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Gómez

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INTRODUCTION

Since its publication in 1991, John Rechy’s *The Miraculous Day of Amalia Gómez* has been the subject of a number of critical treatments, ranging from the novel’s borderlands ethos (Saldívar), to the challenges it poses to an unproblematic Catholic spirituality (Kevane), to its echoes of Modernist form (Aldama) emotional, and narrational ingredients (that is, the subject matter and the formal traits). To this point, however, little attention has been paid to how *The Miraculous Day* represents relationships between environment, race, and the transnational dimensions of urban space. Rechy’s representations of Chicana/o barrios in El Paso, Hollywood, and East LA underscore how space is controlled and abstracted to disenfranchise the novel’s eponymous protagonist, particularly as an effect of neoliberal discourses that co-opt grassroots resistance like the Chicano Movement.¹ As José David Saldívar observes, Rechy’s “liminal cultural critiques have been more accurate and politically perceptive than mainline postmodern realists and urban planners” (Saldívar 97). Indeed, the novel represents and comments on state efforts to enforce social hierarchies through historical preservation and neoliberal urban renewal policies, especially those emerging out of conflicting transnational spaces like Los Angeles.

In the face of state attempts to control and racialize space, critics like Raúl Homero Villa and Mary Pat Brady point out that Chicana/os mobilize home-grown cultural affirmation and preservation projects designed to counter spatial marginalization. Yet these efforts to valorize the space of the barrio sometimes have paradoxical results: they

uncritically memorialize the Chicano Movement and affirm patriarchal culture and compulsory heterosexuality. What's more, state and municipal authorities have not been complacent in the face of grassroots resistance. Indeed, part of the logic of neoliberal urban policy is to co-opt features of grassroots activism—most notably cultural productions like the murals and public art that are ubiquitous in the novel. The primary vectors of these representations are the ironic portrayals of preservation schemes Amalia encounters as she traverses her “decaying” (Rechy 3) neighborhoods. These preservation schemes range from Chicana/o nationalist murals to state-sponsored infrastructure projects like earthquake retrofitting and historical restoration that disempower and marginalize subjects who, like Amalia, occupy the lower rungs of the social hierarchy.

Although Rechy is known for his semi-autobiographical novels such as *City of Night* and *The Sexual Outlaw* that chronicle urban, gay experiences, *The Miraculous Day of Amalia Gómez* is his only novel told from the perspective of an urban Mexican American woman.² *The Miraculous Day* recounts a single day in the protagonist's life. Upon waking after a disturbing evening where she experiences a traumatic sexual humiliation, Amalia sees—or at least thinks she sees—a silver cross in the sky. While Rechy never confirms its materiality, Amalia embarks on a journey through Hollywood to determine the miraculous meaning of the cross—all while keeping the memory of her sexual encounter at bay. As her expedition unfolds, we see flashbacks that detail a lifetime of humiliations, including multiple rapes, abusive relationships, traumatic pregnancies, gang violence, omnipresent garbage, and the truth of the aforementioned sexual humiliation at the hands of a coyote (or smuggler who assists in the transit of undocumented immigrants), ironically named Angel. Even though Amalia's abjection replicates her existential frustration for the reader, the novel culminates in several important realizations. Among these is the fact that her lover Raynaldo has sexually assaulted her daughter Gloria, that her son Juan is gay, and that her eldest son Manny has committed suicide. Amalia realizes that she too has been an agent of oppression in her denial of her children's pain, her refusal to resist her and their marginalization, and in her dismissal of an undocumented Salvadoran boy who is in a relationship with Juan. To the extent that there is hope in the novel, it comes through Amalia's final rejection and literal throwing off of an

assailant who holds her at gunpoint at a Beverly Hills mall. It is at this point that Amalia sees an apparition of La Virgen de Guadalupe, who, as Saldívar points out, paradoxically serves as a symbol of empowering change, despite the difficulties she experiences at the hands of Catholic priests, the intrusive image of another figuration of Mary (La Dolorosa/Our Lady of Sorrow), and Amalia's own self-righteous mother, Teresa (Saldívar 121).

While Amalia's abjection and inability to act as an agent in her own empowerment challenge the reader's empathy, Rechy's depictions emphasize how space in the barrio overdetermines Amalia's and her family's life chances. Referring to spatial relations in Chicana/o communities, Mary Pat Brady argues that the "processes of producing space, however quotidian or grand, hidden or visible, have an enormous effect on subject formation—on the choices people can make and how they conceptualize themselves, each other, and the world" (7–8). Brady's point sheds light on Amalia's struggles for agency, particularly as they apply to her movement through urban space. Ranging from the physical traces of gang violence to the crumbling buildings relegated to destruction due to a lack of earthquake retrofitting, the spaces that Amalia inhabits in the novel often render her and her fellow barrio denizens marginal. These representations and others demonstrate how *The Miraculous Day* posits the space of the barrio as a location where conflicting social relations are mediated, including those that encompass aspects of the transnational. The mediation of these conflicting relations often comes through Amalia's encounters with preservation schemes and figures that range from Chicano Movement murals to environmental activists. Regardless of whether they are Chicano Movement efforts to resist dominant power relations or applications of state power enacted by government officials, authority figures of all kinds silence and marginalize Amalia as she traverses the barrio.

ECOCRITICISM, THE TRANSNATIONAL,
AND THE POLITICS OF URBAN PRESERVATION

During the past two decades, ecocritical and Latina/o studies scholars have engaged in conversations designed to illuminate the environmental stakes of Chicana/o and Latina/o literature—a trend replicated in conversations between environmental studies and other ethnic American literary and cultural traditions.³ Texts like Helena María

Viramontes's *Under the Feet of Jesus*, Ana Castillo's *So Far from God*, and Rudolfo Anaya's *Bless Me Ultima*, as well as numerous treatments of African American, Native American, and Asian American literature and cultural productions, have garnered importance within ecocritical and environmental justice conversations.⁴ Along with interest in Latina/o texts among ecocritics, a growing group of Latina/o studies scholars is exploring environmental representations in Latina/o and Chicana/o literature and cultural productions.⁵ These engagements with Latina/o literature and culture tend to focus on rural and agrarian issues—in part due to the nature writing and pastoral traditions in environmental studies and the expansive natural images that appear in Latina/o texts set in agrarian and rural locations.

