neighborhood, using Viramontes to explore the psychological damage of freeway (and cemetery) incursion, with their simultaneous alienating and isolating effects, depicted metaphorically through the novel's "Quarantine Authority," which equates East LA barrio residents to second-class citizens, foreign to the US, who therefore require identification of residence to enter or leave their own neighborhood. The Chicano response to freeway destruction of their neighborhood is to shore up their place memories, their experiences of one another and

their concrete ties to the Eastside, which cannot be erased, despite the attempts of earthmovers. That this method of collective place remembering is endemic to the neighborhood is evidenced not only by Viramontes' deployment of the mode, but also by its use in the city's first museum for and about Mexican-Americans in Los Angeles, La Plaza de Cultura y Artes.

From *Californios* to Californians: A Brief History of Mexican-American Los Angeles

The history of East Los Angeles is part of Los Angeles history, and that history has been profoundly intertwined with the history of transportation in the 19th and 20th century. Founded in 1781 as a Spanish pueblo, part of New Spain, the city we now call Los Angeles has gone from Spanish, to Mexican, to US, and in the case of East LA, back to Latino again. In the late 18th and early 19th century, the majority of pueblo residents were self-identified "Californios," citizens of Nueva Espana who were born in California. "From the founding of the city by Spanish settlers in 1781 to the American conquest in 1848," Ricardo Romo writes, "slow economic growth and relatively little social change characterized Los Angeles. Wealthy Mexicans owned expansive ranches in the Los Angeles basin and maintained second homes in town" (4). Whites formed a minority in the town: "numbering less than fifty families in Los Angeles in 1848, Anglo Americans and Europeans lived alongside the Mexican residents" (4).

Two nearly simultaneous events, the gold rush and the statehood of California, following Mexico's defeat and the subsequent treaty granting the US California as well as much of Texas and the southwest, radically changed the composition of Los Angeles. US citizens, and others, began to settle in Los Angeles in increasing numbers (22):

A migration of Anglos, Chinese, Jews, Germans, and Blacks to California followed the Gold Rush of 1849 and statehood in 1850. [...] In a short time most Anglo settlers had established residences and businesses beyond the old plaza community. They

clustered together and attempted to restrict Mexican voting rights and to prohibit cultural practices native to the Mexican community. The Mexican population did not grow at the same rate as the Anglo population and remained near the center of town. (Romo 5)

The plaza offered a Catholic church, bilingual schools, Mexican-owned shops where Spanish was spoken, and Mexicans continued to live and work close to the plaza, even as the main Los Angeles business district shifted from the plaza to southwest Los Angeles (5). Anglos and other European settlers moved away from the original core, which began to be called “Sonoratown” or “Little Mexico” (5). However, trade continued to draw Mexicans to the region, especially Sonorans, and the pueblo remained predominantly Mexican into the 1850s (24).

The city changed again following the arrival of the railroads in the early 1880s. The Southern Pacific and Santa Fe Railroad companies branded Los Angeles as a halcyon suburban paradise, and outdid one another offering inexpensive one way fares—at one time as low as a dollar—from Midwestern points to the city (Hutchinson 22). The population of the town doubled within a decade, and continued to grow: “Between 1900 and 1930, Los Angeles grew from a town of 100,000 people to a metropolis of over a million” (Romo 5). For Mexican residents this meant the loss of numerical supremacy, and a loss of political power. As the Santa Fe Railroad and the interurban railway expanded, depots were built on the plaza, bringing new industry to the area and finally forcing Mexican migrants to spread out, mainly eastward, from “Sonoratown” (5). A majority Mexican town up until the 1880s, by 1910 the Mexicans become a minority in their former pueblo. George Sanchez writes that, “by the turn of the century, the native-born element in the population had been reduced to a relatively insignificant constituency in the life of the metropolis” (71).

Extraordinary sustained growth characterized Los Angeles in the early twentieth century: “In the twenty-year period ending in 1930, Los Angeles grew at a rate never matched by any other American metropolis; it quadrupled its population from 319,000 to 1.24 million” (Sanchez 71). This rapid industrialization of Los Angeles depended, however, on Mexican labor. In the 1920s, amidst the city’s radical economic growth, industries in need of both skilled and unskilled workers turned to Mexico: “reliable and cheap, Mexican labor became the basis for industrial development” (Romo 6). Thus despite being moved from the plaza, the former center of town, Mexican residents continued to form a crucial part of the city’s economy, and by the 1930s Los Angeles’ industries had grown dependent on the local Mexican labor force (7).

Railroads and interurban railway companies like Pacific Electric also recruited Mexicans and provided them with company housing, usually along the track lines in labor camps, which were often shack towns, on the outskirts of any existing part of town (Romo 69); these camps would transform into barrios in many cases, dotting the suburban enclaves east of LA: “as communities around the labor camps grew, small oases of Mexican residents became surrounded by suburban residents of a different class and nationality. In the middle of suburbia these small Mexican communities evolved into isolated urban satellite barrios outside of the political and cultural mainstream” (69). The railways Mexicans helped build furthered their own isolation, however, as improved urban transportation “hastened the decentralization of the city” (6), and the extended interurban railway line to Boyle Heights helped spark “the massive exodus of Mexicans from the Plaza to the east side” (68).

By 1930 the East Los Angeles barrio was the largest Mexican city in the US, rivaling in size many major US cities (Romo vii); the speed of its growth matched Los Angeles’ own. During this period, rapid suburbanization—permitted by the new interurban railway lines—and

industrial growth—which consumed inner-city residential space—pushed Mexican residents of the old Plaza community to the east (61). The barrio is formed out of a combination of factors: the rapid increases in migration from Mexico between 1910 and 1920 (during Mexico’s revolutionary war and WWI), the booming industry and commerce in the old Mexican plaza that pushed out residential areas, the decentralizing effects of interurban transportation; and a rise in racial tension and subsequent efforts to segregate Mexican residents, which prevented immigrants from moving into the north or west sections of the city, all contributed to the making of East Los Angeles (61-62).

Romo writes that the move to the Eastside gave the Mexican “colonia” more cohesiveness, and insulation, that it had experience downtown:

In the Plaza area, Mexicanos mingled with Europeans and sections of the neighborhood crossed into Chinatown and the Black community. On the east side, by contrast, the barrio had more clearly defined boundaries that gave the community an insulated character. Sociologists of that era considered the segregated features of the Mexican *colonia* an inevitable consequence of racism [...] but they also moved in great numbers to the east side for the opportunity to maintain social relationships that made their transitions to American life easier. In the *colonias* they found Spanish spoken in the stores and churches, and there they could expect to receive credit and meet with others from their village or homeland. The social world of the Mexican immigrant in Los Angeles depended on the primacy of personal relationships. (148-9)

The *colonia*’s self-sufficiency as a community also diminished Mexican residents’ need to interact with the Anglo residents of the city, reinforcing its cultural insulation. The transformation of Los Angeles’ public transportation system and urban planning schema in the

mid 1920s will solidify the neighborhood cohesion, making it not just unnecessary, but excessively difficult, for Eastside residents to move outside the Eastside.

In her book, *Imagining Transit: Race, Gender, and Transportation in Los Angeles*, Sikivu Hutchinson argues that the changing transportation systems of the city have determined the aggressively segregated and sprawling landscape of Los Angeles. Hutchinson claims that “the streetcar companies of the 1910s and 1920s were responsible for promoting a pattern of development that profoundly influenced the racialization of space in the city”: “Looking at the map of [tycoon Henry] Huntington’s railway ‘empire,’ its tendrils extending as far north as San Fernando, and as far east as Redlands in San Bernardino County—the Pacific Electric’s path neatly presaged the suburban shift to eastern counties propelled by highway development” (118). These streetcar lines allowed the movement of Mexicans and Mexican-Americans to the Eastside; however, as railways make way for freeways, the Eastside becomes cut up and cordoned off by new interstates and state highways running through the barrio.

Hutchinson accounts for Los Angeles’ unwieldy sprawl in part through what she calls a “sea change” in American city planning—“always a fundamentally weak enterprise within the American political economy”—during the Depression era: “Planners, embracing decentralization as the best path for ‘urban’ development, began to turn away from their promotion of ‘core-city oriented systems’” (121). In the wake of an era of downtown traffic and congestion during the 1920s, and as support for public transportation initiatives dwindled, the auto began to be integrated into city landscapes. In 1924 Los Angeles city planners, led by Gordon Whitehall, announced their vision for a “horizontal city of the future,” which would break with the conventions of eastern cities and seize upon the automobile as the key to the city’s longstanding and paradoxical desire for antiurban urban development (122).

Los Angeles planners decided to avoid costly and time consuming “core-city problems” by focusing their resources on suburban expansion outside the city center, essentially abandoning the inner city in favor of developing freeway access to spaces further afield. As part of this new mandate, the “horizontal city of the future” plan led to two key changes in urban planning that have resulted in LA’s contemporary segregated landscape: the creation of the planning commission, and the institutionalization of zoning laws (122). The planning commission was composed of land developers, real estate agents, and bankers, who had no ties to the communities that would be under development, and who pushed for street and regional highway development: “Ultimately, instead of making a contribution to the trajectory of the urban landscape, planning merely facilitated the massive segregation of land use and concomitant preservation of private space during the superhighway era” (123). Zoning laws segregated residential space from retail and manufacturing spaces, increasing the need for the automobile, and undermining the mixed-use spaces of the central city. Together, these initiatives “helped solidify the model of the decentered, auto-dependent, racially segregated antiurban city” (122).

The implementation of this new model inordinately affected the East LA barrio, as freeways and public structures began being built upon their community. During the 1950s, just before *Their Dogs Came With Them* takes place, East LA barrio residents faced dual challenges, subject to housing and employment discrimination and thus unable to move. They were subjected to “Urban Renewal” projects that disrupted their neighborhood, as “giant earth movers began carving up East Los Angeles” (Sanchez 169). In the late 1950s and into the 1960s, massive construction of freeways connecting Anglo suburban communities with the city center included the building of high overpasses and six-lane freeways, which crisscrossed the east side (Sanchez 170). Thousands of residents were relocated. Freeway construction eliminated trolley

lines and disrupted public transit, further isolating the Eastside from other areas of town. The highway system would thus radically change the physical landscape of the barrio while conversely radically stabilizing its character as a Mexican *colonia*.

The Abstract and the Concrete: Papers and Freeways in the Barrio

Their Dogs Came With Them takes places from 1960-1970, and oscillates in that timeframe between chapters and within chapters. We follow half a dozen characters, chief among them Ermila Zumaya, Turtle Gamboa, and Tranquilina Tomás. Ermila, Turtle, and Tranquilina are natives to the Eastside; Turtle and Ermila are next-door neighbors on First Street, who as children witnessed the destruction of that street just to the east of their homes in the face of freeway construction of the on-ramps for the 710 Interstate and the Pomona Freeway (Highway 60). Ermila continues to live on First Street with her grandparents; we follow her destructive relationship with Alfonso, a leader in the local McBride Boys gang, her fraught romantic entanglement with Nacho, her "fresh off the boat" cousin from Mexico, and her deepening friendship with her girlfriends and fellow Eastsiders. Turtle is born a girl but who acts, dresses, and is perceived as a boy; now AWOL from her gang (the McBride Boys), and homeless since her mother left her and the house on First Street, she wanders the streets of the barrio, attempting to evade detection from the Quarantine Authority, her own gang, and the rival gang, Lote M. Tranquilina's parents escaped essential indentured servitude in Mexico by crossing the desert illegally, and after starting to raise Tranquilina on the Eastside they move their ministry to Texas, only to return to East Los Angeles after Tranquilina and her mother are brutally sexually assaulted. They find the neighborhood so altered as to be unrecognizable, but Papa Tomás and his family continue to seek out new church members.

Viramontes' narrative continues the history of the East LA barrio as effectively under siege by the city's urban planning and transportation projects. First separated from the city by the very interurban railways many barrio residents built, restrictive covenants and a neglectful public transportation network left the barrio unconnected and insulated by the 1960s. *Their Dogs Came With Them* narrates a new phase of aggressive expansion of freeways by the California Department of Transportation, with its concomitant construction throughout the Eastside. The novel opens in 1960, with the eviction of Chavela, Ermila's neighbor, from her house on First Street. Through this scene, the chapter alludes to the forced eviction of many Eastside residents as multiple, imminent freeway construction projects consumed neighborhood land. After the opening the novel remains largely in the mid to late 1960s, with frequent flashbacks to this earlier period. Viramontes gives us multiple perspectives on the building of the freeways as lived by neighbors on First Street, whose block will eventually live under and between the intersection of two freeways (see Figure 9).



Figure 9. Modern-day First Street, just east of the fictional homes of Cavela, Ermila, and Turtle; 2014

The neighborhood by 1970 is unrecognizable after a series of freeway construction projects that essentially assaulted the Eastside in the 1950s and 1960s:

In the late 1950s the massive construction of freeways linking the Anglo suburban communities with the central business core began. High overpasses and expansive six-lane freeways crisscrossed the east side. Thousands of residents from Boyle Heights, Lincoln Heights, City Terrace, and surrounding neighborhoods were relocated. The freeways divided the neighborhoods without consideration for the residents' loyalties to churches, schools, businesses, or family. (Sanchez 170)

Mike Davis refers to the contemporary clearing out of South Central to make way for the century freeway as “a traumatic removal of housing and restriction of neighborhood ties that was the equivalent of a natural disaster” for its close-knit black community (298); the emotional and physical effects of eviction, earth removal, and freeway construction are no less brutal in the

Eastside. Davis relates that once redevelopment of Downtown began in earnest, “established Black and Chicano neighborhoods were losing several thousand [housing] units a year to freeway construction” (168). Multiple freeways now run through East Los Angeles: I-5, I-10, Highway 101, Highway 60, and I-710, and several of their interchanges between one another now occur literally on top of the Eastside neighborhood. The hyper-connectivity of this section of road for freeway travelers ironically—or tragically—results in a bifurcated and hyper-unconnected east side barrio.

The freeways take on epic significance for the characters, as a malevolent force from the outside: “the bulldozers had started from very far away and slowly arrived on First Street, their muzzles like sharpened metal teeth making way for the freeway” (6). The result would be “the four-freeway exchange” which Viramontes tells us will “reroute 547,300 cars a day through the Eastside and would become the busiest in the city” (169). For Grandmother Zumaya, the freeways are erasing her neighborhood: “If she looked out the window, the freeway construction bit endless trenches into the earth that resembled a moat, fortifying their safety from all that furious violence outside. No sooner would her sense of consolation override any panic than she realized the construction of the freeway was ridding the neighborhood of everything that was familiar to her. The memory of who lived where, who buried their children’s umbilical cords or grew lemons the size of apples, done away” (146). Zumaya’s image of a moat, at first comforting and then terrifying, as she realizes moats as readily keep things trapped within as keep “furious violence” out, indicates the isolation created by the construction. She and the older neighbor Chavela call the bulldozers “earthmovers.” They use more profound language to describe the construction, connecting it to fortified moats, earthmoving and earthquaking. They recognize the history of destruction that the grandchildren do not.

The “lemons the size of apples” belong to Chavela, who lived across the street from Turtle and the Zumayas and whose oft-mentioned blue house is demolished to make way for the freeway interchange. The novel opens at Chavela’s house in 1960, with a very young Ermila listening to Chavela as she packs up for her eviction. Chavela tries to warn the child about the dangers of displacement, herself a victim of an earthquake in “mi tierra firme, mi país”—an ironic expression for a country hit by an earthquake. Chavela connects that catastrophe to the one she is currently victim to, as the Los Angeles earthmovers are forcing her eviction and the subsequent demolition of her home, as well as the other homes on the “dead side” of First Street (7): “Pay attention, Chavela demanded. Because displacement will always come down to two things: earthquakes or earthmovers” (8). The parallel continues between Chavela’s earthquake—“the earthquake’s rubble of wood and clay and water yielded only what was missing; shoes without shoelaces, flowered curtains without windows, a baby rattle without seeds in its hollow belly” (7)—and First Street’s earthmovers—“The rows of vacant houses were missing things. Without hinged doors, the doorframes invited games. Shattered windows had been used as targets” (9). Things left in the wake of earthmoving become characterized by the absences they point to, shoes without shoelaces, curtains without windows, doorframes without doors.

Inanimate objects also stand in for missing people, as those evicted from First Street become equated to their condemned houses. Throughout the text, mentions of First Street are qualified as referring either to “the living side” (or “saved side”) or the “the dead side” (and “other side”). Years later, these terms still reference the 1960 displacements, when neighbors on the un-saved side were being evicted. Those neighbors become as condemned as their homes:

She [Ermila] looked out at her own house and all the other houses on Grandfather’s side of First Street; the houses on the saved side were bright and ornamental like the big

Easter eggs on display at the Segunda counter store. Some of the houses had cluttered porches with hanging plants or yards with makeshift gardens; others had parked cars on front lawns. Some built wrought-iron grate fences, while others had drowsy curtains swaying in wide-open windows. In a few weeks, Chavela's side of the neighborhood, *the dead side of the street*, would disappear forever. The earthmovers had anchored, their tarps whipping like banging sails, their bellies petroleum-readied to bite trenches wider than rivers. In a few weeks the blue house and all the other houses *would vanish just like Chavela and all the other neighbors* (my emphasis). (12)

Viramontes marks the contrast between the robust living side of First Street, with its cluttered porches and makeshift gardens, and the dead side of the street, caught up in the extended simile of the bulldozers as anchored ships widening a river, drowning the houses under water. The earthmovers as a ship, "anchored," with "banging sails," biting trenches "wider than rivers," plays on Chavela's notion of "tierra firme" from earlier, and the idea of moving, or losing, earth (to water). The shock of the scene is that Chavela and the other neighbors are also going to "vanish": somehow part of their homes, they suffer the same fate as the dead side of the street.

The neighbors and houses are linked: if the houses vanish, the neighbors in the houses too must vanish. As a child in the same timeframe, Turtle feels the connection between house and neighbor in similar terms:

By Monday, the earthmovers would be running again, biting trenches wider than rivers; the groan, thump and burr noise of the constant motors would weave into the sound of her own breath whistling the blackened fumes of dust and crumble in nasal cavities. And this sound would only disappear at night when she held her breath or when she looked out from her porch steps as she was doing now to see the blue house like all *the*

other houses disappearing inch by inch just like Chavela and all the other neighbors (my emphasis). (169)

The notion that Chavela and the neighbors will disappear “inch by inch” just like their houses is absurd—that’s not really how humans exit a scene—but Turtle’s sentiment is that both animate and inanimate objects are being methodically removed in measured increments from her landscape. The passage further insists on the inevitable tie of the inanimate and animate, as the remains of the construction become particles in Turtle’s nasal cavities. This braiding of place and person is a characteristic of the barrio perspective, as represented by Chavela, Ermila, Turtle, and Grandmother Zumaya, but also by neighbors throughout the text. For Eastside residents, who are part of a *colonia* that has been isolated from the outside, and that has come to identify itself as its own separate community, being of the place is who you are: place identity and identity itself become inextricable. Thus, neighbors are connected to their homes or stores as though they only constitute an entire self, not susceptible to disappearance or erasure, when they are located together.

The opening scene with Chavela and Ermila introduces both what is being lost, and plants the possibility for how it can be kept, in the face of erasure and change. As we watch Chavela frantically smoke and pack her things, all the while warning Ermila of the dangers of earthmovers, Viramontes scans the house and reports its contents:

The old woman had taped scribbled instructions all over the walls of the house. **Leve message for Josie. Basura on Wetsday. J work # AN 54389.** I need to remember, Chavela had told the child when the child pointed a matchbox at the torn pieces of paper clinging on the walls. **Water flours. Pepto Bismo. Chek gas off.** It’s important to remember my name, my address, where I put my cigarillo down **Call Josie. Chavela Luz**

Ibarra de Cortez. SS #010-56-8336. 4356 East 1st or how the earthquake cracked mi tierra firme, my país, now as far away as my youth, a big boom-crack. The dogs and gente went crazy from having the earth pulled out right from under them. **Cal**

Mr...Lencho's tio sobre apartment. Shut off luz. The earthquake's rubble of wood and clay and water yielded only what was missing; shoes without shoelaces, flowered curtains without windows, a baby rattle without seeds in its hollow belly, an arm without a body; and how the white smell of burnt flesh choked. **J work # AN 54389. Smoke outside.** That's why I began to smoke cigarettes, to hide the white smell even over here in El Norte. (7)

Chavela has written her full name, social security number, and address on scraps of paper on her walls, among other reminders and important data. The written words are in bold in the text, and the narrator intersperses the notes throughout the scene, at times mid-sentence, introducing phrases that at first seem random (“**Cobijas**, one note said; **Cosa de baño**, said another. **No good dreses. Josie's typewriter. Fotos**” (5)), but eventually make sense in terms of the monologue Chavela is giving the Zumaya child. The memory of the smell of charred flesh after an earthquake precedes the scribbled directive to “**Smoke outside**”; when she explains she needs to remember her name and address they follow in bold.

Ermila Zumaya is mute in the scene, but “when the child pointed a matchbox at the torn pieces of paper clinging on the walls” (7), Chavela explains: “I need to remember. [...] It's important to remember” (7). The paper scraps, offset and scattered in bold in the text and scattered throughout the house, serve as Chavela's memory. The novel thus begins by introducing the importance of writing to memory and remembrance. Yet it also gives us an unorthodox kind of writing to remember: the notes combine boring, misspelled, quotidian

reminders (“Water flours. Pepto Bismo” (7)) with crucial, essential facts, like Chavela’s full name and address. Paper functions as memory here, but like memory, it does not discriminate between important memories and everyday reminders, and perhaps it even suggests that the everyday reminders, which locate Chavela in time and space, watering plants, shutting off the lights, J’s identification number at work (which she writes out twice), are as important as her name. The scribbled notes, while anchoring Chavela in the present and in a concrete place, also prompt her, in indirect ways, to recount her deeper memories of the earthquake in her former country. In some ways the profundity of what is written on the notes does not matter; their mere presence in the room recalls for Chavela her past history, even as they fail to remind her of the things they are intended to remind her of: Chavela lights a cigarillo in the kitchen and forgets, again, to “**Smoke outside,**” as she tells the child about the “white smell” of “burnt flesh choked” (7).

