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THE CHOLA LOCA IN LANDSCAPES OF STRUGGLE: BREAKING SILENCE IN THE WORKS OF HELENA MARÍA VIRAMONTES AND YXTA MAYA MURRAY

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Lorena Galván

Candidate

Spanish and Portuguese

Department

This dissertation is approved, and it is acceptable in quality and form for publication:

Approved by the Dissertation Committee:

Dr. Tey Diana Rebolledo, Co-Chairperson

Dr. Enrique Lamadrid, Co-Chairperson

Dr. Miguel López

Dr. Bárbara Reyes

**THE *CHOLA LOCA* IN LANDSCAPES OF STRUGGLE:
BREAKING SILENCE IN THE WORKS OF
HELENA MARÍA VIRAMONTES AND YXTA MAYA MURRAY**

BY

LORENA GALVÁN

B.A., Spanish, University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, 2004
M.A., Spanish, Southwest Studies, University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, 2006

DISSERTATION
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of

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Spanish and Portuguese**

The University of New Mexico
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May 2015

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DEDICATION

To my daughters Mari and Brianna Valenzuela, Emma Liliana Miramontes,

Estrella Gallegos, Alexis and Areli Miramontes

Dedicated to all living *La Vida Loca*

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This study owes its completion almost entirely to the support of my amazing family who touch my life everyday. Foremost, I wish to thank my mother and father, Tirza and Arturo Galván, my sister Julie and my wonderful husband Raúl Miramontes. Most of all, I would like to thank my daughters Mari and Brianna for their patient support and for always helping me keep academia in perspective.

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ABSTRACT

The struggle of reimagining and resituating once ignored or vilified female icons is an example of how Chicanas turn to the past to instill a new meaning to female archetypes. In breaking silence, Helena María Viramontes and Yxta Maya Murray found a way to make the *Chola* visible, and a voice from which she could speak about the concerns of women living *la vida loca* in urban landscapes. The analysis of Chicana representations, of the *Chola* and *la vida loca* thus offers a counter-narrative to the dominant narratives offered by Chicano texts but also to the rise of representations about *Cholas/Cholos* in dominant society toward the end of the 20th century.

In this dissertation project I examine the written expressions of the *Chola* and the *queer Vato* by Chicana feminist writers to analyze how women utilize counter-narratives to express lived realities and to negotiate new understandings on issues of gender roles, identity

and shifting social urban conditions. The analysis of how women offer alternative descriptions of the *Chola* as *Malfloras* and *Locas*, symbols of women gone bad and crazy, provides the context from which to study how women create alternative forms of expression through and by the appropriation of a tough male aesthetic to re-inscribe the *Cholas* as empowered women. The recuperation of the *Chola's* sliced tongue and silent scream in women's literary representation thus offers an alternative refiguring of the *Chola* figure as a speaking subject.

This study also emphasizes how Chicana feminists recuperate and reinscribe the *Chola* to provide new interpretations of the *Chola* as an agent of resistance and opposition and to express what Yvonne Yarbro Bejarano terms “the reversal of an accepted image” (“The Lesbian Body,” 183). Feminist writers’ development of an emblem of resistance, as a strategic tool to code the *Chola* with new meaning proves to be “more complex than rejection, for such strategies both critique and derive power” from the reversal and repositioning of the *Chola's* image (Yarbro Bejarano, 183). This study also reveals how, in flipping the meaning of the *Chola's*, body as a silent object to speaking subject, Chicanas brought authority to the ways women use gender performance to re-frame the meaning of *Malfloras* and *Locas*. Additionally, by coding the *Malflora* figure to function like a geographical artifact that can be read by others does more than inform readers about the Chicana's struggle for self-definition but also speaks to simultaneous external and internal social and cultural pressures. As a result of repositioning and re-coding the image of the *Chola*, these writers articulate a sense of difference and defiance in writing about *la vida loca* from gendered lenses.

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Introduction

The figure of the Chola, the Latina Homegirl, echoes the challenges of her predecessor the Pachuca. The Pachuca emerged during the World War II-era, a particular moment in history when the Pachuca embodied wartime fears of sexuality and juvenile delinquency because she participated in *pachuquismo*, a zoot suit youth subculture that transgressed both physical and social boundaries alongside her male counterpart the Pachuco. For decades now these subjects have resonated in the imagination of people living in both the United States and México. For many observers, the Pachuca and Pachuco constituted a “lost generation,” cast by Mexicans as “a caricature of the American, while in the United States the Pachuco was proof of Mexican degeneracy” (Mazón, *The Zoot Suit Riots* 5).

José Manuel Valenzuela Arce in “Cien Años de Choleidad” (2007), contends that Pachucos and Pachucas are transnational and transborder subjects that surged in the late 1930’s as a direct result of the specific historical context of urbanization and swelling population of Mexican origin. As a consequence of urbanization and the demand for wartime industrial workers, people of Mexican origin migrated from rural areas where they previously worked in agriculture and the Railroad system to urban hubs (37). The high number of youths living in urbanized landscapes, like that of Los Angeles, California generated an environment in which they could articulate autonomy and self-valorization through a fashion aesthetic. Thus Pachucas and Pachucos expressed a distinct working class Mexican American identity that distinguished them from their parent’s generation and, in general, from American society by wearing a zoot suit. While the highly stylized fashion defined a new form of self-identification, it also marked those who donned the zoot suit as defiant and un-American. Precisely because zoot suit attire arose in a particular moment in

history during World War II, the conspicuous consumption of the zoot suit challenged dominant codes of wartime sacrifice. Within this historical moment, the zoot suit emerges as a hallmark for an oppositional cultural identity. For this reason the Zoot Suit Riots and the Sleepy Lagoon incident can be read as a historical process that highlights the instability of class, race and gender categories in which the occupation of public space and the appearance of non-productive leisure, it represented in the zoot suit style became a menace to society.

The male zoot suit, also known as “drapes” or *tacuche* consisted of draped pants that ballooned out at the knee. They were closely tapered at the ankle and paired with a “finger-tip” coat. Pachucos drew upon a conventional white middle class style by appropriating the “business suit” as a mainstream symbol, but re-contextualized it, with its new meaning through the zoot suit. The juxtaposition of the zoot suit with the business suit produced a cultural affirmation for Pachucos while at the same time it further isolated them from U.S. mainstream culture. Accordingly, many Mexican Americans added a long watch chain as an aesthetic compliment to the suit. In addition, Pachucos combed their relatively long hair into a pompadour on top and a ducktail (Ramírez, *The Woman in The Zoot Suit* xiii).

The Pachuco’s flashy zoot suits characterized him as un-American. In fact, the combination of the zoot pompadours and ducktails marked him as “unmanly” because the zoot suit diverged from heteronormative and bourgeois masculinities (Ramírez, *The Woman* 74). Furthermore, the Pachuco’s zoot suit was read as a sign of disposable income and class mobility, threatening the social and class order. During the Zoot Suit Riots, Mexican American men who wore the zoot suit were stripped of the cloths and were beaten in front of gathering crowds by white servicemen on the streets of Los Angeles. The Pachuco’s presence was an imminent danger in urban wartime landscape. In fact, the figure of the

Pachuco was viewed as a “draft-dodger” and constructed as a public danger symbolic of the enemy on the home front. Mauricio Mazón notes that the riots enabled servicemen to “symbolically castrate” the Pachuco when they beat them, cut their hair and “unpanted” them (*The Zoot-Suit* 87).

Many Pachucas also wore the *tacuche* masculine zoot suit. The female zoot suit consisted of “cardigan or V-neck sweater and a long, broad shouldered “finger-tip” coat; a knee-length (and therefore relatively short) pleated skirt, fishnet stockings or bobby socks; and platform heels” (Ramírez, *The Woman* xii). They combined the zoot suit with a distinctive make-up and hairstyle, which consisted of dark lipstick, pencil thin eye brows and “used foam inserts called “rats” to lift their hair into a high bouffant” (Ramírez, *The Woman* xii). The Pachuca’s hyper-femininity “distorted a look popularized by Hollywood’s leading ladies of the time,” in which Pachucas “undermined exclusionary definitions of lady hood” based on white femininity as well it allowed working-class Mexican American women to claim the “cultural category from which they had been excluded from” (Ramírez, *The Woman* 59-69). Appropriating and exaggerating the image of lady hood, Pachucas threatened middle-class efforts to control the definition of “lady” (Ramírez, *The Woman* 69). Additionally, her divergence from the “feminine ideal” represented by the “feminine patriot” also signified a rejection of domesticity and the traditional role of women during WW II, marking the Pachuca as a threat on and to the home front (Ramírez, *The Woman* 64). Their exaggerated femininity of makeup, hairstyle, and clothes, was viewed as a declaration of insubordination because it was regarded tacky and cheap. Thus, the Pachuca emerged as a challenge to cultural, economic and racial pressures.

Take Mexican gender norms and cultural assumptions about proper femininity and the role of women, for instance. The Pachuca openly and publicly defied these cultural conventions. Similarly, the economic conditions of the wartime-era disrupted middle class conventions of domesticity by calling upon women to contribute to the war effort. The entry of women into the labor force impacted dominant American norms of beauty and femininity based on middle-class white normative ideal. As a result of the challenge to gender norms Pachucas exhibited during wartime, they were characterized as morally and sexually loose. Their presence challenged dominant expectation of female identity under patriarchal and male-dominated society, and therefore, considered a civic hazard. As a result, they were demonized as un-American in mainstream media because of their gender, cultural and racial difference. Because of the negative associations linked to the zoot suit, the Pachuco became a defining feature of *la vida loca*. Often associated with gangs, the image of the Pachuco was as a violent criminal. The Pachuca too was seen as a civic hazard.

However, during the 1960's the Pachuco was re-inscribed with new meaning during the Chicano movement as a symbol of resistance. In the context of poverty, racism, police brutality, exclusionary public education system, social devaluation and lack of opportunity facing second generation Mexican Americans, the image of the fierce *vato loco* developed along with his zoot suit wearing predecessor the Pachuco. Both representations have been valorized in Chicano cultural nationalism as a "rebel" in a network of *carnales*.

For example, José Montoya, a poet and visual artist from New Mexico, creates his art and poetry that call for the revision of a true history for Chicano youth, through Chicano lenses of interpreting the world. In an interview in *Contemporary Chicana and Chicano Art* (2002), Montoya stated that he created "Chicano art to insure that the heroic struggle of the

Mexicans who are not from Mexico is recorded accurately by us and not dependent on the media and the historical biases depicted in textbooks. I create Chicano art so that our worldview is appreciated, respected, and not misunderstood” (Keller, 152). Thus, the Pachuco became an icon of opposition and a hero for Chicano cultural nationalism precisely because of his refusal to accede to dominant Anglo expectations.

Montoya has linked his poetics with remembering, and recording, to comment upon some significant historical moments for Mexican American people in the United States. His art view often includes the Pachuco and the urban Vato who emerge as a collective persona in his visual and literary expressions. Montoya seeks to clarify and validate the Pachuco experience within a political context of resistance. His poetry proposes that the positive values derived from barrio life such as *carnalismo* (brotherhood) and the defiant stance of the Pachuco be integrated into a new aesthetic, a Vato lifestyle. For Montoya, the *Vato* lifestyle, serves as a viable alternative to cultural assimilation. In recuperating the Pachuco and recasting him as a role model “movement-era writers and artist also redeemed the male youth gang as a model for group identity” (Ramírez, *The Woman* 113). As Rosa Linda Fregoso observes, “The transgressive nature of Chicanos as ‘gang members,’ formally articulated as a pathological masculinity in dominant discourse, was rearticulated into the positive masculine attributes of brotherhood and Chicanismo” (*The Bronze Screen* 37).

The Chicano movement valorized *carnalismo* and *la familia* (family) as ideal conceptual models for Chicano group identity that relied upon and reproduced traditional gender and sexual norms. Seeing the *vato loco* “*Cholo*” of the present, as the Pachuco of the past, some reinterpreted their unruliness and defiance as revolutionary. Thus, representations of Pachucos and *Cholos* are valorized as “the avatar of an oppositional, rather than

assimilationist, Chicano cultural identity and as a harbinger of the Chicano movement” (Ramírez, *The Woman* 16). In contrast, their female contemporaries the Pachuca, *Chola*, Homegirl, are excluded from the movement’s discourse precisely because of their unruliness and defiance. Because they violated dominant conventions of movement’s view of *carnalismo* and *la familia*, Pachucas identity was negatively stereotyped.

Pachucas, *Cholas* and Homegirls were considered “monstrously feminine” and at the same time they were “dangerously masculine” (Ramírez, *The Woman* 20). In fact, they were often regarded as *malinchistas* a term used to describe traitors behavior or unruly conduct. Referring to Pachucas, *Cholas* and Homegirls as modern-day *malinches* provides a glimpse into the deeply rooted idea that women who define themselves on their own terms and their own codes are considered traitors, and therefore, foreign because their violation of dominant norms and protocols of female gender roles expectations are considered a form of social deviance.

Thus, Pachucas, *Cholas* and Homegirls assume a very different status as *malinchistas* or female traitors because as Ramírez states, “*Malinche*, gangsterette, pocha, alien, whore, and lesbian, failed to reproduce the ideal subjects of normative gender and sexuality” for U.S. and Chicano nationalism (Ramírez, *The Woman* 23). Ramírez argues that the Pachuca is notably absent in much of the movement-era cultural production because,

La pachuca was not easily absorbed into the Chicano cultural nation qua family, an imaginary that relied upon and reproduced traditional gender roles. She encroached upon the male and masculine realm of resistance and refused to be contained by heteropatriarchal domesticity. In doing so, she forged alternative, homosocial, communities and thus threatened what the literary

critic Sonia Saldívar-Hull has termed “code of family loyalty”—that is, “the assumption that men can claim possession of female sexuality. (Ramírez, *The Woman in the Zoot Suit* 20)

As a consequence, the Pachuca is erased and ignored on a number of representational fronts.

The Pachuca appropriated conventional notions of masculinity from her Pachuco counterpart in combination with a hyper-feminine style that included bleached hair, dark lips and fine arched eyebrows. This remains a distinctive characteristic of a contemporary *Chola* aesthetic. The Pachuca’s appropriation of the masculine zoot suit, space and behavior as well as other symbols of masculinity, such as knives, razors, and cigarettes, all of which she hid in her elaborate hairdo have endured for decades. During the 1970s and 1980s the *Chola* also combined hyper-femininity of hair and makeup styles with chinos (khaki pants), tank tops, plaid shirts and other masculine signifiers like guns, and handkerchiefs. Although hyper-sexualized, *Cholas* were considered masculine because of their toughness. With the signature aspects of *Chola* style remaining by the 1990s the *Cholas* also were referred to as Homegirls. But the Homegirl aesthetic slightly differed, marking a change in public forms of representation and style. By the close of the twentieth century, Homegirls began to incorporate “white eye shadow, a stark contrast to the jet-black eyeliner and mascara” meanwhile the dark lipstick worn by *Cholas* “morphed into brown or very dark lip liner surrounding light brown or otherwise totally nude lips” (Magsaysay, *City of Style* 100).

The link between the Pachuca, *Chola* and Homegirl is also made apparent in contemporary male-authored gang narratives in which, at best, *Cholas* and Homegirls are treated as secondary and at worst, are sexually objectified and silenced.

During the 1990's gang culture aesthetics became popularized in films, music, and Chicana/o literature. *Cholos* and *Cholas* have been portrayed in a number of mediums. Films such as *American Me* (1992), *Blood In, Blood Out* (1993), *Mi Vida Loca* (1994), and *Mi Familia* (1995); to novels such as *Working in the Dark: Reflections of a Poet of the Barrio* (Jimmy Santiago Baca, 1992), *Always Running: La Vida Loca, Gang Days in L.A.* (Luís Rodríguez, 1993), *Locas* (Yxta Maya Murray, 1997), and *Two Badges: The Lives of Mona Ruiz* (Mona Ruiz, 1997) show the range of scope in representing *Chola* and *Cholo* subjectivities. Take for example Allison Andres's 1994 film *Mi Vida Loca*. In this film Andres captures the general aesthetic of *Cholas* during the 1990's in Los Angeles.



Figure 1 Cholas in the 1993 film *Mi Vida Loca*

Namely, through *Mi Vida Loca* we witness the cultural appropriation of a *Chola* aesthetic by U.S. popular culture, which mirrors the spike in publications about gang life during this time period. As a result the promotion of *Cholo*/homeboy and *Chola*/homegirl culture influenced popular culture significantly. From clothing attire to lowrider fashion became acceptable when appropriated by mainstream culture.

The appropriation of the *Chola* and *Cholo* aesthetic is evident in U.S. pop-culture with performers Gwen Stefani, Fergie, Madonna and Lady Gaga just to name a few. In popular culture expression, it is commonplace today to witness identity performances by the dominant class that makes reference to identity markers unique to the *Chola*/homegirl subject, of course, with some alterations. The *Chola*'s high hair, distinctive cat eyeliner makeup, thin eyebrows and dark lipstick became a mix of hard and soft, similar to the strong, confident glamorous look of the Pachucas. Many women who find the "glamorous-but-tough vibe appealing and aesthetically on point with conveying confidence and a sense of mystery" appropriate the *Chola* style, including Fergie, Gwen Stefani and tattoo artist Kat Von D (Magsaysay 100).

For example, Gwen Stefani appropriates both *Cholo* masculinities as well as *Chola* femininities in the videos for "Just a Girl," (1995), "Hollaback Girl," (2005), and "Luxurious," (2005). Stefani underscores her pro-girl message with her appropriation of chinos a white tank top and wallet chain, signifiers of *Cholo* masculinity along with teased hair, pencil thin eyebrows and dark lipstick aspects of the *Chola* aesthetic. Fergie, who, like Stefani grew up in Southern California, invokes the tough masculine power of the *Cholo* alongside the sexual agency and hyper-femininity of the *Chola* in the video for her 2006 song "London Bridge." Additionally, Stefani in her 2005 video for "Luxurious," portrays two other important archetypes in Mexican American culture, La Virgen de Guadalupe and Frida Kahlo. The three archetypes are intertwined with specific ethnic, racial, and gendered histories. Stefani's female empowerment discourse of the tough girl juxtaposed with hyper-femininity reduces the archetypes to a style and attitude, which in turn depoliticizes and de-historicizes them.



Figure 2 Stefani as a Chola in "Luxurious"



Figure 3 Stefani as Frida Kahlo in "Luxurious"



Figure 4 Stefani as Virgin De Guadalupe in "Luxurious"

In comparison to the representations of *Cholas* and Homegirls in the film *Mi Vida Loca*, *Cholas* and Homegirls do not convey the same “glamorous-but-tough” meaning as do the white-women performers that appropriate their style. Precisely because their street-tough aesthetic is associated to gang affiliation and it historically has been linked with criminality and hyper-femininity much like their predecessor the Pachuca. The Pachuca that wore the male zoot suit, destabilized race, class, and gender categories, was deemed oversexed yet became “butch” “by wearing an outfit that signaled gender and sexual transgressions they betrayed gender norms, and in doing so, they betrayed the nation” (Ramírez, *The Woman* 80). Although Pachucas and Cholas have been cross-dressing and transgressing gender and social boundaries for generations, they have not been celebrated in the same way as the *vato loco*, the war time archetypes Rosie the Riveter, and the “feminine patriot” nor pop-culture performers.

Holla-back Girl

I grew up in Albuquerque New Mexico during the 1980’s and 1990’s in a barrio known as Kinney Brick in the South Valley where I also participated in the Chola style by lightening my hair with peroxide and teasing my bangs up high holding them up with just enough Aqua Net. Where I grew up there was a notable presence of gang culture with *Los Padillas*, *Southside* and *San José* gangs staking claim to their neighborhoods. However, not all dressed in the *Chola/o* style nor participated in the gang subculture.

It was in graduate school where for the first time, I saw the people I grew up with (*Cholas* and *Cholos*) reinserted into narratives of Mexican American cultural identity, community, and history. Initially, I began this dissertation examining male-authored gang narratives. My initial reason was to come closer to understanding my brother’s participation

in *la vida loca*. However, I changed my focus and scope about *la vida loca* as I began to uncover and understand how *Cholas* in male-authored gang narratives are objectified as sex objects adorning cars and tattoos, denied agency, literally by having their tongues sliced, and reduced to capital to be shared between *carnales*. Yet, their style is appropriated and their lives made into movies by “outsiders” immersed in the lowrider and *Chola* scene rooted in Mexican American culture. I became interested in analyzing how Chicana feminist revised the *Chola* as a symbolic image of female empowerment and resistance to the effects of urbanization. This led me to ask: How did women generate new representations of the *Chola* to respond to the conditions and role of these women as living *la vida loca* on one hand, and on the other, criticize the male dominated images of the *Chola* as morally and sexually loose and passive submissive objects? How were revisionist narratives about the *Chola* reflective of the Chicana desire to create cultural icons in contemporary times that connected both a Chicana’s sense of community knowledge and lived experiences to a tough youth aesthetic and urban landscapes?

I have been inspired not only by Catherine S. Ramírez’s work in *The Women in the Zoot Suit*, in which she excavates the overlooked subject of the Pachuca and examines the meanings ascribed to her by World War II-era narratives, Chicano cultural nationalisms and Chicana feminist but also by Rosa Linda Fregoso’s “Cool Chuca Style” and Luis Rodríguez’s autobiography *Always Running*. Their initial works led me to think about the *Cholas*’ exclusion from Chicano/a discourse. In point of fact, I first became conscious of the silence and invisibility related to the *Chola* subjectivity when I read *Always Running*. For instance, there is the character Payasa, whose *veterano* brothers would beat her to make her stronger and “would slice her tongue with a razor” making her “meaner, crazier, unpredictable”

(*Always Running* 106). Additionally, Rodríguez recounts witnessing his *carnales* rape a drugged girl, he explains that “her legs were spread outward, and a torn underwear twisted around an ankle [...] her eyes closed, her mouth opened unconscious, but as if in a silent scream” (*Always Running* 122). The silent screams and sliced tongues not only represent the violence *Cholas* encounter at the hands of their *carnales*, but symbolically the physical slicing of Payasa’s tongue and the silent scream of an unconscious female, in his work renders them all voiceless.

As Fregoso observes, “Perhaps, the production of *pachuca-chola*-homegirl urban identities has not been celebrated by many of us precisely because her body defies, provokes, and challenges the traditional basis of our representation and formulation of the Chicano nation” (327).

Representations of the Pachuca, *Chola* and Homegirl, however, are not exclusive to Chicano male-authored gang narratives. In an effort to work against the negative stereotyping of Pachuca/o urban reality, Chicana women writers have produced narratives about the Pachuca, *Chola* and Homegirl. These Chicana cultural productions have taken the Pachuca, *Chola*, Homegirl, their bodies and voices and redefined them with new meanings and, by doing so, have reinserted them back into the Chicana/o imaginary. This works include Carmen Lomas Garza’s gouache painting *Las Pachucas, Razor Blade’do* (1989), Mary Helen Ponce’s novel *The Wedding* (1989), Laura del Fuego’s novel *Maravilla* (1989), Carmen Tafolla’s poetry, “Los Cortes (5 Voices),” “and when I dream dreams,” Inés Hernández’s poem “Para Teresa,” Cherrie Moraga’s poem “Later, She Met Joyce,” and play *Giving Up the Ghost* (1986), and Mona Ruiz’s memoir *Two Badges: the Lives of Mona Ruiz* (1997). Duo to the alternative voices about Pachuca, *Chola* Homegirl present in Chicana

literature, I came to appreciate how women participate in breaking silence to articulate subjectivity distinct from the way men interpret them.

This study draws from various methods used in urban studies and Chicana/o studies to analyze the complicated relationship between Chicana ‘chola’ identity in connection to and in relationship with her urban setting. The application of Critical Race Theory (CRT), and in particular, Latino Critical Race Theory (LatCrit), offers a framework in which to analyze the racialized identities of minority women in urban context. A key component to CRT is the inclusion of personal narratives or stories that offer different languages to present social and cultural problems enabling different truths. LatCrit also seeks to use counter-storytelling as a method to provide marginalized individuals a platform to speak against the official and many times one-sided narratives created by systems of power. According to George A. Martínez, “Narrative provides a language for minorities to communicate harms. Without narrative, minorities have no voice to explain how they have been harmed” (“Constructing LatCrit Theory” 686). CRT also utilizes storytelling as a tool to insert their knowledge attained through their lived experience to give voice to their community. Richard Delgado notes that narratives can open new windows into reality and “urges writers to pay attention to the details of minorities’ lives as a foundation” for change (*Critical Race Theory* 4).

CRT and LatCrit scholars have observed that identifying the meta-narratives that underline racial dialogue can be helpful in explaining why racial divisions are so enduring. Delgado explains that the “dominant group” generates its own stories within meta-narratives in which they establish an “identity in relation to outgroups, and provide it with a form of shared reality in which its own superior position is seen as natural” (“Storytelling” 2412). As

a result Delgado, advocates that minorities should insert their own counter narrative to debunk the myths and “prevailing mindset by means of which members of the dominant group justify the world as it is, that is, with whites on top and browns and blacks at the bottom” (“Storytelling” 2413). Thus, LatCrit writers recount stories to challenge the dominant group’s meta-narratives.

The deconstruction of the dominant society’s interpretation of Latino identity and the way that the misrepresentation of such identities affects the legal system is also central to Latino/a Critical Theory. Through the use of counter-narratives LatCrit theorists are able to locate and give voice to the marginalized, while challenging the systems of power that often are responsible for the improper construction of Latino identity. Martínez explains that “cultural frameworks are the lens through which people understand the world” and narratives are an important critical tool through which “LatCrit theory seeks to produce knowledge, transform society, exhibit connections between the various subordinations, and construct coalitions” (“Constructing LatCrit Theory” 793).

As I focused on how Chicana authors gave a different presence to the histories and lived experiences of women living *la vida loca*, I focused on how Chicanas negotiate issues related to silence and invisibility in order to demonstrate how they achieve a new interpretation of the *Chola* through revisionist and counter-narratives of female icons. The analysis of Chicana representations thus offers a counter-narrative to the dominant narratives offered by Chicano text but also the rise of representations about *Cholas/Cholos* in dominant society toward the end of the 20th century.

The principal goal of this study is to engage with the topic of *Cholas* and *Homegirls* as a social justice act-a call to action and a response that actively engages in a textual

analysis of works where the *Cholas* are primary characters in order to demonstrate how women writers use writing to bring voice to the voiceless. The texts I analyze in this dissertation are *Their Dogs Came With Them* (2007), by Helena María Viramontes and *Locas* (1997), by Yxta Maya Murray. By no means are they the only works by Chicana authors to focus on *Cholas*. I analyze these two works because they problematize gender norms by appropriating the tough defiant *Cholo* stance to redefine the *Chola* thus positioning the *Chola* as both feminine and masculine. Therefore, their interpretation of the *Chola* as well as the *Cholo* presents alternative and different modes of thought. Additionally, I analyze what happens when the *Chola* articulates difference and defiance and what happens when this difference and defiance is unexpected and self-defined. In short, what happens when *Cholas* enact and embody resistance? Similarly, this study also recognizes the empowerment and authority women exert when they write and construct gender and cultural identities that offer new insight to the effects of urbanization in barrio communities. Thus, writers also articulate a sense of difference and defiance in writing about *la vida loca* from gendered lenses.

Chapter one, “Sliced Tongues, Silent Screams: In Yxta Maya Murray’s *Locas*,” demonstrates how Critical Race Theory (CRT), Latino Critical Race Theory (LatCrit), and feminist legal theory offer a paradigm from which to analyze gang narrative in new contexts. In addition to being silenced, Chicanas were rendered invisible by Chicano cultural nationalism. Interested in the *Chola*’s absence in Chicano movement narratives about opposition and what happens when they are reinserted into gang narratives, this chapter explains how Murray uses literature to bring awareness to racist labeling and the effects it has on cultural identities. This chapter shows how the author uses a narrative framework as a tool for critical self-reflection and to make legal arguments and statements that help to

reconsider the complexity of *Chola* identity. I focus on the way Murray frames her first published novel, *Locas* (1997), with the image of women, in particular, women who fall outside of the traditional norms set by society and who are deemed *locas*. I argue that her writing creates a new mode of understanding women who have gone crazy and at the same time address the crazy spaces of *la vida loca* in which the *Chola* gang members learn to survive. In other words, sometimes going crazy is a coping mechanism and a strategy of survival.

Additionally, I study the *Chola loca*'s counter-narrative to explore how women modify established hierarchies of power, gender and spaces constructed by gangs and to analyze how Murray writes against the notions of women as passive, submissive, objects in competing male-authored gang narratives. This chapter demonstrates how writers also articulate a sense of difference and defiance in writing about *la vida loca*. For example, Murray's representation of young Chicana gang members has turned a critical lens onto Murray the author. According to some critics of her novel *Locas*, her reflection of the lived realities of *la vida loca* is viewed as inauthentic, characterizing Murray as a *holicona* (women who talk too much) for giving voice to the *Chola* and writing about women and violence.

The decay of urban landscape and memory are the subject of chapter two, "La Malflora in Helena María Viramontes' novel *Their Dogs Came With Them*." This chapter examines how Viramontes considers the ill-effects of urban development by showing how urbanization erases the collective knowledge of the barrio by erasing its landscapes. For Viramontes, her deep identification with urban space, specifically the barrio and the half-mile area of East Los Angeles where her mother grew up, intrigued her to write about that

particular landscape to document the urban situation, good or bad, providing a complex reading of barrio life. I probe the ways she breaks historical and contemporary silence by expressing sites of memory in urban landscape. Her use of the landscape humanizes the loss of community ties “freeways amputated the streets into stumped dead ends, and the lives of the neighbors itched like phantom limbs” (120). Viramontes’ attention to the disruption of barrio life and the uprooting of the East L.A. community brings to the surface the effects urban development has on the landscape, community and in particular the Chicanas living in the barrio. The East L.A. landscape brought by urban development creates a sort of labyrinth in which a variety of characters have to learn to maneuver and survive.

In this chapter I locate Turtle’s character “*La Malflora*” (bad flower) a female gang member, against the backdrop of urban landscape to theorize how Viramontes re-inscribes the Chola’s body to write about the trauma, fragmentation, and the loss of historical knowledge. For instance, I analyze the way Viramontes juxtaposes the imposed relationship between the female body’s experience with patriarchal oppression and the kinds of exploitation suffered by the barrio environment. For example, she reflects the destruction of the barrio landscape upon the Chicana body in three significant ways. For one, the fragmentation of a geographical space coincides with the fragmentation of Turtle’s identity and gender performance. Second, the physical rape of Turtle’s character is parallel with the violation of the landscape. Lastly the destruction of the barrio corresponds to the destruction of the family, community cohesiveness and the cultural historical knowledge resulting in the invisibility of the female body at home and on the streets.

While chapter two emphasizes the historical landscape, in chapter three, “Dark and Wicked, *La Llorona* Roams the Urban Landscape,” I outline the development of a new

Llorona legend sprouting from and in conversation with urbanization to explore the narrative similarity between the lore of *La Llorona* and myths about *Cholas*. This chapter takes a closer look at the mediations of individual and social death in the urban landscape to analyze how Viramontes' imagery of *La Llorona's* ghost in urban landscapes serves as a critical documentary, bearing witness to the devastation urban displacement has on the barrio. Additionally, I look at how both Viramontes and Murray write *La Llorona* as a witness to the past in order to bring her memories forward as a haunting to articulate the *Chola's* mobility and survival strategies in the urban landscape and gang subculture. Chapters one and two offer a close reading of the *Chola's* counter-narrative to explore how Chicanas desire to create a new context for women to articulate voice by reclaiming silenced histories and re-visioning the *Chola*. Chapter three then addresses myriad images of good and bad women ascribed to the *Chola* and *La Llorona* in order to better understand the demonizing and dehumanizing ascribed to youth gang subculture. Paying close attention to women's portrayals of *La Llorona* as a *Chola* gang member, I probe the ways they express, women's past exclusions and silencing, making the previously unknown known, telling new stories, and correcting myths.

Then Chapter four, "Queering the *Vato Loco*: Challenging Androcentric Stereotypes," looks at the way many Chicano writers and artist transformed the figure of the Pachuco from victim, pocho, orphan, "gamin dandy" and delinquent to heroic revolutionary icon in movement-era texts. In doing so they recast the Pachuco and Vato into a masculine cultural identity while the Pachuca was treated as secondary in much Chicano cultural production. The introduction of a tough *Chola* masculine aesthetic reflects how the Chicana imaginary charted new frontiers in re-visioning the notions of femininity, and masculinity in gang

subculture is the focus of this chapter. This chapter looks at the way Chicana writers recasts the figures of the *Chola* and the *Cholo* as a means to offer a counter-narrative that's offsets and responds to dominant narratives offered by Chicano texts. I locate Viramontes and Murray's works against the backdrop of the Chicano movement's texts to explore how they recast the *Cholo* to articulate a "queer" *vato loco*. In short I analyze how both Viramontes and Murray recast the *Chola* and the *Cholo*, and what they articulate by appropriating the tough defiant *Cholo* stance to redefine the *Chola*.

The conclusion outlines how Viramontes and Murray engage in reclaiming the *Chola* to create an alternative interpretation of women living *la vida loca*. Their desire to rethink older narratives of *la vida loca* shows their commitment to create new identities reflective of lived realities so that *Cholas* are not rendered invisible or forgotten altogether. Thus, they invite their readers, as did Judith F. Baca's *Las Tres Marías*¹ (1976), to participate in re-visioning a collective identity in relation to other Chicanas.

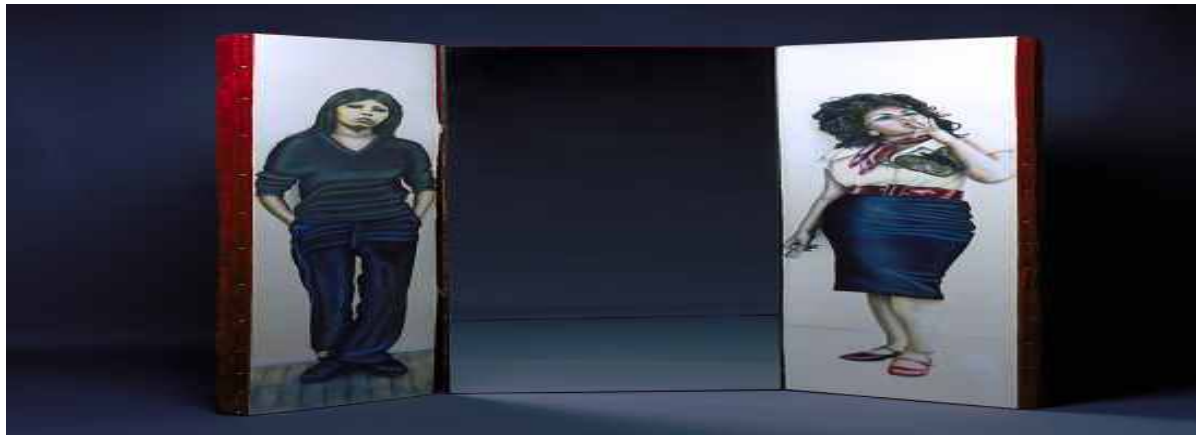


Figure 5 *Las Tres Marías* by Judith F. Baca

¹ Baca's multimedia triptych *Las Tres Marías* features a Pachuca of the 1950s a Chola of the 1970s and a mirror situated in the middle inviting the viewer into the text.

Chapter 1: Sliced Tongues, Silent Screams: In Yxta Maya Murray's *Locas*

Yxta Maya Murray was born in Long Beach, California in 1968. Murray graduated cum laude, with a B.A. in English from the University of California, Los Angeles and earned a J.D, with distinction, from Stanford University in 1993. That same year her article titled “Employer Liability After Johnson Controls: A No Fault Situation” (1993), was published in the *Stanford Law Review*. After Law School, from 1993 to 1995 Murray worked as a law clerk for Judge Harry L. Hupp, in the Central District Court of Los Angeles and for Judge Ferdinand F. Fernandez, in the 9th Circuit, Pasadena. In 1995 Murray joined the faculty of Loyola Law School in Los Angeles, California as an associate professor of Law where she currently teaches courses on the administration of criminal justice, feminist jurisprudence, sexual orientation and the law, sentencing, feminist theory, and law and literature. Murray has written fiction and non-fiction on Latino culture for *Buzz*, the *North America Review*, *Glamour*, *ZYZZYVA*, and *Slake*.

In addition, Murray has contributed numerous articles to law review journals concerning issues of identity, inter and intra-group relations, immigration law, critical pedagogy, affirmative action, and gender issues. Some of her articles, to name a few, are “The Latino-American Crisis of Citizenship” (1998), “Merit Teaching” (1996), “Tragicomedy” (2004), and “The Pedagogy of Violence” (2011). In 1996 Murray was a finalist for the National Magazine Award for fiction. In 1999 she received a Whiting Award for literature and in 2001 earned a MacDowell Fellowship². Murray is also the author of six novels, *The Good Girl's Guide to Getting Kidnapped* (2009), *The King's Gold* (2007), *The*

² The MacDowell Colony is a nonprofit artist residency program that provides up to a two month retreat that includes a private studio and facilitates a balance between focused work and interdisciplinary interaction, among composers, writers, architects, film and video artists.

Jade Queen (2004), *The Conquest* (2002), *What it Takes to Get to Vegas* (1999), and *Locas* (1997).

According to an online interview Murray gave to Book Club Girl, she began writing after graduating from law school (Interview Authors on Air, 2008). At that time Murray worked for a Federal Judge in Los Angeles where she remembers witnessing gang members being sentenced. The courtroom provided for Murray a landscape abundant with diverse and competing readings of what “really” goes on in the judicial process. It also became a site to project the clash between a judicial discourse and a defendant’s counter discourse. For example, Murray explains that allocution³ is the “storytelling” segment in the law, which allows defendants to articulate, through their personal narrative, perhaps for the first time, why they committed the crime. This provides a counter discourse that reveals the oppression and objectification they encountered in society. Murray suggests that the allocution process “is very telling of what goes on in society” (Interview Authors on Air). She recounts one particular defendant’s “storytelling” in which he stated that he did not choose to commit the crime that led to a lifetime sentence. That, in fact, his crime was “an act of rebellion against a racist America” (Interview Authors on Air). Murray describes his demeanor as he spoke as “dramatic, educated and lunatic,” and agrees that there is “some substance in what he said,” because, she also agrees that “there are problems with racism, immigration and the distribution of resources in the United States” (Interview Authors on Air). Other Latinos have expressed the same sentiment as the above defendant described by Murray. For example, Jimmy Santiago Baca in *A Place to Stand* (2001), states, “all I ever wanted was

³ Allocute generally means to formally declare something. In the legal context, it refers to a criminal defendant being given the opportunity before sentencing to offer an explanation for the crime through allocution.

what others had. I didn't want sympathy or pity. I just wanted a fair go at the things they had. But to get these opportunities, I had to go outside the law" (88). Similarly, Piri Thomas in *Down These Mean Streets* (1974), reflects on his life, "I'd pulled these stickups. I'd stand up to that. But who's going to stand up and admit it was this country's racial and economic inequalities that forces so many of us to the brink of insanity, making our anger and frustration so great that we literally blew ourselves over the precipice into deep, dark whirlpools of drugs and crime?" (175). Both Baca and Thomas contextualize their criminality as a strategic response to their oppressed status within dominant society.