The Miraculous Day participates in a parallel history of Latina/o environmental literature that departs from rural and agrarian representations. Rechy's novel and others like it are set in urban environments and encounter issues such as toxicity, access to affordable housing,⁶ and transportation security that underlie much environmental activism in cities. *The Miraculous Day* can thus be read alongside works that document urban Latina/o experiences such as Viramontes's *Their Dogs Came With Them*, Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, Piri Thomas's *Down These Mean Streets*, Ernesto Quiñonez's *Bodega Dreams* and *Chango's Fire*, Ron Arias's *The Road to Tamazunchale*, and Mario Acevedo's *X-Rated Blood Suckers*.

The majority of the Latina/o population in the United States lives in and around major metropolitan areas. According to the 2010 Census, 62.7 percent of all US residents live in cities, a measure that expands to 80.7 percent when one considers people who live in associated metropolitan areas. These demographic trends are more attenuated in relation to Latina/o populations, who, as Mike Davis observes “are heavily concentrated in the twenty largest [US] cities, with Los Angeles and New York alone accounting for almost one-third of the national Spanish-surname population” (Davis 7). A 2013 report authored for the Pew Research Center reinforces this data, finding that 44 percent of the nation's Latina/o population now reside in the 10 largest metropolitan areas, including Los Angeles, New York, Miami, Houston, Chicago, Phoenix, and San Antonio (Brown and Lopez). This data illuminates the fact that Latina/os' and other people of color's experiences are centered in the urban.

It should be unsurprising, then, that Latina/o urban environments figure prominently in cultural productions produced by and about Latina/os. Texts like *The Miraculous Day* question the foundations of environmentalism and its impulses toward abstract preservation. As Priscilla Ybarra observes, “much of Chicana/o literature . . . testifies to alternative, decolonial environmentalisms evident within Mexican American culture” (20). These ideas do not suggest that taking action to rectify environmental harm is misguided; on the contrary, because “Mexican Americans remain the people for whom environmental degradation is most relevant because they are among the most vulnerable to the consequences of environmental destruction” (16), preserving the natural environment is a primary ethical imperative within Chicana/o literature and culture. Ybarra makes a case for understanding how environmental crises like climate change, sea-level rise, and deforestation require remedies that take seriously issues of resource allocation and preservation—and that also consider processes of race, racialization, and the legacies of colonialism. Chicana/o environmental thinking thus functions as an untapped resource that articulates inventive ways to think about environmental issues such as space, place, and preservation.

Flowing from Ybarra's suggestion, it is important to imagine alternative hermeneutics for understanding Latina/o environmental writing. Texts like Rechy's are not so much contesting, ignoring, or conforming to traditional environmental aesthetics as they are exhibiting generative antagonism toward conventional ideas about environmentalism, urban space, and the transnational. Generative antagonism suggests an engagement with these ideas that interrogates, contests, validates, and revises. It is not that writers like Rechy reject the terms of environmentalism, urban space, or the transnational. Instead, generative antagonists seek to problematize issues of power, even as they corroborate and validate progressive acts of environmental, racial, gender, and sexual resistance within multiple transnational and translocal contexts.⁷ Given the importance of environmental crises like climate change, ocean acidification, and exposure to toxic chemicals, it is logical that authors imaginatively respond to these threats in their work. The generative antagonism offered by authors like Rechy calls out regressive power dynamics, even as they validate and champion progressive aspects of multiple struggles.

Implicit to the function of generative antagonism is the role the transnational plays in the construction and preservation of contemporary cities—especially mega cities like Los Angeles that have been central to urban studies during the past four decades. Michael Peter Smith argues that contemporary theorizations of cities posit a false dichotomy between the local and global.⁸ He emphasizes instead the interrelated aspects of the “temporally and spatially particular, socially constructed relations of power and meaning” that locate the transnational or global on the ground in all of their messy detail. For Smith, migration to and from Latin America has been critical to the formation of resistance networks from below. As such, he understands resistance to both local forms of racialized oppression and the effects of neoliberal, global capitalism as centered in grassroots activism. Smith suggests that theorists of the negative, homogenizing aspects of neoliberal globalization misunderstand that city authorities and institutions of global capital are not the only agents of the transnational. Smith instead considers how local communities resist the forces that have divested from the urban economy and commodified ethnic cultures in the service of neoliberal policies like urban renewal and historical preservation.

Smith’s observation about the role of local resistance in relation to the transnational is a useful context for understanding how the novel reframes grassroots resistance. Particularly helpful is Smith’s recognition that transnational migrants enact social networks from below that are used to “cope with perceived threats to their members’ lives and livelihoods” (Smith 4). These transnational flows are actualized through travel, migration, and political organizing, bringing together translocal communities that share similar political interests.

