Borders Beyond Borders: Women's Mobility in the U.S. and Mexico

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Borders Beyond Borders: Women’s Mobility in the U.S. and Mexico
by
Britta Anderson

A dissertation presented to the
Graduate School of Arts & Sciences
of Washington University in
partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree
of Doctor of Philosophy

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Borders Beyond Borders:

Women’s Mobility in the U.S and Mexico

by

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Tabea Linhard, Chair

In this dissertation, I identify the cultural workings of four systems that embody the restriction of women’s mobility on both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border. These systems are highways, prisons, factories, and the border wall. Understanding these systems as cultural matrices and physical spaces, I construct a new cartography of border cultural production that pairs well-known authors and mural artists with lesser known figures from San Diego to Ciudad Juárez. A fundamental component of my analysis is the use of religious imagery to show how Mexican and Chicana women enact counter-discourses around these four systems. I argue that through the appropriation of spiritual imagery in creative works, border women challenge the processes that criminalize and immobilize them, claiming institutional religion’s authority in order to forge new, fluid forms of movement and subjectivity. My first chapter examines responses to the displacement of Chicano communities by the construction of freeways in California in Helena Maria Viramontes’ novel Their Dogs Came with Them and in the public murals painted onto highway pylons in San Diego’s Chicano Park. Chapter Two analyzes murals and poetry produced in women’s prisons in Mexico and the United States, focusing particularly on how
inmates use cultural production to restructure their experience of time. Chapter Three examines the role of border assembly factories in shaping the landscape and cultural production of Ciudad Juárez, focusing on local poetry, short stories, and graffiti murals to study the performance of gesture in supervisors’ bodily control of workers. My final chapter focuses on the surveillance and physical barrier of the border wall itself, examining the trope of walking women in murals applied directly to the wall, Luis Humberto Crosthwaite’s “Marcela y el Rey al fin juntos,” and Yuri Herrera’s Señales que precederán al fin del mundo. My analysis focuses on the use of recontextualized spiritual imagery in cultural production as politically engaged practice. Through this dissertation, I question the distinction between Mexican and Latino studies, framing Mexican studies as the inquiry into the cultural flows related to Greater Mexico. I highlight local residents’ work, which is often overshadowed by international responses to the region.
Introduction

Checkpoints, the building blocks in a world where some subjects are desirable citizens and others become criminalized, expand beyond national borders. The apparatuses that police citizenship take many forms—architectural, corporeal, and discursive—constituting border zones across vast territories. Contemporary barriers morph and expand; any encounter can potentially regulate national belonging and the bodily movements of those it excludes. This border-laden geography severely restricts the mobility of criminalized populations, long after they have passed through any official frontier. In Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability, Emily Apter rejects the myth that globalization has erased the rigidity of national borders and facilitated widespread access to international travel and exchange, a story that has contributed to the institutionalization of “world literature” as a category. She contrasts this narrative of the ease of global mobility with the violently intensified nationalism, xenophobia, and segregation taking hold throughout the world through both official and unofficial means, a phenomenon she calls “check-pointization.” While her work focuses on what cannot cross borders, whether material or metaphorical, this dissertation examines the creative, resilient forms of aesthetic production through which criminalized populations create new forms of mobility despite the multiplication and expansion of borders across spaces and sectors of society.

These chapters study the “check-pointization” of the U.S.-Mexico border, or its evolution from a symbolic line to an extensive system of surveillance and control that permeates many social domains. In his Instrucciones para cruzar la frontera, Luis Humberto Crosthwaite notes this progression of the border from a national boundary to an entire violent geography of obstacles for those outside of national belonging: “donde antes era tela de alambre ahora es un
muro imponente; y si logras cruzar ese muro, hay otro, más grande; y si logras cruzar ése, más vale que te eches a correr porque los guardianes te están buscando con sus helicópteros y sus camionetas y sus radares y sus macanas y sus pistolotas” (169). Each obstacle that limits migrants’ movement is always followed by another impediment. This dissertation examines the walls beyond the border wall, the diffuse spaces, bodies, and discourses that adopt the architecture and logic of the militarized border patrol infrastructure.

Border zones emerge within the spatial layout of cities, in assembly plants, and throughout the criminal justice system. I examine freeways, factories, and prisons as sites of transnational crisis that operate parallel to the border wall, as cultural tropes and physical spaces that regulate citizenship and limit movement. Each of these spaces operates like a border checkpoint, “an apparatus of state function dedicated to divisive acts of profiling and selectionism . . . a figure of performative sovereignty inseparable from the politics of catastrophism” (Apter 97). The discourses and policies that lead to the multiplication of border zones, where vulnerable subjects turn into threats to the nation and its actual and perceived boundaries.

In my discussion of the processes of criminalization enacted through checkpoints, I focus particularly on women’s experiences, or the ways that Mexican and U.S. government officials represent border women and seek to control their movements without assuming responsibility for their lives or wellbeing. I use the term “border women,” as employed in Debra Castillo and María Socorro Tabuenca Córdoba’s 2002 Border Women: Writing from La Frontera, to refer to the women who reside on both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border and who most directly articulate their own experiences of the region, the multiple voices that create, move, and write from, not just about, the border. The following chapters study the literary works and murals from the
border that challenge the limitations imposed on women’s mobility through these varied border zones. In particular, they examine what spiritual imagery employed in cultural production outside of institutional religion can offer in social contexts dominated by military border logic. In the works examined in this dissertation, artistic practice challenges institutional violence and the normative constructions of border subjectivity. My work centers local aesthetic production as action that can transform the lived interactions and movements in the border spaces at and beyond the U.S.-Mexico border wall.