Their narratives indicate that unequal access to economic stability and racial inequalities not only perpetuates the subordination of minority groups but also pushes them to criminality. Additionally, their storytelling serves to create a text, where the public is invited to join in the interpretation of their lived criminal experience, as contrasted with the more familiar social and legal interpretation of Latino identities as criminal and undeserving. In Murray's case, the allocution process allowed her to hear firsthand the defendants counter-story at sentencing. However, the fact that she helped sentence them created an inner turmoil, and, as a result, she tells the listeners of *Book Club Girl*, she "began to write at night to rest her inner conflicts" (Interview Authors on Air).

The turn to writing enables Murray to make explicit what she believes is overlooked in the production of legal discourse. Her writings are representative of what Laurel Richardson, in *Fields of Play: Constructing an Academic Life* (1997), terms a "collective story" that "displays an individual's story by narrating the experiences of the social category to which the individual belongs, rather than by telling the particular individual's story or simply retelling the cultural story" (32). As a law professor, Murray has written extensively

on the cultural issues of immigration, affirmative action and inter-group relations. Woven within her writings we find Murray's counter-story or personal narrative, which she uses as a tool to identify the multiple narratives that emerge in her personal life as a student, lawyer and professor. Murray explores what their presence suggests by focusing on what these narratives convey about her own identity as a Latina "outsider" and what they reveal about the intersection of race, gender, class and identity within the U.S. legal system.

For example, in her article "Merit-Teaching" (1995), Murray uses her family's narrative to contest our understandings of "merit" in order to develop a more inclusive meaning of it. First, Murray suggests that there are different sides, which have vastly different notions of fairness and merit that inform the construction of affirmative action. On one side there is the "equal opportunity" and "color blind society," that assumes that all individuals are equal in important aspects, such as racial identification, socio-economic status, and gender and sexual preferences, and that society bases social reality on the premise of equality. The opposite side there are the "Outsiders" who are people of color, women, and sexual minorities whose merit can be seen in "their empathy for disadvantaged people, their developed skills for interpreting and overcoming subordination" all of which are devalued in a color-blind society (1075).

Armed with a gender and race consciousness, Murray then analyzes the notion of merit, that is what is "good" and what is considered "valuable" in society from the perspective of critical race theory and feminist legal theory. Murray notes that critical race theorists and feminist theorists have developed tools that aid in deconstructing the definition of merit, one of them being peeling back the "layers of foundational "truth," bringing to light underlying assumptions which are, inevitably, "white-centered" and "male-centered"

(1087). A second tool developed by these scholars is “storytelling, which “Outsiders,” use in order to “subvert....in group reality and destroy mindset” (1086). Murray applies these tools and uncovers layers of her family history revealing the silenced voices of her Mexican grandmother María Aldrete Adastik, her mother Thelma Diaz Quinn, as well as her own. Including “the contributions of previously silenced voices” allows Murray, to challenge dominant theories about law and justice allowing for a diverse interpretation of the issues of merit, affirmative action, citizenship, and color-blindness (1075).

It takes determination to achieve voice and selfhood, to take control of one’s life from another, making one’s self-heard and overcoming silence. María Aldrete Adastik, did not resign herself to her circumstances in Mexico. María explains to Murray that, although she was only sixteen and pregnant, she made the choice to leave her husband, when she learned he was having affairs with other women. Aware that Mexican culture seeks to control women’s sexuality and bodies through restrictive rules, María understood that her marital separation meant she could face danger “not only because her estranged husband could respond violently but also because estranged wives and their daughters were devalued by the larger society” (1097).

For six years María and her daughter were forced to live with her mother “confined to strict rules imposed by Mexican society and her estranged husband” (1093). María reveals that in México a woman is forgiven if she is widowed but if she is divorced she will always be at fault. She explains how a divorced woman she says is associated with such a bad reputation to the extent that no man will marry her daughter with good intentions (1094). Aware of the consequences of being labeled a deviant and the effects it would have on her daughter, María made the decision to marry an American man she barely knew and move to

the United States. Murray notes that her grandmother's personal experience with oppression and subjugation are key in developing empathy, which she adds, "is a form of merit currently unrecognized by the majority of society" (1096). Furthermore, Murray notes that her grandmother's ability to recognize her oppressive situation and commit to providing a better life, both for herself and her daughter, illustrates "her ability to take productive, adaptive, resistant action in the face of intractability" all of which are a form of merit (1098). María's story also illustrates "less visible forms of oppression" caused by marital separation that include "alienation, fear caused by status and increased vulnerability", which Murray contends "may not always be taken into account by privileged policymakers who have never been exposed to these conditions" (1097). Thus she suggests that her grandmother's lived experience and "learned methods of moral coping" can be extended beyond the private realm of the family to the public sphere "to achieve an enlightened societal understanding of merit" (1099).

Murray's mother Thelma Diaz Quinn's story of becoming a role model for her Latino students "expands the definition of what "merit" is by example, skill, and commitment" (1103). Thelma's lived experience with subordination and discrimination gave her a richer perspective on minority student's experience and coping tools that the majority might not understand. She concluded that their stories "may contain concrete, particular details illuminating modes of value which largely have been ignored" (1886). In Murray's life these two women are examples of empowered role models who managed to combine different ideologies, to create their own beliefs system of survival while overcoming Mexican society's destructive myths about sexuality and women's roles.

The personal counter-stories Murray includes in her scholarly law articles are grounded in Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Latino/a Critical Theory (LatCrit). In the introduction to the new edition of *Critical Race Theory: The Cutting Edge* (2013), Richard Delgado explains that Critical Race Theory emerged in the mid-1970s as a direct response to what law scholars saw as a regression in the accomplishments made during the civil rights movements. Delgado contends that out of the disappointment with the slow advances being made in racial reform, CRT emerged as a framework to theorize what accounts for minorities experiences of racial subordination in the United States. This framework provided a way to address how systems of power operate to oppress people of color under a colorblind ideology.

Similarly, María Malagon, Lindsay Pérez Huber, and Veronica Velez in their article “Our Experiences, Our Methods: Using Grounded Theory to Inform a Critical Race Theory Methodology Education and Pedagogy” (2010), explain that CRT sprang from a specific historical context that produced a new “racial structure in the United States” post-civil rights movement (255). CRT scholars argued that this racial structure “was maintained by a colorblind ideology that hid and protected white privilege, while masking racism within the rhetoric of “meritocracy” and “fairness”” (255). Focused on uncovering the embeddedness of racism and white privilege that lead to a colorblind ideology, CRT becomes a theoretical source for other disciplines to draw from. Due to the historical forces shaping Latina/o narratives in the United States in recent years, scholars have written about the unique intersections among Latinas/os and CRT, known as Latina/o Critical Race Theory (LatCrit) Malagon, Pérez Huber and Velez, employ “CRT to examine the particular ways multiple forms of oppression intersect to shape the experiences of Latinas/os in the U.S.” (255).

Additionally they contend that LatCrit contributes to the CRT framework by examining “the intersection of race, class, and gender while also acknowledging the unique forms of subordination within the Latina/o community based on immigration status, language, phenotype, and ethnicity” (256). Correspondingly, Tara J. Yosso notes that LatCrit expands CRT framework beyond the Black/White binary to include the cultural knowledge and racialized experience of Chicana/o, Latina/o, Native American and Asian American communities (“Critical Race Theory” 5).

Gorge Martínez further explains that one of the major points of interest of Latino/a Critical theory is to “critically scrutinize the evolution of law” (“Narrative in Law” 787). CRT and LatCrit scholars critique the exclusion of narrative testimony in court hearings. In particular Delgado notes that such exclusion of “counter storytelling” rejects facts which help explain an outgroups⁴ point of view (“Storytelling” 2413). Supporting Delgado’s argument, Martínez notes that the use of narrative in law is a tool to introduce a perspective that is silenced in mainstream legal discourse (“Narrative in Law” 683). Thus, injecting the counter-stories provided by Jimmy Santiago Baca, Piri Thomas, and the defendant described by Murray, fills in the gap of traditional legal discourse with images and perspectives allowing an alternative view of reality.

Furthermore, stories are essential to a sense of “self” Martínez reinforces the power of telling when he notes how the use of narrative “provides a way for minorities to achieve authenticity” (“Narrative in Law” 692). Storytelling thus offers both the out-group and the dominant group the opportunity, as Delgado stresses to “enrich their own reality” and acquire

⁴ Delgado defines outgroups as “groups whose marginality defines the boundaries of the mainstream, whose voice and perspective – whose consciousness – has been suppressed, devalued, and abnormalized” (2412)

the “ability to see the world through other’s eyes” (“Storytelling,” 2439). As distinguished by the scholars of CRT and LatCrit both theories have been especially influential in developing frameworks that seek to challenge mainstreams legal discourse and dominant ideology that have the effect of devaluing and subordinating minority groups.

Murray along with other LatCrit scholars, take part in analyzing the way society constructs, racializes, or “others,” various Latino groups in different ways. By writing articles in law review journals that defend equality of opportunity for all persons within the economic, political and educational spheres of society, LatCrit scholars take up the issue to challenge laws that discriminate minorities. In her article “The Latino-American Crisis of Citizenship” (1997), Murray examines the discriminating effects of immigration law on Latino social identity. She argues, in part, that the stigmatization of Latino identity and Latino intercultural tensions can be traced back to the enforcement of various “government acts, such as repressive immigration enforcement tactics and language laws” along with the “surrounding political rhetoric” that “characterize Latino-Americans as pestilential invaders who speak a divisive, even dangerous, language” (“Crisis of Citizenship,” 506). She also contends that stigmatization is dangerous and leads to a “crisis of citizenship” for Latino-Americans. Drawing on LatCrit and CRT, Murray reviews case law and legislative records while injecting her personal narrative as a critical tool through which she scrutinizes the evolution of law and its misrepresentation of Latino identities. Murray’s view of Latino’s dual identity crisis can be viewed in her own “lived experience.” These lenses allow her to illustrate the emergence of a crisis of citizenship in Latino communities.

A closer reading of Murray’s article reveals her “lived experience” as a Latina, a key issue in her academic writings, which, I argue, has not been explored in the criticism of her

novel *Locas*. For example, the narrative of her lived experience as a Latina law clerk produces knowledge about systems of power, and their improper construction of Latino identity. Through storytelling Murray recounts the first time she came across the word “Wetback” in a Congressional record and states that it was at that precise moment that she became aware of the history behind the crisis of citizenship in the United States. First, the conflation evident between Murray’s Latina identity and its signification is mirrored by a conflation between Latina/o identity crises and racism in American law.

For instance, Murray’s discussion of the concept of wetback highlights the use of racism, in this case racist labeling and the effects it has on cultural identities. Her initial response was to hate the history and the “makers of that history” for what she saw as “the denial of rights, and the intentional mixed-messages that Congress sent to the world” (“Crisis of Citizenship” 522). This observation of the dominant culture’s xenophobic construction of Latino identity, leads her to question the documented/undocumented binary Latino identity and to suggest that there is an identity crisis being manipulated by the dominant discourse. She argues that Latino-Americans “have a powerful identification and empathy with non-U.S. Latinos” whom either weren’t “lucky enough to be born here or have the proper papers” (“Crisis of Citizenship” 516). However, she explains that identifying with a group dehumanized and racialized by political rhetoric “triggers a Latino-American identity crisis” which, she argues, has long been developing (“Crisis of Citizenship” 516).

Many CRT and LatCrit theorist would agree with her analysis. For example, Yasso demonstrates that LatCrit theory “extends critical race discussions to address the layers of racialized subordination that comprise Chicana/o, Latina/o experiences” (“Critical Race” 5). Therefore, by employing a historical approach, Murray is able to scrutinize the evolution of

law that contributes to the development of a Latino-American identity crisis. Giving a historical account of immigration policy⁵ Murray traces the stigmatization of Latinos and their language to argue that such policies create an “identity paradox for Latinos living in the United States. The “master narrative” of immigration policy is constructed around the issue of a “secure border” which Murray argues, produces images of Latinos as “aliens” and a “strange, almost inhuman invasion of darkness, hungry mouths, thieves, and lazy channel-surfing welfare scammers” (“Crisis of Citizenship” 529). These images she contends, “impede” a “healthy development of Latino-American identity” (“Crisis of Citizenship” 529) and trigger a divide between both groups.

Murray illustrates that those who align themselves with the rhetoric of “secure border” view themselves as ““patriots” who are trying to protect the sovereign from foreign invasion” (“Crisis of Citizenship” 530). Furthermore, Murray recounts that the evoked images of dangerous criminals along with immigration policies that allow “raids” and “sweeps⁶” and the “expanding enactment of English-only laws” create a large divide “between these Latino “aliens” and “We the People” (“Crisis of Citizenship” 530). Thus she concluded that Latino-Americans must then choose to either identify with non-U.S. Latinos or “distance themselves from their Latin heritage in temporal, spatial, or physical terms”

⁵ Murray provides a historical “road map” of the methods officials have used to exploit Latinos in the labor market. An example is the 1942 Bracero Program, which permitted Mexican citizens to work temporarily in the U.S. in the agricultural labor market. She notes that the its “temporary and backbreaking work, reinforced the national perception of Latinos as being good for cheap labor but unfit for inclusion in the American community” (Latino-American 520). She also notes the “draconian measures” the U.S. federal government takes to oust them when fears of invasion and border security arise notes as an example, “Operation Wetback” initiated in 1954, to “combat the “wetback problem” by apprehending over one million undocumented Mexicans and sending them back to Mexico” (Latino-American 521).

⁶ INS official target areas where undocumented immigrants are suspected to work, as well as their homes, and schools in attempts to deport those residing in the U.S. illegally.

learning “to navigate between two competing ethnic identities” (“Crisis of Citizenship” 531). However, performing a dual-identity is not always easy to navigate and it’s not necessarily pleasant.

In a section of her article “The Latino-American Crisis of Citizenship” titled “The Cuban Mariel and MiniRitz Carlton: A Study in Immigrant Rights and Legal Fictions” Murray uses a narrative framework as a tool for critical self-reflection and to make legal arguments and statements. As a law clerk in the Ninth Circuit, Murray reflects on the fact that the majority of the defendants she encountered were persons of color with whom she identified with at some level. Her position as a law clerk called for her to be judicially neutral, however her Latina identity urged her to question the harsh reality of the legal system. Being assigned to the Barrera-Echavarria⁷ case triggered in Murray her own dual-identity crisis, which she used to navigate between two competing spaces. Although the only connection between Murray and Barrera-Echavarria was a Spanish name, she felt a deeper connection to him because her family also had crossed a border to enter the United States. However, what distinguished her family’s status from that of Barrera-Echavarria was her grandmother’s choice to marry an American citizen. Her identification with Barrera-Echavarria caused an internal debate around the fact that he was jailed without trial because he was not a citizen. After attending the oral argument of the Barrera-Echavarria case, Murray came to a resolution that the Ninth Circuit operated under a legal fiction and makes a

⁷ Alexis Barrera-Echavarria is one of the 125,000 Cuban immigrants sent to U.S. by Fidel Castro as a response to President Jimmy Carter’s political move inviting Cuban immigrants to come to the U.S. in 1980. Barrera-Echavarria was detained at the border and deemed “excluded” under the provisions of the Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1952 that stated that anyone with a criminal record in his home country were “excludable aliens” (Latino-American 537).

compelling case that legal fiction was utilized in legal discourse to justify the denial of the Fourth Amendment to Barrera-Echavarria.

First, by utilizing “entry fiction”⁸ the court leads us to “imagine [how] Barrera-Echavarria is stopped and, presumably, is still levitating at the Florida border” (“Crisis of Citizenship” 543). Identifying the inner workings and role of legal fiction in court matters allows Murray to develop the argument that not all Latinos are afforded due process in the United States. In essence, the United States has the task to put into effect laws that seem rational and just in order to insure the detention of bodies and the distribution of rights. In consequence, the courts develop the “entry fiction” to conceal the fact that someone “living on United States soil, could be deprived of what otherwise appear to be a fundamental rights” and be detained without trial (“Crisis of Citizenship” 544). Second, the fact that Barrera-Echavarria’s counsel failed to provide evidence of the punitive conditions of Leavenworth, where Barrera-Echavarria remained detained for almost nine years by the INS allowed “the court to transform Leavenworth into the Ritz Carlton at oral argument” (“Crisis of Citizenship” 543). One judge argued that counsel had not provided documented evidence to make a clear distinction “between being housed at Leavenworth and being housed at the Ritz Carlton” while another chimed in “How do we know that there’s not a mini Ritz Carlton inside of Leavenworth, where he romps with his friends and watches television and just has a

⁸ Barrera-Echavarria was considered to be an “excluded alien,” who in a legal sense has not entered this country “although officials still let him onto American soil by virtue of what is known as an “entry fiction.” This doctrine provides that aliens, who are “physically...allowed within [the U.S.] borders pending a determination of admissibility are [still] legally considered to be detained at the border and hence never having effected entry into this country. Barrera-Echavarria was thereafter granted parole, but soon began to commit crimes: stealing cars, burglarizing, and committing armed robbery. In 1985, after he finished serving his sentences in a state penitentiary, officials transferred Barrera-Echavarria to a series of federal prisons, including Leavenworth and Lompoc where the INS “detained” him for most of the next nine years” (Latino-American 538).

gay time?” (“Crisis of Citizenship” 540-1). Murray explains, that “Courts cannot assume facts not in the record” yet, “the reluctance” of the court “to at least recognize the reality of prison” and, their fictitious construction of the Ritz Carlton story “mask the painful reality of prison” (“Crisis of Citizenship” 545).

In summary, the outcome of Barrera-Echavarria highlights that “some non-U.S. Latinos are less entitled to justice than the average person” by identifying with non-U.S. Latinos as she identified with Barrera-Echavarria, Latinos, feel they lie outside the U.S. collective (“Crisis of Citizenship” 545). Hence, Murray is able to address the systematic construction of Latina/o identity as an inhuman threat to the U.S. and identifies Latina/o cultural identity as a space to practice knowledge and coalition building.

LatCrit projects, according to Delgado, provide “a critical space for coalition building” that transgresses “socio-spatial boundaries” (“Storytelling” 306). This space enables Murray to engage in a critical dialogue about community and coalition building. In the following section of that same article titled “Pugilists, Flags, and The Fight Over What It Means To Be “Mexican”: A Case Study in The Crisis of Citizenship,” Murray frames the intercultural tension that arose between Mexican and Mexican-Americans in East Los Angeles in late 1996, pending the fight between Julio César Chávez and Oscar De La Hoya around the issue of the Latina/o identity crisis. She notes that the intercultural tensions were motivated by concerns that De La Hoya, a Mexican-American from the Los Angeles, intended to take the championship title from the native Mexican champion Julio César Chávez. Interested in the dynamics of identity politics Murray examines the relationship between people that identify as “real” Mexicans and those who identify as Mexican-Americans. In this section, Murray again employs her personal narrative to provide an

insider's view and to illustrate the effects of being labeled inauthentic, or furthermore, a sell-out has on Latina/o identity.

Identifying as a Mexican-American herself, Murray is taken aback by the negative labels expressed to identify De La Hoya and recounts how she also has been labeled “coconut” and “pocho”, which therefore provides her a real point of reference from which to empathize and identifying with De La Hoya (“Crisis of Citizenship” 206). She notes that many Mexican and Mexican-Americans felt a dislike for De La Hoya and labeled him a “pretty boy” and “sell-out”, even though he seemed to embrace his bicultural identity by wearing both the Mexican and American flags on his boxing shorts (“Crisis of Citizenship” 502).

Chávez, on the other hand, was a Mexican national, only spoke Spanish and stuck to a narrative that stressed his humble beginnings. Additionally Chávez was considered a national hero that had everything to do with Mexico and not the United States. It seemed to Murray that De La Hoya was not “considered “authentic” enough or that, at least as an assimilated” Mexican-American, he paled “in comparison with the undeniable brownness of Chávez” (“Crisis of Citizenship” 563). Murray’s story provides another piece of the puzzle regarding the history of identity politics and it reinforces that, through its rhetoric, policies, and actions, the U.S. creates an atmosphere that pits Latinos against each other.

In the above article, Murray utilized the theories outlined by Delgado in CRT and LatCrit that claim the value of the use of counter-stories in law and legal scholarship as a tool to debunk the dominant groups meta-narrative. As Murray noted in the section “MiniRitz Carlton,” the dominant group position in society, allowed them to view their “legal fiction” narrative as unqualified truth. Thus the repeated telling of the story itself becomes a

constructed reality for its storytellers. Consequently because of its dominant position, these narratives often acquire the status of societal norms and over time are seen as natural (Delgado, "Storytelling"). Moreover, the counter-stories, including Murray's own personal narrative that she includes in her legal scholarship, become an important strategic tool for her to offer both the dominant group and the out-group the opportunity to "enrich their own reality" and most importantly acquire the "ability to see the world through other's eyes" (Delgado, "Storytelling" 2439). Therefore, CRT and LatCrit becomes a theoretical source for other disciplines to draw from.

Literary critic Carl Gutiérrez-Jones draws from CRT in his analysis of Chicano literature and notes how CRT has been deployed in the works of Chicano artists in ways that offer potential for addressing the "stereotypical ascription of "criminality" to Chicanos" suggesting that it "must be read in the context of larger U.S. institutional aims, including the maintenance of Chicanos and Mexicanos as a malleable, productive underclass" (*Rethinking the Borderlands*, 3). He contends that Chicano artists "project their own version of the courtroom, and of legal culture in general, as a critical arena of resistance" (4). Adding that their framework deconstructs "the notion that crimes are a deviation from an otherwise just and egalitarian code of behavior" (4). Some contemporary Chicana/o writers have employed their counter-stories to document life in the barrio and as interventions against the disparities, injustice, and discrimination they encounter. For example, works by Chicano authors have challenged prior narratives that pathologized Chicano and Latino youth particularly the Pachuco and his predecessor the Cholo as delinquent and worthless.

As Luis Rodríguez observes, "youth...aren't in gangs to be criminals, killers, or prison inmates. For them a gang embraces who they are, gives them the incipient authority

they need to eventually control their lives, the empowerment that other institutions including schools and families often fail to provide” (25). Therefore, for some youth, the gang offers a stable sense of community, belonging, self-respect, and empowerment, while for others it affords them a source of income and emotional stability that replaces the role of the traditional family.

Other such works that offer a counter-story to dominant Chicano youth stereotypes include José Montoya’s poem *El Louie*, Luis Rodríguez’s autobiography *Always Running: La Vida Loca: Gang Days in L.A.* (1993), Miguel Duran’s *Don’t Spit on My Corner* (1992), Luis Valdez’s play *Zoot-Suit* (1978), Piri Thomas *These Mean Streets* (1967), which shed light on the issues of delinquency and reinscribe the Pachuco/Cholo identity with new meaning. The constant themes that weave their narratives together are the low socioeconomic situations of the barrio that result from scarce educational resources and high rates of unemployment along with exclusion of urban youth from a dominant society.

Sliced Tongues & Silent Screams

The above-mentioned works are part of a male-centered discourse that defined earlier Chicano ideology and consequently marginalized and silenced women’s voices in the interest of a cohesive solidarity. Concerned with tackling the issues of social justice, racism and discrimination, many Chicanos discouraged women from addressing other forms of oppression, fearing that it would take away from the common struggle against race and class oppression. In the introduction of *Chicana Feminist Thought: The Basic Historical Writings* (1997), Alma M. García notes the limited attention or focus given to the roles of women, gender issues and the overall contributions made by women to the Chicano movement (11). Instead, Chicano cultural nationalism centered on the ideology of *Chicanismo*, to appear

unified on all fronts, which García said “emphasized cultural pride as a source of political unity and strength capable of mobilizing Chicanos and Chicanas into an oppositional political group within the dominant political landscape in the United States” (*Chicana Feminist Thought*, 3). However, the unity was predicated on women fitting into secondary roles as ‘Ideal Chicanas’ drawn out by Chicano cultural nationalism. García points out the meaning of the “Ideal Chicana” of “El Movimiento” as “representing strong, long-suffering women who endured social injustice, maintained the family as a safe “haven in a heartless world” for their families, and, as a result, assured the survival of Chicano culture” and family (6). Hence, the meaning of family or *familia* in Chicano culture remains crucial in the formation and maintenance of a Chicana/o politics and community. However, because the concept of *familia* relies heavily on narrowly defined roles for men and women that extend from the private to the public sphere, the concept of *familia* puts into effect a sexist and homophobic belief reinforcing gender biases already present in the Chicano community.

The glorification and romanticization of the Chicano family and the traditional role of women is present in the films *Zoot Suit*, *American Me*, the novel *Always Running: La Vida Loca: Gang Days in L.A.*, and the poem *El Louie*, as well as other contemporary Chicano works. These works about youth delinquency give voice to the Pachuco and Vato, offering a counter discourse to a dominant story often seen only in news media reports. Within these narratives of Chicano counter history and cultural identity the Pachuca or Chola is muted in silence because she does not fit into the paradigm of the “Ideal Chicana.”

For example, Luis Valdez’s play *Zoot Suit* is framed around a male cultural identity and male desire. The Pachuco character initiates the film using a switchblade to tear apart a full screen newspaper as he address the audience with the following words

It was the secret fantasy of every bato
In our out of the *pachucada*
To put on the Zoot Suit and play the Myth
Más chucote que la chingada (Luis Valdez, *Zoot Suit and Other Plays*

26)

As Rosa Linda Fregoso notes, “the depiction of the Pachuco as desire normalizes a masculine content for Chicano cultural identity” (*The Bronze Screen* 37). Thus, the notion of identity as male-centered negates Chicana agency, as did the term *Chicanismo*. Fregoso also notes that the categories available to Chicanas in Valdez’s play are “the virgin or the whore, the long suffering mother or the ‘cheap broad’” all of which make the Pachuco their “object of desire” (*The Bronze Screen*, 38). Hanks’s mother for example, represents the stereotypical long-suffering mother who is named appropriately Dolores (the Spanish word for pain). In the one and only scene in which Dolores appears, she is in the traditional role of the mother, in the kitchen preoccupied with feeding the family and the safety of her Pachuco sons Hank and Rudy. As she serves dinner Lupe, her daughter, sneaks out the window to avoid her parents’ gaze and criticism of her female zoot suit. Lupe’s Pachuca attire, hair, and makeup are clear indicators to her parents of her rejection of their social sanctions of femininity. Dolores tells Lupe, as she forces her to come back inside, that “she looks like a *puta* I mean Pachuca” to which Lupe comments, “It’s the latest American style like the guys’ drapes” looking at her brother Hank for support to which he doesn’t respond.

On the other side of the spectrum, Hank’s father uses the terms innocent and young to describe his *compadre*’s daughter, and Hank’s loyal girlfriend Della. She comes to represent the long-suffering virgin, insistent on waiting for Hank to return from the Navy to marry her.

However, when Hank finds himself in jail rather than the Navy, Della continues to express her loyalty. She assures him that she will wait for him.

Another female character Bertha, Hank's ex-girlfriend, Della's opposite, is loud, sexual and has an in your face attitude. Hank's father describes her as "the one with the tattoo" a sign that marks her as a Pachuca. Additionally her use of profanity and vulgarity such as "Mira you got no hold on me, Cabrón" also ties Bertha to a Pachuca identity. The representations of these women reflect the values linked to gender roles and identity formation. To not follow instructions, to dress in new and provocative ways and to speak out as do Bertha and Lupe profile the good/bad women dichotomy of Chicano culture.

The female characters, Dolores, and Della represent how women should behave. That is they should be good, faithful, silent and strong, all characteristics tied to the Virgen de Guadalupe. Additionally by centering the female characters mother, sister, and love interest, around Hank the Pachuco the "female desire is subsumed within a universal male desire" (Fregoso, *The Bronze Screen*, 37). Consequently, Fregoso suggests that, "centering the play around and privileging the Pachuco" Valdez thereby "interpellates all subjects, Chicanas and Chicanos, into new relations, into inhabiting the brotherhood of Chicanismo" (*The Bronze Screen*, 37). Therefore, Valdez fails to recount the stories of women, in particular the Pachuca, making of her a passive agent in the battles that were taking place during the Zoot Suit era.

In other Chicano works, the Pachuca's body is symbolically mapped by geographical, physical, and cultural ideologies. For example, geographically the Pachuca should remain in the confinements of the home and not venture out to the streets especially not looking like a Pachuca, like the characters Lupe and Bertha in *Zoot-Suit*. If the Pachuca deviates from

those ideological spaces, she is open to physical violence. Therefore, the violence inflicted during the Zoot Suit Riots was not restricted to the Pachuco body. We witness the sexual violence inflicted upon the Pachucas in the 1992 film *American Me*.

In the opening scene depicting the Zoot Suit Riots, Esperanza, a Pachuca, is raped by a gang of white Navy service men while her male partner a Pachuco is beaten and stripped of his cloths. Esperanza turns out to be Santana's mother, the leader of the Mexican Mafia gang. Much more pertinent for the understanding of the workings of female fragility, Edward James Olmos, the director of the film, frames the downfall of the traditional *familia* and the rise of the gang family in relation to Esperanza's gender and sex. For example, the film locates gender in a discussion of the deterioration of *familia* through Esperanza's rape, which marks her as *La Malinche*, a passive victim of rape, consequently marking Santana as *el hijo de La Chingada*. Suspecting that his son might be the offspring of a white soldier, Pedro, Santana's father cuts him off emotionally, leaving Santana to look for other forms of male bonding. As a result Santa forms his gang, called La Primera, in Los Angeles.

The account of Esperanza's behavior elevates the potential for not only physical but also familial disempowerment. Suggesting for one that, if Esperanza was geographically in her parent's home of origin, in this case México, and not the U.S. she would have not encountered U.S. sailors. Second if she would physically be in the private realm of the home instead of the public space of the streets then she wouldn't have defied her parent's cultural expectations of a dutiful daughter, and therefore she wouldn't have been open to physical violence and disempowerment. Therefore, the message in the opening scene of *American Me* is very powerful in that it suggests that venturing beyond the "safe" confinements of the home subjects women to physical violence. Moreover, the rape of a female body then is

symbolic in the way it is used to communicate the blame of the downfall of the Chicano *familia* on women. What this film fails to reveal is Esperanza's voice recounting the effects the physical violence had on her person.

A more contemporary representation of gangs is seen in Luis Rodríguez's, autobiography *Always Running: La Vida Loca: Gang Days in L.A.* (1993), in which he recounts his journey into a drug-infested world of gang violence. Rodríguez writes of post-World War II East Los Angeles, where the Pachucos have taken up a new identity. The Pachuco is no longer Valdez's heroic cultural icon but instead a burned out *veterano*. Rodríguez also includes a variety of women characters that serve as girlfriends, mothers, sisters and homegirls. Payasa, whose name means, "clown" in Spanish, one of Rodríguez's girlfriends, represents the demonized Chola who becomes a *loca*, a mad woman who has literally gone crazy. Rodríguez tells us that her *veterano* brothers would beat her to make her stronger and "would slice her tongue with a razor" which made her "meaner, crazier—unpredictable" (106). The other homegirls in his autobiography are also objectified and denied agency, reduced to sexual objects to be shared between his homeboys. In a scene described by Rodríguez, his homeboys participated in the rape of two young Cholas that according to Rodríguez must have been between 12 and 14 years old. Rodríguez claims that he took no part in the rape but did observe his boy Paco manhandling one of the girls. He describes that "her legs were spread outward, and a torn underwear twisted around an ankle [...] her eyes closed, her mouth opened unconscious, but as if in a silent scream" (122). The silent screams and sliced tongues not only represent the violence women encounter at the hands of men but more symbolically the physical slicing of Payasa's tongue and the silent

scream of an unconscious female simultaneously purge women's voices from the Chicano nationalist discourse in which Rodríguez, Valdez and Olmos participate.

Rosa Linda Fregoso in her critique and review of Luis Rodríguez's autobiography *Always Running*, and Luis Valdez's play *Zoot-Suit* as well as the film *American Me*, notes, that the mythical male image of the Pachuco displaces and ignores the figure of the Pachuca. As she observes, these works don't offer a space for a resistant Pachuca voice, instead there are only three options they can draw from the "self-renounced female," the "passive virgin," or La Malinche the figure of promiscuity and traitor (*The Bronze Screen* 77). She suggests perhaps that the production of a pachuca-chola-homegirl subject of resistance has not been explored "precisely because her body defies, provokes, challenges as it interrogates the traditional familial basis" introducing disorder into the "constructions of the Chicano nation" (*The Bronze Screen* 90). For example, when Lupe, Bertha, Esperanza, Payasa, along with the unnamed women in these male centered narratives, stepped out of the very rigid defined roles available to them, they were labeled *putas* and considered to be *locas* subjected to physical violence and rendered voiceless. Fregoso concludes by calling out to Chicana feminists to take on the Pachuca and Chola subjects as agents of resistance and as an "oppositional practice" (*The Bronze Screen* 90). However, it has proven difficult to articulate a *Chola* subject's voice of resistance because she is figured as excessive, violent, a street-roamer, scandalous and belongs to a group of youth that is marginalized within its own cultural group.

For many Chicanas, resistance is both ethnic and gendered and their resistance takes many forms. Tey Diana Rebolledo and Eliana S. Rivero in *Infinite Divisions: An Anthology of Chicana Literature* (1993), point out that the silence of women has been a major theme for

many Chicana writers. María Herrera-Sobek articulates the forced silencing experienced by some women and echoes that theme in “Silent Screams:”

There is
So much pain
Inside our throats
We are afraid
That if we speak
We’ll yell
We’ll shriek
We’ll moan
We’ll scream
We’ll cry
And so
We stay
Quiiiiiiit.

(Naked Moon, 87)

Lucha Corpi in *Delia’s Song* echoes a similar theme as she describes the process of being silenced and coming to voice through her writing:

I learned silence, painfully, slowly, as one learns to write, stroke by stroke until the letters’ form a sound is etched on the whiteness of the paper, and voice uncovers its reason for being.

Silence then is simply the pause between words, the breath that keeps them alive, the secret element that spans the territory between them.

I have feared you so, Silence, my oldest enemy, my dearest friend. I surrendered my tongue to you once, freely, and I learned your secret. I learned to write. (*Delia’s Song*, 150)

As noted in the works above, early male centered Chicano literary works lacked the vocabulary to address female oppression. Chabram-Dernersesian, notes that this short

sightedness derives from the Chicano Movement's nationalistic ideology, which she terms as a "discourse of exclusion and betrayal" toward women ("I Throw Punches" 84). While other Chicana/o writings unconsciously participate in the silencing of women voices, repeating the same type of silencing Chicano literature as a whole experienced in mainstream literary criticism, contemporary Chicana feminist writers have actively critiqued the Movement's nationalist ideology and participate in the introduction of previously abject subjectivity within Chicana/o discourse. For example, Chicana feminists like Corpi and Herrera-Sobek who voiced women's issues but were identified with La Malinche "in her traditionally defined aspect of traitor" have reinterpreted such images to debunk the myths that malign women (Rebolledo, *Women Singing* 71).

Contemporary Chicana works have taken up the challenge, to re-interpret other stereotypes. For instance, the rebellious tough *Chola* is re-inscribed as an agent of resistance giving voice to women that are viewed as *locas*. For example, Adelina Anthony's *La Hociconas Series: An Original X-X-Xicana Comedic Triptych* is a three-part series that highlights queer-Xicana aesthetics. The triptych includes performances based on the personalities of three characters "La Angry Xicana?!", "La Sad Girl...", and "La Chismosa!!!" all of which are *hociconas* (loud mouths) that speak out. In the third monologue "La Chismosa" (female gossip) Anthony humanizes and modernizes the goddess *Tlazolteotl* linking her to La Chismosa a pregnant Chola who embodies the female deity. Gloria Anzaldúa explains that Mesoamerican fertility and Earth goddesses like *Coatlicue* or "Serpent Skirt" who is goddess and monster, life giver and destroyer, "possessed both upper light and underworld dark aspects" (49). As a result of the goddesses' dual identity of creation and destruction, she is split into good and evil by the male-

dominated Azteca-Mexica culture (49). Anzaldúa contends that the feared “*Coatlicue*, the Serpent goddess, and her more sinister aspects, *Tlazolteotl* and *Cihuacoatl*, were “darkened” and disempowered” driven underground by giving them monstrous attributes” (49). Tey Diana Rebolledo in *Women Singing in The Snow* (1995), similarly explains that *Tlazolteotl* was characterized as:

Goddess of filth and as such is linked to that aspect of Coatlicue. Filth, in the Aztec world as in Christian, world, was symbolic of sin, but Tlazolteotl has four phases, related to the four phases on the moon, and in the third phase, she has the power to cleanse or “forgive” all sin (50).

La Chismosa the pregnant *Chola* wields the power to create and devour life because she smokes, drinks, all while pregnant, therefore embodying both the sacred and profane of *Coatlicue* and *Tlazolteotl*. Anthony’s work is particularly interesting in that it links queer and ghetto subjectivities to a sacred force. For example, La Chismosa is marked by sin because she represents a queer subject who wears a dildo suggesting that she is a lesbian. At the end of her performance in the closing scene, La Chismosa crouches in *Tlazolteotl* position as she grunts fiercely as corn rushes from between her legs simulating the breaking of water in the birth process. At this point the stage goes black and moments later the lights go back on to the sound of Shakira’s song “Loca.” On the stage lays the *Chola*’s black bandana on top of the scattered corn suggesting that La Chismosa, the pregnant *Chola* gave birth to herself. Through the birth process Anthony symbolically recovers abject subjectivities mainly the *Chola loca* gang member, and recasts her as *Tlazolteotl*.

Similarly Murray, writing from a LatCrit position, offers a competing interpretation of the *Chola loca* and Latino urban youth that gives both minority and majority groups the

opportunity to “enrich their own reality” and acquire the “ability to see the world through others’ eyes” (Delgado, *Critical Race Theory* 109). Just as her grandmother and mother did, Murray developed an empathy for Latinos that grew out of a particular knowledge of oppression instilled in her by these two women in her life. Murray deliberately chose to situate herself at the margins of academia by injecting her personal narrative to give voice to silent stories, which dispute legal discourse that racializes and oppresses Latino communities. It is in that space where her stories intertwine with her experiences as a Latina law professor that Murray produces fiction that acknowledges and validates the presences of Latinas navigating untraditional spaces. I turn now to Murray’s first published novel, *Locas* (1997), to analyze a female interpretation of *la vida loca* and probe into what is at stake when Chicanas feminist speak out about *la vida loca*.