The scene delivers two prophecies, one fictional and one metafictional. Chavela’s memory of how “the dogs and gente went crazy from having the earth pulled out right from under them” becomes a prophecy for the imminent catastrophe she is currently living through, as several years later in the novel East LA becomes subject to a barrio-wide quarantine for rabid dogs and its *gente* too go crazy in various ways. Chavela recognizes her role as prophet: “I’m trying to tell you how it feels to have no solid tierra under you. Listen to me! Where could you run? The sound of walls cracking, the ceiling pushed up into a mushroom cloud. Do you need Draño to clean out those ears of yours?” (7). The next line drives home the tie between paper and memory: “But the child heard it, a long rip of paper” (7). The role of paper hints at the second prophecy. Chavela is clearly illiterate; without the narrator to tell the story her notes are lost. As in *The People of Paper, Their Dogs Came With Them* will enumerate the dangers of paper. In

Plascencia's text paper obscures Mexican residents with a public history that excludes them; here paper renders barrio residents second class citizens, fomenting the Eastside's fear of official documents. However, in both works (albeit to different degrees), paper also becomes the solution to the erasure of the community. Like Chavela's strips of reminders, or Ermila's memory of ripping paper to recall something, Viramontes' text itself is serving as the Eastside's memory, giving voice to Mexican immigrants like Chavela as well as Chicanos like Ermila, writing it down to remember, because "it's important to remember."

Viramontes must justify her use of paper, as throughout the novel papers are used to restrict and coerce Eastside residents. By 1970, the ostensible present of the novel, the construction that kills the "dead side" of First Street is complete: "Four freeways crossing and interchanging, looping and stacking in the Eastside, but if you didn't own a car, you were fucked. Many were, and this is something Ermila always said in her head: You're fucked" (176). By this time the characters now face a new form of exclusion and isolation: The Quarantine Authority, a shadowy governmental force that declares an alleged rabies outbreak in the barrio, and decrees that access in and out of the affected area—a map which contains the Eastside—be restricted, imposing a curfew on its residents, enforced by police, and operating nightly helicopter sweeps and shootings of all undomesticated animals. For the neighborhood, the QA is but a continuation of the assault that began with the freeways: "Ten years later the child [Ermila] becomes a young woman who will recognize the invading engines of the Quarantine Authority helicopters because their whirl of blades above the roof of her home, their earth-rattling explosive motors, will surpass in volume the combustion of engines driving the bulldozer tractors, slowly, methodically unspooling the six freeways" (12).

The Quarantine Authority, or QA, as they are usually referred to in the novel, has descended on East LA by 1970 to prevent the spread of rabies. Ermila and her friends, as well as Turtle and Tranquilina's ministry, all exist inside the limits of a barrio-wide quarantine, an ominous map of exclusion:

The girlfriends lived within the shaded boundaries of the map printed in English only and distributed by the city. From First Street to Boyle to Whittier and back to Pacific Boulevard, the roadblocks enforced a quarantine to contain a potential outbreak of rabies. Back in early February, a pamphlet delivered by the postman read: *Rising cases of rabies reported in the neighborhood (see shaded area) have forced Health officials to approve, for limited time only, the aerial observation and shooting of undomesticated mammals. Unchained and/or unlicensed mammals will not be exempt.* (54)

The boundaries of the quarantine—First to Boyle, Whittier to Pacific—neatly demarcate the borders of the Eastside barrio. The pamphlet's printing in English only and its distribution by "the city" doubly indicate that this authority is being imposed from the outside. The quarantine enforces a curfew, requiring residents to show an ID card to get in and out of the neighborhood after sunset. The absence of any medical aspect to the quarantine, such as checking entering and exiting patients for symptoms of rabies, suggest that the residents themselves present a danger to the city, and that the "undomesticated," "unchained," and "unlicensed" mammals cited here as easily refer to the neighbors as to the barrio's stray dogs. The complete irony of shooting undomesticated or unlicensed mammals without exemption isn't revealed until the final scene, when Turtle is gunned down by the Quarantine Authority. The roadblocks of the quarantine stymie characters throughout the novel. Ermila is caught waiting in lines at First Street multiple times after curfew; Ana tries to evade them by taking the 60 Freeway, and hits gridlock instead;

Turtle goes to great lengths on foot to avoid them. The roadblocks, however, do not affect the freeways, which run above the barrio and are thus not subject to the quarantine.

The QA controls barrio residents through the use of blockaded checkpoints, as the quarantine requires residents to carry proof of identification: “Four months of waiting in lines longer than the devil’s tail only to be interrogated by the *culeros* for *valid government documentation*, from eight in the evening to six in the morning” (55). Stood up by her boyfriend Alfonso after school and thus failing to get home before curfew because she has to take a bus instead of a ride, Ermila waits in line behind a frantic woman without identification who wants access to her house to get rent receipts for the QA. As she waits Ermila considers the absurdity of the checkpoints:

The city officials demanded paper so thin and weightless, it resisted the possibility of upholding legal import to people like herself [Ermila], her cousin Nacho, her girlfriends and all the other neighbors with or without children who had the misfortune of living within the shaded designated areas. Didn’t the QA know that in the Eastside getting a valid ID was more complicated than a twelve-year-old purchasing a six-pack from Going Bananas [a store clerk’s drunk brother]? A neighbor’s idea of validity was totally incongruent with the QA’s norms or anyone else’s, for that matter. Business was done differently on the Eastside. In need of a dentist? Wait for Dr. Padilla from Tijuana the first of each month, home visits with a leather bag full of clanging metal tools and novacaine injections. What about a loan? The lending was done between two men, one of which had a reputation for breaking bones. Need legal status? For those without papers, legal status became a shift in perspective, a matter of dubious demarcation, depending on who the border belonged to.

No one in the Eastside believed in paper. Most of the Eastside stores didn't even give paper receipts. Ray, the Japanese owner of the Friendly Shop, calculated sums on paper bags. La Bootie had an adding machine that she punched and cranked with amazing precision. No one questioned the calculations as long as all agreed that the poor didn't cheat the poorer, and, of course, your word was your word (emphasis mine) (63).

The neighborhood's notion of identity and validity is different from that of city officials. The thinness and lightness of paper defies the common sense of the barrio, which "resists the possibility" that objects so frivolous could uphold "legal import." "Legal status" in particular is arbitrary on the Eastside, "a matter of dubious demarcation." Viramontes extends the disdain or disbelief of paper to everyday financial transactions on the Eastside, as even store receipts are not used. Instead of paper proof of transaction, in the Eastside proofs are oral: the calculations were all considered valid because, "of course, your word was your word." So the checkpoints become fraught with residents who lack the proper pieces of paper to gain entry into their own neighborhood.

Viramontes' style here mimics the barrio's oral, rather than written, mode of communicating. In the manuscript version of the novel, currently housed at the California Ethnic and Multicultural Archives (CEMA) at UC Santa Barbara, Viramontes changes the language here from the draft by removing prior anaphora, making the passage sound more aural than literary (Manuscript, 76). The first draft read: "Need a dentist? [...] Need a loan? [...] Need legal status?" (76). Substituting a colloquial "what" for "need" here—"What about a dentist?"—recasts this as a speech or monologue, spoken out loud, as opposed to the more studied feel of repeating the introductory phrase, "need a." This slight change alters the tenor of the passage, making it read like a conversation among those waiting in line. The novel's construction here

imitates the barrio's suspicion of paper, by highlighting the spoken over the written, while ironically using that very medium to convey its alliance with neighborhood customs.

The disbelief in paper turns into a fear of its fragility in the roadblock line: "But there they lined up, behind Ermila, these unquestioning neighbors leaning on their canes as the thinning colors of twilight made them nostalgic for their cluttered, coffee-smelling kitchens, or their delicious beds. [...] They fisted gas company bills, birth certificates, bogus driver's licenses, anything to get themselves home. The longer the wait, *the larger the nervous obsession with the handled paper*" (emphasis mine) (63). "Fisted" tightly like talismans against the QA, the neighbors' documents, forged and real, are trusted by the "unquestioning" residents as their only key for entry. The nervousness provoked by the "handled paper" makes the neighbors seem like "illegal aliens" attempting to cross an international border, yet while some of the documents are bogus, these residents are not illegal aliens of the barrio: they have cluttered kitchens and beds waiting for them inside the neighborhood. Natives treated as foreigners, those in line recognize through their nervousness that their own proof of belonging is a too-thin and too-light piece of paper. The elision of two kinds of legality—are the neighbors "illegal aliens" to the barrio or "illegal aliens" to the country, or both?—returns later in the story when Ermila watches the women of uncertain nationality waiting for the bus outside her house: "They sat on the bus bench, canvas bags beside them, filled with the day's essentials: fearlessness scrambled with huevos con chorizo and wrapped in a tortilla *as thin as the documents they carried to prove legality*" (emphasis mine) (176).

This view of paper as a tool of Eastside oppression foreign to the barrio is both upheld and challenged throughout the text. In terms of legal or financial documents, yes: the Eastside does not believe in paper. However, paper elsewhere in the text carries a lot of meaning:

Chavela's scribbled notes for instance. Or the ripped paper Ermila hears when Chavela speaks. Or Ermila's dream of becoming "an empty wine bottle being jammed with a note and then tossed out into the ocean, rolling on the spume of the sea until someone discovered her" (66). Or Obdulio the butcher's tender regard for the letters from his wife in Mexico, which he rereads so often the paper grows thinner: "Obdulio felt the fold of the letter in his back pocket and it was as thin as his wallet" (137). The thinness or fragility of the documents is always emphasized, in the QA line, in the womens' bags, in Obdulio's wallet. But the thinness of Obdulio's letter indicates that it is something precious and highly valuable. These other kinds of paper, not imposed upon residents from the outside but internal to their community, which are used to communicate and remember, *are* believed in by the Eastside. As an author *writing* about the barrio, Viramontes evokes the neighborhood's wariness of paper as an implement used to control and confine, but as an author writing about *her own* barrio, she demonstrates how the written can become a positive medium, when the residents themselves utilize it. Viramontes uses a number of literary techniques to produce this other type of paper—paper as a precious tie to distant places or persons, paper as reminder, paper as a note in a bottle hoping to escape to a wider audience, paper as integral to Chavela's directive that "it's important to remember."

The Power of Place: Eastside Memory

In her 1995 book *The Power of Place*, Dolores Hayden's study of urban landscapes and the preservation of underrepresented histories, she introduces philosopher Edward S. Carey's definition of "place memory": "it is *the stabilizing persistence of place as a container of experiences* that contributes so powerfully to its intrinsic memorability. [...] We might even say that *memory is naturally place-oriented or at least place-supported* [emphasis mine]" (46).

Hayden argues that our criteria for what deserves to be preserved or protected as a monument is

wrong: architectural achievement, marked by aesthetics and usually by the amount of wealth that went in to the building's construction, has been valued over the preservation of buildings that reflect social history, thus creating the illusion that the poor do not actually have a history, as told by place. *The Power of Place* advocates for the preservation of not just architectural monuments, but the buildings such as tenements, factories, meeting halls, and churches that "have housed working people's everyday lives" (11): "Restoring significant shared meanings for many neglected urban places first involves claiming the entire urban cultural landscape as an important part of American history" (11). Attendant on this re-conception of what is worthy of preservation is the recognition that public spaces house memories, and that places also house both personal and social *identities*: "Public space can help to nurture this more profound, subtle, and inclusive sense of what it means to be an American. Identity is intimately tied to memory: both our personal memories (where we have come from and where we have dwelt) and the collective or social memories interconnected with the histories of our families, neighbors, fellow workers, and ethnic communities. *Urban landscapes are storehouses for these social memories*" (emphasis mine) (9).

Taking up Hayden's formulation of "place memory" as "the stabilizing persistence of place as a container of experiences," and working from the assumption that identity is tied to memory, we can see how *Their Dogs Came With Them* delineates a barrio's memory and sense of itself through its neighbors' experiences of the places that have come to define them. Hayden also highlights the stakes of urban development and massive demolition and construction: the potential loss of those storehouses of social memories and the loss of a stabilizing container for shared experience. The characters face the disorientation and sadness of watching parts of the neighborhood be destroyed, and with them the memories that had been housed there. To

counteract this loss, the novel attempts to become its own place container: by incessantly telling and retelling place stories, by walking the streets and recording all its details, and by transforming the reader into an honorary barrio resident, Viramontes is creating a new place, on the page, for barrio memories to persist in.

We've seen how the Eastside perspective on identity links person to place, so that the loss of a neighbor's house results in the loss of the neighbor in a profound way. However, another characteristic of this barrio perspective is to use the power of place memory to keep both houses and neighbors from disappearing forever, when that linkage between person and place is ruptured. Although by 1960 the “dead” side of First Street is gone, ten years later each of the characters who lives or has lived on First Street refers to the “living side” of it whenever indicating where they're heading, consistently positing the “dead side” that has supposedly vanished. Like the continued presence of the dead side of First Street in linguistic memory, Ermila's reveries, as well as the memories of Turtle, Grandmother and Grandfather Zumaya which Viramontes returns to throughout the text, keep Chavela and the other side of First Street from disappearing. The novel opens with Chavela's “disappearance” from the neighborhood, as well as her house and the other houses on the “dead side” of First Street. Yet Chavela and both sides of First Street remain, in the memories of those who have lived there. Turtle and Ermila bring Chavela back into the present through habitual remembering. The street itself serves as the cue for these memories, bringing to mind for the characters pieces of the neighborhood past they had almost forgotten.

As a child, Ermila remembers Chavela, after she moves out but before her house is destroyed, by going to the house. “The child embedded a finger on the last notch of the last cigarette burn and then she remembered that Chavela had laid the cigarette down on the

windowsill to lift a cardboard box to a chair. The old woman had resumed packing plates while the last cigarette burned the last brown notch on the white paint of the windowsill and when the child placed her fingers there to remember—boxes, tin cans, scribbled notes, pyramids and cigarettes burning—she rolled each finger back and forth” (13). The windowsill notches, like the things “yielding only what was missing” that Chavela and Ermila share in their torn apart landscapes, gestures to the absent cigarettes. Ermila seeks out the memory, placing “her fingers there to remember,” and the notch carries Ermila from the cigarette to its smoker, reconstituting her last conversation with Chavela. Twice she only begins to remember after she embeds “a finger on the last notch of the last cigarette burn.” Indeed, she places her finger there *to remember*, as if the memory cannot be accessed apart from its physical reminder. The state of her yard also reminds the child of something else missing: “Chavela would never have allowed her yard to weed wild, never allowed cans of trash to be scattered by the street dogs or left to the crows who pecked at coffee grinds and cucumber peelings” (9).

The living side of First Street continues to produce memories of the dead side. Like the windowsill notches, these memories require a physical reminder, and are spurred by place memory. When Turtle hides out in the Chinese cemetery on First Street—across from her old house—she is forced to remember her street memories by the overwhelming physical reminders. The cemetery itself brings up unwanted past moments: “Wasn’t this the spot where she was jumped senseless, here, to be initiated into McBride? She could never forget that night, didn’t want to relive it and tried to get the hell out of the memory” (220). The place forces her to remember, against her will; she refers to the memory as physical, something she has to get out of. The pull of place memory in the Chinese cemetery is too strong—“this was her

neighborhood, the one she grew up in, right across the street from where she stood now” (219)—and so she looks out and remembers:

If there was one thing she didn't want to do tonight, it was remember, and despite herself, she stared through the diamond wire fence at their old house. Of course the years would change it, the history of various renters, a family or two, but except for Turtle's landmark, the Zumaya house next door, their old house was hardly recognizable. Cars parked in front of the porch like some wrecking yard. And the house was painted a god-awful baby pink. Diapers hung on the old laundry line between the T-poles in the backyard where she and Luis used to build their tent. (221)

In spite of the changes to the house—*rascuache* front yard décor in place of Turtle's mother's thriving nopales, diapers hanging instead of a makeshift tent—the old house brings with it a series of unpleasant memories for Turtle: “It had been years since, and no, Turtle didn't want to remember how careless they were to the house and each other. Broken windows veined with duct tape, Amá's broken bones, tiles eroded and fallen to the ground like teeth, Luis's locura, paint peeled, Frank's explosive temper and the stink of a thousand regrets like an old discarded refrigerator lingered in their rented house. But a home? You only realized you had one once you didn't” (221). Echoing the barrio perspective of persons *as* places, Turtle's memories conflate the house and its inhabitants, juxtaposing broken windows with her mother's broken bones, carelessness towards the place and towards each other, and emotions like anger and regret palpable and stinking like an abandoned refrigerator. The inanimate objects too become human, as tiles turn into teeth and windows are veined like appendages. The distinction Turtle makes between the rented house and a home hinges on how a home achieves this alchemy of tying

people to a place in one's memory, even if the memories are unsavory. However, without the prompt of her old rented *house* in view, Turtle would not have remembered her *home*.

The equation of people and things that Turtle alludes to becomes concrete throughout the novel. Turtle seems incapable of unbraiding her memories of her family from her memories of the house: "The nopal cactus was the only thing that thrived in their small rented house on First Street. The walls had absorbed so many years of disappointments, bad plumbing, strife, arguments, electrical shorts and temper outages that the wallpaper became unglued, the tiles fell from their grouting, the toilet chain in the water tank busted. Amá *was part of the house*, carelessly repaired with cardboard and duct tape like her cracked windows. Frank *was part of the house*, a loose, exposed wire ready to electrocute anyone who touched him [emphasis mine]" (161). Turtle, and Viramontes, tie the neighbors to their houses, in this scene through adjectival pairings of emotional and physical states that is just shy of zeugma. Turtle's house is worn down by both electrical and emotional shorts ("temper outages"), and its wallpaper is undone by bad plumbing and disappointment. Turtle's mother is "carelessly repaired," like the house, with makeshift stopgaps like cardboard and tape. Later, Turtle's older brother Luis becomes "an infinite part of the freeways" (164). The nopal cactus—a symbol perhaps of an indigenous creature—is the only thing that not only survives, but thrives.

At the end of that same chapter, the freeway on-ramp bridge that is under construction becomes human: "It resembles a mangled limb, as if a monster dinosaur had bitten into it, and a mesh of electrical wires hung out of broken cement like arteries dripping mounds of heaped-up rubble" (169). The mention of electrical wires recalls Frank's bad wiring (as "a loose, exposed wire" (161)) and the "electrical shorts and temper outages" of Turtle's house on First Street. The reversal becomes complete: the freeways are living, are new neighbors in fact, and the old

neighbors are becoming the objects that surround them, the freeways, the dilapidated houses, the bad wiring. At the very end of the chapter, the construction resembles “trenches being readied for a mass burial,” whether of the old neighbors or the new ones is unclear, and Turtle hears her name spoken by “no one.” Turtle tries to get back into her house but is locked out, and eventually is “suctioned at once and forever into the prolonged length of the street’s mournful plea” (172). Her mother a broken house, her father a loose wire, and her brother a freeway, Turtle finally “goes bad” and becomes the street that she grew up on.

As the neighbors become their neighborhood, the freeways continue to become animate: the new, unwanted neighbors in the Eastside. Tranquilina and Mama get a donation from the new butcher of El Zócalo Fine Meats (after Obdulio goes home to Zacatecas, Mexico), but find themselves getting lost on their way back to the church:

The two women struggled through the rain in a maze of unfamiliar streets. Whole residential blocks had been gutted since their departure, and they soon discovered that Kern Street abruptly dead-ended, forcing them to retrace their trail. The streets Mamá remembered had once connected to other arteries of the city, rolling up and down hills, and in and out of neighborhoods where neighbors of different nationalities intersected with one another. To the west, La Pelota Panadería on Soto Street crossed Canter’s Kosher Deli on Brooklyn Avenue, which crossed Pol’s Chinese Kitchen on Pacific Boulevard to the east. But now the freeways amputated the streets into stumped dead ends, and the lives of the neighbors itched like phantom limbs in Mama’s memory: La Señora Ybarra’s tobacco smell and deep raspy voice; the Gómez father’s garden of tomatoes; Old Refugia, who had two goats living in her cluttered backyard and who took the goats to graze at the edge of the Chinese cemetery before opening hours.

The city of Tranquilina's birth was hardly recognizable. (33)

Here as elsewhere Viramontes connects disappeared places to disappeared people: "the freeways amputated the streets," which had formerly served as the barrio's arteries—both literal and figurative, connecting it to other ethnic enclaves, resulting in the stumped and dead-ended lives of neighbors that "itched like phantom limbs in Mama's memory." However, while the freeways do isolate the East side, stopping flows to communities to the west and east, Mama can still conjure the memories of the neighbors whose streets have been amputated. Señora Ybarra's smell and Gómez's tomato garden and Old Refugia's goat grazing practices are still brought to mind by the streets, even though they are now dead ends, and their neighborhood looks "hardly recognizable." The simile of a phantom limb is apt, as Mama has a memory tied to a location that she continues to feel even after that specific location marker (the limb itself) is gone. This passage simultaneously demonstrates the importance of places as containers of memory, and Hayden's notion that memory is "place oriented" and even "place supported," while showing that even in the absence of a specific place support—the street, the garden—the memories remain in the landscape. The ability to remember at the site of a place memory even in spite of fundamental changes to the location is one powerful way that the characters maintain their sense of community. Viramontes introduces more active ways in which characters spark their barrio memories as well.

The characters combat the erasure of places and identities in various ways. Ermila and her girlfriends use "talkstory." Her friend Mousie mentions her brother Yoyo—killed in Vietnam—everyday to the girls, trying "to cross-stitch him together to recapture his soul. Her friends understood. She mentioned him at least once a day, so that no one, least of all her, forgot that he lived until his nineteenth year, and punched arms, went to school with purple lips, reeked

of bargain cologne, made her feel special because she was his sister” (61). They fight forgetting by remembering out loud, and they create stories to imagine landscapes other than the one they are in: “their only private property were the stories they continued to create and re-create in a world which only gave them one to tell. [...] With conviction, they designed escape routes, rehearsed their breakout and hurled their futures over the roadblocks of their marooned existence. Lest they forget that silence is destructive, they pitted each other against the sorrowful and infinite solitude, each and every hour” (62). The girls talk to create new futures for themselves, to imagine other places and identities, and to remember where they have come from.

