Aztlan, Revisited: Towards a Reconfiguration of Queer Chicano Literary Discourse

by

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“In the ruins of representation, there is feeling.” - Juana Maria Rodriguez
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Introduction
Beginning the reformulation

Two Anecdotes

To begin the actual writing process for this project, I revisited two events that had an outsized effect on the ways I conceive of space, stories which I think inform most of the theoretical goals of my writing. The first event is a well-known one: the murder of Matthew Shepard. Shepard, a young student at the time, was beaten, tortured, and left to die by two men, who, as testimony from one of the assailer’s girlfriend later explained, were motivated by violent homophobia. The girlfriend would later on also say that her boyfriend had been enraged by Shepard making a pass at him. For me, this story was a warning about the dangers of being “seen”, of not hiding one’s sexuality. The hypervisuality of transgressive sexuality can, and will, be punished; in Shepard’s case, it resulted in death. The second event is a story from my childhood, a “horror story” about crossing the border. As the story goes, an old family friend, who had lived in the United States for many years, was suddenly deported. Desperate to return, he hired a coyote to smuggle him across the border, but was abandoned in the desert. It’s believed he died there; he disappeared and his body was never found.

These two stories were important to me as I began the writing process because they highlighted, to me, the ways in which space can affect our interpretation of events & phenomena. Navigating particular locations is tough and can be dangerous, from the bars & highways of Wisconsin to the Sonoran Desert. There are geographic factors to consider, including the vast expanses of the Sonoran Desert, its oppressive heat, the lack of directional markers, the cold of the Wisconsin highways, the snow falling, the emptiness, and the ways in which this influenced the fates of the two. We can also consider social factors that may have played a role, the ways in which their marginalized identities marked
them as beings “able to be killed.” Shepard’s assailants had to have thought their violence would be justified. The portion of the border that crosses the Sonoran Desert is usually unmanned and poorly guarded, leaving migrants who try their luck crossing the desert largely way to be found should something go wrong. Thus, these stories show the intricate ways in which the way we construct identities, and how these identities when manifest within particular geographic locations, can often be a cause of death, the difference between making it through the desert, through the wintry Wisconsin landscape, and being left for dead, dying of starvation.

One thing that these stories do not address is the ways in which identity, physicality, and embodiment can often affect our perceptions of such crimes. Would Shepard’s death have provoked such a national response if he hadn’t been white, or normatively attractive? Would such a national push for hate crime legislation have occurred had Shepard’s sexuality never been mentioned in conjunction with his standing as a white, young, college student? Would we even have been moved by the tragedy had the image of him, alone, on the snowy road left to die not been so effective in instilling a sense of outrage? On the other hand, why hasn’t the story of the forgotten migrant (a story that, unfortunately, occurs frequently) been taken up in the national consciousness? What about these individuals marks them as “forgettable”? Is it the transgressive nature of the border crossing? Or is it simply their non-whiteness? Then there are the issues of “visible” sexualities. Shepard’s sexuality becomes visual only in the way his assailants purportedly saw it, in his “advances” on them. And what is said of the migrant’s sexuality? He is a “rapist”, a “drug dealer”, he is a “he”. These bodies are inscribed with particular social narratives by what appears to be the “straightforwardness” in identifying (perhaps “categorizing” is more accurate) the bodies engaged in these interactions. I note too that
these are also instances of socialized movements across borders, physical (in the case of the U.S-Mexico border crosses) and metaphorical (the crossing of sexual borders, of the private to the public in the display of one’s sexuality.) There are many questions to consider in understanding these anecdotes, and I don’t consider the two to be incredibly dissimilar; in fact, the societal impulses that surround the *interpretation* and the *cultural reproduction* of these events are telling about the ways in which we envision the movements, performances, and embodiments of certain individuals, and the ways in which our conceptions of race, gender, sexuality, and the Law all influence such perceptions. The point of invoking these anecdotes is to indicate that the goal of this project is to seek to understand the ways in which different social factors influence our perceptions of the interactions between bodies, spaces, and culture.

**Borders**

The two anecdotes presented are, in some abstract sense, intensely connected to the problem of borders. But, what is a border? A cursory Google search says that a border is “the edge or boundary of something, or the part near it”.¹ That isn’t nearly as satisfying as one might hope for. What is an “edge”? How do you know you’re “near” a boundary? Are there signs? What are the markers of such a place? More significantly, where *is* the border? Who does it belong to? Is the border a division between *here* and *there*? These are questions that have confounded not just geography experts but social & cultural theorists for many years; the border is a site of flux, a site of change. To some theorists, a border is little more than a line, a geographic division, a modern invention of nation-states. To others, the boundary is a space of cultural and historical “collision”. Borders become

¹ A cursory Google search of “border” will yield this definition, along with some other interesting ones.  

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spaces where the cultures, histories, and tensions of the two cultures and/or nation-states come into contact with each other, whether it be violent or peaceful. But the border, as a “site of flux”, is a space where histories and positionalities are being constantly negotiated.

The border this work is concerned with is a familiar one: the U.S-Mexico border, which is experiencing a renaissance in the American cultural consciousness. It could be argued that the problem of the U.S-Mexico border is a contemporary one; the current political climate surrounding immigration from the Global South has become increasingly tense, and legislation in recent years has been designed to fortify the border and deter immigration. However, one could argue that the problem of immigration, more significantly of the border, has been a long standing one, even dating back centuries. The history of the U.S-Mexico border goes back farther than contemporary discourse would suggest, back to, I would argue, the original conception of the border itself, which came to be a significant issue as Texas statehood became an issue for the nascent Mexican republic. Then, there is the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, at the 1848 end to the Mexican-American War, in which the United States dubiously acquired from Mexico a huge tract of land in the American Southwest. Already in these conflicts exist the tensions between imperialism, expansion, national identity, and how those relate to the issue of the border. Thus, understanding how we conceive of, construct, and maintain borders is an imperative question for understanding histories themselves.

**Border Literature**

Primarily a literary-focused project, this thesis seeks to understand the ways in which we write about the border, by focusing on the ways the border is taken up and analyzed through a particular critical lens. My particular focus is on queer Chicano literature, and its associated criticism. Queer Chicano literature is quite useful in these
discussions about borders, because of the ways, as I’ve tried to express through the anecdotes, that being nonwhite and/or non-heterosexual implies a border crossing of some sort, the passing from normative to transgressive, acceptable to perverse, and these complications are manifested in the context of the border. And the border becomes a method through which these others crossings can be understood, which helps us understand the ways in which borders and divisions figure largely into the way we conceive of our social realities.

In focusing on this particular type of literature, the hope is that we can work towards a reconfiguration of the discourse related to border literature, to depictions of the border, to the ways in which we talk about subjects in particular social spaces who cross different boundaries, whether it be the U.S.-Mexico border, or the border between straight/gay and white/non-white. The border has figured largely in Chicano literature as both a physical and metaphorical impediment, a boundary that must be crossed or, in some instances, a boundary that has crossed us. Thus, the critical treatment of the Chicano literary canon comes already with an awareness of the border as a potent structural and metaphysical construct which has enormous effects on the interpretation and cultural legibility of certain bodies in the American mythos. Chicano cultural theorists from all disciplines, from economics to literature, have focused on and analyzed the ways in which the border, crossing the border, and cultural perceptions of both influence the particular social positionality and mobility that Chicanos face and experience in the United States. This is important, because analyzing the tools that have been used to discuss the “problem” of the border and its position within the Chicano mythos will be important in my project of extending the current discourse to incorporate other identities and positionalities that have been traditionally excluded from the theoretical exercises within
the Chicano literary canon, and reformulating the discourse to incorporate new understandings of the relationship between space, history, and culture.

What is meant by “traditionally excluded”? There are considerations about what could be considered “traditional” or “excluded” but in the context of the Chicano literary canon, it’s important to consider the importance of a signifier such as “traditional”. Many theorists, notably Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, have criticized Chicano cultural discourse for its propagation of normative hierarchies of gender, sexuality, race, etc.\(^2\) Thus, to say “traditional”, in the sense that it’s being used here, is to refer to images, narratives, and histories that are frequently discussed within the Chicano cultural consciousness that mimic/mirror their larger, societal counterparts (for example, the propagation of the “immigrant as hardworker” myth is a common narrative employed to position Chicanos (and other Latinos) as “model citizens”, “striving for the American Dream” which is meant to facilitate their assimilation.) Thus, in the sense that there are certain identities, narratives, and “stereotypes” that are considered canonical, it’s necessary then that other bodies, identities be excluded and rejected from such a canon. These exclusions can be understood in many ways as part of a larger, assimilatory project, one that has sought to “introduce” the Chicano into the larger American mythos. Queer Chicanidad, as discussed by Anzaldúa and Moraga, became a liminal identity, especially during the Chicano nationalist *movimiento* of the late 20th century. Thus critical treatment of queer Chicano literature, within the larger topic of border analysis, is limited, and has remained stagnant in its scope. Therefore, the goal of this project can also be framed as an attempt to reframe border literature and its associated criticism and to incorporate queer-centric discourse

\(^2\) Moraga does this in her piece “Queer Aztlan”, while Anzaldúa addresses the question in her text *Borderlands/La New Frontera.*
into the analysis of such literature. The main theoretical focus of this thesis is to provide a new framework for interpreting queer Chicano border literature. Much of the scholarly critique on the subject has simply sought to replicate the theoretical bent of the larger Chicano literary canon, which is to say it applies the same lens, perspectives, and biases to queer Chicano literature as it would any other text in the canon, an analysis that often fails in understanding the multiplicity of ways in which Queer racialized subjects navigate a space as fraught as the border. Thus, my goal is to incorporate other theoretical perspectives towards a new understanding of queer Chicano subjects in relation to the border.

In incorporating other forms of literary criticism and applying them to queer Chicano border literature in the way that traditional analysis has been applied, I hope to expand the criticism to go beyond the identity-centered rhetoric that has characterized it since Chicano literary criticism became a serious school of thought in the 1970s, and move towards a more nuanced understanding of how identity is formed within certain spaces and how questions of the border problematize the formation of consciousness and identity within particular historical contexts. Thus, the chapters of this thesis are centered around dismantling existing criticism on the texts selected. I work closely with two texts, Gil Cuadros’ City of God & Eduardo Corral’s Slow Lightning, contemporary (by which I mean published within the last 25 years) queer Chicano literature that, in ways that will be explored, is intricately located within the U.S-Mexico border and the other social borders that this physical border comes to signify.

The first chapter focuses on Slow Lightning, and is constructed around dismantling a particular vein of critical analysis that has gone towards interpreting the book. In this chapter, I focus on the interactions between content & aesthetic in Corral’s work,
specifically the usage of the erotic and the idea of the liminal that comes to be manifested as the “borderland”, a nebulous geographical and psychic space that finds its roots in postcolonial & Chicana criticism. In this, I argue that Corral attempts to provide a kind of radical queer futurity that allows for the existence and continuation of a queer Chicano mythos within the larger Chicanx cultural landscape, but, in his invocation of the mythical “Aztlan” as the borderland, falls prey to many of the similar tropes that befall other Chicano discourse on race & mestizaje. The second chapter is concerned with *City of God*, and deals with its exploration of the trope of border crossings. Scholarly criticism of the text, as sparse as it is, has focused on understanding the ways in which it can be read as the construction of a new queer Chicano body living with AIDS. However, I will argue that to focus on embodiment as Cuadros’ goal is to create the fallacy of transferring traditional Chicano literary discourse and its homogenizing language to a problematized existence. Instead, I push towards reading *City of God* as a post-structuralist text which is concerned with disembodiment, and examine the ways in which the question of “border crossing” is used by Cuadros to explore the entanglements of dominant sexual, racial, and class fantasies. The final chapter, then, is, as a theoretical exercise, interested in extending the analysis presented in the previous two chapters. In this section, I thoroughly explore what I come to denote the “fallacy of Aztlan” and will introduce new work that is focused on pushing beyond Aztlan as the main theoretical framework in this subject at large, and show the ways in which it is used by modern writers.

I struggled a bit in thinking about the most appropriate title for this project. Trying to summarize a year’s worth of work in one line can be quite the task. I realized that I kept coming back towards ideas of “home” whenever I had to describe the focus of this project. And it’s true that these authors are critically concerned with the question of “home”.
is home? Can transgressive bodies have homes? What constitutes the home? “Home” is a deeply personal subject, of course, but there is a home, here, in the mythical Chicano consciousness: Aztlan. Aztlan as a concept, a place, a rallying cry is something that will be expanded on in later chapters, but Aztlan is supposed to be the home of the Chicanx people in the United States. However, is it a home that, as many have claimed, propagates the same forms of social subjection that operate within the larger American social fabric? Many queer Chicano theorists have abandoned the idea of Aztlan as a potential for radical positionality and ahistorical discourse. However, there has been a recent turn towards “revisiting” Aztlan, and expanding its theoretical limits to accommodate other forms of being. This, ultimately, is a theoretical turn I hope to continue. Thus, this work is about “coming back home” so to speak, building new homes, new walls, new borders to cross, ones that can be open to other forms of being. Thus, “Aztlan, Revisited” seemed like the most fitting, and most encompassing title. “Towards a Reconfiguration” highlights my desire to disrupt the discourse that surrounds queer Chicano literature and reorient the theoretical direction has been used to interpret it. In a way, this text is a highway itself, a path to travel towards a new Aztlan which can be used to construct experiences and “homes” for all Chicano subjects to find comfort in. Let the journey begin.
Chapter 1
“such hunger”: Erotics, Mappings, and the Problem of Aztlan in Eduardo Corral’s Slow Lighting

Many historians and cultural theorists have used the phrase “el movimiento” (“the movement”) to refer to the moment in which the Chicano community, as a distinct cultural group, first began its political organizing in the late 1960s and early 1970s. “Chicano” as a cultural descriptor had already, at that point, a long history as a pejorative term, but el movimiento became the first moment in which the term was reclaimed as a celebratory label, infused with pride and used as a rallying point to challenge institutional discrimination against Mexican-Americans. Many theorists have divided el movimiento into 4 constituent parts: the agrarian workers’ movement, famously led by Cesar Chavez & Dolores Huerta, a Chicano youth movement which rallied against education discrimination, the formation of the United Raza party, and the fight to end housing discrimination in the Southwest. While each of these parts constituted a different theoretical portion of the entire Chicano nationalist movement, they are broadly seen as covering the deficiencies in the everyday experiences of the Chicano subject.

As is the case with many other social & political movements, el movimiento benefitted immensely from the production of different kinds of art, through which cultural critiques could be produced in conjunction with political & social action. One form that became incredibly useful in its scope and impact is poetry, which came to the Chicano nationalist movement in the late 1960s, with an oft-agreed on starting point in

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3 A useful description and categorization of the movement is provided in the following text: Cordelia Candelaria. Chicano poetry: a critical introduction. (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1986.)
the publication of Rudolfo Gonzales’ *I am Joaquin* in 1967. The poem had a huge impact on the movement, especially among the young Chicano factions, for whom it provided the first moment for envisioning a (revolutionary) Chicano consciousness. This movement picked up steam with 1967’s founding of El Grito, a journal responsible for circulating “Chicano critical thought”. These origin stories show the many ways in which understanding Chicano poetry & writing became a path for understanding Chicano identity formation and political consciousness, and how Chicano poetry continues to play a huge role in the development of critical Chicano consciousness. Therefore, this chapter focuses on a text that seeks to further this tradition, Eduardo Corral’s critically acclaimed *Slow Lightning*.

*Slow Lightning*, published to critical acclaim in 2012 as a text in the Yale Younger Poets series, is a collection of poems & short stories that portray the experiences of Chicano men & woman on both sides of the border. The poems are thematically concerned with questions of migration, border crossings, sexuality, nationhood, and belonging. The collection is divided into three sections: two sections containing 15 poems each, and one section between them, the epic “Variation on a theme by Jose Montoya”. Thus, Corral builds within the structure of the collection itself a kind or border, a land between two worlds. The organization of the poems is important to understand, as the macrostructure of the collection is reflected in the subversive microstructure of the individual poems.

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4 The poem’s original publication is lost, but it was reprinted in 1991 here: Rudolfo Gonzales, *I am Joaquin*. (Denver: El Gallo, 1991.) There’s some debate whether or not the original title was in English or Spanish but not much is lost in referring to it in either language.

5 *El Grito* was a Chicano academic journal, which was in print from 1967-1974. While it published poetry and short stories, it’s main focus was on circulating theoretical pieces by Chicano writers that could help further the political goals of the movement.

The Borderland

As mentioned previously, the structure of *Slow Lightning* includes a small hiccup: the introduction of a “space between spaces”, the epic poem “Variation on a theme by Jose Montoya”. The two sections on either side are similar to each other, each comprised of a mix of poems and short prose narratives; thus, Corral constructs the similarities between the worlds on either side of the poem, establishing the “in-between” as a space *that is not them*. This invocation is deliberate and important here, as this space, the “space between worlds” is a reference to Aztlan, the mythical Chicano home. Aztlan, as conceived of by Anzaldúa works as a specific kind of space, a “borderland”.

To Anzaldúa, the borderland is the “vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary.” Borderlands are constantly, she says, “in a state of transition”, a forever-imposed state of liminality, in a way, always an “in-between” space. The only ones who occupy the borderlands are the *atravesados*; “the squint-eyed, the perverse, the queer, the troublesome…”.

To pass through the borderland is to “go through the confines of the normal”, which is to say that to be able to pass through the borderland is to assimilate, to adopt an identificatory position that is culturally legible and acceptable. Anzaldúa specifies her analysis of the borderland to a Chicano-centric understanding of the theory with her theorizing of Aztlan. Aztlan, as formulated by Anzaldúa, is her attempt to reclaim a geographic “home” for the Chicano people. If the problem of Chicano subjectivity, as theorized in the previous chapter, is one of place & belonging, then Aztlan, for Anzaldúa, is the attempt to “solve the problem”, allowing

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7 Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La New Frontera*. (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Book Company, 1987.)
Chicanos to construct a nationalist identificatory discourse centered on a shared geopolitical identity.\(^\text{11}\) Aztlan, Anzaldua says, is the home of the “new mestiza”, the land formed from the collision of the colonial and indigenous cultures.\(^\text{12}\) Postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha has a name for these places: the “third space”, where subversive forms of identity “are produced on the boundaries in-between forms of difference, in the intersections and overlaps across the spheres of class, gender, race, nation, generation, location.”\(^\text{13}\) If Bhabha considers the third space the remnants of a violent collision, the places where new forms of identity, hybridity, and culture can be produced, we can think of Anzaldua’s Aztlan, her borderland, the home of the new mestiza, as exactly that kind of postcolonial “third space”. Then, Aztlan and the borderland become places charged with subversive potential, where the liminality of the space itself is not the only power contained in it.

There is a problem, however, with Anzaldua’s reformulation of Aztlan. In its original introduction, for Anzaldua, the reclamation of Aztlan involves also a reinforcement of the mestizaje\(^\text{14}\) on which Aztlan is constructed. Aztlan, as a geopolitical concept involving the marking of Chicano communities as separate from the Mexican nation and the American community, involves the complex construction of mestizaje, whereby which Chicano subjects mark themselves as being descended from the original

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\(^\text{12}\) Gloria Anzaldua, “La conciencia de la mestiza: Towards a New Consciousness.” In Borderlands/ La New Frontera. (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Book Company, 1987.): 77-91

\(^\text{13}\) Jonathan Rutherford, “The Third Space; An Interview with Homi Bhabha.” In Identity: Community, Culture, Difference. (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1998.): 207-221

\(^\text{14}\) Rafael Perez Torres explains the history of the term mestizaje as a “descriptive term and cultural practice”, which finds its roots in a “highly vexed…racial history.” To Perez Torres, mestizaje is not merely the racial term (which finds its roots in colonial Latin America) but it comes to represent the idealized subject, which serves to “celebrate miscegenation or cultural mixture as the bases for conceiving a homogenous national identity.” This, we’ll come to see, will run into problems with ideas of indigenismo, but we’ll take it throughout this thesis as a racial & social signifier.
encounter between indigenous communities and Spanish conquistadores.\textsuperscript{15} The indigenous presence is marked as historical, as \textit{not here} but back then, and this is reflected in the geographic “home” of Aztlan. The claim to continuity that Anzaldúa offers as a rationale for the reclamation of the geography that constitutes Aztlan, the claim that Chicano people have always “lived there” is to erase centuries of indigenous presence in the area. Thus, the project of Aztlan introduces an uneasy dichotomy between the racialities and possibilities for radical identificatory positions, in the ways that to “inhabit” Aztlan is to force an erasing, to reify the border between Chicanidad and indigenismo. Anzaldúa does provide a solution to this, or at least attempts to: in her proclamation of the \textit{new mestiza}, Anzaldúa offers a possibility for understanding the power of Aztlan to legitimate other positionalities, to claim the connection between different Chicano subjects through a reclaimed (and celebrated) indigenous ancestry, which she invokes in the figures of the Aztec goddesses, through which she claims to “legitimize the Indian” as a Mexican subject as well, thus allowing Aztlan to be a home to the multiplicities within the Chicano community.\textsuperscript{16} Anzaldúa’s \textit{new mestiza} is a product of the violent collisions that produce the borderland itself; she is a new cosmopolitan figure which incorporates the violent multitudes that categorize the violent encounter, and thus can navigate such forces. This \textit{new mestiza} is a potent figure for radical intervention, and I will argue that it is this image that Corral attempts to appeal to in his figurations of Aztlan, though at a cost.