**Militarized Border Infrastructure**

The border is an imaginary line, the result of the U.S.’s take-over of Mexican territory through the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo.\(^1\) While the limit remains abstract, the U.S. has deployed an arsenal of workers to make it a clearly delineated edge, to give it material existence as a spatial obstacle. After the Mexican American War, surveyors and cartographers were tasked with determining the geographical location of the border. Later, stonemasons marked the territory symbolically with marker stones and wire fences. U.S. economic recession in the late 1970s resulted in political discourse that blamed migrants for decreased job availability, which brought discussions of marking the boundary with a physical wall into legislative debates (Vilanova 80). The Reagan administration in the 1980s approached undocumented immigration as a topic of concern to U.S. national security, in reaction to perceptions of threat from Central America's political instability. After the 1994 implementation of NAFTA, U.S. food products entered the Mexican market, undercutting Mexican prices and forcing many Mexican farmers into the U.S. to seek work. After the 9/11 attacks in the U.S., legislation officially connected this increased immigration with criminality, framing it as a national security issue and constructing every border crosser as a potential terrorist. The U.S. House of Representatives passed HR 4437,
the Border Protection, Anti-Terrorism, and Illegal Immigration Control Act, in 2005, officially linking terrorism and immigration together as parallel threats within national policy. The physical wall at the border was constructed as a response to this post-NAFTA wave of forced migration, and was reinforced and extended enormously since post-9/11 political discourse framed immigration as a danger to the nation. Edward Casey notes “concrete things like walls and border markers are required to put the border on the ground and in everyone’s sight: walls and markers serve as material concretions, modes of surety, for what would otherwise remain an abstract entity. A wall is an especially effective way of embodying the very idea of border” (17). As policymakers increasingly depicted migration as a threat, legislators passed more and more bills to intensify the material infrastructure to make the boundary between nations concrete and visible.

The machinery deployed in the name of national security resembles a military operation. The “security paraphernalia,” towers, cameras, infrared and night vision technologies, vehicles, helicopters, and reinforced walls look to Margaret Regan “like a military outpost in the Sahara” (142). These efforts constrict the movement of people and animals, and the flow of water, driving migrants into increasingly more dangerous areas of the desert. Luis Alberto Urrea describes the systematic security measures employed in rural areas, after fortified urban crossings drove migrants into harsher areas of the desert: “Bigger fences, floodlights, a Border Patrol truck every half-mile, sensors, infrared spy videos, night vision cameras, Immigration and Naturalization Service checkpoints on all major freeways in and out of town, more agents” (19). This extensive system means that those who do successfully cross must be vigilant at all times to avoid detention and deportation. These methods push migrants towards invisibility and silence, and distances them from access to resources or rights.
These measures have failed to control the space, and have not deterred or lowered undocumented immigration. Despite the failure of this border strategy to reduce illegal immigration, it continues to expand, due to the xenophobic attitudes that dictate these militarized measures along the border. Treating the border as war zone increases territoriality, and the public impression of being under siege or invaded, perpetuating a binary citizen versus criminal mentality. Sang Hea Kil and Cecilia Menjívar argue that current border policy and structures produce anxiety about and violence towards border crossers even more than they respond to those phenomena. They maintain that “the militarization of the border shapes racist and violent responses to undocumented border crossing—public policy, rhetoric, criminalization, and militarization have turned the border into a violent place” (Kil and Menjívar 164). The language and imagery of invasion creates a sense of crisis and the desire to protect territory. The use of the vocabulary of war has brutalized the public perception of immigrants.

The antagonistic, hyper-regulatory zone of police and hegemonic surveillance and restriction at the U.S.-Mexico border divides those perceived as public citizens and those read as illegal bodies, residing outside the law and unqualified for citizenship. The escalation of the criminalization process in response to anxieties about undocumented immigration has led to the implementation of this militarized model in an effort to achieve a sealed national border. U.S. legislation mobilizes military personnel, equipment, and tactics in order to define clear distinctions between citizens and criminals, and to turn the geography of the border into a contained and organized environment, with impenetrable entrances and exits and highly regulated temporal and spatial delineations marked through strict schedules and rules about who can occupy particular spaces. The border, however, spans 1,969 miles, through cities, deserts,
ocean, and multiple political zones. The implementation of prison-like architecture in the vast territory of the border is a perpetually incomplete project.

The impossibility of comprehensive surveillance or of ever containing or controlling the border space fuels the drive that demands more and more border infrastructure expansion: more guards, technology, and resources directed towards the failed containment task, which in turn increase anxiety about the bodies that do not belong. Under Operation Gatekeeper in San Diego in 1994 the United States Congress dramatically increased funds to the United States Border Patrol. By 1997, the budget of the Immigration and Naturalization Service had doubled to 800 million dollars, the number of Border Patrol agents had nearly doubled, the amount of fencing or other barriers more than doubled, and the number of underground sensors nearly tripled. Operations in El Paso and along the Rio Grande Valley installed similar infrastructure to police the border, multiplying border patrol staff, walls, and stadium lighting.