Where Rechy extends this thinking, however, is in his rejection of unproblematically valorizing home-grown memorialization efforts on the part of the Chicano Movement. Because Chicano Movement memorialization efforts reify nature and the pastoral, while also excluding women and queers from the imagined (transnational) community, they often reinscribe many of the hierarchical social dynamics they wish to combat. It is also the case that Chicano Movement memorialization efforts have been co-opted by neoliberal city authorities through the marketing of mural tours⁹, the preservation of what anthropologist Arlene Dávila calls “marketable ethnicity” in urban renewal

(gentrification) schemes (Dávila 11), and the incorporation of ethnic signifiers in tourism campaigns.¹⁰

One way to understand Rechy's generative antagonism is by combining ecocritical methodologies that consider environmental representations in the novel—flowers, trees and other forms of “nature,” as well as buildings, parks, and other public places—with considerations of transnational urban space. Ignacio López-Calvo notes that “ecocriticism . . . provides useful tools” for thinking about Rechy's work (67). While López-Calvo's analysis focuses on urban vegetation as pathetic fallacy in the novel, environmental themes and ideas affirm Chicana/o cultural preservation, even as *The Miraculous Day* is critical of institutional preservation discourses and the erasure of the disenfranchised from within Chicana/o culture. By understanding the novel as an environmental text that operates in racialized transnational space, it is possible to see how Rechy critiques preservation projects imposed on and emerging from Amalia's urban barrios.

THE MIRACULOUS DAY OF AMALIA GÓMEZ
AND TRANSNATIONAL URBAN PRESERVATION

The Miraculous Day invests in representations of racialized space and meditates on questions of cultural preservation within the urban transnational. The novel thus represents how space is racialized to produce negative outcomes for Amalia and her family, as well as the advantages and shortcomings of Chicano Movement activism. These representations include the flowers—both real and artificial—that Amalia uses to decorate her home and body, her meditations on gendered and racialized transnational space in the city, her fear of natural disasters such as earthquakes, fires, and Santa Ana windstorms, the ubiquity of garbage and decay, the presence of conventional forms of “nature” in urban space such as weeds, rosebushes, and palm trees, and the unfortunate encounter she has with a pair of environmental activists that provides the title for this essay. Environmental representations function as both signifiers of Amalia's emotional state and the social forces that constrain her. Accordingly, Amalia's journey through her barrio exposes her to a range of preservation efforts that allow her to question how people like her are written out of imagined communal space—sometimes through community attempts to affirm and preserve Chicana/o culture.

Key to these preservation efforts are the representations of nature in the city that appear throughout the novel. One such example is the ubiquity of vegetation of various types that persists, even in the constrained conditions of Amalia's urban barrio. This ethic of persistence functions within *The Miraculous Day*, as Patrick Hamilton points out, as a reminder of Chicana/os' survival within the confines of hostile conditions in Los Angeles. For example, describing the exterior of her tiny Hollywood bungalow, Amalia notes "each unit in the court did have a small "garden"—only two feet by four—and there was a rose bush toward the back. The unit was flanked by stubby palm trees" (Rechy 73). Similarly, Amalia notices the presence of the weeds and other plants that cling to life in her barrio:

Even the poorest sections retained a flashy prettiness, flowers pasted against cracking walls draped by splashes of bougainvillea. Even weeds had tiny buds. And sometimes, out of the gathering rubble on the streets, there would be the sudden sweetness of flowers. (7)

In these passages and others, Amalia notices natural resilience in the persistence of plants and flowers in the city. Even in the midst of rubble, "the sudden sweetness of flowers" perseveres. The determination of life to exist within such confines suggests one strategy of preservation for Amalia: survival by sheer tenacity.

Another aspect of the representation of nature in the city is its ability to mediate the pressures of urban life. Here, Rechy evidences generative antagonism that counters paradigmatic environmental figures like Henry David Thoreau or Edward Abbey who remove themselves from urban environments to pastoral settings in order to engage in journeys of self-discovery. By contrast, Amalia's maternal responsibilities and her lack of financial resources prevent such a retreat to an isolated pastoral existence. The novel de-emphasizes the possibility of pastoral retreat for characters like Amalia. But this rejection of retreat does not suggest a divorce from the natural. Instead, the novel valorizes preservation by noting the resilience of living things in the city and suggests that even these forms of attenuated life have value for people like Amalia. One of the ways she is able to mediate her marginalization in the city is therefore through her relationships to living things. She adorns her

home, her body, her hair, and her surroundings with flowers in order to emphasize her own and her family's survival in the face of poverty, gang violence, and racialization.

These representations of nature in the urban do not function, however, as mediations that purely and progressively ameliorate Amalia's painful existence. In fact, nature poses its own dangers, even in the city. During her walk through the neighborhood, Amalia encounters more signs of life in the city:

A little farther into the garage area, a plant had managed to squeeze through a large crack in the cement. She had noticed it, but today it had blossoms. In the center, their petals were rolled into folds like candles, and then they opened at the bottom and they were white. This is not rare in Los Angeles, that flowers seem to grow overnight, perhaps from seeds scattered by wind and then surprised into premature life by sudden heat. (Rechy 109)

The plant in question is likely jimsonweed, or Devil's snare, a toxic invasive nightshade common to Southern California. Amalia is unaware of the risk the weed poses, as she plucks the flower and adorns her hair with it, eventually wearing it to a fast-food restaurant. At the restaurant, she meets a neighbor, Mrs. Huerta, who points out that the flower is a poisonous weed. Amalia is horrified: "she tore the flower from her hair, threw it on the floor. *I put a poisonous weed in my hair!* She stared at the blossom, amid scraps of food not yet swept away from an earlier meal" (125). Although it is unlikely that the plant poses a serious threat to her health unless ingested, it symbolizes the risks that Amalia and people like her encounter in urban environments. Even in her attempt to adorn herself, Amalia is unable to completely escape danger. Here, Rechy's generative antagonism is again visible: while he rejects the idea of idyllic retreat for characters like Amalia, emphasizing instead the idea of nature in the city, he also recognizes that some aspects of nature pose risks. From this standpoint, the natural features of Amalia's world provide no respite, even in the traces that persist in the city.