\textsuperscript{15} To suggest that \textit{mestizaje} allows for the Chicano subject to completely differentiate themselves from a Mexican subject, for whom citizenship is built around the concept of \textit{mestizaje}, is slightly misleading. Rather, I mean to suggest here that the particularities of forming a \textit{mestizo} identity while being in a space where the language for it doesn’t exist (i.e. the United States) allows the Chicano subject to form a notion of citizenship that is reliant on the sense of identity in conjunction with that sense of displacement. Thus, the invocation here is to suggest that the particularities of space have an outsized effect on how Chicano subjects form their subjecthood.

It’s possible to also consider Anzaldúa’s own poem “To live in the borderlands means you”, as a space where she attempts to offer a strategy for occupying the traditional Aztlan/borderland homeland, an attempt to symbolically construct such a “new mestiza”. She suggests you “speak Tex-Mex with a Brooklyn accent”, a powerful combination, considering Tex-Mex functions as a “stand in” for Tejano, a person of Mexican descent who lives in the American Southwest. Thus, its mixing with the “Brooklyn accent” forges a new being, a resident of Aztlan who is transnational and transcultural. Anzaldúa does this repeatedly throughout the poem, a strategy referred to by Fredric Jameson as a “cognitive mapping”, a methodology in which mental maps of physical locations are “extrapolated to…mental [maps] of the social and global totality”, which are mapped to “real conditions of existence”. The new mestiza’s awareness of the particular social contours of the space in which she finds herself provides the potential to radically rework the intricate social fabric of the given space, in the sense that the mestiza’s awareness of her positionality allows for disidentificatory practices in which the power of surveillance can be subverted. This “cognitive mapping” strategy is used extensively by Carlos Gallego in his analysis of Tomas Rivera’s …y no se lo trago la tierra, in which Rivera’s characters often relate their cultural anxieties as migrants to geo-spatial awareness and knowledge. Returning to Anzaldúa’s poem, it’s clear how Anzaldúa maps the new mestiza aesthetic to the borderland via a connection to a pre-existing aesthetic form; the fusion of the “Tex-Mex” and the “Brooklyn” accent form a method.

by which the new radically subversive identity can be connected to pre-existing culturally legible forms in an attempt at legibility. In this way, Anzaldua attempts to offer a method for legitimizing radical positionalities through connecting this positionality to existing aesthetic forms within the borderland. This, I argue, is also Corral’s strategy, to map queer Chicano subjectivities onto culturally legible Chicano narratives & forms in ways that attempt to legitimize the previously “problematic” identificatory forms, and Corral does so, in many instances, through the power of the “magical” and the “erotic”.

The erotic

Audre Lorde articulates the erotic as a “power”, a “personal and political power” that is often vilified within patriarchal institutions. Arguing against its confluence with the “pornographic”, Lorde articulates a way of utilizing erotic power as the mode through which self-autonomy can be acquired. Thus, the erotic as personal power can function as a significantly subversive political power, one that disavows traditional modes of understanding female sexuality. In her essay “Slow Lightning: Image, Time, and an Erotics of Reading”, Eliza Rodriguez y Gibson argues that Lorde’s theorizing of the erotic provides an avenue for understanding Corral’s poetry, through its musing on the “significance of embodiment”. Rodriguez y Gibson argues that the erotic functions as a conduit through which “poetic and textual bodies function as analogues of one another” and of the physical queer Chicano body. While I agree with the invocation of the erotic, I disagree with Rodriguez y Gibson’s premise that the erotic’s “[attention] to the significance of embodiment” is what renders it useful in understanding the cultural

22 Lorde. “Uses of the Erotic”.
dialectics in which Corral engages. To the contrary, Corral’s poems, in my reading, argue against *innovative* embodiment. Rather, the power of the erotic here is its connection to other physical imagery (primarily that of hunger, a recurring motif in both these texts) and its ability to serve as a conduit between the existing queer Chicano body and the traditional Chicano landscape. As a “personal and political power”, the erotic allows for the abstraction from the personal to the societal and the cultural. Corral does not seek to outright *reject* his own body, but instead textualizes, inscribes, and legitimizes it by connecting it to Chicano narratives. This is contrary to Rodriguez y Gibson’s invocation of “embodiment”, in the sense that Corral is not preoccupied with the formation of a new aesthetic form; Corral insists on the legitimizing of his existing identificatory position. This, in effect, is another way of rejecting signifying systems of power; this body does not become defective or visible only because of its queer perverseness; it’s visible because it is now a normalized subject, on whom problematizing social forces are meaningless.

One of the most important significant forces that Corral seeks to navigate is the homographetic one. A neologism coined by Lee Edelman, homographesis refers to what he considers to be the processes by which “homosexual identity” is constructed through its absorption and assimilation into the “tradition” of the Western canon, which is to say in the ways in which it is able to “appear to be” traditional body/sexual discourse. Edelman’s usage of homographesis provides a way in which gay literature, as a genre in its own right, can serve to disrupt the “binary logic of sexual difference on which symbolic identity is based, effectively disrupting the cognitive stability of culture itself”.

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Edelman argues that this is best done in writing itself, because, he argues, it is through “textuality”, or the process of making something into text, that homosexual difference becomes codified and legible. As will be shown in greater detail in the next chapter, the homographetic impulse, and the larger tendency towards the textualization of non-normative bodies, forms the bulk of the structure which Corral (and Cuadros) seek to dismantle.

Corral is ultimately preoccupied with the erotic and what Anzaldúa considers “the magic of the grotesque” in his attempt to map a queer Chicano subjectivity. He uses the power of the erotic to map the Queer body in ways that connect it to traditional Chicano narratives in an attempt to map an existence in accordance—not in opposition—to Chicano national subjectivity. To do this, he uses Aztlan, the mythic landscape. In the collection, Aztlan becomes represented as the space between Mexico and the United States, often considered a desert, in line with the conception of the borderland as being a place of great danger. Here, Corral adopts images of border crossings, of ethnic solidarity, traditional Chicano narratives, ones that are culturally legible, and links them, through space & the erotic, to images of queer Chicano desire & pleasure. However, this occurs only in the borderland, where these images exist (for Corral, talking about migration between states is much more fruitful than talking about migration within states.) Thus, Corral attempts to constructs the borderland not as a site of danger, but as a site of revolutionary potential, and his usage of the erotic to appropriate Aztlan as a home for Queer Chicanos is exactly the mapping of a Queer Chicano subjectivity onto Chicano nationalism.

The usage of geography and space is critical in Corral’s strategy. In Slow Lightning, physical places become the site for revolution, which is mirrored in the landscape of the
book itself. The embodiment of a new queer landscape is reflected in the landscape of the poems, where form and structure are subverted. In The Archive and the Repertoire, Diana Taylor argues that the landscape “like... culture, [is] the product of violent social practices, mutually defining, double and triple coded—traditional and postmodern, rooted, superimposed, and interstitial”. Thus, the landscape of the borderland, as the product of the violent collision of a colonial and a colonized culture, must be violent itself. This, intertwined with Taylor's assertion that bodies are like landscapes themselves in the same vein, implies her more forceful argument: the body, the landscape are “embodied cultural memory”; it is “impossible to think about cultural memory and identity as disembodied”. The usage of “disembodiment” doesn’t work in the same vein in which Rodriguez y Gibson uses “embodiment” to refer to the power of the erotic, which is to say this isn’t a physical body-centered rhetoric; what Taylor refers to is the idea that cultural memory & identity can be tied to a body, whether it be an immaterial one (a strategy that will be explored in the next chapter), a physical one, or the landscape itself; the locality to which cultural memory & identity can be tied to is malleable, which is to say the specific places in which they manifest could occur on the body, but Taylor’s theorizing of the matter allows for the possibility of displacing these inscriptive forces from problematized bodies to other culturally legible forms.

**Form & Queerness**

Corral uses the layout of the collection and individual structures of the poems to construct this “borderland”. For starters, Corral constructs a pairing within the collection, linking poems through imagery, forming layers as one progresses through the

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27 Taylor. “Memory as Cultural Practice.” pg 86
text. The first poem of the collection, “Our Completion: Oil On Wood: Tino Rodriguez: 1999”, opens Slow Lightning with a charged line: “Before nourishment there must be obedience”.28 This image of obedience & servitude is paired to the last line of the final poem of the collection, titled “Monologue of a Vulture’s Shadow”: “As my master ate, I ate”.29 The poems become linked through the reinforced images of servitude and hunger, an important motif throughout the poems. The next set of paired poems, the second and second to last ones, are connected through their title: “Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome”. The images in the poems are striking, reinforcing this connection through hunger. In the first “Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome”, Corral writes:

The deer passes me.
    I lower my head,
Stick out my tongue
    To taste
The honey smeared
    On its hind leg.30

This image of surreal hunger, of communion with nature, is reflected and transformed in the second to last “Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome”:

I toss off my robe. A mule
  curls its tongue around
  my erection. I throw
my head back,
  & stare at the slowest lightning,
  the stars.31

Thus, the poems connected not only by their shared title, but also by the magical realist imagery that populates each poem, the connection only reinforced by the images of hunger (“I lower my head/ stick out my tongue/ to taste/ the honey smeared” is

mirrored in “A mule/ curls its tongue around/ my erection.”) As Carl Phillips implies in the foreword to the collection, Corral’s strategy of mirroring invokes the “chiasmus”, the rhetorical device in which “words, grammatical constructions, or are repeated in reverse order”, “a cage within a cage”. By the linking of the “outside” poems, Corral maps to each other the worlds separated by the borderland. In those ways, Corral’s structure employs the mapping structure deliberated on earlier, the mapping of two distinct forms to create an understanding of both. In this way then, also, the book becomes a metaphorical journey in its own right, a kind of epic, a mapping of descent and eventual emergence. In this way, also, this journey mirrors a biblical one, a descent downwards, through purgatory, and up again (the usage of the word “purgatory” is deliberate, here, as Corral is deliberately invoking a thematic structure similar to epics such as The Divine Comedy. Corral is invested in the construction of reclaiming identities and subjectivities as divine journeys, hermeneutic quests towards an understanding of the self and the body in spite of problematizing forces that warrant its destruction.

Corral also uses the individual structure and aesthetic of the poems themselves to subvert traditional aesthetic forms. There are five poems which comprise the “sideways” poems group, poems whose orientation forces the reader to physically “turn” the book. Thus, the poem not only challenges our mental perception of the words on the page, but the sensory ways in which we interpret and absorb the novel. To read these poems means to quite literally that the readers must change their perspective, to shift one’s head

33 This “journey” narrative as metaphor is an old one, spanning back to tales such as that of Orpheus and Eurydice. The suggestion here is to think about the ways in which Corral constructs, through the textualization of the forms, a journey which is divine, a perilous journey between two worlds (Hell & Earth), which is meant to symbolize the perilous process of constructing a subjugated identity.
34 Rodriguez y Gibson refers to them as such in her essay, cited previously.
or shift the book itself. Rodriguez y Gibson argues that the “haptics of reading a printed book… is as much of the experience”; through the haptics, the aesthetic pleasure of reading itself, Corral is able to metaphorically and visually change the readers’ perspective, a strategy with profound consequences once we consider the thematic content of these poems. Three of the five “sideways poems” are ekphrastic poems, poems based on and about works of art. These three poems are based on queer Chicano/Latino artists: Frida Kahlo, Julio Galan, and Felix Gonzalez-Torres. These poems are sideways, implicitly lying down, in the way the dead artists do so in a coffin. There are other poems as well, other ekphrastic poems, that are not sideways. These poems invoke artists like Ester Hernandez, Gabriel Orozco, and Tino Rodriguez, who are alive, and as such these poems are upright. In this way, Corral invokes the body through the structure of the poem, the structure itself reflecting the body of the author. In this way, Corral suggests one method for textualizing with inscribing. It’s interesting to note that the dead artists are all queer, the still living are not. Thus, there’s this connection with “finding new ways to read” these queer bodies, reflected in the literal rejection of form that their ekphrastic poems take.

“such hunger”

One of the linking images used in constructing the chiasmus, and one that becomes increasingly more prevalent as one traverses through Slow Lightning’s landscape is the motif of hunger. Hunger, of course, manifests in myriad ways, at times sexual, physical, or spiritual. In all cases, however, the image of hunger becomes a strategy for Corral to connect and map a queer Chicano subjectivity onto traditional Chicano affective positions. To understand hunger, I start at the beginning, the opening poem

“Our Completion: Oil on Wood: Tino Rodriguez: 1999” (which will hereafter be referred to as “Our Completion”). As noted previously, the poem opens with an image of hunger: “Before nourishment there must be obedience”36. The hunger prevalent here, by the “nourishment” that is delayed, is constrained, the body conditioned by “obedience” before ceding to pleasure. This sentiment of restraining is reinforced by the following line: “In his hands I was a cup overflowing with thirst”.37 There is a juxtaposition present, of the “overflowing” of the cup and its apparent emptiness which leads to the “thirst”. Here, the “thirst” is connected to being “in his hands”. A master-slave dynamic rises between the narrator of the poem and the owner of the hands; it is the hands which represent the man, who must be “obeyed” before the thirst may be “nourished”.38 Corral frames this desire for pleasure, the need to fulfill the hunger, as a spiritual journey, a form of self-discovery. The poem references the “Eighth” and “Ninth” houses, astrological “houses” with each “house” referring to ideas about sexual pleasure and self-discovery. Then, the master-slave dynamic manifested in the opening lines of the poems becomes a kind of symbiotic relationship, a hermeneutic quest to self-discovery of the body. This curious relationship, of the submissive following the dominant lover is meant to mirror and mimic to a certain extent the Chicano notion of parenthood, this notion of the father demanding obedience from his children. In this way, the narrator’s relationship to his lover becomes one of learning, of guidance; the narrator must obey before he can be “nourished”, much like a parent with a child. This normalizing impulse on the relationship of the narrator with his lover is further

naturalized by an invocation of nature: “He thrashed above me like branches”.39 The “thrashing” invokes the sexual imagery, while the semblance to “branches” naturalizes the motion; this impulse is followed by the lover “[slicing] a potato in half to remind [the narrator] of the moon” after “weeks of rain”.40 The “weeks of rain” brings to mind a kind of biblical deluge, while the slicing of the potato, to “remind [one] of the moon”, deifies the lover, which we saw in the previous line where he’s referred to as the “Eighth ruler…ninth lord”.41 This deification forces a kind of liminality on the lover, a celestial-mortal divide, manifested in his body: “The dark slept in the small of his back”.42 The lover is transformed again, celestial, and also a landscape. The lover becomes a location. Here, the “small of his back” is a literal border itself, between light and dark, his back and his butt. The “small of his back” is immediately contrasted with the “back of his knees”, again a borderland, which became connected to “pale music”, in opposition to the “dark”.

Hunger returns again, in the hands of the lover: he would “crumble the Eucharist and feed it to the pigeons”.43 The lover is holy, with the power to serve the body of Christ, and, in his hands, hunger is satiated. The titling of the lover as “He Who Makes Things Sprout” reinforces this idea of the lover as giver of life.44 The poem ends with a curious image; the lover stands between two roads, to his left “huesos” (bones), to his right “mapas de cuero” (leather maps).45 The final line “When I’d yawn, he’d pluck black

petals out of my mouth” solidifies this deification.46 The lover in these images stands at a crossroads, a sort of gatekeeper between worlds. Thus, the lover again is a border, occupying the borderland between two realities. To his left, there are “huesos”, which imply death, and to his right “mapas de cuero”, which can be translated in two ways: the first, a transliteration to “leather maps”. However, “cuero” refers to any general hide, or expanse of skin. We can think back to the “dark [sleeping] in the small of [the lover’s] back” and can envision these “mapas de cuero” to refer to the back of the lover, an expanse of skin that is also a locality, where places are separated. Then, to the right of the lover at the crossroads, is life, love. The ending image of “plucking black petals” out of the narrator’s mouth reinforces this notion of the lover as God. Here, the plucking is reversed; they are plucked “out of” the narrator’s mouth. Their power is reversed, the lover “plucking” death out of the narrator.

The religious symbolism in the poem allows for a mapping of queer desire into traditional Chicano narratives. The lover is repeatedly referred to in divine terms, manifesting divine powers, so as to deify him. In addition, there are many instances of this “God” existing and manifest in the “in-between spaces”: there’s the small of his back, where the dark sleeps, there are the “margins in a book”, where the lover makes a pun about “Trojans” in an Emily Dickinson poem.47 There is also this moment of the lover-as-gatekeeper; the lover stands between the bones and the leather maps (or the people.) Thus, the lover exists “in between” things, in between often contrasting worlds (there is the small of the back, between the “vastness” of the lover’s back and the confinedness of his butt, the margins of the book, between the words already on it and the edge of the paper, and standing between the bones and the leather maps, coming to

symbolize life and death itself.) While the lover is a sexual being, a subversive one (the lover is gay, as is the narrator), the lover is also God. So, while the narrator’s submissiveness to the lover is a sexual one (one that uses BDSM imagery), it’s also a religious one, a submissiveness to God Himself. The power dynamic then takes on both a sexual and religious dimension, and one that isn’t separable, since the lover comes to be constructed as God himself. This confluence of the gay lover with God is important for many reasons. The control over the narrator’s body lies with the lover (“before nourishment there must be obedience.”) Thus, the ceding of desire and of pleasure is both religious (echoing “The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want”\textsuperscript{48}) and sexual (“In his hands I was a cup overflowing with thirst”.) This love, rather than perverse, is its own kind of religion, its own form of worship that is natural and necessary. The narrator’s submissiveness to his lover is thus paired to a kind of submissiveness to God, a religious motif common in Chicano culture. The images of love, of obsession, desire, and hunger, become linked to more “understandable” and “palatable” images of religious devotion. Through this presentation of queer desire, the queer body becomes readable through an understanding of the religious imagery.

In “Our Completion”, the usage of religious iconography becomes paramount to the cultural legibility of queer desire. Hunger is paramount in the linkage between the religious imagery and the sexual desire of the narrator and his lover. This strategy, to link disparate images through motifs of hunger, is also the central strategy in the poem “Want”. “Want” opens in the desert, with the narrator’s father having been “abandoned by his coyote” (referring to the person in charge of helping him cross the border),

\textsuperscript{48} Ps.23:1 KJV
trekking through the desert.\textsuperscript{49} The desert is immediately transformed into a magical place; the sand is “seething beneath his sneakers”, the “cold sweat [cuts] his face”.\textsuperscript{50} The desert is also a place of invasion; the father is an invader, an immigrant as are the “acacia” and the “cholla”, which form a “maze” he must traverse, the acacia being a plant non-native in the American Southwest.\textsuperscript{51} The borderland is transformed into a space of contradictions, of home and of invasion, of inanimate coming to life and life remaining depersonalized.

“Want” ends with a curious image:

\begin{verbatim}
 on the third day, he picked up
  a rock, killed a blue lizard
 with a single strike he tore it
 apart, shoved guts & bones
 into his mouth the first
time I knelt for a man, my
 lips pressed to his zipper,
 I suffered such hunger.\textsuperscript{52}
\end{verbatim}

The importance of this excerpt lies in its thematic concerns and structural layout. Here, the son and father are connected by physical desire: the hunger the father feels in the desert and the sexual desire the son feels towards his lover. The father “shoved…bones into his mouth”, a play on the colloquial term for an erection, “boner”, which mirrors the oral sex the son is (implicitly) engaging in. There is a reference to a kind of trinity here: “on the third day”, which mirrors the macro structure of the novel itself, the poem “Border Triptych”, and the Holy Trinity itself, the body becomes whole again, is nourished, mirroring Jesus’ resurrection.\textsuperscript{53} The zipper of the pants is meant to mirror the father’s “tearing apart” of the lizard itself, the opening of the body to the

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{50} Corral. “Want.” 17
\textsuperscript{51} Corral. “Want.” 17
\textsuperscript{52} Corral. “Want.” 17
\textsuperscript{53} The invocation here is the trinity of Good Friday, Holy Saturday, and Easter. The poem “Border Triptych” is featured in this collection, and is comprised of three disparate “mini poems.”
\end{flushright}
“guts & bones” inside, which is reflected in the (implied) erection hiding behind the zipper. The “shoving” is reflected in the “lips pressed against [the] zipper”, the proximity of the mouth to what it is about to consume. The sexual desire the narrator feels towards his lover his likened to physical hunger, both in the invocation of the father’s memory and the final word “such hunger”, a physical desperation, a sexual passion likened to starvation. However, there is a protracted space between “I suffered” and “such hunger” in the last line, a spacing that occurs in moments of agency. It first appears in the line “sand seething beneath his sneakers    trekked through southern Arizona”, again in “he picked up a rock,     killed a blue lizard”, and then “into his mouth     the first time I knelt for a man”. The images all represent moments of transgression: the crossing of a border, the crossing into savagery (eating a raw animal), and the crossing of sexual boundaries. The space separates the physical body from the transgressive impulse, a border the physical body cannot cross. Thus, the border the father must cross (as he inhabits the borderland) is reflected structurally within the poem itself, a moment of form and content working together. Note also the interesting progression of the spaces, which zig-zag from line to line, forming a kind of “zipper” in the structure, mirroring the zipper the narrator has his lips pressed to. Thus, this becomes yet another moment of the connections between form & content, where the form of the poem mirrors the thematic concerns it addresses. “Want” is interesting in the sense that its invocation of the father is entirely dependent on the locality in which the memory is invoked. The image of incredible hunger, of desperation, necessitates a landscape in which the image “makes sense”, which is to say the image must be culturally legible. This is one of the most important instances of such an invocation because the “dangerous border crossing” trope is a narrative common and legible in traditional Chicano discourse. By
joining the border-crossing trope to queer desire, Corral is able to form a discourse on queer love that is then, in this way, legible as well, understandable as a relatable sort of hunger, a desperation that can be associated to other forms of hunger and desperation. This is done by using the “dangers” of the borderland. Anzaldúa claims that the borderland is a site of “great danger” to normative subjects. The dangers to the normative Chicano body are then made to be dangers to the subversive queer Chicano subject.

