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Space, Identity, and Memory in Queer Brown Los Angeles: Finding Sequins in the Rubble

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy
in Chicana and Chicano Studies

by

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June 2014

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PREVIEW

PREVIEW

Space, Identity, and Memory in Queer Brown Los Angeles: Finding Sequins in the Rubble

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by

Eddy Francisco Alvarez Jr.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I dedicate my dissertation to my father, Eddy Francisco Alvarez Sr. who passed away May 8, 2008 and to whom I owe so much of who I am, including the value for education which he instilled in me. Ever since I was a little kid, he would ask me almost daily what I had learned in school. This went on all the way through high school, a time when I had lost touch with that little boy inside me that loved school and learning, and whom I wouldn't recuperate until years later in college. My father cared deeply about my education and supported me however he could despite his schizophrenia. I also dedicate this dissertation, eight years and a life time in the making, to the queer people of color lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender who have been victims of hate crimes, of the decimation caused by AIDS, of structural violence and to the people whose work in the streets and in the classrooms have made it possible for me to complete this work. I honor the life of Zoraida "Ale" Reyes a young trans Latina activist and my former student, whose body was found dead behind a Dairy Queen restaurant in Anaheim, California. She was a brave and beautiful spirit.

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studies scholar and an oral historian and his blunt, unapologetic teachings and writings on queer Latina/o lives, will forever mark my own work.

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ABSTRACT

Space, Identity, and Memory in Queer Brown Los Angeles: Finding Sequins in the Rubble

by

Eddy Francisco Alvarez Jr.

This project is a cartography of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer Latino/a Los Angeles, mapping alternative spaces-physical, ephemeral and performative- of queer Latina/o life in Los Angeles. This interdisciplinary project uses a feminist and queer of color approach to the analysis of Latina/o urban space, situating US Third World feminists and the narrators in my research as critical geographers and social semioticians. In the first chapter I argue that LGBTQ or “queer” brown LA, as a borderlands space, is a transnational site of gendered, raced and sexed processes and as such has experienced epistemological, curricular, representational and physical, omissions and erasures. Some of us have literally been removed. Stemming from legacies of colonialism, nationalisms and neo-liberalism, queer transnational Latina/o LA has been rendered invisible by homonationalist, racist, mainstream narratives that represent “gay LA” as white, middle class, and male. The second chapter focuses on methodology and functions as the “decolonial” chapter. Based on Chela Sandoval’s “methodology of the oppressed,” I trace the various technologies that LGBTQ Latinas/os employ to resist erasures and engage in processes of self-craft. I offer an interdisciplinary theoretical framework called “finding sequins in the rubble,” a method and process that involves negotiating spaces, identities, and violence faced daily in this

globalized, urban and rapidly gentrifying city. I argue that “reading” the queer city is a decolonizing process that involves multiple decolonial strategies for survival and self-fashioning, within and against, the erasures and violence of globalization, and hegemonic institutions and structures. Chapter 3, through photographs, spoken word, visual art and oral histories, looks at the 2006 immigrant rights marches in Los Angeles, and how LGBTQ activists and immigrants reterritorialized the city streets, creating an alternative, urban cartography, enacting “performances of memory.” The fourth chapter maps the social landscape of religion and spirituality in LA, tracing how LGBTQ Latinos/as negotiate their spiritual lives. It focuses on two lesbian narrators, Glenda Cael, a Guatemalan immigrant who was raised in the evangelical church, and María Teresa Maynez Bodtcher, an ex-Mormon Chicana. Focusing on oral history interviews, literary analysis, and cemetery and grave markers as texts, the last chapter looks at AIDS and HIV, especially in the 1980s and nineties, and how its history is remembered *and* erased in the city.

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Introduction

When I first conceptualized this dissertation project, in conversation with fellow graduate students and advisors, we agreed that given the lack of scholarly attention to queer brown Los Angeles, a history of this community is greatly needed. However, I do not believe a traditional history can tell us about queer brown LA. By understanding the present we can see how the past influences it, but we are not stuck there, it informs just as much as a dream, a piece of literature, a song. As I progressed in my graduate work, influenced by my training in oral history and decolonizing feminisms, I set out to write a dissertation about Los Angeles that addressed and took account of the affective life of the city- as U.S. women of color have taught me to do. For that reason—in the pages that follow, I approach the city of Los Angeles from a woman of color feminist perspective and place their work in conversation with spatial theorists, geographers, and other more traditional scholars. While not all of my narrators are immigrants, in this research I privilege the transnational and immigrant experience that parallels the notion of that LA is a city of immigrants (with the exception, of course, of the region’s indigenous peoples). All together the chapters form part of a queer brown LA that is informed by “history,” but it is more than that. It is about what the late queer theorist José Esteban Muñoz (2009) calls “queer futurity”—the now, informed by hope and the past, a present not quite here yet. This inquiry into the lives, deaths, imaginations, journeys, dreams of joteria in LA is about identity in motion, identity as “rhizomatic” as described by Juana María Rodríguez (2003) — about the spaces that shape and influence us— about the spatiality of queer Latinidad, the spaces that we inhabit, pray, work, love, and dream in. It is about a shifting consciousness —a “differential