These policing tactics position death as a constant threat for border crossers. Alicia Schmidt Camacho describes the desert frontier, where migrant fatalities have risen over 500 percent over the past decade due to invasive border policing, as a “space of death” (835).² Urrea’s 2004 The Devil’s Highway, which tells the true story of fourteen men who died from thirst and heat exposure in the Arizona desert in 2001, presents the territory between I-19, I-8, the Colorado River, and the international border as a sort of hell, a space of tormented, perpetual death: “In many ancient religious texts, fallen angels were bound in chains and buried beneath a desert known only as Desolation. This could be the place” (Urrea 4). The immigration activist group No More Deaths calculates that more than 5,000 migrant corpses have been found in the borderland deserts since Operation Gatekeeper began in 1994 (Regan 162).³ Border patrol policies that drive migrants deeper into the most severe desert territory produce this space of
death along the border. It is also a space of impunity, where policy makers, vigilantes, coyotes, and border patrol agents face no accountability for their complicit role in the deaths.

While rates of Mexican immigration into the U.S. have declined substantially in recent years, xenophobic rhetoric and deportations have intensified, making the journey increasingly hostile for those who do cross the border. In 2014, 5.6 million unauthorized immigrants from Mexico lived in the U.S., making up about half of undocumented migrants in the country. This number is down by about one million people since the 2007 immigration peak (González-Barrera n. pag.). Despite this decline, deportations of Mexican immigrants have nearly doubled since 2005, due to a shift in border enforcement policy from “prevention through deterrence” through the concentration of personnel, infrastructure, and surveillance technology, to an approach that subjects apprehended migrants “high consequence outcomes” (Seghetti ii). These more severe penalties demonstrate the continued and shifting character of the “check-pointization” of the border.

Urrea and Regan’s investigative reporting about the loss of human lives along the border during the peak years of migration rates work to humanize migrants’ stories of suffering, in order to reinstate a recognition of loss and the possibility of mourning. Current political rhetoric and the language of illegality desensitizes audiences to the experiences of the people who cross the national border without documentation, reducing their lives to statistics. Within the oppositional framework of separating citizens from criminals, lawmakers and vigilantes debate whether migrants are fully human. A Minuteman volunteer camping outside Douglas, Arizona in 2005, for example, argues that “It should be legal to kill illegals . . . Just shoot ‘em on sight. That’s my immigration policy . . . I just have more respect for the lives of stray cats and dogs than I do illegal aliens” (Holthouse n. pag.) Judith Butler, in her 2004 Precarious Life: The Powers of
Mourning and Violence, calls this process of dehumanization “derealization,” and argues that the primary violence inflicted on the derealized is that of not being counted among the lives that matter, or of being excluded from “culturally viable notions of the human” (33). Any further violence perpetrated against people already made invisible is then considered unmarkable and ungrievable. Within border spaces in particular, highly unequal social relations and legal statuses produce lives whose loss is not publically recognized nor whose mourning officially sanctioned.

The invasion of militarized structures at the U.S.-Mexico border and in the border zones beyond it inhibit the rituals of mourning by systematically displacing and derealizing human experiences.

Critics from the U.S. often refer to the border in abstract metaphorical terms, while northern Mexican authors and critics tend to focus on its physical structures. The differential ability to cross causes the border to lose its materiality in the eyes of U.S. citizens who cross freely, while the policing and restrictions of mobility for Mexicans constantly reinforce the physical reality of the boundary. Chicana theorist Gloria Anzaldúa, for example, theorizes the third space between nations as the home of border subjects’ “mestiza consciousness,” an identity based on the experience of being perpetually in between communities. Her framework elevates this third space, valuing hybridity as a privileged vantage point from which to understand the border. Following Anzaldúa, U.S. critics in the late 1990s such as Nestor García Canclini and Walter Mignolo celebrate the region as a liminal space, exploring new forms of hybridity that emerge in border subjects. They discuss the zone as a productive third country, or as a creative space of cultural crossing and blending. María Socorro Tabuenca-Córdoba critiques U.S. scholars for representing the border as metaphorical rather than also literal, for not including literature produced on the Mexican side in their discussion of the border, and for reducing border
residents to a handful of bicultural stereotypes. These shortcomings, and the focus on the metaphorical creativity of the border, result in the erasure of lived reality for many border subjects. Ellie Hernández notes the urgency of seriously considering the militarized forces along the border: “One must not be fooled by an apparent liberating quality of the border because, if anything, the U.S.-Mexico divide is one of the most regulated zones in the United States” (91). My dissertation approaches the material reality of the border and the metaphors used to understand it as intimately related and equally necessary for a comprehensive border theory. It accounts for the simultaneous cultural interaction and restriction at the border, the flow of ideas and materials, and the limitations on bodies, incorporating both the productive exchanges and the history of restriction that characterizes the zone. My work re-centers the regulatory mechanisms that take place at the U.S.-Mexico border as both physical and discursive operations that police national belonging. The costs of this regulation are apparent both in the national resources deployed in the attempt to seal the border, and in the declining social worth, or “derealization,” of ethnically marked human lives (Butler 33).