Finding Tongues From Which To Speak

Murray frames the novel with the image of women, in particular women who fall outside of the traditional norms set by society and that are deemed *locas*, women that have gone crazy. Most clearly, the novel addresses the crazy spaces of *la vida loca* in which the Chola gang member, must learn to survive. Murray approaches the figure of the *Chola*, looking at her through a CRT and LatCrit lens, engaging her readers in a critique of the social, economic, familial, and cultural conditions that help produce the *Chola* subject. In a letter to the editor of *Los Angeles Times Book Review* (1997), Murray acknowledges that writing characters that are consistent with madwomen or *locas* is dangerous yet her artistic representation of them is consistent with what she sees as social justice (*Los Angeles Times* 10).

A distinctive feature that Murray, as an author and a law scholar, shares with the *Chola loca* characters she writes about is a strong resistance to silence. In literature this attribute of resistance is considered negative and inauthentic in women, but valued in men. For example, as a law scholar Murray's use of legal storytelling as a form of resistance, of giving voice to historically voiceless communities is seen by formalist conservatives as an illegitimate form of writing. However, the act of writing, of telling one's story, of coming into voice for author and activist Luis Rodríguez about the existence of what he calls *locura* has received recognition and subsequently has been included in many college curriculums. Rodríguez's memoir *Always Running* bears witness and makes public the violence and despair faced on a daily basis by urban youth. Rodríguez builds on the notion that "the more we know the more we owe," and hopes that his storytelling leads to a better public understanding of the real issues leading to *la vida loca* (250).

Murray also articulates a vision of the urban gang experience and provides *la loca* with a personal dialogue, via the two main characters, to explain a female's perspective on gangs. However, her representation of young Chicana gang members has turned a critical lens onto Murray the author. According to some critics of *Locas*, her reflection of the lived realities of *la vida loca* is viewed as inauthentic, characterizing Murray as a *hocicona* (women who talk too much) for giving voice to the *Chola* and writing about women and violence. While her characters are characterized as monsters. For example, Ramón García and María Martínez-Gutiérrez label *Locas* as "The epic tale of ignorance and gang warfare" a story about "the pathetic lives of gangster girls" ("Rebozos Reconsidered" 113). They accuse Murray of performing "a ghetto ventriloquism that sounds off all the most damaging and unpleasant stereotypes about Mexican men and women" (113).

Similarly Manuel David Hernández does a double critique of the novel and of Murray in his book review of *Locas*. Hernández, suggests that the remarks made by Murray during her reading of *Locas* in Albuquerque, New Mexico in 1998, in which she stated that she has “no gang background” and that she wrote *Locas* about “the gang world as” she imagined it, does not give Murray the cultural authority to write for the “other” (153). Hernández also questions Murray’s authenticity as a Latina urban writer by arguing that not only the language used in *Locas* but also Murray’s own vocalization of that particular vernacular at the reading was forced and not, as Hernández states, “Murray’s natural speaking voice, nor that of a lively storyteller” (153). As a result he argues “*Locas* reads like a fanciful dream in which the author manipulates stereotypes to please a readership unfamiliar with this complex community” (153). For women, writing brings power and change. Cherrie Moraga speaks of the importance of language in her poem “It’s the poverty”:

I lack imagination you say
No. I lack language.
The language to clarify
my resistance to the literature.
Words are war to me.
They threaten my family.
To gain the word
to describe the loss
I risk losing everything.
I may create a monster
the word’s length and body
swelling up colorful and thrilling
looming over my mother, characterized.
Her voice in the distance
unintelligible illiterate.

These are the monster's words. (*Loving In The War Years* 62-63)

Moraga makes it very clear just what is at stake when Chicanas speak out. Moraga's poetics engages in braking silence through language to pierce through the limitations put on women by masculine discourse. Similarly, Murray's mode of expression (language) provides a voice that has been suppressed and by doing so raises question about whose voice is rewarded and whose is penalized, but more importantly, she reveals the limitations put on women's right to use language as resistance.

Additionally Murray's unconventional representation of Chicana subjectivity also generates controversy. For example, Hernández argues that *Locas* is filled with a superficial pro-women voice because Murray links the stereotypical passive and hypersexual Latina to the protagonists Lucía and Cecilia in the novel. Hernández affirms that although the female characters in *Locas* gain power and "beat the men at their own game" they do so with violence, deceit, and bravado, qualities typically associated with a male gang member. But this mimicry or "gender switcheroo" as Hernandez coins, it that Lucía embodies, according to him, only estranges Murray further from representing any form of female resistance. Moreover, James Diego Vigil an Irvine professor of criminology, law & society, has written several books on urban minority youths and Southern California gangs in which he contends, "violent gang girls hold a more deviant status than males that have similar patterns of behavior. The reason for this enhanced status is that the aggressive acts break with societal expectations of femininity, such as being non-confrontational" (*Barrio Gangs* 108). The inauthentic voice that Hernández links to Murray's authorship is a response to her strong resistance to reproduce female characters that follow the expected norms of the family,

community or what dominant society expects of young women. Instead Murray opts to write young women that break traditional cultural and gender norms.

Monica Brown's analysis of *Locas* in *Gang Nation: Delinquent Citizens in Puerto Rican, Chicano, and Chicana Narratives* (2002), suggests that although Murray does not accurately depict why young women choose to align themselves with a gang, the characters narratives do however reflect "lived realities." Brown states:

If they cannot be viewed as straightforwardly revealing "the real," they act as art of resistance, art that grapples with the "real": that is art that works to resist erasure and oppression, art that revisits and revises history, art that tells new stories that complicate received notion of Chicanos/as and Latinos/as, rather than confirming simplistic and degrading stereotypes.
(85)

However, in *Latino Los Angeles in Film and Fiction: The Cultural Production of Social Anxiety* (2011), Ignacio López-Calvo assures that Murray "describes in detail the violent reality of today's female gangs" and although the characters' path to resistance is nontraditional "they nevertheless articulate, in their own way, an oppositional discourse against patriarchal rules" (López-Calvo 139-140). As a response to her critics, in the letter to the editor of *Los Angeles Times Book Review*, (1997) Murray addresses the question of why she decided to write a novel about females that some readers believe reinforce stereotypes that Latinas are passive and hypersexual;

If the women in *Locas* for example, Lucía, an undocumented immigrant and would-be gang boss who feverishly wants power and control and who thrives on capitalism, competition and struggle—are stereotypes, they are no kind of Latina stereotype that I've ever seen before. Latinas....are typically

depicted as wilting Catholic flowers or as easy, sex addicted hot tamales—not as pathologically ambitious power-seekers. I believe that, as a Latina writer, I have a social and political obligation to the Latino community, but I don't believe that this always requires writing about "good" golden-hearted Latinos. (*Los Angeles Times Book Review* 10)

Framing her writing in relation to her obligation to the Latino community, Murray's remarks emphasize her reasons for becoming a writer. Murray's journey into authorship provides several points in which the female "I" becomes developed in her legal scholarship, and simultaneously engages in a dialogue with the "we" of her community. My argument is that while Murray didn't live *la vida loca* that she writes about in *Locas* she should not be viewed as inherently inauthentic. Within her interviews, she notes that her writings reveal her preoccupation with Latino identity, "As a lawyer interested in Latino rights," she explained in an interview with David L. Ulin for the *Los Angeles Times*, (1997) that she spends "a lot of time thinking about what it means to be Latino, female, legal" (*Los Angeles Times* 10).

In particular she emphasizes that writing Latinas like Lucía's character offers a different voice subverting the stereotypical rendering of gang members as inherently violent "monsters". Although Murray acknowledges that Lucía can be viewed as "a monster to some", her reason for acting badly, according to Murray, is a direct "response to a society that rejects her" and in turn she becomes "an outlaw because of that rage" (*Los Angeles Times* 10). Murray expresses an active desire for social change as a result of her "outsider" experience, noting that her fiction is an "artistic representation" which "is absolutely consistent with social justice," although she recognizes that it also can be dangerous (*Los Angeles Times* 10).

By dismissing her writing as inauthentic, we run the risk of further marginalizing the voices of female gang members. For example, Fregoso argues that the figure of the Pachuca/Chola/Homegirl has been “overlooked” by Chicana/o writers “*Cool Chuca Style*”. I also argue that Murray has much to offer to our interpretation of Chicana gang member’s social reality, by addressing in particular female issues of oppression, victimization, sexuality, and gender dynamics some of which are often silenced in other literary works. Some of the women in her novel are independent and strong, and are not held down by rules and regulations. They create their own universe. For example Lucía creates an alternative “family” of women by enlisting Star Girl and Chique to form a gang of their own.

Additionally, Murray’s use of storytelling in *Locas* is an extension of the counter-stories presented in her legal scholarship that document the historical and political factors that explain Chicano’s present condition in the U.S. that are not present in mainstream knowledge. For example, Murray documents the drug use, violence, and inter group conflicts in barrio life, calling attention to issues specific to the Chicana experience while also reflecting on the larger challenge Chicanas/os face, such as poverty, the internalization of multiple marginalities, self-preservation, as well as self-destruction.

Lyn Di Iorio Sandín, in *Killing Spanish: Literary Essay on Ambivalent U.S. Latino/a Identity* (2004), praises Murray’s work for being “The only novel thus far” to offer “a serious portrayal of Latinas on the street” and to “account the rise of a *chola* gang leader in the East L.A. of the 1980s” (127). She defines Murray’s portrayal of *Cholas* as an important contributor to the recasting of the Chola subject because her work establishes a dialogue within Chicana/o literature that requires treating the Chola as an agent of resistance. Thus,

Murray offers alternative discourses and knowledge from which to understand the *loca* subject

La Loca

In *Locas* Murray offers her readers access to two individual women's version of gang life by employing a double voiced narrative. Inserting the counter-stories of two main character's Lucía and Cecilia allows Murray to unsettle the prevailing image of the Chola in male-authored works as passive silent victims. For example, Payasa in Rodríguez's *Always Running*, is presumed to have gone mad *loca* after her tongue was sliced by her older brothers in an attempt to make her meaner and stronger. Payasa's story ends "in a prison of matrimony somewhere" (124). Through the *loca* characters Murray portrays, the sliced tongues and the silent screams become sites to articulate the crazy male centered spaces of *la vida loca* through a female tongue. This kind of re-interpreting of the Chola's sliced tongue has made it possible for Murray to articulate the Chola urban identity into the Chicano culture's literary imagination and its public consciousness. Therefore, re-reading *Locas* as a tool of contestation and resistance against the silencing and misrepresentation of subjects provides the opportunity to examine issues specific to the Chola experience. In *Locas* Murray notes that females face the same problems as their male counterparts, which are alcoholism, drug abuse, unemployment, poverty, loss of tradition and identity. However, they also face problems that are distinctively female gendered. For example, the loss of their families, the inability to take care for their children, the trauma of psychological, physical, and sexual abuse from men, prostitution, and the high rate of teen age pregnancy and infant mortality. These issues expose the evils of society, reflecting the larger challenge of finding a voice for female urban delinquent youth in the Chicano literary canon.

Murray sections the novel into three parts: the first spans the years 1980-1985, the second 1985-1990, and the last section concludes in the year 1997. The setting for the novel is the neighborhood of Echo Park in Los Angeles, the same neighborhood that serves as the set for Alison Andere's film *Mi Vida Loca* (1993), the first commercial film to focus entirely on a group of young Cholas. The connection between the characters Lucía and Cecilia is Manny, the leader and founder of the Echo Park Lobos. Manny is Cecilia's, older brother and Lucía's lover. Faced with the immobilization that at times results from the social, cultural and economic barriers of barrio life, Lucía and Cecilia strategically position themselves within the Echo Park Lobos' gang hierarchy structure as a form of social mobilization.

According to Monica Brown, minority youths turn to gangs as a way of creating an alternative "nation" within which they can gain access to a version of "equal citizenship" (*Gang Nation* xvi). By engaging in nationalistic signifying practices that assert a code of loyalty and honor to the gang, "Latina/o urban gang members are asserting an alternative citizenship in a counter-nation, one that provides a sense of economic security, one that establishes its own moral and juridical authority with a history tied to territory, and one that provides a sense of communal identity, belonging" (*Gang Nation* xxiii). The Echo Park Lobos declare themselves an independent society via laws, traditions and systems of authority. Hence, their social hierarchy includes jefes, right hands, taggers, third raters and "sheep", the homegirls who "grin, sex, color up their faces, that's about it" (*Locas* 19). It could be said that the gang structure sets in motion a system of gender differentiations designed to maintain a power patriarchy which positions the vato as jefe and which makes the Chola an object of reproduction and desire.

As the narrators of their own stories, Lucía and Cecilia take turns recounting the past two decades from two different perspectives, to highlight how minorities, in particular women, are injured by racism and gender. They articulate their Chola identity as complex, and one in which they must negotiate their identity within their family, gang, culture, gender and sexuality. In the first section of the novel Cecilia opens up the dialogue about the formation of the Lobos gang. She remembers that at fifteen, Manny dropped out of school to hang around with his friends Paco Beto and Chico. She recalls that it was not long before the boys went from “knocking down liquor stores” to dealing guns “that could misfire and take off your face” (7). Seeing in her brother “what it [was] to become a man” Cecilia yearns to become a man just like him (7). At eighteen, Manny spent seven months in jail after his right hand man Chico gave police information about Manny’s gun dealings in order to take him out of the picture and begin his own gang, the C-4’s. This event sets in motion Manny’s downfall and the upward mobility of his girlfriend Lucía within the Lobo’s gang structure.

Lucía begins her narrative articulating the shifts in gender roles. She explains that at fifteen when she first meets Manny she is just a “red-candy cherry girl,” a “sheep” because that is all she knew (21). However, when Manny is in jail he lets her into his secret world when he instructs her to deliver a package to his friend Paco hence initiating her transformation from “sheep” to hard loca boss. Her sense of autonomy comes when she discovers a taste for gangbang after she “saw those guns in the secret little brown bag...the action made [her] feel like a Superloca” and “wanting what *he’s* got” (21-25). When Manny got out of jail two major things occur that lead Lucía to form a new perspective about Manny whom she sees getting weak “all soft looking in the belly and chest, not like the hard vato I first hooked up with” (106). For one, not taking revenge against Chico makes

him “soft,” and second not able to make sense of the gang’s money makes him “weak”: it also allows Lucía to become more involved in the gang’s drug economy and “after a few months of doing the books, [she] knew more about the business than anybody else” (39).

Through the following twelve years, Lucía and Cecilia take different routes to fulfillment. Cecilia focuses on motherhood as a source of liberation desiring a secure place within a community of women. However, when she miscarriages she finds only comfort in her relationship with Chucha. In the closing of her narrative Cecilia reveals that she has turned to the church and left the gang life altogether after also losing Chucha; “God chased me down. He saw my black heart my wicked self” referring to her lesbian desire (195). In contrast, by 1997 Lucía is the “jefa” she takes pride in her ownership of Echo Park “See that street? Alvarado Street, the straight black road lined with bodega stores and the little cholas hanging by the corner? It belongs to me (239). However, her power and toughness come at the expense of a true autonomy. Frustrated with Manny’s softness, Lucía selects Beto to replace Manny as the leader of the Lobos. But, because she cannot take over the leadership of the gang, she says, she still must “let Beto think he’s the Man,” thus never achieves true independence (242).

Malcriadas

The violence that foregrounds Lucía’s story becomes a key to her liberation because her experience with female subjugation demands an equally violent act to counter its effects. Witness to the psychological and physical violence her mother experienced at the hands of her husband, Lucía is forced to reflect on the conflicting experiences in her life. For example, Lucía remembers her mother holding her in her arms the night they crossed the border as a family. Their lives in México were filled with poverty and her “Mami and Papi dreamed

about the States all the time” (143). Yet at the same time, Lucía recalls that their new life in California wasn’t much different because you can’t run away from México when “México is right here” (143). Pointing to the fact that their social reality is not much different in the U.S. where they are still poor.

Not long after arriving in the U.S., her father finds himself unemployed and “started coming home full of piss and fire like a monster cause he can’t get work” (144). The stark scene Murray depicts is one not uncommon for many families that flee their poor countries and find themselves living in poor, urban environments. Children that find themselves in this situation are witness to more than they can comprehend. For example, as time passed, Lucía notes that her father, a once “proud macho,” was “making pennies begging the gabachos to scrub out their toilets” and “would spend his Friday nights at the bar and came home “ready for a fight” screaming at his wife “Vieja! What do I need with an ugly bitch like you” (144). Lucía’s mother’s words, “*Todo lo que tú quieras*,” becomes a virtual law in her household which systematically teaches a young and impressionable Lucía that “some women, just lay down and die nice and quiet” (36). Additionally, her mother’s reaction to the domestic violence confuses Lucía; “she kept loving her man like he was God, even when he cuts up her face with his fists” (145).

Murray’s characterization of Lucía’s mother complicates the idea of how young women learn about feminism. According to Aída Hurtado in *Voicing Chicana Feminisms: Young Women Speak Out on Sexuality and Identity* (2003), the young women in her study were exposed to feminism by “observing women’s lives” and receiving the “message about two core issues” to “refuse abuse from men” and to “become economically self-sufficient at all cost” (209). Indirectly through her actions and response to her own abuse, Lucía’s

mother, teaches Lucía that the only way for her to escape abuse from men was to stand on her own two feet economically. Additionally Murray's depiction of Lucía's defiance against her imposed destiny draws out a much more complex portrayal of mother and daughter and their relationship. At this point Lucía becomes distant from her mother and seeks drastically to sever herself from her, as depicted in her following thoughts:

A women can't take no punch like a man. After a while he'd wake up from his little drunkie sleep crackpot mad and let her have it. He slammed down on my mami like she was a punching bag and he's Roberto Durán, giving her an uppercut so that she's bleeding from the mouth, and he wouldn't stop for Dios or the devil. She got broke up so that she can't even open her eyes and I can't breathe there in the corner, where I stayed quiet and learned my lesson. Even then I was thinking, Mami, you're a loser. Me, I ain't never gonna be like that. (145)

In addition, Murray complicates the story further by continuing Lucía's mother's irresponsible behavior and considers the broader implications for young woman about to enter into the same world that fostered Lucía's mother's destruction. After her father fails to come back home, her mother turns to alcohol and prostitution. Lucía has to contend with the everyday violence and her poor surroundings in order to save herself from her mother's alcoholic and prostitute fate. When she discovers her mother drunk in her apartment "staring out her window at the sky, watching the dark blue night coming" it makes Lucía "*loca*" (36). In that moment of self-preservation Lucía for the first time embodies the *loca*:

I'm getting this good mad feeling burning up low in my chest, a wildfire spreading that makes me wanna hit something, and that makes me strong, She's as good as dead and might as well be. This ain't my mami, I tell myself. This ain't that woman

border-running with her fast legs. My face is hot, but I don't
feel sick no more. Painless. I see that blue sky getting black
through the window, but her face don't look like no moon now,
do it" It don't matter non. Bring that black sky on. Look at her,
she's trashed out. It makes me wanna break this house up and
tear it to pieces. (37)

The process of Lucía becoming a *loca* functions as a metaphor for self-transformation and survival. The wildfire that spreads through her body is the contained anger of witnessing her mother's oppression in the home, society and culture. Finding a voice to articulate her madness is what makes Lucía strong. Murray's re-interpretation of the *loca* offers a female voice to redefine the complexities of the Chola struggle. Lucía's urge to break down the house conveys a need to survive and cross the limitations that contained other women.

Within Lucía's dialogues Murray introduces several controversial topics. She explores taboo subjects of domestic violence, prostitution, and emphasizes the backdrop of Lucía's mother's alcoholism and subsequent death. Yvonne Yarbrow-Bejarano in "Chicana Literature From A Chicana Feminist Perspective" (1987), contends that Chicana literature often concerns itself with a "collective experience and identity" (141). She notes that "The tongues of fire of Chicana writers" in the play *Tongues on Fire* (1981), "exposed oppression from without as well as from within the culture, denouncing exploitation and racism but also the subordination of Chicanas through their culture's rigid gender roles and negative attitudes toward female sexuality" (143). The connection that Yarbrow-Bejarano illustrates between Chicana writers and their communities' struggles, serves as a basis for self-reflection and social activism. Murray's compassion for the characters she gives voice to echo the personal connection Yarbrow-Bejarano outlines between the writer and her work. The preoccupation

with what it means to be legal and female for Murray is a crucial force in developing a Chicana feminist discourse in *Locas*.

Additionally, she introduces the subject of a young girl's sexual awareness. Lucía at an age when her mother still gave her dolls, shows signs of understanding adult sexual encounters as she witnessed men paying her mother “ten dollars for a fast twelve minutes” (147). In fact, she reminds herself about waiting out in the hall humming and “looking at the ceiling, smelling that grease and the whiskey and hearing the bad noises from inside” her mother's apartment (147). Thus, at a young age Lucía also recognizes the limited possibilities of employment for undocumented women that are abandoned by their husbands, do not speak English, and have no prior work experience, “too scared of immigration to ask a gabachos for work. “Illegal” don't mean nothing but a fucked-up life” (146). Thus, without a system of support it becomes difficult for her mother to avoid the grim reality of her life “Scratch a hungry woman and you'll find a whore, it's that simple” Lucía thought (146). The lack of a stable mother figure, and the disillusionment with her absent father, leaves Lucía facing a difficult predicament of sifting through what she has witnessed, and breaking away from the destructive aspects of her mother's experience.

The explicit description of Lucía's memories of her mother as a domestic violence victim and alcoholic and sexually permissive woman evokes some of the more commonly held stereotypes of poor women of color. As a result, one can suggest that Lucía's body is also marked by the same prejudices and that it is inevitable for her to avoid her mother's fate. At fifteen, when Lucía meets Manny she describes him as her “fairy prince” that drove up in his “Bel Air cruiser” and saved her “from hooking, from the gutter” (21-23). Soon she “was dressing like some whore” and spent all her time “putting on lip gloss, pumping up her

hair...squeezing into skin-tights and five-inch heels” (23). However, by understanding the politics of her body Lucía thinks she avoids the sexual exploitation that trapped her mother, “I knew how to play that sheepy game better than anybody else” (31).

Murray draws a parallel between Lucía her mother and the cycle of sexual abuse and exploitation because the same accepted modes of behavior are passed down from mother to daughter. Lucía’s exposure to danger arises in part from her mother who did not discuss or protect her from the harm they jointly faced. Although she succumbs to her alcoholism, Lucía’s mother manages to leave her daughter with a life lesson. When Lucía felt that she was becoming trapped in the role of the sheep, all she had to do to remind herself of what she could become is to “go and take a good look at [her] broken down Mami” (35). In this moment of reflection, Lucía rejects surrendering to her mother’s fate and focuses instead on self-preservation.

Murray’s representation of the mother is not without flaws, which I read as an important revision of early nationalist discourse, in which women are trapped in the role of the traditional nurturing submissive mothers. On the other hand, Cecilia’s mother Corazón represents a more complex vision of female identity, a body capable of a variety of behaviors both supportive and undermining. Anzaldúa contends that it is “Through our mothers, the culture gave us mixed messages [...] Which was it to be strong, or submissive, rebellious or conforming?” (*Borderlands* 40). Corazón finds herself caught in a dilemma of either staying in México, after her husband abandons her feeling sorry for herself or pulling herself up and taking control of her life. Murray’s protagonist Corazón decides to take control of her life and leaves Oaxaca, México and moves to the United States to raising her children without the help of her husband. Although Corazón is pregnant with her daughter Cecilia, and has her

young son, she establishes her family in California. Murray makes a strong statement about the will and determination of women who are confronted with many obstacles of uncertainty and frustration yet find it within them to forge a different outcome.

In one sense, it is a story of liberation from the traditional subordinate role Corazón had in México. But at another level it is the story about the marginalization of people and women of color in the United States. Corazón discovers that she will always remain in a subordinate role because of her race, class, gender, and citizenship. And thus, Corazón manages her life working cleaning rich white women's houses, a job that left her unfulfilled and tired.

Within Corazón's story of survival lies a subtext that speaks of the generational changes brought by living between two cultures. As much as Corazón tried to be a positive role model to her daughter, sharing her dreams of one day getting a "business degree" and opening up her very "own business," she also participated in the perpetuation of myths about female behavior which enforced woman's role in the family as subservient, silent, and obedient in the face of male authority (11). For example, Cecilia witnesses her mother as she "shrunk back, ashamed and frightened" after Manny, threatens to "hit her like she was just any other women" because she insisted on knowing where he was getting money from (9). However, she does not have the economic stability to force Manny out of her home because, she depends on the "five hundred dollars" he leaves her "on the table" to sustain the family (7). The author makes an effective connection between the exploitation inherent in the labor market in this country and the downward economic mobility of youth, particularly young Chicano men.

Not earning enough money, Corazón acknowledges her limitation therefore, all that was left for her is to “pray and pray, doing the rosary and sprinkling holy water on the floor” (7). Murray also underscores the oppression brought about by organized religion, especially for women. Although Corazón has managed without a husband she remains trapped by the patriarchal Church, society, and her son. Corazón doesn’t force Manny out of her house because she needs the economic help but as well for fear of being punished and labeled as *la mala madre* (bad mother), instead she starts “squeezing back into her skin like she wants to hide” and “doesn’t want anyone to notice her” (11). In short, Corazón remains powerless not because of her husband but rather from a capitalist system and a religious system that oppress her.

Cecilia sees in her brother “what it is to become a man” getting stronger and earning respect as the leader of the Lobos (11). More than anything Cecilia wants “to be a part of [her] brother” and so at ten years old she turns her back on her mother and becomes part of the Lobos first, as a “lookout” sitting in the dark out on the streets watching “out for police and East L.A. gangsters” while the Lobos “would do their deals on the corners with the Echo Parkers or in the houses with the college people (59). By fifteen faced with an immobilization that results from her involvement with gang culture Cecilia suffers from alienation and loss of identity. As she reminds herself:

In this town a woman doesn’t have a hundred choices. Can’t make yourself into a man...can’t even pick up and cruise on out of here just because you get some itch. And even though people talk all about doing college, that’s just some dream they get from watching too much afternoon TV. No a woman’s got her place if she’s a mama. That makes her a real person. (61-62)

Ironically, Cecilia comes to believe, that having a baby will earn her a respected role as a *mamasita* within the gang because, she thinks that having a baby “is the only thing that would get [her] a better life” (61). Although Cecilia makes several references to her “dirt-dark Indian” color and how she looks “like a ditch digging *bracero*,” being Manny’s little sister makes her attractive to the other gang members noting that the “gangsters came calling” (60). And although Cecilia recognizes that she does not feel “that hot covering [her] skin like [she] does other times. Down there, in [her] stomach, in [her] secret parts” she chooses Beto, Manny’s right hand man to be her boyfriend because he reminds her of her brother (61).

According to Gloria Anzaldúa the ultimate rebellion against one’s culture is through sexual behavior (*Borderlands* 41). For many Chicanas lesbians, the relationship they form with their family is strongly predicated on the cultural norms present in their community. Therefore, opposing the cultural norms regarding homosexuality often times can result in the breaking of family ties. Anzaldúa describes the deeply rooted fear of “of going home. And not being taken in. We’re afraid of being abandoned by the mothers, the culture, *la Raza*, for being unacceptable, faulty, damaged. Most of us unconsciously believe that if we reveal this unacceptable aspect of the self our mother/culture/race will totally reject us” (*Borderlands* 41).

For this reason, Cecilia’s pregnancy serves to reject her desire “to break off loose the same as Lucía and her *cholas*. I wanted to scream and sing and run away and fight dirty, steal money, hit somebody else real hard, even though deep down I knew I had to pack all them wrong thoughts in a box and close the lid up tight” (86). Because her mother’s images of “Virgins and pictures of Jesus...on her wall” would watch over Cecilia and “keep tabs on how bad [she] was,” they remind Cecilia that her lesbian desire would be more of a betrayal

to her mother than a teen age pregnancy (66). Carla Trujillo, in the introduction to *Chicana Lesbians: The Girls Our Mothers Warned Us About* (1991), asserts that a lesbian daughter under the watchful eye of her mother can prove to be both the enemy and the one in need of protection,

Though our fathers had much to do with imposing sexual conformity, it was usually our mothers who actually whispered the warnings, raised the eyebrows, or covertly transmitted to us the “taboo nature” of same-sex relationships. How often were we told in this manner that anything but the love of a man was wrong an affront to nature. Our very existence upsets the gender-specific role playing our mothers so aggressively employ. This existence and the embracing of ourselves in it sends out shock waves; how could *we* become the very women our fathers fear and our mothers misunderstand? (x)

In the case of Cecilia, the images of La Virgen and the rosary are objects used by her mother to police her daughter’s sexuality and instill appropriate female behavior. Cecilia also learns from her mother from a young age that in times of crises one must pray the rosary and to La Virgen. Corazón finds refuge in prayer to cope with the loss of her family, particularly her son Manny. Religion then became a source of strength for Corazón helping her cope with her family’s trauma and finds inspiration in it to continue living. Corazón tries to live by her Catholic principles and forces them on to Cecilia. Twice a week Corazón gets “dressed up fancy for God” and with a sour face says “God knows you hija...he knows them bad things in your heart” refereeing to her lesbian desires (196). However, Cecilia’s closeness to God and La Virgen are not as strong because she feels alienated and believes that church is “for sad people who need something” (196).

Ultimately, the loss of her baby girl comes after Lucía convinces Manny to force Cecilia to sell drugs to “babies” at the junior high. As she offers drugs to a sixth grade girl she experienced a “burning in my belly with my baby telling me STOP” (125). This incident along with the brutal beating she received from Beto causes the loss of her baby girl. Furthermore she believes that she “wasn’t like a real woman. I had something wrong in me, something dirty. I didn’t deserve her and God showed me that crystal clear. He showed me twice” referring to her loss of Chucha (226). Cecilia, aware that she “don’t like men for sex” in contrast expresses her awareness of her lesbian desire for Chucha “When she touched my cheek soft I forgot my old *bracero* face and my clunky fat body that can’t even make me a baby. I didn’t think about Manny or the clikas or how I was living with my mama. Right then I was warm. I had a soft fire up and down and when she pressed over me there I tasted seawater and breathed in the dizzy musk smell under her hair” (185). As Rebolledo writes in discussing the stories written by contemporary Chicanas that chronicle the world of young adolescents;

The narrator’s voice is often one of guilt felt in the rebellion against these established cultural institutions, the rebellion itself internalized and viewed as “sinning.” These dialogues about freedom and sexuality are generally internal ones, self-reflective and not revealed even to female friends and relatives, yet now, surprisingly enough, revealed to us, the readers. These “confessions,” if you will, are revealed in an intimate voice that [...] exposes societal conventions that have attempted to restrict the young woman. (*Women Singing*, 111)

What Cecilia longs for is to find freedom, to leave the barrio, to have a meaningful relationship, and to understand her sexuality. At the end, Cecilia’s voice is one of guilt as she internalizes her desire for a woman as a sin “This is my life now and I didn’t have a

choice in it. God chased me down. He saw my bad black heart, my wicked self.” (*Locas* 195).

For girls like Lucía and Cecilia, who not only absorb unhealthy images of women but must also learn to navigate male centered spaces like gangs and streets, the crisis of survival becomes heightened. Anthropologist James Diego Vigil claims that, “the gang has become a “spontaneous” street social unit that fills a void left by families under stress. As a sort of tradition, it is also, perhaps, the gang members’ way of continuing Mexican familial and palomilla customs under conditions of uneven culture change and the stress of street life, in other words, to attach them to “something” when everything else is not working or has failed” (*Barrio Gangs* 90). Feminist scholars have long criticized traditional gang research for its reliance on male gang members to gain information about young women. Gini Sikes a journalist who spent two years living and recording the lived reality of Latina female gang member in Los Angeles, San Antonio and Milwaukee put together the information collected of the girls’ real life stories in her book, *8 Ball Chicks: A Year in the Violent World of Girl Gangsters* (1997). One of the interviewees, TJ, explains that she joined a gang as the only means of obtaining recognition and acquiring the family structure she and others like her yearn for (35).

The unstable family dynamics, along with the failure of the educational system and the lack of support systems, are factors, which relate to Lucía and Cecilia’s life choice of joining a gang. Murray emphasizes the uncertainty young Chicanas face when they do not have role models or necessary support systems. Her interest is not to draw a wider gap between females who are already alienated by their exterior pressures, instead she articulates one form that Cholas utilize to reconcile and allow them to heal collectively. For example,

Lucía chooses Star Girl and Chique to be her “right hand cholas” and starts up their own *clika* “gang” (*Locas* 48). Lucía’s observation of Manny and the Lobos taught Lucía the ways a gang functions. To stay true to what she learned, Lucía and the girls participate in the jumping in ritual of joining a gang “where you fight all your homies at once” and “like good locas don’t hold nothing back” (49).

Marie “Keta” Miranda in her ethnographic study *Homegirls In The Public Sphere* (2003), notes that girls that join an all-girl gang “are not only able to avoid sexual initiation but also can maintain a greater sense of collective self-esteem” (86). The physical violence Murray depicts in the girls initiation as forceful and wild, “I’ll beat the fuck out of you first...our hands reaching out like spiders, gripping her head and her hair and her throat” symbolically represents what Miranda sees as a “self-depiction of survival in the streets” and participating “in street codes on a par with men” (86). Miranda also notes that young women involved in gangs have changed the pattern of initiation of getting jumped in from sexual initiation to fighting because “being sexed in relegates girls to the status of property” (86). Moreover she explains that;

This discursive construction of the self functions as an admittance to street “public life,” enabling girls to maintain control of their own sexuality. Moreover, the production of a gang member as a soldier and not a sexual object, as a fighter and not property, is the constant performance that their meanness and menace of violence calls into play. (86)

Murray’s depiction of the *loca* in these later scenes is also a tool of survival and empowerment for Lucía. For example, she becomes forceful and increasingly wild, rejecting Manny and female expectation. Maintaining control of her own sexuality, Lucía goes to

“Family Planning and got on the pill nice and quick and didn’t tell a soul” (*Locas* 41).

Anxious to escape her environment and fulfill her own desire for something more, Lucía approaches Manny, threatening to walk away from the gang if he did not give her, a portion of the drug business. Additionally, she advocates for equality, economic independence, the right to decide and have control not only for herself but also Star Girl and Chique. Together, the three women cultivate a feminist based subjectivity “You can sweet-talk them, but they ain’t your friends...and you ain’t their whore. So don’t let nobody touch you, Girl, cause this is money business” (111).

The narrator of her personal lived experiences as well as communal experiences, Murray illustrates the complex lives and personal struggles of women. In bringing their stories to light, Murray develops a feminist tongue articulating the Chola’s lived experience. Throughout *Locas* Murray documents the demoralization that results from the imbalance that misogyny and poverty create in the lives of her female characters. Lucía, Cecilia and their mothers confront similar challenges against sexual exploitation and economic instability. Therefore, both Lucía and her mother use measures that are extreme within patriarchy in order to overcome the physical and emotional violence that is their reality.

The depiction of the everyday realities that face many poor women of color allows Murray to begin to address the issue of invisibility. Rebolledo notes that Chicana writers often times are “historians of their times as well as *testigas* (witnesses) to the social and political happenings around them (*Women Singing* 119-120). As a lawyer, Murray was a *testiga* to defendants’ life stories, finding voice in women that are defined as *locas*, “a monster to some,” Murray is able to inscribe the stories that most often remain untold. In addition, Murray depiction of *la vida loca* through the *loca* character functions as a counter

discourse, which allocates a competing story to the dominant male narratives of girls in gangs.

CHAPTER 2: La Malflora in Helena María Viramontes' *Their Dogs Came With Them*

Helena María Viramontes was born on February 26, 1954 and raised in East Los Angeles. Viramontes is one of nine children who grew up as fourth generation Californians. The daughter of working class parents, her father worked in construction and would take the family to California's Central Valley every summer to pick grapes. In her first novel *Under The Feet of Jesus* (1995), the Central Valley is the stage of a story about the living and working conditions of Mexican American agricultural workers. However, in some of her earlier short stories and her most recent novel, *Their Dogs Came With Them*, (2007), Viramontes sets East L.A., in particular the neighborhood she grew up in, at center stage. Viramontes' mother raised her six daughters and three sons while finding space and time to welcome "friends and relatives who crossed the border from México searching for the promises that "el otro lado" (the other side) offered" (Francisco Lomeli and Carl Shirley, *Dictionary of Literary Biography* 323). Viramontes credits the "poets in the kitchen" who gathered at night in her mother's kitchen "where everyone talked and laughed in low voices. Voices aching with hopeful, optimistic plans for the future; voices spinning tales "of love lost or won"; voices of men crying, and women laughing" as a source of her fiction (*Dictionary of Literary Biography* 323). Viramontes also vividly remembers listening to the tales of joy and heartache from relatives and friends in the barrio. She would wake up at midnight to hear voices and soft music. It was then that she began her literary apprenticeship "without even knowing it," she states (Viramontes, "Nopalitos" 291). Her surroundings and childhood memories informed her writings more than the formal writers' school that she later attended (*Dictionary of Literary Biography* 323).

Viramontes received a B.A. in English literature from Immaculate Heart College in 1975. It was during her undergraduate years that she began writing poetry and then fiction. She attended a creative writing program at the University of California, Irvine and in 1977 “Requiem for the Poor,” one of her first short stories won first prize for fiction in a literary contest sponsored by *Statement Magazine* of California State University, Los Angeles. In 1978 her short story “The Broken Web,” won her first prize in the same literary contest. The following year she was awarded first prize for “Birthday” in the Chicano Literary Contest at the University of California, Irvine. In 1994 she earned an MFA in Creative Writing from the University of California, Irvine. Her publications include *The Moths and Other Stories* (1985), “Miss Clairol,” (1987), “Nopalitos”: The Making of Fiction,” (1989), “Tears on My Pillow,” (1992), *Under the Feet of Jesus* (1995), and *Their Dogs Came With Them* (2007). She also collaborated with María Herrera-Sobek, on a collection of critical articles, *Chicana Creativity and Criticism: Charting New Frontiers in American Literature* (1987), as well as *Chicana Writers: On Word and Film* (1993), which, according to Tey Diana Rebolledo brought “Chicana literature and literary criticism to the forefront” (*Women Singing in the Snow* 4). Viramontes was awarded a National Endowment for the Arts grant and, was among one of six writers chosen to attend a workshop given by Gabriel García Márquez at Robert Redford’s Sundance Institute. In 1995, she was awarded the Longwood College John Dos Passos Prize for Literature. More recent in 2006, Viramontes was the recipient of the Luis Leal Award for Distinction in Chicano/Latino Literature. Currently Viramontes teaches Creative Writing at Cornell University.