consciousness” as Chela Sandoval (2000) calls it- a decolonizing methodology for accessing liberatory modes of consciousness.

A Primer on Terminology

As my title, “Space, Identity and Memory in Queer Brown Los Angeles: Finding Sequins in the Rubble,” indicates, this dissertation is about the intersection of memory, space and identity. By memory I mean individual and collective memory, both of which are important to understand the city and the narratives that lie within it. I am interested in fleshing out memory as a tool for remembrance and as a way to engage with “self-craft” (Barvosa 2008). However, as some of the individuals I interviewed show, remembering can be quite painful. Following women of color feminists, I argue that remembering can also be healing. When speaking of memory, I am also interested in the way that land has a memory as Native Americans remind us. In this vein, within urban space it is important to recognize how the city is a repository of memories lodged within the alleyways and cracks in sidewalks and out in the open through public art like that of Chicana artist and muralist, Judy Baca. On a more intimate scale, I argue that the body memory and the violences of colonization and the traumas of migration, displacement, racism and homophobia are embedded into the bodies of the people I interviewed as well as of those I watched traverse the city, both in my role as an inhabitant of and a researcher in Los Angeles. In this dissertation as I give shape to this palimpsest of stories, and dreams, and maps, I am working against what I call a hetero-memory—memory seen and heard through heteronormative and heterosexist eyes and ears—that has erased the queer LA many have lived and witnessed.

In regards to space, I follow spatial theorists like Edward Soja, Henri Lefevre, and James Rojas, but also position women of color feminists such as Gloria Anzaldúa, Chela

Sandoval, bell hooks, and others, as critical geographers, I describe later. I also find useful the work of queer and literary studies scholar Ernesto Javier Martínez (2013) who writes about space in terms of the movement *between* spaces, the spatiality of people's lives, and how they navigate these spaces. This notion of space also approximates what Gaye Theresa Johnson (2013: x) calls "spatial entitlement" or "the everyday reclamations of space, assertions of social citizenship, created new articulations, new sensibilities, a new vision." My concern here is not only about physical spaces, but ephemeral ones as well. My approach following the scholars mentioned above, also understands these spaces that jotería navigate as what Martínez (2012) calls "locations of impermanence," such as movie theaters; spaces that are impermanent as they are transitory spaces for these individuals or because they make queer space temporarily, to then return to their oppressive state. Martínez writes, "In a homophobic world, places of impermanence become the 'region' for transient queer sociality. These are "locations of queer sociality" (2012: 57-59). When Martínez discusses "migratory sexual identity" he is referring to the need to migrate, to move back and forth for survival, hence a "transient subsistence." These queer migrants, he suggests then, must negotiate a social landscape where geographies and social histories of queer subjects of color have been ignored and/or erased.

In terms of identity I am interested in the multiplicity of identities, social, cultural and political, performed by queer Latinas/os and Chicanas/os in Los Angeles (Barvosa 2008; Hames-García and Moya 2006; Hurtado 2003;). As I discuss in chapter one, I refer to identities beyond the term "gay" and embrace the term "jotería" which Gloria Anzaldúa used in her seminal book, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987) to refer to race, classed gender gente, and taken up by a new generation of activists, scholars and

artists.¹ This queer identity exists and manifests itself beyond homonationalism and Chicano cultural nationalism. How do these individual identities shape and influence the identity of the city of Los Angeles? Another aspect of identity in this project is my privileging of immigrant and feminine experiences. Although there were so many stories of queer men, and jotos, among my oral history interviews and close perusal of archives, I chose queer women, lesbian and trans identified bodies as the primary focus of these last chapters. Joto voices including my own are audible in this journey that unfolds in the next several hundred pages, but part of that rationale for focusing on womyn, was to de-center the gay or queer male experience, and make even more evident the centrality of women's lives in the analysis of the city.²