**Borders beyond the Border**

The production of zones that threaten and dehumanize life extend beyond the geographic border region. Mary Pat Brady claims that institutional infrastructure anywhere that privileges profit, policy, and efficiency over human interactions produces dead spaces, or territories where life does not thrive or move naturally. This “turn from lived, embodied space to the abstract space of capitalism” wipes out living systems of social connections in favor of structured, lifeless spatial relations (Brady 5). The abstract space of capitalism becomes material and intertwined with state practices in the zones that result in inhabitants’ literal and social or spiritual deaths.
This applies to the physical U.S.-Mexico border and the extensive, equally hazardous border zones of prisons, factories, and highways that also regulate citizenship and physical movement.

Migrants, displaced urban residents, inmates, and factory workers all experience different types of death, as a physical reality and as the destruction of social networks and loss of vitality. Schmidt Camacho argues that the “space of death is not confined to the border . . . but incorporates the limited spheres of agency afforded undocumented people in the United States” (835). This limited sphere of agency also includes citizens and other people who have legal documentation in the U.S., but who are treated with suspicion due to public perceptions about their ethnicity or class. Placing migrants outside of the realm of legality denies them the recognition of rights, justifying violence against them and casting all those who visually resemble them under scrutiny and suspicion. For example, Arizona’s 2010 SB 1070, legalized racial profiling, criminalizing anyone who looks or sounds “non-American” by requiring local police who stop a resident for any reason to inquire into the person’s immigration status if they have “reasonable suspicion” that they are in the U.S. illegally. In this way, the border machinery migrates and operates beyond the physical border.

I argue that border zones emerge not only through the border security infrastructure, but also through urban planning decisions, through the architecture and temporal structures of criminal justice system, and through the supervisory gestures in assembly plants. While each border exists in a distinct social context, these spaces function as transnational mirrors that reflect similar circumstances of immobilization and control. The border spaces of prisons, factories, and freeways are profit-driven industries that warehouse and displace bodies, police movement and reproduction, and reorganize communities and space. U.S. society views the wide
range of border subjects that populate these systems with suspicion, treats them as criminals, and subjects them to mechanisms of regulation.

The discourse that criminalizes those who do not fit neatly within the category of the nation, or the construct of the ideal citizen, extends into all of these spaces. Hernández notes that the categories of difference that elicit suspicion extend beyond perceived nationality: “a border subject’s apparent disassembled disposition (whether sexual, gendered, national, or aesthetic) leads to the emergence of a questionable body: such persons have few rights” (89). A “questionable body” is a subject not recognized within the legal or social discourse of citizenship, such as a migrant crossing the border illegally or an incarcerated Chicana woman. Hernández discusses citizenship as a culturally produced category constituted through a highly visual process of discernment that draws on historical and contemporary frameworks of racial and sexual categories (106). The impossibility of the total visibility and control of subjects who pass through fluid border spaces results in a methodology of control through the visual gaze that employs hyperregulatory inspections to monitor bodies for the “look of illegality” (Hernández 99). Border Patrol agents and citizens beyond the border visually scrutinize the appearance of individuals’ skin color, clothing, car style, and other imprecise aesthetic measures in their efforts to “read citizenship” in the body (98). Those not immediately recognized within racialized notions of national belonging become inscribed as “illicit,” “questionable bodies,” and provoke fear by threatening the stability of categories of belonging through their illegibility (88).

The cultural processes of visual discernment throughout the border zones examined in these chapters place those perceived as outside of citizenship in physically dangerous positions. The death of a migrant in the desert exists on a continuum with the social death enacted through the imprisonment of a Chicana citizen in Los Angeles. Both have questionable bodies and few
rights, as a result of their criminalization through the institutional border machinery. Both are subjects excluded from national belonging, and both are subject to the physical structures that regulate their movements: the border wall that forces the migrants’ trajectory into the desert, the freeway system that displaces and divides the urban resident’s community, and the prison walls that further isolate her. Prisons, factories, highways, and checkpoints all enact border subjects’ social and literal deaths, by enforcing policies and generating discourses that construct them as people with an illicit or “disassembled disposition,” marked individuals deemed unfit for national belonging (Hernández 89).

Death emerges as a dominant trope in the cultural production associated with these four parallel border zones. Novelist Helena María Viramontes, for example, imagines ancestors’ bones ground in with the cement that paves the freeways (218). Incarcerated poet Judy Lucero asks “Am I alive or am I dead?” and Élmer Mendoza refers to border factories as “la antesala de la muerte” (Lucero n. pag., Aboytia and Vigueras 13). Similarly, Yuri Herrera’s border crossing novel Señales que precederán al fin del mundo begins with the words “Estoy muerta,” framing the entire text as a possible post-death narration (11). Despite the restrictive mechanisms that enact their figurative and literal deaths, the residents of these border spaces articulate experiences of institutional violence, and continue to produce creative expression. Michael Taussig theorizes the idea of a “space of death” to refer to the threshold through which people pass to begin to create meaning, identity, and artistic expression in societies where terror and colonial abuses of power are widespread (467). The four border zones examined in these chapters are spaces of death, then, not only because of the violence seen through the border body count, the division of urban communities, over-incarceration, and managerial practices in factories, but also because of the critical attention and creative responses that border subjects produce in response. In these
chapters, I focus on the resourceful visual, literary, and bodily movements of those with limited spheres of agency who are discursively and physically policed because border agents and citizens classify them as “questionable bodies,” outside of their visual perception of citizenship (Hernández 88). Through their aesthetic production, these border women generate new forms of mobility within these restrictions.