Although jimsonweed now thrives in every state in the contiguous United States, it is not native to Southern California. In fact, it is thought to have evolved in Southern Mexico or Central America.¹¹

Even though its botanical origins are in Latin America, jimsonweed has been present in North America since at least the Jamestown settlement.¹² The presence of this toxic weed in urban Southern California thus suggests a transnational dimension to both the persistence of life in the city and the hidden risks such life represents. Its invasive properties (jimsonweed is one of the most common invasive plants in Southern California), as well as its adaptability (jimsonweed thrives in urban, suburban, and even desert climate zones), suggest a naturalization of the transnational. As a transnational migrant of sorts, jimsonweed represents the potential transformation of nature in the city vis-à-vis those elements of Latin America that are deemed unwanted or unauthorized by the Global North. That jimsonweed is able to thrive in Southern California also suggests another preservation technique for Amalia and characters like her: survival through adaptability.

Nature in the city is not the only environmental idea worth considering in the novel. Raúl Homero Villa has explored aspects of urban environments and cultural production in Latina/o communities. As Villa explains, the legacies of colonial expansion, including the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo and the subsequent racialization of Chicana/os has resulted in a process he calls “barrioization.” As Villa puts it, “the consequences of deterritorialization for *mexicanos* in the newly annexed territories literally put them in their designated place within the emergent social space of Anglo American capitalism” (Villa 2). Barrioization is thus the spatial and geographic deformation of Chicana/o communities that places them within racialized space. While geographic emplacement in racialized space has been the fate of Chicana/os in many metropolitan areas, these acts of spatial animus are not random. Rather, they represent intentional and systematic structures of disenfranchisement designed to limit life chances for Chicana/os and other Latina/os in urban environments. Racist spatial practices are thus part of the fabric of the transformation of cities like Los Angeles from formerly Mexican villages to global cities.

While the deformation of social space through experiences of geographical dis- and re-placing has left indelible marks on Chicana/os as racialized citizens, it has also enabled unique forms of cultural preservation and survival. As Villa shows, the process of barrioization does not progress uniformly and without resistance. In fact, Chicana/os have marshaled resistance strategies to preserve the status of their “cultural

place-identity," or the articulation of identities that are situated in and emerge out of relationships with specific geographical spaces—and in particular the urban spaces of cities like Los Angeles. It is therefore both the hostile process of barrioization and resistance to barrioization that dialectically produce the external forces that shape urban barrios and the internal changes within them. Since the history of urban renewal often results in more destruction than preservation, Villa advocates understanding cultural preservation efforts as forms of affirmation that challenge the social deformation of spatial practices.

Although Amalia lives in at least four different locations (El Paso, Texas, East Los Angeles, Torrance, and Hollywood), there are similarities between the neighborhoods that she and her family call home. The uniformity of these spaces suggests something of a translocal experience based on the similar ways Southwestern cities have historically implemented neoliberal urban policies that racialize and segregate Latinas/os. The narrator describes Amalia's birthplace in El Paso as "a fist of dark tenements" where the view from the room she shares with her two brothers looks out onto "a pile of garbage" (Rechy 15). Later, when she becomes pregnant after her first husband Salvador rapes her, she moves into a series of apartments that are described as "another ugly room" (24), "a one-bedroom government project" (26), and a number of other small, confining, and unattractive spaces. There is no respite for Amalia and her family when they arrive in California in search of her second husband, Gabriel. After a brief stay in Torrance, she relocates to a "pinkish bungalow in a small court" that is "old and not exactly well kept" (42) in East Los Angeles. Later, in an attempt to shield herself and her family from gang violence, she moves to a Hollywood "bungalow in another of the ubiquitous clutches of stucco courts that proliferate throughout Los Angeles" (73). Regardless of her particular geographical location, Amalia's life is characterized by "tenements, freezing rooms, garbage, beatings, the rape [perpetrated by Salvador], more beatings" (188).

On one hand, given her low income and lack of white collar skills,¹³ it makes sense that Amalia is forced to make do with what she can afford in Los Angeles, a city that has been for the past 40 years one of the most expensive housing markets in the country. Although she lives at various points with at least three different men (Salvador, Gabriel, and Raynaldo), she is largely on her own when it comes to raising and

providing for her children. Her experience as both a Chicana and as a single-mother with an inadequate income further limits her life chances. On the other hand, her experiences with white authority figures, ranging from a social worker she encounters in El Paso, to the immigration officials who stage surprise raids on the garment factory where she works in Los Angeles, reinforce the racial hierarchies that accrue around Chicana/os in Texas and California. As scholar George Lipsitz and journalist Ta-Nehisi Coates have shown in relation to African American communities, practices such as redlining (the practice of denying mortgage financing to certain neighborhoods based on race and ethnicity) and block busting (persuading home owners in a particular area to sell their property cheaply due to the fear of incursions from ethnic or racialized neighbors), alongside racist zoning and urban redevelopment practices have limited housing opportunities for people of color since WWII. When considered from the standpoint of neoliberal urban policy and housing discrimination, it is arguable that Amalia's experiences of sub-standard housing are a reflection of structured and organized practices designed to enforce the racialization of space in urban barrios.

This particular dynamic is exacerbated by the fact that Amalia, like many urban Chicana/os in Los Angeles is perpetually treated as a non-citizen, despite the fact that she is born in the United States and speaks fluent (albeit accented) English.¹⁴ Part of what produces Amalia's experience of racialization and housing discrimination, then, is the fact that she is treated as an outsider in her home space. This representation suggests that the emplacement Villa describes might be productively reframed in terms of a racial project—to borrow Michael Omi and Howard Winant's terminology—perpetrated by civic authorities to manage translocal forms of resistance.