Viramontes frames her passion for writing in relation to the Chicana/o community’s needs and challenges by emphasizing her reasons for writing as political. By focusing on the

community as a legitimate forum for her writing, Viramontes has discovered a creative outlet to publicly address the oppressions the Chicano community encounters. Her community and personal circumstance are therefore linked and are necessary elements in understanding Viramontes' poetic voice. *The Moths and Other Stories*, was published first by Arte Público Press in 1985, and has since gone through four printings and a second edition. The eight short stories in this book present the multi components of patriarchy and expose male domination and oppression with its consequent victimization of Chicanas. As a whole, the stories describe the multiple constraints of race; class and gender based oppression, whether at the local level dealing with California's barrios or at an international level in connection with Latin American nations.

In her narratives, Viramontes has given voice to the vast experiences of women. The major female characters of each story are punished by society for transgressing their circumscribed role models, of mother/wife as determined by Chicano culture or sometimes just for being born female. Given the characters' wide range of age, her stories show how women encounter constraints at all stages of their lives. Additionally Viramontes utilizes her stories as a critical tool of resistance to silencing. As a result, Viramontes is able to articulate the experiences of individuals who are often rendered voiceless within mainstream culture as well as within their own communities.

Chicana literary critic, Tey Diana Rebolledo, has identified silence and voice as central topics in Chicana literature. Rebolledo notes that one particular characteristic in Chicana literature "is seizing of subjectivity—evolving into a speaking/writing subject" (*Women Singing* 5). Outlining the history and inspiration for Chicana literature, Rebolledo and Rivera note that Chicanas attribute their silence to the experiences of colonization

including the religiously inspired sexual guilt of Catholicism patriarchal tensions in the family and the widespread lack of opportunity for education (Rebolledo and Rivera, *Infinite Divisions* 1-33). Rebolledo concludes that Chicanas form their identities through their writing by placing themselves within historical and political events that have implications for the Chicano community.

Additionally, Rebolledo sees Chicana writers as “mediators—between past and present, between cultures” and as “testigos/historians/ethnographers, translators of foreign mail” (*Women Singing* 116). Viramontes, as well as other Chicana writers, uses a multi-layered narrative that evolves into a complex representation of voice. Saldívar-Hull also suggests that Viramontes’ “groundbreaking narrative strategies, combined with her sociopolitical focus, situates her at the forefront of an emerging Chicana literary tradition that redefines Chicano literature and feminist theory” (*Dictionary of Literary Biography* 325). Saldívar-Hull notes that Viramontes “explodes the false dichotomy between the aesthetic and the political” by creating literature “that extends and complicates the boundaries of American literary production” (*Feminism on the Border* 156). In particular, Saldívar-Hull cites Viramontes’ nontraditional discursive style, which varies from the “dominant U.S. traditions of literary expression” and most closely resembles other forms of resistance literature (*Feminism on the Border* 156-157).

In her impressive critical study *Resistance Literature* (1987), Barbara Harlow examines the relationship between third world literature and political liberation movements. Harlow suggests that resistance literature, “calls attention to itself, and to literature in general, as a political and politicized activity. The literature of resistance sees itself furthermore as immediately and directly involved in a struggle against ascendant or dominant forms of

ideological and cultural production” (28-29). As a native of East Los Angeles, for Viramontes writing offers an opportunity to engage the reader politically on issues regarding the Chicano community. The plots of her stories disrupt the traditional model of linear stages of progressive development. Therefore, by employing a non-linear narrative Viramontes’ fragmented writing style illustrates the extent of isolation and immobilization many of her characters suffer.

However, as a member of Los Angeles Latino Writers Associations Viramontes’ political engagement, as Raúl Homero Villa observes in *Barrio Logos: Space and Place in Urban Chicano Literature and Culture* (2000), extends beyond her literature and onto the grassroots infrastructure of Los Angeles (115). For example, Villa contends that in 1989 Viramontes founded the Southern California Latino Writers and Filmmakers Group and has extensively collaborated alongside other prominent Chicana/os such as María Herrera-Sobek in organizing university conferences on Chicana literary and cultural criticism (Villa, 115). In particular, as the literary editor of *201/Two Hundred and One: Homenaje a la ciudad de Los Angeles*, Viramontes has “influenced the formal and ideological parameters of this landmark barriological document and played an important role in offsetting some of the masculinist tendencies of her co-editors” (Villa, 116).

Landscapes of Power

The annexation of the northern Mexican territory as a result of the Mexican, United States War in 1848 is the originating moment of the subordination of Chicanos in the United States. Therefore, the mid-nineteenth century serves as the determining period in the formation of Chicana/o’s racial identity and position in the U.S. racial order. Villa examines the displacements of California Mexicanos and Chicano communities and suggest that some

of the mechanisms used to dispossess the elite Californios, and *pobladores* (working class) of their land, political authority, cultural lifeways and legacy was through local, state, and federal legislation, along with overt racist violence (Villa, *Barrio Logos* 2). These dominant social patterns he contends, are instrumental to the social-spatial transformation or “metamorphoses” of the city of Los Angeles, and continue to persist into the present Chicano community. For example, Villa notes three subordinating practices active in contemporary barrio life:

- (1) The physical regulation and constitution of space (via land-use decisions and the built environment); (2) the social control of space (via legal/juridical state apparatuses and police authority); and (3) the ideological control of space (via the interpellation of citizens-subjects through educational and informational apparatuses). (3-4)

In his analysis, this identified triad and its points of intersection have functioned historically “as mechanisms for literally “placing” Chicanos in a material and symbolic geography of dominance drawn by the visible hand of urbanizing, mostly Anglo-controlled capital” (Villa, 4). In *Occupied America* Rodolfo Acuña similarly emphasized that post World War II city planners in Los Angeles allocated much of the money originally designated for inner city rehabilitation to the construction of extensive freeway systems. Above all, two federal acts in particular, the Collier-Burns Highway Act of 1947 and National Interstate and Defense Highways Act of 1956 provided the necessary funds to facilitate their construction. Acuña is especially interested in detailing the Mexican diaspora caused by the erection of the freeway system, because he notes that the lived realities of Chicanos lives are profoundly different from those of the white middle class.

He explains that the housing development caused the expansion of suburbs, which were mostly populated by white middle class Americans while minorities, poor, and immigrant communities occupied the city center. According to Mike Davis the turning point in the social demographic change of the Chicano residential space runs parallel to the migration of upper and middle class Anglos as part of the successive booms of real estate speculation and development precipitated by the arrival of the Southern Pacific (1883) and the Santa Fe (1886) railroads in Southern California (Davis, *City of Quartz* 111).

Consequently, during the 1950s and 1960s the need to connect the suburbs to the city center allowed for seven major freeways to be built in East Los Angeles, running through Chicano communities displacing countless families (Acuña 295). The fact that Chicano barrios were situated in the path of urban development, the city's displacement of its residents was justified by its planners through a "clinical discourse of blight removal" and progress, which emphasized the importance of the city's modernity (Villa 10). In response to the chaotic growth rate of the urban metropolis, the civic leaders created a "zoning institutional apparatus" to organize and bring order to the new formed metropolis.

The visionaries and professional planners of Los Angeles designated themselves as "surgeon generals" in the fight for the moral health of the metropolitan body, their main argument being that they had to contain the "infection" (Villa 41). Because private urban developers and federal agencies considered the ethnic working-class communities a "blight" entity, they were set for removal in order to achieve a more utopian vision of Los Angeles. Eric R. Avila in "The Folklore of the Freeway: Space, Culture, and Identity in Postwar Los Angeles" (1998) explains that, "the pattern of freeway construction in 1950s Los Angeles followed the recommendations of the ULI (Urban Land Institute) to coordinate highway

construction with slum clearance” (207). Hence, the urban development of Los Angeles, masked the urban removal of mostly poor residents.

Albert Camarillo also analyzes the organization of space and the creation of barrios in Southern California. Here Camarillo observes “a new reality for Mexican people.... perhaps best reflected in what can be called the *barrioization* of the Mexican population—the formation of residentially and socially segregated Chicano barrios or neighborhoods” (*Chicanos in a Changing Society* 53).

The topographic violence against the barrios became a fact and was shared community knowledge. Mary Prado reveals how, in the disrupted barrios, the monumental freeways “are now a concrete reminder of shared injustice, of the vulnerability of the community in the 1950s” (“Mexican American Women” 5). This kind of symbolic geography of dominance has made it possible for Chicana/o writers to articulate the disruptions in the landscape within history, via both the retrieval of memory and analysis of urbanization. Thus, the literature that comes from making order out of chaos can be read as a counter discourse, which critically interrogates the reasoning for redevelopment projects and contesting the urban development of major cities.

Leonard Lutwack notes that, in the nineteenth century, writers began to prioritize the environment by describing place through dialogue and the consciousness of characters (*The Role of Place in Literature* 20). Lutwack, contends that “the detailed delineation of place and the deterministic construction (the writer) put upon it very nearly pushed fiction into historical and scientific documentation” (20).

Chicana writers too have proposed their own vision of place drawing from their lived experiences. For *nuevomexicanas* and Hispanic writers in the nineteenth and early twentieth

century, the use of landscape and place was used to document family traditions and customs. Tey Diana Rebolledo in her essay “Tradition and Mythology Signatures of Landscape in Chicana Literature” (1997), writes about the symbolism the land and the landscape have had on Hispanic and Chicana Women writers. Rebolledo demonstrates that Hispanic women writing in the first half of the twentieth century, “identified the landscape with loss: of culture, of traditions, of language” (97). For example, in Cleofas M. Jaramillo’s autobiography *Romance of a Little Village Girl* (1955), the landscape symbolized a cultural loss and it offered her space to voice her resentment of the devastation the newcomers brought to New Mexico after 1848. In the opening chapters, Jaramillo positions herself and other *nuevomexicanos* as peaceful peoples that lived in an isolated valley of Arroyo Hondo “in our nook, isolated from the outside world and still untouched by modern progress, people were content to live their simple lives” (35). As Jaramillo matures and moves away from this enclave she is confronted with the rapidly vanishing traditions that she associates and parallels with the change in the scenery of the land. The land is no longer a picturesque social utopia but a dilapidated and dead land. With a sob choked in her throat, Jaramillo documents how difficult it was to come to terms with what she saw “It was hard to believe my eyes that what I was seeing were the melting remains of these once big, fine lively homes” (119). For Jaramillo, as well as for other Hispanic *nuevomexicanas* writers, the landscape is a metaphor for the loss of land, traditions, language and culture.

Given the geographical consequences of both domination and resistance, and how urban development affects Chicano barrios, it is crucial to read Chicana/o literature through the lenses of space and place. Contemporary Chicana writers utilize landscape and space to talk about the issues surrounding political and social struggles. According to Rebolledo

contemporary Chicana writers, “have centered on two distinct perceptions of landscape: the urban situation and the urge to return to the middle landscape that integrates human beings and nature” (“Tradition and Mythology” 107).

Viramontes’ short story “Neighbors” illustrates how she integrates the changes in the East L.A. landscape into her writing in order to reflect on social issues affecting her home geography. “Neighbors,” is a short story included in *The Moths and Other Stories*; it is narrated through the voices of two elderly neighbors Aura and Fierro who share a common lot in life. Their increasing and painful physical disabilities, and sense of imminent death connects them in a bond of solidarity. Throughout the narrative, Viramontes attempts to develop an alternative way to view the historical changes in the landscape. In particular she relies on the power of memory as a source of excavating that history. This remembering means, among other things, relying on the elders to make a connection between the past and present. Through the use of two interwoven narratives, that of Fierro’s recollection of memory and Aura’s reflection and description of the landscape of her neighborhood, Viramontes demonstrates how a barrio is changed by urban development. Viramontes’ introduction of Aura and her barrio set the stage to the dialogue between the individual and the collective social death of the barrio.

Aura Rodríguez always stayed within her perimeters, both personal and otherwise, and expected the same of her neighbors. She was quite aware that the neighborhood had slowly metamorphosed into a graveyard. People of her age died off only to leave their grandchildren with little knowledge of struggle....She shared the streets and corner stores and midnight with tough minded young men who threw empty beer cans into her yard; but once within her own solitude, surrounded by a tall wrought-iron fence, she belonged to a different time. Like

those who barricade themselves against an incomprehensible generation. Aura had resigned herself to live with the caution and silence of an apparition, as she had lived for the past seventy-three years, asking no questions, assured of no want, no deep-hearted yearning other than to live out the remainder of her years without hurting anyone, including herself. (103)

Viramontes depicts the barrio landscape as a “graveyard,” reflecting not only the actual death of its people but of their customs, beliefs, traditions and history.

For example, the night when Aura asks a group of young neighbors, the “Bixby Boys,” to lower their music as they were gathered in front of her house drinking and throwing their empty beer cans into her yard, she is only to be mocked by them. Although Aura has known them since they were young children, the lack of respect is abundant as they laugh at her even when she stumbles and falls. Aura sees these young men as “an incomprehensible generation,” lost in the “abyss of defeat,” who find “temporary solace among each other” (109). Her frustration with this and other intrusive street activities such as police sirens and all night parties lead her to call the police one night. While Aura is shocked by the violent handling by the police of the matter, she refuses to open the door for Toastie, one of the Bixby Boys whose baptism she had attended and who so desperately attempts to escape the police; he leaps over Aura’s fence, falls on her rose bush and, face scratched and bloodied by thorns, pounds on her door with fear in his eyes screaming “please” (109).

Aura’s refusal to help Toastie sets in motion a tragic escalation of vengeance between Aura and the young men. After the roundup of the Bixby boys, Aura ventures outside to tend to her mother’s garden only to be devastated by what she finds. The landscape reflects the changing cultural values in which the gang takes revenge by uprooting all the rose bushes

and plants Aura had tended to for over twenty years symbolically represents a landscape of waste and social disorder. Additionally the uprooting of Aura's rose bushes symbolize the uprooting of three generations, those of the Bixby Boys, Aura and her mother at the hands of the new generation who, she says were left behind with no knowledge of struggle or respect.

The threat she feels when leaving the confinement of her home now obligates her to live in solitude and thus she enters her home with a heavy feeling of resignation. Her entrapment raises issues of the dissolution of a community because no one comes to her aid when the Bixby Boys harass her and destroy her property. The thread that links a community that we first see represented by Aura's presence at Toastie's baptism and the traditional respect for and value of the elderly in Chicano culture has been completely cut. The process of deformation that transpired in this barrio is reflected in the alienation and separation of its inhabitants. Night after night Aura is left alone as her neighbors retreat back into their homes. And the neighborhood begins to resemble an unattended graveyard with dead rosebushes uprooted and cast aside, she thinks: "I'm so glad I'm going to die soon" (119).

"Neighbors," employs the complex decentered form "characteristic of Viramontes' narrative technique" (Yarbro-Bejarano, "Introduction" 19). It allows the reader a glimpse of the barrio's past and present from multiple points of view. Aura's elderly neighbor Fierro, recounts the uprooting of families, a history, and memories as he describes remembering the destruction produced by urban development. One afternoon as he reached the freeway on-ramp crossing as he walked home from the Citizen Center Luncheon he paused to remember:

He was suddenly amazed how things had changed and how easy it would be to forget that there were once quiet hills here, hills that he roamed in until they were flattened into vacant lots where dirt paths became streets and houses became homes. Then the government letter

arrived and everyone was forced to uproot, one by one, leaving behind rows and rows of wooden houses that creaked with swollen age. He remembered realizing, as he watched the carelessness with which the company men tore into the shabby homes with clawing efficiency, that it was easy for them to demolish some twenty, thirty, forty years of memories within a matter of months. As if that weren't enough, huge pits were dug up to make sure that no roots were left. The endless freeway paved over his sacred ruins, his secrets, his graves, his fertile soil in which all memories were seeded and waiting for the right time to flower, and he could do nothing. (106)

Describing how it used to be, along with the careless destruction of Fierro's land, can also be read as Viramontes' interrogation of the larger landscape of power. First, Fierro's memories recount the rural landscape that he grew up in as the once quiet hills that were refigured and flattened by urbanization. Second, the tragedy of uprooting is reflected in the disfiguration of the landscape by modernization. At first glance, the uprooting is caused solely by urban development. The freeway comes to symbolize the infinite de-rooting of a culture and lives in the memories of its elders. Barbara Harlow observes that hegemonic urban renewal plans not only confine working class populations of color within spaces such as ghettos and barrios, but also sabotage the historical continuity and internal coherence within those same spaces ("Sites of Struggle," 161). Hence, in Aura's memory, the younger generation and the dissolution of a community is what caused the uprooting of a history, of memories and traditions and not the successive modernizations of the landscape.

For Fierro it was the loss of his memory that hunted him the most: "his greatest fear in life, greater than his fear of death or of not receiving his social security check, was that he would forget so much that he would not know whether it was like that in the first place, or

whether he had made it up, or whether he had made it up so well that he began to believe it was true” (“Neighbors” 106). Fierro’s internal dialogue reflects a state of mind mirroring a chaotic sense of place that can only be retained and navigated through memory, and notice this when he states “here was where the Paramount Theater stood, and here was where Chuy was stabbed, over there the citrus orchards grew” (106). Fierro is not able to retain and pass on his knowledge to his only son Chuy because he was fatally stabbed by a group of boys. As a consequence, Fierro’s historical knowledge and memories die along with him because he has no one to pass them on to.

The representation of Chuy’s death at the hands of other Chicano youth addresses the issue of intercultural tensions associated with the changing social patterns in barrios. In his analysis of “Neighbors,” Villa notes that the “twin dysfunctional tendencies in the East Los Angeles community—of gang to non-gang relations and of cross-generational exchanges of experiential knowledge—are, in no small part, a disabling effect” (*Barrio Logos* 121). Viramontes’ approach to writing about the urban decay and violence in East Los Angeles, locates outside forces at the center for the construction of gangs. For example, in “Neighbors” and in *Their Dogs Came With Them* the deterioration of the physical space of the barrio along with the larger context of economic disenfranchisement and urban development causes youths to join a gang. Additionally, her representation of the McBride Boys and Lote M Homeboys demonstrates how the urban renewal plans from the post-World War II period continue to disrupt the historical continuity and internal coherence within the barrio by the creation of gangs.

In her most recent novel *Their Dogs Came With Them* (2007), Viramontes again goes back in time in order to, as she has termed it elsewhere, “excavate” the history of East L.A.,

through its constant transforming landscape. She frames the novel in two temporal settings first, 1960 when the freeway was first being built in East L.A., which consequently uprooted and displaced communities, and the second 1970, when the freeway hovers over communities rendered them and their inhabitants invisible. Her use of the landscape humanizes the loss of community ties “freeways amputated the streets into stumped dead ends, and the lives of the neighbors itched like phantom limbs in Mama’s memory” (*Their Dogs Came With Them* 33). Additionally, Viramontes explores multiple voices, as the novel does not have just one main character, instead she utilizes a variety of characters who don’t necessarily know of each other but whose lives crisscross because they happen to live in the same barrio. In an interview with Daniel Olivas, Viramontes explains that, “It’s impossible to just tell one story. I had to tell all these different stories and, like the freeways, have them all intersect” (*La Bloga* Interview 2007). The four main female characters resemble freeway pillars grounded in a history of erasure that locate sites of memory and articulate their adaptation to the changing urban space. Ermilia Zumaya a high school student living with her grandparents, receives the historical knowledge from her elders, which triggers her to question what is wrong with her surrounding, as a result she undergoes a feminist political awakening. Tranquilina, the daughter of missionaries, questions the role that her faith plays in the contemporary barrio that surrounds her with its violence. Ana, a working class Chicana, struggles to take care of her mentally unstable brother Ben. Finally, Antonia María Gamboa a homeless gang member who was christened Turtle “always and por vida till death do us part when she joined the McBride Boys” (16).

My reading of the text will look at the character of Turtle to theorize how girls are lured into male gangs after they suffer a sense of loss of place and space. By place I am

referring to the place a daughter holds within the family structure and space being the geographical landscape of the barrio. For example, Turtle's body will represent the fragmentation of family relationships, the loss historical knowledge and alienation of people within the urban space. As a homeless gang member living on the streets of East Los Angeles, Turtle occupies nontraditional spaces for Chicanas. For one, she is considered a *malflora*, women who go against set gender norms. In addition, she is also viewed as an *andariega* because she ventures beyond the spaces considered safe and proper for women. Rebolledo defines the trope of *mujeres andariegas* as "women who don't stay at home tending to their husband, children, parents," but rather "wander and roam" and are then considered socially reckless and morally depraved by their community (*Women Singing* 183). Viramontes' representation of the *andariega* as a Chicana gang member is not a new concept. In 1994, the figure of the *Chola* or gang member was catapulted into U.S. popular cinematographic culture in Alison Anders's film *Mi Vida Loca* (1993). In 1997 the female gang member took center stage in Yxta Maya Murray's novel *Locas* (1997), Mona Ruiz's autobiography *Two Badges* (1997), and Gini Sikes's ethnographic work *8 Ball Chicks: A Year in the Violent World of Girl Gangsters* (1997). More recently, the *Chola* has been the subject of scholarly works, among them Monica Brown's *Gang Nation: Delinquent Citizens in Puerto Rican, Chicano, and Chicana Narratives* (2002), and Marie "Keta" Miranda's *Homegirls in the Public Sphere* (2003).

In 2008 Reymundo Sánchez co-wrote the autobiography of Sonia Rodríguez in *Lady Q: The Rise and Fall of a Latin Queen*. Viramontes' version of the female gang member adds another twist to the already mythitified *Chola* subject. Turtle is unlike any of the *Cholas* in the previously mentioned Chicana works. What sets Turtle apart is that she chooses to

portray herself as a male gang member. Although the chola characters in contemporary Chicana fiction break gender norms by dressing and to some extent acting like boys, other gang members consider them female. As for Turtle, she is viewed as *la malflora*, which is tangibly linked to her gender performance as a *pelón* a “male” gang member who is involved in criminal activities, and at the end of the novel commits a horrendous crime.

In an interview with Jesús José Romero, Viramontes states that one of her objectives in writing is to challenge and transform her readers by inserting them in the lives of her characters and having her readers “see them not as a criminal but as a human being who have been influenced by forces sometimes beyond their control and show they’re not just evil bad people” (Romero *Interview* 2010). The restructured landscape of Los Angeles, functions as an urban force that leads some to crime. Additionally, it will come to define the deformation of the barrio serving as the setting for the novel.

The novel opens with Chavela, the elderly protagonist packing her belongings, getting ready to move out of the home she has lived in for seventy-five years. Viramontes writes, “In a few weeks, Chavela’s side of the neighborhood, the dead side of the street, would disappear forever. The earthmovers had anchored, their tarps whipping like banging sails, their bellies petroleum-readied to bite trenches wider than rivers. In a few weeks the blue house and all the other houses would vanish just like Chavela and all the other neighbors” (12). In describing this trajectory, Viramontes narrates an itinerary of remembered space filled with Chavela’s intimate memories. Chavela goes through the instructions she had scribbled on the walls for herself, and instructs Ermilia the young neighboring child about the importance of not forgetting. “It’s important to remember my name, my address, Chavela Luz Ybarra de Cortez. SS#010-56-8336. 4356 East 1st or how the earthquake cracked mi

tierra firme, mi país, now as far away as my youth” (7). Chavela’s insistence in remembering her social security number along with the recollection of her *tierra* her *país* is a mediation rooted and expressed from within a binary identity. Her social security number suggests U.S citizenship, while her utterance of *tierra* and *país* claim not to be rooted in nationality but a Mexican-American identity. Chavela’s mind, then, becomes an archive of personal memories and historical knowledge. However, unlike Fierro and Aura, in “Neighbors,” Chavela has Ermilia to retain and pass on her personal and cultural histories. The following day as Ermilia explores the vacant house she gazes at “a pair of wooden beams [that] held up the ceiling [she] tried to memorize them because Chavela told her it was important not to forget” (14). For Viramontes, then, the act of memory is empowering, and urban development is continuously trying to erase these sites of memory that are so important to Chavela. Therefore, the sites of memory that Ermilia the child archives function as sites that will aid her years later to contest the erasure of a history. Later in the novel, as a young women, Ermilia also recalls her grandmother talking about the bulldozers or, as she called them, the “earthmovers” that came into their neighborhood to make way for the freeway.

By placing Ermilia in between the discourse of these two elderly women and then tracing the social and political awareness of this character, Viramontes points to the importance of remembering and passing on cultural and historical knowledge. On the other hand Turtle’s character spends much of her time in the novel wandering around the urban space, struggling to remember and locate a secure place to rest. Unfortunately, for Turtle the freeway system ripped up communal roots both literally a figuratively erasing the community of her youth. As she sits down to rest under a tree, Turtle remembers that, “Chavela’s warm towel carried the fragrance of Dove soap. She wiped Turtle’s face and the moist cleansing

made her feel refreshed, lovely. For some reason, the *viejita* liked Turtle and tweaked her chin and gave her lemonade because as far back as Turtle can remember, she always had an unquenchable thirst” (235). The distinction between Ermilia and Turtle’s relationship with Chavela is time. Chavela’s knowledge disappeared before Turtle was able to receive it. In this narrative Viramontes is interested in remembering and documenting the changes in the urban landscape, particularly the chaotic freeways that are above and over communities rendering them and their inhabitants invisible.

Raúl Homero Villa’s analysis of *barriological* works (culturally affirming practices) by Viramontes also suggests that the memory of place is inseparable from the complex “wisdom of the barrio” that her works convey (*Barrio Logos* 118). He also reveals the degree to which lament and anger over the loss of what he terms a “communitarian ethos” in Chicana/o texts takes place against the backdrop of destructive urban development (*Barrio Logos* 116). For Viramontes, her deep identification with urban space, specifically the barrio and the half-mile area of East Los Angeles where her mother grew up, intrigued her to write about that particular landscape to document the urban situation good or bad providing a complex reading of barrio life.

Fragmented and Alienated Spaces in *Califas*⁹

Like many large cities during the post-World War II period, Los Angeles embarked upon a plan of reconstruction, reorganization and modernization. The cornerstone of this plan was urban renewal through dominant social structures of community building (Villa, 40).

⁹ The term *Califas* (California) is associated with the sub-dialect known as caló used by Pachuco/as in the 1940’s. “Carlos Ortega, *Celebrating Latino Folklore: An Encyclopedia of Cultural Traditions* 195”

In the case of the largely Chicano communities this meant, “urban removal” of long standing residential areas in favor of the San Bernardino, Santa Ana, Long Beach, Golden State and Pomona freeways (Acuña, 295). Although the freeways ultimately contributed to the modernization of Los Angeles the seven freeways that cut through the Eastside devoured twelve percent of the land, exacerbated the housing shortage, and disrupted local businesses (Villa, 82). In the wake of the city’s reconstruction and reorganization, those who remained were left behind in neighborhoods filled with high unemployment or underemployment in a secondary labor market, infested with poverty, gangs and crime.

In *Their Dogs Came With Them*, Viramontes looks at how the altered landscape affects its residents in one such East L.A. neighborhood. To discuss the urban removal and the displacement of communities in the novel, Viramontes selects details of East L.A.’s landscape and the environmental ambience around the neighborhood as symbols of spatial containment that come with urban development. These details include the freeways, city landmarks, the persistent sound of patrol sirens, helicopters, cemeteries, and city roadblocks that served as barricades to quarantine the barrio and lastly the fictional Quarantine Authority.

Throughout the novel Viramontes makes use of the Quarantine Authority, as a metaphor for containment, along with factual urban development, as symbols to show how Chicano barrios were amputated, restructured and contained during the 1960s. These devices constitute what Michel Foucault refers to a “mechanisms of power” involving a “whole set of techniques and institutions for measuring, supervising, and correcting the abnormal” (*Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* 199). In the novel, the Quarantine Authority enforced a curfew and set up roadblocks around the East LA. Barrio to form a confined space, in which the neighborhood was locked down and its inhabitants prohibited leaving for fear of

a potential outbreak of rabies. The containment and or removal of the “infected” social spaces of the barrios were applied in the development of Los Angeles, California.

According to Villa, the mainstream press published sensationalized accounts of the growing “Mexican problem” producing a generalized vilification of their community. It is this precise social scientific discourse of the *mexicano* sociocultural pathology that Villa finds as evidence used to justify the urban renewal and removal of the “infected” (*Barrio Logos* 63). Similarly, Viramontes uses the narrative of infection and containment to explain how barrios are dislocated from the rest of the city of Los Angeles. Viramontes identifies the planners (government) of the uprooting and containment of the neighborhood with the city’s Mayor who contains this captive population through a pamphlet that read:

Rising cases of rabies reported in the neighborhood (see shaded area) have forced health officials to approve, for limited time only, the aerial observation and shooting of undomesticated mammals. Unchained and/or unlicensed mammals will not be exempt. (54)

“Wearing puffy orange vests, the Quarantine Authority officers distribute the orange traffic cones” (59) that enclose a segmented space to isolate individuals and to keep out the wild dogs from exiting the neighborhood. The nightly helicopter sweeps assure that no one leaves or enters the neighborhood after a specified time. This surveillance is based on a system of registration, in which the neighborhood people have to prove their residency by supplying documentation. At the end of a long day Ermilia observes as her unquestioning neighbors line up and wait their turn to be interrogated:

They clutched grocery bags or parcels that grew into heavy buckets of gravel in their arms as hours passed and the slithering line of people either shrank or lengthened against the curb. They fisted gas company bills, birth certificates, bogus driver’s licenses, anything to get

themselves home. The longer the wait, the larger the nervous obsession with the handled paper. Shifting weight of bodies, hushing children, hours passing, backs aching, only to be told certain papers were unacceptable as proof of residency, including rent receipts, the QA officer yelled back. (63)

The neighborhood was convinced that the curfew, the shootings and the Quarantine Authority were what contained the rabies epidemic by not letting the wild dogs run loose. But for Ermilia and her friends the Quarantine Authority were nothing but “culeros,” that took advantage of their positions.

Four months of waiting in lines longer than the devil’s tail only to be interrogated by the culeros for valid government documentation, from eight in the evening to six in the morning. In a suspicious tone, the QA examined the girls from sneakers to earrings, studied their IDs, long pauses of distrust to unnerve them, to convince them of some guilt. Except for the troublemakers, the neighborhood people bit into the quarantine without question. (55)

The conjunction of these various symbols, characters and discourses serve to frame the neighborhood and Viramontes’ story about the affects urban development has on a community. Viramontes demonstrates how spatial divisions such as residential segregation, urban renewal, contemporary restructuring and police brutality subsequently negatively impact the lives of already marginalized peoples.

Viramontes’ attention to the disruption of barrio life and the uprooting of the East L.A. community brings to the surface the effects urban development has on the landscape, community and in particular the Chicanas living in the barrio. The East L.A. landscape brought by urban development creates a sort of labyrinth in which a variety of characters

have to learn to maneuver and survive. For Turtle's character, the barrio's changing landscape becomes a place where she must fight for survival against the forces of poverty, gang violence, drugs and death. Viramontes also explores the imposed relationship between the female body's experience with patriarchal oppression and the kinds of exploitation suffered by the barrio environment. For example, she reflects the destruction of the barrio landscape upon the Chicana body in three significant ways. For one, the fragmentation of a geographical space coincides with the fragmentation of Turtle's identity and gender performance. Second, the physical rape of Turtle's character is parallel with the violation of the landscape. Lastly the destruction of the barrio corresponds to the destruction of the family, community cohesiveness and the cultural historical knowledge resulting in the invisibility of the female body at home and on the streets.

La Malflora Drifting on a Memory

Viramontes portrayal of Turtle as a *malflora* (a bad flower) that is a girl who refuses to conform to gender expectations by performing masculinity, constructs a fragmented identity that articulates the psychological effects urban growth has on barrio landscape and its inhabitants. Viramontes ignores linear time in order to reflect the unconscious dynamics going on in Turtle's mind. The narrative structure loops in and out Turtle's thoughts, memories, and flashbacks, leading the reader along a winding path in order to reach an understanding of why Turtle, a young girl, comes to reject her female body. Turtle's shifting narratives illustrate the disassociation from her family, in particular her mother and older brother Luis. Through Turtle's "looking back" at her life, as Alarcón asserts many speaking subjects in Chicana works do, allows the reader to analyze "the treacherous route on the way to becoming "woman" or not becoming "woman"" (223). Hence, "looking back" the reader

witnesses the destruction of the female body, the familia, and the barrio's landscape, at the hands of urban development, husbands, fathers, brothers and gang members.

Throughout the narrative Viramontes draws a connection between Turtle's fragmented gender performance with her family's destructive violent behavior, particularly the fights between her parents and her brother's involvement in a gang, and not one of lesbian desire. Turtle takes on the male gang member persona after she joins her brother's street gang the McBride Boys and her family rejects her. Eventually Turtle roams the streets as a homeless *pelón* after her brother is drafted to serve in the Vietnam War. Although by that time she has left the gang, she continued to perform a masculine identity. This affords her protection from sexual harassment and violence directed towards women on the streets. By navigating the urban landscape through her characters, Viramontes writes into her novel the invisible people that lie beneath the freeway as well as the historical landscape that is threatened by the erasure effect of urban development. Juxtaposing the fragmentation (urban planning) and disfiguration (amputation) of the urban landscape with Turtle's fragmented identity and gender performance opens up an important dialogue about the consequences of the barrios social and historical erasure.

Turtle's memories place the narrative into a historical and cultural context. Her story begins in the temporal setting on the streets of East L.A. in 1970. She is awoken by the sound of someone screaming her name. The calling out of Turtle's name is a recurrent howling that brings her back from a deep sleep or thought. The previous night she had been running from the Lote M Homeboys, a rival gang, and from the Quarantine Authority and found a place to sleep in between a warehouse wall and a dumpster. As she walks the city blocks she grew up in, she becomes aware that she is a bull's eye target for the Lote M Boys the Quarantine

Authority and the vendors setting up for the day. Her khakis, tight leather jacket and her “shaved, razor-skinned scalp” make her visible to rival gangs and her community, yet render her invisible to her family (21). On the streets, dazed and weak from hunger, Turtle “felt God Almighty shitty [...] She looked rumpled, sleepless and old for her eighteen years” (21). At one point, Turtle’s thoughts drift back to a family barbecue, a time before her brother Luis had shaved her head, and before she started going bad. In fact, she had shoulder-length hair which her “Amá absentmindedly wrapped [...] around her finger” putting Turtle to sleep (169). However, Turtle remembers being awoken by an explosion of expletives. Her aunt Mercy had caught Tío Angel slow dancing with Rosie. A young impressionable Turtle witnesses:

Breast hung out, blouses shredded, fleshy open wounds bled... Puffed, bright red, losing her grip on Mercy, her nose bleeding everywhere. And then Mercy losing, her once-rolled-up hair now matted in coagulated blood like a cheap dye job. Rosie losing and then Mercy losing. (170)

Although Angel partakes in the infidelity, the struggle here is between the women. They fall into the paradigm set up by a patriarchal structure that pits women against other women while men remain at a safe distance and in control of the whole situation. As long as women are part of the masculine phallogentric order they are bound to fight each other for the limited space allotted to them. Tío Angel’s wife Mercy and Rosie are portrayed as hysterical women who lose control over a man’s attention. This violent destructive behavior against women in her family becomes central to the struggles facing Turtle.

The very representations of home and *familia* are problematized and put topsy-turvy to examine intra-familial relationships. As Richard Griswold del Castillo notes “The bonds of

affection and assistance among members of the family household and wide network of kinfolk have been found to be one of the most important characteristics of Mexican-American family life” (*La Familia* 27). Although the concepts of home and *familia* have served as a powerful form of resistance in Chicana/o literature, not examining it would conceal other forms of oppression within the *familia*. For example, Viramontes stresses that:

Family ties are fierce. Especially for *mujeres*. We are raised to care for. We are raised to stick together, for the family unit is our only source of safety. Outside our home there lies a dominant culture that is foreign to us, isolates us, and labels us illegal alien. But what may be seen a nurturing, close unit, may also become suffocating, manipulative, and sadly victimizing. (“Nopalitos” 293)

For many Chicanas, the relationship they have with their family is also strongly predicated upon the cultural norms present within the greater community. Therefore, opposing the community’s intolerance toward a girl’s un-femininity also runs the risk of initiating a break with one’s own family. Norma Alarcón, describes how “The female-speaking subject that would want to speak from a different position than that of a mother, or future wife/mother, is thrown into a crisis of meaning that begins with her own gendered personal identity and its relational position with others” (“Making *Familia* From Scratch” 221).

Turtle’s remembrance of things past transports her back to the image of her childhood home. Sonia Saldívar-Hull’s analysis of Viramontes’ narrative strategy suggests that the fragmentation reflects “the disorientations” that her characters experience in their lived environment (*Feminism on the Border* 223). For example, Turtle “didn’t want to remember how careless they were to the house and each other. Broken windows veined with duct tape, Amá’s broken bones, tile eroded and fallen to the ground like teeth, Luis’ locura, paint peeled,

Frank's explosive temper and the stink of a thousand regrets lingered" (*Their Dogs* 221). The concept of home acquires a negative connotation because it is overflowing with the images of domestic violence. The house is not the space that Gaston Bachelard describes in *The Politics of Space*, (1994), as "...the house that shelters daydreaming, the house protects the dreamer, the house allows one to dream in peace" (6). For Turtle the house was not a place where a child felt safe to daydream. It is during her real experience with homelessness that living on the streets brings significance to her name. Like a turtle she carries her home on her back. She daydreams about the house of her childhood in an attempt to deal with the harsh realities of her urban disposition. She was a dreamer without the protection of conventional forms of shelter.

She remembers how terrified she felt when the fights began, "she would take refuge on top of the house to escape the knowledge of how easy flesh tore, how fragile a bone was" (*Their Dogs* 162). In "The Street Scene: Metaphoric Strategies in Two Contemporary Chicana Poets" (1995), María Herrera-Sobek finds that "For feminist writers the house is no longer perceived as a symbol of security but as a metaphor for prison. It has become a claustrophobic space which enslaves and imprison women within its four walls" (164). Turtle rejects the imprisonment of the house by sleeping outside of it; she refuses to become part of the house that "Amá was part of" a house that was "carelessly repaired with cardboard and duct tape" additionally her father "Frank was part of the house, a loose, exposed wire ready to electrocute anyone who touched him" (*Their Dogs* 161).