Turtle and her former gang, the McBride Boys, combat erasure through written words rather than spoken ones:

Tonight the McBride Homeboys would claim Luis Lil Lizard by searching out the freshly laid cement of the freeway bridges and sidewalks in order to record their names, solidify their bond, to proclaim eternal allegiance to one another so that in twenty, thirty years from tonight, their dried cemented names would harden like sentimental fossils of a former time. The huge slabs of concrete would provide inviting canvases for the boys, an exhilarating challenge of the best kind, beyond anything else offered tonight, and Caltrans would try not to lay cement over the weekend, too many vandals destroying property. (164)

Not only do they assert their own name, and their own territory, the blocks surrounding McBride Avenue that they control; they also assert themselves against the encroachment of the freeways and Caltrans’ (the California Department of Transportation) construction. The manuscript version of the novel reveals that Viramontes does quite a bit of revising in the following paragraph in order to emphasize this gravity, to explain the motivation for the taggers to

proclaim their names, and their allegiances, to the neighborhood—and to the Caltrans invaders. She begins the paragraph stating that “The boys would never know that in thirty years from tonight, the tags would crack from earthquakes, the force of muscular tree roots, from the trampling of passerby,” and then in the margins of the draft she adds the damning line, “become as faded as ancient engravings, as old as the concrete itself, as cold and clammy as a morgue table” (Manuscript, 207). “Faded,” “ancient engravings” immediately conjures the image of old tombstones in an older graveyard, perhaps even alluding to the six cemeteries which dot McBride Boys’ territory, and whose outer walls and sidewalks are today still popular sites for graffiti tags, over forty years later (“On one of the brick pillars [of Evergreen cemetery], which held the gate hinges, Turtle saw the old wash-out tag: **McBride Boys Controla**” (222)).

The conversion of the tag to a tombstone epitaph “in thirty years” foreshadows the contracted life spans of the gang members, as Luis Lil Lizard dies in Vietnam while most likely still in his teens, and Turtle will be shot down in the closing scene of the novel. Thought of this way, tags and epitaphs or “engravings” both connect the name to the person in order to honor them publicly; the only distinction is that in the latter medium the person is no longer living. The image of “old” concrete strengthens the metaphor of tags as tombstones, and the “morgue table” makes the transition explicit. The language here also anthropomorphizes objects, especially the morgue table, which is “cold and clammy.” “Cold” is equally viable as an adjective for things and persons, but when paired with “clammy” it can only refer to inanimate things through a conceptual reach. The result is a morgue table that takes on the characteristics of what it carries, becoming as dead as the person on it. This prestidigitation follows logic identical to that of the tags: the cement slab or engraving *takes on* the identity of the name inscribed there.

The metaphorical yoking of tag to tombstone continues in the next lines, to which Viramontes adds the phrase “eternal bonds” in the manuscript (Manuscript, 207): “And in those thirty years the cracks would be repaired [...] making the boys’ eternal bonds look worn and forgotten. Not even concrete engravings would guarantee immortality, though tonight they would all feel immortal” (164). “Eternal,” “immortality” and “immortal,” all call up Catholic rhetoric of immortal souls and eternal rest. Like a gravestone, these tags are meant to confer a life for the departed after death, offering a form of immortality. The import of the tags can thus apparently not be overstated, as they are created to represent eternal bonds and to attempt personal immortality. Not coincidentally Turtle’s mind shifts from the tags to the ghost stories Luis tells her about how freeway construction workers dug up dead bodies, by digging too close to the Chinese cemetery, “chewing up coffins” (218), and decide to pave over them. “Fuck it, keep plowing and acting like it’s no big deal, sabes? I swear to God. Who cares? Like it’s nothing to throw in the skulls and bones and shit into the cement mixer, act like they never found the bones. So now all those little bones tick to find the rest of their family bones to tock, you know?” (218).

Given the import of these tags for defining both the gang and their territory, the destruction of the tags by other neighbors is a grave offense (pun intended). Turtle remembers Luis’ initiation when she looks at their former tags on the Third Street Bridge, but in the present they’ve been vandalized, not by Caltrans, but by a rival gang:

She could read, Turtle wasn’t stupid. The cross-outs, tags, new gang emblems trashed all over McBride’s graffiti on the walls of the bridge—all bad news. Lote M had fingered out the McBride Boys big time, singled them out for a class-grade-A, full-blown showdown. Tearing off McBride balls, Turtle was thinking [...] The Lote M vatos meant

business and crudely chiseled away at the calligraphic tags—**Alfonso aka Big Al, Sir Santos, Palo, Lucho Libre, Luis Lil Lizard, Turtle, McBride Boys Que Rifa.**

Perforating new conquerors over old ones with a blunt hammer, the remaining tags erased, shitted on, with strokes of red runny spray paint. Bold, ballsy headlines, Turtle was thinking, staring at Luis's old sketch of a lizard, a blueprint for his tattoo, now effaced under red initials from Lote M. That's exactly what the Maravilla vatos planned to do on the bridge, send a dispatch announcing erasure. (217) (see Figure 10)



Figure 10. "Turtle wasn't stupid. The cross-outs, tags, new gang emblems [...] all bad news." A few graffiti tags outside the Evergreen cemetery on First Street; 2014.

The novel's characters are preoccupied with themes of disappearance and memory; tags are another way to try to prevent erasure or vanishing, and so to attempt to "erase" someone else's tags is a serious offense. The insult of tags being tagged-over or effaced is not only ground for a gang war, but is specifically tied to the taggers themselves; Turtle insists on the physical, anatomical nature of the affront, referring to it as "tearing off McBride balls" by "shitting on" old conquerors." Here, as throughout the text, erasure is far from total, and in fact it is ironically preserved by the objects being threatened. The names are still visible, the tags, cross-outs, and new gang emblems are all visible as a palimpsest of the conflict. Further, the sight of the tags, even when they've been tagged over, sends Turtle into a reverie about how the tags got there and his memories of his brother Luis Lizard. The bridge hosts the memory of all the taggers, as once again, place memory prevents erasure in the Eastside, though the threat of erasure seems to be place memory's constant fear.

Viramontes' literary treatment of the tags indicates that she shares the gang's reverence for the written name and the power of the tag to solidify place memory, and suggests that her own writing project has similar aims: to preserve place memory and the identity of those who live in the barrio. In the manuscript, she offers a depiction of the tags that comes with specific instructions:

Too many warning signs that justify menacing threats, more sheriffs patrolling giving the boys a hit-and-run game of tagging, spray-painting all over the signs in laugh-out-loud violation, becoming the Caltrans contractor's worst nightmare.

On a Monday morning the workers would find:

MR SPEEDY x POOR x SIDE; BROOKLYN DIABLOS c/s; RUEBEN, ERNIE,
RALPH; EL CHINO JOCKEY x Lote M/ LIL LIZARD, SANTOS X McBRIDE QUE
RIFA; RUDE LOVES LA CAT BERNIECE POR VIDA. (164)

Note the “c/s” or “con safos” attached to “Brooklyn Diablos.” Viramontes insisted in the manuscript draft, with bold underlining and two extra large, circled, all caps “STET”s, that these names were to be written *as is*, in bold, in all capitalized letters. Viramontes also continues her education of the editor, offering a definition in the margin: “game of tagging=spray-painting all over the signs” (Manuscript, 207).¹⁸ Considering Viramontes feels she needs to explain to her early reader what “tagging” means and how the McBride Boys saw it as a challenge to deface the warning signs the sheriff posted against trespassing and destruction of property, her emphasis that the names she’s listing be protected takes on new significance. Viramontes suspects the editor will not recognize the “x”s common to street tags, the “c/s” marker, the logic of what is capitalized and what is not; furthermore, even in the fictional world of the novel it matters to Viramontes that these names not be mis-written; her anxiety over their “performance,” as it were, mimics the gravity of the tags for the boys themselves, who search the “freshly laid cement of the freeway bridges and sidewalks” to “record their names,” to have their names harden, fossilize, and remain as a testament to their identities twenty, thirty years from now. We will see

¹⁸ Throughout the *Their Dogs Came With Them* manuscript, Viramontes writes in the margins to explain aspects of Chicano culture to her editor, who seems unaware of the meaning of phrases like “con safos.” Elsewhere Viramontes elucidates phrases for her non-Chicano reader(s): in the margins of one passage she writes, “La Bootie is a person,” with checkmarks to make sure the copyeditor has not substituted the “she” pronoun later in the sentence: “La Bootie had an adding machine that she punched and cranked with amazing precision” (Manuscript, 76). To a Spanish speaker, “La Bootie” is clearly a name (if an unusual one) for a female, based on the “la” pronoun, but apparently the copyeditor conflated the store name and the storeowner’s name in earlier drafts.

below how the novel itself also seeks to endure as a kind of barrio tag, attempting to preserve the place identity it represents in the face of disappearance and destruction.

Text as Barrio, Barrio as Text: *Their Dogs Came With Them* As Place Memory

The manuscript of *Their Dogs Came With Them* reveals a pedagogical relationship between Viramontes and her early readers: throughout, the author adds marginalia for the editor, explaining terms native to the barrio, and offering her rationale for utilizing unorthodox grammar, punctuation, or capitalization, when the accepted English standards for these do not match the norms of Eastside communication. Viramontes clearly seeks to include the editor in her audience, to make the barrio legible to a broader audience, and this desire for inclusion extends to the audience of the completed novel. Utilizing a number of stylistic techniques, Viramontes, in essence, turns the reader into a neighbor.

Viramontes shapes her narrative so that we remember moments and encounter characters before we realize who those characters are or what those moments mean. Then the narrative will return to the moment, or introduce a character, often from the perspective of a different character, and we will suddenly realize that we remember already meeting that person, or already having that memory of an event told earlier and out of context. It's a disorienting experience of reading that mimics the non-linear and decontextualized nature of memory. She keeps the reader from becoming totally unmoored, however, by painstakingly tracking the movements of her characters in the barrio. Here, too, by learning street names, landmarks, paths in and out of roadblocks, journeys on foot, by bus, and very occasionally by car, we come to recognize the streets and to remember them as they reappear in the narrative. Viramontes makes the neighborhood streets feel like the reader's own. Anchored in streets we now know, and encountering characters we've met before, and returning to memories of events we now feel like

we've lived through, *Their Dogs Came With Them* achieves a strange prestidigitation, transforming the reader into a member of the East Los Angeles community it is remembering.

The narrator of *Their Dogs Came With Them* traces the paths of its characters with remarkable precision. Street names, storefront names, which bus routes are taken where, which freeways are taken in the rare event of a car scene (there are only two in the novel). The reader is constantly located in a specific part of the barrio, and Viramontes always tells us which direction we're headed in and what houses, landmarks, landscapes, or persons are there. This anchoring offsets the disorientation of the narrative structure, which moves around in time without warning and which oscillates among the perspectives of over a dozen characters. It also makes the barrio familiar to the reader. After following multiple characters on multiple trajectories as they return to First Street, we start to know the Zumaya front porch, its avocado tree, and its unhappy residents. We even feel like we know Chavela's old blue house, long since demolished, across the street. There are several journeys taken by the characters, most within the limits of the barrio. However, Turtle's night-long mission to stay awake, stay undetected by the rival gang, and stay warm outside is the most detailed and extended journey of the novel. By mapping her steps, Viramontes steeps the reader even further in the barrio, offering up the neighborhood's deep history, as told through its many cemeteries. By the end of Turtle's vigil—which ends with her death (spoiler!)—the “dead side” of First Street takes on new meaning.

We see this both in Turtle's walk through the neighborhood, as well as my own four decades after. Juxtaposing the two neighborhood-wide treks illustrates the confining nature of the barrio and its resistance to foot traffic and outside visitors; it also excavates the history of a neighborhood essentially transformed into a giant graveyard and freeway for Los Angeles' city center. This closeness and confinement of the Eastside is represented literarily by the Quarantine

Authority: the sharply demarcated lines of the fictional QA's shaded area feels very accurate compared to the lived experience of being a pedestrian in the neighborhood. The anchoring in place that Viramontes achieves through Turtle's precisely detailed all-night barrio walk also allows her the freedom to move the reader about in time and space, creating myriad intersections of characters with one another throughout the novel, and crafting place memories for us and for barrio residents in the novel itself. The ease with which a reader can, even forty years later, use *Their Dogs Came With Them* as an accurate map and representation of the eastside speaks to the success of Viramontes' project of preserving the barrio on paper.

We first meet Turtle at First and Hastings, scoping storefronts for the possibility of food she can steal. Next we meet her on the Third Street Bridge through the eyes of the homeless "ubiquitous woman." Turtle wanders for several hours to stay warm, and then, "after two hours of walking, she arrived in the Eastside late" (218), and must cut a path to avoid the QA roadblocks. She decides it safer to stay with the deceased, and she takes Third Street again to walk past Calvary cemetery. From here she turns on Eastern, then vaults over "the short brick wall" into the first Serbian cemetery. From there she "hopped out and jogged across the severed deserted remains of Second Street, and then climbed the wire-mesh fence of the second Serbian cemetery. She stood under an ancient Eucalyptus until she was sure the coast was clear" (219). She mentions the names of those in the Serbian cemetery as strange but familiar. While no one she knows currently living in the Eastside has names like these, the cemetery's presence in the barrio has made such names common to her, and the Serbian community, at least in death, has been subsumed into the neighborhood: "she walked in a rumor of lamppost light past the engraved markers with names like Radulovich, Babich, Bezunar, Mijanovich. In a fenced-up country, the names were exotic, safely protected from the outside of the living, from the spray-

painted names like Gallo, Spook, Lencho, Fox, BamBam, Wilo x *Con Safos*” (219). The names are “exotic,” but they need no protection from the living, the way the Chicano names tagged outside do—hence the application of a “con safos” to the graffiti. The barrio under quarantine is as much a “fenced-up country” as the Serbian cemetery, and Turtle seems to recognize the kinship (see Figure 11).



Figure 11. The Serbian cemetery at the edge of the freeway; 2014.

To a reader it seems jarring or a contrivance of fiction that Turtle passes through so many cemeteries (by the end of her all-night journey there are five). However, in reality the Eastside is indeed beset on all sides with dead people. Walking the neighborhood draws in relief the effects on pedestrians of having so many cemeteries in close proximity. Since the 1870s, the Eastside functioned as the burgeoning city of Los Angeles’ main burial site. Beginning with the Evergreen cemetery in 1877, multiple cemeteries were built here. A few of these, such as Evergreen and Calvary cemetery, built in 1896, house some of the illustrious founders of Anglo Los Angeles as well as prominent developers, who, as Turtle later mentions, are now the

namesakes for the streets of LA: Lankershim, Van Nuys, Holman, Hollenbeck, Bixby. Other sites were purchased from the city for various ethnic and religious communities, some of whom lived in the Eastside; these include Mount Zion (1916) and Home of Peace (1890s), two Jewish cemeteries, as well as the First and Second Serbian cemetery. By the time the Chinese cemetery was built in the 1920s, the Eastside was already housing the majority of the city's population of immigrant and ethnic dead. *Six* of these are within a few blocks of one another; Evergreen is only a mile and a half to the west. The close proximity of the cemeteries to one another, and in turn their proximity to several freeways, including the I-710, the I-5, and Highway 60, result in a very un-walkable neighborhood. The cemeteries are all fenced or walled, and often only have one functional entrance gate. This forces pedestrians to walk around the green spaces, and to go sometimes several blocks before returning to stores, restaurants, or space used for anything other than burial or vehicle traffic. This isolating effect is compounded by the unavoidability of walking under overpasses, over concrete bridges, or otherwise in the shadows of the freeways. The neighborhood's wealth of cemeteries and freeway exchanges serve Turtle well as hiding places for the same reason they serve poorly as functional spaces for the community: they limit the ability of walkers to move among them, or from them to parts of the neighborhood that are literally more alive.

From the Serbian cemetery, and with “the Interstate 710 below her, Turtle sprinted, Go, Go, Go, across the bridge, and then slammed and scaled the tall chain-link fence, up and over, dropped into the Chinese cemetery like a load of stolen goods” (219). She has just traveled north from Second Street to First Street, over one of the on-ramps built in the early 1960s. She decides that the Chinese cemetery’s position half underneath the 60 and 710 freeways makes it low

profile enough for her to rest here a few hours. She leans on the brick crematory chimney and smells the incense and begins to remember:

This was her neighborhood, the one she grew up in, right across the street from where she stood now, and yet this particular cemetery had always remained a mystery. She touched the crematorium and remembered smoke from the chimney blowing ash over their games of stickball, and remembered the fireworks too and the grieving brassy orchestra playing mournful songs of farewell. The music, the scent, the mystery, had begged for Turtle to press her face against the fence like the other neighborhood kids had done, as if the Chinese funeral pageantry were created for their childhood curiosity (219).

Touching the crematorium launches a set of place memories for Turtle, even though she's never touched it before. Its placement reminds her of ash over stickball, then sounds of funeral procession, and although the Chinese cemetery is one of the most familiar sights of her childhood—across the street—and of the neighborhood, it is shrouded in mystery (the word “mystery” is used twice in three sentences). The cemetery is a foreign element that is somehow also indigenous to her neighborhood. Like the names in the Serbian cemetery, it is exotic and yet familiar. While the rites of Chinese mourning are foreign to Chicano customs, it is still part of her neighborhood, and Turtle although literally starving refuses to eat the food offerings left by families for their ancestors (219-220). After a few hours by the crematorium, remembering her gang initiation and looking out at her old house—“What happened, she wondered, to all those nopales Amá had planted? All but one small cactus remained to give Turtle such an aching

prick” (221)—Turtle jumps out of the Chinese cemetery and heads west (see Figure 12).

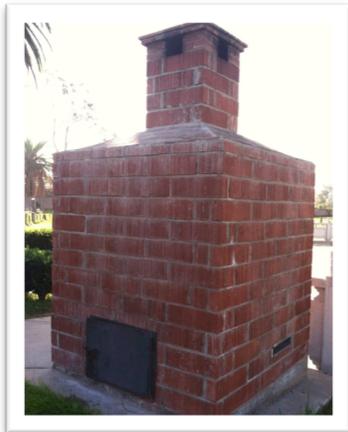


Figure 12. From top, counterclockwise: the Chinese cemetery; the crematorium Turtle rests upon; The view from the crematorium, showing the roof of where Turtle's fictional house would stand; 2014.

I find what would have been Chavela's house, 4356 East First Street, and I start walking. The Chinese cemetery across the street is still in use. On a Sunday there is a family visiting an ancestor's grave, with incense and offerings. Fresh flowers, clementines, and even an open juice bottle adorn newer graves, most of which are situated in the western part of the cemetery, furthest from the freeway. A newer pavilion, near the cremation chimney Turtle leans against (which is still there, and still in use), was built in 2006, and symbolically marks the oldest part of

the cemetery, which contains older graves, dating from the mid-1800, when Chinese immigrants first came to the area, through the first and second world wars (Cheung and Chiu). For many years, Chinese were excluded from cemeteries in the area, and buried in unmarked fields near labor sites, as they were “relegated to quasi-slave labor, in the constructions of railroads, farms, and cities” (Cheung and Chiu). The Chinese community raised funds for the cemetery in the early 20th century and established this site in 1922. At that time the Eastside was still ethnically heterogeneous, with Jewish, Italian, Russian, and Polish residents as well as Mexicans (Romo 65). In the 1920s the diversity of the neighborhood's cemeteries matched the diversity of its surroundings, as the Eastside functioned as Los Angeles' catch-all immigrant neighborhood until the late 1930s.

I head south from the Chinese cemetery, after passing over the imposing Pomona Freeway, and reach the First and Second Serbian cemeteries, divided from one another by the stump half block of Second Street, and both edged by Interstate 710. The first, closest to the cemetery, is older and appears to be abandoned. It's fenced off, a simple chain link fence without a lock, but empty, even on a Sunday, and there are no new flowers on the graves. Its derelict state suggests that the older Serbians and Russians buried there have not been survived by local families. Conversely, the Serbian Cemetery across the short numb of Second Street Street has Poinsettias and visitors. The main cemetery was built in the 1880s, and houses deceased through the late 20th century, hence the few visitors there are. Walk south from the Serbian cemetery and immediately at your diagonal is Calvary cemetery. This large cemetery edges both Third Street and Eastern Street, but the entrances are only on Downey and Whittier, the south and west corners of the eight block by six block area. This means that while you can see the green space of the well-kept burial ground, you cannot access it from this part of the neighborhood. Calvary's

rolling hills, green, manicured lawns, and quaint asphalt path are rendered inaccessible from the north and east corner by a tall fence with barbed-wire on top. The names on the graves are visible from Third Street however. Unlike the Chinese or Serbian cemetery, Calvary boasts an ethnic variety of residents. Spanish, Italian, Irish, and Eastern European surnames rest near one another: Flores, Vasquez, Herrera, Zapata, Padilla, but also Ledesma, Sardo, Kriaucziunas, McKinney, Buysens, and Abat. Calvary, one of the oldest cemeteries in Los Angeles, older than the Chinese and Serbian sites, gestures to East Los Angeles' era as a mixed immigrant community, before the barrio's edges became rigidly defined in the mid-1900s.

Turtle walks west from the Serbian and Chinese cemeteries to Evergreen, along the perimeter of Calvary cemetery. The first three cemeteries lay within three blocks of each other; but reaching Evergreen by foot entails a mile and a half walk. The first half of Turtle's route—across crosses Hastings Street, then the cantinas of First Street, and then past the First Street Store, “downward and upward the paved hills of First Street” (222)—takes me through one of the Eastside's main drags, as First Street from Gage Street to Hicks Street is a bustling commercial area. Here we find a local department store, “El Surtidito” (“variety”) outlet store, “El Mexicano” shoe repair, various *panaderías*, First Street Burgers, a few dollar stores, “Dental Jalisco,” and the *tienda de segunda*, the oft-mentioned First Street thrift store. There are crowds of families walking First Street on a Sunday late morning, and even more outside the churches in the area, several of which lie on or just off First Street. There's a large gathering of parishioners outside of Our Lady of Lourdes Catholic Church on Third Street and Rowan, preparing to go in for the noon service. The only language I hear in the streets is Spanish. I don't know whether the Spanish I hear is Mexican, Salvadoran, Guatemalan, Nicaraguan, or Chicano—I can't distinguish those accents—but I can say that no English is being spoken in the streets I'm walking, the

markets and eateries I'm going into to, the stores I browse at, or the churches I pass by. Families are walking the main street of First, and perhaps it's just the feeling of an outsider, but everyone seems to know everyone else. *Their Dogs Came With Them* conveys the insularity of its barrio, and it is not an exaggeration (see Figure 13).



Figure 13. Scenes from *First Street*; 2014.