I use "brown" in my title and throughout the dissertation, as a racial and ethnic nomenclature, to refer to Chicanas/os, Latinas/os and Latina/o immigrants in Los Angeles. My usage derives from the historic, strategic use of "brown" as a descriptor for "Raza" or the Chicana/o community, as used by Chicanas/os in the 1960s and seventies. Slogans like "Brown is Beautiful" and "Brown and Proud" were often used in movement literature and cultural texts. This discourse was strongly inspired by the Black Power movement which coined the phrase, "Black is Beautiful." In addition, the Brown Berets, a revolutionary, para-military, community-based organization that bore many similarities to the Black Panther Party, used that adjective to describe themselves. Similarly, "brown" has been used in many cultural texts to describe Chicanas/os. For example in Lucha Corpi's *Eulogy for a Brown Angel* (2002) the author refers to a "brown angel," a child was murdered during the Chicano Moratorium in 1970. In a similar vein, in *The Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo*

¹ See Aztlan's spring 2014 issue for various essays on the developing field of Joteria Studies.

² See Hauser, Deborah 2005. "Woman, Womyn, Wom: A Word of One's Own." *MP: An Online Feminist Journal* http://academinst.org/wp-content/uploads/2005/03/010205Hauser_Woman.pdf

(1972), Oscar Zeta Acosta refers to himself as a “brown buffalo,” a revolutionary figure inspired by the Buffalo Soldiers, the African American cavalry regiment, which fought during the Civil War.

Lastly, my usage of “brown” within a queer *and* raced referent is inspired by José Esteban Muñoz’s (2006) notion of “feeling, brown, feeling down.” Muñoz argues that “feeling, brown, feeling down” is “a modality of recognizing the racial performativity generated by an affective particularity that is coded to specify historical subjects who can provisionally be recognized as Latinos.” Drawing on Chicano author Richard Rodríguez’s notion of brownness as attached to non-normativity, Muñoz (2013: 214) continues, “‘feeling brown’ is the way in which minoritarian affect is always partially illegible in relation to the normative affect performed by normative citizen subjects.” These “brown” feelings, he argues, are less about individual affect and more about a “collective mapping of the self” (Muñoz 2013: 214). Brownness, like all racialized attentiveness, is about the self that cannot and will not be white.

Structure and Organization

This dissertation is divided in three parts, each consisting of two chapters, which are linked conceptually. The individual chapters are connected theoretically and methodologically, but are structured to function as independent “case studies” and future scholarly articles. In unison, the chapters function as a map and a blueprint for queer brown Los Angeles. They are a journey and a ride through LA, a ritual of multiple crossings.

Part I, which includes chapters one and two, sets the foundation historically, methodologically and theoretically for the rest of the dissertation. Chapter one reviews a series of literatures, documenting the multiple erasures of queer brown Chicanas/os from scholarship on Los Angeles and within Chicana/o Studies and Queer Studies. Chapter two

examines methodological issues, such as, mapping the research design, qualitative tools, and theoretical frameworks that I relied on which enabled me to “find sequins in the rubble.” As a discursive trope, “finding sequins in the rubble” is grounded in materiality, but also can be seen in psychic and affective negotiations. It is about hope and desire— a set of decolonial strategies to make sense of the physical and discursive violence and the erasures I discuss throughout the entire dissertation. Finding sequins in the rubble is as much about the materiality to which it alludes—synthetic materials and rubble—physical debris left after a catastrophe or a the wrecking ball— as it is about a particular form of consciousness, a decolonial approach to the way aggrieved communities make sense of their lives— consciously or unconsciously. Drawing from what seem like disparate theoretical, cultural and affective locations—songs by Gloria Trevi, sequined dresses hanging in the background of one of my narrator’s fashion boutique, dreams and hopes of queer immigrants, Emma Perez’s (2104) “queer decolonial imaginary” and José Esteban Muñoz’s “queer futurity,”— finding sequins in the rubble, as a theoretical framework and a lived reality, like Chela Sandoval’s “oppositional consciousness,” (2000) speaks to that mobile, physical and affective “thirdspace” space from which jotería make and remake themselves. *Finding Sequins in the Rubble* comes from that ephemeral moment of possibility, that moment of hope, of self-fashioning in the face of violence.