Not being able to occupy a house or a unified female experience, Turtle is drawn into a deeper isolation on the streets and it is there where she performs her fragmented identity as one "half of the cold-blooded Gamboas" (17). The relationship Turtle draws between the

silencing of women and the empowerment of men leads her to mimic those in power. For example, from a young age her brother Luis, whom she saw as a confident badass made Turtle want to be like him and not like her aunts. Therefore, she would try “to pee like a man, standing up, legs apart, and peed in the darkness like her brother” just as Luis did (157). It seems that Turtle chooses to dress like and identify with her brother Luis “whom she loved worse than herself, this homeboy who always appeared without a semblance of fear” (25) because she wanted to be part of the McBride Boys like her brother. As she remembers:

Hanging out with the McBride Boys, Luis was learning how not to talk, and it was all about learning the unspoken for him now: the downward three-finger signal meaning *M* for McBride-Marijuana-Muerte, Que Rifa: the confident badass walk protecting a nation of city blocks claimed by McBride: the khakis and Pendleton uniforms por vida, the spit-shine wingtips polished, the haircut readied for battle; the one of a-kind McBride handshake—finger bullhorns ramming; the middle finger pulled erect like cannons to shoot out a Fuck you, y que? A slight lift of chin to gesture, You ain’t worth the trouble if you ain’t part of McBride. It was all about unquestioned loyalty the only familia could understand. (158)

The empowerment that she gains from this alternative identification defies the boundaries that society and her Amá have laid out for her. In fact, her Amá’s greatest objection to her behavior is that it refuses to respect society’s system of logic. For this reason she yanks at Turtle’s hair “in an argument over her choice of boxers under her cutoffs, of her erasure of breasts and dresses and all that was outwardly female, over her behaving like some unholy malflora” (25). Amá’s word choice of *malflora* or “bad flower” is significantly loaded. The

notion that Turtle's is somehow "bad" relies on how her body's is perceived by others, especially the women in her family.

Turtle's body is considered doubly dangerous because it transgresses gender borders and is perceived as violent. During a conversation at the kitchen table, Aunt Mercy asks Turtle's mother "What's with the shaved head?" looking though Turtle as if she wasn't there (167). "Aunt Mercy had a way of excluding people from a conversation. She had a way of making people like Turtle feel invisible" (167). Aunt Mercy remembers the *malflora* that killed her own father down the street. As she looks through Turtle, rendering her invisible, she tells Frank that when "la malflora shaved her head. That was the start of [her] going bad" (167). Aunt Mercy's words underline the fact that women are judged by their appearance as well as their gender performance. In other words, they are perceived dangerous and even capable of murder if they don't fit in nicely into their society's prescribed roles. Not questioning the reason why the girl had killed her father, it was automatically assumed that she did it because she had gone bad. Recognizing this fact Turtle wonders "What can be worse in life than a bad flower?" (168).

As she stands at the cross roads of an intersection, Turtle keeps an eye out for venders leaving their box carts unattended so that she can get something to eat. However, that never happens, instead the memories of her brother Luis intervened. Turtle "tried to remember if Luis was with her the day she watched the steamroller, the day she sucked on a pig's foot" (22). Her momentary silence is interrupted by the broadcasted casualties of the Vietnam War on the televisions sets of the corner store. Viramontes links the Vietnam War in which Luis is participating and the war waged on the streets by the Quarantine Authority and the gangs.

Viramontes also suggests a similarity between Luis, a soldier at war, and Turtle a soldier fighting a war of survival on the streets of East Los Angeles.

For example, at night the helicopters' nightly patrols force Turtle to take refuge in various cemeteries. Viramontes clearly evokes the persistent "grave" and "war" metaphors to illustrate the tragic sense of loss of life, violence and death of the landscape of the contemporary barrio. Again Turtle's fragmented memories reflect "the disorientations" in urban landscapes and of Turtle herself. She felt dead tired "That's how she said it in her head" or "did Luis say that? I'm dead, somewhere in 'Nam, bullets whisking by, did she just hear him?" (235). Turtle is surprised at how fatigued her body is, and the effect it has on her memory and street sense. This serves as a telling example of the alienation that had occurred between her and her brother Luis when he was drafted to fight the war in Vietnam. She emphasizes that "None of this would be happening if the other half of the cold-blooded Gamboas were around. Til death do us part. That was the rule. She wasn't supposed to be left behind [...]" (22). As Rebolledo demonstrates "in many barrios life became an increasing struggle" as the urban space evolves "into a labyrinth of social ills and alienation" ("Tradition and Mythology" 107). That explains why Turtle must constantly out run and outwit the Quarantine Authority and her rival gang the Lote M Homeboys. As she crisscrosses the East L.A. landscape she imagines Luis' voice offering instruction "**S** for *Size up the situation*; **U** for *Undue haste makes waste*; **R** for *Remember where you are*" (*Their Dogs* 219-20). These instructions continue to guide her throughout the chapter spelling out the word **SURVIVAL**. Imagining her brother's instructions and spelling out the word survival symbolically links Turtle to Luis. Additionally, as a lone woman walking the streets, Turtle's survival also

depends on her street smarts, fragmented identity and masculinity performance. Although most believe her to be a male, she knows the consequences if they figure her true gender out.

***In Memory of Antonia María Gamboa*¹⁰**

María Herrera-Sobek notes that Chicana writers often use the concept of rape “as a literary motif in order to engage the reader in a reconstruction of the experience from the victim’s perspective and from a feminist point of view” (“The Politics of Rape” 245). In particular, she describes how the actual act of rape highlights the inferior status women hold in relation to men by rendering them into “voiceless, worthless, devalued objects, non-existent entities” who are left feeling “disembodied” (“The Politics of Rape” 247, 250). Therefore, the rape scenes in Chicana literature functions to illustrate a brutal reality and serves as a metaphor that encodes the subordinate status these women hold at various social, individual and familial levels (“The Politics of Rape” 246). The rape scene in *Their Dogs Came With Them* occurs on the freeway overpass, the geographical space of urban development signifying both the rape of the land by the city developers and the physical violence inflicted on the female body. As kids, Turtle and her younger brother Luis devise a plan to steal candy from the Mini Mart. As Luis plays lookout, Turtle stuffs candy beneath her mother’s winter coat. On their way back home, the bagman catches up to her at the freeway on-ramp where:

He forced her to stand spread-eagled. Disregarding the traffic, his big man fingers began to frisk her legs and poke into her cutoffs’ back pockets At first he believed what he felt on her chest were not breast but stolen apples, hard and concealed, and he clamped his big man

¹⁰ *In Memory of* is a way of remembering someone that has died. In Chicana/o cultural memory of place, space, and people is inseparable from the multifaceted and not always comforting “wisdom of the barrio” (Villa, *Barrio Logos* 118).

fingers on her flesh under her loose T-shirt to make sure. This boy had tits, this boy was really a braless girl with growing, firm chi-chis, her big brown nipples just there, under the shirt for him to pinch in utter disbelief, Then he did it again. The bagman groped her body under the draping wool coat again to make sure they weren't stolen produce, and the he slowly dug his metal-cold fingers between her thighs again, this time pressing harder, palming her buttocks, swirling his two hands much slower and slower to make himself believe. (*Their Dogs* 24)

As she stand there helpless “not one driver from all those cars zooming on the new freeway bridge not one driver driving the overpass 710 freeway construction, not one stopped to protest, to scream” (24). Viramontes strategically criticizes the fast pace of life and the dissolution of a community that the freeway system brought about the barrio when no one stopped to help Turtle. The representation of women without a voice and the disembodied feeling after a sexual violation is reiterated when Turtle shuts her eyes tight to shut out any cry. When she does open her eyes, her brother Luis has shoved himself between her and the bagman telling him he would kill him if he didn't leave her alone.

On the way home Turtle tries to speak of what occurred but Luis snaps at her and commands her to shut up, thus maintaining control over her and ensuring that she remain a muted object. Later that night Luis takes revenge on the bagman but he has to do it alone “because he had a girl for a brother” and “it shamed them both” (26). As Turtle stands in front of her house on the porch she stares at “the long bending metal rods jutting out of the semi construct of overpasses, on-ramps, bridges and interchanges being built across First Street” where she had been assaulted (27). Here Viramontes juxtaposes the landscape and Turtle's body with the metal-cold fingers of the bagman and the metal construction rods to

illustrate how Turtle's sexual assault is paralleled to the violation of the land by urban developers:

Turtle smelled the belly of the earth. Cool and dry, dark and rich, flat. Dead and alive [.....] To the right and left of her, the walls resembled legs sprawled apart. Her sneakers stood beneath miles of earth that had been heaved up, plowed aside, carted off and carried away in preparation for the rolling asphalt of the Interstate 710 Long Beach and Pomona freeways. (225)

The rape experience is especially significant in the collapse of the sister brother relationship formed between Turtle and Luis. For Turtle the love for her brother Luis was felt more than the love for herself. However, Luis resents having a girl for a brother. He realizes then that it didn't matter if the neighborhood thought of them as the Gamboa boys, "lizard boy, the smaller but the meaner of the two [.....] and the bald headed Gamboa brother [.....] who was really a girl but didn't want to be and got beaten up for it" (11). The sexual assault reminded Luis of his sister's gender and the dangers she faced on the streets. As a result Luis, also the leader of the McBride boys, chooses to have Turtle initiated into the gang by being beat up by the other boys "hundreds of bullet-speed shots to her head, stomach, legs" (232). The violation and the way in which Turtle was initiated into the gang reflect yet another system of power that claims to, but does not value individuality. Hence that night the real Antonia María Gamboa died and only an empty version of her lived on as Turtle.

Belonging to a new family, the McBride Boys, Turtle's movement through the barrio is informed by the *placas* (graffiti tagging) left by her gang and The Lote M vatos. "She could read, Turtle wasn't stupid. The cross-outs, tags, new gang emblems trashed all over McBride's graffiti on the walls of the bridge all bad news—**Alfonso aka Big Al, Sir Santos,**

Palo, Lucho Libre, Luis Lil Lizard, Turtle, McBride Boys Que Rifa” (217). Marcos

Sánchez-Tranquilino details the meaning of graffiti tagging:

The space available to Mexican American youth in the *barrios* (and housing projects in particular) for recreation and social interaction was severely restricted due to the carving up of these working-class neighborhoods by manufactures and developers. *Placas* represented a system developed by Chicano youths by which they could divide what little space (territory) was left. Space as a limited resource was the territorial economy upon which their street culture was based.

Operating on that level, *placas* were designed by them to serve as a public check of the abuse of power in the streets. *Barrio* calligraphy became an innovation developed by Chicano street youth culture to visually signal and monitor the social dynamics of power through coded symbology in economy of restricted public space. (“Mi Casa No Es Su Casa,” 51-52)

Graffiti is one medium to signal one’s gang affiliation and also to proclaim one’s territory. Additionally, the public display of graffiti is a tactic or weapon used in the warfare between rival gangs. For example, it is used as an insult and as a form of erasure when a rival gang dares to enter enemy territory to tag on their rivals *placas* therefore erasing its previous meaning. According to Ralph Cintron “this system of inscription and erasure” results “in a layered message” of respect and disrespect (*Angels’ Town* 173). Turtle remembers the night the McBride Homeboys claimed her brother Luis as one of their own. That night Luis and his homeboys set out to find freshly laid cement in which to record their names proclaiming “eternal allegiance to one another” (163). Viramontes underscores the importance of this allegiance by addressing the factors that are causing the fragmentation of their very existence:

The boys would never know that in thirty years from tonight the tags would crack from the earthquakes, the weight of vehicles, the force of muscular tree roots, from the trampling of passersby, become as faded as ancient engravings, as old as the concrete itself, as cold and clammy as a morgue table...not even concrete engravings would guarantee immortality. (*Their Dogs* 164)

Furthermore, the landscape is clearly used to reflect the death of its young people by comparing the cold-cemented freeway still a form of erasure with a morgue table. Turtle understood then that the Lote M boys meant business proclaiming the McBride Boys territory by chiseling away their tags on the freeway bridge with a hammer and crossing-out what was left of their names with red paint sending a “dispatch announcing erasure” (216).

***Qvo, You Vatos Heard Our History*¹¹?**

Cultural theorist Edward Soja critically analyzes the social and spatial configuration of greater Los Angeles. For Soja the relationship between the spacial and the social are “dialectically inter-reactive, interdependent” while the “social relations of production are both space-forming and space contingent (at least insofar as we maintain, to begin with, a view of organized space as socially constructed)” (*Postmodern Geographies* 81). Soja’s analysis looks at geographical space as being a central category in understanding how unequal power relations are spatially configured yet effectively ignored. Soja suggests that because paradigms of space mask power relations “the demystification of spatiality and its veiled instruments of power is key to making practical, political, and theoretical sense of the contemporary era” (61). Therefore, he concludes that the construction of ones “social life” is a geographical and historical process.

¹¹ *Qvo* is used in *barrio* Spanish to mean “what’s up?” or “hello.”

In *Their Dogs Came With Them* we are witness to the unmistakable union of geography and history in so called urban renewal plans from the post-World War II period. The infamous “network of freeways” both bridges the distances between residence and workplace, but also fortify existing divisions among communities (Soja, 231). Viramontes locates the root of Los Angeles community history erasure within the broader context of urban development. The persistent “freeway” metaphor is evoked to articulate Viramontes’ concern with the uprooting of barrios, and the threat of a severed historical knowledge. For example, when Turtle looks out from her front porch she sees the old woman Chavela’s “blue house like all the other houses disappearing inch by inch [...] in its place, the four-freeway interchange would be constructed” (169). By addressing the issue of uprooting a community and, in this case, the knowledge of the old woman Chavela, Viramontes utilizes what Barbra Harlow suggests is a critique on how urban renewal plans sabotage the historical continuity of the barrio (“Sites of Struggle,” 161). Villa argues that the “aggressive deterritorialization is produced at the level of city planning under the guise of urban modernization” and that the “devastating uprooting is effected upon the greater barrio and its historical-cultural landscape (*Barrio Logos* 125). Specifically, he emphasizes the central role that the uprooting of people plays in severing a “cultural continuum” and community (125).

In fact, Villa finds that Viramontes resists the numerous forms of erasure by retaining memory. For example, he notes that the “will-to-memory of her characters” like Aura, and Fierro in her short story “Neighbors,” is also a metaphor for Viramontes’ “own authorial struggle to discursively render the consequences of East Los Angeles’ social-geographic subordination into usable, transmittable community knowledge through the medium of her fiction” (126). Viramontes acknowledges the need for a deep connection among elders and

the succeeding generation and illustrate the personal bonds that are made through memories. For example, at her lowest point, Turtle now remembers the *viejita* Chavela and wonders if she would welcome her now that she is a “Grade-A cold-blooded malflora [...] smelling like vomit from the trash she had been forced to eat” (236). The two women carry the memory of Turtle’s true gender and Turtle wonders if, Chavela still lived across from her childhood home, would she offer her “a shower sudsy Dove foam for her chest, hips, her thighs?” (236). However, the personal memories and historical knowledge that would be shared between Turtle and Chavela are no longer available to Turtle. Thus she calls attention to what Villa calls the “barrio’s historical and material deformation” caused by the “infrastructural developments of post war urban restructuring” (126). Viramontes articulates and warns that one goal of urban development is to erase the collective knowledge of the barrio by erasing its landscape. In fact, Turtle’s account of the changing landscape informs us that the younger generation lacks historical knowledge and is not aware of their deep roots to the land.

Severed tree roots jutted from mud walls....she gazed above her at the high ridge and marveled at how far down the tree roots had grown. Except for the horizon being erased by the night, she saw nothing above them. Out of sight, out of mind, and over the embankment, everything was forgotten. (226)

For the younger generation, the dissolution of a community also causes the uprooting of a history, of memories and traditions, all of which were buried in the trenches dug out for the freeway construction. Viramontes’ fiction speaks out to that erasure, literally the physical burying of history, and puts into words the history of injustice that surrounds the barrio landscape. The concrete in the landscape is a symbol connected to death and silence. Viramontes uses the concrete as imagery to describe a mass burial “the ghost houses and

abandoned machinery and trenches being readied” for the poring of concrete that would be used as pillars for the freeway (172). Later the McBride Boys would engrave their *placas* on the fresh cement again referencing death, their tags resembled tombstones that became “as faded as ancient engravings, as old as the concrete itself, as cold and clammy as a morgue table” (164).

In the midst of this destruction, Viramontes interjects some hope by emphasizing the image of the *nopal* in the cemented concrete of the urban barrio landscape “the nopal cactus was the only thing that thrived in their small rented house on First Street” (161). Throughout the novel it is the *nopal* that grows against all the chaos in the barrio landscape precisely because it is “enduring, strong with inner reserves and resources” (Rebolledo “Tradition and Mythology,” 123). Turtle would later visit her childhood home “what ever happened, she wondered, to all those nopales Amá had planted? All but one small cactus remained to give Turtle such an aching prick” (221). Turtle’s endurance and survival suggest, “perhaps, they had, the nopal and she, something in common” (171). However, Viramontes resists writing a story about a heroin coming-to-consciousness. Instead the author directs a dialogue about erasure and loss to the reader so that within the novel we can read the changing landscape and the disastrous consequences of not retaining that historical knowledge. Viramontes articulates that one of those consequences is that it fosters the social conditions that give rise to gang formation and violence. In doing so, she subverts the idea that Turtle was born bad a *malflora*, but instead the erasure of the land coincides with the “erasure of breast...and all that was outwardly female” (25). Thus, Turtle must align herself to a gang male identity as a form of survival.

Not finding a place or space within her family or her brother's gang, Turtle finds herself alone and abandoned to be victimized by the gang and the police department. After being on the streets for months hungry and dead tired, Turtle is picked up by her gang and although hesitant to go with them because "she knew the rules---Santos would take her to the others so as to beat some sense into her good. Beat her something fierce" the thought of convincing Santos into buying her a hamburger clouded her better judgment (268). That night high on drugs Turtle mind goes down memory lane. First she asks Santos to take her to The Falls in Monterey Park, "years ago the water cascades and lights and Roman-columned balcony has spawned generation of lovers who parked at its base" but now after years of being shut down the falls seemed empty and only "a few placazos belonging to the McBride Boys, were splattered everywhere on the flaking turquoise concrete" (300). "In her memory of a memory, Turtle began to" hear and remember "The first time she had come to the waterfalls, Tío Angel had bought her" (300). She imagines, that her tío Angel must have parked in the same spot "where lovers might have parked" and there he "bought Turtle a Coca-cola, and told her she didn't have to share it with anyone" and so she "drank it then, the sinful drink then. Turtle saw her young self then, her face bouncing back then, surfacing then, falling back then, to the bottom then, and back again" (301). In Turtle's final flashback we also learn that she was sexually victimized as a young girl by her tío Angel.

Viramontes effectively critiques the secrets and silence of incest in the family traditions by juxtaposing the physical erasure of the landmarks with the erasure of Turtle's memories. After years of neglect the "the lush growth of trees began to overlap" the sidewalks of The Falls and like Turtles memories her secrets resembled the "leafy branches of the trees" through which she could barely see (301). After that final flashback, Turtle's

narrative ends abruptly and violent. At the instruction of her gang, that same night, while on a drug faze that resembled the “perpetual drowsy fog of gaseous fumes” that “hovered over the freeway routes,” Turtle with a screwdriver in her hand “lunged at the boy with all the dynamite rage of all the fucked-up boys stored in her rented body” (313-322). Turtle opened her eyes and looked around for her gang family and “found herself abandoned” once more by the McBride Boys (323).

In her reading of Viramontes’ “Paris Rats in L.A.” Saldívar-Hull notes “Instead of the media oversimplifications of barrio as gang-violence war zone, she presents barrio as township, barrio as home, and its young men and women in gangs” (*Feminism on the Border* 155). She goes on to say that “Admittedly, the gang ethic is violent, but this political narrative gives us the reason for the violence. She offers us insights into how our children, our young women and men, are tracked to lives on the margins, on the borders, of the United States” (155). Concluding that “Viramontes gives a name, a face, and ultimately humanity to people whom the dominant group prefers to keep anonymous, sinister, and therefore easier to kill on the street or to disappear into the labyrinth of the US prison system” (155). In fact, the shell of masculinity that at one point offered Turtle protection is read by the police as criminal and disposable and therefore shoot her in an execution style.

In the closing of the novel, Tranquilina cradled Turtle in her arms and asked why she killed the young boy “Turtle didn’t know why: She didn’t make the rules. Why? Because a tall girl named Antonia never existed, because her history held no memory” (324). Turtle’s answer provides the space from which we can critique the devastation of erasure of the personal and community. Forced to perform a masculine identity as the other half of the Gamboa brothers meant that Antonia lacked the language to articulate her memories. Her

death in the end claimed her body along with her memory. However, if we read Turtle's death as Viramontes' contribution to Chicana/o historical knowledge then the female gang member is no longer mute, her voice her history has been restored by Viramontes to forewarn the present generation of the consequences of the loss of cultural and historical knowledge. Thus Viramontes as a writer continues the dialogue with future generations by addressing the historical landscapes that give voice to those that have been cemented in silence.

CHAPTER 3: DARK AND WICKED: *LA LLORONA* ROAMS THE URBAN LANDSCAPE

All cultures have ascribed norms that speak to the way women should or should not behave. In Chicana/o culture, three female archetypes, La Malinche, *La Llorona*, and La Virgen de Guadalupe, define the culturally acceptable limitations and categories of female behavior. Gloria Anzaldúa states that “*La gente Chicana tiene tres madres*. All three female figures are mediators: Guadalupe, the virgin mother who has not abandoned us, la Chingada (Malinche), the raped mother who we have abandoned, and la Llorona, the mother who seeks her lost children and is a combination of the other two. In part, the true identity of all three has been subverted—Guadalupe to make us docile and enduring, la Chingada to make us ashamed of our Indian side, and La Llorona to make us long-suffering people” (52-53).

La Llorona, the “Weeping Woman,” is the legend of a mother who abandoned her children, or whose children were murdered. In some cases as a response to her dissolution with the relationship with her lover, she drowns herself and her children. There also are variants in the legend as to her marital status, in some she is the lover and in others she is the wife of a wealthy man. Nevertheless, her punishment for her sins is to be condemned to wander alone for eternity crying out for her dead children as she is often found wailing alongside rivers and other bodies of water. Whatever version of the tale is told, *La Llorona* is, as Tey Diana Rebolledo asserts, a cultural icon “tied up in some vague way with sexuality and the death or loss of children: the negative mother image” (*Women Singing* 63).

As Domino Renee Pérez, points out, the legend of *La Llorona* has been a “part of Greater Mexican cultural tradition for approximately five hundred years” (*There Was a Woman* 19). *La Llorona* and the oral stories about her have been the focus of artists, folklorist,

and writers, who have studied and documented the legend. Such is the dedication to the lore that the oral stories told about her are “housed in some of the largest folkloric collections in the United States” (Pérez, 20).

Scholars like Gloria Anzaldúa and Luis Leal have traced the origins of *La Llorona* to Cihuacoatl, or “Serpent Women, ancient Aztec goddess of earth, of war and birth, patron of midwives,” (*Borderlands* 35). Cihuacóatl is a manifestation of the creator goddess Coatlicue, terrifying but also powerful (*Borderlands* 42). According to Leal, *La Llorona* can be traced to pre-Conquest mythology linked to Cihuacóatl who would walk the city at night crying out for dead children or appearing before men, and her wails were considered an omen of war (“The Malinche-Llorona” 36). The characteristics present in the mythology link her to *La Llorona*. Soon after the Conquest of Tenochtitlan Cihuacóatl was transformed from goddess to *La Llorona* “a savage beast and an evil omen” (Leal, “The Malinche-Llorona” 136).

Other scholars trace her origins to a European narrative. For instance, Américo Paredes explains that *La Llorona*’s legend “struck deep roots in the Mexican tradition because it was grafted on an Indian legend cycle about the supernatural woman who seduces men when they are out alone or working in the fields” (103). José Limón suggests that many European elements crept into pre-Colombian mythology that include the motifs of, infanticide, kidnapping, a woman’s betrayal by either a husband or father, and the substitution of grief and remorse instead of an avenging spirit (“La Llorona, The Third Legend” 408). Enduring features of Aztec mythology that remain in many versions of *La Llorona*’s legend are “an *Indian* woman sometimes in a flowing white dress, crying *in the night*, near a body of water, and confronting people, mostly men who are terrified when they see her” (Limón 408).

La Llorona transgressed into a story and image used to frighten children and warns of women's danger. Cordelia Candelaria states, "What I heard about her as a child is unforgettable, even though I realize that my unrestrained imagination was as much responsible for her image in my mind as anything I heard. Fear and innocence offer the perfect chemistry for mythmaking" ("Letting La Llorona Go" 95). Cherrie Moraga suggests that *La Llorona's* story functions as another way to reinforce the idea of woman as inherently sinful, an "aberration, criminal against nature" (*Loving* 145). Candelaria offers a more elaborate interpretation of the message conveyed by *La Llorona*, stating that, "On its face the tale teaches that girls get punished for conduct of which men are rewarded; that pleasure, especially sexual gratification, is sinful for women; that female independence and personal agency create monsters capable of destroying even their offspring; that children are handy pawns in the revenge chess of jealousy, and other lessons of similar scapegoating orthodoxy" ("Letting La Llorona Go" 94).

La Llorona's cuento (story) endures into present time with her legend being passed on to new generations in oral and literary tradition. In my family, *La Llorona's cuento* was used to regulate and control behavior. As a young girl I visited my family in México during the summers. My *abuelita* warned us girls that if we were out late at night *de malcriadas* (misbehaving) *La Llorona* would be watching. What her story implied was that *La Llorona's* surveillance possessed both the power to discipline and punish. In my *abuelita's cuento* *La Llorona* was a young woman from a neighboring town, (who got pregnant much too young of course, because that kind of behavior only happened elsewhere), and her *novio no le corespondió* (boyfriend didn't stay with her).

Instead he married someone else *de blanco* in a church and they moved to the United States. *La Llorona*'s shame and heartache was so much for her to bear that she killed her son and herself in *el arroyo* (river). My *abuelita*'s purpose was to warn us of the bad things that could happen and to pass on the cultural values and beliefs that "good" girls remained inside at night and not *de andariegas*. The *Llorona* legend also signifies different messages for individuals. *Abuelita* had a different version of the *cuento* for the males in our family that would start off as; there once was a beautiful girl that appeared at El Palomar to a drunken boy who was on his way home from a dance. The beautiful girl seduced him and convinced him to take her home with him. The next day the girl was gone and when he went into town looking for her, he found out that the girl he spent the night with had been dead for years. Rebolledo notes, that *La Llorona* is also "known to appear to young men who roam about at nights. They believe she is a young girl or beautiful young woman, but when they approach her (with sexual intent in mind), she shows herself to be a hag or a terrible image of death personified" (*Women Singing* 63).

The variations in *La Llorona*'s oral story introduce differences in the expectations and consequences for women and men. The tale teaches males that women they encounter at night are either *andariegas*, bad girls not the marrying type or are ghostly temptresses out haunting for their souls. In either story, labeling a woman as *andariega* or temptress alleviates male social and sexual responsibility for his actions. Additionally, male domination is reinforced when a woman is made to feel inferior by assigning negative value to their behavior.

The rewriting of these myths and archetypes has been the project of many Contemporary Chicana authors who demonstrate how these figures have been used

historically for the disempowerment of women and reimagine them in ways that overturn that oppressive ideology. Yvonne Yarbro Bejarano emphasizes the importance of the reinterpretation of myths or “the reversal of an accepted image” a “strategy of filling traditional imagery with new meanings is more complex than rejection, for such strategies both critique and derive power from the image reversed or repositioned” (“The Lesbian Body” 183). As Angie Chabram Dernerseian notes, Chicana feminists “altered the subject position of Chicanas in cultural productions, taking them from subjection to subjectivity, from entrapment to liberation, and from distortion and/ or censure to self-awareness and definition” (“And, Yes....The Earth Did Part,” 42).

Sandra Cisneros’ short story “Woman Hollering Creek,” in *Women Hollering Creek and Other Stories* (1991), provides a fine example of the way women redefine the myth of *La Llorona* to call into question cultural systems, which enable the oppression of women. Cleófilas, the principal character, needs to find a way out of an abusive marriage and out of the town “built so that you have to depend on husbands” (51). Cleófilas has been taught to be submissive by her favorite *telenovela* “Tú o Nadie” which reinforces patriarchal norms by socializing her into what it means to be in love and molding how a wife should behave in her marriage. “Tú o Nadie” literally means you or no one. As Cleófilas watches the *telenovelas* she tells herself “Somehow one ought to live one’s life like that, don’t you think? You or no one. Because to suffer for love is good” (45).

To offer a counter discourse to the *telenovelas*’ teachings, Cisneros introduces two countering female voices; Graciela, Cleófilas doctor who notices the bruises on her body, and helps her escape her abusive husband and her friend Felice who drives Cleófilas to the Greyhound bus station in San Antonio. As the women drive across the creek called La

Gritona “Woman Hollering,” Cleófilas is startled at Felice’s holler, turned into laughter as they cross the bridge. Cleófilas had been warned by her neighbors Dolores and Soledad to stay away from the creek because it was bad luck and bad for one’s health (51). Felice tells Cleófilas that she lets out a holler every time she crosses the bridge. Through the women’s dialogue Cisneros provides us with a critique of *La Llorona*’s legend:

Because of the name, you know. Woman Hollering. *Pues*, I holler. She said this in a Spanish pocked with English and laughed. Did you ever notice, Felice continued, how nothing around here is named after a woman? Really. Unless, she’s the Virgin. I guess you’re only famous if you’re a virgin. She was laughing again. That’s why I like the name of that *arroyo*. Makes you want to holler like Tarzan, right?

Everything about this woman, this Felice, amazed Cleófilas. The fact that she drove a pickup. A pickup, mind you, but when Cleófilas asked if it was her husband’s, she said she didn’t have a husband. The pickup was hers. She herself had chosen it. She herself was paying for it. I used to have a Pontiac Sunbird. But those cars are for *Viejas*. Pussy cars. Now this is a real car. (55)

Cisneros reverses the interpretation of the suffering “wailing” of *La Llorona* to a holler of liberation offering Chicanas an alternative understanding of how women may behave and what they may attain. In various contexts, Chicanas have recuperated and revisioned the myth of *La Llorona* to analyze the conditions of contemporary women as they challenge the heteropatriarchal domesticity of Chicano traditions. Women’s literature provides the method, the voice, experiences, and the rituals involved in growing up female that allow for the unpacking of myths.

For the purpose of this chapter, I analyze Helena María Viramontes’ novel *Their Dogs Came With Them* and Yxta Maya Murray’s *Locas* to look at how women retextualize *La*

Llorona's myth by using countering tools such as reinterpreting, and retelling to inscribe it with new meaning, within their counter-narrative as a mode of *tagging* (marking) the present absences or absent presences of people, places and history.

The authors utilize the dynamics of the legend of *La Llorona*, allowing them to reflect on the changing concerns of women particularly the *Cholas* residing in urban barrios. They reimagine and resituate *La Llorona* and the *Chola* gang member to highlight their past exclusions and silencing, making the previously unknown known, telling new stories, and correcting myths. The *Chola* is a complex shifting entity so to try and tell the truths of her story Viramontes and Murray translate the *Chola*'s complex social lived reality in urban gang subculture into hauntings, ghosts, gaps, seething absences, and muted presences. This allows them to develop a historical account distinct from male-authored narratives, inviting us to make contact with the haunting (*La Llorona*) to engage with the haunted souls (*Cholas*).

Landscapes of Struggle: *La Llorona* Roams Los Angeles

In *Their Dogs Came With Them*, Helena María Viramontes' contemporary interpretation of *La Llorona* calls attention to the issues of fragmentation, segregation and restructuring of the urban landscape. The *Llorona*'s narrative is set in the militarized urban landscape of East Los Angeles, where the Quarantine Authority, government, McBride Boys gang, and Turtle's father Frank and her tío Angel wage wars. Viramontes assigns various levels of meanings to *La Llorona*'s weeping and her actions. She writes *La Llorona* in her traditional bad mother role in Turtle's Amá, and a homeless woman to contextualize the complexity of their struggles and as a tool to address their husband's part in the symbolic death of their children. *La Llorona* is placed in the urban landscape to personify the urban chaos that claims her lost children on the streets of East Los Angeles. Viramontes includes

this non-traditional version of the legend in which Turtle, feels her ghostly presence at night with her piercing wail, heard as the “night time noises and sirens” (157). *La Llorona*’s haunting of Turtle’s character suggests, initially that Viramontes writes *La Llorona* in her traditional role as a ghostly presence that serves as a behavioral deterrent for girls. However, *La Llorona*’s purpose in the story becomes far greater. At the conclusion of the novel, Viramontes articulates *La Llorona* as a speaking subject to provide a path of active resistance against victimization and the erasure of the barrios social space, using her voice to shout back at the aggressors because, “the murdered souls” in the urban landscape, their “tears and blood and rain and bullet wounds belonged to her as well” (325).

The multilayered narrative is like the freeway, in the way that the character’s lives intersect, moving them along until merging at the Greyhound bus depot where the novel concludes. Regardless of their differences, they all live in a barrio labyrinth under the freeway, “out of sight, out of mind” where the Quarantine Authority and the McBride Boys wage turf wars “protecting a nation of city blocks” (158). It is especially significant that Viramontes links these two male dominant institutions, since both gangs and the police state share many key characteristics. Adam Miller list the following as defining attributes of a gang; structured organization, identifiable leadership, territorial identification, continuous association, specific purpose, and illegal behavior (Miller, “Gang Murder in the Heartland,” 316). Just as gangs organize for the specific purpose of finding a suitable social identity and a chance for economic mobility, so too the police state needs recognition and funds. Occupying the public space of the streets that these two male dominant groups claim to protect, pits Turtle and the other women characters against their oppressive forces. Thus, one group orchestrates Turtle’s death and is put into action by the other. Viramontes debunks the

traditional version of the *Llorona*'s tale when she reveals that the militarized urban space has devoured *La Llorona*'s children, at the hands of men or in this case their institutions that are responsible for the deaths that occur at the Greyhound bus depot.

As recounted through Turtle's memories, we learn that her real name is Antonia María Gamboa and that she roams the streets as a homeless *malflora* a male gang member after her brother Luis is drafted to fight in the Vietnam War and her mother moves out of the home they rented in East Los Angeles. Turtle became a *malflora* when she joined her brother's street gang the McBride Boys as a strategy to avoid the domestic violence she experienced at home. The *malflora* image provided Turtle empowerment and a closer relationship with her brother because they participated in gang activities together. It was precisely her Amá's objection to her masculine behavior that caused a distance between them.

Unlike the relationship with her brother Luis, her relationship with her mother is strained and their daughter, mother story articulates why some mothers might choose the destructive powers of *La Llorona*. For example, for Turtle's Amá a combination of poverty, domestic violence and an absent husband push her to seek an alternative existence for herself. Overall, the actions that Turtle's mother takes result in an estrangement between her and her daughter. María Gonzales suggests that one of the possibilities in the relationship between *La Llorona* and her daughter, is that it "can end in total emotional disaster and estrangement" because "the mother who believes she is attempting simply to survive and the daughter who creates emotional havoc for others represents one of the possible outcomes for the relationship between *La Llorona* and her daughter" (Gonzales, "Love and Conflict," 166). Turtle's Amá begins to embody the *Llorona*'s narrative with her failure to nurture and protect her children from their harsh environment. On a dark night Turtle finds herself alone,

awaiting her brother's return in the tent they built behind their house. There she imagines hearing her name being called out "*What are you waiting for? Come on, no one said*" (171). Her imagination running wild, the trees begin to resemble *La Llorona's* long fingers. When Turtle tries frantically to go back inside the home she can't because "her mother had bolted the back door even though she knew they slept outside" (171). The wailing and howling of sirens becomes representative of *La Llorona's* watchful eye in the lives of the characters who, like Turtle, are lost. Turtle feels her "body lifting by the coalescing force of the siren's vacuous mouth" and although she held on to the doorknob "the ribbon of its wailing was wrapping around her ankles...the siren's mouth opened wider" and Turtle felt herself slipping "at once and forever into the prolonged length of the street's mournful plea" (172). At this point her mother is too entrenched in her broken marriage to connect with her daughter.

Additionally, Turtle's rebellious nature, her "erasure of breast and dresses, and all that was outwardly female" goes against her mother's social and cultural values that dictate what women's bodies should look like. Angry at Turtle's conduct, Amá pulled at her hair for behaving like an "unholy malflora" (25). Feeling weighed down by her mother's anger and her father's neglect, Turtle doesn't defend herself against her mother, instead Luis challenges Amá and in defiance, cuts Turtle's hair and grabs a "dull razor from the soap dish in the tub and rasped it against her scalp" (25).

Amá's alienation from her daughter and the disrespect from her son open her eyes to what she has lost. She had listened to her husband Frank's endless rampages for years and had borne his physical abuse for just as long. Frank was "a man who could knock out" her "teeth so that she would have to cover her mouth whenever she smiled; a man who could

throw a punch so hard, the thumps shattered the glassiness of her eyes” (360). Speaking out and confronting Frank’s abuse is not an option for the nameless Amá, who embodies a maimed soul without a language to defend herself or her children from their father’s wrath.

Turtle recounts numerous times seeing her mother after yet another fight with her father: “Amá looked tired. The whites of her eyes were pinkish as if the pain flooded even the smallest of veins” (166). María Gonzalez notes that daughters grow up observing their mother’s limited roles as wives and mothers that allow for little flexibility elaborating “that the failure to nurture a daughter and provide some semblance of direction other than that offered by popular culture condemns the daughter to reenacting her mother’s experience, a cycle not to be broken” (158). Thus, Turtle stands to become the next victim of domestic violence that swallowed up Amá because she is not encouraged to develop her own subjectivity.

However, Viramontes detracts from the popular narrative of *La Llorona* when Turtle’s Amá engages in an act of resistance exposing the physical abuse of women and finds a way out from the oppression that has clouded her life. In contrast to how the conventional tale concludes with *La Llorona* weeping and wandering, the ongoing cycle of abuse finally wears on Turtle’s Amá, and she “stopped crying” refusing to wait for her husband’s return and to stay in a tragically failed marriage rejecting *La Llorona*’s fate of becoming the forever weeping women (166).

In *La Llorona*’s story, she destroys her own children in a vindictive act against her lover. In opposition to the legend, rather than being drowned by an insane mother, Turtle chooses not to follow her mother out of state and instead stays behind with Luis until “someone stole him away to another war” (23). Viramontes paints many different layers and

context of war playing out in an urban environment. From father, to mother, to Luis to Antonia, all parties are victims of an invisible urban war, what Villa has called and “absent present.” Thus Viramontes focuses on the conflictive relationships existing in one family to present a sense of war going on in the city.