Once past this busy intersection, First Street takes on an abandoned feel, as I continue walking west. The second mile of the route to Evergreen leaves Turtle, and me, exposed, and even midday on a Sunday the neighborhood makes a solo female traveler uneasy. Here and on neighboring side street excursions, I pass several groups of men with their pitbulls talking by

their cars, or men talking through their car windows to one another, engines idling; the sidewalks and even some houses are graffiti-laced, and whether by virtue of being a woman or of being not of the neighborhood I am the recipient of intense attention from passerby in cars and on foot. The discomfort draws into relief the dangers of Turtle's staying out in the open for days at a time, as well as Ermila's anxious waiting at the bus-stop alone at night (285), a scene whose emotional import I didn't fully understand until walking the Eastside. Turtle has to escape from drunks exiting the cantina as she's attempting to break in to the cemetery; I have no such problem, but the fear of exposure and interpellation is similar. Inside Evergreen, like Calvary, burials reflect an integration no longer seen in the neighborhood outside, with the older graves of Los Angeles' Anglo elite interspersed with newer Japanese graves. The permanent Latino residents of the cemetery, lying mostly in the eastern corner, have several different visitors on a Sunday; I see a cherry red low rider pass, and another family with small children at a gravesite with flowers. All the oldest graves at Evergreen, however, are for people who came from somewhere else, many from New York, Massachusetts, and the Midwest. Ross' crypt does indeed lie just across from the "ancient chapel" Turtle mentions, and his origins and dates are as she relates (see Figure 14).

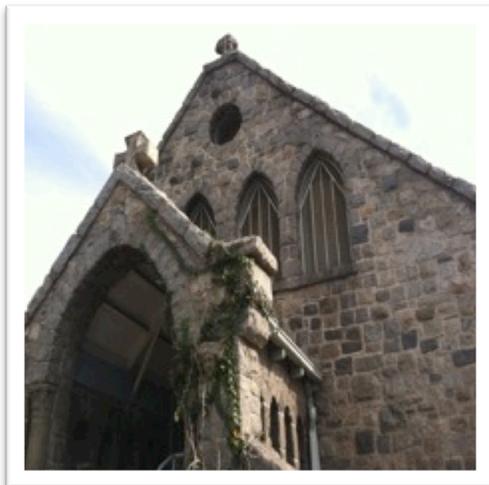


Figure 14. The "ancient chapel" at Evergreen cemetery, across from Ross' crypt and Turtle's resting place; 2014.

At last, Turtle reaches Evergreen cemetery: “It was the oldest cemetery city-wide” (222); Turtle is drawn by “an ancient chapel” that “stood right smack in the middle of the grounds” (222), which she hopes to sleep in (see photos). The names in the Evergreen cemetery are different again: “The majority of the names engraved on the mausoleum and on the large marble staffs were those Turtle recognized as street names: Hollenbeck, Lankershim, Van Nuys, Bixby” (236). These kinds of names are as foreign to the present-day barrio as the Serbian surnames or Chinese burial customs, but they are familiar to Turtle not because of their presence in her neighborhood, but because of the stature of the men buried for the city of Los Angeles. Lankershim, Van Nuys, Bixby and others came to Los Angeles after it traded hands from Mexico to the U.S., and took up ranching in the area before the waves of Midwestern settlers came on the railroads in the late 1880s. She cites the names and dates from the graves of men who came from elsewhere (New York state, Ohio) and died in Los Angeles in the mid 1880s.

Turtle breaks in to the cemetery, and takes the gravel path, heading for the central chapel—the Cremain Garden Chapel (234). It’s locked. She ends up gathering dead flowers from a trashcan near the graves, stuffing them into her leather jacket for warmth—all the time remembering the word “malflora”—and sleeping in Robert E. Ross’ crypt, who she notes was born in Clarke County Ohio in 1836, and dies March 31, 1884 in Los Angeles (236) (the real life Ross is, in fact, still buried at Evergreen Cemetery). The dates and places of Ross’ life puzzle Turtle, and “right before she drifted off, Turtle wondered what possessed this old white man named Ross to die so far from home” (236). This close to the chapter is almost humorous. The presence of Serbian and Chinese dead in her Chicano/Mexican barrio does not faze Turtle, and while the Chinese cemetery holds mystery for her, she thinks of it as part of the neighborhood.

Yet the “white man” dying “so far from home” gives Turtle pause. What we learn from her wonder is that, dead or alive, she is not used to white people in the barrio.

Reader As Neighbor: Viramontes’ Proleptic/Analeptic Trick

Viramontes anchors us in the minutia of place detail, weaving moment by moment depictions of characters’ journeys in the barrio with their memories of the places they pass. Yet while we are constantly and precisely oriented in space, we become maddeningly disoriented in time. *Their Dogs Came With Them* seeks to make the reader a citizen of the barrio it narrates. Part of that project consists in making us feel as if the streets are our own through repetition and description; another is to make the memories of the neighbors *also* feel like our own. Viramontes achieves this through the use of what I call literary prolepsis and analepsis. By moving memories out of order and introducing characters and events without context, Viramontes mimics the feeling of remembering for the reader. As a result, we too, along with the characters, remember images or stories or other characters that have been remembered before in the narrative from other points of view, or that will soon be mentioned again when we least expect it.

Allow me to provide some examples, as Viramontes’ magic trick is complicated. In the first chapter, Chavela warns Ermila that earthmovers, like earthquakes, will make the *gente* and dogs crazy. Ten years later, Chavela’s prophecy rings true: “She [Ermila Zumaya] will be a young woman peering from between the palm tree drapes of her grandparents’ living room, a woman watching the QA helicopters burst out of the midnight sky to shoot dogs not chained up by curfew. Qué locura, she thinks. The world is going crazy” (12). So far this is not too strange: Ermila is looking out the window, thinking that the world has gone crazy, and this reminds her of her conversation with Chavela. However, we return to this *exact* moment in chapter four, with Ermila looking out the window: “Ermila watched the Quarantine Authority helicopters burst out

of the midnight sky to shoot dogs not chained up by curfew. *Qué locura*, she thought. The world is going crazy” (77); “The wheeling copter blades over the power lines rose louder and louder and closer and closer and louder, just like the unrelenting engines of bulldozers ten years earlier when Ermila was a child” (77). The two scenes cite one another, like a chiasmus. First, the narrator prophesizes forward, from the kitchen scene to “ten years later,” and then the character/narrator looks back, “ten years earlier.” This structure makes the earlier moment of prophecy feel like a memory for the reader: we have a sense of *déjà vu*, of having seen/heard this scene before; there’s a nagging suspicion that we know what Ermila is thinking before she says it, because we have a vague recollection of this brief moment that we read several chapters ago. The connection is made explicit in the lines referencing Ermila’s childhood. This move turns the reader into a rememberer as well. It ties the extreme policing of impoverished Chicano communities to the negligent urban development that provokes their impoverishment (the authority’s copter blades “just like” the bulldozers), and it ties us as readers to Ermila’s place memory, and her understanding of outside forces impinging upon the *barrio*.

Here’s another one. Chapter 8 linguistically references memories we don’t yet have, or only have parts of, through the use of a qualified past tense formulation consisting of a series of “befores”: “A few summers before the summer of Renata Valenzuela’s disappearance, there was the tent, and before the tent, there was Tío Angel lugging three quarts of Schlitz beer in paper bags twisted for easy handling. And before that [...] And before Tío Angel knocked on the door of the house on First Street [...] And before all of this” (154). Viramontes’ grammar suggests that we as readers might remember it, using articles like “the” for “the tent” or referring to characters we haven’t met without explaining whose uncle they are or where the tent is or why. It’s disconcerting and disorienting, but as the scene progresses we find our bearings. It is crafted

to deliver an act of reading that intentionally offsets and then supports us. She returns to this formulation later in the chapter: “And before the male children were old enough to be drafted into the Vietnam War, and before the female children became widows and single parents [...] they removed their shoes and ran around the front yard [...] never thinking of war or death or sorrow” (160).

In this chapter Turtle, as a teenage tomboy still named Antonia, begins to “go bad.” In the kitchen while cracking ice cubes she remembers Chavela, “she remembered the viejita then, the one they called Chavela, and remembered the way her cigarette hung from the corner of her mouth while cracking a tray of ice cubes on the porch railing” (166). We learn much later that Chavela cared for Turtle: “the viejita like Turtle and tweaked her chin and gave her lemonade” (235). Chavela’s dangling cigarette reminds Turtle of her Tío Angel, who is smoking in the kitchen with Aunt Mercy and Turtle’s mom Amá. In this scene, Viramontes foreshadows the final scene of the novel, but of course as readers we don’t know that. Aunt Mercy asks Amá about the teenage Turtle’s new freshly shaven head:

You remember Chuy’s daughter? ‘Member her, Angel baby? Mercy asked. From Humphrey Street? La malflora who did her old man in, ‘member?

Aunt Mercy dug a finger in her ear, her face crunching. She inspected her ear wax.

Chuy was a drunk, Tío Angel said, gulping from the amber quart of Schlitz. The bottle looked small in his hand. He took a long drag from his frajo.

Drunk or no, he didn’t deserve to die like some pinche perro on the street.

Tío Angel’s words Mercy, mercy, mercy floated on the exhaling puffs of cigarette smoke. Amá slowly wrapped a raggedy paper towel around a finger.

La pinche malflora stabbed him cold, man. I ‘member you could see the police chalk marks where he just laid there like a dog. Dead. The malflora was bad news all around.

Bottom-line it, Tio Angel replied. Get to the point of your chisme.

Bottom line is la malflora shaved her head. That was the start of going bad. (167)

The story, and especially its words, sits uncomfortably with Turtle: “The word ‘malflora’ sounded so sad to Turtle, it was a word you shouldn’t be left alone with” (168). Aunt Mercy’s veiled warning that Turtle is on her way to becoming a malflora, to “going bad,” is passed over and not mentioned for several chapters. Finally in Chapter 11, when Turtle is wandering the streets homeless, she stuffs dead flowers into her jacket for warmth in the Evergreen cemetery; the dead flowers bring the word “malflora” (literally, “bad flower”) back to her memory, but at first it is not stated explicitly: “Under a willow, Turtle sat dead tired on a marble bench to rest and thought about how hurtful bad flowers can be and then she thought of Chavela and the potted ferns and her hibiscus flowers” (235). As readers we vaguely recollect something about bad flowers being mentioned earlier. Eventually she makes the mental connection, and because her introduction to the word “malflora” happens when she is in the kitchen thinking of Chavela, she unconsciously connects the two: “But let’s face it, if Turtle knocked on Chavela’s door right now, a Grade-A cold-blooded malflora with studded ears,” “would Chavela welcome her?” (236). This brief conversation between Aunt Mercy and Amá, perhaps, is far in the back of our minds in the final scene of the novel when Turtle, high on angel dust, stabs Nacho—a total stranger to her, but known to us the readers—outside the bus depot, leaving him to die like a “pinche perro on the street” at the end of the story. Aunt Mercy’s words make Turtle’s act a fulfillment of prophecy, and allow us to reread Turtle’s homicide as la malflora symbolically

killing her terrible father. As part of the neighborhood and privy to its *chisme* or gossip, we remember the earlier story, and the excessive violence of Turtle's father, and those memories soften our interpretation of Turtle's seemingly senseless violence.

After the stabbing, when we are told that "except for Tranquilina, no one, not the sharpshooters, the cabdrivers, the travelers dashing out of the depot, the barefoot or slipper-clad spectators in robes, not one of them, in all their glorious hallucinatory gawking, knew who the victims were, who the perpetrators were" (325), we know that Tranquilina knows the truth because she is from the barrio and knows her neighbors, having encountered both Nacho and Turtle before. However, the narrator omits another witness who also knows "who the victims were, who the perpetrators were": the reader. The reader has been made aware of the dubious notion of what it means to be a victim or perpetrator for a person like Turtle, who cannot understand the question, "why" she did it: "'Why' was not a word that meant something to Turtle. [...] Why? Because a tall girl named Antonia never existed, because her history held no memory. Why? Go ask another" (324). Between Turtle's memories, barrio *chisme*, and our own accumulated memories of walking the neighborhood with Turtle, we recognize that the motivation for this violence begins over ten years ago with the aggression of the freeways upon First Street.

Viramontes creates this literary prolepsis and analepsis throughout the story in myriad small details. She has characters encounter other characters before we know who they are, and then later, when we see the scene from a different character's point of view, the reader feels as if she's remembering the encounter. Turtle sees and describes Ben before we know who Ben is; the homeless "ubiquitous woman" sees Turtle on the Third Street Bridge before we know where she is and who she is; Turtle does not see the woman back until chapters later (217); We meet

Tranquilina through Turtle's eyes before we meet her, we meet Ermila's girlfriends through Tranquilina's eyes before we meet them; We're introduced to Obdulio the butcher through the Eastside reporter in Ben's hospital room (113); Turtle sees the fruit crate Nacho stacks by the bathroom to peep at Ermila (221), after Nacho tells us of it and before Ermila uses it to escape. These foreshadowings and flashbacks not only place us in the community as rememberers; they also suggest that knowledge of the neighborhood is relative: everything depends on one's point of view, and from which vantage point you stand. The neighbors are all inscribed in each other's memories, and get stitched between them, but we never get an objective, outside perspective on any of them. Furthermore, our perspective as readers long ceases to be objective, as this literary legerdemain stitches our memories to that of the neighbors as well.

LA Starts Here: La Plaza de Cultura y Artes and An Eastside Aesthetic

A local museum offers another version of the Eastside which illuminates Viramontes' text. La Plaza de Cultura y Artes is greater Los Angeles' Mexican-American museum and cultural center; opened in the spring of 2011, it recounts the history of the Mexican-American population of Los Angeles. The museum is located on La Plaza, the site of the original pueblo of Los Angeles, which continued to house the majority of the city's Mexican-American population until growing industry and the construction of Union Station pushed out the Mexican and Chinese communities to the east in the early 20th century; post-gentrification in the mid- to late-20th century, urban developers of La Plaza have recuperated the earlier history of old "Sonoratown," but mainly as a tourist attraction; while there are several Latino businesses in the area, La Plaza now boasts very few Chicano residents. However, even though downtown and the Eastside are geographically distinct, the history of East LA is tied to the history of La Plaza's development, and the Mexicans and Mexican-Americans responsible for the mission and

character of the museum make a claim for the geographical significance of *both* La Plaza and the Eastside barrio to the local Chicano community. I discover that the museum utilizes the same narrative techniques as *Their Dogs Came With Them*: the emphasis on oral rather than written storytelling, the consistent yoking of place to identity, and of a people to where they are from, the particularly strong connection between place and community for the Mexican-American population of Los Angeles as a result of the city's history, and even the use of assumed familiarity with the visitor, to incorporate former outsiders into the community. The stylistic resemblance of these two cultural productions, both emerging from the same local Mexican-American community, indicates that this mode of narrating is characteristic of that community. By comparing the museum to the novel we see the outlines of a local Chicano aesthetic.

Once you enter the museum, you are first met with this message, printed in simple font and posted on a wall:

The most powerful stories are those that are told from generation to generation. In their telling, they help define not only who we are, but who we are becoming. This is one of those stories. *It is not the first one told about this place, nor is it the only one.* Yet it is among the longest, and it is by no means finished. *What the people in this story have in common is a shared heritage in the place we now call Mexico, and a life lived in this place we now call Los Angeles.* Gente de Razón, Californio, Mexicano, Inmigrante, Mexican American, Chicano, Latina—each of these is a personal and cultural identity that has emerged here. None has ever completely disappeared. Some are still being defined. And beneath the surface of each are real people with real hopes, dreams, loves, and aspirations. Whether or not you have Mexican heritage, and whether or not you

embrace some, all, or none of these identities, *the stories they tell shape your life here in Los Angeles. LA—and the story you're living in it—starts here!* (emphasis mine)

In this subtle manifesto, the museum announces its subjective stance, and rebuffs several potential counterarguments against the museum's layout. The opening declares the preference for oral storytelling over written narratives, arguing that the most powerful stories are "told," and that their "telling" helps define communities. Anticipating the objection that museums by their very nature limit the stories that can be told, and assume an "objective" teller, La Plaza (as the museum is informally known) asserts that Mexican and Mexican-American Los Angelinos are "speaking" in the exhibits—"the people in this story have a shared heritage in the place we now call Mexico, and a life lived in this place we now call Los Angeles"—acknowledging that the museum account is subjective, while averring that theirs is not the only, or the first, story of this place. To corroborate this statement the museum tempers its exhibits, which are mainly written narratives, with the inclusion of direct quotations from the populations whose story is being told in any given section. The museum also justifies its claim to telling this story through its tellers' connection to place, asserting that the various identities of the speakers showcased at La Plaza have all "emerged here," from "this place we now call Los Angeles." The caption closes by inscribing all Los Angelinos within the Mexican-American story: "Whether or not you have Mexican heritage, [...] the stories they tell shape your life here in Los Angeles. LA—and the story you're living in it—starts here!" At first glance, this ending salvo seems to edge close to an essentialist argument about Mexican-American rights to the land; however, considering the city's own aggressive erasure of its Mexican, Spanish, and Native American past, this reads more as a corrective: Los Angeles' history informs its present, and both these have been irrevocably shaped by Mexico.

The museum itself is very self-conscious of its positioning. It is a Mexican-American museum that is overtly speaking from the perspective of the local Mexican-American community. The introductory video of the museum adopts a historical tone, and presents historians from various backgrounds and ethnicities. Aside from this first exhibit, however, the museum's artifacts are explicitly narrated from a Mexican and/or Chicano point of view. Each new section of the museum is labeled at the top of the informative column with the years of the era explored, and the Spanish name for the peoples whose lives are being narrated, such as "Los Californios, 1821," "Los Mexicanos, 1850," and "Los Inmigrantes, 1910." Below the heading, the text begins with a first person plural identity statement, mainly written in Spanish. From the first artifacts, detailing the foundation of the pueblo in 1781, the museum's timeline unfolds through new identity statements for each era depicted: "Somos Gente de Razón," "Somos Californios," "Somos Mexicanos," "Somos Inmigrantes: we moved here to escape the revolution," "Somos Auténticos," "Somos Braceros," "We Are Americans," "Somos Pachucos." These assertions are followed by a timeline, and then a direct quotation from a primary source dating from the era under discussion.

The bias is intentional, and explicit, in all of the captions. For instance, in the section, "Somos Mexicanos, 1850":

We weren't born here like the *Californios*, who like to tell the Yankees they're 'Spanish.' Together, they all turn their backs on us and call us *cholos*. Whether they call us 'Californio,' 'Spanish,' 'Mexican'—or worse—the Yankees are ignoring us, and the Treaty they signed, just the same. With the arrogance of their undignified victory they are overwhelming this place, our land, and our language.

The preceding portion of the caption is not a direct quote; the first person plural voice is impersonating the thoughts and feelings of mid-19th century Mexicanos, who are marked by their Native-American ancestry and lower class status. The vitriol of the voice, which expresses anger at both upper class Californios and the Yankees, is startling. Although in tone it is matched by the direct quotation from the time period, from a daily newspaper, *La Crónica*, which follows: “why don’t [the authorities] give us the same services that the others have? We still have a voice, tenacity, and rights.”

This announcement of a subjective stance echoes Viramontes’ use of perspective in *Their Dogs Came With Them*. Each chapter is narrated from a different character’s point of view, with minimal omniscient narrative intrusion, and the unexplained references to specific locations, local events, and Spanish or Chicano expressions indicates that the story is being told by a Mexican-American, to a Mexican-American audience, although both the museum and Viramontes provide sufficient context clues to make these references intelligible to an outsider. Both museum and novel at times presume a prior knowledge on the part of the reader/visitor, which works to make the outsider a part of the community. In *Their Dogs Came With Them* this is achieved through prolepsis/analepsis; the museum utilizes a similar trope. For instance in a section on urban renewal and the division of the Eastside barrio in the 1950s, the sub-heading caption reads, “somos vecinos,” with the following narrative: “You may call this blight, but we call it our neighborhood. Sure, we say *sal si puedes*, get out if you can. [...]What gives you the right to take our land away from us? We didn’t sign on to ‘eminent domain.’ It’s unspeakable the way you dragged Mrs. Aurora Archega out of her very own house in Chavez Ravine—” The reference to Aurora Archega is not explained; the speakers assume the visitor already knows Mrs. Archega, a move which insinuates the visitor into the neighborhood, and echoes

Viramontes' practice of referring to unknown neighbors in her novel. The use of the Spanish phrases "sal si puedes" and "somos vecinos" ("we are neighbors"), also inserts the visitor into the circle of the barrio being described.

The museum ties identity to place throughout. One of the most striking instances is a single plank of wood on the floor under the visitor's feet, not wider than a foot, only a few feet long, painted white, with the words in black and red: "Do you identify yourself **by the place** where you are from?" The double emphasis on place, first by highlighting the word in red, and then by positioning it on the ground, on the physical place that is being referred to in the exhibits all around it, provides a powerful reminder to the visitor that the stories being recounted took place literally underfoot. The open-endedness of the question draws in the visitor. Although it might initially alienate the viewer, as the tacit assumption of the query is that the communities being discussed in this museum, those telling the story, *do* identify themselves by the place(s) they are from, its positioning and its formulation as a question lead visitors to consider how they too are defined by the places they are from, ultimately including potential outsiders within this story of place and group identity. Like the opening caption, which declares all Los Angeles stories—"the stories you're living in it"—to be a part of *this* story, the museum seeks to expand the Mexican-American community to encapsulate everyone who comes to this place.

Towards the end of the museum's narrative, it returns the visitor to the importance of place. A large map of the Eastside, with shadowed lines to represent the newer freeways built over neighborhoods like Boyle Heights and East Los Angeles, is adorned with small open clear envelopes, labeled "My Memory" with scraps of paper inside each. Above the map reads: "Use the map pieces to describe a place in your neighborhood where something happened that stuck in your memory. How do you feel about that place today?" The location of the envelopes implies

that the memories being described occurred at that point on the map, in this or that neighborhood. Thus, while the instructions are open ended—a visitor from elsewhere could simply write about a place memory and place it in any of the envelopes—this exhibit is rhetorically geared towards young residents of the Eastside, who can locate their place memories from the streets they know on the map. Several of the memories are more abstract, though the majority are from young students familiar with the Eastside. One piece reads: “Porque [sic] nos discriminan [sic]? Nosotros siempre hemos estado en nuestro continente. Chey, 2014” Another reads: “In tenth grade our Mexican-American teacher told the class that he bought a house that week, and then explained that our people weren’t always allowed that right. Betsy Lopez, 2000.” Much like Viramontes’ painstakingly detailed indications of where in the neighborhood a scene is taking place, and her use of minimal omniscient intrusion to let the characters speak from their own points of view, the museum’s large map explicitly ties memories to the places where they transpired, visually representing the function of place as a container for memory, and displaying examples of this process by showcasing the personal experiences of Eastside adolescents, as told from their own perspectives.

We’ve seen how Viramontes’ novel demarcates place, walking readers through the barrio with her characters, teaching us street names and landmarks to the point where we feel we know the neighborhood, demonstrating how her characters have developed their identities in symbiosis with where they have grown up and what they are living through there. What La Plaza de Cultura y Artes reveals through its similar emphasis on location and community is that this intimate relationship between identity and place is part of Mexican-American culture in Los Angeles. The museum’s style, so similar to that of *Their Dogs Came With Them*, demonstrates the accuracy of Viramontes’ portrayal of her barrio’s cultural norms.