The very processes of cultural preservation that Villa describes are informed by transnational and translocal connections that blur the transformation of Los Angeles from distinct national spaces (from Mexican village to US city). Historian Alan Eladio Gómez explains that this distinction between national spaces does not correspond to the transactional development of the Chicano Movement as an aspect of global left activism during the 1960s and 1970s. These global resonances included solidarities with Latin American liberation movements. Gómez leverages Américo Paredes's famous formulation of "Greater Mexico" to

name the transnational connections and migratory flows between Chicana/os in the United States and Mexican and Latin American nationals. For Gómez, relations between Chicana/os and radical activists in Latin America do not contribute to the privileging of the nation state (Greater Mexico), but instead encompass places “where people of Mexican descent lived, worked, dreamed and struggled to make their lives better” (Gómez 3) on both sides of the US/Mexico border. This more expansive conception of Chicana/os and Mexicans as integrally connected constitutes a political imaginary that names a way of mobilizing culture to “emphasize how political movements created new narratives, experimenting with new (and sometimes forgotten) retrofitted tactics often inspired by previous movements, ideas, theories, and experiences” (3) in Latin America. These transnational “connectivities” open how political actors created solidarities that circulated, translated, and communicated ideas about resistance and struggle that shaped forms of political action on both sides of the border (7). Chicana/o left politics created possibilities and inspired political imaginaries of Mexicans and Latin Americans to include Latina/os living in US as part of their political analysis, and vice versa. As such, Gómez reconsiders how solidarities between Latin America and US Chicana/os were established in the shared experiences of struggle, encounter, and trust (9).

In fact, such transnational and translocal resonances are a prominent feature of the novel, particularly in relation to how Chicano Movement efforts to remember the past are represented. For example, after Amalia relocates to East Los Angeles from El Paso she works a series of domestic jobs. On her way to work she encounters Chicano Movement murals “scattered about the area,” “paintings as colorful as those on calendars, sprawled on whole walls” (Rechy 45). One such mural features:

A muscular Aztec prince, amber-gold faced, in lordly feathers stood with others as proud as he. They gazed toward the distance. Behind them on a hill pale armed men mounted on horses watched them. At the opposite end of the painting brown-faced muslin-clothed men stared into a bright horizon. They were the ones whom the Aztecs were facing distantly. (45)

While gazing at the “painting that fascinated and puzzled her,” Amalia encounters a veterano (an experienced former or current gang member)

who explains the painting's significance: "The *conquistadores* are about to subdue the Indians with weapons, as they did, but over there'—he pointed to the band of muslin-clad men—'are the *revolucionarios*, who will triumph and bring about *Aztlán*, our promised land of justice.'" Even as she thanks him for his explanation, Amalia notes that "There were no women. Where were they? Had *they* survived?" (45).

First, the image offers iconography common to the Chicano Movement: the figuring of Chicana/os as Aztecs. Briefly, the Aztec origin story holds that the Mexica (one of the indigenous groups that became the Aztecs) migrated from what is now either northwest Mexico or the Southwestern portions of the United States to Tenochtitlán, the capital city of the Aztecs which stood on what is now Mexico City. While historians and archaeologists have been unable to locate its precise location, Chicano Movement groups mobilized the idea of *Aztlán* in order to claim a natural affinity to the Southwest portions of the United States. Some, such as the author, lawyer, and activist Oscar "Zeta" Acosta, even advocated for a separate nation based on the concept of *Aztlán*.¹⁵ The mural thus offers an example of how space was mobilized by the Chicano Movement to legitimize claims for civil rights. By pointing to their historical ties to the land and space of the Southwest, activists could claim nativity to and ownership of the landscape—and thereby assert rights within this space.

The idea that Chicana/os are the descendants of Aztecs raises another important aspect of Chicano Movement activism. As Gómez points out, the Chicano Movement was not only inspired by struggles for civil and human rights in the United States, but also sought to make transnational connections with activists and artists in Latin America. These dynamics are evident in several aspects of the mural. First, Aztec iconography was fundamental to the Reconquista imagined by the Chicano Movement, suggesting an unbroken line that links the colonization of the Americas—including, significantly, Mexico and Central America—with the racialization of Chicana/os in the United States. Related to this figuration is the idea of *Aztlán* as the space of emancipation for subjugated Chicana/os. In both of these claims there is an implicit assumption that the geographies that cities like Los Angeles are built upon are transnational, translocal spaces with connections to Latin America. In other words, the mural imagines historical and cultural continuity with indigenous communities and resistance movements in Latin America.

Another crucial aspect of the image is its linking of race and geography. Rafael Pérez-Torres argues that Chicana/o public art makes visible “the contours shaping the complex relationship between identity and geography” (Pérez-Torres 115), making the case that urban barrios are part of the cultural and geographical heritage of Chicana/os in the United States. In a similar vein, George Lipsitz argues that Chicano Movement art:

documented the struggles of *braceros* and Brown Berets, of boycotts and ballot initiatives, of antiwar activism and immigrant self-defense. They presented a permanent record of mass mobilizations and community coalitions against police brutality, educational inequality, and economic exploitation. (169)

Lipsitz's point emphasizes a different feature of Chicano Movement public art: that it serves as repository of history and cultural memory. Viewed through these lenses, the links between geography, history, space, and race are apparent in the veterano's assertion that Chicano Movement actors “rioted” to let them know that “I [the veterano] was there too” (Rechy 45–46). Here, the veterano's spatial assertion (“I was there too”) links radical Chicano (masculine ending intended) subjectivity to the space of the barrio and instantiates him as a historical agent, whose actions form part of the record of activism within the barrio.