**Mobility**

The border is a space of bodies, goods, and influences in motion, but it does not grant passage equally for all. Beverly Skeggs explains the differential access to movement and discourses of belonging: “Mobility and control over mobility both reflect and reinforce power. Mobility is a resource to which not everyone has an equal relationship” (49). The same mechanisms that facilitate mobility of some restrict that of others, such as freeways that assist suburban commuters while dislocating communities of color. The concept of restricted mobility refers to limitations on physical movement in space, as well as to the production of discourses that exclude certain people from the category of citizenship. This work prioritizes women’s experiences, noting that female border subjects’ movements, or their efforts to navigate public space, prison, or the work place, are regulated in particularly gendered ways. My definition of mobility refers not only to the relative accessibility of movement through the physical world, but also to the discourses that arrest border subjects’ representation and silence their cultural expression. The related categories of migration and mobility are not synonymous. Migration is movement that often subjects migrants to multiple physical obstacles as well as to criminalizing discourses. When migrants enter a new country, they are subjected to the terms and stereotypes that construct them as questionable bodies. The concept of mobility encompasses both their capacity to move through space and their navigation of these discourses.
The infrastructure that polices border subjects’ bodily movement includes prison walls, border walls, miles of stadium lighting, agents, drones, assembly plant protocols, and the highways that cut through and cut off communities as often as they connect them. My dissertation frames these spatial restrictions in relation to how they impact and are informed by normative representations of border residents’ subjectivity. Antonio Viego argues that in order to maintain control, racist discourse depends on the transparency and representability of racialized subjects, or the ability to reduce them to simplistic stereotypes (48). Control over a population’s representation corresponds with control over their experiences, as it impacts the way society treats them. The anxieties that prompt the need to conceptualize ethnic-racialized subjects, or “questionable bodies” in transparent, simplified, static terms lead to the industries that physically regulate these bodies’ movement in space. The desire for transparent ethnic-racialized subjects manifests physically in the structures that police spatial practices in an effort to keep border subjects’ bodies readable, and thus controllable, at all times. The material limitations on border subjects’ movement are direct results of racist discourses’ ability to circulate a rigid construction of their criminal otherness. These chapters affirm border subjects’ capacity for self-representation in the face of rigid external representation, by examining the work of women regulated within these border structures, such as the murals of incarcerated artists and the poems of former factory workers.

The immobility of speech is a result of the horror produced by witnessing violence, or of dwelling in a bordered space of death. In her collection of essays on the impact of violence in Mexico, Dolerse: textos desde un país herido, Cristina Rivera Garza maintains that the horror of violence produces linguistic paralysis, or the inability to speak. This is a key dimension of the restricted mobility that marginalized border residents experience. The fixed subject, the
ungrievable, derealized life is both spatially and linguistically immobilized. As Rivera Garza describes existence within the daily violence of northern Mexico, she equates the fear of speaking with kidnapping: “el secuestro cotidiano . . . el miedo de hablar” (106). In this way, she establishes a correspondence between the spatial and linguistic loss of agency, analogous modes of restricting mobility. The paralysis of the voice accompanies the policing of movement through space and a discursive criminalization. Taussig refers to a “space of death” as an environment in which subjects face “the problems of writing effectively against terror” (467). He discusses this space as a creatively productive threshold, but also one in which articulation is difficult. This is the case for the criminalized border subjects who face institutionalized obstacles to their mobility and expression. Their creative movements, both aesthetic and physical, disrupt the border machinery that criminalizes and obstructs.

I position this dissertation within the “the new mobilities paradigm,” an interdisciplinary area of study that examines the power relations at the heart of subjects’ motility (Scheller 2). The new approach to the study of mobilities that has emerged over the past decade critiques the assumption of a bourgeois male subjectivity at the center of traditional studies of movement, and engages questions of the differential mobility of gendered, classed, and racialized subjects. Scholars in the field are as interested in the restriction of mobility as in flows of movement, exploring the concepts of immobility, impasse, slowness and friction alongside notions of embodied movement, speed, and the ideologies attached to both movement and stasis. They study the circulation and blockages not only of people, but also of objects, ideas, images, and information, as well as the means of movement and communication such as infrastructures, vehicles and software systems. Theories of mobility bridge multiple disciplines, by bringing together concerns of sociology, geography, cultural and media studies, and humanities, from
inequality and hierarchies to spatial territories, discourses, and representations. Mimi Scheller situates mobilities researchers’ current understandings of the meanings of mobility and immobility within Foucauldian and postcolonial theory, in their interest in tracking the power of discourses, practices and infrastructures to create movement and stasis. Scheller explains that “Critical mobilities research interrogates who and what is demobilized and remobilized across many different scales, and in what situations mobility or immobility might be desired options, coerced, or paradoxically interconnected” (4). These interrogations are deeply grounded in materiality and spatiality, and recent research shows an interest in temporality, or the ways in which humans’ embodied movements take place through sensory experiences over time. Theories of mobility overlap with border studies in their focus on the regulation of mobility and their interest in areas of social exclusion, disconnection, and movements constituted as illegal.