**Inside the Borderland**

The two poems analyzed previously utilize the rhetoric and positionality of the “borderland” as a physical and psychic structure to begin to construct alternative queer Chicano subjectivities. However, thematically, the poems are not concerned only with using the borderland was a way to link disparate identificatory positions, but to also, in these invocations, reform and reconstruct the borderland as a space that accommodates all forms of subjectivity. To achieve that goal, many of Corral’s poems take place in the “in-between” of worlds. “Variation on a theme by Jose Montoya” is emblematic of this. “Variation on a theme by Jose Montoya” (which will be referred to as “Variation” from here on out) is the physical “borderland” of the collection itself, lying between the two other sections of poetry. It is the longest poem in the collection, at 161 lines, compared to an average length of 25-30 lines.

“Variation” opens at a funeral: “Hoy enterraron al Monchie”. Monchie is “El Mero Mero de Durango. Mister No Contaron con Mi Astucia”. The references to Durango music and *El Chapulín Colorado*, a Mexican TV show character (whose signature line is “No contaron con mi astucia!”) invoke a nationalized subject; Monchie is

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representative, then, of Mexico. He becomes the depersonalized national subject through which the cultural critique is focalized. Monchie is dead, found outside “Eloy”, a border town, under a mesquite tree, a tree referenced in other poems as a stand-in for the desert.\textsuperscript{55} The opening lines also refer to “El Louie”, an old Mexican folklore song about El Louie, a revered anti-hero figure. Thus, framing el Monchie in this way subverts the traditional Chicano narrative of the “good immigrant”, coming to the United States to “better himself”. There’s an invocation to the poem “Border Triptych”, where, in the first section, we’re shown a man who crosses the border on a daily basis to work at a factory, who manages to deceive a Border Patrol agent about his bike-smuggling business.\textsuperscript{56} Monchie “pushed a lawnmower in Palo Alto” and “flipped burgers in Sacramento”, but dies before arriving in Eloy.\textsuperscript{57} There’s a destruction of the “arrival”; his border crossing is incomplete. This is reflected in the revelation of Monchie’s true character. Monchie, it turns out, is most likely working for a drug cartel, as is implied in the insistence “Tell los chismosos naco but not narco”.\textsuperscript{58} Eloy, curiously enough as well, is dominated by correctional facilities. Thus, Monchie’s death takes on a surveillatory aspect. The incompleteness of Monchie’s border crossing is reflected in the form of the poem itself, which after the insistence that Monchie is “not narco”, the poem abruptly switches structure, from a more free-verse style to a kind of song, with two voices present, represented by italicized and non-italicized text. The italicized text is taken from Robert Hayden’s “Runagate Runagate”, thus linking the idea of the border crossing to slaves running away.\textsuperscript{59} The instability of the form then is connected further to a kind of

\textsuperscript{55} Corral. “Variation on a theme by Jose Montoya.” 33
\textsuperscript{57} Corral. “Variation on a theme by Jose Montoya.” 33
\textsuperscript{58} Corral. “Variation on a theme by Jose Montoya.” 33
\textsuperscript{59} Robert Hayden, “Runagate Runagate.” In \textit{Collected Poems} (Liveright Publishing Corporation, 1985.)
crossing, some form of transgression, akin to the runaway slave. The poem’s shifting structure is reflective of the often confusing and harrowing journey of “crossing a border” and its abrupt, seemingly random switch is reflective of the instability of the “border” itself, the tendency towards flux instead of fixation of borders and borderlands.

The next section of the poem retains the song structure, intercepted now by an old Mexican song “El Crudo” (“The Hungover One”). The poem takes on a serpentine structure, structurally referring to the poem “Want” and the lizard the father consumes. Naturally then, this section of the poem is about food & hunger. American foods get transformed and corrupted, like “Girled cheese” and “Trench fries.” This section of the poem deals with weird fusions of Mexican and American imagery, a kind of incomplete border crossing, not fully assimilated, a situation further exemplified with usage of the word “pocho”, which appears as “Pocho words like pepper on his lengua”. “Pocho” is traditionally a slur used to refer to people “who act white” (are assimilated.) The “pocho words” refer to Spanglish, the linguistic phenomenon of comingling English & Spanish words. The final line of this section sums up the strategy of this section: “Agringado. Recien llegado”. The line roughly translates to “Whitened. Newly Arrived”. The usage of “Whitened” refers to the concept of being fully assimilated of “acting white” (acting gringo), which is paired with “Recien llegado”, referring to someone newly arrived to the United States. Naturally, these are contradictory statements, and they’re reflective of the incomplete border crossing that the “Girled cheese” & “Trench fries” refer to. These examples of awkwardly fused

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61 Corral. “Variation on a theme by Jose Montoya.” 35
62 Corral. “Variation on a theme by Jose Montoya.” 35
63 Corral. “Variation on a theme by Jose Montoya.” 35
cultures are emblematic of the aesthetics of the “borderland” that Anzaldúa describes. The shifting of the form, from an American poem to a Mexican folklore song, is again reflective of the intangibility of the border, of the fluidity of borderlands, and of the problem of reifying these borders.

The poem switches structures three more times, an astounding rejection of form and stability that Corral exploits to further criticize the notion of stasis and stability. The scenes depicted are startling: a border agent who has been murdered, hung up like a scarecrow with a sign “around its neck” saying “Pancho was here”, referencing the legendary Mexican revolutionary figure; a moment of honoring Monchie, from the poem’s opening, a series of exaltations, and a car, a “rusty ’68 Impala” driving through the desert. The poem then returns to Monchie, and to the structure present at the opening of the poem, a circular macrostructure that is reflective of the circularity of the migratory process. We’re taken back to Monchie’s burial (curious also that Monchie serves as the lynchpin for the entire poem, centering the depersonalized migrant subject in the entire epic). Here now, however, there is a geographic change; before, we were in “Eloy” where his body was found; now we see the procession, his “brothers carrying him” through the “calles of Orizaba”, a town in Southeast Mexico. Again, we see this invocation of the weird amalgamation of American and Mexican imagery. Monchie is in a “Dodgers jersey, necklaces de oro, snakeskin botas”. There’s a weird combination of the articles of clothing and accessories, a weirdness only further complicated by the casual intermixing of Spanish and English. This strategy is prevalent throughout the entire poem, the putting together of Spanish and English in the same line, the refusal to italicize the Spanish words, which serves only to highlight the mixture that is the

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64 Corral. “Variation on a theme by Jose Montoya.” 37-39
65 Corral. “Variation on a theme by Jose Montoya.” 33-40
borderlands, the confusing congregation of seemingly separate things (Spanish and English) into the same spaces (spaces quite literally, as the words exist right next to each other on the page.). At the end of the funeral scene, the poem switches form one last time, to the song-form that followed the first portion of the poem, keeping with the circularity of the epic, as the narrator sings of returning to Los Angeles and the “trumpet wails” (the “trumpet wailing” seems to refer to the biblical Seven trumpets that sound before the “apocalypse”, a reading in line with the earlier moments of religious invocation.)

The Magic of the Borderland

“Variation on a theme by Jose Montoya” depicts an “in-between” border space in which cultures are fused (roughly), disparate images become paired, and the unlikely becomes certain. We’ve seen the idea of the “unlikely” manifesting before, in the poem “Our Completion”, where the master-slave dynamic of the lovers becomes elevated to a holy, god-like pairing. It’s natural then to see the poem connected to “Our Completion” through the chiasmus structure, the final poem “Monologue of a Vulture’s Shadow”. “Monologue” presents the most complex usage of the borderland, and in many ways, is emblematic of the limits of the invocation of the Aztlan and the borderland as potentialities through which the queer Chicano subject can assert its subjectivity.

Like many of the poems in Slow Lightning, “Monologue” takes place in the desert. The title clues us in to the narrator of the poem: the shadow of a vulture. The poem opens with a kind of longing that was prevalent in “Our Completion”: “I long to return to my master/who knew neither fear nor patience” (echoing the opening lines of “Our Completion”: “Before nourishment, there must be obedience/ In his hands I was a

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66 Cuadros. “Monologue of a Vulture’s shadow.” 73-74
The poem begins with the personalization of an abstract object: a shadow. There are borders being crossed here: animate/inanimate, light/shadow, human/animal; this is a borderland. The poem eschews a form of continuity, going back “years ago”, to when the master, the vulture, “spiraled above a woman trudging through the desert”, an image of a migrant crossing the desert. Here, there is the traditional relationship of life & death. The woman “trudges” through the desert, implying a kind of difficulty; the vulture “[spirals] above” her, implying she is near death. The vulture and the woman are more closely connected than one would assume: the vulture itself “[knows] neither fear nor patience”, implying that the vulture is desperate; it is near death as well. The woman does not die without a fight, becoming the aggressor instead of the aggressed: “She raised her face & cursed us: Black Torches of Plague, Turd Blossoms.” The woman becomes a witch figure; the desert wanderer now eschews the inevitability of death and fights against it, a magic not previously seen; interesting here is also the woman’s curse, seemingly illogical babble (“black torches of plague/turd blossoms”), which serves to highlight how the borderland becomes a space of the absurd and of the fantastic. The witch “lashed out with her hands\ pinned me to her shoulders./ I went slack./ I called for my master.” The poem offers a magical take on Hegel’s master-slave dialectic, a power dynamic witnessed previously in “Our Completion”. The narrator, in “[calling] for [its] master”, remains submissive, as the master, as predator, stalks the witchy shadow-thief. The submissiveness of the shadow

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68 Cuadros. “Monologue of a Vulture’s shadow.”
69 Cuadros. “Monologue of a Vulture’s shadow.”
70 Cuadros. “Monologue of a Vulture’s shadow.”
71 Cuadros. “Monologue of a Vulture’s shadow.” Also note here the usage of the phrase “Turd Blossoms”, which was George W. Bush’s nickname for advisor Karl Rove, an interesting inclusion.
72 Cuadros. “Monologue of a Vulture’s shadow.”
73 phenomenology of spirit citation
remains as it goes “slack”, “pinned” to the witch’s shoulders; it is the profanities, the
curses of the witch that allow her to now control the shadow, which is appropriated and
transformed into a “black shawl” embroidered with red thread.\textsuperscript{74} The shadow is wholly
preoccupied with “completion”; it laments being “[anchored]…to her dress with a
cameo of a bird/ clutching prey/as if to remind me of when my master flew close to the
desert floor.”\textsuperscript{75} There’s a casual echo of S&M in here, the punishment the submissive
shadow must receive for its master flying “close to the desert floor.” The ending lines of
the poem are moments of disappearance:

“How could I forget?
Sometimes my master soared so high
I ceased to blacken the earth.
What became of me in those moments?
But the scent of decay always lured my master
earthward.
As my master ate, I ate.” \textsuperscript{76}

Here, the unification is implicitly impossible. The shadow can never join the
master, for the master forgets about the existence of its submissive shadow. The shadow
is left to lament its separation, only able to enjoy the moments in which the master is
“lured…earthward.” The shadow gets nourishment when the master does: “As my
master ate, I ate”, a line that references the opening line of the book: “Before
nourishment, there must be obedience.”

“Monologue” uses imagery from other poems to construct a subversive borderland. The image of the witchy shadow thief, the abandoned woman traversing the
desert on her own is reminiscent of the woman presented in the third section of the
poem “Border Triptych”, the woman who is physically assaulted yet spared rape. Here,

\textsuperscript{74} Cuadros. “Monologue of a Vulture’s shadow.” 73
\textsuperscript{75} Cuadros. “Monologue of a Vulture’s shadow.” 73
\textsuperscript{76} Cuadros. “Monologue of a Vulture’s shadow.” 73-74
instead of being defenseless, the woman migrant figure is given supernatural power, the power to defy death itself. The lover, who we saw in “Our Completion”, transforms from the giver of life to the harbinger of death. The familial nature of death is distorted; it’s transcended in a way. Whereas in “Our Completion”, hunger was normal, and unfulfilled, here the slave eats and is “nourished”. Gender roles themselves are reversed; the vulture who is the lover, who, it is implied, is male, is thwarted by the woman. In “Border Triptych”, we saw the nine women who were the victims of sexual assault. In “Monologue”, the body of the vulture is the one disrupted. We see in all these ways a destruction of sorts, a rejection, through the magical invocations.

**Corral’s Subjectivities**

*Slow Lightning* ends with the provocative line “As my master ate, I ate”, an image of hunger and sexuality combined, which references the opening line “Before nourishment, there must be obedience”, a circularity in the structure itself which culminates with this return to the opening imagery. Corral’s poems are also focused on a kind of journey, a passing through spaces, through conflicting temporalities, which ultimately is based in understanding the experience and aesthetics of the borderland itself. His usage of the borderland in this way invokes the notion of the “margin”. bell hooks is concerned with the “margins”, referring to, what she conceives, as the power of the marginal, the liminal, in producing positionalities and experiences that reject those socially dominant inscriptive forces.77 Then, what is meant by “Corral’s subjectivities”? Throughout the collection, in many of the poems, we see Corral adopt a variety of “positions” so to speak: queer, Chicano, migrant, etc. In many of these instances, Corral’s adopting and posturing in such a position is coupled with movement. There’s a

77 bell hooks, “Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness.” In *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics*. (UK: Routledge, 1990.)
particular linkage of position with movement in many of the poems, and this movement through dangerous spaces is linked, in a powerful way, to movement through traditional psychic landscapes.

In “Want”, the reader is able to see how Corral is invested in relating the image of the father’s hunger and desperation as he crosses the desert to the image of his desire for his lover. In many ways, this is a linkage of movement. The father moves throughout the environment, traversing through the desert, and it is this particular motif, the moment of crossing the border, of traversing the borderland, that becomes linked to the son, who “[kneels] for” his lover, a movement through space as well. “Want” also employs an interesting structural technique: the odd usage of extra spacing in the final lines of the poem. The spaces gradually become larger and larger as the narrator “kneels”, the un-doing of the poem’s structure reflecting the un-coming of a zipper being opened, a physical movement reflected in the spacing of the poem, which, as mentioned earlier, links the opening of the metaphorical zipper and the “tearing” apart of the lizard which the father consumes raw. The movement of the father, of the son, of the zipper itself, all get mapped through this motif of hunger, an erotic, desperate form of hunger, representative of what can be thought of as the usage of the “erotic” as a kind of language communicating between the two worlds. The usage of the erotic in this instance is in a way to “understand” the choreography that is the homosexual encounter between the son and his lover; it is the way the movement is understood. This is prevalent in many of the poems that focus on the (graphically) erotic. “Our completion” features many moments of movement: the “plucking” of black petals out of the narrator’s mouth, the “slicing” of the potato in half, to remind the narrator “of the moon”. These images are not just images of sex, they are images of movement, non-
static representations of “forbidden” sexual encounters. These movements are made parallel to the movement of the Chicano subject, whether it be the physical movement over the border, a highly stylized “choreography” in itself, or the psychic movement over a border, an idea that will be explored more fully in *City of God*, the linking of the physical border crossings with “crossings” of other forms (from Chicano to white, straight to queer, etc.), or even, as Corral explores, the movement within the borderland itself, and the way the rules of movement and choreography are expanded and distorted in a way that allows for multiplicity in the existence of a queer-Chicano subjectivity.

There are limitations to the subjectivity Corral ascribes to the pathologized queer Chicano body. The most important, and telling, one is this seeming contradiction between movement through space & attachment to a geophysical locality. Corral’s bodies are free-moving; within the psychic realms in which they manifest, these bodies transcend borders in many ways, crossing through the queer border, the identificatory border, etc. But, in many physical aspects, Cuadros’ bodies are trapped, in some sense, in a specific locality. Monchie, in “Variation on a theme by Jose Montoya”, is an example of this; Monchie dies in the desert, found “outside Eloy”, ultimately physically failing to “leave the borderland” if, as Corral constructs it, the borderland is the desert landscape, which is emblematic of the kind of liminality Anzaldúa delineates, the spaces where the extreme and the perverse become manifest. Considering Chicano mythos and its preoccupation with the desert as a site of danger to the Chicano subject, Corral takes up the desert as one such borderland, and his bodies are unable to escape it. Then, the borderland is incomplete in some way, as it provides the *only* home for the figures we encounter like Monchie, who become hybridic subjects in some way. Monchie’s death in “Variation” outside and his manifestation as a Mexican-American hybrid within the
desert and within Mexico itself speaks to the idea that these bodies are, if not psychically, then at least physically tied to the borderland. As we saw in “Monologue”, to leave the borderland, as the shadow must do as the witchy shadow-thief emerges unharmed, is to face starvation, both physical and spiritual; it is to be chained and punished without “nourishment”.

It’s important to mention “Monologue” again as it does, in my reading, articulate the most pushback against the insistence, in Corral’s text, on utilizing and reformulating Aztlan in this attempt to have it incorporate multiple identities. “Monologue” ends provocatively, but it does end in a kind of lament; the shadow figure disappears in moments when the vulture “[flies] too close to the sun” and is sustained only in moments when the vulture’s extreme hunger is satiated. This is counterbalanced with the image of the bruja, the woman in the desert whose dark magic is her ability to “steal” the shadow away from its master.78 The bruja is a common trope in Mexican folklore, her witchy powers a testament to her india origins, a counter-point to Mexico’s often venerated mater dolorosa, the Catholic image of the pious, motherly woman. This scene can be interrogated for the ways in which the non-Catholic, which is to say Indian, aspects of the bruja lead to her agency and to her disruption of the bond between dominant and submissive that is seen in its partner poem “Our Completion”. There, the bond between dominant and submissive is celebrated. But here, the presence of the Indian bruja serves to disrupt that, altering the methods by which “nourishment” is provided, robbing the shadow of the possibility of “obedience”. The closing statement,

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“as my master ate…”, is predicated on the disappearance of the bruja figure, the interloper whose india powers disrupt the possibility of the master-slave dynamic (which, throughout the text, is indicative of queer relationships and queer desire.) In this slippage, it’s clear that Aztlan has an “Indian problem”. The figure of the india predicates the disruption of the space and the prohibition of the queer Chicano body to manifest. Thus, as the bruja disappears, the desire is satiated (“As my master ate, I ate.”) This forms the most forceful articulation of the tension present in attempting to reformulate Aztlan, and why, throughout this chapter, I have referred to Corral’s strategy as an “attempt”. Aztlan, as a space, is predicated on the continuous erasure of indigenismo, and Corral is complicit in attempting to highlight his Chicano and queer subjectivities while ignoring the ways in which the manifestation of such identities within Aztlan, specifically, necessitate the erasure of the figure of the Indian bruja. Thus, in the ways that Corral explores the ways in which his queer Chicano subjectivity is persecuted, his exploration is complicit with the persecution of the figure of the indio.

There is something significant about the politics of representation, and the value of self-formation in spite of the ways in which it is participating in other forms of social domination. This is a question that Corral fails to answer, and ultimately, his insistence of having Aztlan “work” for the queer Chicano identity fails to truly dismantle the forms of domination that inform and propagate his own subjection and oppression. In constructing dynamics in which the figure of the india continues to be a problem which must be neutralized within Aztlan and in insisting that Aztlan be a “home”, and even further that bodies must have “homes”, which falls prey to the fallacy of “locality” and geographic belonging as a method for self-formation, Corral’s text fails to truly construct a strategy through which radical intervention is possible. Though his gestures towards
positionality and disembodiment offer narratives in which their “slippages” could be further explored to understand the hidden radical possibility, Corral’s constructions ultimately fail to perform any deconstructive social work, a goal to which he certainly gestures. While there is a problematizing dynamic in the insistence to expect some kind of “social work” from cultural texts, and while Corral’s formulations on queer Chicano subjectivity are indeed fruitful discussions in their own right, the problem of the india will continue to prohibit a true reformulation of Aztlan. This is a problem that, I believe, is, in some ways, addressed more fully by Cuadros.