Their Dogs Came With Them is a difficult text. While not expressly experimental like *The People of Paper*, or expressly autobiographical like *This Is How You Lose Her*, Viramontes still achieves the same acute self-awareness on the part of the reader as Plascencia or Díaz. The novel overwhelms the reader with numerous characters, shifting time frames, and plot encounters that can only be understood with foresight, in hindsight, upon rereading, or all three. To track the characters and their timelines requires mooring them in space; *Their Dogs Came With Them* encourages the drawing of maps, the recalling of street names, and the recognition of landmarks, rewarding such attention to place by revealing other meetings among characters or other vectors of meaning based in place memories of each location. In short, Viramontes crafts a text that must be *occupied* by the reader. *Their Dogs Came With Them* must be inhabited, experienced not by reading front to back, but rather by going back and forth within it, inside the text and outside of it, drawing connections between place and persons and memories both real and fictitious. Readers who stay become residents of Viramontes' literary barrio, which stands as a protection, in paper, against the threat of the Eastside's erasure.

CHAPTER 4

“The Language of Knots and Rosettes”: The Narrative Migrant Fringe of Sandra Cisneros’ *Caramelo*

Until now we’ve seen writers who find themselves largely defined by and identifying with the US neighborhoods that have become their primary home. Sandra Cisneros’ *Caramelo* offers up a different paradigm. How does a writer construct his or her relationship to place and self in the face of constant migration between two countries? How does one tell a family history that criss-crosses the US and Mexico, and that continues to define itself by its position between places? Cisneros’ writing about Chicago reflects some of the traits of migrant writers describing their adoptive barrio: an obsession with place detail, the yoking of specific sites to memory, the use of place as a shorthand for one’s own identity. However, *Caramelo* cannot fully map onto Chicago alone because the author/narrator has more than one formative site of identification. So the novel must invent a form that can allow for multiple significant soils and multiple avenues for identification. Its style imitates the characteristics of the migrant family it narrates: portable, oral, fluid, and polyvocal (often cacophonously so).

Caramelo is a bildungsroman, family history, and tall tale all at once. Lala, the only daughter of her grandmother’s favorite, eldest son, tells the story of her parents, her ancestors, and herself in a playful style imitative of oral narration, but which moves from Chicago to Mexico City and back again, with a sojourn in San Antonio for good measure. Lala inherits many life details from Cisneros herself, and the character is loosely based on Cisneros’ own adolescence and family history.¹⁹ The story also tracks the creation and life of a *caramelo*

¹⁹ Cisneros acknowledges the novel as semi-autobiographical in several interviews. She asserts that “much of my book is based on real things. Even if I made things up, I could never match what happens in

rebozo, or Mexican shawl, crafted by Lala's paternal great-grandparents, which eventually finds its way to Lala as a memento and inheritance. Like the great *empuntadoras* or fringe-weavers of her ancestry, Cisneros presents an intricate embellishment of her family history. The novel is a narrative *rebozo*. *Caramelo* reflects the distinct character of her family history, marked by infamous fabricators and constant migrancy, with its own celebration of healthy lies and its particular relationship to places.

Many critics and reviewers have noted the symbolic importance of the *rebozo* to the novel²⁰; the most perspicacious interpretation perhaps comes from Heather Alumbaugh, who argues that Lala's storytelling replaces the art of shawl-making which recurs throughout the text (71). Alumbaugh also notes that the constant migrancy of the family "demand[s] a narrative voice that likewise has the ability to transgress boundaries" (54). Yet how exactly the text is like a *rebozo*, or in my reading, *becomes a rebozo*, and why Cisneros utilizes this form to "transgress boundaries" of narration is left unexplained. These interpretations do not push the connection between form, migrancy, and the art of the *rebozo* far enough. By explicating the local production and circulation of this shawl, I will illustrate how Cisneros weaves a history that, like the *rebozo*, is at once mobile, mestizo, communal, and tied to place.

This chapter will demonstrate that *Caramelo's* stylistic innovations are predicated by the author's three inheritances: a history of healthy lying, a multi-generational history of migrancy, and an unfinished *caramelo rebozo* from Santa María del Río in Mexico. In an homage to great

real life" (quoted in Lopez, 3), and that she wanted to expand the focus from *The House on Mango Street* to tell her family history: "With this book I wanted to [...] handle all the people that I knew growing up, all the cousins and uncles, the family that I could recall [...] It's as if I took real people and made little puppets out of them and made them do things that maybe they never did in real life" (Cisneros quoted in Newman, 48).

²⁰ See for instance Newman; Hoffert; Stavans; McCracken; even the book jacket, which reads: "The striped *caramelo rebozo* is the most beautiful of all, and the one that makes its way, like the family history it has come to represent, into Lala's possession."

embellishers of her past, whether those embellishments were upon fringe or upon the truth, Cisneros crafts a story in the way her parents and ancestors have taught her to: weaving truth, fiction, history, and personal experience to make the tale both of the family and one's own. The fringe work on a *rebozo*—crafted by *empuntadoras*—simultaneously reflects the artisan's knowledge of the tradition of fringe-weaving and her unique capabilities as the sole weaver; as a literary fringe-weaver, Lala's inheritance of a migrant life informs her unique style of embellishment. The narrator's movement between places and the absence of any single formative neighborhood allows her the freedom to fabricate and invent. Lala's depictions of Chicago, Mexico City, and San Antonio reveal a relationship to place and memory particular to a subject who has formed an identity based on lifelong circular migrations between the US and Mexico. While the actual places occupied are sacred—the real homes and neighborhoods of Cisneros are embellished upon but not invented in the novel—the operating metaphor for this text is not the *barrio*, but the *rebozo*. In this novel, in contrast to the others in this dissertation, the *lack* of one neighborhood tie, or rather the presence of several neighborhood ties, accounts for the way the story is told. By “knotting words” rather than knotting fringe, Cisneros makes the story mobile, capable of traveling without losing its communal spirit, improving upon and improvising on the *reboceros* or shawl-makers of her family tree, who were tied to one pueblo and one community.

Prelude to a *Puro Cuento*

Before the story proper even begins, Caramelo throws into doubt who is speaking and on what authority. The front matter of the novel introduces the instability of the categories of truth, history, and fiction, priming the reader for an intergenerational history of fabricators, or, to use a term the Reyes clan generally refuses, a history of liars. The novel's full title is: *Caramelo, or,*

Puro Cuento. “Cuento” in Spanish has several connotations. It can refer to a story, a short work of fiction (like a short story), or a fable or fairy tale. The noun comes from the verb, “contar,” which means to tell. “Puro cuento,” literally translated “pure story,” is a figurative expression akin to a tall tale, with the connotation that what is being said is not totally, necessarily true; Ilan Stavans translates “puro cuento” as a term that in “south-of-the-Río-Grande Spanish” means “only stories” and “untruthful tales” (33). Up front, then, the novel announces itself as fiction, although it only does so in Spanish.

The dedication page reads “para ti, papá.” It is written in Spanish only, using the second person familiar. This dedication contrasts starkly with the closing scene of the novel, where Lala promises her father she will *not* recount the history of the family to anyone else:

—But Lala, Father whispers in my ear, —these things I’ve told you tonight, my heaven, I tell them only to you, Father says, adjusting the *caramelo rebozo* on my shoulders properly. —Only you have heard these stories, daughter, understand? *Sólo tú*. Be dignified, Lala. *Digna*. Don’t be talking such things like the barbarians, *mi vida*. To mention them makes our family look like *sinvergüenzas*, understand? You don’t want people to think we’re shameless, do you? Promise me you won’t talk these things, Lalita. Ever. Promise.

I look into Father’s face, that face that is the same face as the Grandmother’s, the same face as mine.

—I promise, Father. (430)

The novel ends with a lie. Lala has already recounted the family history, including the secrets her father has just told her, along with several stories told to her in confidence. To then dedicate the story to a father who asked for silence is either meant to placate, or to insist that breaking the

promise and sharing these stories is an act of love or honor rather than an act of “shamelessness.” Or perhaps here in the dedication we can see Cisneros consciously marking the split between the author and the narrator, however much the two are fused later. What becomes clear is that the dedication page, along with the rest of the front matter, cannot be read in the usual way, as a more objective genre not part of the story. The novel also closes with the blending of history and story, as the back matter betrays the same rebellion against generic conventions for appendices and timelines. The “Chronology” offered after the narrative is ostensibly objective, in line with the genre of chronologies, but as it unfolds the dates are accompanied by editorializing and subjective interpretations. The narrator of the chronology references moments in the story, and introduces specious, fictional elements alongside historical fact. Much like Salvador Plascencia’s dedication page in *The People of Paper*, from the onset Cisneros blurs generic norms for what is in the story and what is outside of it, implying that the entire contents of the book could conceivably be *puro cuento*. This skepticism towards the authorial voice is reinforced by the epigraph to the novel, given first in Spanish, and then in English: “Cuéntame algo, aunque sea una mentira.” “Tell me a story, even if it’s a lie.”

This is followed by a disclaimer, in bold and all capital letters: “**DISCLAIMER, OR I DON’T WANT HER, YOU CAN HAVE HER, SHE’S TOO *HOCICONA* FOR ME.**” In the disclaimer Cisneros tells us to pardon her writing if she’s stumbled on truth:

The truth, these stories are nothing but story, bits of string, odds and ends found here and there, embroidered together to make something new. I have invented what I do not know and exaggerated what I do to continue the family tradition of telling healthy lies. If, in the course of my inventing, I have inadvertently stumbled on the truth, *perdónenme*.

Cisneros offers the unapologetic caveat—and an arguably unnecessary one for a novel labeled as such—that her work of fiction *is* a work of fiction, protesting too much against the novel being read as truthful. By introducing the concept of lying, she immediately subverts the dichotomy she sets out, truth versus fiction, or truth versus story, with another, truth versus falsity. “Healthy lies” seems to be not quite the same as story, or as fiction; they suggest a closer relationship to the truth. Equating her story to lying rather than fiction undermines the disclaimer.

The disclaimer goes on: “To write is to ask questions. It doesn’t matter if the answers are true or *puro cuento*.” Here Cisneros asserts her identity as a writer, thus allowed the freedom to invent or to use the truth. This facetious disclaimer, couched in a larger facetious disclaimer, absolves Cisneros from fault in telling true histories of her family. Indeed, to embroider family histories is a family inheritance, as Cisneros claims she does so “to continue the family tradition of telling healthy lies.” Her assertion that *Caramelo* will tell “healthy lies” indicates that her mode of storytelling will be self-consciously imitative of the fabricators of her family tree. That she wants absolution for doing so, particularly from her family, whose lives she embellishes in *Caramelo*, is evidenced by her asking them specifically—in Spanish—to be excused for it: “if I have inadvertently stumbled on the truth, *perdónenme*.”

The two untranslated words she offers here operate in a similar fashion to undo an already tongue in cheek disclaimer. She’s referred to as a *hocicona*, a blabbermouth or a bigmouth.²¹ The insult implies that secrets are being betrayed, or that speaking is being done on subjects that should not be spoken of; the slight thus incriminates the narrator as telling stories that do have some basis in truth. Furthermore, the phrasing of the alternate title, and its

²¹ In *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Gloria Anzaldúa also uses the word “*hocicona*,” to refer to herself as a rebellious female teenager who would “talk back”: “*Repele* [sic]. *Hable pa’t ras* [sic]. *Fui muy hocicona. Era indiferente a muchos valores de mi cultura. No me dejé de los hombres. No fui buena ni obediente*” (37).

appearance in bold (“**I DON’T WANT HER, YOU CAN HAVE HER, SHE’S TOO HOCICONA FOR ME**”), suggest the speaker who is disavowing the blabbermouth narrator is the Awful Grandmother in *Caramelo*, who interrupts the narrator constantly, often uses untranslated Spanish, and is always indicated by speech laid out in bold. As with many parts of the novel, this information is not available to a reader until they can see the work as a whole after reading it. But for Cisneros’ family members, the voice of the grandmother is already familiar. The second Spanish word, “*perdóñeme*,” “forgive me,” functions as a genuine apology to her relatives, all Spanish speaking, who might be offended by the accounts to follow, ostensibly because they touch on real people and events. The disclaimer conveys two messages to two different audiences: a Spanish speaking family potentially enraged by the use of true life details, even if it is “embroidered together to make something new,” and an English speaking readership—perhaps we could even say the “barbarians” Lala’s father mentions, who might think the family *sinvergüenzas* if these stories were true—being told that this is, indeed, wholly a work of fiction, or at least, of healthy lying.

This disclaimer introduces three terms that will be played with throughout the narrative: truth, story, and “healthy lies.” The quieter fourth term, what Cisneros has “found here and there,” is history, which emerges with truth but is equally susceptible to individual interpretation. By eschewing any pretention to truth, Cisneros’ disclaimer functions ironically to invite comparisons to historical facts. Even in disavowing the truthfulness of the narrative, she indicates that she is working *from* truths: inventing what she “does not *know* (my emphasis)” and exaggerating what she *does know* suggests that she has taken true events and improvised with them to make something new. Of course, she has received many of these accounts from family members, themselves known for the circulation of “healthy lies.” Ostensibly this *caveat lector* is

Cisneros' version of the generic "all persons fictitious" disclaimer, common to film and television and used to protect against libel, which states that all characters appearing in this work are fictitious, and any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental; Yet ultimately her disclaimer calls into question the possibility of locating truth in *any* story.

This disclaimer, with its intrusions of characters, parody of disclaiming, and ironic insistence first that the story to follow is based in truth but still fictional, and that the relationship to truth and story is in itself innately problematic, presents a microcosm of the themes of *Caramelo* as a whole. The questions of who is speaking, and whether they are telling truth or story, occurs with maddening frequency throughout the narrative. That this somewhat sacred space—the front matter of a novel, usually the home of the author rather than the narrator—is contained within this confusion of truth and fiction leads us to conflate or at least habitually confuse Cisneros the writer and Lala the narrator. This confusion is intentional, crafted by Cisneros in her subversion of narrative conventions of parts of a novel normally considered objective and not fictional, such as the disclaimer, the dedication, and the chronology in the back matter.

Considering all the fictions, untruths, and blending of history, story, and fact, *Caramelo's* relationship to actual places provides a stark contrast. No space of the novel is sacred, but *spaces* themselves—childhood apartments, the neighborhoods of Cisneros, her parents, and her grandparents—are treated with reverence, and depicted with painstaking real-life accuracy. The way in which Cisneros relates her settings anchors an otherwise fantastical storytelling mode in specific locations, and Cisneros' generally flowery prose turns to minimalist precision when describing the ride to *abuelita's* house, Lala's Chicago apartment, or the roads of San Antonio. The structure and limits of Lala's narrative is shaped by her three inheritances of migrancy,

healthy lying, and *rebozo* making, as we will see below. Yet it is this first inheritance, of a multi-generational itinerant family, which irrevocably transforms the way places are viewed, and which accounts for the other two: constant migrancy allows for the fluidity of circumstances that enables embellishment of one's own life history, and necessitates a family storytelling tradition that can move easily from shoulder to shoulder and nation to nation—like a *rebozo*.

“Not a lie, a healthy lie”: How to Tell a Family History of Liars

When Lala can't eat her grandmother's *mole* because it's too spicy and the grandmother insists she finish the plate (“Don't pretend you're not Mexican!”), Lala's grandfather tells the servant to give the plate to the neighbor's dog, and to tell Grandmother the girl ate it if asked. Lala exclaims, “but it's a lie!” to which Grandfather responds, “Not a lie! A healthy lie. Which sometimes we have to tell so that there won't be trouble” (56). Grandfather introduces a phrase that Lala's father will repeat throughout the story: “Not a lie! A healthy lie.” This lovely grammatical aporia lies about lying, as the liar refuses to be called a liar, but at the same time knows that what he or she is saying is not quite true. Lala is careful to maintain the boundaries of healthy lying as taught her by her father and grandfather, as rules for invention and embellishment arise in the text that are tied to this idea of semi-truths. What emerges is a delicate balance between family history, fiction, and autobiographical detail, woven together with the skills of embroidery that are Lala's inheritance on the distaff side. *Caramelo* is not autobiography and not historical fiction, but nor is it, despite Cisneros' protestation, *puro cuento*, or a tall tale. In fact, it is a genre all its own, which develops its own conventions for narration. These conventions are dictated by family tradition: the parameters of healthy lying inherited from the paternal side, and the art of embellishing, embroidering, and weaving passed down from the maternal side.

It is said of Lala's father's side that, "like all chronic *mitoteros*," or "liar[s]/gossip[s]/troublemaker[s]" (351), "los Reyes invented a past [...] It was a pretty story and told with such fine attention to detail, neighbors who knew better said nothing, charmed by the rococo embroidery that came to be a Reyes talent" (163). Healthy lying is predominantly a male Reyes trait, as Lala's mother and her grandmother both object to the practice, but Lala claims it as part of her inheritance, despite being her father's only female child. Lala's mother Zoila repeatedly calls her father a liar, often angrily: "Can't you even tell a story straight? I can't stand liars" (309); "You're nothing but a goddamn, shitty, liar! Liar! Liar!! Liar!!!" (83). Zoila distinguishes between *cuentos* and *historias*, or stories and histories/true stories. Father agrees that there is a difference between *cuentos* and *historias* ("—Tell more *cuentos* of your life, Father, go on. —But I keep telling you, they're not *cuentos*, Lala, they're true. They're *historias*" (246)), but sees neither as necessarily true, and both as types of lies: "—What's the difference between "un cuento" and "una historia"?—Ah!...now that's a different kind of lie" (246). The Awful Grandmother, as she is called in the beginning of the text, also enjoys accusing others of lying, though she reserves most of her censure for Lala:

Lies, lies. Nothing but lies from beginning to end. I don't know why I trusted you with my beautiful story. You've never been able to tell the truth to save your life. Never! I must've been out of my mind...

Grandmother! You're the one who was after me to tell this story, remember? You don't realize what a tangled mess you've given me. I'm doing the best I can with what little you've told me.

But do you have to lie?

They're not lies, they're healthy lies. So as to fill in the gaps. (188)

Rather than deny being unreliable—“You’ve never been able to tell the truth to save your life. Never!”—Lala admits she is a *qualified* liar, inventing portions “so as to fill the gaps.” Lying about unknowns is one of the accepted uses for healthy lies in the text.

Other rules for healthy lying emerge in the footnotes. In these, another conventionally objective genre like the disclaimer or the appendix, Cisneros²² folds hearsay, gossip, and false attribution into historical data pertaining to parts of the story, then confesses to these insertions of half-truths or untruths, further attenuating her authorial reliability. In an extended footnote about Lala’s paternal great-grandmother Regina, Cisneros explains how Regina married Eleuterio Reyes for status. Within the footnote is a second addendum note, where Cisneros admits that one of the lines she has Regina utter is stolen: “**These words were actually Lola Alvarez Bravo’s, the great Mexican photographer, but I loved them so much I had to ‘borrow’ them here*” (117). Further throwing the account into doubt, in the note she claims that only Narciso, Regina’s son, knows the truth of her love for a man other than his father: “*Only Narciso knew the truth. —Only you have heard this story, Narciso, only you*” (116). Yet this account is not coming from Narciso. In another footnote, Cisneros tells us that the story she’s just related was told to her in confidence, using the datum as proof of its authenticity, while simultaneously calling her own promises into question: “My friend’s mother, who still lives in the Colonia Roma and was neighbors with the Vasconcelos family in the forties and fifties, told me this story but made me promise never to tell anyone, which is why I am certain it must be true, or, at the very least, somewhat true” (230). The *author’s* reliability is so tenuous after these admissions of borrowing and transmitting stories no one is supposed to have heard that even the footnotes, conventionally a space for historical detail or for a more objective voice of the author to emerge,

²² Aside from footnotes generally being the provenance of the author, in *Caramelo’s* footnotes Cisneros refers to herself as the author, and references her own family (discussed below). I thus feel justified in claiming Cisneros and not Lala as the narrator of these sections of the novel.

are as taken over by the uncertainty between truth, history, story, and lying as the main body of the story.

Cisneros' broken promise to her friend's mother, who tells her about the Vasconcelos family and insists she not reveal the secret, has many antecedents in the text. Both Cisneros and Lala are told secrets by multiple speakers. Aunt Light-Skin, Father, Grandmother, and Grandfather all tell Lala stories and make her promise not to tell anyone. Variations on Aunt's words, "only to you have I told this story, [...] But don't tell the others or their feelings will get hurt, promise?" (275), are repeated by Father ("Only you have heard these stories, daughter, understand? *Sólo tú*. [...] Promise me you won't talk these things, Lalita. Ever. Promise" (430)), and Zoila when she tells Lala about her father's illegitimate child (404). Only Grandmother gives Lala license to tell her story (408), though she complains about how it is told and especially how *much* of it is told multiple times. Each time Lala faithfully promises the speaker, and each time the story has already been transmitted to her broader audience in full. The lies of the narrator(s)—who promise not to tell—point to another tenet of Cisneros' version of healthy lying. Yet this oath-breaking for the sake of the story appears to be her individual elaboration on the family skill. Her father for instance does not approve of breaking promises to silence, and nor does the Grandmother, who habitually accuses the narrator of being *una hocicona*, or a blabbermouth.

In another footnote, Cisneros explicitly reveals herself as the footnote author, as opposed to the narrator Lala. The first footnote says that the song "A Waltz Without a Name" is composed by Eleuterio Reyes, the Spaniard Grandmother's mother in law is married to. However, the second footnote, attached to this first one, tells us: "*This song was actually written by the author's great-grandfather, Enrique Cisneros Vásquez*" (123). Whether Cisneros is

distinguishing between who wrote the lyrics and who wrote the music (thus allowing the possibility for the fiction and fact to coexist), or whether she is almost immediately admitting the fiction of attributing the song to Eleuterio, is unclear. Both destabilize the authority of the footnotes, and suggest that what is found here is still as open for debate as the narrative itself. What is also crucial is the introduction of a personal historical fact about the author into the narrative. This allows us the license to infer that Cisneros is taking from her own family history and autobiography. It suggests, too, that there are rules governing how she can appropriate family history, and in what ways. She introduces herself to the reader for the first time (aside from the opening disclaimer), in order to give credit to her great-grandfather for a song she is attributing to a fictional character ostensibly based on her great-grandfather. While using the ancestor's likeness appears to be within the provenance of storytelling, taking away the great-grandfather's claim to his musical production is not. Here, like Cisneros' refusal to "pretend to invent what I do not know," we find another boundary to *Caramelo*'s healthy lies. Certain actual things—like works of art, and houses, as we shall see—are not to be embellished upon, or lied about.