Like his problematizing of nature and pastoral retreat, however, Rechy's generative antagonism questions the mobilization of romantic Chicano Movement imagery. As a distinctly urban form, the mural is ironic in its depiction of the pastoral as a potential antidote to Anglo hegemony. By depicting a prelapsarian space of green hills and agrarian productivity, the mural intertwines aspects of social and environmental justice as remedies for the decay of barrio space. The mural also draws part of its charge by locating itself in relation to the transnational history of the Americas.¹⁶ The figuring of Chicana/os as the historical inheritors of a resistant Aztec tradition suggests an affinity between forms of indigenous protest staged in (relatively) unspoiled landscapes, and urban forms of protest in the 20th century. Part of the mural's force emerges from the implicit contrast between the green hills, horses, and muslin-clad men and the painting's physical location in, in the narrator's words, a “decaying” barrio. In this sense, the

mural's liberatory potential falls short by imagining environmental justice as necessarily located outside of the barrio. There is thus an ironic disavowal of urban environmentalism inherent in the mural's iconography.¹⁷ Part of Amalia's confusion in relation to the mural centers on its omission of the urban from environmental imaginaries. As someone who has never lived in a rural or agrarian setting, the pastoral is illegible to her. Rather than advocating for urban space as a valid environmental location, Rechy's generative antagonism underscores how the image reifies the pastoral and imagines preservation as a rural, agrarian endeavor.

Another aspect of Rechy's generative antagonism emerges in relation to the mural's gender politics. While the mural evokes the pastoral as potential antidote to the deformation of the urban, it replicates the gender and sexual problematics that, as a number of critics have noted in other contexts, often plagued cultural nationalist movements.¹⁸ It should come as no surprise, then, that the novel is critical of Movement iconography that wrote out women or relegated them to subordinate roles. In this context, Amalia's questioning response—"There were no women. Where were they? Had *they* survived?"—makes visible how, in its efforts to affirm Chicana/o culture, Movement iconography often erased women.

Rechy reinforces these ideas through Amalia's encounter with a second mural—"a mural that had startled her recently: A tall, plumed Aztec held a bleeding, dying city boy in his arms" (56). The image in question is Manuel Cruz's 1974 mural "To Ace Out a Homeboy," (see Figure 1) which originally bore the inscription, "To ace out a homeboy from another barrio is to kill la raza. Viva la Raza" ("Murals"). Like the unnamed mural Amalia encounters earlier, "To Ace Out a Homeboy" also mobilizes romantic Chicano Movement imagery in its central depiction of an Aztec warrior. Unlike the first image, "To Ace Out a Homeboy" situates itself in urban space, eschewing pastoral imagery. Indeed, in its depiction of a car moving toward an unidentified skyline on a golden road, "To Ace Out a Homeboy" imagines urban space as a more appropriate venue for social justice. Part of Amalia's disturbance may thus emerge from the fact that the image includes a female figure (albeit a passive one) who appears to be mourning the death of the bleeding city boy as she pauses to kneel on the road to another possible vector of empowerment: education, as symbolized by a school door.



Figure 1: “To Ace Out a Homeboy,” Manuel Cruz (1974). Photograph by Rich Puchalsky, reproduced by permission of the photographer.

While the image ironically foreshadows the escalating gang-related bloodshed Amalia witnesses in East LA and Hollywood, it also underscores how brown-on-brown violence in Amalia’s neighborhood serves hegemonic power. Rechy’s inclusion of the painting thus suggests a corrective for self-inflicted wounds imposed in the name of Chicana/o nationalism. These points are salient given the “bleeding, dying city” boys who populate the novel: Amalia’s sons Manny, who commits suicide to avoid gang violence, and Juan, the victim of a brutal homophobic attack. The image also ironically foreshadows Amalia’s implication in homophobia, as she disavows Juan’s homosexuality and evicts his undocumented Salvadoran lover Paco from her garage, likely relegating him to homelessness and sexual exploitation.

But Rechy’s complex readings of cultural affirmation and preservation are not limited to the problematics of Chicano Movement iconography. His critiques of urban decay, garbage, and violence implicate the state as a primary perpetrator of racist neglect. This idea is articulated

in a number of scenes where Amalia recognizes the incommensurability of Hollywood glamour with her experiences of decay, including endless garbage, the spatial separation between television and movie studios and Amalia's run-down Hollywood bungalow, and the streams of homeless, gang members, prostitutes, and drug addicts who populate the narrative.

For example, Amalia recognizes how neoliberal historical preservation and urban redevelopment efforts are applied unevenly to reinforce racialization in her neighborhoods. Michael Peter Smith recuperates grassroots resistance to neoliberal urban preservation efforts as an occluded form of agency for underrepresented groups. Although Smith's point is useful for understanding how activists resist the efforts of city authorities from below, it is important to consider characters like Amalia in relation to such valorizations of grassroots organizations. Rechy underscores how neoliberal discourses incorporate and contain grassroots resistance and preservation efforts by depicting Amalia as someone who exists at the bottom of a range of social hierarchies that include race, gender, class, sexuality (by virtue of her son's homosexuality),¹⁹ as well as discourses of beauty that exoticize and dehumanize her.

We see evidence of these dynamics as Amalia journeys through the barrio to visit her friend Milagros, a former sweatshop co-worker. After crossing MacArthur Park—a park she sees as a “ravaged battlefield” (Rechy 142)—Amalia finds Milagros's apartment. The building which “had probably once been a stylish hotel” has fallen into disrepair and is now populated by “addicts, drunks, dealers, [and] desolate men and women” (143). Amalia notes the neglect the former hotel suffers at the hands of landlords, urban planners, and city officials:

All over the city brick buildings were being torn down or reinforced to resist the shaking of earthquakes. Amalia had grown used to noticing the giant bolts that indicated a building had been ‘anchored.’ She did not see any on this building. And so it was being abandoned, to decay or to an earthquake. (143)

Milagros's building has not undergone earthquake retrofitting. As a recent FEMA report notes, most municipalities in Los Angeles County established earthquake retrofitting ordinances by the 1970s and had achieved high rates of compliance in the most dangerous buildings

(brick buildings like Milagros's) by the 1980s ("Seismic Retrofit Incentive Programs"). Amalia's recognition that Milagros's building is not anchored is significant in part because it suggests that she is conscious of municipal efforts to secure unsafe buildings, especially those in historic districts. Amalia's recognition also implicitly acknowledges the difference between retrofitting and historical preservation efforts in nearby neighborhoods like Echo Park, Silverlake, and Wilshire Park—areas that experienced gentrification during the past 20 years—and the neglect of Milagros's MacArthur Park apartment. Amalia's final question about the lack of earthquake retrofitting ("Did Milagros know that?") thus suggests the sinister implications of urban decay and neglect: that urban Latina/os are sacrificed in order to channel resources to areas deemed "worthy" of preservation.