Part II, which includes chapters three and four, focuses on collective voices and memories that create cartographies of the city through a multiplicity of voices, bodies, deaths. These two chapters focus on significant moments to LGBTQ Latinas/os in Los Angeles and the memorialization of queer Latinidad through memory, the body and space. For example, in chapter three I show how some of my narrators remember the onset of AIDS and HIV in the 1980s in Los Angeles, how the memory of LA has been memorialized

or not, and how the city continues to practice erasure in terms of AIDS and HIV. It takes on the topic of memorialization through dying bodies, grave markers, altars, and memorials, together, which together make claims for space through memory and the body. The chapter itself is an ofrenda—an offering to those who have died of AIDS, an obituary, an altar, and a tribute to those to have survived. In the fourth chapter, through photographs, artwork, spoken word and personal and collective memories, I chart the path of protesters and immigrant rights activists as they marched in the 2006 immigrant rights march in Los Angeles “reterritorializing” the streets of the city. The chapter also centers the body and approaches memorialization through corporeality, claiming space through their chanting, marching and protesting bodies. Differing from the other chapters, it relies less on individual narratives and memories and more on collective embodiment. It also differs in that it provides an alternative mapping of LA, within the larger mapping I do in the dissertation.

Part III, which includes chapters five and six, analyzes broad topics such as religion, spirituality and labor, with a specific emphasis on key narrators and their personal cartographies and narratives. Topically, labor and spirituality were consistent themes expressed during many interviews. As part of the “technologies for survival,” which I propose as being central to *jotería* in LA, labor and spirituality are crucial for survival, physically and emotionally for my narrators. As Chicana scholars have noted, among identity traits these are two elements important to self-identity (Ruiz 2008; Hurtado 2003; Zavella and Segura 2008). Social psychologist Aída Hurtado (2003) contends, religion and labor are important to self-identity.

In chapter five I focus on spirituality and religion, centering the life narratives of María Teresa Maynez Bodtcher and Glenda Cael, two queer women and mothers. Although

some of the narrators in this project are not religious, everyone showed some sense of spirituality if defined broadly as a relationship that helps make sense of the world—whether through writing, performance church, activism, romantic love (Perez 2000; Medina 1998, 2006, 2014). All those whom I interviewed showed some sense of connection to themselves—a form of self-renewal that I believe is spirituality— a technology for finding sequins in the rubble.

In the concluding chapter, I focus on Bamby Salcedo, the role of labor (work)-paid and unpaid in her life, and that of other transgender or Trans Latinas. Labors, a term that I use in this chapter, are about financial sustenance and survival. This is an especially delicate topic since many Latina/o immigrants in Los Angeles risk their lives and families daily to go to work and make money to put on the table – a simple fact of life. Affected by the neoliberal machine in a “global city” as geographer Sassia Sasken (1988) has put it, immigrants and Latinas/os are among all the different ranks of labor in the city, and have been integral to labor union organizing and various campaigns such as the Justice for Janitors Strike and the Bus Riders Union in the 1990s (Soldatenko 2005; Soja 2009). I also refer here to other types of labor(s)—the work of love, of gender, of self-making of activism, which is part of the labor of which I am taking about. Closing the dissertation with Trans Latinas makes sense if we understand that it is the framework from which we need to move forward, as trans³ Chicano scholar J. Francisco Galarte (2011 and 2014) asks us to do. “Trans” functions as an analytic and nuanced conceptual frame to understand *jotería* specifically in the city. It is striking to note, as my research shows, that many Trans Latinas have been trained in the streets—they are indeed “radical semioticians” or sign readers in ways many of us are not. As Part III elucidates, spirituality and labor form part of the

technologies for finding sequins in the rubble. In the concluding chapter, I point toward future directions and briefly talk about Wyvernwood apartments. The campaign to save Wyvernwood has been inspired by queer futurity.

PREVIEW

³ While I capitalize Trans in most of the dissertation based on Bamby Salcedo's study, when referring to J Francisco Galarte's work I use lower case as he does.

Part I: Colonial and Decolonial Structures: History, Theory and Methods

Chapter One

Erasures and Forgetting in Queer Brown Los Angeles

Epigraphs

“I am writing these words as a route map
an artifact for survival
a chronicle of buried treasure
a mourning
for this place we are about to be leaving
a rudder for my children your children
our lovers our hopes. —Audre Lorde⁴

The consequences of geographic displacement loom large in Chicano historical memory, characterized, among other things, by the determining effects of land loss, shifting and porous national borders, coerced and voluntary migrations, and disparate impacts of urban development. —Raúl Villa⁵

Maps and memories are bound together, a little as songs and love affairs are. We go to live somewhere and when we see a schematic representation of it and superimposing our memories on upon it, we find that it becomes particularly...alive. —Becky Cooper⁶
My heart is so entwined with this city that I can't talk about it without talking about myself—I can't talk about myself without talking about it. This is my art.

I know no other terrain—so intimately. Its violence is my violence. Wanda Coleman⁷

Digging beneath the surface of the city's present is the best way historians know to shape ideas into potential action for the future. It is an action—an excavation—predicated on remembering in hopes of forcing change. William Deverell⁸

⁴ Lorde, Audre. 1994. *Our Dead Behind Us: Poems*. New York: W.W. Norton, 404.