As I say, the formulations that Corral engages in do have their own merit. The usage of movement within these loosely defined psychic spaces becomes a powerful method of survival for the subjectivities Corral displays. In the ways in which Corral does engage the mapping of affective modes onto other normative cultural narratives, and how movement becomes to be central to the strategies that Corral’s (limited) subjects enact for survival, Corral does attempt to offer a kind of futurity, a visual aesthetic of queer temporality and movement in which the multiplicitous signatory processes can be eschewed, mainly because they can be “avoided”. The insistence on movement is a way, then, not only to rationalize oneself within a community bent on ignoring the queer Chicano subjectivity presented, but within a larger hostile geopolitical space in which these conflicting identities synergize to produce damaging graphetic forces. This mapping outwards of the personal affect onto the larger Chicano consciousness provides a method for de-scripting in many ways the identity-focused criticism to which this collection has been (unjustly) subjected, in an attempt to understand the ways in which the Chicano subject presented, in many ways, is
subaltern⁷⁹, and the methods through which these subjects make themselves heard. The invocation of the erotic as the *lingua franca* of sorts of these strategies is again a powerful invocation of the power of the personal in a space often intensely focused on the larger communal figure. Corral can be read in a way that can elucidate, in my opinion, the more complex entanglements and strategies that Cuadros manifests in *City of God*. Though, as I have argued, Corral fails to truly dismantle inscriptive forces in his refusal to disavow the problematizing force that marks the Chicano body as non-Indian and the *india* as atemporal, his exploration of the profound ways in which queer Chicano subjects navigate hostile spaces is an important first step towards reconfiguring, or perhaps disavowing, Aztlan in its entirety.

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⁷⁹ This is, of course, gesturing to Spivak’s articulation of the “subaltern” as done in the essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?”
Chapter 2
“nothing but a small glow”: The contours of the border imaginary in Gil Cuadros’
*City of God*

The concept of a border has long posed a problem for Chicano theorists, many of whom are and have been troubled by the inherent ephemerality of the borders which the Chicano subject has, historically, encountered. There is the classical “border with Mexico”, a border that purports to have a physical location, but in many ways exists in a nebulous state; at some points, heavily guarded, at others, nonexistent, and many have postulated that the border with Mexico is in the wrong spot. What does it mean to have a border “in the wrong place”? There is, also, what I consider the historical border, the mythic line drawn out of the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, which ceded Mexican territory in the American Southwest to the United States. Many historians consider the treaty to have been drawn up and enforced under dubious circumstances, and the historical sense of betrayal that grew from its injustice became a rallying point for el movimiento, the Chicano nationalist movement that sprang up in the 1970s, and which, in many instances, rallied around the ideology of “the border crossed us”, a rhetoric that defies the traditional American narrative of the Mexican border as legal, but also one that then positions the Chicano subject as relatively powerless in relation to the American conqueror. In that way, there exists another border, many borders, in fact, that construct the complex ways in which Chicano subjects in the United States navigate the social atmosphere as, in many ways, oppressed subjects.

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80 The National Archives website has a nice, if U.S-centric, explanation of the negotiation and the land ceded to the United States, located here: [https://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/guadalupe-hidalgo](https://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/guadalupe-hidalgo).
82 This is a phrasing borrowed from Candelaria’s explanation of the political movement, as cited last chapter.
The notion of borders is the subject of this chapter, particularly the ways in which they are made manifest and the ways in which the Chicano subject crosses them. The image of a border crossing has often been the stuff of nightmares in the American consciousness but, as many hegemonic inscriptive forces do, it contains possibilities for radical futurities, and this chapter is concerned with the ways in which, to that end, border crossings become the “language”, so to speak, of projects of legitimizing problematized identities. Then, many of the questions that will be considered in this chapter will focus on the ways in which the process of crossing is not only in itself transformed, but linked to other forms of crossings, other kinds of invasions and transgressions, and how those relate to the positionality and survival strategy for multiply-defined non-normative subjects. By this, I mean that for non-normative Chicano subjects, the image/motif of the border crossing becomes a potentially radical image, an act of movement that becomes radicalized and contains in it potential for subversion. Hence, the particularities of the border crossing lie not in its temporal & geographical situationality, but in the inherent choreography that is required of the border crossing subject, the linked set of movements and physiospatial actions that not only come to define the “migrant” as conceived in Chicano cultural discourse, but a larger, more abstract figure of a “transgressor”, an invader, a crosser of borders, the image, then, that contains within it infinite possibilities for subversion.

The figure of the “border crosser” is central to Gil Cuadros’ *City of God*; published in 1994, the text is structured around “Gil Cuadros”, both narrator and fictitious character, who is a young queer Chicano man living (and dying) with AIDS. The collection of poems and stories is set in 1990s Los Angeles, a particular social space.

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83 Gil Cuadros, *City of God*. (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1994.)
which, at that moment, was grappling with intense racialized conflict and fears of infection, as the AIDS crisis took it toll on the town’s population. Thus, Cuadros situates his work in a time where the ideas of borders and divides are particularly important and under intense scrutiny, whether it be due to the threat of infection (the collapsing of bodily borders) or the continued racial mixing and hostilities manifest in the city that was highly segregated at the time. This idea of the border is further stressed within the structure of the collection itself; divided into two sections, one comprised of short stories and the other of poetry, never mixing, the idea of the border is reified by the division of the mediums within the text, and the crossing from one to another becomes emblematic of the crossings and forms of movement Cuadros seeks to highlight in his work. That these spaces each become representative of different kinds of movements, their failures and successes, highlights the different rules and guiding principles that manifest within each space, again a reference to the metaphysical concept of the border, as the thing to keep the other out.

City of God has, for the large part, been ignored in the Chicano literary consciousness; criticism on it is sparse, bordering on neglectful, with only a handful of Chicano theorists significantly engaging with the text and the questions it raises. One of the most significant treatments of the work comes from Paul Allatson, who argues that Cuadros, in his works, constructs a method of de-scripting the queer Chicano body. Through an entanglement of notions of ‘Chicano’ & ‘Queer”, Cuadros is able to work through them, allowing the body, in a disidentificatory impulse, to become the

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84 Notable theorists engaging with the text include Jose Monteagudo (1995), who provides a short review of the text, Raul Villa (2000), who analyzes the text as a testimonial to the then-urbanization of Los Angeles, Rafael Ocasio (1999), who compares the work to that of Cuban poet Reinaldo Arenas, and Rafael Perez Torres (2006), whose criticism will figure largely later in the chapter.
hypertextualized site of inscription. This yields the signifying forces at work to scrutiny and, by then de-scripting the body of these cultural narratives, this allows, Allatson argues, for a method of existence that pushes against the problematizing forces that do not take into consideration the intersectional existence of the queer Chicano subject. By inscription, Allatson refers to Edelman, whose concept of homographesis we visited previously in the previous chapter. Edelman’s work is vastly important in Allatson’s—and in my own—analysis that focuses on the way Cuadros disrupts such a process. Allatson argues that it is through the coding of the body as the site for multiple identificatory conflicts, Chicano & American, heterosexual & homosexual, native & foreign, that eventually these conflicts become “too much” for the body, so that the body “disappears”. Allatson argues that City of God works as a “textual response” to such processes, which ultimately prohibits the body from being inscripted as a queer body to be read, known, and punished. While I agree with Allatson’s premise—that Cuadros’ work is interested in rejecting the processes that mark the queer Chicano body as solely queer or solely Chicano, in a way that each of these bodies can be problematized, read, and punished in their own right—I argue that Allatson’s analysis fails to acknowledge the way that the body in such a framework necessitates a kind of stasis. It’s a paradox of sorts, a contradictory impulse to seek to understand how the body rejects bodily narratives through its hyperawareness of the physicality of the target of such narratives. Allatson attempts to resolve the body paradox by introducing the problem of AIDS, in an attempt to demonstrate how such a reification process required of his analysis is immediately disrupted and never completed. However, ultimately, to reinstitute the body as the primary axis for understanding the work Cuadros is

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86 Edelman, “Homographesis”
attempting to do undermines the moments of corporeal disappearance, moments which constitute one of the unifying questions presented in the text, the question of the position of the body.

Cuadros’ work is a careful interrogation of traditional Chicano bodily narratives, particularly the systems working on the queer Chicano body. This body operates as the textual subject, more precisely the focal point, through which many of the cultural and social tensions that Cuadros attempts to mediate first manifest. More significantly, however, and where I depart from Allatson in my analysis, is that the body is not the textual site for the conflicts; the confrontation between the signifying systems of history, memory, and affect, I argue, are reliant on two things: movement and location. The crucial distinction between the track I take in understanding Cuadros’ work and the one undertaken by Allatson and, by default, many other theorists working on this specific text is the importance and centrality of the body. Like Allatson, many theorists have centered Cuadros’ body in the text as the main object of study and theorists like Perez-Torres, as we’ll see later on, have taken the work to task for its inability to be read in terms of a larger Chicano corpus. Acknowledging the physical presence of the body is important here (and by “body”, I refer to the physical body of the narrator who acts as the dominant voice throughout the text); however, I argue, the work is best understood by reading the body as a parameter, as opposed to an object in its own right. The argument I seek to make about movement is reliant on understanding that for much of Cuadros’ work, the body “disappears”; it is removed from the text, it is killed off, it is transformed. Understanding the body as a parameter allows for other discussions to be had, including how such a body can move through space, how the body disappears in

87 Rafael Perez Torres, “The Transgressive Body and Sexual Mestizaje.” In Mestizaje: Critical Uses of Race in Chicano Culture
particular physical spaces, “landscapes” as I’ll refer to them from here on out, and how the crossing of a border, the passage from one world to another, denotes the “destruction” of one body and the emergence of a new one.

*City of God* is, I argue, structurally divided by two main objectives: to display and critique traditional modes of bodily inscription through the usage of movement and to offer a possibility for alternative methods of relationality. These objectives can only be achieved by a careful usage of space, of the particular landscapes Cuadros constructs, and of understanding how subjectivities move in relation to other signifying forces unique to the localities they find themselves in. The first section of the collection, of short stories, is concerned with the mapping (and interrogation) of these traditional Chicano bodily narratives, with disastrous consequences. The short stories map a body-centric physical (and spiritual) journey from the Chicano home to an alternate Queer home, a mapping that runs parallel to the physical degradation of the queer Chicano body with AIDS. Cuadros posits that this body-oriented reading must result in the death of the Chicano body. Conversely, the poetry section is concerned with, through locations and landscapes, mapping the now-ethereal body to a choreography of border crossings, which allows for a multitude of possibilities for subversion, though at a cost. The importance in the work Cuadros is performing is what I refer to as the mapping of “ambivalences of power” and how Cuadros uses borders in his attempt to understand, in an abstract sense, the ways in which the “crossing of borders” can be used towards projects of legitimization.

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89 “Parameter” here refers to a mathematical concept, in which equations and coordinates can be represented as functions of other independent variables; I find it a useful way to understand the relationship of the body to the atemporal movements throughout space that Cuadros describes.
Structures, Mappings, Affects

The 9 short stories that comprise the first section of *City of God* are organized thematically, constructing a physical & metaphorical journey between two homes. The first three short stories—“Indulgences”, “Reynaldo”, and “Chivalry”—construct the familial, biological childhood home. These stories are preoccupied with the issue of origin; set in rural California, these stories are intensely preoccupied with sites and spaces, a preoccupation that marks the first invocation of Aztlan, referring to the problematic reclaimed geographic “home” for the Chicano people. This site of genesis, an Edenic kind of locality, marks the beginning, from which Cuadros, the sexual being, who is immediately constructed as concurrently being the non-Chicano being, the transgressive being, will depart. This origin of a place “to begin”, a place to depart from becomes critical to our understanding of movement “between” places, from one psychic world to another. Furthermore, the invocation of the familial home establishes a world in which the biological heteronormativity of the Chicano family becomes the norm, against which the homosexuality of the Chicano son becomes perverse.

The middle three stories—“My Aztlan: White Place”, “Unprotected”, & “Holy”—deal with the formation of individual sexual identity in the face of the familial pressure, a tension that marks the moment of transition between two homes: the biologically rooted family and the alternative queer family. In each of these short stories, the tension between being read as a racialized body and being read as a sexualized body constitutes graphic sexual content, the preoccupation being the juxtaposition of bodily exploration, which is to say the ways in which the body moves through space, with physical exclusion, by which I mean how the body is paradoxically excluded from certain

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90 “Edenic” refers to, of course, the biblical Garden of Eden, as presented in the Book of Genesis.
spaces of exploration. The three final stories of the section -- “Baptism”, “Letting Go”, and “Sight”—mark the arrival of Cuadros into his fictive imaginative Queer home, one devoid of raciality, and the body’s subsequent destruction. The three final stories all draw on religious imagery to mark a process of self-transformation; however, the self-transformation is destructive, as these stories are focused on the destruction of the body. The presence of AIDS transforms from a spectral figure to a tangible threat, one that destroys the corporeality of the body. Ultimately, the short stories construct an environment where the body in in flux and able to resist so long as it is able to “move”, which is to say that Cuadros’ work finds its footing in the middle three stories, where the question of the body moving between states, transitioning between modes & affects is at its tensest. The subsequent arrival of the body into a new home marks its death, not because the home cannot welcome it but rather because, in these stories, the issue of surveillance re-emerges; the body, now stable and static, is “found” and is made readable as a physically dying Chicano body, at which point it must be removed.

Whereas “Indulgences” and “Chivalry” are distinctly preoccupied with constructing a biological, heteronormative Chicano (and also worthy of noting, mestizo) family, “Reynaldo”, arguably the most significant story of this first section, operates in a particular way, by offering an alternate reality for the reader, a co-mingling of mestizaje and homosexuality that Cuadros, through the invocation of “ghosts” and the supernatural, immediately marks as a delusion. In “Reynaldo”, we’re given three narratives: the first, about a boy Reynaldo who will be starting school, and the second, an adult Reynaldo, now battling AIDS. In the present day, Reynaldo has been sent to take care of his grandmother\(^9\). This sets in motion the development of the third narrative: a

flashback, to the 1920s, to Reynaldo’s father, Jesus, and his friend also named Reynaldo. The religious invocation of the name “Jesus” serves to reinforce the journey that causes the rift between Jesus and Reynaldo: the (implied romantic) getaway the boys have planned is ruined by the father’s “wooing” of an unnamed girl, and thus by extension, the ideal Chicano familial image. The conflict present in the three threads of the story, the one of the Chicano body dying of AIDS, mirroring the image of the dying grandmother, with the implied homosexuality of Reynaldo’s father, the end of the story resolves the tension only through the supernatural, with the appearance of Reynaldo’s ghost to the young Reynaldo. There is, then, a weird kind of mirroring, and an alternate mode of inheritance; in naming his son Reynaldo, Jesus has passed to his son the stigma. The story ultimately reifies the familial structure that the other two stories in this first section construct, and sets up an uneasy tension between the two familial constructs, the biological Chicano one espoused by Jesus and his building of a traditional family, and the alternate family forged between Reynaldo Jr. and the ghost. It’s also important to note the way movement figures already in the work Cuadros is doing. Reynaldo, the son, inherits his AIDS (and his perverse sexuality), it is implied, from his father’s friend of the same name, so we have the stigma “moving downwards” through time. We have the son “moving” up to the attic and encountering the ghost of his father’s friend, which is to say that the physical movement of the body throughout space is the way by which it is able to assume and come into conflict with the particular histories that plague it.

The usage of movement, of movement “between worlds”, of the body passing through borders becomes exemplified in the short story “My Aztlan: White Place”, the

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92 Cuadros. “Reynaldo.” 28
93 Cuadros. “Reynaldo.” 28
symbolic “highway” between the first and third clusters of short stories.\textsuperscript{94} This section is dominated by Cuadros’ increasingly more frequent excursions into the queer sphere, a coordinated choreography of movement outward. “My Aztlan: White Place” focuses on “Gil Cuadros”, based off the author himself and still separate. This raises a question of unreliability, one that becomes compounded as the physical body fails, on his way home to his apartment after a night at “Rage, Revolver, Motherlode, and Mickey’s” (gay clubs Cuadros repeatedly refers to.\textsuperscript{95}) Cuadros finds himself, in the short story, in a particular time-space; the highway (he’s traveling home in between night and day, and the reader is left with a questionable sense of time as is Cuadros himself), a site of displacement (it is “the wrong freeway”; he is “stinking drunk”, and so unsettled)\textsuperscript{96}, and yet is also a kind of home: “…the San Bernardino is the closest I get to Mecca”)\textsuperscript{97}. It is his present home as well, though the relationship is again disturbed; he is going home, on the “wrong freeway back to my place”. Home is material and immaterial; there is the invocation of his “place” countered with the “wish for [his] childhood home”\textsuperscript{98}. There are many different kinds of movement here: the movement on the highway, which is meant to reference the movement of the migrant, the movement between homes, the leaving of one home and returning to another, a movement made perverse, by being “on the wrong freeway”. The separation textually of the image of his apartment with the wish for the familial home makes fraught this idea of home; he’s “going home” but it’s not quite the home he seeks; then, the text implies there are multiple visions of “home” already at play, and that they are on some level disjointed from each other. There is also a different kind of home,

\textsuperscript{94} Gil Cuadros, “My Aztlan: White Place.” In City of God. (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1994.): 53-58
\textsuperscript{95} Cuadros. “My Aztlan: White Place.” 53
\textsuperscript{96} Cuadros. “My Aztlan: White Place.” 53
\textsuperscript{97} Cuadros. “My Aztlan: White Place.” 54
\textsuperscript{98} Cuadros. “My Aztlan: White Place.” 53
“Rage, Revolver, Motherlode, and Mickey’s”, the gay clubs he inhabits, where the “blond hair, blue eyes” guys he finds “attractive” reside, though they bring attention to his “alien-ness”: “They ask where I’m from, disappointed at my answer, as if they are the natives”\(^9\). It’s curious to focus on the slippage of language here, with the tension that’s presented between the narrator, who is interrogated for some sense of “foreignness” to counterbalance the white gays’ claim to “nativeness”. This marks the first moment of an undercurrent of “nativeness” that’s presented, a deliberate usage of the word to invoke this idea of the native and how it relates to ideas of “home” and belonging. This is the construction of another border, so to speak, now between the “native” and the “non-native”, a border that will be explored more in detail later. This new border, however, forces a tension between what home is and what home should be, between who the narrator is and who he is read as; true home, his childhood home, his “Aztlan”, is situated “below this freeway”\(^1\)\(^0\). Home is denied to Cuadros; it is a site of pilgrimage like Mecca, that is now inaccessible to him. Aztlan is no longer utopia, no longer a site of national identification and communal inclusion, inclusion which becomes immediately troubled by the idea of Cuadros as “foreign”; this cannot be his home. If Aztlan lies under the freeway, under the clubs in which he encounters the “white blond, Hollywood types”, then the insistence that he be rendered as “foreign”. That Aztlan is, in a temporal and symbolic way, unreachable is heightened by how Cuadros the character already is representative of a cultural tension. “All it takes is a well-chosen phrase to cave in” the dream of “my Aztlan, a glimpse of my ancient home, my family”\(^1\)\(^0\), suggests Cuadros, implying that the transgressive sexuality he embodies destroys the physical home, the

\(^9\) Cuadros. “My Aztlan: White Place.” 53
\(^1\)\(^0\) Cuadros. “My Aztlan: White Place.” 54
\(^1\)\(^0\) Cuadros. “My Aztlan: White Place.” 55
Aztlan. Aztlan in this story is an important signifier, the archetypal “heavenly abode” suggested by the title *City of God* that is disrupted and unreachable.