Rechy further emphasizes these points in a series of encounters Amalia has with institutional figures. Ranging from a fast-food employee who marginalizes her, to a priest who masturbates during her confession, Amalia's experiences with powerful figures reinscribe her subordinate position. But Rechy is careful to represent Amalia's gradual awakening as a potential avenue of empowerment. For example, when she encounters a pair of environmental activists gathering signatures for a petition for clean air legislation, Amalia at first attempts to "dodge" them, misinterpreting the "aggressively plain woman in her thirties" as an evangelical Christian. When the woman asks her to "sign a petition for cleaning up the air?" (Rechy 161), Amalia at first finds the request incomprehensible: "Who didn't want clean air?" As the woman persists, attempting to communicate in Spanish ("*Aire limpio*"), Amalia asserts her command of English and corrects the woman's Spanish ("I understand English" and "you mean '*limpio*' not '*limpio*'"). When the woman argues, "do you realize that automobile exhausts account for—?" Amalia cuts her off with the admonition that the activists "Feed the hungry" (162). Here, Rechy critiques the perspectives of what Ramachandra Guha and Juan Martínez-Alier have called "First-World Environmentalists" that abstract environmental harm from issues of social and political justice. Amalia's response draws attention to the fact that the urban poor also care about issues of environmental harm in ways that are indistinguishable from other social justice concerns (Ybarra 23–24). Thus her response: "Feed the hungry." But, like the city officials who neglect Milagros's apartment, this point is disturbingly dismissed by the activists: "Didn't I tell you

they don't understand their own oppression" and "It's the same in India" (Rechy 162). The implicit comparison displaces Amalia as a potential interlocutor (she doesn't understand her oppression) and spatially aligns her with other abject populations in the Global South.

The transnational alignment of Amalia with the abject Global South is another aspect to Amalia's rejection of the environmental activists. As someone who lives in and has tenuous benefits from her relationship to the Global North, Amalia resents her characterization as the embodiment of stereotypically powerless actors in the Global South. This last point is worth lingering on: given the admonitions of Smith and other theorists of the transnational who invest in grassroots actors as agents of resistance to the homogenizing impulses of neoliberal globalization, it is fascinating that Amalia is divested of her power at the moment that she pushes back against the logic of environmental preservation. In this sense, there is an uncanny return of the abject global: the poor in Los Angeles are equated with disempowered populations in other parts of the world ("It's the same in India"), while simultaneously asserting the primacy of neoliberal actors (the environmental activists) with the power to "properly" preserve and change the environment. By ironically depicting these environmental activists as the true agents in the transaction, Rechy aligns their perspectives with authority figures who homogenize and stereotype while espousing the language of liberalism.

These representations and others in the novel demonstrate how Amalia's experiences of exploitation and oppression operate on several levels. While she is culpable in the projects of patriarchy and homophobia, Amalia's and her family's situation owes significantly to the spatial politics that accrue within urban barrios as a result of discourses of racialization and neoliberal globalization—especially as they manifest in urban policy. Both Chicano Movement politics and environmental ethics of preservation combine to further marginalize people like Amalia. While the novel refuses to postulate a solution to these multifaceted dilemmas, it offers a useful meditation on the consequences of barrio space and contested relationships with the environment.

CONCLUSION

Throughout the novel, Rechy offers generative antagonism designed to illuminate how ethics of institutional and cultural preservation

sometimes work paradoxically to reinscribe social hierarchies within the urban transnational. Even though the novel offers a modicum of hope in its denouement—Amalia is able to recognize her abject position in a glittering Beverly Hills mall and literally throws off the gun being held to her head—the novel does not articulate a comprehensive alternative to dominant conceptions of preservation. Rechy's novel remains important, however, for rethinking how an ethos of preservation might look when theorized from below.

Key to this rethinking is the way Rechy complicates the valorization of grassroots movements within theories of the transnational. While Rechy does point to the transnational histories of the Americas as a powerful source of resistance for urban Chicana/os, he also problematizes how the pastoral is mobilized in the service of romantic Chicano Movement imagery. He does so by ironically portraying how romantic imagery renders women and queers marginal to the imagined (transnational) community. Moreover, Rechy demonstrates how problematic facets of Chicano Movement resistance replicate and reinforce attempts on the part of civic authorities to commodify transnational ethnic cultures in official preservation efforts and urban renewal policies. Consequently, as Amalia traverses her urban barrios, she is confronted by numerous preservation projects that further marginalize her and other liminal denizens of the barrio. By questioning how these preservation projects are constructed, Rechy brings an important corrective to bear on neoliberal urban renewal projects and heteropatriarchal cultural affirmation efforts in Chicana/o barrios. In essence, he asks us to rethink how preservation discourses collapse in order to clear space for a more egalitarian ethic of transnational and translocal resistance schemes.

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NOTES

1. I use the masculine *Chicano* to describe the Movement to emphasize both the historical designation (the *a/o* did not enter the critical lexicon until Chicana feminist critiques of the 1970s and 1980s) and the patriarchal imperatives inherent in many Movement groups. For recent considerations of the Movement's gender politics, see Bebout, Blackwell, and Gómez.