⁵ Villa Raúl Homero. 2000. *Barrio-Logos: Space and Place in Urban Chicano Literature and Culture*. Austin: University of Texas, 1.

⁶ Erickson, Amanda. 2013. “The Map as Ghost Story, Love Story and Everything in Between.” *The Atlantic*. April 17, 2013.

⁷ Coleman, Wanda. 1996. *Native in a Strange Land: Trials and Tremors*. Santa Rosa: Black Sparrow

Press.

⁸ Deverell, William. 2004. *Whitewashed Adobe: The Rise of Los Angeles and the Making of the US Mexican Past*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 48.

Introduction

I remember a map; a map of city streets, busy intersections, of visible bodies, invisible bodies, racialized, policed, young, old,
I draw geographies of aging memories, of desire,
of generations and migrations of intersections where my soul met yours, where love was still unclear, unrequited, often mistaken for lust.

I make a map of the secret places we visited, the liquor stores where we used to buy malt liquor, at Cisco's, then down them before we entered Escándalo, one of my first gay clubs, where I first saw cholos kissing.

I make topographies of the contours of your *cuervo* and my *cuervo*, the crevices your tongue, discovered as you traced my scars with your fingers

I want to draw a map, include also the painful places you took me to, the ones we went to together,

the places you couldn't allow yourself to go,
of empty bottles, empty parking lots, empty courage, empty promises.

I want to draw a map of the histories that connect us, the legacies that shaped us, colonization, rape, murder, lovelessness, draw a map of my senses, my smell, my touch. So I can once again feel, hear the sounds of the shower, of sweat, of steam, of heavy breathing, of our dancing bodies, the smell of youth, of the quiet screaming of the closet.

This dissertation is about survival and love in the face, and in spite of, violence—the violence of erasure, of oblivion, of displacement, of exile. It insists on hope, as Chicana cultural theorist and historian Emma Pérez (1999) has argued about the queer decolonial imaginary. It is about making each other legible in the face of empire, coloniality, and the toxicity of nationalisms of different types, like homonationalism and Chicano nationalism. It is about finding a way back home, to ourselves, our geographies, our memories, our bodies, despite the violence and destruction caused by erasure of histories, our epistemologies, and maps that lead to our own history as *jotería* or queer Chicanas/os and Latinas/os, and specifically for this project, in Los Angeles. I am specifically interested in the “technologies of survival” that *jotería* in the city of Angels participate in as they resist the discursive, and often physical, violence that manifests itself in the way our stories are told, leaving behind debris and rubble after the violence and the destruction; scraps of shredded maps that once showed blueprints and paths, “crossings,” towards each other and

towards ourselves. Underneath the debris, however, are the stories, lives, memories, feelings, and “sequins” that we must dig from under the rubble.

The Spoken-Word-Art-Performance as Activism or SWAPA above, maps part of my adolescence; my teenage angst and memories, *recuerdos* of not fitting in to West Hollywood culture when I first started exploring my sexuality and navigating gay L.A. My first encounters with gay spaces were going to all-ages night at Arena Night Club on Friday nights. It was there I saw drag queens for the first time. The legendary DJ Irene played her hypnotic beats and Stacy Hollywood was master of ceremonies every Friday night. Arena, housed by an ice factory on Santa Monica Boulevard, was a haven for young queer kids in the 1990s, becoming our Friday night queer sanctuary. Another event significantly marked in my queer history was the now defunct AIDS Dance-A-Thon, which was a yearly fundraising event organized by AIDS Project Los Angeles. Getting its start in 1989, it featured celebrities like Madonna, Paula Abdul, and Tyra Banks. My friend André and I went together several times, but it was during a time when I was still uncomfortable in my body and didn't really talk to other gay people there.

Another place I frequented was Wednesday nights at Club Escándalo. Located at The Factory on 652 North La Peer, this is where I used a fake ID for the first time. I gained entry shortly before I turned 18. Escándalo was where I saw cholos (or gangsters) kissing for the first time in my life; the first place I kissed a boy who wore make up; and a place, unlike other bars in West Hollywood, where I felt I could be brown *and* gay simultaneously. That was, in fact, the main issue. Often for me, being gay in LA meant navigating white spaces and somehow feeling like I didn't fit in. I, unlike my other peers, didn't have gay male mentors. My first encounter with other gay men on a personal level happened at Blockbuster Music in Studio City. I worked there while I was still finishing high school.