To many Chicano nationals, Aztlan is a geographical and spiritual “home”, a reclamation of a geopolitical history within the imperial power which disrupts the narrative of invasion and foreignness often (violently) inscribed on the Chicano body. In light of the social construction of Aztlan as anachronistic, the reclamation of Aztlan disrupts not only the linear narrative of dominance that the U.S is particularly invested in, but also disrupts the physical continuity of the state as well, by introducing a new border, between the U.S and Aztlan, one that has “crossed” the Chicano body. However, for Cuadros, the Chicano body is what prevents the arrival “home”. Him being “stinking drunk” prevents the peaceful arrival of the body home, and confuses which home is reachable. Then, Cuadros ties the image of the body and its perversion to the inability to reach the biological home. Cuadros’ sexuality, never explicit but always symbolic, operates to disrupt the continuity of the home. The home, the childhood home, Aztlan, the nuclear home of his parents is corrupted, destroyed by his perverse sexuality: “A milky white fluid floats in my body’s space, breaks into the secret bonding of her sex, my father’s sex, and the marriage of their cells”\(^\text{102}\). Here, the anti-normative performances of sexuality Cuadros enacts not only disrupt the familial relation of the home, but the biological connection of the nuclear family, and so it poses a larger threat to the stability of Aztlan, and to a larger heteronormative Chicano imaginary. Here, again, telling is the notion of movement. The “milky white fluid” (a metaphor for semen, representative of the sex he has that is considered transgressive) “floats” into the “bonding of [his mother’s] sex”; it “breaks into” his father’s “sex” and the “marriage” of

\(^{102}\text{Cuadros, “My Aztlan: White Place.” 54}\)
their bodies. The “milky white fluid” as thief, as moving and performing in a particular choreography, is again emblematic of the ways in which movement becomes coded, signifying the ways in which Cuadros’ body is constructed as disruptive in the stances and positions it takes. Important to note here as well are the ways in which AIDS & sexuality are linked. We can envision the semen “destroying” the bond between cells imagery as invoking the specter of AIDS; the semen introduces the virus into the body, which physically destroys the cells, and which also destroys the family, as it becomes the “stain” of the perverse sexuality. In these ways, for Cuadros, biology becomes a problem. The problem of a biological affinity to Aztlan is complicated by the other transgressive forms of physicality which he embodies. The invocation of AIDS disrupting the “marriage of cells” reinforces the image of Aztlan being the home of the Chicano family, one predicated on the American trope of the “nuclear family”.

Aztlan, the mythical home for the Chicano nationalist movement, has been both panacea and anathema for theorists attempting to understand its cultural, political, and historical significance within el movimiento. For Gloria Anzaldúa, the problem of Aztlan is, in nature, an “uncanny” one. Anzaldúa refers to Aztlan as a “third world country” that is “set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe”, to further distinguish between “us and them”. Here, the problem of assimilation lies on the level of the body; the landscape is a place of partition, into safe and unsafe, us and them. However, the anti-temporality of Anzaldúa’s Aztlan, one that exists out of time and in time renders these labels ultimately insufficient; to Anzaldúa, Aztlan’s mythical borders mark those we read as “perverse, queer, troublesome” and those who cross pass through the “confines” of

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103 Freud, Sigmund. “The Uncanny.” (1919.)
104 Anzaldúa, “The Homeland, Aztlan/ El Otro México.” 3
normativity. Anzaldua’s particular construction of Aztlan—one that incorporates bodies other than male—also relies on the concept of surveillance & regulation. At the border, Anzaldua argues, the Chicano body undergoes tremendous scrutiny; it must be deemed acceptable to pass through. Again, there is this notion of “passing”, of a movement through spaces and modes of surveillance. The notion of Aztlan as a place of perpetual movement becomes apparent; it is a space where to “cease to move” is to cease to live, because as Anzaldua’s construction suggests, these bodies risk surveillance and inscription precisely in the moments of stasis.

Returning then to this idea of Aztlan in “My Aztlan: White Place”, there’s the pairing, within the title and within the story itself, of Aztlan with a white world, one at odds with the metaphorical concept of who Aztlan can “be home” to (it is the home of the mestizo Chicano; white Chicanos have no place here). Having abandoned his familial home, Cuadros (the character) retreats to his lover’s abode, symbolically abandoning “Aztlan” in favor of an alternate family, one based in the White gay Californian landscape. However, Cuadros’ positionality in relation to this new alternate home is fraught and complicated. As seen early on in “My Aztlan: White Place”, Cuadros is erased in these sites of whiteness: “They ask where I’m from, disappointed at my answer, as if they’re the natives”.

There is an erasure here, a familiarity in the locality due to his sexuality that is at once forced to be eerie due to his racial “otherness”. He is human and gay but at the same time “alien”, unable to be absorbed into the mythic fabric of the gay white community, and yet present and “exotic”. If Cuadros’ sexuality poses a dangerous threat to the Chicano concept of “home”, one centered, as it has been described, on the biological connection between members of the family, then it becomes clear that as

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105 Anzaldua, “The Homeland, Aztlan/ El Otro Mexico.” 3
106 Cuadros, “My Aztlan: White Place.” 53
Cuadros, the narrator, a queer Chicano man living with AIDS, progresses through the short stories, they become increasingly focused on the degradation of his physical body. The story following “My Aztlan: White Place” is a short story titled “Unprotected”, in which the images of his father and his sexuality face off. In “Unprotected”, Cuadros recounts his experience in a bar, going home with a man, confessing his HIV-positive status, and proceeding nonetheless to have sexual intercourse. In the story, sexuality becomes visible on the body, a hyper-reinforcement of the body politic that had been missing in previous stories. There is a smell of “hand lotion” (which, we learn later on, has doubled as lubricant) which Cuadros “cannot...get off” him. Interestingly, this crisis of legibility occurs on a bus, as the narrator sits next to a man who reminds him of his father. Thus, again, the “highway” is invoked here, a space where the intricacies of sexuality within the confines of the Chicano home become mapped as movements throughout particular localities. The social disruption of the heterogeneity of the Chicano family by the “perverse” families Cuadros is able to create in the white, gay landscape is linked to the physical crumbling of his body. Then, each of these homes becomes disrupted: The archetypal Chicano home is destroyed and rendered unreachable by the presence of the queer subject. However, the alternative home is destroyed by the presence of the disease: “I lived with [Cuadros’ lover] for more than four years then he died.” Then, Cuadros, the writer, implies that bodies like his have no home. Much of “Unprotected” takes place in transitive states, their own mini-highways akin to the San Bernardino Highway in “My Aztlan: White Place”; the sequence of bar after bar that Cuadros visits before visiting his parents, his walk home with the john he has picked up..

107 Gil Cuadros, “Unprotected.” In City of God (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1994.): 59-70
108 Cuadros. “Unprotected.” 59
109 Cuadros. “Unprotected.” 60
the bus ride he then takes the next day, where the man who reminds him of his father unnerves him, makes him fear that he “could smell the shit that was in [his] beard [and the] sticky shine of cum over my body.” Note, again then, that this is another moment of homographesis. Cuadros’ sexuality becomes legible and visible to other people on the bus through physical means (the smell of the lotion, the shine of the “sticky cum”.) However, the moment of homographetic inscription is deficient, in a way; there is no definitive locality in which the sexuality manifests; in a bar, a bedroom, the bus, and so on. So, the question for Cuadros is, what happens when the body reaches home?

Arrival is the dominant theme of “Sight”, the final entry in the opening prose section of the *City of God*. In “Sight”, Cuadros visits his doctor one last time, who attempts to give him medication for his dangerously failing vision, medication he refuses before going to his apartment. The short story marks one of the only moments of definite physical arrival; in “My Aztlan: White Place”, he never arrives, in a way: “The traffic roars...back at my apartment”; he just appears, a kind of “ghostly” arrival, immediate physical displacement from one landscape to another. Here, in “Sight”, the scene of arrival is explicit: “An elderly woman holds the door to the elevator for me...”. However, the physical arrival is immediately complicated by a supernatural kind of occurrence, a “light” he sees emanating from his attending doctor and the sick woman in the elevator. The “fantastic” occurrence of the light, the auras Cuadros is now able to detect, flies in the face of the real loss of his eyesight; he “sees” in a different

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110 Cuadros. “Unprotected.” 69
112 Cuadros. “My Aztlan: White Place.” 55
113 Cuadros. “Sight.” 97
114 Cuadros. “Sight.” 97-98
Thus, queerness and AIDS have allowed for an alternative way of seeing, akin to how the biological family is disrupted and replaced by the “alternative” gay family. Then, this should be a kind of reconciliation, a habituation of these two conflicting structures in one physical body. However, this proves to be too much, in a way, for Cuadros. The moment of collision at the physical level becomes a moment of death:

“But I have come to the end, thoughts of the world seem woven of thread, thinly disguised, a veil. I let the angels consume me, each one biting into my body, until nothing is left, nothing but a small glow and even that begins to perish.”

Cuadros the writer immediately rejects the possibility of cohabitation of the images of home and family with the image of sexuality and queerness. The problematized biological Chicano family lies at odds with the also problematized alternative gay home that Cuadros’ lover provides, much how the alternative form of seeing that Cuadros develops, the seeing of auras, develops only at the final moments of being able to physically see. Then, Cuadros’ physical body is overrun by the conflicting identities. The “angels” consuming him become signifiers for the queer home that has led to his demise: there is a “man [watching] me”, Cuadros writes, a “white” man, “bright as if a hundred candles were burning inside him.” The angels that then consume him are white as well. Thus, there’s an immediate kind of transitivity that becomes apparent to the reader in this moment of transformation: whereas the rejection from the biological Chicano home led to Cuadros taking refuge in the alternative queer family, living with his lover, the rejection from the queer home, now the only abode for Cuadros, destroyed by AIDS, is akin to his own personal death. We note that his apartment in “Sight” becomes a site of uncanny power; he is finally home, however

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115 This “seeing in a different way” is meant to recall the ways in which Corral, in the first chapter, plays with sight with the “sideways” poems, and how it relates to seeing queer bodies in a new way.
117 Cuadros. “Sight.” 98
imbued with a strange power. He has been home before; in “My Aztlan: White Place”, we’re given an image of him puking his AZT pills into the toilet\textsuperscript{118}. But in that story, and in the other preceding “Sight”, home is never a place physically reached, at least it’s not depicted for the reader. The apartment, his only home, is now devoid of the familial and sexual component, the only reminder being the “astragalus” in the closet he forgot to give to his roommate\textsuperscript{119}.

There is this moment of recognition and disrecognition, for the reader, of the locality of the transcendence, which becomes the fitting culmination of a tense stand-off between his conflicting identificatory positions. And his death is as much normative and subversive in its performance. The “biting” of his body by his angels, the transformation from body to ghostly & eternal mimics the spiritual process of transubstantiation. Thus, as Cuadros’ body is transformed into the spiritual, the heavenly abodes opening and welcoming him, though through a very visceral and physical way (the “biting”, which throughout the stories is also a sexual act) mark a final form of resistance for Cuadros’ body. Cuadros is unable to reach a physical home, displaced throughout the landscapes, the home and the highway, each carrying with them powers, the “black smoke” of the highway that becomes the harbinger of his ultimate demise,\textsuperscript{120} and the “lights” he sees,\textsuperscript{121} the signifiers of the manifestation of the alternative family on the site of the body, as opposed to the landscape as we have seen previously. Note again how to cease to move is to kill the body. Ultimately, Cuadros’ body is unable to reach the famed City of God, the heavenly abode which marked the goal of the hermeneutic quest embarked in this

\textsuperscript{118} Cuadros. “My Aztlan: White Place.” 56
\textsuperscript{119} Cuadros. “Sight.” 98
\textsuperscript{120} Cuadros. “Sight.” 95
\textsuperscript{121} Cuadros. “Sight.” 96-98
section of the novel. Whereas the heavenly abode is eternal, Cuadros is not: “...nothing but a small glow and even that begins to perish.”

Disembodiment and New Potential

“Sight” ends in a border crossing. It marks the end of Cuadros as a physical being and the emergence of Cuadros’ voice as a ghostly, disembodied one. It’s a crossing that coincides with a switch in the structure of the text, from the short stories to the poetry. This is reflective of many of the thematic concerns of the first section. The crossing from living to dead, from one section to another are two of the crossings that Cuadros addresses in the switch. The kind of border crossing that Cuadros is most concerned with in this next section is the crossing between homes, akin to the kind of crossing presented in the first half. The crossing from the traditional biological home, the “Aztlan” of his childhood to the oft-unforgiving white gay Americana that “Rage, Revolver, Motherlode, and Mickey’s” represent marks one of the borders that comes to define the different landscapes. Cuadros, in “My Aztlan: White Place”, is troubled by the notion of borders and belonging. Switching between one world and the next, each carrying their own signifiers, presents an immediate tension in balancing the multiple identifications that the queer body of Cuadros must deal with. However, the poetry section disrupts the construction of the journey that the first section offers. Whereas the first section focuses (ultimately unsuccessfully) on the cartographic mapping of the body through space, the second section of City of God is concerned with understanding the way in which “movement” of many kinds can be used as an effective tool against inscription, again, to find the “heavenly abode”. To that end, Cuadros employs a strategy defined by Jose Esteban Munoz as the process of disidentification. Munoz describes the process of

122 Cuadros. “Sight.” 99
disidentification as a “mode of performance whereby a toxic identity is remade and infiltrated by subjects who have been hailed by such identity categories…Disidentification is therefore about the management of an identity that has been “spoiled” in the majoritarian public sphere”. ¹²³ The possibility of “managing” identity becomes prevalent in the poetry section of the text.

Referencing back to Edelman’s concept of homographesis, in the poem “There Are Places You Don’t Walk at Night, Alone”, there is a moment of disidentification, which is reliant on queer movement/reclamation. ¹²⁴ There is an example of Edelman’s homographetic impulse:

They’d cuff me from behind  
their hands lingering on my neck, saying  
“Come here faggot, kiss me.”  
Their shoes made me crawl,  
black mirrors, pointed tips,  
imperials that my lips fell upon  
and leather soles  
that brushed the hair out of my face  

nearly blinding me. ¹²⁵

Here, the textualization of Cuadros’ non-normative sexuality becomes inscribed in his body. The “otherness” is easily readable on him, easily detected by the thugs in the East Los Angeles barrios; Cuadros becomes “readable”, which leads to physical violence. The poem moves on to describing how the narrator explains having “to walk/ with an attitude” in order to avoid the wrath of the homophobic barrio dwellers. After the narrator’s friend is stabbed with a knife and a Corona bottle, the narrator switches that homographetic disciplinary gaze (and violence) back towards the group of barrio thugs, one shirtless bearing a tattoo, “Viva La Raza!” (A rallying cry for Aztlan used by Chicano

¹²⁴ Gil Cuadros, “There are Places You don’t Walk at Night, Alone.” In City of God (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1994): 112-114
¹²⁵ Cuadros. “There are Places You don’t Walk at Night, Alone.” 112
nationals that, in this moment, is indicative of the violence the narrator’s queerness presents in a decidedly Chicano space):

I want to smash them into the windows,
Make them spread their legs,
My boots kicking them wide,
Let my spit drip
Into their ears
Seep into their brains,
Tell them how much I love them.\textsuperscript{126}

The violence is directed towards those who initially exert the power to brutalize the narrator’s body. This is a scene of reclamation & movement, the “smashing” into windows, the spit “dripping” into the ears of the thugs (eerily reminiscent of the milky white fluid floating).\textsuperscript{127} The body “moves” in a way such that it is able to reject the homographetic impulse of the earlier stanza. The barrio homeboys’ bodies are at the same time transformed from sites of violence to sites of queer desire & queer control, in a textual re-assertion of the narrator’s ability to intervene in the homographetic impulses the homeboys project in “reading” the body as queer.

If “There are Places You don’t Walk at Night, Alone” is preoccupied with the possibility of subversive disidentification, which is connected to locality, the poem “Bordertowns” is preoccupied with the liminality of spectrality. In “Bordertowns”, there is a renewed interest in the issue of “being ghost-ed”.\textsuperscript{128} In the poem, the narrator and his lesbian friend traverse the Mexican border (in the opposite direction) to Tijuana where, to their surprise, they realize that

\begin{quote}
  The vendors think we are married
  The way she snaps at me,
  “Look”, or “How about this?”\textsuperscript{129}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{126} Cuadros, “There are Places You don’t Walk at Night, Alone.” 114
\textsuperscript{127} Cuadros, “My Aztlan: White Place”. 54
\textsuperscript{128} Gil Cuadros, “Bordertowns.” In \textit{City of God}. (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1994.) 109-110
\textsuperscript{129} Cuadros, Gil. “Bordertowns.” 110
It’s interesting to consider the ways in which the body resists inscription in both of these narrative voices. In “Bordertowns”, the narrator and his friend realize that by crossing the border, they have also rejected the homographetic “scarlet letter”; they have “re-entered the closet”, their queer bodies now depoliticized national subjects. In this case, the “passing” as heterosexual not only elicits an unintended performance for an otherwise clueless audience (the vendors that offer “wedding rings and bridal gowns all in white lace”), it also signals the power of the crossing of the border. Not only do they become a married couple, they become tourists. Though the narrator and his friend fill the role of tourists well, they do so mocking American constructed notions of mexicanidad:

We settled for a polaroid on the burro cart,
put on ponchos and sombreros.
In cocky letters, my brim spells
“Cisco Kid,” and Laura sparkles,
“Kiss Me.”

The camp-y performance here confirms the inherent ephemerality of the identities claimed by the narrator and his friend. As they pass the border, the narrator and his friend enter a zone with a different set of systems for bodily inscription, one in which the identities “gay” and “lesbian” do not carry the same potent power. Similarly, paradoxically, in adopting the kitschy “Mexican” performance, the pair lose their Chicano signifier, and become just another generic heterosexual tourist couple. Thus, though they leave the oppressive social landscape of the U.S and “return home” so to speak, the problem of geography returns; the movement into the new space has not rendered them “whole”. However, this movement is powerful in the sense that it does

130 Cuadros, Gil. “Bordertowns.” 110
131 Cuadros, Gil. “Bordertowns.” 110
allow them to access identificatory positions that had previously been restricted from
them.

**Transcendence**

Cuadros eventually turns from the strategy of disidentification in the poems to
symbolic transcendence, of which “Conquering Immortality” is most emblematic.

“Conquering Immortality”, the final entry in the second section of City of God and the
longest poem in the collection, offers a powerful counterpoint to “Sight” and is the
climactic denouement of the conflict between the graphetic impulses that “chase” the queer
Chicano subject and the “queer movement” it undertakes to avoid them.132 The poem
charts a kind of “going back”; through invocations of the narrator’s sexual fantasies, the
poem traces a return to a pre-AIDS era, “before the time of lovers’ funerals”.133

Simultaneously, however, the poem traces a “going forward”, a spatial movement (as
opposed to the temporal one) through an earthquake-ravaged Los Angeles. As the
narrator traverses the damaged Los Angeles, regular city sights are paired with his
memories and fantasies; the memories are triggered by the disused theater, “The
Egyptian”,134 with its caricature-esque hieroglyphics. Outside the theater, the only thing
legible are the hieroglyphs; inside, the symptoms of the body living with AIDS manifest
and are legible in a new way, as the “decayed hieroglyphs/words that make no sense”.135

There is an interiority, then, to the legibility; it is only within the confines of the decrepit
theater itself that the symptoms of the body dying of AIDS can become legible in the

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132 Gil Cuadros, “Conquering Immortality.” In City of God (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1994.): 137-
150
133 Cuadros, “Conquering Immortality.” 137
134 Cuadros, “Conquering Immortality.” 137
135 Cuadros, “Conquering Immortality.” 144
way of the “decayed hieroglyphs”. Concurrently, the landscape serves as a potent lens through which to read the body: “I look like the city/only bare bones of what I used to be”. More interestingly, the body becomes the decrepit city, which reminds us then of Augustine’s earthly city of eternal misery.

In line with the temporal “going back” trajectory that the poem sets, the poem explores the spatial power of the “temple” (the theater is reminiscent of a temple) as a site of sexual awakening for the narrator. However, the manifestation of the memories is troubled; the memories of sexual awakening that manifest within the decrepit theater are threatened by memories of the “disciplinarian gaze”, the ushers “in the bathroom, bored/ having to bust up another couple of fags/ like nameless creatures fucking in plain sight/ who needed to be shamed/ and we begged for it”. The ushers here represent the disciplinary state that must regulate the sexuality of the “couple of fags” publicly expressing their subversive sexuality; however, that they “begged for it” recalls the moment of disciplinary subversion we saw in the poem “There are places you don’t walk at night, Alone”, where the Chicano homeboy, ostensibly the disciplinary force in that poem, was transformed to be the object of desire. Here, the disciplinary force loses its power of intimidation; the couple “fucking in plain sight” subvert the need to hide their subversive performance. The narrator must ultimately redefine what it means for his body to be scripted:

disabilities are what frame me.
And what is left
after my body, torn down,
is my soul.
In this instance, the body is rejected wholly, allowing instead for the “soul”, the immaterial, spectral images we’ve been given so far, to be the “signifier”. Triumphanty, the homographetic impulse is denied a target.