2. Even though *The Miraculous Day* is the first of his novels to directly document Chicana/o experiences, thinkers such as Gloria Anzaldúa and critics such as José David Saldívar, Juan Bruce-Novoa, and Carl Gutiérrez-Jones long ago

recognized Rechy as a Chicano novelist. See Anzaldúa's chapter "How to Tame a Wild Tongue" from *Borderlands/La Frontera*. In the chapter she writes, "In the 1960s, I read my first Chicano novel. It was *City of Night* by John Rechy, a gay Texan, son of a Scottish father and a Mexican mother. For days I walked around in stunned amazement that a Chicano could write and get published" (Anzaldúa 40). See also Bruce Novoa's "Canonical and Noncanonical Texts," Saldívar's *Border Matters*, and Gutiérrez-Jones's *Critical Race Narratives*.

3. For more on the intersections of ethnic American literature and ecocriticism, see Ruffin, Parrish, and Salt on the intersections of ecocriticism and African American and African Diaspora literatures; Hayashi and Wald on intersections with Asian American literature; and Adamson and Monani and Adamson on intersections with Native American literature.

4. See, for example, Grewe-Volpp, Fiskio, Wald, Huehls, Platt, Cook, and Martin.

5. See, for example, Ybarra, Ontiveros, Herrera-Sobek, Ramírez-Dhoore, Acosta, and Nuñez.

6. Access to affordable housing is an "environmental" matter, as evidenced by the fact that it is now being driven by issues like sea level rise in places like Miami and New York. In a recent issue of *The Atlantic*, journalist Matt Vasilogambros links sea level rise to a surge in gentrification in historically black and Haitian neighborhoods that occupy higher ground in Miami. Similar dynamics are under way in US cities such as New Orleans, Boston, and Sacramento that are also threatened by sea level rise and other environmental changes. Moreover, in a 2012 executive order, Obama administration Deputy HUD Secretary Shaun Donovan links healthy communities to environmental justice by "promot[ing] communities that are healthy, sustainable, affordable, and inclusive" through access to fair housing ("2012–2015 Environmental Justice Strategy").

7. I use the term translocal as a way to designate solidarities between individual resistance movements in distinct national and transnational spaces. As Michael Peter Smith helpfully defines it, the translocal suggests "the social construction of transnational social ties" that maintain social relations sustained through material connections and/or means of advanced communication (4). For more, see Smith's *Transnational Urbanism: Locating Globalization*.

8. Importantly, the relationship between the local and the global is an issue that is also fundamental to environmental studies and ecocriticism. See for example, Ursula K. Heise's *Sense of Place, Sense of Planet* and Ulrich Beck's *World at Risk*.

9. Several companies and NGOs currently market "mural tours" in Los Angeles. See, for example, the Downtown LA Graffiti and Mural Tour, operated by LA Art Tours (<http://laarttours.com>), Downtown Art Walk (<http://downtownartwalk.org>), and tours offered by the Mural Conservancy of Los Angeles (<http://www.muralconservancy.org>).

10. See Dávila's discussion of marketable ethnicity and the ways capital is aligned with urban renewal in relation to the gentrification of Upper Manhattan. See especially pages 10–13.

11. For more on the origins of jimsonweed, see the “*Datura Stramonium*” web page.

12. “This plant is known to have been in Virginia as early as 1676. It was at Jamestown, Virginia that a group of British soldiers accidentally ate the plant and were affected by its hallucinogenic properties. It is not known, however, if the plant was native to Virginia, or if it was being moved around by the early European settlers. Fernald (1950) reported it from Massachusetts to Ohio and Pennsylvania. It is likely that this plant made its way to the more northern states of New England by contaminated agricultural crops or perhaps intentional introduction” (“*Datura stramonium*”).

13. Although she works primarily as a house cleaner throughout much of the novel, Amalia is an expert seamstress. She makes a conscious choice not to pursue her trade due to experiences of sexual harassment, frequent immigration raids, and the rigid work hours in the garment factories where she is employed.

14. Like many Chicana/os of her generation, Amalia speaks Spanish as her primary language. The narrator notes that “she spoke no English” when she enters public school and is admonished by teachers and school authorities both directly (“God doesn’t want you to speak with a Mexican accent” [17]) and structurally through her enrollment in special pronunciation courses. See *The Miraculous Day*, esp. 16–18.

15. Acosta writes in his “Autobiographical Essay,” “Aztlán is the land we’re sitting on now. The land where my forefathers lived hundreds of years ago before they migrated to the valley of Mexico. The Aztecs referred to the entire Southwest as Aztlán” and “You can’t be a class or a nation without land. Without it, it doesn’t have any meaning. It’s that simple. So we are beginning to see that what we’re talking about is getting land and having our own government. Period. It is that clear-cut” (Acosta 11–12).

16. I am indebted to the editors of this special issue for this observation.

17. Again, I am grateful to the editors of this special issue for this formulation.

18. See David J. Vázquez, *Triangulations: Narrative Strategies for Navigating Latino Identity*, esp. chapters 2 and 3. See also Maylei Blackwell’s *Chicana Power!: Contested Histories of Feminism in the Chicano Movement* and Catherine Sue Ramírez’s *The Woman in the Zoot Suit: Gender, Nationalism, and the Cultural Politics of Memory*.

19. Amalia clearly feels a social stigma applied to the mothers of gay men in the barrio. For example, while waiting in line to visit Manny in jail, she notes the presence of a separate line for women visiting men incarcerated for homosexual activities:

Only then did Amalia notice that there was another line on the opposite side of the entrance to the Hall of Justice. A younger pregnant woman in a bright dress noticed Amalia's confusion. "That other line is for the visitors of the *maricones*."

Amalia did not know what to think. She didn't like homosexuals any more than the next person—sometimes they disgusted her; but why should their families—their mothers, that woman she had just talked to?—be separated as if they shared contamination? (82)

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