Criminality

I employ the term criminality to point to the constructed, contingent nature of the category of crime, and define crime as violence that inflicts harm on another. The term criminalization refers to the processes through which an individual’s ethnically, aesthetically, or sexually marked “questionable body” becomes constructed as dangerous, or as inherently disposed to perpetrating crime, regardless of their actions (Hernández 89). Criminals, according to this definition, are those individuals, corporations, or institutions that perpetrate violence, cause harm, and as a result dehumanize others. Individuals have agency and certainly some of them do commit crimes. They are not simply passive subjects criminalized by external forces, but the legislation and rhetoric that preemptively represent them as criminals impact their identities and actions. Criminalized subjects simultaneously are acted upon in how they are represented to society and consciously act as individuals based on their own decisions. My study
of the institutional processes of criminalization does not erase the capacity of individuals to commit or combat crime.

The state inflicts criminal harm on border subjects while enjoying impunity from conviction. A great deal of the crime perpetrated in the border region, then, is not formally recognized as such, because it is socially sanctioned, within the bounds of the law, and perpetrated by governments and institutions. Rivera Garza examines the criminal nature of the contemporary Mexican state, which, operated by a logic of profit, washes its hands of responsibility to the wellbeing of its citizens. She calls this “un Estado sin entrañas” (52). In the 19th century, the Mexican state formed a “relación entrañable” by applying the language of medicine to the social body, utilizing its role as benefactor of citizens’ bodies as a nation building project (54). Rivera Garza makes an argument for the criminality of the state, as it has given up its protective role in the move to a neoliberal state governed by the drive for profit. The resulting inefficient justice system and brutal state indifference has opened doors to growing violence against the social body and citizens’ bodies. I place Rivera Garza’s condemnation of the Mexican state into dialogue with the impunity and violence of the U.S.’s apparatuses of spatial regulation.

My dissertation grafts an awareness of discourses of criminality onto Viego and Butler’s discussions of subjectivity. Anxieties about controlling border space and protecting the nation from outside threats activate the discourse of border subjects as scapegoats and the industries built around controlling them. Border systems function as machines that separate those constructed as citizens from criminalized populations. That is, a socially-constructed, changing notion of legality forms ethnic-racialized subjects while it “circulates scripts for what it means to be a proper, that is identifiable, ethnic-racialized subject worthy of protection” (Viego 104).
Criminalized populations, residing outside of the category of citizenship, exist outside of the nation’s rights and protection. The state does not protect these populations from violence, and society does not recognize the criminality or harm of acts perpetrated against the criminalized. Butler asks, “Who counts as a livable life and a grievable death?” (xv). According to dominant social discourse, citizens who fit within the bounds of permissible bodies, languages, and movements, merit recognition; dehumanized border subjects, often nameless and faceless, do not. My dissertation examines works that reposition border subjects in a space of grievability by highlighting their vulnerability and complexity, and by reconsidering the relationship between criminality and spirituality. In a challenge to processes of criminalization, the spiritual and artistic practices explored in these chapters assert their authors’ humanity, reaching toward collective action and an engagement with the sacred.

**Spirituality**

This work focuses on spirituality as a mobile discourse of transferrable authority that gestures towards the sacred, or that which cannot be fully visible. The spirituality examined in these chapters refers to the popular, individual, creative motions that border subjects enact in order to define new forms of mobility. Luis D. León defines religion as “a system of symbols that are constantly contested, negotiated, and redefined,” and Theresa Delgadillo discusses spirituality as a “critical mobility” (León viii; Delgadillo 1). Even seemingly static institutional dogma is subject to creative redefinition. León notes that when institutional religious promises fail to comfort or provide meaning for marginalized people, “then the meanings of religious symbols can be redirected, reinterpreted, or conjured anew” (5). Tomás Ybarra-Frausto suggests that the innovative reorganization and reworking of indigenous, Catholic, and African religious forms is particularly characteristic of spiritual practice among Latino artists in the U.S., who “re-
examine, reinterpret and redefine ancestral religious forms” (12). The reworking of spiritual symbols occurs within institutional religious traditions and parallel to, at the margins of, and in conflict with them.

In the works examined in this dissertation, the responses evoked by spiritual vocabularies function both in and outside of institutional religion, at times inspired by sincere dogmatic devotion, at others in radical opposition to institutional tradition. The negotiation between personal spiritual practice, traditional dogma, and syncretic spiritual blending functions a form of disidentification, as theorized by José Esteban Muñoz in Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics. Disidentification is a creative response to a criminalized, immobilized existence, “the survival strategy the minority subject practices in order to negotiate a phobic majoritarian public sphere that continually elides or punishes the existence of subjects who do not conform to the phantasm of normative citizenship” (4). It recycles stereotypes as powerful sites of self-creation, and works to transform cultural logic from within, a tactic that “works within and outside the dominant public sphere simultaneously” (5). Similarly, these works that engage religion at once work within and outside dominant religious institutions. The disidentificatory mode of identification neither assimilates nor opposes dominant ideology, but rather “works on and against” it (3). It is not the apolitical middle ground between assimilation and separatism, but rather “a remaking and rewriting of a dominant script” (23). Border subjects engage with spirituality through the use disidentification as a strategy of creative movement within their physical and discursive restrictions.