In preparation for the poem’s transcendent conclusion, the poem switches focus in the last stanza, from being overly concerned with the temporal journey to being concerned with the spatial one, and focusing on the state of the theater itself. There is a sudden explosion of color:

I notice as I stand here
that today is beautiful,
that the sand-colored walls of the Egyptian,
yellow like dark mustard,
set out against this blue sky.¹⁴⁰

This color, the further “gold and blood red” symbols that decorate the walls of the theater spark a revelation in the narrator; the theater takes on new life, and the narrator reassesses the signifier and its connection to his body:

The walls of this building
are sturdy like myself,
guarded by the spirits of long dead stars.
And even if the parapets are bulldozed in haste
this sacred space can never die out.¹⁴¹

This invocation of immortality here, the “sacred space”, at once a bodily signifier and its defier, prepares the reader for the final stanza of the poem, one where the hieroglyphs we saw earlier become conservers of memories, elevated, deified in a way. This concludes in, then, the body transcending mortality:

I am protected by myth,
a dream of immortality,
enfolded in this theater's
tomb-like darkness.¹⁴²

¹⁴⁰ Cuadros, Gil. “Conquering Immortality.” 149
¹⁴¹ Cuadros, Gil. “Conquering Immortality.” 149
¹⁴² Cuadros, Gil. “Conquering Immortality.” 150
We see immediately how this poem then serves as a counterpoint for the physical disappearance we were privy to in “Sight”. In that short story, the ceasing of movement and the arrival mark the moment of death, and death is made finite. Here, however, death & transcendence are immortal; the small glow does not perish. There is a larger thematic argument, the assertion that the narrator’s queer history, his sexual encounters, the disciplinary forces he has been subject to, all will be preserved in some way, not destroyed by his death. This is the final image, a rejection of erasure, that we’re given in Cuadros’ *City of God*. The narrator (to say, Cuadros) is now bodiless, but in a new way. Whereas in “Sight”, the body was consumed, until “nothing but a small glow remained” which “began to fade”, here the “small glow” lives on, protected by the “tomb-like darkness”. Bodiless, the narrator has reached the metaphorical City of God.

**The specters**

*City of God* closes, through “Conquering Immortality”, triumphantly. Much like Jesus’ triumph over death and ascent from hell, the closing image of the text is one of transformation, immortality, and transcendence. However, ultimately, the complete rejection of the homographetic impulse, the rejection of legibility, the de-scription of social narratives on Cuadros’ body requires corporeal disappearance, which forces the reader to recall and reanalyze other such moments, most notably the ending of “My Aztlan: White Place”, with its bold claim: “My bones shine in the dark”.\(^{143}\) In both these images, the Chicano body living (and dying) with AIDS lies in ruins, a set of bones shining in a decrepit tomb, the “torn down” childhood home. Each of these ruins requires an understanding of how the body as signifier operates in different spaces and systems. Though the body disappears, Cuadros argues that it does not necessitate the

\(^{143}\) Cuadros. “My Aztlan: White Place.” 58
forgetting of the body’s histories. Instead, the poetry suggests a framework for resisting
the homographetic project and transcending the body rhetoric, ultimately designing a
new method for the queer Chicano subject to disidentify and exist.

In spending a considerable portion of the text in disrupting the social desire to
mark the body as legible, in constructing borders between the many different psychic
worlds the body will have to traverse, and ultimately displacing the social narrative
ascribed to the body to the landscape, Cuadros’ desire to produce a new way of reading
Chicano queerness requires Cuadros to acknowledge that this is a reconciliation that
cannot occur on the level of the body, which is to say that the process of Chicano queer
reconciliation is a fraught and ambivalent one. Thus, Cuadros’ imaginary produces an
inability to reach “home”, by which I mean that Cuadros rejects Aztlan as the Chicano
home, in the ways that “biology” disrupts the continuity of such a home, and rejects the
white landscape as the Queer home. For Cuadros, the queer Chicano body living (and
dying) with AIDS, has no “home” and is reduced to constant forms of movement that
ultimately redefine the subjectivity’s relation to space and landscape. This “lack of a
home” proves bothersome to some critics; in fact, Rafael Perez Torres takes Cuadros’
narrative to task for this inability to “go home”, remarking that the transcendence of the
body “fails to convey the very necessary social transformation that could ultimately make
queer mestizos find a sense of place and home”. I argue that the merit of Cuadros’
work lies not in its ability to be a “source of social agency”, but rather in the psychic and
cultural questions it raises, questions that, I believe, address many of the shortcomings of
Corral’s Slow Lightning.

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Perez Torres, “The Transgressive Body and Sexual Mestizaje.” 173
Cuadros’ work is primarily concerned with the idea of home, and what it means to situate oneself within a cultural landscape fraught with different identificatory conflicts. *City of God* takes place in a Los Angeles reeling from the Rodney King controversy and dealing with the AIDS epidemic. Cuadros’ body finds itself positioned within a particular scene of apocalypse, a social space at the verge of being ripped apart by cultural conflicts centering on race & sexuality. It’s clear that sexuality is a problem in such a space, as for Cuadros, it allows for an (ambivalent) attempt at the reconfiguration of a home, in the ways that Cuadros uses strategies such as disidentification (turning the homeboys in the *barrio* to objects of queer desire) or the rejection of self (the extreme physical manifestation of AIDS which necessitates the destruction of the body.) Race becomes a vector through which Cuadros attempts another (ultimately unsuccessful) attempt at reconfiguration, through the rejection of his Chicano identity (the abandoning of the Chicano home and turning to the “white lover”). The question of race provides another interesting moment, in which Cuadros attempts to solve the “problem of Aztlan”, in an attempt to make a home. There is, of course, the moment in which Cuadros is read for a sense of foreignness (“They ask where I’m from, disappointed by my answer, as if they are the natives.”) as opposed to sense of “nativeness”. There is the talk of “Sleepy Lagoon, Indian massacres, and insecticides” which Cuadros rejects as an attempt to pacify his white lover.\footnote{Cuadros. “My Aztlan: White Place.” 56} In these moments, the question of the “native”, the Indian becomes an important question in its own right, a tension in the racial formation of the Chicano subject. The racial dichotomies present become not only about the difference between White/Chicano, but also show how Cuadros is exploring his own racial positionality with respect to the mestizo ideal that forms the racial backbone of
Aztlan and the lineage of *indigenismo* in such a racial identity.\(^{146}\) In the forcing of the talk of “Sleepy Lagoon, Indian massacres, and insecticides” to be silent, to be a moment of the past, which is to say that which *cannot be talked about right now*, Cuadros highlights the issues in which the formation of a radical queer Chicano identity requires reformulation of not only the sexual contours with which Aztlan defines itself in relation to the larger U.S imaginary, but also the interior racial dichotomies on which the decidedly *mestizo* Aztlan is predicated. The power of movement and choreography, as Cuadros uses it, can be re-formulated to highlight and consider the ways in which physical displacement, as Cuadros utilizes it, can be used to force radical reconsiderations of the spaces in which such an agent finds themselves. Thus, the rejection of Aztlan and the queer homes are even more powerful statements, in the ways in which the reject the notion of stasis, and suggest that true radical positionality requires a constant form of movement, that the home based in Aztlan, or the white gay clubs in which Cuadros finds himself later on, can *never* be home, that these spaces and their particular histories can never be truly remedied to account for infinite radical futurities. The white gay landscape, in its insistence on an ahistorical treatment of queerness, by which I mean insistence on the erasure of a racial history and the construction of an unmarked queer body (in the ways that Cuadros must reject “talk of Sleepy Lagoon…” and Aztlan, in its insistence on constructing a racialized hierarchy within its borders, the creation of a dichotomy between the temporal *mestizo* and the always-historical Indian presence, *cannot* ever account for the multiplicities Cuadros describes, and as such, the power of movement in

\(^{146}\) This idea of *indigenismo* comes from Mercedes Serna’s essay “*Hispanismo, indigenismo, y americanismo en la construcción de la unidad nacional y los discursos identitarios de Bolívar, Martí, Sarmiento y Rodó*”, which delineates the ways in which *indigenismo* comes to figure in the early nation-building projects of Latin American revolutionaries, which involves, as I’ve suggested, the idealization of cultural mixing (with the colonial power) as opposed to integrating and framing the Indian subject as a national citizen.
those spaces is to avoid what Cuadros considers not only the problematizing forces in the larger American imaginary, but also the problematizing dichotomies which exist within those spaces.

Torres suggests that reading minoritarian literature must, in some way, produce social change. This operates in tandem with an oft-held belief that the value of cultural work lies in its ability to produce cultural change, or, as Torres puts it, enact “a reconfiguration of effective social relations.” More harmful, however, is the assumption that the production of cultural work by marginalized subjects carries enough radical potential, on its own, to overthrow oppressive systems of power & surveillance. Reading Cuadros, it’s clear that radical reformulations are not quite his target; instead, Cuadros is interesting in charting the “ambivalences” of living as a subject under particular social agendas, narrating the intersecting forces of being read and refusing such a reading. To expect Cuadros’ work to produce social change as Torres suggests is to reject the possibility & value of reading Cuadros’ work as an agent of memory, a testimonial, which is predicated on the exploration and legitimizing of particular identificatory positions which are, by virtue of the spaces in which these agents are at work, marked as exterminable. This is a reclamations, one reliant on the idea of movement, which, as a strategy, delineates how these exterminating impulses can be avoided. In Cuadros’ work, race & sexuality work in conjunction with history and geography to become the dimensions through which he is able to explore how different bodily signifiers work on a psychic and experiential level. However, in removing the body, Cuadros is able to effectively explore such impulses, elaborating on the liminal subjects Queer Chicano subjects are forced to navigate, both in a “racial” home rooted

147 Perez Torres, “The Transgressive Body and Sexual Mestizaje.” 173
in the “othering” of their sexuality (and problematized racial histories in the context of indigeneity) and a “sexual” home invested in the re-inscription of their racialized “otherness”. Ultimately, Cuadros suggests that these concurrent structures of power and legibility ensure that Chicano and queer, as signifiers, cannot be fully avoided, and his response is to remove the body and transfer such forces to the landscape, a geography in which these systems are subject to scrutiny and can be reformulated in ways to force a reckoning with the particular histories of such identities, in moments where their ahistoricity is preferable. While the hermeneutic quest for a home mentioned earlier has a destination only when the “spirit” is made immortal and independent from the body, the reader is made aware of the ways in which the problematized body is able to perform such an escape and arrival. In that, thus, lies the power of Cuadros work, and through those methods, the queer Chicano body is, in a way, saved and preserved by de-scriptive displacement despite the inscriptive forces seeking the opposite.
Chapter Three
The Allure of Aztlan: A Refutation & Reconfiguration of the Fantasies of Aztlan in Chicano Literature

As seen in the previous chapters, both Corral & Cuadros are concerned with questions of movement and geography, and particularly the concept of “Aztlan”, which is used to varying degrees by both writers towards a new understanding of the position of the queer Chicano subject within a larger Chicano cultural consciousness. This chapter is structured around two main objectives: a theoretical complication of Aztlan as it appears in the texts, which will yield an exploration of what could be called the “fallacy” of Aztlan. This will be followed by an introduction to and discussion of what is called “post-borderlands” criticism, which, as an extreme, attempts to do away with the figure of Aztlan, which will provide a new, and I argue, more robust, framework to analyze the texts presented.

Histories of Reading

As is the case with many works by “ethnic” writers, there is a tendency towards reading for universal “truths”. As mentioned at the end of the second chapter, Perez-Torres, in his analysis of City of God, takes Cuadros to task for his seeming inability to discern some larger truth for the queer Chicano subject, which can then be applied to some larger sociopolitical action. This could be considered a larger graphetic force, which operates on the texts of non-white authors, in the sense that these texts are immediately interrogated for the ways in which they can either be negotiated into or serve to legitimize the social fantasy through which the non-whiteness of the author is surveilled. In the case of the Chicano community, it problematizes the ways in which Chicano racial identity can be formed; by stereotyping the visual racialities of the

Perez Torres, “The Transgressive Body and Sexual Mestizaje.”
authors, these larger social forces prohibit the manifestation of multiple racial categories and forbid the transcendence, in their reification, of these signifying systems. This is not a reading often ascribed to white writers; Richard Dyer notes on the “universality of whiteness”, that it often serves as the “human norm”, with “racial imagery” serving only to work in distinction, which means to only serve to mark one as “other”.\textsuperscript{149} This is to say that in the ways that whiteness is seen as universal and thus personal and individual, racialized “otherness” is not. Thus, the textualization of these texts operates on a racial dichotomy, and it is this dichotomy that serves to limit the ways in which Chicano authors can manifest a personalized identity.

In many ways, this reading of raciality is tied to locality and geography. Part of the way the American imaginary conceives of race is through geographical belonging, by buying into the idea that locality, in some way, can be used to discern someone’s racial composition. Even more nefarious is the idea embedded in this logic, of the biological nature of race & its interconnectivity with space. To say that geography can serve to elucidate racial origins, the logic requires a (seemingly contradictory) physical connection to the land, akin to “We have always lived here!” which serves, in the Chicano context, as a particularly ludicrous suggestion given that most Chicano criticism figures around questions of migration. In the invocation of such a rhetoric, the reading of geographic belonging becomes a coded way through which biological notions of race & human difference become textualized, and thus affects the way in which these writers manifest identities of difference and strategies through which they can dismantle such oppressive regimes. The notion of raciality as being spatially rooted is a critical strategy to the political myth of Aztlan. The claim of \textit{el movimiento} to such a space is the assertion of

continuous presence and, for writers like Anzaldua, the power of Aztlan lies in its ability to serve as the home of the “mestizo” subject. As was seen with Anzaldua, and to some extent, Corral, projects to reformulate Aztlan take the form of a radical push towards a “new understanding” of these ties, and their relation to racialized Chicano imaginaries.

The problem in this kind of formulation is the question mixed-raciality, which, in the context of Chicanidad, becomes a question of the “mestizo”. Mestizo as a term in Chicano national discourse has two axes for understanding: the historical usage of mestizo and the state-sponsored use of mestizaje. Mestizo, of course, finds its origins in colonial Latin America, as a legal term used to denote people of mixed Indigenous and Spanish descent. In this way, then, mestizaje comes to be a way through which the Law can uphold notions of biological racial difference, and it establishes the ways in which one could be “mestizo”. This word entered the cultural consciousness in a charged way during the ideological conflicts of Mexican nation-building, in which it is reclaimed as a method to differentiate the Mexican “citizen” from the colonial Spanish subject. “Mestizaje” becomes the language through which civil belonging and ideal Mexican citizenship comes to be defined and articulated, and such an articulation is entirely dependent on the erasure of the indio.

What does it mean to “erase the indio”? This erasure is a complex state-sponsored project, and a project whose prevalence in ideas of Mexican nationhood and subjectivity affect in profound ways the figure of Aztlan that Cuadros & Corral are invoking. As “mestizaje” is invoked as a racial category, it becomes a methodology through which the national modern project of Mexico can enter the cultural conversation. The mestizo is the ideal citizen, the culmination of the modern project of

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nationhood. In many ways, textuality becomes the way through which the ideal of the mestizo as the ideal modern subject comes to be reified into the cultural consciousness. In his essay La Raza Cósmica, Jose Vasconcelos celebrates the vision of the citizen as the “culmination”, the idealized modern conclusion to the racial mixing that has categorized social relations and reproduction in Latin America since the colonial encounter.\(^{151}\) To Vasconcelos, the mestizo population is the “raza de bronce”, a direct invocation of this idea of “superhumanity” and “divinity” of the mestizo population (the invocation of the term “raza de bronce” coming from a poem dedicated to revolutionary figure Benito Juarez.\(^{152}\)) Thus, in this textualization of the idea of the mestizo as being a divine” race, or a people on the path towards the idealized “deracialized” raza cosmica, the discourse that then surrounds the question of racial formation in Latin America becomes reliant on the cultural production of such textualized discourses. Vasconcelos’ idea picked up steam as Mexico worked toward modernization and the cultural discourse surrounding the ideal Mexican citizen, the modern cosmopolitan Mexican citizen, became in many ways dependent on these ideas surrounding lineage. As the state engaged in its nation-building project, it recognized the need for a distinct cultural identity divorced from the colonial legacy and positioned in a socially dominant position in relation to the indigenous and black-descendant populations. This problem was solved through the invocation of the “mestizo”, which, in celebrating its racial mixture (Spanish and Indian, but not quite both), distances itself from the Spanish populace while establishing a notion of racial superiority and guaranteeing the ahistoricity of the modern Indian. By this I mean, as the mestizo identity is constructed as “progress”, its futurity guaranteed in the linkage with it and moving “beyond” the colonial regime, the figure of the Indian becomes historical.


\(^{152}\) Amado Nervo, “La Raza de Bronce.” In *Poesias completas*. (Lisbon: Editorial Teorema, 1982.)
that which was a long time ago, similar to how now the colonial regime becomes a remnant. The difference, and significance in relation to Aztlan, in between the historical treatment of both figures is the continued romanticizing of the Indian figure. Whereas the colonial power is marked as historical and that which should be forgotten, the Indian is memorialized, serialized, transformed into a vector of cultural production, whose erasure in the historical consciousness allows for its signifying terms to be used and appropriated into fetishized apparatuses whose new signifying power is to invoke the feeling of “other”, which, as has been delineated, serves to distinguish the “mestizo” subject.

This erasure is important in the formulation and, what I consider, the “fallacy” of Aztlan. Aztlan is constructed as the home of the Chicano subject, subjects whose own identificatory positions are hugely reliant on their own subjectivities in the patria. The Chicano subject as the displaced mestizo subject draws on the cultural constructions that the Mexican national consciousness uses to distinguish itself from the colonial Spanish power. In many ways, the relationship between the Chicano people and the American imaginary is similar, in the power differentials that exist, and the distinct geographic relationship that exists between the two groups. In many ways, then, it’s possible to see how the power dynamic between the United States and the mythic nation of Aztlan does mirror an imperial one, and that has tremendous implications for the ways the possibilities for cultural resistance and reinvention are imagined.

Postcolonialism & Its Discontents

To understand the “fallacy of Aztlan”, it’s important to understand its “allure”, by which I mean why Aztlan has been and continues to be fertile ground for Chicanx writers seeking to articulate modes of anti-normative subjectivity. One useful way to look at Aztlan is to think about the aforementioned power dynamic between the Chicano
community and the United States, and imagine it in terms of imperial relations. This can be best understood through a postcolonial lens. As an academic discipline, Postcolonialism focuses on the historical, cultural, social, and economic consequences of colonial regimes; postcolonial literary theory focuses on literature produced by writers from colonized nations (though it sometimes can come from voices within the colonizer nation.) These works are analyzed as “conversations” between colonizer and colonized, and the ways in which these works can serve as attempts to articulate a separate identity, culture, etc. from that of the colonizer.

One of the central reasons for invoking postcolonial literary theory here is to understand the ways in which it elucidates one of the “allures” of Aztlan, in its conception of the “other”. The “other” refers to that subject which is not us, and postcolonial theory is built around understanding the psychological and social ways in which one is made “other”. In literature, to be “other” refers to the ways in which both the literature of the colonizer and of the colonized reflects social structures in the ways that these bodies/subjects are depicted as being transgressive of some sort. The literature (and by extension, the language) of the colonizer often operates on the Manichean allegory, wherein the world is often viewed in terms of two mutually exclusive opposites, which, in the case of the colonizer, is depicted as the “global” civilized Colonizer & the “savage”, “primitive” colonized subject, which is “other”.


“ambivalences” of the colonizer’s language. Bhabha conceives of culture as being composed of different perceptions and dimensions; this multiplicity allows for the colonized other to develop a hybrid identity. This is the ambivalence; since the colonial authority develops its power only after the traumatic moment of colonization, it is torn between its desire to function as the original authority (what Andrea Smith considers the desire to seem “natural” and “native”) and its ability to only claim such a power through the repetition of such a trauma after the fact. Thus, the colonial power comes to be characterized by its lateness and splitness, and in these “cracks” the hybrid colonial identity comes to be formed.

The importance of this framework is that these “cracks” represent the marginal spaces, the collision spaces between the dominant and colonized cultures, exactly the kind of borderlands Anzaldúa seeks to describe, the sites of trauma and violence and also the sites of subversion and radical potential. I note here also his idea of the “marginal”. Bhabha in particular refers to the marginal as the “third space”, an ambiguous social/psychic space which is an area of collision. The third space serves as a threat to the geohistorical continuity and dominance of the colonizer, in the ways in which it serves as a direct challenge to the notion of culture as a “homogenizing, unifying force, authenticated by the originary past”. Thus, in the collisions of cultures, notions of “superiority” of cultures are dismantled, and this ambivalent discursive space displaces the colonizer’s temporal narrative. In these spaces, statements and positionalities are

155 Homi K. Bhabha “Of mimicry and man: The ambivalence of colonial discourse.” In The Location of Culture. (London: Routledge, 1994.): 85-92
156 Homi K. Bhabha, “The Commitment to Theory.” In The Location of Culture. (London: Routledge, 1994.): 19-39
158 Bhabha. “Of mimicry and man: The ambivalence of colonial discourse.” 86
159 Bhabha. “The Commitment to Theory.” 36
160 Bhabha. “The Commitment to Theory.” 37
constructed in contradiction to those of the colonizers and in this space, even those can be appropriated and subverted. Aztlan, in this way, can be conceived of as a “third space” in a way, the violent collision between two cultures, the home of the “perverse” as Anzaldúa suggests, and, most importantly, the geographical entity that disrupts the cultural and historical dominance of the United States. Aztlan as a third space complicates notions of boundaries, something that both Bhabha and Gayatri Spivak pay close attention to, in the ways that boundaries are constructed to separate that which is not us, which, for theorists like Spivak, comes to signify the subaltern, the subject positioned at the marginalities of culture. 161 The subaltern, as subject and positionality simultaneously, is a powerful theoretical tool in the ways that it allows for a thorough discussion on the powers of the body and of the subject to articulate itself within the discursive splits in enunciation within the text and language of the colonizer while also taking into consideration the particular cultural and geopolitical positionality of the subaltern subject itself (by which I mean that it is possible to conceive of a subaltern at the margin and a subaltern positioned within the metropole itself.) Thus, understanding the subaltern subject as a form/framework/movement through which the Chicano subject can be understood is critical.