So what else won't be prevaricated upon, according to the rules of healthy lying? Cisneros hints at another boundary for the act, even when the lines between history and fiction blur: "*I can't pretend to invent what I don't know*" (footnote, 117). What constitutes "knowing" seems broadly construed, and can include hearsay, story, lies, and imaginative deduction, yet without *any* form of knowledge, Cisneros refuses to invent. This parameter for lying echoes the disclaimer, where the narrator asserts that while she will invent what she does not know, she will only exaggerate upon the things she does know, and is repeated in various forms throughout *Caramelo*. When describing her great-great Uncle Old, the "scoundrel" of the family who stole

from the Mexican army and then fled the country, Lala again comes up against the rules of the story: “I wish I could tell you about this episode in my family’s history, but nobody talks about it, and *I refuse to invent what I don’t know* (emphasis mine)” (134). This offhand admission gestures towards the story’s need for a kernel of historical truth, however that truth is mediated or mitigated by those who lived it or heard about it. When this information is coupled with Cisneros’ admission to using portions of her family history in the footnotes to scaffold the story, *Caramelo* becomes a hybrid genre: a fictionalized account of real events personal, familial, and historical, which obeys its own conventions, distinct from either fiction or history.

Chief among the rules of the story is the faithful depiction of actual places in the telling. Cisneros uses real homes from her past as settings in the novel, and the narration often contributes details as specific as address numbers and street names; the minute descriptions of each neighborhood point to and reinforce these homes’ existence outside of the novel. Embellishment is disallowed when referring to the grandmother’s house in Mexico City or the streets of Chicago, and the precision with which such settings are presented contrasts sharply with the more florid prose Cisneros employs elsewhere in the text. Lala’s refusal to lie or embroider the places of her childhood and adolescence suggests a desire for place memory which has resulted from constant migrancy. This desire informs the place descriptions in the novel, as well as the need for and use of the *rebozo* as a narrative model—as the shawl is both rooted in the Mexican pueblo of Lala’s family and able to travel.

“Vamos a Más-güel”: How to Tell a History of Migrants

Another inheritance Lala receives, on both the maternal and paternal sides, is an extended history of migration and transmigration. In the immediate past, her father, grandfather, grandmother, and great-grandparents all moved from the town and often country of their birth,

many returning for extended sojourns, or moving among two or more places. Lala tells us that her father, who “lived the life of a person in self-exile,” was “continuing a tradition that traveled across water and sand from nomadic ancestors, Persian poets, Cretan acrobats, Bedouin philosophers, Andalusian matadors. [...] the shores of Abi Diz. Tunis. Carthage. Fez. Cartagena. Seville. And like his ancestors he attempted his own treatise” (200). Her grandmother travels from the pueblo of Santa María Del Río—“birthplace of the *rebozo*” as it calls itself today—to Mexico City, and eventually to Chicago and San Antonio. Lala’s grandfather Narciso stays in Chicago for a time with his Uncle, who fled Mexico via Cuba, who lives with his sons as though they were permanent exiles: “they live in the very upholstery shop, with walls made from fabric scraps partitioning the workspace from the kitchen, if it can be called a kitchen. A camp stove is how they cook and a wooden door placed across two sawhorses is their table. [...] This is how they live, worse than soldiers camping in the field” (139). This exiled uncle eventually teaches his trade, and apparently his way of life, to his sons, who teach their nephews the same. Lala’s father and her uncles become upholsterers, who take their craft with them, perennially ready to move on, and “when they don’t like their bosses, they pick up their hammers and their time cards and walk out cursing in two languages” (8).

Raised by migrants, Lala and her brothers become cyclical travelers, driving every summer from Chicago to Mexico, moving within Chicago from apartment to apartment, and eventually relocating to and from Chicago to Texas, with trips to Mexico in between. Every apartment is full of junk kept year round to bring to Mexico City, “all the rooms in our house fill up with too many things. Things father buys at Maxwell Street, things Mother buys at the secondhand stores when Father isn’t looking, things bought here to take to the other side and things bought on the other side to bring here, so that it always feels as if our house is a storage

room” (14). What isn’t to be taken elsewhere by the family is often borrowed from customers: “Our own house is made up of furniture on loan, mismatched Duncan Phyfes and Queen Annes, Victorian horsehair settees [...] Anything left over, abandoned, or sitting in storage at the shop winds up at our house until reupholstered and reclaimed” (14); in this way even the apartments themselves become transient. Lala comments jokingly when her friend proudly mentions how her family has been in Nuevo Laredo for seven generations: “I can’t even imagine staying in one place for seven years” (328). This migrant inheritance, like the healthy lies and the gift of embroidery, informs the novel’s mode of narration. No one place wholly defines Lala. Cisneros does not stitch herself, or her story, to one neighborhood. Instead, a series of neighborhoods work in tandem to construct the narrator’s identity and shape the form of the telling. The ways in which these few sacred places are depicted reflects a migrant perspective on place, one experienced by the author herself and one handed down from a line of migrants Cisneros muses “was going as far back as our graffiti-artists grand-others of Altamira who painted on the walls of caves” (200).

Caramelo begins with the Reyes family’s annual migration to Mexico City from Chicago. As they cross into Mexico, after driving through “Illinois, Missouri, Oklahoma, and Texas singing all the songs we know” (16), Lala launches into a beautiful multi-sensory depiction of Mexico:

As soon as we cross the bridge everything switches to another language. *Toc*, says the light switch in this country, at home it says *click*. *Honk*, say the cars at home, here they say *tán-tán-tán*. The *scrip-scraper-scrip* of high heels across *salttillo* floor tiles [...] Sweets sweeter, colors brighter, the bitter more bitter. A cage of parrots all the rainbow colors of Lulú sodas. Pushing a window out to open it instead of pulling it up. A cold

slash of door latch in your hand instead of the dull round doorknob. Tin sugar spoon and how surprised the hand feels because it's so light [...] fresh-baked crusty *bolillos*; carrots with lime juice, *carne asada* [...] the smell of hot corn tortillas along with the pat-pat of the women's hands making them. (17-18)

Her repertory of sensory memories for Mexico is vast and vivid, comparing the subtle differences between the US and Mexico—how sounds themselves become new sounds when referred to in new ways, how handles and windows and utensils are not the same—as well as capturing the unique peculiarities of every sensation she finds there. After minutely going through taste, sight, smell, sound, and touch Lala finally asserts: “every year I cross the border, it's the same—my mind forgets. But my body always remembers” (18). The habitual act of crossing over, where “every year [...] it's the same,” marks the crossing itself as a place so familiar to Lala that her “body always remembers.” The state of change, which she forgets unless or until she returns to it, is characterized by a panoply of identifications, many of them sensory, but also metacognitive: the experience of returning carries its own cyclical history, as the mind always forgets, and then is always reminded each year by the remembering body.²³

In an interesting contrast to this lyrical experience of the sensory impact of Mexico, Lala's description of the Grandmother's house—her childhood summer home for many years—is short on descriptors:

Hurray *la colonia* Industrial, hurray Tepeyac, hurray La Villa. Hurray when the green iron gates of the house on Destiny Street, number 12, open, abracadabra.

²³ Tereza Szeghi presents more examples of Lala's remembering body, and its role in transnational cultural identity formation, in her compelling article for *MELUS*, cited in the bibliography.

In the belly button of the house, the Awful Grandmother tossing her black *rebozo de bolita* crisscross across her breasts, like a *soldadera*'s bandoleers. The big black X at the map's end. (26)

The arrival to the house mimics the drive, as Lala's family nears the house; beginning with the *colonia* or district and then narrowing to the local hills, then the specific neighborhood, then the exact street, and finally the actual house number, the passage offers geographical movement and a series of "hurrahs" but few adjectives. This description of the house conveys the house as a terminus rather than a site in and of itself; its role in Lala's experience is as an unremarkable endpoint in a remarkable journey. The equation of the Grandmother's shawl to the "X at the map's end" completes the conceit.

The oddly precise situating of the house in relation to its physical space emerges in another passage, when Lala describes her father's summer birthday celebrations:

Every year Father's birthday is celebrated in Mexico City and never in Chicago, because Father's birthday falls in the summer. [...] Every year a record of Pedro Infante singing 'Las Mañanitas' booms through the house, across the courtyard, through the front and back apartments, upstairs and down, beyond the roof where Oralia lives, to the grimy mechanic's pit next door, above the high walls capped with broken glass, over to the neighbor's rooftop chickens, across the street to la Muñeca's house and the Doctor Arteaga's office three houses over, and down Misterios to the Grandfather's *tlapalería* shop, beyond the sooty walls of *la basilica*, to the dusty little derby of a hill behind it called Tepeyec. Everyone, everyone in La Villa, even the rooster, wakes to Pedro Infante's dark and velvety voice serenading the little morning of Father's birth. (48)

Lala reckons noise and the impact of the event by its effect on the surrounding neighborhood. A series of prepositional phrases, “through the house,” “across the courtyard,” “beyond the roof,” “above the high walls,” “over to the neighbor’s rooftop,” “across the street,” and “down Misterios,” insistently locate the house in space in relation to other objects. Lala takes us from all corners of the house, to the next-door neighbor’s houses, and then beyond that, to the “office three houses over,” the basilica blocks away, and even to the hills of Tepeyec. “Everyone, everyone in La Villa,” is proven to be not an exaggeration, by the detailed enumerating of where the other La Villa neighbors are and how their space is penetrated by sound. This conception of the neighborhood is concrete, anchored in place detail, and particularly invested in architecture, in the structures that house those around the narrator in La Villa. Furthermore, as in the previous passage, the narrator describes through movement and distance, as the area around the house comes into view through either descriptions zeroing in from further away, in the case of the drive to 12 Destiny Street, or as sound traveling out, in this case. For the migrant Lala, memories of places are constructed in motion, the result of habitual dislocation.

When the narrative does turn to the houses themselves, the consistently idiosyncratic manner in which these dwellings are described becomes conspicuous. Lala’s mention of the house number for Grandmother’s house, “Destiny Street, number 12,” is incongruous in its specificity, but this mode persists as *Caramelo* unfolds. Chapter 24 is called “Leandro Valle Street, Corner of Misericordia, Over by Santo Domingo” (111). As the chapter opens it sets the reader in a pinpointed geographic location, becoming even more exact:

The Reyes del Castillo family lived in the *corazón* of the capital, off *la plaza de Santo Domingo* in an apartment with two balconies overlooking Leandro Valle Street,

apartment number 37, building number 24, corner of Misericordia. In other times the building was a monastery for friars from Santo Domingo Church. (111)

This is an oddly precise move on the part of the storyteller, who is describing her paternal great-grandparents' house. Here not only the apartment number, but the building number is given, along with architectural detail and street names. This house and her grandmother's house, both sites familiar to Lala, are presented practically devoid of embellishment. In contrast, a few chapters earlier Lala attempts to describe her great-Aunty Fina's house, which she has never seen—"No one is still alive who remembers where this building stood exactly"—and she elaborates on the house in such dramatic tones that her grandmother Soledad has to correct her (her words are in bold):

In rosy pastels it seemed to rise like a dream of a more charming time...

It was never rosy, and it certainly wasn't charming. It was smelly, dank, noisy, hot, and filled with vermin. [...]

It had withstood several centuries of epidemics, fires, earthquakes, floods, and families, with each age dividing its former elegance into tiny apartments crowded with ever-increasing inhabitants. No one is still alive who remembers where this building stood exactly, but let's assume it was on the Street of the Lost Child, since that would suit our story to perfection.

Nonsense! It wasn't like that at all. It was like this. At the back of a narrow courtyard, up a flight of stairs, in the fourth doorway of a wide hallway Aunty Fina and her children lived. (98)

Each time Lala applies a dramatic tone to describe what to her is an imaginary house, Soledad responds with accurate detail: where the apartment was, in which doorway, up which hallway, on

which street. The Grandmother offers a corrective that we see throughout the story. Real places, the actual houses of family members, are not to be embellished upon. In fact, while other street names have changed, present-day Leandro Valle Street is where Lala tells us, next to the Santo Domingo Church, as is Tacuba Street, *another* locale given an exact address, in a footnote:

“*The marvelous Café Tacuba on Tacuba, number 28, still operates today, serving traditional Mexican fare” (275). We’ve established as a boundary of healthy lying that the narrator cannot invent upon real places. When they are known to the author/narrator firsthand, they are described with numerical and architectural precision, and even when they are not known, if they have an analog in real space they are resistant to Lala’s purple prose. *Caramelo* observes a reverence for the sacredness of places that disallows the flights of narrative license the narrator is normally prone to, and indicates the particular regard for known places for a narrator who has so few geographical constants in her adolescence.

Chicago places are met with the same stringent realism, a precision that clashes with the lush, impressionistic descriptions elsewhere in the narrative. Lala describes each of her uncles’ houses in sparse, geographic terms. Uncle Fat-Face lives in “an apartment so close to the ground people knock on the window instead of the door. Just off Taylor Street. Not far from Saint Francis church of the Mexicans. A stone’s throw from Maxwell Street flea market. The old Italian section of Chicago in the shadow of the downtown Loop. This is where Uncle Fat-Face, Aunty Licha, Elvis, Aristotle, and Byron live, on a block where everyone knows Uncle Fat-Face by his Italian nickname, Rico, instead of Fat-Face or Federico” (11); Uncle Baby lives “in an immaculate apartment on the top floor of a ziggurat-capped three-flat facing the Kennedy Expressway, off North Avenue and Ashland. In the old days the hallways of these brick buildings had exhaled the scent of pierogi or kielbasa, but now they let go a whiff of *arroz con*

gandules or *sopa de fideo*” (287). The narrator connects both apartments to their street, cross streets, and local landmarks. Lala also indicates the type of neighborhood, whether “old Italian” or formerly Polish and now Latino. Lala’s own family lives in many apartments (until they finally buy one towards the end of the novel, which she does of course describe as “a two-story walkup on Homan near Fullerton” (400)), so she does not locate them in space, describing them all at once by what they have in common: “I can remember every flat we’ve ever rented, especially the ones I want to forget. Their hallways and their hallway smell [...] No yard, or if there is a yard, no grass. [...] Paint old and splintering off. [...] Voices behind apartment doors. [...] Neighbors who are a pain. Manolo and Cirilo, and their bad-mouth mama. Floorboards thumping to Mexican country music” (301).

Yet the Maxwell Street flea market receives a thorough geographical and sensorial rendering. Despite living in different apartments growing up (possibly however always close to the “undersized upholstery shop on Halsted Street” belonging to her great-Uncle Snake, where her father usually worked (137)), attending the Maxwell Street market was a consistent weekly activity for the family, the only consistent place in Lala’s Chicago: “On Sunday mornings other families go to church. We go to Maxwell Street. —*Vamos a Más-güel*, Father announces” (294). Sunday mornings achieve a ritualistic significance; “Father wears his good clothes even though Maxwell Street is filthy” (294), and Cisneros and Lala’s descriptions of Maxwell Street amount to an homage to what becomes a prized space for the author/narrator. The straightforward street markers are still here, for instance regarding one shop off the market: “It’s over to Harold’s we’re headed, corner of Halsted and Maxwell, across the street from Jim’s Original Hot Dogs. Harold has been there since...—Since before you were born, girlie. Up a narrow, dark flight of wooden stairs” (295); or Lala’s mother’s favorite *taquería*, “a place on Halsted Street called La

Milagrosa, a few blocks south from Jim's Original Hot Dogs on Maxwell" (298), or where Grandmother and Mother like to stop at the market, "at 18th Street for *carnitas* and *chicharrón*, or at Taylor Street for Italian lemonade on the way home" (295).

Yet the flea market is also given a walking description to rival the vividness of Lala's multi-sensory scene entering Mexico, one far surpassing in richness the house depictions:

Flies on crates of rotten cantaloupe. Rusty coffee cans filled with rusty nails. A plastic Timex box filled with gold molars. Boxed lemon meringue pies with the meringue a little squashed. Beyond the trash are real and not-so-real treasures. A man playing an accordion with a live chicken on his head. Strings of plastic pearls the colors of Easter eggs. A china shepherdess statue with a crack like a strand of blond hair, —From Paris, gimme ten dollars. The finest homemade tamales in the world from that Michoacán widow the police keep hassling because she doesn't have a food permit. (294)

Sound, smell, and taste are all here in addition to sight, although they are implied, by the rottenness of the cabbage, squashed meringue in summer, the quality of the tamales, or the unattributed uttered imperative of a vendor. Cisneros stacks nouns, both within each sentence (flies on crates, cans on nails, molars and pies in boxes), and from sentence to sentence, cluttering the passage in imitation of the market, with its surfeit of "real and not-so-real treasures." People and things are described with equal alacrity, as the description moves through space, matching how the scene would unfold to a visitor walking by each stall. The narration does not embellish: it presents, as it travels. To further anchor the market, Cisneros appears as the author to provide a history of the space in a footnote:

**The original Maxwell Street, a Chicago flea market for more than 120 years, spread itself around the intersections of Maxwell and Halsted Streets. It was a filthy, pungent,*

wonderful place filled with astonishing people, good music, and goods from don't-ask-where. Devoured by the growth of the University of Illinois, it was relocated, though the new Maxwell Street market is no longer on Maxwell Street and exists as a shadow of its former grime and glory. Only Jim's Original Hot Dogs, founded in 1939, stands where it always has, a memorial to Maxwell Street's funky past. (9)

Cisneros takes the narration out of the story's present (40 years earlier) to explain the *flea market's* present, providing what feels like almost absurd detail about the market's former exact location, its landmarks, and how its "grime and glory" came to fade. The narrator's sentimental attachment to the site leaks out of the main story and into the author's footnote. Unable to fabricate upon real-life places as one of the rules of the novel, Cisneros here admits that Maxwell Street no longer exists as she describes it, and verifies that her descriptions of it are, in fact, accurate and precise.

Much later, when the family has moved to San Antonio and Lala is a teenager, memories of Maxwell Street return to her. Lala feels rootless in San Antonio, and her narrative keeps returning to Chicago, telling vignettes about their life there, or comparing the two places. When she visits her grandmother's at the hospital on her death bed, she even finds herself *compelled* to remember Chicago:

And then I start to think about all the things I shouldn't think about. [...] The spiral of sticky flypaper dangling above the meat counter at Taquería la Milagrosa on South Halsted Street droning, droning, droning that death song—Instead of the things I should think about—love and heartily sorry, but I don't feel anything for my grandmother, who at this very moment is no doubt fluttering above our heads searching for her route out of this world of pain and rotten stink.

Barbacoa taquitos. Sawdust on the floor to soak up the blood. When I was born Mother said she needed two things after getting out of the hospital, —Please, a pork chop sandwich from Jim’s Original Hot Dogs on Maxwell Street, and a *barbacoa taquito* just down the street at La Milagrosa. And me just born wrapped in my new flannel blanket, hair wet as a calf, face still long from coming through the birth chute, and my mother standing there on Halsted and Maxwell with her pork chop sandwich, and men with gold teeth hawking watches, and the balloon man with his prophylactic-shaped ugly balloons, and right across the street that man Harold my father always fights with every time he buys shoes, and La Milagrosa filled with mice. Don’t look!

This is what I’m thinking instead of the prayer I’m trying to compose. (350)

Her usual descriptive markers of places come up, on which streets, by which landmarks, what to eat, what the senses recall, as Lala goes back to Maxwell Street in her mind. As readers we return too, having read about Harold’s shoe store, La Milagrosa *taquería*, Jim’s Original Hot Dogs, and the flea market itself. Lala evinces guilt at thinking of Maxwell Street and barbeque tacos instead of what she should be thinking about, but the memory serves as a very place-oriented way to consider exactly what is happening to her grandmother. She thinks of the hospital she herself was born in, comparing it with the one she finds herself in currently; she muses on the strange juxtaposition of bringing a new life into the world and craving a pork chop sandwich and a *taquito* afterwards; and barbeque comes to her mind because the smell of Grandmother’s death reminds her mother of “rotten *barbacoa*” (349). Feeling displaced in San Antonio and displaced emotionally by her indifference towards Grandmother’s death, Lala reaches for one of the only place-anchored memories she has to understand the moment.

The centrality of known spaces for Lala's sense of self, which until now has been latent in the text, becomes clear in San Antonio. When Grandmother dies, the metaphor of "this side or that side," how the family refers to Mexico or the US—shifts from reference to nations to a metaphor for the living and the dead. The chapter title, "The Great Divide, or, This Side and That," refers to Grandmother's crossing over from the land of the living to the land of the dead (349). The following chapter, entitled, "Mexican on Both Sides," returns the metaphor to national lines. The subtitle for the chapter, however, provokes the reader to question what is meant by being on this side or that, not in terms of nationality, or life, but in terms of truth, fiction, and fable: "or, Metiche, Mirona, Mitotera, Hocicono—en Otras Palabras, Cuentista—Busybody, Ogler, Liar/Gossip/Troublemaker, Big-Mouth—in Other Words, Storyteller" (351). The chapter title introduces the two formative aspects of Lala's identity: her inheritance of healthy lying, as a bilingual *hocicono* and *cuentista*, and her inheritance as a migrant, a "Mexican on both sides" of the border.

At school when her identity is questioned, "Hey, hippie girl, you Mexican? On both sides? [...] You sure don't look Mexican" (352), Lala invents a history to silence the insults: "I tell them a story. —I come from a long line of royalty. On both sides" (353). Her mother, like Lala, is Mexican-American and born in the US, and the Awful Grandmother often insults her mother's Spanish ("a woman who can't even speak a proper Spanish" (85)), so technically the answer is that she *isn't* a Mexican on both sides, if "sides" refer to national lines. Yet Lala does not think of being Mexican in terms of national lines, a result of her own incessant border crossings, and she identifies as Mexican on both sides: "I don't know what you're talking about when you say I don't look Mexican. I *am* Mexican. Even though I was born on the U.S. side of

the border” (352). Lala takes up lying as a birthright: to lie is to continue a Reyes family tradition, and thus Lala’s lies about her ancestry, to her mind, confirm her as Mexican.

Lala finds more difficulty navigating her Chicano classmates, who think she is pretending to be Mexican or even Spanish to avoid being Chicana, a Mexican from *this* side of the border. Lala mentions having a Spanish great-grandfather in history class, and the Chicanos in the class would “like nothing better than to slap the crap out of me”: “—Bitch! Pretending like you’re Spanish and shit” (354). They call her “gabacha,” white girl, and criticize her for not taking pride in the Chicano movement—“You think you’re better than us, right? *Pinche* princess” (356). Lala protests to herself, “What can you say when you know who you are?” (354), but her certainty in who she is begins to falter in the face of criticisms that she is both not Mexican enough (“you don’t look Mexican”), and too Mexican (“you think you’re better than us, right”).