Spiritual concerns are not separate from lived reality, but rather a means of critical engagement with political and social oppression. Delgadillo’s exploration of spirituality addresses the moments in which “[v]iolent state power and exploitative economic systems are
confronted through the mobilization of religious identity and community” (187). Her book *Spiritual Mestizaje* argues that spirituality can provide a concrete resource for marginalized people, rather than an escape or distraction from oppression. Similarly, León sees spirituality as a possible “tool to invert justice and injustice and to rewrite the religious, cultural, and mythical maps in ways that privilege those outside the official cartography of history” (viii). Laura Pérez also asserts that spiritual practice has the capacity to produce material changes in the world, and specifies this impact as the focus of her study of Chicana artists: “it is the day-to-day practices of spiritual consciousness and its material effects, rather than identification with the dogma and ritual practices of religious organizations, that are brought to our attention as mattering individually, socially, and globally” (298). These critics of spirituality in the U.S.-Mexico borderlands agree that the process of redefining the relationships among sacred symbols and systems of belief constitutes real action that can impact situations of extreme power imbalance. The theorists exist alongside a rich feminist Chicana tradition of popular religion, spiritual activism, and artistic re-appropriations of religious symbols, such as Yolanda López and Ester Hernández’s visual interpretations of the Virgin of Guadalupe beginning in the 1970s. Theresa Delgadillo points to the possibility of oppressed populations reframing spirituality as a means of resistance: “Queering spirituality creates a vehicle for the mestiza body and self to combat and surpass oppressions” (4). The act of queering spirituality transfers ownership of religious authority, from institutional control to those excluded from citizenship or majoritarian belonging.

Most scholarship about what it means to appropriate spirituality, or to transfer religious authority, focuses on the reframing of visual iconography. In *Borderlands Saints*, Desirée Martín examines the process of spirit possession frequently invoked in Chicano and Mexican cultural production, through which devotees and artists achieve communion with their favored saints.
Revered reproductions of the saints’ images and icons, she argues, create and transmit sanctity, conferring divine contact and power. The visual stories told through saints’ images in both devotional practice and cultural production such as murals, monuments, altars, and novels, Martín maintains, shapes identities and transfers saints’ spiritual transcendence to individuals and communities (27). While she focuses on communion and exchange with the embodied figures of saints, I argue throughout this dissertation that a similar transference of spiritual and social authority, or spiritual repossession, can occur through contact with the objects, gestures, spaces and schedules that structure sacred practice.

Discourses of spirituality offer scripts and rituals for grief, routes for mourning that can mobilize and revitalize criminalized border subjects exposed to violence. Butler notes the important work of mourning: “it is not that mourning is the goal of politics, but that without the capacity to mourn, we lose that deeper sense of life we need in order to oppose violence” (xviii-xix). Mourning encourages an awareness of human relationality and interdependence and a resulting sense of community. Within a religious or spiritual framework, mourning can serve as an active response to the restriction of border subjects’ mobility. The state’s spatial practices of policing and constructing physical and discursive borders obstruct these spiritual practices. U.S. immigration history and the militarized, prison-like system of border control produce a certain regulatory form of citizenship. Those who violate these standards write their own discourses of belonging from the position of offending, marked bodies. These criminalized border subjects mobilize new scripts that challenge a homogenous conception and history of citizenship through the language and imagery of spirituality in their cultural production

Muralism
Each chapter establishes a dialogue between literary works and murals. Images, W. J. T. Mitchell argues, embody complex interactions of “apparatus, institutions, discourse, bodies” (16). For this reason, they are an ideal locus for studying the relationship of dominant institutions to the discourses and obstacles produced around racialized bodies. Mitchell traces the interactions between visual and verbal forms as indications of social systems of value and power. Following his understanding of text and image as deeply related and mutually informing each other, I examine murals alongside related literary works. Indeed, some of the murals in this study are made of text, such as Arminé Arjona’s pintas, graffitied poems painted throughout the public spaces of Ciudad Juárez. The visual and textual works produced on prison or the border wall articulate narratives of dominance and resistance in complementary ways.

The material, public nature of murals emphasizes the physicality of the infrastructure that impedes border women’s mobility, as many of the murals appear on the physical surfaces of the border architecture, from highway pylons to prison walls. The murals transform and comment directly on their cement canvasses, situating my chapters within the spatial confines of each border zone. Brady notes “the ongoing capacity of the visual to localize and instantiate power through the manipulation of space” (4). As large-scale visual manipulations of space, murals intervene in the power structures and social interactions of the territories they occupy. The process of producing a mural requires movement; by painting murals, artists enact the mobility that challenges their structural obstacles. The murals capture in public spaces the traces of the bodily movements that construct counter narratives to the institutional policing of border infrastructure. The public character of murals makes them equally accessible to wide, varied audiences, positioning them as forums for both asserting and challenging collective values. Martín notes the role of the visual in communicating spirituality directly to followers: “the image
is a more efficient and democratic means of translating and transmitting sanctity” (27). Murals in particular participate in a tradition of democratized iconicity and the public reframing of community ideals.