The notion of the “other” is critical and contradictory to Aztlan in many ways. While Aztlan provides a home for the “other” within the metropole of the United States, this is complicated in many ways. Aztlan does not position the “other” on the margin, as Spivak would suggest, but rather attempts to construct the “other” as belonging within the metropole itself, as Aztlan is more so a psychic space rather than a true geographical one. In the case of Corral, the subject is normalized through the mapping of queer affect

to normative *Chicanidad*, at which point the other cannot be *that which is not us*. This is an inherent contradiction, because in the situation of the “other” as being able to reclaim a space within the metropole disallows the discursive split that the marginal represents. While certainly there is something to be said about the radical potentiality in the disruption of the continuous dominance of the metropole by disrupting its geographical continuity, or reclaiming a history the metropole deems anachronistic, the contradiction lies in the insistence that those within the metropole can remain “other” completely, eschewing the norms of the social power and existing in a space such that the “other” can articulate its full social potential. But, in this lies the assumption that the “other” is able to navigate the new borders between the metropole and this reclaimed space, which, following Anzaldúa’s logic, is a site of hypersurveillance, a gaze under which the “other” cannot be “other”. To survive the border, the “other” must be able to enact the performative aspects of the social norm in the metropole, at which point its visuality ceases to be that of the “other” and is thus unmarked social subject. This problem of positionality becomes prevalent in seeing the way the imperial discourse does not always manifest in Aztlan. This problem of positionality highlights the ways in which attempting to understand the Chicano subject, the *mestizo*, as continually “other” fails in many respects. One way to understand this failure is to analyze the image of the “native” as it appears in the texts, particularly *City of God* since, it has been argued, this text grapples more directly with this question than *Slow Lightning*.

The second chapter questioned the apparition of “the native” as it was presented in the short story “My Aztlan: White Place”. This scene, I argue, can also be interrogated to understand the ways in which using a purely postcolonial framework to understand the positionality of the Chicano is a flawed exercise. The question of the “native” comes
up in postcolonial theory in interesting ways. Rey Chow explores the figure of the “native” as being part of the colonial fantasy in the ways that the colonizer uses the image of the “native” to control the fantasy of discourse and encounter with the subaltern.\footnote{Rey Chow, “Where Have All the Natives Gone?” In Writing Diaspora: Tactics of Intervention in Contemporary Cultural Studies. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993): 27-} The image of the “native”, Chow argues, is consistently revisited by the colonial power. The image of the native as it is presented offers an interesting dynamic between the indigeneity that is being read onto the body in contrast to said body’s irredeemability with such a reading. The mestizo subject, as elaborated previously, cannot be native, for the construction of the identity necessitates the historicization of such a problematized subjecthood. Though Cuadros does not use “native” to explicitly refer to the indio, the split in the language, between what it is meant and what could be meant by it, allows for the reading of the problem of the Indian presence in the formation of a mestizo subjecthood. Such a process requires a constant revisiting of what indio is; to further the formation, the state must constantly renegotiate the borders between citizen and indio, and these constant renegotiations secure the continued erasing of such an identity. Chow’s exploration of said process allows for an understanding of how the scene, where the question of “nativeness” is presented, presents the first problem of Aztlan, in the sense that Aztlan, as conceptually constructed, cannot account for the “native” in this way; the body cannot be read as such, though Aztlan claims, through its stake to “We have always lived here”, a kind of nativeness which must be immediately “othered”, though to “other” the claim to the geography is to “other” the identity itself, a contradiction.

Visualizing Aztlan
When one thinks about geography, one often thinks of maps. One could think of the Mercator projection, in particular, how it has been accused of promoting a Eurocentric view of the world, and more generally how many have come to consider the ways in which we visualize maps and space inform our prejudices and biases. This idea of maps is important, particularly for Slow Lightning, since devising a system by which to “navigate spaces” becomes an important tool in attempting to enact counter-hegemonic performances. While both authors aren’t invested in the particularities of making an actual map per se, the analogy is useful in understanding how psychic visualizations of the spaces come to be textualized, and how this again figures largely into the ways these authors assume Aztlan will work. Here, Jonathan Flatley’s concept of affective mapping is particularly useful, and renders up for interrogation the second part of the “fallacy of Aztlan”.

Flatley’s work is based largely on Lynch & Jameson’s articulations about cognitive maps, by which they refer to ways in which people envision cities, landscapes, and larger social realities “in their heads”, a mental map.163164 Carlos Gallego makes great use of this concept, invoking the concept in relation to Rivera’s …y no se lo trago la tierra, analyzing the ways in which the circular structure of the migratory process and the text itself comes to be reified in instances where envisioning the world around them becomes a critical step towards the characters’ formulations of subjecthood and identity.165 However, Gallego’s analysis fails to critically engage with the particular affective postures that come with the treatment of space, the envisioning of the “world around them”. For the narrator of …y no se lo trago la tierra, the production of a cognitive map of the United

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164 Jameson, “Cognitive Mapping.”  
165 Gallego, “Topographies of Resistance: Cognitive Mapping in Chicano/a Migrant Literature.”
States, of the states the migrants travel to for work and so on, produces a sense of alien-ness and strangeness which leads to the detachment from his family through which the larger network of connectivity and belonging within the Chicano community can be explored. This production of affect, emotion in the face of moving through a space is precisely what Flatley considers the affective map, the “affective aspects of the maps that guide” subjects in any locality.¹⁶⁶ In this articulation of the interplay between space and affect, social spaces are never “independent” of emotions. Each space can be assigned a particular affect, and that affective value determines the possibilities for identity and consciousness within that and in conjunction outside of those spaces. Note then at work is the next important component of such affective maps: the “non-uniqueness” of affect. In the ways that social spaces come to be imbued with particular affective power, this power is significant inasmuch as social structures survive due to such affective values. Oppressive systems (capitalism, patriarchy) exist continually only in the emotional responses they invoke in subjects, responses through which subjects are mediated in global systems. Then, affect in these spaces are continually replayed, reinscribed, and reformulated, never new; as Flatley puts it: “We never experience an affect for the first time.”¹⁶⁷ Ahistorical in the sense that these affective responses have no beginning, but merely are powers within a social landscape, and historical in the sense that these affects can be traced and constructed into a lineage, interacting with social-historical forces to produce particular affective webs which, again, determine how subjects move through these spaces and are ascribed by particular social inscriptive impulses, this condition of

¹⁶⁷ Flatley, “Affective Mapping”: 81
affective values in social spaces being “non-unique” allows for the linkage of such values to other affective gestures.

We can see how this strategy is utilized in by Corral in the poem “Want”, Cuadros in many of his short stories, and in a larger sense in the invocations of Aztlan. In “Want”, the hunger of the narrator’s father is linked to another kind of hunger: queer desire. But, that hunger is not independent of the space in which it manifests. The desert carries with it a particular signifying system; its extremity and liminality ensures that forms of hunger become exaggerated here, a desperate kind of hunger that is represented by the father “shoving the lizard” in his mouth, which becomes transformed into the son engaging in oral sex. Thus, it’s not that these characters are just hungry, but that the particularities of the space in which they find themselves, the desert, which is to say the liminal, produces a kind of affect in which the son can understand his hunger as part of a contingency operating under a similar signifying system. As such, then, hunger becomes a map of sorts, a blueprint through which the desert can be navigated, and by which these subversive affective gestures can be mollified and legitimized. We can see how affect is produced in localities in City of God as well. The power of such a value is its specificity. While an affective value such as hunger “makes sense” in the “cultural” desert, in the liminal or margin, such a value may not hold the same power in another landscape, say the city. While Corral exploits the power of hunger, Cuadros is exploring the power of the foreign, the alien, which translates to a sense of “disorientation”. Cuadros’ poems & short stories often take place in the highly urban spaces: the highway, the apartment complex, etc. For Cuadros, the sprawling city landscape comes to be exemplified by disorientation, i.e. the loss of the senses (such as the short story where Cuadros loses his eyesight.) This disorientation in the city, the sense of loss or
foreignness in the metropolis, often considered a symbol of modernity, is used by Cuadros to explore the perpetual sense of displacement that the queer Chicano subject feels. Thus, Cuadros is using the affective power of the landscape, the disorientation in the metropolis, to construct the queer Chicano subject as a modern one (here, “modern” does not refer to contemporary but rather to “modernity”), a subject continually displaced and lost in the larger social network. It’s again the power of the affective, this non-uniqueness, and the cultural legibility of this condition of modernity that allows for Cuadros to exploit affective power to explore how, if Aztlan is a space of the normative Chicano family, it forces a displacement on the queer Chicano subject.

In a larger context, the concept of Aztlan is affectively connected to a sense of loss. Chicano mythos has largely operated under the mantra “The border crossed us!” In that saying, the Chicano national movement sought to remedy what it had seen as impulses toward the “making foreign” of the Chicano subject. Thus, Aztlan became an intervention against the claims that the Chicano community was “foreign” within the United States, by introducing a locality, a home, to which the Chicano subject could “claim allegiance” and use as a marker of belonging. The logic of “The border crossed us” comes from the “historical betrayal” of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo of 1848, in which Mexico ceded a huge swath of land in the American Southwest to the United States, thus displacing entire communities as their national allegiance suddenly switched. Forced out of Mexico, and not welcome in the United States, these subjects experienced a “loss”, a melancholia due to their sudden dispossession, a dispossession linked to the processes of modernity and imperialism.168 Thus, the “historical betrayal” and formation of the Chicano community is directly rooted in this process of loss, and Aztlan can be

seen as a melancholic intervention in such a process. Aztlan, then, is exactly a kind of affective map, a charged affective concept through which these feelings of belonging and community can be mapped to a particular social space (the American Southwest) which is meant to remedy the Chicano’s feeling of disorientation in this “lack” of a formal “Eden”. However, this history is problematized in the ways that the push towards assimilation forces a formation of Chicano subjecthood that, as has been stated previously, is mimetic of heteronormative social relations in the American imaginary. As such, for the queer Chicano, the experience is “doubly melancholic”, a loss of a Chicano home and a loss of a queer home.

In what ways can Flatley’s concept be used to explore the shortcomings of Aztlan as a framework? It is in the affective connection that is presumed by the authors that the second shortcoming becomes visible. As I have tried to argue, the affective condition of Aztlan is one where Aztlan can be seen as “melancholic” intervention into the “loss of a home”, a space through which feelings of displacement can be remedied and reassessed. However, this carries with it the nefarious assumption that it is the Chicano people who have been displaced from the space. Anzaldúa’s claim to Aztlan relies on the premise that it is the Chicano people who are the rightful dwellers of the American Southwest, which, at best, is woefully ignorant of the mixture of communities that lived in the area in 1848 or, at worst, a purposeful denial of centuries of indigenous presence in the area. In many ways, the displacement of the indigenous communities can be thought of as a modern “loss”, a displacement and sense of disorientation brought on by those modern impulses (expansion, imperialism, capitalism, etc.) In Flatley’s working, we can see how one can visualize the indio as having the affective connection to the area of Aztlan that Cuadros & Corral both exploit. In the interlocking machinations of
imperialism and expansion, exactly the kind that the *mestizo* subject claims to be victim to, the “native”, by which I mean the *indio*, is the first casualty of such an expansionary project. The *mestizo* citizen, in many instances, becomes not only complicit but participatory in the displacement of native peoples from their lands (invoking, here, the ways in which Mexico has been involved in its own program of indigenous displacement.) Thus, the linkage that Cuadros & Corral (Corral, I have tried to argue, more so than Cuadros since his work buys a bit more into the myth) attempt to make between affective positions is a fraught one, and one that ignores the way in which the *mestizo* is, in many ways throughout history, complicit in the structures of domination & oppression which it seeks to escape. Thus, another contradiction that arises is the seeming disconnect between the ways in which, in these texts, the *mestizo* space attempts to position itself as continually against the metropole, ignoring the ways in which it itself functions as such a metropole in relation to the figures of the “native”. In this way, Aztlan is not counter-revolutionary in its positionality, but is rather continuing the dynamic that exists between it and the true periphery.$^\text{169}$

**The “fallacy” of Aztlan**

In the previous section, I sought to elucidate what I consider some of the shortcomings to Aztlan as a theoretical framework for counter-hegemonic discourse. In this section, I attempt to delineate the ways in which Anzaldúa’s—and the larger Chicano critical canon—framework of the borderland, and her invocation of Aztlan, fail to serve as a viable resistive strategy for these authors.

$^\text{169}$ The term “periphery” is described often in terms of the binary of the metropole-periphery, with the metropole being the center of the imperial power (i.e. London for the British Empire) and the periphery being “everything else”; that is, the colonized nations
At the end of the first chapter, there was a gesture to the particular “ambivalences of power” that marked some of the less forward-resistive moments. “Ambivalences of power” refers to the ways in which these authors, rather than explicitly attempting to subvert dominating inscriptive systems, explore & delineate the way in which they navigate and exist within such matrices of power, which can produce radical discourse as a result. In these ways, in the explorations of subjection and the forms of testimonials that such practices produce, Aztlan as a framework renders itself particularly useful. Aztlan, as a psychic concept, does offer the possibility of futurity in many ways. For starters, the premise on which Aztlan resides is a kind of alterity. Aztlan provides a template through which Chicano writers in can explore ideas of belonging which had been previously denied to them. Irregardless, for a moment, of the problematizing implications that such a desire for “belonging” carries, this idea of a “home” allows for the exploration of modernist impulses of loss and disorientation. There’s a potential for futurity, the exploration of the Chicano community, through Aztlan, as being its own nation, and the radical possibilities that accompany this idea of being “in power”, so to speak. The potential for Aztlan to be the nexus through which the mestizo writer explores imaginations of subjectivity is one of the reasons that Aztlan continues to figure so largely in the Chicano literary consciousness. Another way of thinking about the ways in which Aztlan is a powerful theoretical tool is in its disruption of geographic continuity. Though I explained the ways in which the geographic positionality of Aztlan in regards to the figure of the indio is in many ways complicit in continued anti-indigenous state-sponsored action, Aztlan, as a relational figure between the Chicano people and the larger American cultural consciousness, works to interrupt the United States’ claim to contiguous and continuous presence. The United States as an
imperial power rises through its forceful expansion and its ability to claim that expansion as merely a presence, one that has always “been there”. In situating Aztlan between Mexico and the United States, and centering it in a space that historically marks the area of conflict between the two nations, Chicano theorists not only position themselves as different racialized beings, but also as different national subjects, who cannot be read solely in terms of either state. In those ways, then, Aztlan does offer a powerful counter-discourse.

However, what I refer to as the “fallacy” of Aztlan refers specifically to its usage in the texts that I am analyzing. As has been elaborated on, these authors are invested in extending the ways in which the processes of self-formation and identity reconfiguration are textualized. In these ways, Corral & Cuadros both invoke the shadow of Aztlan as methodologies through which to explore these projects of legitimization. As I’ve explained, in many ways, Aztlan’s potential for futurity renders itself to these kinds of projects. But, here is where the tension lies, in the possibilities for futurity and the necessities of present radical intervention. In many ways, Aztlan is a modern project. It invokes the sense of future, that it is working “towards true inclusivity”, but because of the ways in which Aztlan’s existence relies on the continued erasure of the figure of the indio, Aztlan can never reach its potential, exactly because its potential for future dismantling of oppressive signifying systems never collides with the particular social moment in which these authors find themselves. The fallacy of Aztlan is its ability, in the theoretical foundations, to appear to provide an idealized home whereas it serves only to reify the fraught positionalities that the mestizo subject historically has been complicit in, particularly in its relation to the figure of the indio. That the indio is a spectral presence for Aztlan (as seen in the ways in which the figure of the bruja serves to disrupt the master-
slave dynamic in “Monologue of a vulture’s shadow”) ensures that the psychic energy such a framework provides is consistently applied to reifying the mestizo presence through the continuous erasure of the problematized body (that of the indigenous.) Thus, as mentioned, Aztlan is a “modern” project, always promising the nexus of radical possibilities, but always failing to serve such promises, forcing onto its inhabitants a sense of disorientation. This disorientation, then, translates, for these authors, as moments of movement; the failure of stasis, the necessity to continually move and negotiate one’s position within these troubled psychic spaces. Thus, movement is not only subversive strategy for these authors; it is the only way true Aztlan will allow these subjectivities to exist.

Josefina Saldaña-Portillo goes further in her condemnation of Aztlan, arguing that Anzaldua’s formulation is reliant on the Mexican state project of resurrecting Mexican-Indian culture and fetishizing it to the exclusion of “dozens of living indigenous subjectivity”.

Saldaña-Portillo argues that in reclaiming the Aztec imagery that makes up the mestizo, and forms the crux of Anzaldua’s racial formation, Anzaldua resuscitates problematized subjectivities only “to be incorporated into contemporary mestiza consciousness…to the exclusion and…erasure of contemporary indigenous subjectivity and practices on both sides of the border.”

To Saldaña-Portillo, Anzaldua’s theorizing is a transnational erasure of extremely marginal identities, and engages in a fantasy of colonial relations, in which the mestizo subject is always better than [his] indio counterpart, and that this subject is the true Mexican citizen. While I do temper my criticism of...
Anzaldúa’s conceptualization, and certainly disagree with Saldaña-Portillo in her subsequent vindication of Richard’s Rodriguez (a figure she finds to adequately deal with the problem of the *indio*, but who I read as being emblematic of the extremities of internalizing hegemony in his almost poetic hatred of his own “dark skin”\(^{172}\)), I do find similarities between the argument Saldaña-Portillo presents and the one I seek to make, inasmuch that both perspectives take into consideration the failure of Aztlan to serve as a moment and space in the present, as opposed to being concerned *solely* with rewriting history or contemplating the future. In the present moment, Aztlan can never be remedied, never be cured of its structural deficiencies, and as such serves only to envision times *other than these*. As our writers explore the ways in which the queer Chicano body lives (and dies with AIDS), these extreme forms of physicality force a kind of perspective deeply rooted in the experiential, and the present. This is why, as suggested in the first chapter, Corral’s text finds itself more susceptible to falling for the fallacy. As Corral attempts to construct subjectivities that can become legible and normalized to the larger Chicano community, the necessary invocation of the past, of those stories/images *that have already happened*, the usefulness of Aztlan in reconfiguring the past becomes too strong an allure for Corral, and he falls for the fallacy in assuming that disrupting the past is sufficient in disrupting the day-to-day normative negotiations his body must enact with larger socially inscriptive forces. In this way, Cuadros is significantly more successful, as, for Cuadros, Aztlan figures largely as a *spectre*, that which is not there, but can be felt. In many ways, Aztlan operates as a ghost for Cuadros, a ghostly presence that colors and taints his experiences as a queer Chicano man. As Cuadros constructs Aztlan as the emblematic nexus of the Chicano home that has

\(^{172}\) Saldaña-Portillo, “Who’s the Indian in Aztlán? Re-Writing Mestizaje, Indianism, and Chicanismo from the Lacandón.” 416
rejected him, he is able to more efficiently explore the ways in which the promised homeland is deficient for a variety of subjectivities. Though Cuadros is unable to ultimately mediate his own fraught complex subjecthood with that of the “native”, a positionality he fails to properly address, his radical usage of Aztlan as spectre rather than a main framework allows for the imagining of ways in which the figure of Aztlan can come to disoccupy center stage in the quest for self-legitimization that these authors pursue.