In what feels like a *non sequitor* at first, immediately after this school scene Lala’s narrative returns to Chicago: “In Chicago, Mother and I would walk for blocks over to the Salvation Army for treasures, sometimes as far as the Goodwill” (354). What triggers her memory of Chicago is her assertion of knowing her own identity. Being yelled at for being not Mexican enough forces her to remind herself of all the things that until now she knew about who she is: A liar and a fabricator, but also Mexican, on both sides, and born in Chicago. When Lala needs reassurance about her sense of self, Chicago comes to her mind. And it’s her quotidian trips to Salvation Army with her mother to buy second-hand furniture that emerge in her memory as a constitutive part of her identity. Lala grounds her sense of self in growing up working class and Mexican in Chicago. South Texas introduces questions of being Mexican enough or too Mexican for Lala that are absent from her stories of Chicago. While her father and grandmother indicate a prejudice against Mexicans “from this side,” she herself is not subject to defending her

identity or proclaiming herself from one side or the other. As a migrant, the question loses meaning for Lala; she is neither and both.

Her Chicana and white schoolmates, however, resent her refusing to choose, and San Antonio, “a town halfway between here and there, in the middle of nowhere” (380), leaves her feeling ungrounded. After being jumped and then chased by a group of Chicana girls, Lala scrambles onto and over the interstate, the same one she and her family have taken many times to drive to Mexico City: “A pickup honks and changes lanes to avoid me, I don’t care, I don’t care. *Que me lleven de corbata*. Take me, dangle me from the bumper. I don’t care, I never belonged here. I don’t know where I belong anymore. And the sting from the beating like nothing compared to how much I hurt inside” (356). Lala wants to be dangled from the bumper of a car that is heading north, towards downtown, and then potentially veering northeast all the way to Chicago: this is the route her family used to take from Chicago to Mexico City and back again (5). Both Chicago and Mexico City were places that offered Lala belonging, where she stitched who she was to her surroundings: the Goodwill, the *taquería*, the *basílica*, Maxwell Street or Grandmother’s neighborhood; San Antonio, literally in between and neither here nor there, denies Lala access to place belonging, which, when coupled with locals protesting how she identifies herself, leads to an erosion of belonging *in toto*—“I don’t know where I belong anymore.”

Yet, when Lala straddles the guardrail, she finds her anchoring again. She hears a voice, which she later recognizes as the Grandmother, calling her by her full name, “Celaya” (357). That Lala literally finds (or re-finds) herself in the middle of a freeway is symbolically crucial. She *belongs* in between. The road running from Mexico City to Chicago, as we’ve seen, forms an integral part of who she has become. Her mode of description is full of movement, describing

scenes as they unfold to a body constantly in motion. Her penchant for stories is not only a family inheritance, but a necessity born of car rides with time to kill: Lala's role in the car had been to ask Mother and Father about their lives, to ask them to tell stories. What became a habit extended to the entire family, and we have multiple instances of family members confessing to Lala stories that they swear no one else has heard. Only her grandmother calls her by her full name, "Celaya," "Not 'Lala', not 'La.' My real name" (357); the naming endorses Lala's in-between identity as an inheritance as well, vouched for by Grandmother, who in the end was also inscribed in the migratory patterns that her husband and son both tread. The name helps return Lala to herself: "Celaya. I'm still myself. Still Celaya. Still alive. Sentenced to my life for however long God feels like laughing" (357). Ultimately Lala identifies not just as Mexican, and not just as Mexican-American, but as a self in-between, neither and both, coming from a long line of migrants, prone to describe homes and places from the vantage point of a person on the move. Her simultaneous connection to Chicago and Mexico City, and the ease with which she has traveled between the two places throughout her life, enables Lala to embrace her migrant selfhood as an adolescent.

"The Language of Knots and Rosettes": How to Tell a History As a *Rebozo*

There's one more inheritance that Cisneros uses to shape *Caramelo's* family history: the *caramelo rebozo*. This is an inheritance that has almost been lost, and that the novel must convert or transform in order to pass on. Reviews and criticism of the novel often make the connection between the *rebozo* and the narrative, but they neglect to explain why Cisneros self-consciously sustains a weaving metaphor throughout, or how exactly the form imitates the act of shawl-making. The evocation of the work of *empuntadoras* in the text leads us to a unique history and culture of Mexican *rebozo*, and its diminishment and the subsequent loss of knowledge native to

that community is what propels Cisneros' narrative innovations. The *rebozo* traditionally is a product of an entire village, with ink dyers, loom weavers, and fringe weavers all working in the same community. As this tradition of community-based production fades, an anchored, place-specific craft becomes unmoored from its initial local site. *Caramelo* innovates upon the language of the *rebozo*, inventing a portable method of weaving; yet Cisneros also harkens back to the *rebozo* as a means of bringing together a Mexican pueblo, by embellishing Lala's migrant tale with vivid depictions of the village of her ancestors, the *reboceros* whose inheritance she carries both literally and figuratively.

When a very young Lala wants a *rebozo* like Grandmother's her father seeks them out, asking the Grandmother where he might buy one. Grandmother tells Father that authentic *rebozos* are now scarce, even in Mexico:

—A silk *rebozo*? From Santa María? For what? [...] They don't make them anymore. Good luck trying to find one.

—Not even here in the capital?

—They're disappearing. If you want an authentic one, you'll have to find a family that's willing to part with it. [...] No, the famous *rebozos* from my village you can't find anymore. Go look here in the capital. Look in the countryside. Ask and see if I'm lying. All you'll come back with are the ones they sell in the market. Factory made. *Rebozos* that look as if somebody made them with their feet. (38-39).

Grandmother herself says hers is not for sale, "not even if God commanded it," "not while I'm alive" (38). Grandmother's village is Santa María del Río en San Luis Potosí, which calls itself the "cradle of the *rebozo*." The pueblo is especially known for the shades of brown in their *rebozos*, and for the *rebozo de caramelo*, a particular design pattern and set of colors that results

in shawls with a candy-like striped effect. Grandmother has at least one *rebozo de bolita*, the most common type, probably made of cotton (26). The silk *rebozo* she refuses to part with, however, is a *caramelo rebozo* from her village.

The story of that *rebozo* comes in Part Two of the novel, “When I was dirt,” where Lala recounts Grandmother’s story with heavy intervention from the grandmother, beyond the grave. In the first chapter of Part Two, we learn that Soledad Reyes, Lala’s grandmother, is “the daughter of famed *reboceros* from Santa María del Río, San Luis Potosí, where the finest shawls in all the republic come from, *rebozos* so light and thin they can be pulled through a wedding ring” (92). Soledad’s father was a dyer, and her mother was an *empuntandora*, or fringe weaver. When the narrative turns to the *pueblo* of Santa María Cisneros offers the reader a brief history of the silk *rebozo* in a footnote, highlighting the shawl’s transnational character:

The rebozo was born in Mexico, but like all mestizos, it came from everywhere. It evolved from the cloths Indian women used to carry their babies, borrowed its knotted fringe from Spanish shawls, and was influenced by the silk embroideries from the imperial court of China exported to Manila, then Acapulco, via the Spanish galleons. During the colonial period, mestizo women were prohibited by statutes dictated by the Spanish Crown to dress like Indians, and since they had no means to buy clothing like the Spaniards’, they began to weave cloth on the indigenous looms creating a long and narrow shawl that slowly was shaped by foreign influences. The quintessential Mexican rebozo is the rebozo de bolita, whose spotted design imitates a snakeskin, an animal venerated by the Indians in pre-Columbian times. (96)

Cisneros’ account for how the *rebozo* emerges—a somewhat ironic solution to the Spanish dictate to *mestizo* women to not “dress like Indians,” utilizing indigenous looms and style to

fashion their own version of the traditional Indian shawl—characterizes the *rebozo* as a symbol of rebellion and pride for the Mexican *mestizo* class. Furthermore, the *rebozo* here is the ideal folk art expression of a local identity, reflecting an innovative synthesis of the encounter between indigenous culture and the exposure to international trade routes brought with Spanish rule and the pervasive influence (and restrictions) of Castilian culture. The loom and the shape of the cloth, as well as several of its patterns, are indigenous to this region of Mexico, potentially dating back to “pre-Columbian times,” while the material for the cloth and its embellishments are grafted onto the tradition as a result of Mexico’s position as a crossroads for goods from Spain, China, and the Philippines.

Like the *rebozo* itself, the fringe-weaving done at the ends of the shawls is also transnational in its inheritance:

The art of *empuntadoras* is so old no one remembers whether it arrived from the east, from the *macramé* of Arabia through Spain, or from the west from the blue-sky bay of Acapulco where galleons bobbed weighted down with fin porcelain, lacquerware, and expensive silk of Manila and China. *Perhaps, as is often the case with things Mexican, it came from neither and both* (emphasis mine). (93)

Earlier the *rebozo* is described as a *mestizo*, which “came from everywhere.” Fringe-weaving is also inherently *mestizo*, not just because it begins in Mexico, but because, “as is the case with things Mexican, it came from neither and both.” The art of *empuntadoras* has an unknown provenance, and like other great creole art forms (jazz, tango, the *rebozo* itself) it arises from a confluence of different cultures meeting on native soil. The tradition of these shawls, so tied to Mexican identity that “a Mexican painter claimed they could serve as the national flag” (93), is ironically—or intentionally?—reflective of transnational currents and influences far flung from

Mexico. Yet Mexico, with its indigenous population of textile weavers and its use of back-strap looms, an element not recounted here, provides a fecund site for the art's transformation. The notion of Mexico as the land of "neither and both" becomes central to the novel's style, as Cisneros attempts to narrate a story as "neither and both," one in line with the *mestizo* identity she delineates for the *rebozo*, which "came from everywhere." The healthy lying we've seen, and *Caramelo*'s mode of depicting scenes from the stance of a traveler or migrant, form part of this "neither and both" model. The construction of the narrative itself, with its intrusions from other speakers, the uncertain location in time and space of the narrator or narrators, and its weaving of disparate portions of family history, is also approximating this concept of *mestizaje*. As the story of the grandmother unfolds we learn how Lala's inheritance of the art of the *reboceros* or shawl-makers becomes embodied by the storytelling.

Soledad's father, Ambrosio Reyes, was a dyer of the shawls, known for making ink black *rebozos de olor*, "the most difficult color to dye" (92). He "stank like a shipyard" and his fingernails "were permanently stained blue," "due to his expertise as a maker of black shawls, because the cloth must be soaked "over and over in water where rusty skillets, pipes, nails, horseshoes, bed rails, chains, and wagon wheels have been left to dissolve" (92); In a village known for its *rebozos*, Ambrosio was known for his dyeing: "everyone agreed Ambrosio Reyes' black shawls were the most exquisite anyone had ever seen, as black as Coyotepec pottery, as black as *huitlacoche*, the corn mushroom, as true-black as an *olla* of fresh-cooked black beans" (92). In a brief fusillade of indigenous Mexican references, to local black pottery, fungi, and cuisine, Cisneros uses native terms to compare the blackness of Ambrosio's work, further tying the shawls to their regional Mexican origins. The quality of blackness Ambrosio achieves is due to his pueblo: not only for inheriting the knowledge of how to dye this particular type of shawl,

but also for providing the rusty materials, including horseshoes and wagon wheels. The resultant color, we can infer from the comparisons made, is a uniquely Mexican black.

Ambrosio's wife Guillermina, Soledad's mother, was also famous as a *rebocero*, but her expertise was in fringe weaving, as an *empuntadora*, and "it was his wife Guillermina's fingers that gave the shawls their high value because of the fringe knotted into elaborate designs" (92). After the shawl itself is woven, the ends of the fabric are knotted together to form intricate designs. "*Empuntadora*" is feminine, as the fringe weavers are all women. Guillermina learns her craft through matrilineal inheritance:

Guillermina's mother had taught her the *empuntadora's* art of counting and dividing the silk strands, of braiding and knotting them into fastidious rosettes, arcs, stars, diamonds, names, dates, and even dedications, and before her, her mother taught her as her own mother had learned it, *so it was as if all the mothers and daughters were at work, all one thread interlocking and double-looping, each woman learning from the woman before, but adding a flourish that became her signature, then passing it on* (emphasis mine). (93)

Guillermina's skill comes from over four generations of *empuntadoras*, who have literally handed down the technique of weaving fringe and their storehouse of knowledge concerning patterns and styles. The unbroken nature of this transfer of cultural knowledge is represented by the image of one long fringe, "all one thread interlocking," upon which "all of the mothers and daughters were at work." Each generation also passes down an improvement or embellishment upon the design, a "flourish that became her signature," so that the art of embellishing or improvising upon a given design is *also* passed on.²⁴ Guillermina's own signature is both

²⁴ Cisneros gives a lovely brief dialogue montage to reflect the education of daughters in fringe-weaving, featuring a troublemaking Guillermina: "—Not like that daughter, like this. It's just like braiding hair. Did you wash your hands? —See this little spider design here, pay attention. The widow Elpidia will tell you different, but it was I who invented that. —Hortensia, that shawl you sold the day before yesterday.

enormously complex and second nature to her, a testament to the profundity of the inheritance she receives: “Guillermina’s signature design, with its intricate knots looped into interlocking figure eights, took one hundred and forty-six hours to complete, but if you asked her how she did it, she’s say—How should I know? It’s my hands that know, not my head” (93). The identity of the family is established by the shared work upon the thread, with “each woman learning from the woman before”; but the identity of the individual *empuntadora* or weaver is established by her flourish, the “signature” she develops and which her descendent will in turn learn and improvise upon to make her *own* signature.

The tragedy of Soledad’s life, and by extension the tragedy of Lala’s female inheritance, is the rupture of the unbroken transmission of the art of the family’s *empuntadoras*: “she should have been a knotter of fringe as well, but when Soledad was still too little to braid her own hair, her mother died and *left her without the language* of knots and rosettes, of silk and *artisela*, of cotton and ikat-dyed secrets. There was no mother to take her hands and pass them over a dry snakeskin so her fingers would remember the pattern of diamonds (emphasis mine)” (94). The single interlocking thread is cut, as Guillermina’s death prevents Soledad from leaning the history of the art passed down in her family, as well as her own “ikat-dyed secrets” for weaving. Soledad’s only inheritance is Guillermina’s last, unfinished *caramelo rebozo*, half its fringe unbraided, a “slippery-soft” shawl “of an excellent quality and weight,” “an exquisite *rebozo* of five *tiras* [stripes], the cloth a beautiful blend of toffee, licorice, and vanilla flecked with black and white,” with fringe work so intricate no one but Guillermina had the skill to complete it (94).

Policarpa knotted the fringe, am I right? You can always tell Policarpa’s work...It looks like she made it with her feet. —*Puro cuento!* What a *mitotera* you are, Guillermina! You know I did that myself. You like weaving stories just to make trouble” (93).

Soledad's failure to learn the language of the *rebozo* leaves her, in some sense, mute. Years later, Lala expresses Soledad's alienation at not having learned to speak with the *rebozo* (and the grandmother concurs, in bold):

Because she didn't know what else to do, Soledad chewed on the fringe of her *rebozo*. Oh, if only her mother was alive. She could have told her how to speak with her *rebozo*. How, for example, if a woman dips the fringe of her *rebozo* at the fountain when fetching water, this means—I am thinking of you. [...] Or if a woman allows a man to take up the left end of her *rebozo*, she is saying, —I agree to run away with you. [...] Or knotted at the ends, —I wish to marry. [...] But who was there to interpret the language of the *rebozo* to Soledad?

No one! (105)

Not only does the shawl and its *rapacejo* or fringe-weaving communicate through its patterns, which blend Pre-Columbian motifs with a history of transnational influences, as well as unique female family histories passed down; the shawl itself can convey meaning based on how it is used. The *rebozo speaks*; it is capable of communicating a number of messages for Mexican women who have learned the language. However, like the other arts associated with the *rebozo*, this one too is only transmitted from mother to daughter. The mother teaches the child how to “speak with her *rebozo*” in customs ranging from courtship to marriage to how to place the *rebozo* on a deceased woman upon her death (105). Only the mother can “instruct a daughter” that “that’s how it’s done, my girl” (105). Without the language, the *rebozo* loses the ability to narrate and becomes inert, and the wearer in turn becomes mute.

While she cannot make her *caramelo rebozo* speak, it does still remember. As Soledad grows up the *rebozo* accompanies her: “When the Grandmother had slept in the pantry of Regina

Reyes' kitchen, she'd tied her wages in a knot at one end of this *rebozo*. With it she had blown her nose, wiped the sleep from her face, muffled her sobs, and hiccupped hot, syrupy tears. And once with a certain shameless pharmacist named Jesús, she had even used it as a weapon. All this she remembers, and the cloth remembers as well" (254). When as a teenager Lala finally inherits the *rebozo*, which she has wanted ever since she first saw it as a child (58), the *rebozo*'s knowledge of her grandmother comforts her time and again: "I get dressed, tie the Grandmother's *caramelo rebozo* on my head like a gypsy, and start sucking the fringe. It has a familiar sweet taste to it, like carrots, like *camote*, that calms me" (388); "I bring the tips of the *caramelo rebozo* up to my lips, and, without even knowing it, I'm chewing on its fringe, its taste of cooked pumpkin familiar and comforting and good, reminding me I'm connected to so many people, so many" (428). Lala's connection to the *rebozo*, like grandmother's, is physical and bodily, and as she sucks the fringe the shawl now somewhat literally feeds Lala Soledad's tears, among other things.

Soledad's inability to speak eventually brings her to Lala. After she dies, she comes back to haunt Lala, telling her granddaughter that she is trapped between the world of the living and the dead, and needs Lala to help tell her story so that she can be forgiven: "I'm in the middle of nowhere. I can't cross over to the other side till I'm forgiven. And who will forgive me with all the knots I've made out of my tangled life? Help me, Celaya, you'll help me cross over, won't you? [...] You'll tell my story, won't you, Celaya? So that I'll be understood? So that I'll be forgiven?" (408). That she chooses Lala is no accident, not only because Lala has inherited the Reyes talent for healthy lying—"Tell them, please, Celaya," "You're good with talk" (407)—but because she is her female granddaughter. The metaphor of Grandmother's life to knots of thread is not idle; it alludes to the woven knots of her mother and the *empuntadoras* that came before

her. Grandmother has left Lala an unfinished *caramelo rebozo* as well as an unfinished life, and Lala sets about embroidering the fringe of the latter in order to complete the design. Only near the close of *Caramelo* do we learn that Part Two of the novel, in which Lala has been telling Grandmother's story with incessant interruptions from Grandmother, is part of her fulfillment of this agreement to tell Soledad's story so that she might be understood and forgiven.

However, Lala does not just recount Soledad's story. The Grandmother's history becomes part of the larger tale of the family Cisneros is crafting, and it includes Lala's perspective on her parents, grandparents, and her own life as a Reyes. The novel doesn't just complete the Grandmother's story, it incorporates it into Lala's own story, and Cisneros' non-linear and fluid weaving of different eras of family history and different tellings of the past and present creates a pattern all its own. Lala realizes her role as the female descendent of famed *reboceros* on one Reyes side, and famed prevaricators on the other Reyes side (Soledad and her husband Narciso were, in fact, cousins): "Maybe it's my job to separate the strands and knot the words together for everyone who can't say them, and make it all right in the end" (428). The strands are family *historias* as well as *cuentos*, whose suitability for narration Lala unfortunately cannot alter: "La Divina Providencia is the most imaginative writer. Plotlines convolute and spiral, lives intertwine, coincidences collide, seemingly random happenings are laced with knots, figure eights, and double loops, designs more intricate than the fringe of a silk *rebozo*. No, I couldn't make this up. Nobody could make up our lives" (429). Yet, in the telling she can distinguish herself, and the way she "knots the words together" becomes Lala's own flourish upon the material.

The beauty of words for *Caramelo* is that they are mobile. Cisneros takes up the *rebozo* but remakes it for a migrant family that is no longer tied to one pueblo. The style of the novel,

constructed as if by a *rebocero*, learns its structure from the art of fringe-weaving, which relies on a store of passed-down distaff knowledge but also allows each weaver to invent her own signature, yet by using words rather than thread it is not confined in space the way the *empuntadoras* or the *reboceros* are. The teller is able to move from place to place and continue crafting the story. By crafting a literary *rapacejo* or fringe Cisneros demonstrates all the inheritances of her family line: the art of both literal and figurative embellishment, and a migrant subjectivity.

CONCLUSION

Yu Tsun, the spy in “The Garden of Forking Paths,” grows up frequenting the symmetrical garden—presumed by some to be the labyrinth—of his great grandfather Ts’ui Pen in China. Much later, as Tsun travels from Staffordshire to a suburb of Fenton, and then to Stephen Albert’s house, Borges’ narrative traces his path, as the spy crafts his own maze to be discovered by Germany. On his way, Tsun wonders at the labyrinth of his forbear, and what shape it might have taken: “Beneath English trees I meditated on that lost maze” (23); when he is led through the home of Albert, and thus at the conclusion of his own bifurcated, murderous journey, he notes that “the damp path zigzagged like those of my childhood” (24). Tsun ties his present experiences to his childhood memories of place, as the weaving of his own code—a kind of mental maze—recalls to him the physical and imagined labyrinths of his youth. That Tsun is compelled to construct a code or a maze at all is the result of his migrations, from the home of his illustrious ancestor to his sojourn in England as an immigrant and a German spy; Tsun seeks to prove to his Chief, who “somehow feared people of my race—for the innumerable ancestors who merge within me,” “that a yellow man could save his armies” (21). The narrative’s own movement from place to place, as Sun treads towards Albert, makes the protagonist’s trajectory feel deliberate and inevitable, thus rendering the philosophical message of the story, that in the infiniteness of time all paths are contingent, feel shocking, even impossible. “The Garden of Forking Paths,” written in 1941, thus already hints at the themes of migrancy, place, identity, and narrative that find their full voicing in 21st century Latino fiction. Indeed, the methodology presented in *Find Yourself Here* is applicable to texts from a variety of literary traditions, and to many works written prior to the 21st century.