Shifting the image of La Llorona from Turtle’s Amá to personify the environmental space that is created by urban development Viramontes locates *La Llorona* in the East L.A. urban landscape. *La Llorona* is situated in the urban landscape as the howling siren “which was long, urgent and routine in the Eastside” to illustrate her movement from the rural to the urban space (172). Indeed, her urgent howling sirens remind us of her resourcefulness in her new urban setting. According to Anzaldúa as a solitary act, “Wailing is the Indian, Mexican and Chicana woman’s feeble protest when she has no other recourse” adding that historically wailing “may have been a sign of resistance in a society which glorified the warrior and war” (*Borderlands* 22-33). Thus, with her “howl” Viramontes offers an additional interpretation to the howl found in Sandra Cisneros “Woman Hollering Creek.” Viramontes’ “howl” opens up a dialog of the oppressive forces acting on Chicanas, outside of the patriarchal home. The dramatic shift is noted in the barrio when Turtle finds it difficult to see, feeling dizzy like she is drowning from the “thick choking stench of blackened diesel smoke” that rose from the dump trucks and bulldozers used in the interchange being built across First street (27).

Turtle bears witness to the disappearance of her neighbor Chavela’s blue house along with all the other houses and neighbors “disappearing inch by inch” and any personal-historical knowledge that could be passed on to Turtle, by the aggressively construction of the “four-freeway interchange” (169). Viramontes figures this active barrio deterritorialization with the personification of the perpetrators of this destructiveness as a

monstrous “dinosaur” that bites into the earth near the Chinese cemetery in preparation for the freeway that would “reroute 547,300 cars a day through the Eastside” making it the busiest in the city, (169).

At night Luis fills Turtle’s head with “scary *cuentos*” about the bones found by the constructions workers that were building the freeway “telling no one, they just threw the skulls into the wet cement” as if it never happened (157). But the bones according to Luis “tick” at night trying “to find the rest of their family bones to tock” (218). A scared Turtle tries to stay awake as “the night time noises became exaggerated and the sirens sounded like the long arm of *La Llorona*,” until she finally succumbs unwillingly and sleeps “so close to her brother Luis, that they became one instead of two” (157). The intertwining of *La Llorona*’s story with the ghost bones under the freeway construction, offers an alternate interpretation of the legend by calling attention to the institutional forces that actively seek to segregate and dispose of communities in the name of progress and modernity.

Viramontes sets the record straight through Luis’ contemporary *Llorona cuento* about the urban renewal project that brought the freeway system to the barrio, particularly the part involving the “guys working the freeways, the bulldozers biting chingón bites too close to the cemeteries. Behind schedule the bola de pendejos say, Fuck it, keep plowing and acting like it’s no big deal” (218). Luis’ judgment of the *bola de pendejos* (group of idiots) reveals how ideological justifications and political sway of certain industries helped determine the course of the freeway, producing a route best suited to their interest not taking into account the fragmentation of ethnic communities that would be displaced (Gilbert Estrada, “If You Build It” 302). Gilbert Estrada notes, that as a result “of the cost-effective design, East Los Angeles Interchange displaced various community landmarks instead of industrial ones” (“If You

Build It” 303). Additionally, noting that by placing the interstate east of down town, planners avoided fragmenting Euro-Angeleno communities and infringing on the manufacturing districts, causing only the “fragmentation of working-class Mexicans whose histories frequently exemplified displacement and whose homes were referred to as the greatest concentration of poor housing in the country” (Estrada 304).

Viramontes exposes East L.A. history of urban development, ideological justifications and the long-standing creative capacity for segregation. She resituates *La Llorona*, a model of resistance against that history’s erasure, by wailing in protest against her community’s ravaged geography. With her “bag of bones” *La Llorona* roams along with other souls, Interstate 710, and the cemeteries that were infringed upon to make way for the freeway, including the Calvary Cemetery, First and Second Serbian Cemeteries, and the Chinese cemetery that lie below the interchange (*Their Dogs* 218). Demanding a different kind of knowledge, a different kind of acknowledgment. Turtle also roams under the freeway and finds a place to rest within the cemeteries where other ghosts rest. The whole situation of urban displacement is enmeshed with the traffic of the dead and the living dead that cry out against the freeways that separates their screams from the hushed talk of the destructive nature of urban renewal.

Turtle experience with sexual violence as an adolescent and the subsequent harsh realities that marked her as a “lost” soul come back as haunting flashbacks. Turtle remembers the “bag man” from the Val U Mini Mart who “forced her to stand spread-eagle” in order to search for the stolen goods “his big man fingers began to frisk her legs and poke into her cutoffs” (24). Turtle “could think of nothing to say” and she began to cry, “Shut up, Luis snapped” back “because he had a girl for a brother and he profoundly resented it” (25). Luis’

words reflect the attitude that girls and women bear the blame for sexual assault and that they must keep their shame to themselves.

Wandering the urban landscape *La Llorona* wails for Turtle and aligns with her because, like her, she struggles against a male dominated structure. By aligning with *malfloras*, bad women and homeless ghost women that roam the dark urban streets, *La Llorona* exposes how women in particular are punished for not conforming to their cultural and social norms. The various story lines that crisscross throughout the novel are Viramontes' testimony working to bring the absence of the barrio life into present. They can be viewed as a multi perspective act of bearing witness to the consumption of lives and places in East Los Angeles by the monstrous freeway. Evoking the persistent motifs of water, burial, social and individual death, common in *La Llorona's* tale and in Chicano urban place narratives, allows Viramontes to evoke the silent spirits in the displaced neighborhood (Villa, "Ghosts" 115). The freakish rainstorm left a "low-riding level of rancid water" in the city's riverbed allowing a full view of the "spray-painted placazos tagged on the ravine wall" resembling tombstones (*Their Dogs* 111). The *plaqueaso* (Chicano graffiti) represents a marginalized group scripted declaration against erasure. Staring at the crossed out McBride tags "effaced under red initials" from the rival gang, Turtle catches site of the street woman tick-tocking. Turtle "aimed her stare at the owl eyes sunk deep into the woman's skull" and just as Luis warned the "death mask tripped and her bag of bones tocked and Turtle froze scared shitless" (218).

Through Viramontes' complex interweaving of multiple story lines we know that the homeless woman had been looking through trash bins and "packed the findings in the belly of her rainbow straw bag and the bottles rolled and chinked to her nimble, sliding steps" (81). She castigated herself for getting on the wrong bridge, the construction had "altered the city

into a beast alien” and now she came face to face with a haunted soul (82). She “read the presence of the cholo (Turtle) as a premonition” she “recognized his smell of the streets and looked into the slits of his eyes and raised a trembling finger to her parched lips to hush any thoughts of him hurting her” (83). *La Llorona*’s situations of constantly searching for but never finding her children or achieving a settled state of existence mirror Turtle and the homeless women’s own lack of stability, because they both are also constantly roaming in search of lost family members through their memories. The narrator notes that:

Her family in Mexico had lost track of her many years ago; the woman who was not old had planned to venture north, seek employment to feed her younger brothers and sisters, abandon her suffocating and restrictive life of poverty to find a future, against her father’s objection. He assured her that she would leave his house over his dead body’ and soon after, his dead body they found, a heart attack—the towns people said—caused by the sheer vein-bursting anger her plans had inspired. Her desire to leave vanished just as suddenly as his death and although she yearned to stay, now she could not; for the stones of silent accusation of murder befell a woman unable to repel them. (121)

Domino Pérez notes, “For Chicana’s specifically, *La Llorona* is symbolic of historical and contemporary oppressions of women by economic and patriarchal forces” (*There Was a Woman* 110). She adds, that repositioning *La Llorona* in the urban landscape offers writers the tools to “address these new struggles that have followed increased activity outside the home” (*There Was a Woman* 110). Viramontes underscores the business of urban life and disregard of urban growth noting that “if one stopped a minute from the frantic trot of daily life to ask her while she sat on a park bench, her rainbow straw bag filled with discarded redemptions, bottles at her feet, and if one knew how to speak Spanish, for she knew little

English, if one asked what her wildest desire would be, she would reply, I want to hold my boy and girl again, and then her eroding composure would give way to a flood of tears” (122).

Viramontes’ critique of oppression outside of Chicano culture is now directed within and against gangs and homelessness, which she sees are oppressive forces within the barrio brought on by the built environment, which also cause a distance between the barrio inhabitants. For instance, the homeless woman “began to cry, a tearful quiet wailing” She wondered “what message did the gang member on the bridge (Turtle) want to deliver before she hushed him and he rolled away?” (95). Neither, Turtle nor the homeless woman perceives that the ghost that they see in each other is haunted herself because encountering a ghost or approaching a subject in this way is never easy. It takes some effort to recognize the ghost and to reconstruct the world it conjures up. For example, Turtle’s encounter with *La Llorona*’s ghost takes her back to memories she doesn’t want to remember “If there was one thing she didn’t want to do tonight, it was to remember” and despite herself, “she could never forget that night” when she was initiated into her brothers gang, she “didn’t want to relive it and tried to get the hell out of the memory” (220).

Before Turtle was “jumped senseless” or beaten up by the McBride boys as a ritual for joining the gang, Turtle’s change of identity as a girl to a male Cholo was initiated by her brother Luis. As an act of protecting Turtle against their mother’s rage over Turtle acting like a *Malflora* rejecting “all that was outwardly female” Luis shaved Turtle’s head. It is then that they are referred as “half-and-half of the cold-blooded Gamboa brothers” burying any history that Antonia ever existed (16). The feelings of protection, loyalty and empowerment associated with the McBride Boys and her brother Luis “the homeboy who always appeared

without a semblance of fear and yelled, Leave my sister alone” contrast with the rejection and her invisibility at home (21-25).

Turtle’s story highlights some of the factors that lead youths to seek esteem, respect, even love from a gang. Starved for a sense of belonging, of acceptance and solidarity, on her twelfth birthday, at the instruction of her brother Luis, Turtle agrees to become part of the McBride Boys. It also reveals how far removed these youth are from equal access to economic mobility compared to others. They are motivated to join a gang in part as a source of income and by a blindly nationalist loyalty “the confident badass walk protecting a nation of city blocks claimed by McBride” (159). By staking claim of the streets and marking them with their *placasos* the McBride Boys make themselves visible, a direct response to their erasure.

Turtle’s violent initiation into her brother’s gang takes place at the Chinese cemetery and serves as a rite of passage that cements her masculine identity as a gang member on the streets. In Viramontes’ contemporary rendering, the gang personifies the patriarchy’s attempt to silence and oppress women. Moreover, *La Llorona* makes her presence felt at Turtle’s initiation into the McBride gang. Turtle felt it “a presence, a breathing living presence” and then “a cool hand crept around her neck” and “from out of the grave someone grabbed her ankle” (232). Then one of the boys “hollered with an angst big enough to drench the thirst of what was to come, screamed, !La Llorona!” (232). *La Llorona* appears powerless here, but her presence at the cemetery provides Turtle with the strength to survive. Turtle collapsed on a grave and “saw another self run away, another Turtle jumping the gravestones like a gazelle, felling the wind running through her hair like fingers, running faster and out of this pain” (233).

The McBride Boys provide Turtle a source of identity; cohesion and the sense of belonging that she needs but its short lived. After Luis is drafted to fight the Vietnam War she is alone on the streets with only her memories and thoughts of Luis. Her memories leads us through the barrio landscape in which she finds shelter and a “suitable place to rest in peace” within the cemeteries “below the Interstate ramps and except for the distant lights on the freeways, the cemetery’s obscurity” provide her with a temporary shelter from her own McBride Boys gang, the rival Lote M Boys and the Quarantine Authority (219).

Turtle’s act of rejecting her female gender results in a literal incarceration because she is not released from its vulnerability in male dominated spaces. The final scene at the Greyhound bus depot is the culmination of events that the McBride Boys set in motion. On his way to pick up the McBride boys, Santos sees Turtle and orders her to join him. Once in the car, Turtle’s downward spiral to her death begins. Turtle learns from Santos that there is going to be gang retaliation that night in defense of their leader Big Al’s honor. As in the original tale of *La Llorona*, it is infidelity that initiates the tragedy, but Big Al doesn’t abandon his girlfriend Ermilia, for her infidelity, instead he is determined to have her cousin Nacho killed. The most shocking detail behind Big Al’s revenge is that he has been having sexual relationship with Lucho, another one of the McBride Boys, but denies it because he “was no joto,” he even had a “girlfriend he fucked in order to prove he wasn’t a joto” (308).

In Viramontes’ version of the tale, Nacho is the dashing stranger who comes to town and attempts to captures the heart of his younger cousin Ermilia. This feature allows for Viramontes to reveal family secrets, breaking the silence that is forced on women not to speak of taboo subjects, such as being abused by members of their own family.

Additionally, the reorientation of the sexual politics in the tale reveals Al's homosexual desire and erases the female's position as the *Llorona* by shifting the blame for Nacho's death from Ermilia to Al. However, it does not necessarily exonerate *La Llorona*, but it does illustrate other sources of oppressions at work on *La Llorona* and her children. Ironically, in the end Turtle, and not the McBride Boys, carries out Nacho's murder, despite her attempt to convince Santos that fighting over a girl was not worth it. Because everyone knows that Turtle is in fact a girl, she is forced to prove herself and her loyalty to the gang. According to Mary A. Harris, gang members' "behavior reflects their role relations and their adherence to the set of norms standardized among them. The gang enhances its power over members to control behavior through socialization and sanctions eliciting strong loyalty to the gang" ("Cholas" 295).

High on PCP, Turtle's haunted spirit and her abusive environment converge, permitting Nacho's death to occur. Turtle "saw herself vomiting. She was outside the Pontiac standing in the rain watching herself inside the car" (*Their Dogs* 321). Unwittingly, Turtle commits herself to following the steps that lead to the destruction of her own interiority, "She was moving her body, moving to join the McBride Boys because all they had was each other" (321). And then "another Turtle, the one not her, pulled out a screwdriver, her old faithful, the dependable cuete, the nonbetrayal" (321). Her blind loyalty to the McBride Boys forfeits any possibility of her later identifying what went wrong in her life because, the only way out of the gang is death. For that brief moment, Turtle became *La Llorona*, coming after the souls of condemned people and she "lunged at the boy with all the dynamite rage of all the fucked-up boys stored in her rented body" (322). The act releases in her a lifetime of rage and pain that, coupled with the violent act itself, can only be expressed by wildness. In

“Letting La Llorona Go” (1993), Cordelia Candelaria asserts that, “insanity is automatically assumed” when discussing infanticide “and usually proven to explain the horror” (25).

Candelaria suggests a critique of the social and cultural factors that contribute to the murder. Viramontes’ social political writing aims at critiquing those factors and not at creating idealized versions of women but women that are struggling against oppressive forces, and giving memory to those stories like Turtles. Yarbo-Bejarano notes that:

Acutely aware of women’s dilemmas, Viramontes creates female characters who are a contradictory blend of strengths and weaknesses, struggling against lives of unfulfilled potential and restrictions forced upon them because of their sex. These women are conscious that something is wrong with their lives, and what is wrong is linked to the rigid gender roles imposed on them. (“Introduction,” 8)

Viramontes also proves how multiple versions of the *La Llorona*’s story can coexist and contribute to the creation of a new story. *La Llorona*, in the novel, encounters modernity and roams the downtown urban space of East L.A., contesting Chicana/os displacement from the city’s cultural landscape and its historical record turning the critical lens toward male institutions in this case the gang to illustrate their oppressive forces. Turtle opened her eyes and looked around for the McBride Boys, but she found herself abounded by them. Instead she sees a woman with a “superman’s cape” (323). Under a shower of rain and bullets, Turtle drops to her knees, “quietly, into a puddle of oily water” and Tranquilina the woman with the cape “cradled her, held her as tight as strong as her brother, held all of her together until sleep came to her fully welcomed” (324). The references of surging rains, oily water that spills over the concrete, and the sharpshooter’s spotlights highlight the geographical and cultural change in *La Llorona*’s tale.

Tranquilina's screaming and mournful pleas announces that she has taken up *La Llorona's* cause and her wailing becomes a holler as she "roared in the direction of the shooters" demanding they stop shooting. (325). While we may read the ending as tragic, the final scream of *La Llorona* recontextualizes her as an agent of resistance, her sorrow so wide it was blinding, her "words crashed into one another, rocketing into one big howl of pleading, demanding, a speeding blur of raging language blending in with the chaos of commands and shouts" (24). The encounter between Tranquilina and Turtle brings the narrative full circle and serves as the means for delivering Viramontes' "howl" or declaration of resistance to the erasure of a cultural space, people, and memory.

Informed with the social knowledge of the effects of the disruptive freeway construction in East L.A., Viramontes gives voice to the historical devastations of urban development and its consequences on the urban youth. Viramontes closes the narrative with Tranquilina marching forward ignoring the sharpshooters commands to stop instead she raises "her chin higher to fill up with the embrace of ancestral spirits" (325). Tranquilina, amidst the absent but present urban war, proves that she is a warrior. Through an elaborate tapestry of stories Viramontes stitches the moments between past and present, between victimhood and agency, between limits and possibilities to denounce the systems of power that kept the women in *Their Dogs Came With Them* captive.

Along with articulating the *Chola's* appropriation of symbols of masculinity, characterizing Turtle as a *malflora*, Viramontes also reinscribe *La Llorona* as a shifting signifier to address multidimensional oppressive forces functioning against Chicanas. The persistent figuration of social and individual death, individual and collective memories, and the geographical history of urban landscape are represented by the imagery of *La Llorona's*

ghost. Gordon considers textual ghosts to be “haunting reminders of lingering trouble” and considers ghosts to be an aspect of language and “experiential modality” in which “abusive systems of power make themselves known and their impacts felt in everyday life, especially when they are supposedly over and done with (slavery, for instance) or when their oppressive nature is denied” (*Ghostly Matters* xvi).

As Villa has noted, Viramontes expresses urban development’s threat, against historical place and memory by narrating an “itinerary of remembered spaces laden with [...] intimate meanings as well as broader community meanings (*Barrio Logos* 129). Viramontes includes East Los Angeles’ social geographic subordination as contested terrain and turns to *La Llorona*’s ghost as a site of historical knowledge to connect memories and historical links, that are still there in what Villa terms “present absence or absent presences of people places and histories” (“Ghosts in the Growth Machine” 113). Thus, *La Llorona* carries past meaning or memories forward as a kind of haunting that can be excavated.

Not all Chicanas, however, reinscribe *La Llorona* as a figure of agency, so while in *Their Dogs Came With Them*, *La Llorona* is imbued with multiple and complex meanings that make us think about the individual and collective social death of the barrio, in others like Yxta Maya Murray’s novel *Locas*, to which I now turn, *La Llorona* is only connected to evil and violence and thus, is not at first glance recuperated into a figure of Chicana empowerment.

La Llorona Loca: *Smile Now Cry Later*¹²

Yxta Maya Murray's "La Llorona: A Story," told in the first person, gives *La Llorona* a platform to voice her version of the story. *La Llorona* begins her narrative describing a cannibalism scenario in which she imagines that she could have eaten her children "with some fine dark wine" but instead "fed them to the water" (24). Murray, allows her *Llorona* to give the reader her interpretation for the infanticide, using her voice to complicate our understanding of the infanticide, which has turned her into a "monster." She speaks of the domestic problems, neglect and infidelity that went unspoken far too long. The loneliness and the constant waiting, coupled with the anger she felt about her husband's infidelities made her go mad. The thought of her sons becoming the same type of man as their father, leads her to drown her children. In a way, her action protects other women from living in silence and waiting as she did.

¹² The expression *Smile Now, Cry Later* comes from a saying that refers to a person's feelings when doing something they shouldn't be doing. "Initially, one will enjoy the feeling and smile, but eventually the consequences will cause one to "cry later"" *Smile Now, Cry Later* serves as the title of Delilah Montoya's 2008, print in which she chose a female boxer with the image of "*Smile Now, Cry Later*" tattooed on her arm, to be the focus of the print (Delilah Montoya, María T. Márquez, and Chavoya, *Women Boxers: The New Mexico Warriors* 2006).



2003 Sky Ute Casino, Ignacio, Colorado
Teri "Lil' Loca" Lynn Cruz (*Women Boxers* 15)

According to Domino Renee Pérez, the decision of Murray's *Llorona* to kill her sons is not out of jealousy but instead "symbolizes her effort to end her isolation and disrupt the silence that defines it" becoming "a revolutionary act meant to overthrow male dominance in her own home" (Pérez 123). Similarly in *Locas*, we see that *La Llorona* has turned into a monster who tells her own story directly. Murray sets apart the *Llorona* by making her a shifting signifier going from the traditional bad mother to Lucía the *Chola* character and back to a suspected *bruja*. Repositioning *La Llorona* as the *Chola* allows Murray to disrupt the set notions of women as passive, submissive, sexual objects in competing male-authored gang narratives. The *Chola*, much like *La Llorona*, is a fluid image whose characteristics change depending on who tells her story. Rebolledo observes that "Chicana writers choose, define, and image their myths and heroines" including *La Llorona* with "different traits and characteristics" to "create new role models for themselves" (*Women Singing* 49).

La Llorona, the *Pachuca*, and the *Chola* represent models of powerful women who step outside the norms of appropriate female behavior. Although they have been castigated as "bad" women, traitors to the patriarchal culture, Murray's depiction highlights the complex social, gender and political arena in which the *Chola* character exists and the agency in her actions struggling against oppressive forces. In addition, Murray foregrounds the interconnections in the narratives of *La Llorona* and Lucía, the *Chola* gang member, who represent life and death forces. *La Llorona* in this narrative becomes connected to evil and violence, particularly in gang subculture.

Chicana feminist Sonia Saldivar-Hull has noted that the patriarchal structure of *familia* in Chicana/o culture "is based on a masculinist notions that emphasize men's supposedly natural superiority and authority over women. Women's role in Chicano family is

primarily to serve men” (*Feminism on the Border* 30). This notion can also be applied within the context of Chicana/o gang culture. In urban gang life, *Cholas*, whether they are part of the gang or not, have limited access to positions of power. For example, in the “Lobos” the male gang members are the social agents of action. They seize power, creating a gender hierarchy, which limits women’s authority within the gang structure, while the *Cholas*, also known as “sheep”, are objects defined as “*chavalas* good for nothing, a piece of ass” (*Locas* 20). *La Llorona* provides Lucía’s liberation from the narrative of the “sheep” that keeps girls imprisoned as passive sex objects in male gang narratives. When Lucía becomes aware of the limited roles available to women in the Lobos gang, either as “sheep” good for sex or a mother, Lucía, chooses not to “be letting babies suck off her” or “pretend that having a man” is all she wanted out of life (41). *La Llorona* might appear here, as the threatening figure that disrupts the traditional role of motherhood but for Lucía, *La Llorona* becomes her inner voice that articulates her needs and desires that drives her to pursue her self-interest and commit desperate acts even if she is labeled “crazy” or bad for her actions.

Murray reworks the representation of the *Chola* character and subverts the cycle of silence providing Lucía a voice to narrate her own story from her own perspective. Lucía speaks to a female history and experience that is not part of male-authored gang narratives. Lucía begins in the present tense and tells us that, “When [she] got in the business girls wasn’t doing shit in the clika. They could grin, sex, color-up their faces, that’s about it. A woman was a sheep” (19). Boldly and often painfully, she explains how she almost fell into the prescribed role of the sheep that was available to women, she asserts:

I was this close to being a like them sheep. You could of seen me being the same old sprayed-out chavala they go crawling all over the Park, wiggling some screaming kid on my hip, cause pretty soon you

start thinking the same as everybody else. That is, unless you've got a hard heart like me. So you see how it almost was. But I save myself. I just needed to remember something I forgot. All I had to do is go and take a good look at my broken-down mami. That's when I knew I'm not gonna be no dirty sheep my whole life. I couldn't let that happen to me, not ever gonna be like her. (33-35)

In this manner, Lucía undoes the image of the silent sex object and gains agency by choosing her own path. Murray resists here the notion that women must be mothers, good daughters, and/or sexual objects. At this point Lucía and *La Llorona* become the only women in the novel who choose to traverse the boundaries between what is and what is not socially and morally appropriate that they become one.

The physical abuse Lucía witnesses affects how she sees the world and how she thinks about her life. By the age of fifteen, Lucía has already experienced emotional and physical abuse, racism, poverty and dislocation, first when her family left México and then when her mother physically and emotionally dislocates herself from her. These factors contribute to Lucía's trauma and in turn activate in her survival behaviors that cast her as *La Llorona*, such as joining a female gang and resorting to violence against other women, and children. These actions perpetuate domestic abuse but at the same time are Lucía's survival mechanisms that can be misunderstood by others who cannot understand the impact that racism, sexism, classism, in the barrio have on youths.

Vigil has emphasized the factors of poverty and cultural differences within the context of stressful family situations in explaining the psychological problems and delinquent behavior among girls. Furthermore, he adds that, "The delinquent and revered "loca" behavior of a gang member is in many cases a reaction to an emotionally disturbing home

life” (*Barrio Gangs* 112). Moreover, Vigil adds that “along with the forces and pressures of multiple marginality that destabilize a person, there are added post-traumatic stress dimensions that range from cultural to psychological” (*Barrio Gangs* 112). Consistent with sociological studies on gangs, the majority of girls involved in gangs have suffered physical, emotional, or sexual abuse (Moore, *Going Down the Barrio* 33).

The domestic or street trauma girls witness lead many to seek the gang for emotional support and protection. Lucía however, does not join the Lobos instead she disrupts the Lobos, patriarchal hierarchy and creates the possibility for change in women’s role by creating her own female gang. By aligning herself with her girls, Chique and Star Girl, Lucía feels a sense of empowerment, something that belongs to her alone. In the rituals performed in the initiation into the gang, Lucía, Chique and Star Girl fight and beat each other like men. Lucía, “*la chola primera*,” describes that they “tried to break me down into dust, a fist hooking the side of my head, elbows in my cheek” (*Locas* 30). After, the initiation the girls sit under a black sky on “the cold wet grass [...] holding on to each other [...] all bloody and bruised and loving each other” (30). As in the *Llorona* narrative, Lucía considers the girls in her gang as her endangered children “There, you are mine now” she tells them (30).

Months later, Lucía reveals that she howled “crying sounds, filling up the streets and sidewalk” the night that Star Girl is shot by the rival gang. Loosing Star Girl is a pivotal moment in Lucía’s life, “those was some black bad days. I’d look in the mirror sometimes and see this white-faced *llorona*. With skinny bones sticking out her face and big shiny eyes, like I’m sick” (204). At times Lucía feels victimized by *La Llorona*, made into a passive observer, forced to watch the physical abuse of women. First, her mother’s bloody beatings and later her prostitution and now Star Girl’s accident. Demonstrating an ongoing cycle of

witnessing violence, Lucía tries to rid herself from *La Llorona* “but all my talking didn’t make the bruja in the mirror run off, she just showed me her sharp bad wolf teeth” (204). Angry that she is acting weak by crying over Star Girl, Lucía turns to *La Llorona* in the mirror “You’ve gotta be strong, [she] whisper to [herself] staring at what she sees. You didn’t come this far” (204). Rather than rejecting *La Llorona*, she invokes her, stalking her in the mirror until they became one.

The merging of *La Llorona* with Lucía is most evident when Lucía orders the killing of a rival gang leader’s young brother in retaliation for them shooting Star Girl. The infanticide which was a revolutionary act meant to overthrow male dominance in Murray’s “La Llorona: A story” is now an assertion of power within the gang for Lucía because she wields enough power that the male gang members follow her demands. As they stand around staring at what they had done, the Lobos look at Lucía thinking she’s “some baby-eating witch” (220). As the novel progresses, Lucía’s *Llorona* becomes a “monster,” the rumor on the street was that she “had grown red claws, a mouth full of razors, and she could numb a man cold-stone scared just by flashing him her lightning look” (173).

In the closing scene of the novel, Lucía tries to confront the trauma (violence, physical, sexual, psychological) in her life, confronting what lays down deep beneath the water, to retain some sanity after all the evil she has caused. The trauma takes her back to her opening dialogue when she asserts that she is the one screaming and is the “only one who can do what it takes” to survive in the gang’s violent landscape (246). The gang’s system continues to transform the living into the dead, a system of social relations that fundamentally objectifies and dominates women. Lucía admits she is scared she “can feel the black water

rising up” because *La Llorona* is not just the return of the past or the dead, but a ghostly matter that is always waiting for you (246).

Lucía feels aged, tired and unsafe and looks into the water revealing *La Llorona*’s motivation and desires “that old monster I usually stare down wicked and break to my own use comes back dark and windy, and the black water closes up over me. I see it then” (246). Lucía becomes aware that she needs to continue refashioning herself, becoming a different somebody than she was before she became a gang member. The fusion of *La Llorona* and Lucía depicted in this image emphasizes, that to remain alive in the violent world of gangs, Lucía must continue to be the *bruja*.

Murray’s female gang narrative speaks for those that have no audible public voice and who have limited access to offer a counter-narrative. Anne Campbell argues that in most studies on juvenile gangs, girls are “invisible or appear as a footnote, an enigma, an oddity” (*The Girls in the Gang* 5). Thus, Murray recounts the story of Lucía as she imagines the life of those with no voice or language in male gang narratives. Murray does not speak for them but imagines them speaking their complex lived realities as it negotiates the coercive and oppressive forces of urban gang life. But *Locas* also problematizes the retrieval of missing subjects by transforming those who do not speak into what is unspeakable (inhumane monsters). However, Murray subverts the stereotypical rendering of gang members as inhuman monsters by conflating the horror of *La Llorona*’s legend with gang violence by calling on the power of the legends negative dialectics to conjure, imagine, and critique the unspeakable violence in gangs.

Thus, *Locas* articulates what other cultural workers testimonials have shown that “violence, though real, is part of the cultural landscape of gang counternationality that

mimics the most oppressive and violent facets of dominant national culture” (Monica Brown, *Gang Nation* 161). Through, *La Llorona*, Murray is able to contextualize the lived realities for some urban youth and as horrific as they seem their stories invite readers to bear witness to the violence and despair of youths living in our urban landscapes. Because as Monica Brown asserts “Literature about this life should be disturbing, but moreover, it should complicate instead of solidify the notion of criminality” (*Gang Nation* 159). *La Llorona* in this narrative of gang subculture represents the articulation of a contemporary struggle in which she haunts the narrative landscape to remind us of women’s agency, mobility and survival strategies, underscoring the way they challenge and modify the construction of hierarchies, roles, and spaces within the gang.

In conclusion, Viramontes reclaims the characterization of *La Llorona* from a passive object to a woman of action and resistance that fills up with the “embrace of ancestral spirits” and roams the East Los Angeles landscape. Viramontes reinterprets *La Llorona* as a shifting signifier and uses her to draw attention to social issues providing a critical documentary function bearing witness to the devastation urban displacement has on the barrio. As Raúl Homero Villa notes, “the imagery of ghosts and other phantom presences that haunt contemporary Chicano narratives of urban displacement mark the present absences, or absent presences, of people, places, and histories that urban development often obscures or wipes out” (“Ghosts” 112-13). Viramontes’ imagery of haunted souls, ghost, and unearthed graves informs us of the individual and collective social death of the Chicano community which is “one of the most potent motifs of deconstructive Chicano expression, figuratively rendering the community’s social and spatial marginalization within dominant urban planning as a form of social death” (Villa, “Ghosts” 112).

Through various female characters including the personification of the urban landscape, Viramontes writes the modern-day wailing woman, complicating and finding strength in the mythological figure that has traditionally been used to limit women. It is through *La Llorona*'s eyes that we bear witness to the captive inhabitants, the hunted souls, hidden spirits, and murders souls of the urban landscape of East Los Angeles. Viramontes closes her narrative, recasting *La Llorona* coding her with Cihuacóatl the Aztec goddess who appears at night under the rain crying for dead children. By shifting the meaning of *La Llorona* story Viramontes gives it a new ending that advances female strength rather than victimization finally giving her a voice to scream.

La Llorona's "haunting" presence in Yxta Maya Murray's *Locas* also articulates the harm inflicted on women, and the loss sustained by violence (social, domestic) in the past or the present moment. As sociologist Avery Gordon suggests, ghosts notify us that "what's been concealed is very much alive and present" (xvii). *La Llorona* reminds the reader of Lucía's (the Chola) complex social reality. Through Lucía's memories and encounters with *La Llorona* that haunt her we learn of the violence and wounds that also haunt her. *La Llorona* appears to Lucía in the mirror when the violence she represents is no longer being contained or repressed. Her presence is felt at times when Lucía seems to be losing control of either her position in the gangs hierarchy or when she feels she is becoming *loca* (a woman gone crazy) Lucía, whispers to herself "You've gotta be that strong chica" staring at what she sees in the mirror (204). Because it is precisely in haunting that "people who are meant to be invisible show up without any sign of leaving" (Gordon, xvii). The *Llorona*'s ghosts can also signify those who haunt established societies, for instance, images of demonized gang members in mainstream accounts that construct urban Latino youth as

inherently criminal. Thus, Murray repositions *La Llorona* as a strategy that confirms how female archetypes can articulate multiple meanings.

Chapter 4: Queering the *Vato Loco*: Challenging Androcentric Stereotypes

The Pachuco and Pachuca zoot-suiters of the 1940s and its contemporary versions, the *Vatos Loco*, and the *Cholo*, *Chola* also known as homeboys, and homegirls are cultural identity figures that are represented in a variety of popular cultural texts. The variety of representations of these characters found in cultural texts that include novels, poetry, film, and visual art demonstrates that these figures are not static and are always in the process of evolving. From the Mexican comedic actor Germán Valdéz better known as Tin Tan, depiction of the transnational Pachuco in movies like *El Niño Perdido* (1947), and the Los Angeles urban Pachuco and Pachuca in the play *Zoot Suit* (1981), written by Chicano playwright Luis Valdez, these characters contribute to the construction of an oppositional Mexican American youth subculture.

While the Pachuca and *Chola* are underrepresented, the *Vato Loco*, a lead protagonist in controversial films about gangs and prison violence such as *American Me* (1992), and *Blood In, Blood Out* (1993), as well as the coming of age narrative of Carlos, an Echo Park gay Cholo, in the movie *Quinceañera* (2006), also takes a part in the development of a male Chicano identity. In the succession of the texts mentioned above, the hypermasculinity generally associated with the male gang member figures of the Pachuco and *Vato Loco*, undergoes changes in gender and sexual norms, developing a new homeboy aesthetic. The Pachuco and *Vato Loco*'s cultural gender identity must then be viewed as a historical construction, which is shaped by the ever-changing social cultural norms, and the economic and political conditions they live in.

As noted in the introduction, for many observers the Pachuca and Pachuco constituted a “lost generation,” cast by Mexicans as “a caricature of the American, while in the United States the Pachuco was proof of Mexican degeneracy” (Mazón, *The Zoot Suit Riots* 5). José Manuel Valenzuela Arce in “Cien Años de Choleidad” (2007), contends that Pachucos and Pachucas are transnational and transborder subjects that surge in the late 1930s as a direct result of the specific historical context of urbanization and swelling population of Mexican origin. As a consequence of urbanization and the demand for wartime industrial workers, people of Mexican origin migrated from rural areas where they previously worked in agriculture and the Railroad system to urban hubs (Valenzuela Arce, 37). The high number of youths living in urbanized landscapes, like that of Los Angeles, California generated an environment in which they could articulate autonomy and self-valorization through a fashion aesthetic. As transborder subjects, Pachucas and Pachucos express a distinct working class Mexican American identity that distinguished them from their parent’s generation and, in general, from American society by wearing a zoot suit. As Javier Durán contends:

As a "border crossing" subject the pachuco is constantly translating cultural, linguistic, and economic realities on both sides of the border. Appropriating a constructed border language-slang caló that is already a reflection of the multiple realities they inhabit, pachucos translate culture and politics into a theatrical performance that is usually on the margins of the law (or officially sanctioned behavior) so as to produce and represent the unstable, marginalized, and marginal conditions of existence on these multiple borders, both in reality and as cultural metaphor. (Nation and Translation: The “Pachuco” in Mexican Popular Culture: Valdez’s Tin Tan.” 42)

While the highly stylized fashion defines a new form of self-identification, it also marked those who donned the zoot suit as defiant and un-American. Precisely because zoot

suit attire arises in a particular moment in history during World War II, the conspicuous consumption of the challenges dominant codes of wartime sacrifice. Within this historical moment, the zoot suit emerges as a hallmark for oppositional cultural identity. For this reason, the Zoot Suit Riots and the Sleepy Lagoon incident, can be read as a historical process that highlights the instability of class, race and gender categories in which the conspicuous consumption of the zoot suit became a menace to society.

Even as the Pachuco became a defining feature of *la vida loca*, a stigmatized identity often associated with gangs and cast as a violent criminal, the Pachuco was re-inscribed with new meaning during the Chicano movement as a symbol of resistance. In the context of poverty, racism, police brutality, an exclusionary public education system, social devaluation and lack of opportunity facing second generation Mexican Americans, the image of the fierce *vato loco* developed along with his zoot suit wearing predecessor the Pachuco. Both representations have been valorized in Chicano cultural nationalism as a “rebel” in a network of *carnales*.

This was true particularly for Chicano nationalists who set the Pachuco center stage in plays, murals, poems and novels. As Juan Bruce-Novoa notes, Chicano authors populated their literary space with recuperated “vital images” which include such archetypes as Pachucos, Farm Workers, Shamans and the writer himself, as a theme in the paradigm of Chicano literature (*Retrospace* 122). Bruce-Novoa suggests that the Pachuco and the historical time, in which he lived, represent images that needed to be retrieved by Chicanos, if not the images would remain marginalized in dominant discourse. He, contends that if any one thing characterizes the center of Chicano literary space, it would be José Montoya’s poem “El Louie,” an elegy to a dead Pachuco:

It begins with the disappearance of the physical substance of his discontinuous being: “Hoy enterraron al Louie.” Death, which can facilitate the sacred, manifests itself in the cadaver, but the poem begins from the disappearance of that surface, plunging Louie, his group and time, of which he was a prototype according to the poem, into the invisibility of death. Left unchallenged, moreover, Louie’s last, degrading image his solitary death—threatens to envelop his memory. It falls to the poet to retrieve the other, disappeared life images from time and death by giving them a new surface, a new body, in which to display themselves visibly. (99-100)

José Montoya poetics clarifies and validates the Pachuco experience within a political context of resistance. His poetry proposes that the positive values derived from barrio life such as *carnalismo* and the defiant stance of the Pachuco be integrated into a new aesthetic, a *Vato* lifestyle. For Montoya, the *Vato* lifestyle serves as a viable alternative to cultural assimilation. Tere Romo in “José Montoya: The Artist as Provocateur” proposes that “Montoya has used his art to expose political and human atrocities. Montoya’s series on the Pachuco, which included an historical update with photos and newspaper articles from the 1940s, and his more recent portrayal of the casualties of gang violence in “No More Drive Bys” are important revelations to Chicanos” (2). For example, in Montoya’s poem “El Louie” (1969), the Pachuco figure embodied in El Louie, Vato de atolle, is not representative of a glorified figure but rather a more realistic representation of the Pachuco and the political world of that juncture. The late 1940s and early 1950s was a time when Mexican Americans returning home from the war as war heroes, soon realized they were relegated back to being greasers and second-class citizens in the wars happening in the barrios.