Post-borderlands

Having explored the problem of Aztlan, it’s possible to begin to turn to writers who are working towards a complete reconfiguration of the problem of Aztlan. One important example of this is T. Jackie Cuevas, whose work provides the first significant blueprint towards a “post-borderlands” understanding of queer Chicano literature.173

In this radical treatment of Aztlan, Cuevas invokes Cherrie Moraga, a counterpart of sorts to Anzaldua, and her theorizing of a “Queer Aztlan”.174 To Moraga, “Queer Aztlan” is a vision for a “future homeland” where the invoking of Aztec imagery and mythology through Aztlan is a method for “envisioning a future for queer mestizaje”, where “Latinotopic and homophilic spaces would converge.”175 Moraga argues that Aztlan rises in prevalence only because of a “paucity” of models on which to explore notions of community. This is reflected in City of God, in how Cuadros shows the Chicano home expelling him and the Queer home erasing him, forcing a shadowy invocation of Aztlan through which to explore the issues of belonging and home that he

173 T. Jackie Cuevas, “Imagining Queer Chican@s in the Post-Borderlands.” In REVUE LISA E-JOURNAL, Vol.XI (2013): 1-31
175 Cuevas. “Imagining queer Chican@s in the Post-Borderlands.” 3
raises. The important part of the invocation of Moraga, for Cuevas, is Moraga’s dwelling on the issues of identity formation that queer Chicano subjects experience. Moraga claims that the struggle for queer Chicanx subjectivity is directly tied to the struggles of native people around the world, but that this connection is not understood or utilized by the queer Chicano subject because of its preoccupation with its own positionality as a *mestizo* subject, which requires an ignoring of the prevalence of such people in the racial construction of *mestizo* as a social category.\(^{176}\) As an example, Cuevas cites Moraga’s *The Hungry Woman: Mexican Medea* as an example where the intersecting aspects of racist and homophobic signifying systems can be used as “horizontal oppressions” by non-white subjects against one another.\(^{177}\) This turn towards the linkage of oppressed subjectivities with one another, instead of the conflict in which they often find themselves in in texts like *Slow Lightning* and, to a lesser extent, *City of God*, provides an avenue through which to understand how Aztlan as a mythical framework can be reformulated to account for the synergisms between oppressive systems.

Cuevas uses this turn in Moraga’s conceptualization to construct, what she considers, the “post-borderlands” framework, in which “subjectivities may be suggested as being Chicanx but do not struggle with what that may mean to them as an identity formation.”\(^{178}\) Calling on Bhabha’s notion of “third space”, Cuevas argues that for non-normative subjects, a turn towards understanding the ways in which queerness, in its encompassing of many forms of non-normative subjectivity, forces their “experience of existing in a third space...[to manifest] so differently...as to demand a more expansive

\(^{176}\) Cuevas. “Imagining queer Chican@’s in the Post-Borderlands.” 8
\(^{177}\) Cuevas. “Imagining queer Chican@’s in the Post-Borderlands.” 9
\(^{178}\) Cuevas. “Imagining queer Chican@’s in the Post-Borderlands.” 3
critical vocabulary.”^179 There’s a turn Cuevas makes here, to refer to not only gay and non-white subjects, but to subjects whose gender expressions, embodiment, and performativity are so inherently in contradiction to the Chicano mythos that they require a complete re-reading and reconsideration of the politics of merely reformulating existing oppressive structures. Cuevas reads for the ways in which “genderqueer subjects…partially disidentify with both Chicanidad and queerness by reconfiguring the relation between the two categories.”^180 Cuevas’ framework is reliant on a kind of disembodiment, the suspension of bodily legibility to move towards physicalities that cannot always be accounted for, and the complications that such bodies present to traditional signifying systems. Thus, the “post-borderlands” is the space in which questions of sexuality, race, and gender become “special cases” of the general problem of forms of embodiment in its own right, in the ways that non-normative Chicano subjects begin to approach the questions of embodiment and existence in spaces that do not always take such corporeality as given. In this framework, we see the possibility of incredible radical potential. As mentioned in the first chapter, Slow Lightning’s preoccupation with a project of legitimizing one’s own body is responsible for the ultimate failure to negotiate it into a larger cultural consciousness. Cuadros’ own moments of disembodiment serve as testimonials in which the projects of surveillance are avoided and the “ambivalences” which form the normative forces the non-normative subject must negotiate are put up to criticism.

Returning to Cuevas & Moraga, understanding Cuevas’ particular textual focus is also important, and will render even more clearly how both theorists conceive of this “post-borderland” as being the rightful extension of the Aztlan-centric discourse.

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^179 Cuevas. “Imagining queer Chican@’s in the Post-Borderlands.” 3
^180 Cuevas. “Imagining queer Chican@’s in the Post-Borderlands.” 3
Cuevas’ analysis focuses on the work of Felicia Luna Lemus, whose text *Like Son,* she argues, is “not concerned with naming or locating [itself] within a geopolitical, ethnic, psychological, or spiritual borderland”, but rather in “exploring what it means to be genderqueer versus normative as well as punkera/punk versus mainstream.” The text is suggesting that “genderqueerness disrupts a sense of unified cultural wholeness…but allows for reclaiming lost history and coming to terms with a collective Chicanx sense of lost wholeness.”

There’s a lot to unpack here, mainly in the affective arguments Cuevas seeks to make. In her analysis of Lemus’ work, Cuevas locates Lemus’ desire to avoid the pitfalls of the identity-political centered analysis that, Cuevas claims, dominated Chicano discourse in the 1980s and early 90s (this of course is by no means a coincidental occurrence, seeing as how the problem of AIDS and the publicizing of state-sponsored violence against bodies of color force a kind of hyperawareness to physicality, which, in turn, produced id-pol rhetoric.) Rather, Cuevas is interested in mapping the ways in which this affectivity (this notion of genderqueerness) can be used to bridge disparate affective positions. Cuevas’ word choices are specific (cultural wholeness, lost wholeness) and suggest that the “post-borderland” can be used to explore larger affective struggles, rather than identitarian focused ones.

In mathematics, there is this notion of a field extension, which is the larger “extension” of a mathematical structure called a field which satisfies some additional properties. In many ways, the “post-borderlands” works as a field extension of Aztlan as a spatial framework, and offers a potential reconfiguration, as I have tried to suggest, of the problematizing aspects of Aztlan as it stands in current Chicano discourse. The “post-borderlands” does not negate the work that theorists have attempted to do

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181 Cuevas. “Imagining queer Chican@e@s in the Post-Borderlands.” 12
182 Cuevas. “Imagining queer Chican@e@s in the Post-Borderlands.” 12
through Aztlan, but rather extends and redefines it. Arguments about the politics of representation, whether it be about gender, race, sexuality, can be extended and abstracted to their affective counterparts. This “post-borderland” structure promises to not only resolves the issues surrounding identity formation, but also the larger questions regarding embodiment and positionality that these subjects present and face in the works analyzed. The point of this kind of reformulation is that it opens the door for Aztlan to continue to figure in Chicano critical discourse.

**Aztlan, revisited**

Cuevas does not, in her theorizing, seek to completely distance herself from Aztlan. Aztlan, as a mythic figure, proves too enticing to completely dismantle. However, Cuevas is interested in a project of reformulation, in which the perspectives with which we approach and utilize Aztlan become shifted, thus allowing writers and theorists who invoke Aztlan to envision it as a space of true radical potential, rather than a site where normative oppressive systems are reinscribed and repurposed. As mentioned, Aztlan does prove “enticing” for writers, and continues to be invoked in myriad ways. One contemporary example of such an invocation, and a disidentification in the same breath, is Nancy Farmer’s *The House of the Scorpion*.\(^{183}\) Set in a country called Opium, a borderland between Mexico (now called Aztlan) and the United States, the story follows the experiences of a young clone who is raised to eventually serve as an organ donor. Farmer does something interesting with the figure of Aztlan, having it refer to what we would consider Mexico, and having the borderland function as its own separate entity. Aztlan is always the unreachable home in the text, and when it is reached, it is with the surprise that it is a country marred by corruption and forced labor. Thus, the narrator retreats

back to the country of Opium, where he is able to become the new ruler. Aztlan is a site of danger and likened to the United States (in the story, it’s made clear that immigration to Aztlan from the United States is as prevalent as its opposite.) Thus, Farmer, in this usage, is able to set Aztlan up as a mirror figure of the United States, using a new borderland to explore the ways in which the narrator, young Matteo, is able to explore his own subjectivity in the face of his existential dilemma around being a clone. The mirroring of the United States and Aztlan also reinforces this idea that within Aztlan itself exist systems of subjection as they do in the United States. The purpose of this example is to show the ways in which writers writing in the current moment figure Aztlan not only as a method through which Chicano subjectivity can be explored, but as a backdrop against which subjectivity is achieved, irregardless of the problematizing aspects of its political purpose. In *The House of the Scorpion*, subjectivity and identity is achieved through the rejection of this true home; Matteo must leave Aztlan, return to Opium, to discover his own positionality in the world around him. Thus, though Aztlan serves as the mythic home, it is used in a global sense to explore the condition of the individual narrator. That Aztlan is figured as being eerily similar to the United States serves to show the ways in which Chicano subjectivities recognize the ways in which true identity formation is highly problematic. The abstraction from the narrator’s own subjecthood to his relationality to the young boys he finds in Aztlan, the boys he eventually liberates, is reflective of Cuevas’ argument that the “post-borderland” offers a way through which global affective discourse can manifest towards an individual understanding of one’s own affective positionality.
An extreme example of such a revisitation is the complete dismantling of Aztlan in Ana Castillo’s *Sapogonia.* In the text, Ana Castillo reformulates the home of the *mestizo*, discarding the notion of Aztlan and replacing it with the metropolitan Sapogonia, where *all* mestizos reside, regardless of race, nationality, or class. Already, we see the ways in which Sapogonia is inherently at odds with Aztlan, in that Castillo focuses on the experience of those *in between*, whether it be in between races, nations, class markers, etc. Thus, Sapogonia allows for the habitation of a variety of figures, from the Mexican *mestizo* to the *indio.* The narrative concerns itself with an antihero of sorts, who navigates abandoning his inheritance as “conqueror” while coming to terms with his history of being the “conquered”, which becomes manifested in his obsessive relationship with a woman he meets after leaving Sapogonia. In the exploration of the narrator’s positionality as “conqueror” (he is descended from Spanish *conquistadores*) in relation to his positionality as “conquered” (he is also descended from *indios*) through the volatile relationship with his lover, Castillo guarantees that many aspects of identity formation are explored, from his own entanglement with history and the gender dynamics at play. Invoking *Sapogonia* is important here because the text is as concerned with this question of coming home, of geographic belonging working as a precursor to identity formation as Aztlan portends to be, but Sapogonia as a framework allows for the multiplicities of power as they intersect to become apparent and remediable.

In both these texts, there is a possibility for reading the ways in which non-normative subjects can explore and mediate their own tenuous positionalities through a framework not reliant on the subjection and oppression of other bodies. Returning, then, to the queer Chicano bodies, we see how the possibility of a “post-borderland”

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framework can work towards dismantling the signifying systems we saw as being, in many ways, unavoidable. Leaving Aztlan behind and turning to frameworks and spaces in which affective power becomes the question to consider offers the possibility for understanding how queerness, to these authors, both becomes a disruptor of the Chicano home but also a conduit towards a dismantling of the hegemonic systems of subjection that the Chicano cultural consciousness has “inherited”. As Cuadros explores the affective contours of the image of the border, he is able to explore the ways in which bodies come to be signified, in which affect, emotion, and legibility are inscribed, reified, and examined, and the ways in which affective gestures serve to disrupt the linearity of such signifying forces. For Corral, the attempt to reform Aztlan, and that reform’s ultimate failure, highlights the ways in which there remains much work to do in decolonizing and destructuring social relations that restrict the movement and existence of certain bodies in the totality of our social reality. Nevertheless, attempting to restructure Aztlan, offering the potentiality for understanding the Chicano subject against and in conjunction with these problematized spaces opens the door for new understandings of such a global positionality, through which the restructuring of global relations is possible.
Conclusion

La Malinche, and musings on future radical thought

Aztlan is spiteful. Not quite full of baby’s venom, but surely its own kind of toxin. For decades, it has proven to be a theoretical stumbling block for Chicano cultural discourse. Many theorists have used it to their advantage to theorize an existence for Chicanos not rooted in a sense of loss. This has its powers; we can think back to ... y no se lo trago la tierra, and how the idea of movement, of having no home became a problem in the formation of self-subjecthood for the narrator. Being able to root oneself in a “home”, as occurs only at the end of ... y no se lo trago la tierra, and becomes a method for understanding one’s global positionality. However, this has its drawbacks, mainly in the question of who can be accommodated into such a home. Could our narrator in tierra have found himself in the basement of the home if he were a woman or non-gender conforming? Queer? There is a tension between the figures who are able to capitalize on Aztlan, as this narrator does, and those who remain systematically excluded. Now, why do I call Aztlan spiteful? Aztlan cannot handle those who cannot be clearly seen, by which I mean that Aztlan as a framework cannot account for all identities and corporealities, and as such, in its invocations, seeks to destroy and/or demonize them (having its “own toxin”. ) This is why the figure of the bruja in “Monologue of a Vulture’s Shadow” becomes so problematized. She represents a threat to the heteronormative stability of Aztlan; in this way, then, she must be exterminated. Though the figure is not graphically “exterminated”, as the poem ends, her death is necessary: “As my master ate, I ate.” This need to destroy that which it cannot account for is what ultimately renders Aztlan as a flawed framework to employ as the a priori home of the Chicano, a home from which the departure of the Chicano can be explored. While it can be said that there is merit to this, and there certainly is, in many ways, the Chicano’s home will always be
flawed & problematic. Existing outside of the racial binaries that dominate the American consciousness, and physically displaced from a space where the language could accommodate such racial ambiguity (by this, I refer to Mexico, where the language for racial ambiguity, in the form of the *mestizo* as a social category, exists), the Chicano has no space in which it can situate and explore its positionality independent of other social factors. The Chicano subject must consistently negotiate its body to exist in spaces where its identity is inherently problematized. Aztlan’s shortcomings when it comes to *indigenismo* and non-normative sexual identities proves that, in many ways, it is merely an extension of the colonial fantasy, in which the non-normative body is easily identifiable and capable of being eliminated.

Then, why continue to use Aztlan? Or why seek to “reform” it? As a colonial fantasy-esque space for surveillance, Aztlan contains “slippages”, through which articulations of radical discourse can occur. And, as a *mestizo*-centric space of national heritage, Aztlan does offer a possibility for disrupting the American ideal of a white subject. Reformulations or extensions of Aztlan exist because the imaginary of Chicano discourse does not extend as to completely devise a “new home”, but rather, to reconfigure the particular traumatic histories that accompany the historical relationship between Mexico and the United States, conflicts that often placed the *mestizo* subject that calls Aztlan home in the middle. Aztlan offers the potential to truly radicalize the historicity of the *mestizo* subject, giving the identity a home as opposed to the historical impetus to reduce the rise of the *mestizo* as a “racial category” to merely an aftermath of the *encounter*. To legitimize this identity is to provide a foundation through which the violences of the colonial encounter can be remedied. But what does it mean for Aztlan to accept the *mestizo* but reject Malinche? Malinche, the prototypical, “traitor”, la *chingada*,
is, in much of normative Chicano discourse, denigrated and disrespected. But theorists like Anzaldua and Moraga have sought to reclaim her, and she provides an example of the ways in which Aztlan can be remedied, as well as the radical potential of such a remediation.

Malinche figures largely into Chicano discourse; she, as the woman who helped Hernan Cortes as his translator, is largely maligned. She is cursed and denigrated, called a *puta* and *traidora*. Nonetheless, she, as the bearer of Cortes’ child, is often referred to as the “mother” of the *mestizo* people. This dual representation of Malinche, as either mother or whore, has long confounded theorists like Anzaldua, whose reclamation of Malinche is reliant on restructuring her role beyond “violated”.

Anzaldúa draws from myths and historical documents to retrace the history of the mother and provides an alternative interpretation to that of Octavio Paz and others, who largely blame La Malinche as being responsible for Mexican perdition in allowing herself to be “violated”. Anzaldúa forces this legacy to be reinterpreted because casting it aside would only further the denial of the Indian and Mexican past in Chicano consciousness. Anzaldúa traces the figure of La Malinche back to the powerful goddesses of the Aztecs and claims that the male-dominated culture existed even before the time of the conquest. Anzaldúa acknowledges that La Malinche is in some ways the mother of the *mestiza* but at the same time she is unable to fully embrace her. There’s an important slippage here, in Anzaldua’s language; as opposed to being the mother to the *mestizo*, Anzaldua imagines La Malinche as the mother to the *mestiza* race. In switching the gender of the

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185 Anzaldua, “Entering Into the Serpent.”
187 Anzaldua, “Entering Into the Serpent.”
people whom Malinche can serve as a mother, Anzaldua provides an example for the ways in which textualizing a new lineage can serve to disrupt historical structures of relationality. Anzaldua shifts the historical focus of La Malinche’s legacy from the *mestizo* subject to the *mestiza* subject, disrupting what Octavio Paz sees as the inherent problem with La Malinche, that she cannot serve as a worthy ancestor for the *mestizo* because, for Paz, La Malinche has no agency; she is merely violated at will, never able to rise above the colonial power. Anzaldua rewrites history, instead placing La Malinche in a line originating with the Aztec goddesses, giving her power, giving her agency. While Paz envisions agency as a gendered social aspect, Anzaldua expands it, forcing agency to be a matter of power, not relying on normative gender. Anzaldua’s reformulation of La Malinche, rewriting history and restructuring La Malinche as a powerful figure, even in the face of doubly intersecting forces of disempowerment (being a woman and being *india*), provides an interesting method for restructuring problematized objects, such as Aztlan. Anzaldua’s reconfiguration does not deny La Malinche her recorded history, but rather expands beyond her physical actions and attempts to display the affective currents working underneath, and, in this way, is able to envision a world where La Malinche goes beyond simply being a *chingada* and can be an actual mother. Though La Malinche continues to be misaligned, Anzaldua’s reformulation allows for the possibility of imagining La Malinche as being a figure to rally around, a radical possible futurity, one that reclaims female and *india* agency and disrupts the linearity of the patriarchal history that has been proscribed to her.

Bringing in La Malinche as a case study of sorts highlights what I consider to be the potential of Aztlan in providing a base for radical Chicano discourse, particularly in

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188 Paz, “The Sons of La Malinche.” 20
relation to Queer Chicanidad (as it is presented in these texts). What would it mean for Anzaldúa to re-envision La Malinche as a “butch”? Many recoil at such a blatant rewriting of history, but what Anzaldúa, Moraga, and these authors claim is that such a reformulation is the only way to escape inscriptive forces within the Chicano cultural consciousness that continually persecute and surveils non-normative bodies. In many ways, this thesis has been about the ways in which history can be reformulated. As we saw with Slow Lightning, there was this attempt to rewrite the script of the borderland, to envision it concurrently as a site of danger and as a site of queer pleasure, a space where the hunger of queer desire could manifest and be made legible and normalized. Though, as I argued, that project is ultimately doomed to fail due to its inability to deal with the question of the indio, Corral’s attempt to reformulate history is a radical reworking of space as it relates to the question of Chicanidad. In this reformulation, Corral attempts to reclaim and disidentify within a space that would traditionally mark his body as exterminable. This impulse to reclaim and disidentify within spaces is reflected in Cuadros’ poem “There Are Places…”, where, as was noted, the violence of the homeboys in the barrio towards Cuadros & his (implied queer) friend is reimagined and repurposed towards the homeboys themselves, where it becomes graphic queer desire, highlighted by the desire to “spit” in the ears of the homeboys. Cuadros is more successful in his retooling of Aztlan as a place, space, and framework, as evidenced by that poem, in the way that Cuadros is able to not only successfully avoid the homographetic impulse, but is able to completely redirect it. And as true for most of City of God, Cuadros’ invocations of Aztlan as a ghostly place, an “uncanny” home, one whose presence serves only to disrupt and make foreign what should be familiar, he is able to successfully explore the ways in which the queer Chicano body is continually
surveilled and how it continually reconfigures itself to avoid such a surveillance. Cuadros’ exploration of the problem of race, history, and family all provide stunning rebukes of the “prevalence and power” of Aztlan, and his text is largely more successful in suggesting an idea with which to resist the normative fallacies of Aztlan, in the ways that it refuses to deal with question of _indigenismo_ and its seeming potential for only imaginary futurities. Thus, as alluded to in the third chapter, the work being done in regards to the “post-borderlands” as a space of affective power and one where these issues are approached on the affective level, provides, in my opinion, the most effective reformulation of Aztlan as a viable strategy. Anzaldua’s defense of La Malinche, I argue, is exactly this kind of reformulation, an experimenting with affective capabilities, and the extension of affective power to those historically denied it, an experimentation that, as I have tried to make clear, provides the best option for these authors, in their attempt to validate and legitimize their own marginal existences.

The problem of Aztlan will never go away; it is too massive a space, too massive an allure to Chicanx writers considering a range of topics to abandon it outright. However, what I have sought to do, with this thesis, is to explore the ways in which Chicanx discourse textualizes its own colonial limitations and understand the ways in which non-normative writers work beyond those fantasies and work towards new beginnings and new futures. What I have suggested here is a framework of sorts, a way to envision a rewriting of the past and present which relies not on an ephemeral future, but one that is insistent on “flipping the scripts”, allowing those made powerless by Aztlan and its normativity to assume positions traditionally denied to them. Cuadros & Corral both, through their texts, explore the ways in which that is made possible, delineating the positionalities and movements that allow for marginalized bodies to
move “beyond the liminal”, so to speak, to textualize their voices and dialectics beyond the margin. It is clear that much work remains to be done for such a project to be successful. The journey then must continue.
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