“Who Reach and Do Not Forget to Reach”: Excavating Transnational Trajectories

While literary criticism of the fairly recent *Caramelo* is still emerging, there is a wealth of excellent criticism on *The House on Mango Street*, unsurprising for a novel that, since its publication in 1984, has become “probably the most widely read and taught novel by a United States Latina or Latino” (Sanborn, 1335). Engaging this body of criticism highlights what a neighborhood geography—with an eye to the transnational implications of local spaces—can contribute to a reading of not only *Caramelo*, but also to the earlier *Mango Street*, as both works exemplify Cisneros’ identity as a transmigrant writer. *Mango Street* also provides an apt example of how the model of local reading I have presented in this dissertation can be applied to earlier works, demonstrating that even the most canonical texts of Latino literature can benefit from such a lens.

Responses to *Mango Street* generally fall into three camps: arguments about the novel in terms of its space (both literary and physical), arguments about the relationship between Cisneros’ writing and her socio-political investment in her Latino community, and arguments constructing various lines of inheritance, claiming different anxieties of influence upon Cisneros and commenting on her elaboration upon them. An exemplary argument in the *Mango Street* as politically progressive vein comes from John Cutler. In his recent book *Ends of Assimilation*, Cutler counters critics who read the escape of *Mango Street*’s narrator Esperanza from her neighborhood with her “bags of books and paper” (110) as “boundary-crossing assimilation” which sends a message that moving out and up from one’s social and cultural base are a betrayal of one’s own the community (119), by wisely noting that these charges of assimilative selling out fail to consider Cisneros’ position as a Chicana writer who must at once grapple with antiassimilationism and sexism, as well as contemporary sociological debates which tended to blame the (poor, ethnic) victim: “Cisneros’s work offers a powerful counter-discourse to culture-

of-poverty theory by imagining the dynamic and complex inner lives of poor women of color” (121). Cutler also deflates McGurl’s argument that Cisneros’ writing was emptied of political content as a result of her MFA training at Iowa with efficient dispatch, noting that she was in the *poetry* workshop, not the fiction workshop, and thus McGurl’s claims in *The Program Era* about the influences of the institutional teaching of fiction writing do not apply to Cisneros: “if Cisneros’s institutional training is important, then so is the precise nature of that training” (Cutler 131).

In the anxiety of influence camp, critics like Jacqueline Doyle and Geoffrey Sanborn track Virginia Woolf and Emily Dickinson throughout *The House on Mango Street*. Doyle argues that *House* “both continues Woolf’s meditations and alters the legacy of *A Room of One’s Own* in important ways” (6). By “preserving Woolf’s feminist architecture, Cisneros “enlarges and even reconstructs Woolf’s room to make space for her own voice and concerns” (26), by illustrating the obligation of the woman—especially the working class and ethnic woman—who achieves artistic freedom to return to and help her own community speak. Geoffrey Sanborn reads Cisneros as an inheritor of Dickinson rather than Woolf, but still arrives at a similar conclusion, that *Mango Street* is expanding the terms of female authorship Cisneros has inherited by including historically excluded communities: “Cisneros draws us through and past the example of Dickinson, toward something that might seem, at first blush, oxymoronic: a socially progressive politics of private enjoyment” (1345).

Sanborn rightly asserts that most critics have aligned the literary space of *Mango Street* to the lived space of Mango Street, arguing that the space of the novel is inseparable from the house that Esperanza occupies (1336). The space the novel is so eager to recount, to Sanborn, is not the public street but the private spaces of individual enjoyment; ironically his focus on private space

maintains the focus on spaces that dominates the majority of criticism. Sanborn's decision to narrow the space analyzed to the house or even simply the room is echoed by several other critics, even those arguing for a literary inheritance of influence rather than an expressly spatial interpretation of the novel. Many critics follow Julián Olivares in arguing that *Mango Street* is a critical response to Gaston Bachelard's *Poetics of Space* and its concept of the house as the site of memory and imagination. Doyle, Olivares, and others including Sanborn, focus on the house, or even just the room, rather than the street or neighborhood. Doyle mentions the street as formative to Esperanza's identity, but quickly returns to the importance of the house for providing Esperanza a room of her own; Sanborn connects Esperanza to Dickinson as pleased shut-ins. The unit of these analyses is too small to incorporate the role of the entire barrio of *Mango Street*: Might the *street* be crucial to the way the texts are presented?

In Monica Kaup's trenchant reading, she turns away from the house and into the street. She offers a socio-historical analysis of the changing function of architecture and space in the construction of Chicano identity, arguing that it moves from literary iterations of a traditional, national Chicano homeland (exemplified in works by Gloria Anzaldúa and Américo Paredes) to more modern architectures that allow for "postnational, post-*movimiento* concerns with internal heterogeneity—differences of gender and sexuality" (366), found in the work of Richard Rodriguez and Sandra Cisneros. Her overall argument is fascinating, if debatable—the near contemporaneity of *Mango Street* and Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera* complicates the chronology offered—but Kaup's interpretation of *Mango Street* is particularly compelling. Instead of reading Cisneros through earlier Victorian or modernist women writers, Kaup reads her through the lens of geography, starting from the premise that *Mango Street* "employ[s] the house as the master metaphor for the construction of identity" (363). She begins with the houses

in each text, but when turning to *Mango Street* she goes on to consider “the street as a public space,” “to shift the accent in *The House on Mango Street* from ‘house’ to ‘street’” (389). Kaup finds that Cisneros’ use of vignettes imitates the public space of the barrio: “its episodic structure follows the movement of street life, where events begin and end suddenly. [...] this, the real subject of Cisneros’ narrative is not so much the solid architecture of the houses (which is often bleak) as the movements and contacts of the many lives that flow in and out of them” (390). In this way Cisneros reconciled individual identity and the collective, interweaving Esperanza and “the lives of her Latino neighbors” (391).

But where are these Latino neighbors from? And where does “the complex social world” and “lifeworld beyond the confines of the ‘sad houses’” lead to? Kaup takes her interpretation in the right direction, out into the street and the barrio, but it doesn’t follow the text out to its limits. It matters that the neighborhood is a Puerto Rican one, with residents from the island, as well as immigrants from other nations, such as Esperanza’s Mexican family. If Esperanza—and Cisneros through Esperanza, as many of these critics argue—is speaking for a community or a collective that is represented by her neighborhood, that community is not strictly Chicano, or even majority Chicano. Furthermore, that community is, I would argue, markedly transnational. Already in *Mango Street* we see the interplay of migration, identity, and form that will become central to Cisneros’ later work *Caramelo*. Excavating the transnational aspect of the neighborhood of *Mango Street* corrects criticism of the novel, which suffers from being barrio-bound or even housebound, and establishes the themes, largely latent in this novel, that will dominate *Caramelo*.

Cisneros writes her own introduction to the 25th anniversary edition of *Mango Street* in 2008, after *Caramelo* has been published, and in it several of the scenes and characters from

Caramelo appear. The introduction reveals the conflation of author/narrator and the place specificity common to Cisneros' oeuvre and typical of contemporary transmigrant writers. Written in third person, Cisneros describes "the woman in the photo," and explains how that woman—"the young woman who was me" (xv), "the woman I am in the photo" (xv), "the woman I once was" (xvii)—came to be. The introduction locates the photo in space and time, describing the author during the writing of *Mango Street*.

As we saw in *Caramelo*, when Lala moves from apartment to apartment, in *Mango Street* Cisneros measures time by apartments: "We didn't always live on Mango Street. Before that we lived on Loomis on the third floor, and before that we lived on Keeler. Before Keeler it was Paulina, and before that I can't remember" (3). In the introduction she immediately offers location markers for points in her biography: "It's Chicago, 1980, in the down-at-the-heels Bucktown neighborhood. [...] The young woman lives at 1814 N. Paulina Street second floor front. Nelson Algren once wandered these streets. Saul Bellow's turf was over on Division Street, walking distance away. It's a neighborhood that reeks of beer and urine, of sausage and beans" (xi). She persists in naming exact addresses as she tells how she came to be in her current apartment: "the young woman returned to Chicago after graduate school and moved back into her father's house, 1754 N. Keeler, back into her girl's room with its twin bed and floral wallpaper" (xii). Her father shares the menacing "eye of the rooster" that the father from *Caramelo* wields, but concedes to her decision to move out and into a place by herself. First she agrees to a compromise, "to move into the basement of a building where the oldest of her six brothers and his wife lived, 4832 W. Homer" (xiii). After a few months, she "got on her bicycle and rode through the neighborhood of her high school days until she spotted an apartment," in "a hundred-year-old building with big windows that let in the cold," "windows with their view of a

street, rooftops, trees, and the dizzy traffic of the Kennedy Expressway,” which becomes the apartment in the photo (xiii-xiv). She will fill her “‘office’ with things she drags home from the flea market at Maxwell Street” (xii), another location frequented in her childhood, with the family’s religious Sunday trips to the market, as we will see in *Caramelo*. To “pay the rent on her Paulina Street apartment,” she teaches at a school in Pilsen, “her mother’s old neighborhood on Chicago’s south side, a Mexican neighborhood where the rent is cheap and too many families live crowded together” (xviii). The stories of her Pilsen high school dropouts form part of *Mango Street*, along with stories from her upbringing she wrote while at Iowa (xix; xvi). She leaves home, in the sense of the house of her parents, but also returns home, both physically and artistically, drawn to the neighborhood where she spent her “high school days,” and drawn to her family’s roots in the area, choosing to teach in her mother’s old neighborhood and revisit her childhood haunts.

Her father complains that he fought for upward mobility for his family and that Cisneros is “go[ing] backwards” (xiii), but the author describes herself here as committed to the communities that she is from and where she was raised. She recalls for the reader each street address as if drawing them a map of where she’s lived, emphasizing her decision to stay rather than, as her father might put it, go forward, out of the barrios. It would seem she does this not only because she argues that art should serve one’s own community (xvii), but also because these locations fuel her fiction:

Sometimes I write about people I remember, sometimes I write about people I’ve just met, often I mix the two together. My students from Pilsen who sat before me when I was teaching, with girls who sat beside me in another classroom a decade before. I pick up parts of Bucktown, like the monkey garden next door, and plot it down in the Humboldt

Park block where I lived during my middle and high school years—1525 N. Campbell Street. [...] The people I wrote about were real, for the most part, from here and there, now and then. (xxii)

The stories come, quite directly, from the author's neighborhoods. Their sources are Bucktown, Humboldt Park—with another specific street address offered up to anchor the reader—Pilsen, and the experiences she and other Latinos in these communities have had on these streets.

Cisneros' insistence on place detail demonstrates both her authenticity as a member of these communities and her open declaration of the integral role these locales have for her writing. By rendering transparent the line between author and narrator by revealing her artistic process, and admitting her stories' analogs in real life experience, she further connects her work to her places. *Craft* renders them into fiction, and the form of their telling expands the geographic boundaries of the stories.

Despite this geographic specificity, or perhaps in addition to it or even as a result of it, Cisneros talks about “the woman in the photo” trying to develop a mobile, border-crossing literary form: “she wants to write stories that ignore borders between genres, between written and spoken, [...] between New York and the imaginary village of Macondo, between the U.S. and Mexico” (xvii). This form should be legible to people who don't normally read, and people who are busy working (xvii); Cisneros writes and workshops with other local writers, men and women, who “come from Black, white, Latino communities”: “what we have in common is our sense that art should serve our communities” (xvii). This art, in Cisneros' case, speaks to the community by reflecting its geographic specificity, while also incorporating or broadening the scope to take in the divergent paths—from New York or imaginary villages, “between the U.S. and Mexico”—that has brought the different members of her community to their neighborhood.

Cisneros concludes the introduction with a few brief scenes now written from a first person perspective, locating herself in space and time not as “the woman in the photo,” but as the author writing the words we are currently reading: “I no longer make Chicago my home, but Chicago still makes its home in me.[...] Eventually I took a job in San Antonio. Left. Came back. And left again. I kept coming back lured by cheap rent” (xxiv). Now writing from Texas, Cisneros’ mode of description shifts from her earlier, down-to-the-street-address accurate representation of the Chicago she inhabited as a child and as a young writer, to a more expansive style of rendering:

Two years ago my office went up in my backyard, a building created from my Mexican memories. I am writing this today from this very office, Mexican marigold on the outside. [...] Trains moan in the distance all the time, ours is a neighborhood of trains. The same San Antonio River tourists know from the Riverwalk wends its way behind my house to the Missions and beyond until it empties into the Gulf of Mexico. From my terrace you can see the river where it bends into an S. (xxv)

Cisneros moves us from Chicago, so street oriented and focused, to Texas, to a “neighborhood of trains,” where the scope broadens exponentially. Now writing from a house built from memories of Mexico, ostensibly inspired by childhood annual migrations back to Mexico City, this location incessantly points outward and across: the moan of the trains “all the time” evokes passengers traveling through the country and between the US and Mexico; the river runs to the Gulf of Mexico, and to the missions, gesturing towards centuries of transnational and transcontinental movement; and from the house you can see the river changing and imagine its trajectory away. The view from this office is markedly more expansive than the bluntly offered view “of a street,

rooftops, trees, and the dizzy traffic of the Kennedy Expressway” (xiv). Here, where Cisneros has switched from the third person “woman in the photo” to a first person singular, we can see how the writer has merged an attention to the local honed by Chicago neighborhoods with a transmigrant subjectivity learned from years of travel and sojourn between Chicago, Mexico, and San Antonio. This is the mode that *Mango Street* hints at, largely overlooked by critics, and the mode that finds its clearest expression in *Caramelo*.

In *Mango Street*, the stories gesture outward, not simply out of the room or out of the house or onto the street, but out beyond the barrio, through the lives of the immigrant families who find themselves there. Esperanza’s neighbors are Spanish speakers from Texas (15), white Southerners, Puerto Ricans, Guadalajarans (106), and families from undisclosed Central American or Caribbean countries. The novel gestures at the shared experiences these neighbors have as immigrants or transmigrants living in the US: the stories recount several characters with two names, one Spanish and one English (10; 21; 35), and the discomfort of hearing a foreign name—a “name that is the Mexican records my father plays” (10)—mispronounced, when “at school they say my name funny as if the syllables were made out of tin” (11). Other cultural inheritances from foreign places seep into the young girls’ experiences of the world: both Esperanza and her sister Nenny see a house that Esperanza says “looked, in my mind, like houses I had seen in Mexico. I don’t know why. [...] Look at that house, I said, it looks like Mexico. Rachel and Lucy look at me like I’m crazy, but before they can let out a laugh, Nenny says: Yes, that’s Mexico all right. That’s what I was thinking exactly” (17-18). In the girls’ jump rope game words like “*merengue*” and “*tembleque*” are rhymed with words like “hoochi-coochi” and “heebie-geebee” (51).

The neighborhood is incessantly crossed by transnational movement. Several neighbors have visitors who come and go, or who travel back and forth themselves. Esperanza's father goes back to Mexico for a funeral to participate with the larger family in various rituals because "this is how they send the dead away in that country" (56); a nameless acquaintance of the Puerto Rican Marin dies, "just another *brazier* [laborer] who didn't speak English," whose "home is in another country," and whose family there will wonder where he went after "he went north" (66). In a neighboring house live a Puerto Rican family, Louie and his parents, who have their cousin Marin staying with them to earn money while her own family, and her boyfriend, remain on the island, echoing the transnational strategies found in Junot Díaz: cousin Marin writes letters to the island and longs to go back to get married, and eventually gets sent back by Louie's family because she is too much trouble (26-27). The family across the street, from an undisclosed Spanish-speaking country, realizes another transnational strategy. A husband comes to the US ahead of his family, to earn more money and bring his wife and child over later: "the man saved his money to bring her here. He saved and saved because she was alone with the baby boy in that country. He worked two jobs. [...] Then one day *Mamacita* and the baby boy arrived in a yellow taxi" (76). *Mamacita* however never leaves the apartment once she arrives, Esperanza believes because she is afraid to speak English; *Mamacita* is spurred in her desire to go back home by her husband, who replies "we *are* home. This *is* home," and the narrative leaves her crying uncontrollably as her baby boy starts speaking the English she fears ("No speak English, she says to the child" (78)), learned from the television. Many of the women of Mango Street evince nostalgia for a former country, Marin with her letters home, *Mamacita* with her fear of English and her son's assimilation, Rafaela who "drinks coconut and papaya juice on Tuesdays and wishes there were sweeter drinks, [...] sweet sweet like the island" (80). When Esperanza

elegiacally describes the strength of the trees outside her window, the “four who grew despite concrete,” “four who reach and do not forget to reach” (75), her descriptors figuratively describe the neighbors of Mango Street, whose lives reach out past the neighborhood, “when there is nothing left to look at on this street” (75), and out to former homes in former languages in former nations, which they are still tied to by family, romance, and culture. Attention to the transnational reach of a text, even texts published prior to the twenty-first century, opens up possibilities for interpreting writing by transmigrant and immigrant authors that has not yet been tapped.

This dissertation has dealt exclusively with Chicano and Latino writing from the last fifteen years, but the model for literary neighborhood geographies is broadly applicable. As we have seen with *The House on Mango Street*, this methodology can illuminate earlier works, given that they fulfill the criteria *Find Yourself Here* uses: namely, writing that is place-detailed, concerns a transnational community or communities, and is written by an author who is inscribed in a binational social field. Numerous works of Latino literature from the twentieth century can benefit from such a model. Francisco Goldman’s novel *The Ordinary Seaman* (1997), for instance, describes the neighborhood that emerges from a ship that does not move in Brooklyn harbor, following a crew of Hondurans, Nicaraguans, and Salvadorans who are flown to the US to work as seamen, only to find their boat derelict and their employers absentee; Goldman narrates scenes from multiple vantages, introduces contradictory reckonings of time, and plays with grammatical tense to create literarily the disorienting sense of time that occurs on the boat, reflecting the consequences of globalization and transnational movement, as economic disparity allows two white, privately funded Americans to “own a secret slave ship” (304). Cristina García’s novel *The Agüero Sisters* (1997) is another ideal candidate for a neighborhood

geography: her novel depicts a Miami neighborhood stuck in the past, where the Cuban Spanish spoken is “a flash-frozen language, replete with outmoded words and fifties expressions” (236), and the air is pervaded by a “fierce nostalgia” (45); García’s writing choices echo this neighborhood desire, as she employs a non-linear narrative that toggles in time, place, and narrators to thematize the faultiness of memory, the impossibility of return, and the subsequent fierceness with which the neighborhood clings to its memories of the island. Other works, such as Americo Paredes’ *George Washington Gómez* (1990), Ernesto Galarza’s *Barrio Boy* (1971), Hector Tobar’s *The Tattooed Soldier* (1998), Alfredo Vea’s *Gods Go Begging* (1999), and poetry by writers including Julia Alvarez, Judith Ortiz Cofer, and Rafael Campo, solicit a local reading and gain layers of significance when read as literary neighborhood geographies.

“That Lost Maze”: Other Traditions, Other Geographies

Transnational flows are also not exclusive to Chicano and Latino communities, and a number of works in multi-ethnic literature, by authors such as Karen Tei Yamashita, E.C. Osundo, Theresa Kyung Cha, Chang-Rae Lee, and Gayl Jones demonstrate the effects of global networks upon the local. Yamashita’s *Tropic of Orange* offers a prime example: by structuring her novel upon the streets of Los Angeles and the ways that times of day are experienced by various neighbors in that city, her aesthetic imitates the setting, and the narrations of the text’s multiple Los Angeles denizens approximates the various and in many cases unseen vantage points of the lived inhabitants of LA’s contested urban spaces. Chang-Rae Lee’s *Native Speaker* uses New York City as the locus for cultural clashes between Korean, African-American, and Latino communities, while exploring the questions of identity and belonging incumbent on a Korean-American inscribed in the transnational social field of his immigrant family. Gayl Jones’ expansive *Mosquito* uses a number of metafictional techniques to build a literary landscape that

matches the liminal spaces of south Texas its eponymous narrator travels, perceiving the sustained cultural effects of the African-American diaspora in terms of a physical, and literary, borderlands. The intervention of *Find Yourself Here* is in Latino literary criticism, but the methodology is portable, and adaptable to literature from various traditions and various timeframes.

Mark McGurl closes *The Program Era*, his influential book on the consequences of institutional creative writing upon post-45 US fiction, with a critique of the recent turn towards transnationalism in literary criticism:

literary scholars have generally been on the side of excess [...] and this has found another expression in the recent rise to glory of the discourse of the ‘transnational.’ With its adjacent terminologies of transatlanticism, cosmopolitanism, diaspora, and the like, it offers itself as a critical response to the rhetoric (but also the facts) of capitalist globalization, and is founded on a recognition of the limits of the category that has always been the organizing force of the modern literature curriculum—the nation. Is there something necessary about just this frame of analysis of culture? Doesn’t it impede our ability to trace the global flow of persons, ideas, and images, and institutionalize a certain narrow-mindedness on our part? Perhaps, but it is characteristic of the cognitive expansionism of literary studies—a panic response, it may be, to anxieties about its irrelevance in the world at large—that most of its energy has been invested in extending outward from the nation rather than inward to the regions and localities, not to mention the institutions, that are equally corrective to the thoughtless assumptions of disciplinary nationalism. (401)

I share McGurl's suspicion of the meteoric "rise to glory" of transnationalism as a framework, despite its basis in the facts of capitalist globalization, and the acknowledged limitations of thinking only within national boundaries. However, where McGurl sets up a dichotomy—to *either* expand outward from the nation *or* to turn "inward to the regions and localities" in order to combat disciplinary nationalism—I propose a dialectic. My methodology operates from the premise that the global can be found, and even more importantly, can best be analyzed and understood, at the local level. Transnationalism (and its attendant terminologies, to which I add to McGurl's list hemispheric studies) requires grounding to be useful to the literary critic, to avoid the "excess" of expansiveness that ends up becoming mired in generalizations and abstractions.

In the case of US Latino communities, the need to update our rubrics for comprehending contemporary transmigrancy has become particularly urgent. The US Census Bureau predicts that the Latino population will triple in the coming decades. We are already the largest minority group in the US. However, the appellation is misleading, as "Latinos" have never been a single group: the label includes indigenous groups who pre-date current US boundaries, Chilean descendants from the gold rush, Mexican *braceros* who helped build the railroads, Cuban exiles, Dominicans who escaped Trujillo, and Central-Americans fleeing political upheaval. My work pushes back on the generalizing label of "Latino" by analyzing literary depictions of the immigrant experience in microcosm: each work reflects the identity of *one* community, in *one* neighborhood corner of the US. With *Find Yourself Here*, I have contributed a sorely lacking literary dimension to the social scientific discourses of transnationalism and human geography on the US Latino immigrant experience, and to conversely demonstrates how those same discourses can provide an innovative lens for interpreting Latino literature. As a

society, we need to nuance our understanding of Latino identity, especially in the face of ever-increasing migration, immigration, and transmigration.

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