According to Arturo Madrid, Mexican Americans were “used for America’s defense on the warfront: at Corregidor and Bataan, at Tarawa and Iwo Jima at Messina and Anzio, at Normandy and Bastogne” however, back at home “they experienced rejection in public schools, public parks, and public pools, and when they dared to leave the security of the barrios [...] they suffered second-class treatment in America’s theaters, restaurants, skating rinks, and dance halls” (“In Search of the Authentic Pachuco” 18). Reacting to this rejection, El Louie and others like him don’t always deal with these conflicts in a productive way. El Louie ends up in a drug-induced world that takes his life. This harsh realization is one of Montoya’s criticisms of present day reality which is why he resorts to the imagery of Chicano’s past in order to affirm the authenticity of the ever-present conditions Chicanos confront.

In 1965, Luis Valdez’s Teatro Campesino came to life in the fields of Delano, California where he presented his plays to farm workers as a means to strengthen the union’s organization effort. Later, in 1971, Valdez published *Actos: El Teatro Campesino* a collection of nine *actos*, (short plays) which provided the evolution of the Teatro. It also transformed the marginalized bodies of Chicanos into vehicles of political resistance. The topics ranged from the plight of the farm worker and the strikes to others, portraying discrimination in the schools, Chicano militancy, and the Vietnam War. The most significant contribution by Valdez to Chicano literary production is his play *Zoot Suit*, (1981). *Zoot Suit* is set in Los Angeles during World War II and the heightened tensions resulting from the Sleepy Lagoon murder and the Zoot Suit Riots.

The play centers on the main character, Henry Reyna, the leader of the 38th Street Pachuco gang. Reyna and his gang are wrongfully convicted of the murder of José Williams

during a late night rumble. The play then recounts the trial, incarceration and the appeals process while shedding light on the racism enacted by the police and within the judicial system during that time. Written from the vantage point of the 1970s, Valdez assesses the way in which the Pachuco subject was unjustly constructed and portrayed in the media. While the play offers Chicanos an alternative representation of the historical events surrounding the Zoot Suit Riots, it also produces a heroic mythic icon that serves as an enduring revolutionary male hero for the Chicano community. The play turns the negative image of the Pachuco “gang member” in dominant discourse into the positive image of brotherhood and *carnalismo*.

Other Chicanos also rescue the Pachuco from the context of victim, delinquent, “clown,” clueless *poch* that American society and Mexican intellectual Octavio Paz framed him in, and cast him as a heroic, rebel icon for an oppositional Chicano cultural identity. For example, Tino Villanueva captures the masculine stylish manner in which the Pachuco “saunters,” “sways,” and “leans the wrong way in assertion” in his poem “Pachuco Remembered” (1972). Similarly, Valdez, immortalizes the masculine mystique associated with the Pachuco:

It was the secret fantasy of every bato
In or out of the Chicanada
To put on the Zoot Suit and play the Myth
Más chucote que la chingada (26)

Catherin Ramírez reveals that the “bato” was not alone in fantasizing about wearing the zoot suit, his counterpart *La Ruca de la Chicanada* (Chicana chicks) also “took pleasure and found meaning” in wearing the *tacuche* (*The Woman in The Zoot Suit* 28). Pachucas, were considered “monstrously feminine” and at the same time they were “dangerously

masculine” (*The Woman* 20). In fact, they were often regarded as *malinchistas*, a term used to describe traitorous behavior or unruly conduct.

The Pachuca adapted/appropriated/borrowed conventional notions of masculinity from her Pachuco counterpart in combination with a hyper-feminine style that included bleached hair, dark lips and fine arched eyebrows. This remains a distinctive characteristic of a contemporary *Chola* aesthetic. The Pachuca’s appropriation of the masculine zoot suit, space and behavior as well as other symbols of masculinity, such as knives, razors, and cigarettes— all of which she hid in her elaborate hairdo—have endured for decades.

During the 1970s and 1980s the *Chola* combined hyper-femininity of hair and makeup styles with chinos (khaki pants), tank tops, plaid shirts and other masculine signifiers like guns, and handkerchiefs. Although hyper-sexualized, Cholas were considered masculine because of their toughness. Although Pachucas and *Cholas* have been cross-dressing and transgressing gender and social boundaries for generations, they have not been celebrated in the same way as the *vato loco*. Instead they are denigrated to dangerous, temporary or background objects of desire. Referring to Pachucas and *Cholas* as modern-day *malinches* provides a glimpse into the deeply rooted idea that women who define themselves on their own terms and their own codes are considered traitors, and therefore, foreign because their violation of dominant norms and protocols of female gender roles expectations are considered a form of social deviance. The link between the Pachuca and the *Chola* is also made apparent in contemporary male-authored gang narratives in which, at best, *Cholas* are treated as secondary and at worst, are sexually objectified and silenced.

In the *Encyclopedia of Latino Popular Culture*, (2004), Edward Escobar defines how this particular youth (Pachuco/Pachuca) “fully adopted La Vida Loca with its defiant and

hostile attitude and antisocial and even pathological tendencies” (897). In addition, the Pachucos took this attire and added an arrogant posture to it, which would later be viewed as a stance of resistance onto which the Pachucos’ “manhood” would be read. Alfredo Mirandé identifies the Pachuco as a “visual symbol of cultural autonomy and resistance. His distinctive dress, demeanor, mannerism, and language not only express his manhood but set him off culturally from the dominant society” (*The Chicano Experience* 78). World War II provided the context in which to construct an American masculinity. For example, according to Christopher Looby, “manhood in America is crucially dependent upon a dialectic of racial difference; categories of gender and sexuality are inextricably entangled with racial identities” (*Voicing American* 71). Looby goes on to say that white manhood in particular is dependent on a two-sided approach toward black males, which can also be adapted to Mexican Americans. He states that black males, “in white cultural discourses, are often feminized by virtue of their status subordination but at the same time, paradoxically, a hyperbolic masculinity is attributed to them” (*Voicing American* 71).

To the Pachuco, the zoot suit style of dress was an expression of masculinity and style, but many American critics of the Pachuco lifestyle tried to imply the opposite. As Ramírez notes, numerous writers and public officials claimed the zoot suit, “indicated a ‘chaotic’ and ‘ill-defined’ sexuality” (*The Woman* 75). Long after the Zoot Suit Riots, the Pachuco “would continue to be described as feminine and would be pathologized as “sexually perverse” and “queer”” (Ramírez, 75). The Pachucos’ defiance of mainstream American values and culture, along with their search for individuality, creates an oppositional Mexican American identity that can be read as a *queer* identity. *Queer* in that Pachucos negotiate ways to subvert the

oppression they experience in the United States as well as their parents' traditional Mexican values, drawing from both cultures to create an individualized Mexican American identity.

In sum, the *Chola* and *Cholo* participated in a distinct Mexican American subculture that emerged during the World War II-era with the Pachuca/o zoot suiters. The aesthetic of this subculture identity continues to be seen as defiant and conflated with criminality.

Although the *Chola* represents gender transgression and female empowerment, the oversight and abstraction of her subjectivity robs the *Chola* of both her voice and history. The *Cholo* however, has been rescued from obscurity and redefined as an urban warrior by Chicano nationalist who in turn overlooked the *Chola*. The following section looks at a contemporary re-reading of the Pachuco by queer theory critic Daniel Enrique Pérez whose work destabilize the *Cholo*'s hypermasculinity marking an emerging *queer* homeboy identity.

Been There, Done That: From Pachuco to *Cholo* to the *Queer Vato Loco*

Contemporary works engage in *queering* the homeboy, the quintessential hyper-masculine male, in order to represent a new *queer Vato Loco* identity. As defined by Daniel Enrique Pérez, in *Rethinking Chicana/o and Latina/o Popular Culture* (2009), “*queer* identities” are identities that are “constantly evolving and fluctuating, they naturally resist fixed categories of identification” allowing for “ambiguities, contradictions, and fluctuations to coexist” (1). In theorizing *queer* identities, Pérez focuses on the silences in the texts that create ambiguities and highlights the *queer* characteristics already present in Chicana/o Latina/o texts. As Pérez contends “*queer* can encompass all aspects of identity that challenge compulsory heterosexuality, heteronormativity, or any other hegemonic paradigms related to identity, it can include a wide range of sexualized subjects and erotic permutations” (2). As a

result, he concludes that Chicana/o and Latina/o cultural texts have always engaged with represented *queer* identities.

For example, in his reading of *Mi Familia* (1995), a film traditionally not categorized as *queer*, Pérez reexamines the second generation of the Sánchez family to analyze how they represent *queer* characters. He contends that what makes them *queer* is the rejection of their parents' traditional Mexican value system "where heteronormativity determines the role" they should assume. For one, Paco, the eldest of the Sánchez children, becomes a writer after his time in the navy (a homosocial space), his character never engages in a relationship with a woman, gets married or raises a family. Therefore, Paco lacks any "heterosexual markings" and does not follow the heteronormative norms laid-out by his parents' Mexican value system.

On the other hand, the middle child Chucho identifies as a Pachuco and thus expresses his differences from his parents by rejecting traditions and customs creating an individualized identity. At his sister Irene's wedding he seems bored and out of place and makes a comment that he hates "this pinche mariachi music," preferring to listen and dance the mambo. More symbolically is Chucho's rejection of his father José's work ethic. For José, a manual laborer, the most important characteristics that define a man are "dignity" "work" and "respect" all values that he tries to impose on his children. The night José receives a call from the police, informing him that his son Chucho is suspected of selling marijuana, José confronts Chucho, and tells him "I didn't raise my children to be *sinvergüenzas*." For José it is important that his children understand the sacrifices he has made leaving his home country and heading to the United States to offer his children a better life. Chucho however, does not care to acknowledge or respect his father's sacrifices, as he

waves a handful of money he tells his father “Fuck la dignidad. This is all they respect in this country.”

Pérez goes beyond solely indentifying Chucho’s character as *queer* for rejecting his father’s cultural and traditional norms and looks at the “silences” within the altercations between Chucho and his gang rival Mejía, to further develop Chucho’s *queer* identity. Pérez argues that Mejía and Chucho’s, characters serve as an example of “homoerotic desire,” that even though they are not openly gay their bodies serve to map *queer* identities. They have a relationship that Pérez, believes “borders on the homoerotic” that exists from a desire for one another (103). Pérez also suggests, that, under the pretence that they despise each other, these characters engage in a love quarrel that ends with Mejía’s death.

In the scene where Chucho and Mejía meet for the last time, Mejía walks into a dance where he spots Chucho and his girlfriend dancing “and like a jealous lover” pulls his dance partner across the dance floor to get closer to where Chucho dances. As both couples dance, Chucho and Mejía gaze “at one another like lovers” (105). During the course of what follows Mejía, as the aggressor, attempts to get Chucho’s attention by bumping into him several times as they dance. When he finally gets his attention, Chucho stops dancing and Mejía pulls out a pocketknife and cuts Chucho a couple of times. In reaction Chucho’s girlfriend pulls out a knife from her hair and throws it at him to defend himself. Pérez follows up his assertion that Chucho and Mejía participate in a homoerotic desire for one another by suggesting that the knife fight can be describes “as a mutual and reciprocal violent rape scene, where the pocketknives function as phallic objects that penetrate the victim’s bodies” (105). Finally, Chucho sticks his knife into Mejía’s stomach and, leaning over him, watches him die.

By focusing on the individual characters themselves and looking at how they construct their identity through experience with traditional Mexican culture, Pérez has summarized the way in which the Pachuco characters and their bodies become quintessentially *queer* as they reject, gender, sexual, and social norms. In what follows I employ the term *queer* as Pérez uses to describe a wide range of non-heteronormative social and sexual behaviors to analyze the *Cholo* in the movie *Quinceañera*. This in turn will help facilitate a contemporary reading of *queer* identities in the works of Viramontes and Murray.

La Vida Loca

The concept of *Mi Vida Loca* took on a new meaning popularizing the “Latin lover,” who exudes handsome masculinity and creates sex appeal not only across cultures but also across genders with Ricky Martin’s 1999 hit song “*Living’ La Vida Loca*.” Thus, *Mi Vida Loca* now encompasses new identities, including the *queer* homeboy. The film *Quinceañera* (2006), written and directed by Wash Westmoreland and Richard Glatzer, is the story about the traditional celebration of the coming of age of cousins Magdalena and Eillen. The film centers on the families of two sisters that are in preparation of their daughters’ celebration of “the official passage into womanhood” at fifteen.

The film goes beyond portraying the celebration and rituals that are linked to a *quinceañera* and juxtaposes them with the coming of age of a guy *Cholo*. Because the *Cholo* represents a stigmatized identity, often cast as criminal or violent the film’s opening scene shows Carlos walking down the streets of his barrio Echo Park, invoking a certain archetypal “old school” *vato* look, circa 1990s; wearing khaki chinos, paired with knee high white socks, a white tank top informally known as a “wife beater,” and a plaid shirt buttoned up to the neck, the viewer assumes he participates in a gang subculture. Additionally, Carlos

shaved head and had the number 213 tattooed on his neck, representing the area code of his barrio, which signify power and loyalty to his neighborhood.

Though not all who emanate the *vato* style participate in gangs or criminal activities, there is a certain *machismo*, which entails a territorial loyalty and violent fierceness. Richard T. Rodriguez in his essay “Queering the Homeboy Aesthetic,” depicts the contemporary homeboy aesthetic as “an assemblage of key signifiers: clothing (baggy pants and under shirts are perhaps the most significant), the hair (or in this current moment of the aesthetic, lack of hair), bold stance, and distinct language, all combining to form a distinguishable cultural affectation hard to miss on Los Angeles city streets” (228). James Diego Vigil also discusses the dress style of new generations of *Cholos* that emerged during the 1960s and 70s and contends that “Police officials have often viewed such creative cultural forms as representative of deviance” and the news media “have followed similar course in making such dress styles a badge of dishonor” (*Barrio Gangs* 40).

As for Rodríguez, he observes that, the contemporary homeboy aesthetic circulating in Los Angeles, is in reference “to a style, within the Chicano/Latino gay male spaces, whose visibility emanates from the interplay of materiality and fantasy” (“Queering the Homeboy,” 128). For Rodríguez, the fantasy around queering the tough *Cholo* style allows to “destabilize gender norms that commonly frame Chicano/Latino masculinity and crucially alters the ways in which the homeboy aesthetic has been made always already heterosexual or rendered antithetical to homosexuality” (“Queering the Homeboy,” 131). Carlos’ tough *Cholo* style can be viewed as an example of the emerging queer homeboy aesthetic in Chicano culture.

When Carlos arrives to his sister Eileen's Quinceañera, he encounters his angry father who pushes him and yells; "What are you doing here, are you trying to embarrass me? I told you not to be around this family! You're not my son anymore! You disgust me." The entire family is in agreement that Carlos is a troublemaker as his other tattoo *travieso* on his abdomen suggests, except for his *tío* Tomás who takes him in after his family rejects him. Carlos' fight with his father along with his tough *Cholo* aesthetic, casts him as violent, and possibly a gang member. It also leads the viewer to assign him a heterosexual masculine identity because *Cholos*, according to Pérez, are traditionally representative of stereotypical heterosexual macho men. In no way is one led to believe that Carlos is gay thus, repressing his homosexuality. Tío Tomás, as well as Carlos, represent *queer* identities, because both never adhere to the roles designated for men in Chicano culture. For instance, Carlos, as a gay, will also never fulfill the heterosexual duties of reproduction. As for Tomás he never marries and the silence with regard to his sexuality allows us to form our own interpretation of his sexual identity.

In fact, Tomás, takes on a role traditionally taken up by women, becoming the historian of the family. In the back yard, Tomás has an altar for the Virgen of Guadalupe in which he places a picture of Carlos and Magdalena, his fourteen-year-old pregnant niece who also comes to live with them. He also keeps framed pictures on the wall and altars of past family members and recounts their stories in México to Carlos and Magdalena. Pérez suggests that characters, such as Tío Tomás and Paco, from *Mi Familia*, that are not overtly coded as heteronormative are precisely those that permit *queer* mappings. The fact that Tomás is the only adult male in the family who does not hold judgment on Carlos' homosexuality allows for mapping Carlos' *queer* identity. Moreover, Carlos' *queer* identity

highlights urban renewal projects in Echo Park and the changes in objects of desire. For instance, on the onset of the neighborhood's real estate boom, pioneers of gentrification Gary and James, an affluent white gay couple, purchase the property in which tío Tomás' back house rental was located. Tomás has lived in that house for over thirty years and now finds himself with new landlords.

The gentrification of Echo Park brought into contact the white affluent male with the *Vato Loco*, thus not only is the barrio's landscape changing again, so is the object of desire. The viewer then witnesses the transition of Carlos' character from a tough *Cholo* to a "hot *Cholo*" when Carlos becomes the object of sexual desire for white males, in particular his new landlords and their friends. A dangerous, non-conformist, distinctly visual, with a cool movement and speech, the *Cholo* provides an alluring figure for anyone looking for symbols of power, masculinity, and subversion. Thus, the fantasy to become, as Valdes describes, "*Más chucote que la chingada*" appeals to *vatos* both in and out of Chicano culture (*Zoot Suit and Other Plays* 26). And thus, the *Cholo*'s hyper-masculinity enters the realm of homoerotic desire as an example of how *macho* men can be *queered* and become objects of desire for white men.

Carlos' queer identity becomes clear to the viewer the night he attends Gary and James's housewarming party. Carlos, as well as the viewers, are privy to a conversation between James and his friends in which they discuss acquiring property in the desirable "hot area," hinting at the fact that the crime rate that surrounds Echo Park can potentially hurt their investments. Their conversation emphasizes what Pérez sees as the "reconfiguring of the homeboy aesthetic" that challenges the "negative stereotypes that are typically associated with it; violence, criminality, ugliness, stoicism. Instead, the homeboy becomes erotic,

aesthetically appealing, and sensual” (*Rethinking Chicana/o* 34). Therefore, the “*hot Cholo*” these white males parade as a sex trophy disrupts Carlos’ potential connection with gangs and crime. In addition, it reveals that Carlos has also disconnected with that part of his past, as their remarks don’t seem to offend him.

Carlos is later introduced to Alejandro, another Latino who solidifies Carlos’ suspicions and tells him “they love their Latin boys.” Thus, the Latin Lover is also redefined displaying a *queer* macho aesthetic that shapes and reconfigures beauty paradigms. For instance, as Pérez notes by appropriating traits valued by the dominant culture “Via the queering of the macho, hyper-masculine men are removed from a rigid gender and sexual paradigm and are allowed to be sensual, (homo) erotic, and beautiful” (35). The movie then jumps to later that night where only Carlos, James and Gary remain. The three are on the couch drinking Tequila while taking pictures. Symbolically this can be viewed as freezing the image of the *queer Vato Loco*. In what follows, Garry and James explore Carlos’ body they lift his shirt exposing the word *travieso* (troublemaker) tattooed on his abdomen. The tattoo appears as a signifier of gang culture, the message can be read as perhaps his nickname in the gang or his self-identification with breaking rules of heteronormativity, and heterosexuality in dominant as well as Mexican American culture.

In a surprising turn of events, Carlos begins an individual sexual relationship with Gary, who is temporarily unemployed. The only time we see Carlos’ past as a gang member is when he allows Garry a brief intimate access to his world and attempts to show Gary how to make the gang sign for Echo Park with his hands. Gary is intrigued by this and points out to Carlos that he lives in a different world to which Carlos replies “No, you do.” This also points to the fact that gentrification brings into contact two different worlds. It is significant

that this scene is the only one where Carlos is open to share his past as a gang member. It follows what Pérez suggests that “as the macho approximates a queer identity, he is freed from some of the negative traits associated with his image: misogyny, violence, stoicism” (“Queering the Homeboy,”29).

The film ends with Carlos legitimizing his manhood by promising Magdalena to become the father figure to her unborn baby. When Tomás hears Carlos and Magdalena’s future plans, it makes him feel at peace and that night he passes away. The death of Tomás is parallel to the reinterpretation of the *queer* homeboy embodied in Carlos. In fact Carlos’ character serves as an example of what Pérez terms “Latin lover queer macho¹³” whose movement between worlds forges a new alternative space for the *Vato Loco* along with a new reinterpretation of the homeboy.

The *queer* homeboy is also the centerpiece in the artwork of Hector Silva, a visual artist who engages in creating artwork portraying the homeboy figure as erotic and homoerotic. His images serve as visual analogues to the discussion concerning the gay discourse produced by characters like Carlos in *Quinceañera*. Daniel Enrique Pérez, describes Silva’s works as “erotic, sensual, and aesthetically appealing” in which the homeboy body adorned with gang cultural signifiers lacks the defiant stance otherwise associated with the *La Vida Loca*. Instead, the stance of Silva’s Cholo subjects can be interpreted as sites of fantasy and submissiveness.

Pérez cites what Susan Bordo terms as “leaners” to describe the subjects in Silva’s artwork: “these bodies are almost always reclining, leaning against or propped up against

¹³ Daniel Enrique Pérez defines the Latino lover queer macho as men who possess the courage to be who they are without bowing completely to the heteronormative or ethnocentric precepts of the dominant culture.

something in the fashion typical of women's body" (32). Pérez contends that the images produced by Silva, "allows the viewer to fantasizes about what he/she could do to the homeboy who has thus surrendered his body" (33). The reconstruction of gender and sexuality of the *Cholo* in Silva's artwork and the character of Carlos in the film *Quinceañera* originate from a male perspective.

The *queer Vato Loco* and *queer Chola* are also present in Chicana texts that engage in reconfiguring the notions of gender, sexuality, ethnicity and beauty. The *Chola* characters in Helena María Viramontes' *Their Dogs Came With Them* and Yxta Maya Murray's *Locas* serve as a vehicle for transgressive gender discourse. By positioning the *Chola* as both feminine and masculine they simultaneously destabilize binary gender system in gang subculture. Viramontes and Murray are among the first Chicanas to articulate a vision of the *queer* male gang member. Through a feminist lens, they deconstruct the *Vato Loco*'s defiant stance by inverting sexuality and gender roles in gangs. Both authors, I contend, are equally radical and subversive for both confront issues of gender and sexuality and challenge directly dominant patriarchal ideologies in an experimental way. In fact they redefine *carnalismo* by probing into taboo subjects in Chicano culture, for example, such discouraged subject matter as the *Vato Loco*'s homosexual desires. Thus, Viramontes and Murray challenge the essentialist foundation of Chicano cultural identity that produces by and large identity subjects based on heterosexual and masculine aesthetics.

I have addressed the way many Chicano writers and artist transformed the figure of the Pachuco from victim, pocho, orphan, "gamin dandy" and delinquent to heroic revolutionary icon in movement-era texts. In doing so these texts recast the Pachuco and *Vato* into a masculine cultural identity while the Pachuca was treated as secondary in much

Chicano cultural production. In this chapter I locate Viramontes and Murray's works against the backdrop of the Chicano texts to explore how women recast both the *Chola* and the *Cholo*. I argue that by recasting the *Chola* to appropriate the tough defiant *Cholo* stance women authors create a new context to reclaim the *Cholas* silence and yield new interpretations of *la vida loca*.

Challenging Androcentric Stereotypes: The Chola's Female Masculinity

In their reading of the Viramontes' stories in "Paris Rats in East L.A.," (1993), Debra A. Castillo and María Socorro Tabuenca Córdoba examine Viramontes' theoretical approach in writing, offering the term "homely stories," in order to reveal aspects that are "both homelike and unattractive" (*Border Women* 151). The level of intimacy through which Viramontes depicts her character's human struggles in relation to ideas of the good, the bad and ugly challenge binary understandings of Chicano subjectivity. Through a "homely" approach to story telling, the critics show how intimate forms of narrating form a bridge of communication between the author and the reader.

Viramontes' double interpretation of "homely," according to Castillo and Tabuenca, "is a border-straddling world, and one that introduces a reading of a culturally diverse (some might say impoverished or contaminated) social reality quite different from the mediations usually evoked by the dominant culture's sense of the aesthetic process" (151). In fact, they contend "that the power of Viramontes' interconnected sequences of stories depend to a great degree on the double meaning of "homely" (151).

In the section of the essay titled "Unspeakable Macho Chicano Representation," Castillo and Tabuenca, concentrate on the character Spider, a homeboy gang member. In their close reading of the characterization of the gang member, they illustrate how

Viramontes uses the double meaning of “homely” to expose the life style of gang members as both hyper-masculine and *queer*. Spider’s tough *Cholo* style coded with tattoos, and clothing that includes the trademark “Pendleton [...] articulate a powerful masculine identity” (158). Spider also articulates a feminized *queer* gang member identity by sitting outside listening to music with his homeboys “and the oldies caress the boy-men like slow dancing lovers” (*Border Women* 159). Although marking a sense of passiveness, they express feminized homeboy behaviors. Similarly, they suggest that the “intensity of the male bonding in Spider’s gang, the initiation rituals used to cement such ties, and the violence that perpetuates them” represent acts that articulate both hyper-masculine and *queer* subjects (159).

The use of “homely” as a thematic device extends to Viramontes’ groundbreaking novel *Their Dogs Came With Them* (2007). In this work she recasts the figures of the *Chola* and the *Cholo* as a means to offer a counter-narrative that offsets and responds to dominant narratives offered by Chicano texts. Viramontes tactically explores the rise of various representations of the *Chola/Cholo* in society toward the end of the 20th century. However, perhaps one of the most significant contributions of the novel to urban literature is how she brings voice to gender transgressions and visibility to the homosocial¹⁴ nature of street gangs between men and across gender lines.

The novel is set in East Los Angeles in particular the neighborhood Viramontes grew up in. The history of East L.A., through its constant transforming landscape is a key component of the novel. She frames the novel in two temporal settings first, 1960 when the

¹⁴ In *Between Men* Eve Sedgwick explains the phenomenon of *homosociality* a term she applied to the social bonds formed between persons of the same sex. While these bonds can be distinguished from homosexuality—sexual desire between persons of the same sex—they exist on a continuum with it.

freeway was first being built in East L.A., which consequently uprooted and displaced communities, and the second 1970, when the freeway hovers over communities rendering them and their inhabitants invisible.

In Viramontes' novel, the members of the McBride boys, Luis, Palo, Santos, Lucho, Alfonso and Turtle, stake a claim to a few city blocks in East Los Angeles. By setting street parameters, such as McBride Avenue as their own territory, the McBride boys symbolically appropriate urban spaces and develop a sense of community through gang affiliations. Through such organization, the McBride boys also create a sense of safety and authority for themselves that responds to harsh city landscape. "The confident badass walk protecting a nation of city blocks claimed by McBride" demonstrates how organized social relations among men reflect a blindly nationalist loyalty¹⁵ (159). By staking claim to the streets, the McBride Boys become a visible entity. Their confident stride is a public announcement that they exist.

The McBride Boys also make themselves visible through *placasos* (Chicano graffiti). A direct response to their erasure in urban landscapes tagging their names in old English within their *placasos* a scripted declaration of territorial defense. As Chicano graffiti artist Chaz Bojórquez reveals, "Old English lettering was a way to resist and combat the feeling of illegitimacy and invisibility of urban impoverishment" (*The Art and Life* 26). Thus, gang and graffiti artist use this style of lettering in "role-calls" listing gang member's names and

¹⁵ Monica Brown in *Gang Nation* suggests that the "signifying practices within Latino/a urban gangs assert a code of loyalty and honor that partakes of nationalist rhetoric; in this way, then, Latino/a urban gang members are asserting an alternative citizenship in a counternation, one that provides a sense of economic security (most often through delinquent behavior), one that establishes its own moral and juridical authority with a history tied to territory, and one that provides a sense of communal identity, belonging" (xxiii)

neighborhoods as a subversive form of visibility and reclamation of power and importance (*The Art and Life* 26).

Viramontes' depiction of gang graffiti and the East Los Angeles landscape deliberately includes a "homely" approach to reflect the death of its young people. For instance, Viramontes creates an image of death by comparing the pallid-gray cemented freeways to the display of gangs *placasos* that are now "faded as ancient engravings" resembling a "cold and clammy [...] morgue table" (164). When Turtle, the only female gang member, sees her gang's crossed-out *placasos*, or tags, she understands that the rival gang means business proclaiming the McBride Boys territory as their own through graffiti marks. Crossing-out what was left of their names with red paint meant a "dispatch announcing erasure" of the McBride Boys place-memory and place-identity (217).

Similarly, Viramontes' mediation with the thick layers of memory, place, identity and erasure are made visible in her literary landscape just as the gang's *placasos* over lay one another in urban landscapes. Elena Avilés' development of "*Chicana placas*," offers a Chicana feminist method to understand the complexity of gang life in Viramontes' novel. *Chicana placas* refer to "a style of inscription and language use among Chicana feminist that signs the ways women break into language" to underscores the multi-layer of meanings in Chicana texts, that function like *placas*, to create visibility and voice among the marginalized and oppressed (Avilés 319). In effect, Viramontes participates in the appropriation of masculine signifiers such as *placasos* to serve as a symbol of her "*Chicana placa*" in which she inscribes multiple layers of memories, place, space and cultural knowledge. Avilés, demonstrates an extension of thinking about Chicanas author "homely" stories, as Tabuenca

and Corbona propose, to counter act negative stereotypes and invisibility among Chicanos and Chicanas.

Thus, what Viramontes reflects in her work is precisely a challenge to the erasure effects of urbanization as well as the erasure of women's voice in Chicano gang narratives through her particular use of *placasos* and *placas*. More precisely, her novel is *tagged* (marked) with layers of intimacy in connection to public barrio life in East Los Angeles through the defiant signification of *con safos*. In "Ghosts in the Growth Machine" Raúl Homero Villa, describes *con safos* as an emblem in Chicano territorial graffiti that "posts a challenge or warning by the writer-artist" ("Ghosts" 126). To this end, *The Dogs Came with Them* incorporates *con safos* as a warning of the consequences of urbanization--the uprooting of families, a history, and memories. Turtle's personal mediations with the changes in the landscape are corresponding to the actual social devastation of the disfigured landscape. She smelled the belly of the earth as she:

stood beneath miles of earth that had been heaved up, plowed aside, carted off and carried away in preparation for the rolling asphalt of the Interstate 710 Long Beach and Pomona freeways. Severed tree roots jutted from the mud walls. Except for the horizon being erased by the night, she saw nothing above them. Out of sight, out of mind, and over the embankment, everything was forgotten. Nonexistent. (226)

Viramontes also appropriates the tough *Cholo* aesthetic to redefine the *Chola* figure. As explained in chapter two, Turtle is the only female in the McBride boy's gang. She is admitted into the gang and considered part of the 'boys' because she forms her own female masculinity by rejecting feminine norms altogether. For example, Turtle participates in masculine activities by joining a gang and occupying the streets. In her male appropriation

of behaviors and space, she reinforces symbols of masculinity by shaving her head and walking the streets with a screwdriver. Her outward appearance alludes to the stereotypical violent image associated with gangs. It is through her shaved head that Turtle mimics a *pelón*, a bald male gang member. She further rejects a stereotypical sense of femininity since long hair is culturally reinforced as a positive trait for stereotypical images of feminine identity. Turtle also appropriates the tough *Cholo* style in clothing. She dresses in a leather jacket and wears *chinos*. The same as her *carnales*, Turtle hangs out, smokes, and drinks. She is neither passive nor afraid. As a result, she encroaches upon the male and masculine realm of violence.

Before she was Turtle, Antonia María Gamboa was a young girl with “shoulder-length chestnut hair” (169). Turtle’s mother, Amá named her Antonia, after a Mexican movie actress she had once admired. The name Antonia is the female respective of the name Antonio, which comes from the Greek word “anthos” meaning flower. Although she inherits a name which meaning is flower, and also a word heavily associated with the feminine world, she rejects the legacy of femininity and beauty that grounds the history of her family name when she joins a gang and uses Turtle as a her street name. In addition, Viramontes describes Antonia’s “choice of boxers under her cutoffs, of her erasure of breasts and dresses and all that was outwardly female” to demonstrate how Antonia transforms into Turtle. By including an intimate understanding of the significance of Antonia’s name in the streets, and offering private details about Antonia’s life, Viramontes shows how intimate forms of narrating form a bridge of communication between the author and the reader. Through such style of story telling, the narrator informs the reader how Antonia’s street identity is constantly judge against various public and private social value systems. Perhaps the most

important example of this is when Turtle's family describes her new Chola identity as being consistent with "behaving like some unholy *malflora*," or a bad flower (25). Ironically, while her shaved head and choice of dress makes her a good gang member, it also makes her a bad and ugly at home. By informing the reader that the women in Turtle's family characterized her as *la malflora*, the reader comes to understand that *malflora* is bad and unholy. Therefore, as she assimilates hyper-masculine behavior, her family reads this as the "start of going bad" (168). She becomes a *queer* subject at home.

In fact, the night Antonia became Turtle was the night she became part of the McBride Boys "always and por vida till death do us part" (16). Turtle, the name she was christened with, "was her *for Real* one" (16). Turtle also turns out to be a fitting name for her street life. Symbolically, turtles are associated with the ground for their ability to stay grounded, even in moments of disturbances and chaos. Life in the streets, are often described as the same. When Turtle ends up living on the streets homeless, the tough shell she carries on her back offers her the ability to stay grounded in the chaos or urbanization. Moreover, her tough *Cholo* style also serves as a shell of protection against the evils inflicted on women that are living on the streets. Thus, her *malflora* appearance is a protective shell because it allows her to blend in with the boys. In addition, given the strong oral traditions that influence Viramontes style of storytelling, in Native American folklore the turtle is an earth symbol. According to folk myth, America is also known as Turtle Island because the Turtle carried the weight of the land on her back. By transforming Antonia into Turtle, Viramontes offers a modern day critique about women and landscapes. If turtles represent Mother Earth, then Turtle is a modern day representation and embodiment of Mother Earth in an urban context. And the take of Turtle is a contemporary creation myth of the *malflora Chola*

whose creation of a hyper masculine and queer identity is a shell of protection down the mean street and a shell of longevity against the constant threat of erasure and invisibility in Los Angeles.

To conclude Viramontes develops the *malflora Chola* body that has gone unspoken and unthought-of in Chicano texts to recover, claim and re-inscribe her with women's experience and knowledge of survival in gang subcultures. While problematizing gender norms through the *malflora*, Viramontes also turns her feminist lens onto the *vato loco* to explore another dimension of hyper masculinity and queer identities within the homoerotic nature of gangs. Through such modes of seeing, she offers a new perspective on "homely stories" about queer urban landscapes and the lives experiences of those who inhabit them.

The Homoerotic Desire of Gangs

Their Dogs Came With Them underscores the precariousness of sexual identity as it exposes Turtle's androgyny's identity and the male gang member's homosexuality. In her reinterpretation of gang subculture Viramontes moves beyond the cultural task of validating the *Vato Loco* identity established by early Chicano authors. Instead, she moves toward the more difficult process of understanding the multiple identities the *Vato* now negotiates. By addressing their *queer* identity, Viramontes defies the conventional Chicano identity and gender relations that are established in the literature about *Pachucos* and *Vato Locos*. As Jonathan Dollimore states "identity is clearly constituted by the structures of power, of position, allegiance, and service, any disturbance within or of identity could be as dangerous to that order as to the individual subject" ("Subjectivity, Sexuality, and Transgression" 55). This speaks to why not many Chicanos have been open to *queering* the masculine identity associated with the Pachuco and *Vato*.

In a phone conversation I had with Viramontes on February 24th 2014, she commented that her intent was to write a “love story” between two male characters, because she believes that in “any hyperized male group there must exist this sexual tension” that is not addressed (Interview). Through the love story of two *Vatos locos*, Viramontes explores the homosocial bonds between masculine identities in the institution of gangs, and the homoerotic desire it fosters. Dollimore’s analysis of institutions that foster masculine identities emphasizes that, “masculine identity requires masculine gratification, but in the process is potentially complicated by a homoerotic desire in the very situations in which heterosexuality is most ardently pursued. It’s as if, with so much mutual admiration about, some of it just cannot help but transform into deviant desire for, rather than honorable imitation of, “man’s” most significant other (i.e., man)” (77). In what follows I explore how Viramontes’ modes of seeing, offers a new perspective on gang institutions of *carnalismo* (brotherhood). Through Viramontes’ intimate reflection on the situation of the barrios urban-renewal and redevelopment she informs us about queer urban landscapes and the lives experiences of those who inhabit them.

In Raul Humero Villa’s scholarly analyses of barrio social space he observes that contemporary Chicana/o urban literature is abundant with figurative images that code the “present absence or absent presences of people places and histories” that urbanization obscures (“Ghosts in the Growth Machine” 113). Villa has noted, that Viramontes’ literary modes express urban development’s threat, against historical place and memory by narrating an “itinerary of remembered spaces laden with [...] intimate meanings as well as broader community meanings (*Barrio Logos* 129). Throughout the novel Viramontes recast the images of the *malflora* and *La Llorona* as ghostly present absence or absent presences to re-

inscribe them with women's experience and knowledge. I argue that Viramontes also codes the *vato loco* as a ghostly present absence or absent presence in the urban barrio landscape to evoke the persistent motif of social death. At the same time, she pushes her critical inquiry beyond the *vato loco*'s ghostly image to interrogate his *absent homosexuality* what Henning Bech identifies "as a ghost-like character, present but absent, desired and denied, known and unknown" (84). Viramontes inscribes the *absent homosexuality* within the McBride Boys gang to critique the heterosocial and masculinist barrio landscape.

Viramontes use of East Los Angeles' urban landscape as a structural mode brings together the McBride Boys hypermasculinity and *queer* identity. The freeway can be read as the "intersection" that connects the *Vato*'s hyper-masculinity with his newfound *queer* identity within the gang. Alfonso and Lucho's, brief love story speaks to the homosexual desire in male gangs that exists but of which is not readily written about in Chicana/o texts. Alfonso and Lucho's homosexuality is kept a secret to those in their gang. Their love for each other remains "in the closet," illustrating the social pressures confronting the gay *Vato* within the greater Chicano community. Just as Carlos' sexual identity in the film *Quinceañera* evolved alongside the gentrification of his barrio, Echo Park, Viramontes writes Alfonso and Lucho's sexual desire for one another against the backdrop of the changing urban landscape of East Los Angeles.

Before the freeway intersections encroached on their barrio, Alfonso and his friends "had whole abandoned blocks to get lost in" (304). After the freeway completion the McBride Boy's bonding would take place in Alfonso's front porch. Villa describes the repressive effects urban-redevelopment had on the community and notes that it produced "low limits of possibility" for its residents (*Barrio Logos* 137). In this respect, the "home" is

the space the boys occupy “to live up to their badass nowhere status” (*Their Dogs* 304). Viramontes intimate storytelling reveals the lack of a productive activity or of economic mobility in the barrio. Instead of occupying public space either working or hanging out on the streets the McBride Boys “live down some stabbing humiliation” in a space traditionally coded feminine (*Their Dogs* 304). The home symbolizes the social emasculation of *vato loco*’s identity.

In fact, Lucho and Alfonso’s sexual encounters take place in the back room of Alfonso’s home, which lies under the freeway. The home is also the site in which their relationship is revealed to the rest of the McBride Boys indicating crises in masculinity. As Hammaren, and Johansson describe the crises in masculinity produces a homosexual panic referring to the fear of homosocial attention “gliding over into homosexual desire” (“Homosociality: in Between Power and Intimacy” 3). In an attempt to emphasize his heterosexuality, and deflect his feeling for Lucho, Alfonso calls him a *joto*.

Although, Alfonso has been in a sexual relationship with Lucho, he denies it because he “was no joto,” (308). He even had a “girlfriend he fucked in order to prove he wasn’t a joto” (308). For instance, to deflect from his desire for Lucho, Alfonso engages in a loveless but sexual relationship with Ermilia conforming to heteronormative social norms. Furthermore, Ermilia serves as the medium through which Alfonso and Lucho’s male bond is expressed. His relationship with Ermilia provides Alfonso the concrete symbol of male identity therefore masking his homosexuality.

Additionally, engaging in heterosexual acts licenses him to engage in creating an alternative form of hyper-masculine identity. For instance, respect in gang subculture is earned by member’s actions and is linked to masculinity (Daniel Enrique Pérez 157).

Because Alfonso feels that Ermilia's cousin Nacho is disrespecting him, he orders his gang to find and kill Nacho. As Pérez notes, "disrespect is not only seen as a threat to masculinity it also serves as justification for committing acts of violence" (*Their Dogs* 157).

Alfonso and Lucho's desire for one another manifests itself the night Alfonso calls a gang meeting to organize Nacho's death. Recognizing that what bonds men in homosocial groups is the discourse of masculinity, an empowerment that makes men feel they are *hombres* (men) untouchable, Viramontes sets the place in which the boys perform their homosocial bonding of gang cohesion to cross into the homoerotic of male bonding. At the meeting an altercation ensues between Alfonso and Lucho. The physically charged scene is dually and symbolically the site of their erotic desires. As Carl Gutiérrez-Jones contends, in institutional settings such as gangs, gang members attack one another to "codify their relationship among themselves, even their desire for each other" (*Rethinking the Borderlands* 135). The *carnalismo* that gangs like the McBride Boys so eagerly strive to instill rests on creating male bonds like the one Alfonso and Lucho actually achieve.

Ironically, the intimate connection they share leads Lucho to see Alfonso as "a hysterical pussy, always ranting, always wanting his own way" (*Their Dogs* 304). In her intent to narrate the invisible and hidden "homely stories" of *carnalismo*, Viramontes writing is a strategy to make the invisible of *queer vato locos* visible. In her text, she codes the *Cholo* with symbols that are used to refer to women, such as "hysterical," which is also often used to refer to women becoming *locas* (crazy). Lucho, however, never reveals these thoughts to Alfonso or the others. And it wasn't because he didn't "have the guts to tell Big Al to go fuck himself, it was about" his love for Alfonso (304). The others in the gang, view

the ranting and aggressiveness Alfonso displays as male empowerment, because he is out for revenge to restore his honor.

Aggressive male behavior is a valuable aid for survival in the street life of the barrio. Young boys learn at an early age to overemphasize male survival strategies. Therefore, violence and aggression become an integral part of their identity, aiding them in attaining a certain status within their gang. *Vatos* more often than not have to negotiate multiple identities, creating complex intersections between the “self” and the perception others have of them. In the public eye they are associated with violence criminality and chaos. To follow through with this imposed identity, they often assert an even more violent identity to gain status within their gang and overall dominance in society. Alfonso uses violence and instills fear through violent acts as a means of controlling and sustaining hierarchies of power within his gang. Thus, Alfonso functions around systems of violence even towards his *carnales* as a proof of loyalty.

Wanting to calm the situation, Lucho, offers his “yesca joint” to Alfonso, which he takes and puffs (306). The image of Alfonso puffing on the joint and the fact that he backs down indicates to the others that Lucho holds the power. To remain in that passive role would associate Alfonso with weakness because he succumbs to Lucho’s request and femininity and because “of his rants and locura,” and “his acting-out pussy style” (305). And this in fact, would place Alfonso in a marginal role within the gang. Therefore, even though things seemed to have cooled down, Alfonso challenges Lucho. The image of Alfonso’s finger “poking [...] into Lucho’s ham arm” while “Lucho’s lips became a straight flat line as he spread his thighs” produces an erotic image that can be read as a public demonstration of

their mutual desire. Aware that the others are watching, Lucho gets up and poses in a defiant stance challenging Alfonso.

As Diego Vigil has noted, gang members have a distinctive stylized body language that convey messages of control. In an attempt to assert his manliness and to prove his machismo in front of the other *Vatos*, Alfonso grabs on to his genitals telling Lucho “¡Chúpame! you fucken joto” (307). According to Chicano sociologist Tomás Almaguer, in Mexican and Latino sexual systems homosexuality is defined not by object choice “male or female” but by the distribution of power. Therefore, as long as they assume the active inserter role, Mexican and Latino men are able to engage in homosexual acts without putting into question their masculinity or heterosexual persona (418).

A person is considered a maricón or a joto (queer) only if he assumes the passive, insertee role (Almaguer, 137). Hearing Alfonso call him joto was all Lucho needed to pull him out from where he sat “his massive drum thighs apart, Lucho posed in an intimidating stance ready to pounce on the much smarter Big Al. Not doing something about the insult was unthinkable” (*Their Dogs* 307). Viramontes probes the *absent homosexuality* of *carnalismo* making visible the desire between the ghost-like characters known. More substantial, however, is Viramontes’ technique of inscribing the *absent homosexuality* within the McBride Boys gang to critique the heterosocial and masculinist barrio landscape. Before the McBride Boys recognize that what Alfonso and Lucho feel for one another is deeper than a friendship, Lucho retreats and thinks, “If only he Big Al would swallow that nasty smirk of his face,” he could back down (307). The narrator’s understated violence toward his *homeboy* resonates with the dynamics of gang culture that utilizes violence to create submissive docile subjects. Pleading with Alfonso, Lucho “raised a palm around Alfonso’s

neck and then tenderly kneaded the brittle back of his friend's shaved head [...] Say sorry Lucho said" to which Al ignored (307). The two then engage in a verbal a physical exchange in front of all the McBride Boys that mimics a sexual and homoerotic overtone:

Lucho continued massaging Al's neck, and the sense of violent arousal a moment ago now landed on his lips like a picate, which made it more difficult to resist pressing his mouth forward onto Al's, to feel the scratch of Big Al's mustache. The drugs in his body, the feel of Big Al's flesh against his fingers, invoked the desire to release the stiffness of his erection in the wet hole of Al's mouth as he did yesterday, the day before and the day before that in the back room. Lucho's willingness for magic acts, for filing Al's mouth full of fire, allowed him to ignore Alfonso's ambivalence. (308)

Alfonso's relationship with Lucho is *queer*. In their altercation it is evident that their relationship is a manifestation of their mutual homoerotic desire. The fact that Lucho doesn't reject Alfonso in any way and is not afraid of the intimacy between them speaks to Lucho's acceptance of non-heteronormative relationships and sexuality. The fact that Lucho hungers for any type of physical contact with Alfonso even if it is in front of his *carnales*, attests to his desire.

Alfonso and Lucho had some sort of physical relationship but because it is not socially acceptable, Alfonso blames "the angle dust or the whiskey or the mota for his cocksucking because he wasn't a joto like Lucho" (308). Nevertheless, they clearly had a homoerotic relationship that formed a strong bond between the two. Because he was in love Lucho "kicked the porch pillar" instead of Al's face. Lucho engages in a form of self-imposed exile and chooses to walk away "because he was in love" not only losing his lover,

but also the gang because that night “he turned his back on his family of men and walked away” to a place where he can be himself (308).

To conclude through such modes of seeing, Viramontes offers a new perspective on “homely stories” about queer urban landscapes and the lives experiences of those who inhabit them. By weaving the love story of two *Vatos* amidst a changing urban landscape, Viramontes’ text explores urban identities, which are also changing. In fact, Viramontes opens up a dialogue about other changes happening simultaneously in the barrio, exposing *queer Vato* and androgynous identities within Chicano gang subculture. Through Lucho’s silence and the lack of closure of the *vatos*’s love narrative, Viramontes extends her mediation introduced through Turtle’s *malflora Chola* body expressing her intent to narrate the invisible and hidden “homely stories” of *vatos locos* and *malfloras*.

La Chola *Machetona*¹⁶

In *Locas*, Yxta Maya Murray takes a different approach in *queering* the *Cholo* and appropriating his tough style to articulate the *Cholas*’ difference and defiance. *Locas* depicts gang life in Echo Park, Los Angeles, and is one of the first to articulate a women’s voice in gang narratives. By focusing on the *Chola*, Murray offers an alternative reading to the heteronormative fraternity of *carnalismo*. Through Lucía’s *Chola* character, we witness the similarities to her predecessor the Pachuca in that she also cultivates a distinctly working-class Mexican American subculture, expresses her sexuality through an exaggerated femininity, participates in masculine activities by forming a gang, committing crimes, and rejecting feminine norms altogether. While *Locas* uses Lucía, the *Chola* figure, to explore

¹⁶ My interpretation of a *Machetona* is that of a woman a “bad girl” who defies traditional notions of women’s “ladylike” behavior, pushing the limits of gender norms, and infringing on male behavior.

the dynamics between an exaggerated femininity and tough masculinity, and its effects on contemporary gang subculture, uses the *Cholo*, Manny, also Lucía's boyfriend, to articulate how the tough, violent as well as smooth or cool leader of the Lobo's gang can come to represent the *queer Cholo*.

Murray recasts both the *Chola* and *Cholo* subject complicating the fixed gender norms in Chicano gang culture. For instance, there is a certain *machismo*, which entails a hyper-local territorial loyalty and violent fierceness in the *Cholo*. Additionally, gangs are traditionally coded as being masculine because its members assemble within the public space of the streets and participate in violent acts. The gendering of space has been manifested in the division of the "home" and the "workplace" in which the home is regarded as the domain of the private and feminine, while the streets are viewed as a masculine public space. As Doreen Massey suggests, gender relations vary over space, therefore spaces are symbolically gendered and some spaces are marked by the exclusion of a particular sex. Massey also argues "the limitation of women's mobility, in terms of both space and identity has been in some cultural contexts a crucial means of subordination" (*Space, Place and Gender*, 179).

In the Lobos gang, mobility, in terms of both space and identity, is determined by gender roles. Manny, the leader of the Lobos, determines who participates in certain spaces and roles. For example, to be a member of the Lobos you must be male and only they are allowed to attend gang meetings, which ironically take place in the home, a private feminine space mostly associated with domesticity. Manny chooses the Lobo "wolf" to identify the gang, which symbolizes loyalty and is also attributed with being a strong predator. As for the women associated with the Lobos, he assigns them a submissive role, converting their body to a docile one, by identifying them all as "sheep," limiting their mobility and individual

identity. The objectification of women as sheep also links them with qualities of weakness, softness and labels them as followers.

The construction of masculinity as “strong” and femininity as “soft” becomes a key element in destabilizing heteronormative gender and sexuality norms in the Lobos gang. By complicating norms around gender and space, Murray maps out *queer* identities in gang culture, in particular the queer configuration noted by Daniel Enrique Pérez: “women controlling men, men being emasculated and homoerotic desire” (*Rethinking Chicano* 156). Murray feminizes the otherwise stereotypical macho male, who embodies the *Cholo* gang member, as a tool to destabilize gender norms and queer the homeboy. In Pérez’s reading of *Locas*, he establishes that *queer* identities are abound in the novel due to the “juxtaposition of non-normative gender roles” with the “economic structure of gangs” that depends on “dominating submissive bodies” to sustain the gang nation and its leader” (156).

Murray writes the *Chola loca* as women who use their sexualized body to control men and subvert the male order by symbolically using their own bodies as a source of power over men. Lucía’s badness is associated with her body, because she chooses to perform and reject her gender by selecting to wear the *Cholo* aesthetic that provides her the toughness and attitude. Lucía describes the first time she walked into a gang meeting “I was dressed just like a gangster in my hard-assed jeans and red bandanna” (150). At other times Lucía seeks empowerment through the hyper-femininity *Chola* style which enables her to explore her sexuality as a tool for upward social mobility within the gang. When meeting with the leader of the rival gang Lucía tells us “I was fancied up in my best pink skirt, the one they like grabbing under, and my hair was teased high” (148). Lucía uses her hyper-femininity as a means of subverting the socio-sexual order in gangs.

Additionally, the juxtaposition of the dynamic male and female qualities associated with being “soft” and “hard,” allows Lucía to shift from a role of sexual object to that of sexual agent. In the initial stages of the gang, Manny appears to be the traditional hyper-masculine archetype of the “gangster.” He is viewed by his *carnales* in the Lobos as the strong *jefe* (boss), in other words the head male described, by his sister Cecilia as a “businessman, a leader” (7). The Echo Park Lobos declare themselves an independent society via laws, traditions and systems of authority. Hence, their social hierarchy includes *jefes*, right hands, taggers, third raters and “sheep”, the homegirls who “grin, sex, color up their faces, that’s about it” (*Locas* 19). It could be said that the gang structure sets in motion a system of gender differentiations designed to maintain a power patriarchy which positions the *vato* as jefe and which makes the *Chola* an object of reproduction and desire. As the narrator of her own story, Lucía articulates her *Chola* identity as complex, and one in which she must negotiate her identity within her family, gang, culture, gender and sexuality. Lucía begins her narrative and explains that at fifteen when she first meets Manny she is just a “red-candy cherry girl,” a “sheep” because that is all she knew (21). She believes she has “won the sheep lotto” and sees Manny as her “fairy prince” (23). Lucía is aware that women in Lobos gang occupy a position that borders on motherhood and “sheep” that are only “good for fucking” and having baby’s, Lucía, made sure she played the “sheep” part “putting on lip gloss, pumping up her hair so she’s looking like Charo, squeezing into skin-tights and five-inch heels” in order to keep her position as the *jefe*’s girlfriend (23).

Murray reveals that male gang members are also subjected to submissive roles. For instance, Manny serves time in jail, which for Pérez means, “that he [Manny] and his body have been subjected to a submissive role in the sense that it has been controlled by the state”

(Pérez 107). The fact that Manny goes to jail because his *carnal*, his brother in terms of the gang family, identifies him as a gun dealer to police, and splinters from the Lobos creating a rival gang the C-4s, places Manny in a struggle to maintain his power hold on the Lobos. According to Pérez, respect is earned by the actions and the role that individuals have in the economic structure of the gang and is clearly linked to masculinity, adding that, “disrespect is not only seen as a threat to masculinity but also serves as a justification for committing acts of violence” (157). Gang culture demands an equally aggressive act of retaliation to counter acts of dishonor, therefore Manny is expected by all to avenge his honor, his “masculinity” by taking revenge against Chico the *carnal* that turned him into the police. As Scott H. Decker notes, the threat posed by rival gangs allows for the cohesiveness among gang members, increasing their commitment to each other (“Collective and Normative,” 245). The geographical proximity of the C-4s and the Lobos increased the solidarity felt by the Lobos members but also posed a threat to the economic structure of the Lobos gun dealing, something Manny also dismissed.

This event sets in motion Manny’s downfall and the upward mobility of his girlfriend Lucía within the Lobo’s gang structure. For instance, when Manny is in jail he lets Lucía into his secret world when he instructs her to deliver a package to his friend Paco, hence initiating her transformation from “sheep” to hard loca boss. Her sense of autonomy comes when she discovers a taste for gangbangng after she “saw those guns in the secret little brown bag...the action made [her] feel like a Superloca” and “wanting what *he’s* got” (*Locas* 21-25). When Manny gets out of jail two major things occur that lead Lucía to form a new perspective about Manny whom she sees getting weak “all soft looking in the belly and chest, not like the hard vato I first hooked up with” (106). For one, not taking revenge against

Chico makes him “soft,” and second not able to make sense of the gangs money makes him “weak”: it also allows Lucía to become more involved in the gang’s drug economy and “after a few months of doing the books, [she] knew more about the business than anybody else” (39).

Lucía then begins to negotiate the “loose sexuality” associated with the “sheep,” using a number of strategies to shift from a role of sexual object to that of sexual agent. Tired of performing her role as a “sheep,” Lucía forges a different identity by assuming both an exaggerated femininity, with her “lined lips so that they’re bruise dark” and a masculinity with her “ranfla,” and “badass Pachuco pants and Pendletons” (*Locas* 106). Alongside heavy make-up many *Cholas* also wear elements of male attire for instance, combined with the hyper-femininity of hair and make-up are the masculine appropriations of clothing, behaviors and space. Rather than simply wearing the tough *Cholo* style, Lucía combines it with a gun “feeling a piece solid in my pocket” and re-works her female body to create a hybrid masculinity. Lucía begins to take a leadership role in the gang by continuing to handle the gang’s books. As she learns more about the gangs business, she becomes Manny’s right hand. Felling irreplaceable, she claims “I started walking like a man does, taking them long-legged roomy steps so people start getting out of my way” (39). She also claims that she became the “first boss woman in this town” (39).

Lucía identifies her new masculine identity as an alternative source of empowerment. By gaining power she exerts it over male gang members, including Manny whom she sees getting “all soft looking in the belly and chest, not like the hard vato [she] first hooked up with” (106). Murray’s depiction of Manny’s transformation from being “hard” to becoming “soft” suggests that he is losing his power, it also underscores the fact that to maintain the

power within the gang one must not be associated with the female quality of “softness.” As Monica Brown suggests, “These references to Lucía’s ‘hard’ heart and Manny’s ‘softness’ with some of his boys, highlight a hard/soft binary that operates throughout the book. This hard/soft binary is one means by which gender roles are discursively articulated and, in the case of Lucía ruptured” (*Gang Nation* 95).

In fact, as Manny becomes soft, his sexuality and his loyalty to the Lobos are questioned. Manny’s love for his *carnal*, blinded his judgment, he tells Lucía he “was like my own blood” (134). Lucía now identifies with the masculine gender role by assuming the tough stance of the Cholo, while Manny no longer “leans the wrong way/in assertion” instead is as Lucía remembers him “leaning over Chico like a lover, his face all soft.... hugging like maricones” (30). This emasculates Manny, and diminishes his control over the gang.

All of a sudden he wasn’t a vato loco no more, now he had this far-off look...and when his mouth curled down soft I could see he was missing his boy bad. “Can’t have too much heart, right?” he says. “See, so I don’t care.” Manny touched his face real soft with his good hand, like it hurts, and when he started talking he kept getting softer and weaker, right in front of my own eyes. “Chico, but not no more, man. He was like my brother. Hermanos. You know what that means?” Manny looked at me then, with his eyes slitting down, then shakes his head. “No, you don’t cause you got some hard heart in you. Bitches don’t know anyways. Don’t know about vatos. Compadres. That means like blood. Better than blood. You die for your homeboys. (133)

Manny's indecisiveness about confronting Chico, leaves the Lobos without a sense of strong leadership. Eliminating Manny thus becomes a way for Lucía to claim her position as the boss.

The combination of her performative hyper-femininity as a "sheep" with her gangster masculinity while occupying the streets makes Lucía a controversial figure. Because the streets signify danger for women, Lucía subverts gender hierarchies by claiming the street for herself. In order for her to protect herself, she appropriates certain masculine performance, such as toughness and willingness to fight along with the appropriation of the *Cholo's* tough defying stance. Manny and Lucía's confrontation regarding the shift in her appearance is important because it introduces several key elements that are implied when women go against patriarchal norms. For example, on the surface it appears that Manny's greatest objection to Lucía's Chola identity is that it refuses to respect the gangs' system of logic. Therefore, he claims she must be a "bitch gone wrong in the head. Dressing like a man" suggesting to her that something is wrong with her "Something's fucked up" (107). It might also be that her new identity not only challenges his masculinity but also his position in the Lobos hierarchy.

In a heated argument Lucía exerts her masculinity by challenging Manny letting him know that she is there to "talk about [her]" (107). However, Manny dismisses her, focusing instead on what she is wearing rather than what she is trying to tell him. A women dressing like a vato he claims, "is a bitch gone wrong in the head [...] some twisted shit" (107). The notion that Lucia is somehow twisted relies on how her body is perceived or read by men. Indeed, it is his interpretation of her body that condones his behavior and allows for him to

hit her telling her, “Think you gotta cock on you?” reminding Lucía that he is biologically a man while she is not. (107). Lucía fires back:

Yah [...] standing straight as a board. I got a cock on me now,
Manny. I’m the one making the money go round and round.
I’m the one making sure we’re not getting fucked by these
lowlifes and mama’s boys you got hanging all over you. You
think they love you, but they don’t. Especially after you’re
tripping on Beto. And ain’t nobody gonna help you like I can.
So think about it hard, honey, cause I’ll walk right out of here
and leave you all alone. (107)

By performing a masculine identity, Lucía is not only mimicking male subjects but also contesting and disrupting the gang’s feminine ideal. The mimicry is also comparable to what Cordelia Candelaria calls the “wild zone” in which women reposition themselves as speaking subjects and reverse the victimization of women (“The ‘Wild Zone,’” 250). Lucía uses her sharp words to confront rather than encircle issues concerning female exploitation. As a subject she speaks-out to renounce and overthrow masculine domination and thus move the *Chola loca* from subjugation to liberation. Murray’s work ruptures some of the myths about women as submissive and passive, and taboos of language that remained unchallenged and tucked away. Her literature is concerned with bringing women to the forefront as productive, self-sufficient, resourceful and complex entities.

To conclude, both Viramontes and Murray engage in reinserting the *Chola* subject into the Chicana imaginary in order to challenge the notions that *Cholas* are passive, submissive victims and object. In *Locas* Murray codes the *Chola loca* with the masculine strengths of the *Cholo*, to disrupt the discourse of femininity and masculinity by transferring cultural codes assigned to femininity onto the male body and vice versa. For instance,

Murray's juxtaposition of Lucía's performative hyper-femininity in combination with the *Cholos* masculine fierceness in her dialogue "got stuck with pussy, and ain't nothing you can do about it. But you see I'm tougher and meaner than any of these sorry boys" (109) inscribes Lucía with female empowerment and voice to describe her *vida loca* from a feminist lens. Additionally the reposition of the figure of *Chola loca* allows re-inscribing her body to challenge stable notions of gender and the objectification of women. Thus, constructing a masculine identity provides the *Chola loca* with the tools to transcend the limitations put on women by the male gang members, resulting in breaking out of the private domestic space Lucía was relegated to at the beginning of the novel.

Viramontes' appropriates *Cholo*'s masculine signifiers such as *placasos* and tough style to mark her literary landscape and to code the *Malfloras* as a complex identity. Viramontes' fragmentation style of writing becomes a powerful tool that enables her to negotiate and mediate, various social and gender issues. The *Malflora* figure functions like a geographical artifact that does more than inform readers about the Chicana's struggle for self-definition but speaks to the simultaneous external and internal erasures. The outcome of urbanization that creates a loss of memory, landscape and home is figured in the *Malflora*'s fragmented body. In her novel, Viramontes attempts to retaliate against social injustice and erasure by documenting what is at risk; uprooting of women's voice, families, a history, and memories. Within the context of the *Malflora*'s gender transgression, Viramontes explores the *Cholo*'s sexuality to construct alternative *queer* narratives to unpack the complexities of these two images that have shaped and defined Chicano culture and history.

Conclusion

The struggle of reimagining and resituating once ignored or vilified female icons is an example of how Chicanas turn to the past to instill a new meaning to female archetypes. In breaking silence, Helena María Viramontes and Yxta Maya Murray found a way to make the *Chola* visible, and a voice from which she could speak about the concerns of women living *la vida loca* in urban landscapes. The analysis of Chicana representations, of the *Chola* and *la vida loca* thus offers a counter-narrative to the dominant narratives offered by Chicano texts but also to the rise of representations about *Cholas/Cholos* in dominant society toward the end of the 20th century.

In this dissertation project I have examined the written expressions of the *Chola* and the *queer Vato* by Chicana feminist writers to analyze how women utilize counter-narratives to express lived realities and to negotiate new understandings on issues of gender roles, identity and shifting social urban conditions. The analysis of how women offer alternative descriptions of the *Chola* as *Malfloras* and *Locas*, symbols of women gone bad and crazy, provides the context from which to study how women create alternative forms of expression through and by the appropriation of a tough male aesthetic to re-inscribe the *Cholas* as empowered women. The recuperation of the *Chola's* sliced tongue and silent scream in women's literary representation thus offers an alternative refiguring of the *Chola* figure as a speaking subject.

The principal goal of this study is to engage with the topic of *Cholas* and Homegirls as a social justice act-a call to action and a response that actively engages in a textual analysis of works where the *Cholas* are primary characters. This study also emphasizes how

Chicana feminists recuperate and reinscribe the *Chola* to provide new interpretations of the *Chola* as an agent of resistance and opposition and to express what Yvonne Yarbro Bejarano terms “the reversal of an accepted image” (“The Lesbian Body,” 183). Feminist writers’ development of an emblem of resistance, as a strategic tool to code the *Chola* with new meaning proves to be “more complex than rejection, for such strategies both critique and derive power” from the reversal and repositioning of the *Chola*’s image (Yarbro Bejarano, 183). This study also reveals how, in flipping the meaning of the *Chola*’s, body as a silent object to speaking subject, Chicanas brought authority to the ways women use gender performance to re-frame the meaning of *Malfloras* and *Locas*. Additionally, by coding the *Malflora* figure to function like a geographical artifact that can be read by others does more than inform readers about the Chicana’s struggle for self-definition but also speaks to simultaneous external and internal social and cultural pressures. As a result of repositioning and re-coding the image of the *Chola*, these writers articulate a sense of difference and defiance in writing about *la vida loca* from gendered lenses.

This study draws from interdisciplinary methods used in urban studies and Chicana/o studies to analyze the complicated relationship between Chicana ‘*Chola*’ identity in connection to and in relationship with her urban setting. This study analyses Chicana authors’ expressions of the *Chola* as a complex shifting figure that provides a different presence to the histories and lived experiences of women living *la vida loca* by articulating a tough *Chola* masculine aesthetic providing a counter-narrative.

Chapter one explores the development of the *Chola*’s silencing, in male-authored gang narratives in which they were rendered invisible and dispensable. I address the *Chola*’s absence in Chicano movement narratives about opposition and highlight what takes place

when they are reinserted into gang-narratives. I address how Chicano heteropatriarchy privileges men and masculinity, and highlight the ways Chicano literary works have infused the *Cholo* with cultural meanings of machismo, style, resistance, and cultural authority. This Chapter analyzed representations of the *Chola* as a silenced and disempowered image to explain how Chicano cultural narratives frame our understandings of *Cholas* as either passive submissive women or sexual objects and *malinchistas* a term used to describe traitor's behavior or unruly conduct. Referring to *Cholas* as modern day *Malinches* provides a glimpse into the deeply rooted idea that women who define themselves on their own terms and their own codes are considered traitors, and therefore, *locas* because they subvert gender roles and expectations.

The *Chola's* voiceless representation in Chicano cultural production by both men and women speaks to the complexity of her image. As a form of resistance Chicanas used literature to reimagine the *Chola* figure reinterpreting the negative codes she was embedded with. This chapter explains how Murray uses literature to bring awareness to racist labeling and the effects it has on cultural identities. The author uses a personal-narrative framework as a tool for critical self-reflection and to make legal arguments and statements that help to reconsider the complexity of *Chola* identity. I focus on the way Murray frames her novel with the image of women, in particular women who fall outside of the traditional norms set by society and who are deemed *locas*, (women that have gone crazy). In this process she generates new interpretations of women to address the crazy spaces of *la vida loca* in which the *Chola* learns to survive.

The *Chola loca's* counter-narrative reveals how women break silence and find voice to modify and complicate established hierarchies of power, gender and spaces constructed by

gangs. Murray's revision of the *Chola loca* reveals a complicated narrative that contests negative notions of women as passive, submissive, objects in competing male-authored gang narratives. Murray puts together the different layers of the *Chola* and explores the female psyche, the unspeakable, unveiling secrets and taboos (including sexuality and violence) that were repressed by a Chicano discourse in their interpretation of *la vida loca*. The development of the *Chola* into a speaking subject illustrates why it is essential for Chicana feminists to expose the manipulations of this figure by outside authority and contributes to our understanding of how *Cholas* navigate male public spaces.

Therefore, chapter two further explores the *Chola* in urban landscapes. Helena Maria Viramontes, a native of East Los Angeles, provides a familiar and intimate urban landscape to further develop the *Chola*, coding her as a *Malflora* (a bad flower) for transgressing traditional gender norms. This chapter examines how Viramontes considers the consequences of urban development by showing how urbanization erases the collective knowledge of the barrio by erasing its landscapes. I locate Turtle's character, the *Malflora*, against the backdrop of East L.A. urban landscape to theorize how Viramontes re-inscribes the *Chola's* body to write about the trauma, fragmentation, and the loss of historical knowledge. I probe the ways she breaks historical and contemporary silence by expressing sites of memory in urban landscape. This chapter further argues that the development of the *Chola* as a *Malflora* has allowed Viramontes to name the manipulations of various male systems, and to comment on the dissolution of a communitarian ethos. By finding alternative ways to code the *Chola*, Viramontes' writing mediates on multiple aspects of the intimate and public space.

Thus, what Viramontes reflects in her work is precisely a challenge to the erasure effects of urbanization as well as the erasure of women's voice in Chicano gang narratives through her particular use of *placasos* (Chicano graffiti). More precisely, her novel is tagged (marked) with layers of intimacy in connection to public barrio life in East Los Angeles through the defiant signification of *con safos*. Raúl Humero Villa, describes *con safos* as an emblem in Chicano territorial graffiti that "posts a challenge or warning by the writer-artist" ("Ghosts" 126). To this end, *The Dogs Came with Them* incorporates *con safos* as a warning of the consequences of urbanization--the uprooting of families, a history, and memories. For example, Turtle's personal mediations with the changes in the landscape are corresponding to the actual social devastation of the disfigured landscape. Turtle smelled the belly of the earth as she:

stood beneath miles of earth that had been heaved up, plowed aside, carted off and carried away in preparation for the rolling asphalt of the Interstate 710 Long Beach and Pomona freeways. Severed tree roots jutted from the mud walls. Except for the horizon being erased by the night, she saw nothing above them. Out of sight, out of mind, and over the embankment, everything was forgotten. Nonexistent. (226)

Viramontes includes East Los Angeles' social geographic subordination as contested terrain and turns to Turtle la *Chola* figure as a site of historical knowledge to connect memories and historical links, that are still there in what Villa terms "present absence or absent presences of people places and histories" ("Ghosts in the Growth Machine" 113).

Chapter three analyzes the dynamics of the legend of *La Llorona*, allowing women to reflect on the changing concerns of women particularly the *Cholas* residing in urban barrios. The authors reimagine and resituate *La Llorona* and the *Chola* gang member to highlight

their past exclusions and silencing, making the previously unknown known, telling new stories, and correcting myths. The stories analyzed in chapters one and two reveal the multilayered understandings of *Chola* as a complex shifting entity so, to try and tell the truths of her story, Viramontes and Murray translate the *Chola*'s complex social lived reality in urban gang subculture into haunting, ghosts, seething absences, and muted presences. This allows them to develop a historical account distinct from male-authored narratives, inviting the reader to make contact with the *La Llorona* haunting to engage with the *Chola*'s haunted souls.

For example, Viramontes resituates *La Llorona*, a model of resistance against history's erasure, by wailing in protest against her community's ravaged geography. With her "bag of bones" *La Llorona* roams along with other souls, Interstate 710, and the cemeteries that were infringed upon to make way for the freeway. Turtle also roams under the freeway and finds a place to rest within the cemeteries where other ghosts rest. The whole situation of urban displacement is enmeshed with the traffic of the dead and the living dead that cry out against the freeways that separates their screams from the hushed talk of the destructive nature of urban renewal.

Wandering the urban landscape, *La Llorona* wails for Turtle and aligns with her because, like her, she struggles against a male dominated structure. By aligning with *malfloras*, bad women and homeless ghost women that roam the dark urban streets, *La Llorona* exposes how women in particular are punished for not conforming to their cultural and social norms. The various story lines that crisscross throughout the novel are Viramontes' testimony working to bring the absence of the barrio life into present. They can be viewed as a multi perspective act of bearing witness to the consumption of lives and places in East Los

Angeles by the monstrous freeway. Evoking the persistent motifs of water, burial, social and individual death, common in *La Llorona*'s tale and in Chicano urban place narratives, allows Viramontes to evoke the silent spirits in the displaced neighborhood (Villa, "Ghosts" 115). The freakish rainstorm left a "low-riding level of rancid water" in the city's riverbed allowing a full view of the "spray-painted placazos tagged on the ravine wall" resembling tombstones.

Murray foregrounds the interconnections in the narratives of *La Llorona* and Lucía, the *Chola* gang member, who both represent life and death forces. *La Llorona* in this narrative becomes connected to evil and violence, particularly in gang subculture. *La Llorona* reminds the reader of Lucía's complex social reality. Lucía gains subjectivity by drawing strength from the figure of *La Llorona* in her mirrored image and thoughts. Through Lucía's memories and encounters with *La Llorona* we learn of the violence and wounds that haunt her. In fact, *La Llorona* transforms into a cross spacio-temporal figure whose life experience and image directs Lucía to find her idea of "self." *La Llorona* teaches Lucía to reverse childhood trauma, to revise her own history, to exercise her sexuality, and reverse the effects of women's subordination. *La Llorona* encourages Lucía to articulate her own tough *Chola* aesthetic, and to use violence to label herself into existence. *La Llorona* appears to Lucía in the mirror when the violence she represents is no longer being contained or repressed. Her presence is felt at times when Lucía seems to be losing control of either her position in the gang's hierarchy or when she feels she is becoming *loca* (a woman gone crazy). This is illustrated when *La Llorona* whispers to Lucía "You've gotta be that strong chica" as Lucía stares at what she sees in the mirror (204). A positive guiding force, *La Llorona* advises Lucía to embrace who she is and to trust her voice. Using the motifs of "dark water" and "breathing" to name and define, Lucía learns from *La Llorona* how to articulate survival. For

instance “Even when Manny was beating [her] down, I kept [her] nose above water” (204).

La Llorona is a symbolic and literal agent of change meant to end the portrayal of women as victims. And thus, she speaks to Lucía via her image in the mirror or under black water to offer words of advice “Breath and keep staying alive” (204).

Chapter four demonstrates how women have coded the *Chola* as appropriating the tough defiant *Cholo* stance to redefine the *Chola*. Therefore, their interpretation of the *Chola* as well as the *Cholo* presents alternative and different modes of thought. Additionally, I analyze what happens when the *Chola* articulates difference and defiance and what happens when this difference and defiance is unexpected and self-defined. Similarly, this study also recognizes the empowerment and authority women exert when they write and construct gender and cultural identities that offer new insight to the effects of urbanization in barrio communities. This study further demonstrates that, this techniques- the appropriation of the *Cholo*’s masculine signifiers such as *placasos* (Chicano graffiti) and tough style, provides feminist writers a tool to mark their literary landscape and code the *Cholas Locas* and *Malfloras* as complex identities. Within the context of the *Chola/Malflora*’s gender transgression, Chicanas further explore the *Cholo*’s sexuality to construct alternative *queer* narratives and unpack the complexities of these two images that have shaped and defined Chicano culture and history.

In the novel *Locas*, Murray engages in reinserting the *Chola* subject into the Chicana imaginary in order to challenge the notions that *Cholas* are passive, submissive victims and object. Murray codes Lucía the *Chola loca* with masculine strengths of the *Cholo*, to disrupt the discourse of femininity and masculinity by transferring cultural codes assigned to femininity onto the male body and vice versa. For example, the combination of her

performative hyper-femininity with her gangster masculinity occupying the streets makes Lucía a controversial figure.

Viramontes appropriates the tough *Cholo* aesthetic to redefine the *Chola* figure. As explained in chapter two, Turtle is the only female in the McBride boy's gang. She is admitted into the gang and considered part of the 'boys' because she forms her own female masculinity by rejecting feminine norms altogether. For example, Turtle participates in masculine activities by joining a gang and occupying the streets. In her male appropriation of behaviors and space, she reinforces symbols of masculinity by shaving her head and walking the streets with a screwdriver. Her outward appearance alludes to the stereotypical violent image associated with gangs. It is through her shaved head that Turtle mimics a pelón, a bald male gang member. She further rejects a stereotypical sense of femininity since long hair is culturally reinforced as a positive trait for stereotypical images of feminine identity. Turtle also appropriates the tough *Cholo* style in clothing. She dresses in a leather jacket and wears chinos. The same as her carnales, Turtle hangs out, smokes, and drinks. She is neither passive nor afraid. As a result, she encroaches upon the male and masculine realm of violence.

To conclude, this study contributes a new understanding to the way Chicana feminists offer counter-narratives by using urban lived experiences to generate representations of women as speaking subjects through their stories of the *Chola*. In the works of Viramontes and Murray we also witness how feminist counter-narratives forms reverse the negative stereotypes of the *Chola's* image and how, through storytelling, women are recreating the *Chola* as a figure of modern day urban survival. By weaving the tale of *La Llorona* to that of the *Chola*, they demonstrate the historical and contemporary ties that frame how women are

perceived as crazy in public social spaces. Their works demonstrate how they negotiate new realities about what being a loca means, and what living *la vida loca* means by counter narrating the *Chola* as a *loca* through Chicana feminist lenses.

Through the analysis of the *Chola's* female masculinity, aesthetic this study also reveals how in flipping the meaning of the *Chola's* body, Chicanas brought authority to the ways women use gender performance to re-frame “*Malfloras*” bad girls and *Locas* engaging in reclaiming the *Chola* to create an alternative interpretation of women living *la vida loca*. Women’s desire to rethink older narratives of *la vida loca* shows their commitment to create new identities reflective of lived realities so that *Cholas* are not rendered invisible or forgotten altogether.

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