The muralists studied in these chapters engage with the history of Mexican and Chicano muralism in questions of national belonging. They participate in the trajectory of emerging and contesting public discourses that characterizes the modern mural movements. Mary Coffey traces the shift of Mexican muralism from a revolutionary art form to a mode of transmitting institutional national ideology: “a revolutionary art—or at least one that intended to be revolutionary—became an official art that helped to legitimize an authoritarian state” (1). When Mexico’s public education minister José Vasconcelos commissioned Mexican artists to paint murals on public structures in 1921, the art form was thought of as a revolutionary project that would assimilate mestizo identity into the nation and capture an authentic, inclusive national expression. The post-revolutionary government placed muralism in the service of their nationalist project. Los tres grandes—David Siqueiros, Diego Rivera, and José Clemente Orozco—funded by the state, brought their social realist, egalitarian aesthetics into the institutional space of government buildings. It was in the decades after World War II, Coffey argues, that muralism received consistent federal support, and became increasingly tied to national ideology: “in the 1950s muralism became a sacralized form of national art promoted at home and abroad by a state eager to stake a claim on modernity” (14). The artists of Mexico’s mural movement through the early 20th century worked to represent a diverse national population, and sought democratic community access to the murals by locating them in public spaces.
Muralists of the Chicano nationalist movement in the 1970s drew on Mexican muralism as a source of inspiration and historical continuity, and often went to Mexico to complete their artistic training, but they worked from a distinct subject position within the nation. The emerging iconography of Chicano nationalism developed principally through muralism, drawing on Mexican forms. Guisela Latorre notes that, “The dialectic relationship that Chicana/o muralism has had with Mexico points to the dynamic nature of the flow of cultural capital across the U.S.-Mexico border” (34). As a racialized, criminalized minority in the United States, Chicano artists faced very different conditions from the elite, federally funded muralists in Mexico. While Mexican murals embraced a diverse representation of subjects included within the nation, and depicted situations of injustice, the artists remained removed from these first-hand experiences. In contrast, the Chicano muralists often personally experienced the social and institutional discrimination that they denounced in their murals. The location of Chicano murals—in neighborhoods, on highways pylons, and in other non-institutional spaces—reflects the positions of the artists themselves, who were not written into the nation and governmental structures as the Mexican artists were. By using their marginalized landscape as their canvasses, and often painting directly onto the surfaces of the structures that policed their movements, Chicano muralists turned the medium around to critique exclusion from national belonging. While elite Mexican artists worked to depict an inclusive national collectivity, Chicano muralists’ methods of production enacted a nationalist collectivity by including a range of community members in the painting of the murals. While Chicano nationalists used muralism from a marginalized position in the U.S. to assert their claim to Aztlán, the spiritual and territorial Chicano homeland in the U.S. Southwest, they created new exclusions by willfully excluding women from mural production.⁴
Muralism is a visual genre with a long history of excluding and obstructing female artists. Latorre accounts the foundation of muralism in the U.S. and Mexico “as an exclusively male artistic endeavor,” and the belief that women were not physically or politically suited for the public display and exertion of mural production (25). A key moment that demonstrates the obstructions to women’s participation in the medium was when well-established artist María Izquierdo’s commission for a government building in Mexico City was cancelled in 1945, after Siqueiros and Rivera both complained that she was not suited for that branch of painting. Similarly, Judy Baca’s work on the Estrada Courts murals in East Los Angeles, which focused on women’s experiences of crisis, were cancelled after she had already begun. Despite these restrictions, persistent Chicana muralists including Judy Baca, Yreina Cervantes, and the Mujeres Muralistas collective have realized ambitious projects such as the Great Wall of Los Angeles, and made an enormous impact on the medium, challenging the idea of murals as men’s work and the internal sexism in Chicano nationalism.

The murals included in this dissertation recuperate the revolutionary impulse at the core of the Mexican mural renaissance and challenge the histories of exclusion within the medium. Through muralism, which was used as a tool of Mexican and Chicano nationalism, artists engage with questions of national and collective belonging. The act of producing murals as criminalized subjects not recognized or protected within the state is a gesture of disidentification, one that asserts belonging within a national form, and rejects it, appropriating and reinventing the genre. Female artists in particular situate themselves oppositionally within the tradition of muralism; as they visually transform the public spaces that limit their movement, they are also creating within a medium that has traditionally not made space for them. Murals, then, are a fruitful area of inquiry for a study focused on the restrictions to women’s mobility and the aesthetic projects that
resist those limitations. The works I analyze democratize muralism beyond Vasconcelos’ original inclusive ideal, through collective community collaborations that, for example, equip migrants to paint the border wall or incarcerated women to paint their confines.

**Chapter Outlines**

Each chapter in this dissertation situates these murals alongside literary works within a key site of “check-pointization,” a distinct border territory that restricts women’s mobility (Apter 83). My analysis travels between locations and works from both sides of the national border, from the urban neighborhoods of East Los Angeles to the factories of Ciudad Juárez. In each space, female border subjects employ artistic expression and spiritual practice to create new modes of movement and to envision more mobile futures.

In Chapter 1, “Freeways: Cementation and Spiritual Mobility on Route Tenochtitlán-LA,” I examine the ways in which the construction of the extensive freeway system in California in the 1950s and 60s altered the urban geography and displaced Chicano communities, producing new social and spatial borders. I develop the term cementation to describe the parallel physical hardening of the bordered urban landscape though cement infrastructure and the rigidity of institutional portrayals of border subjects. My analysis focuses on Helena María Viramontes’ 2007 novel *Their Dogs Came with Them* and the public murals in San Diego’s Chicano Park, which demonstrate how cementation operates and employ spiritual imagery in secular contexts to resist the limitations imposed on residents’ and characters’ mobility. These works facilitate mobile, fluid border subjectivities that challenge the logic governing freeway infrastructure, state disciplinary organizations, and the field’s current understanding of border subjects, which relies on transparent, adaptable identities.
Chapter 2, “Prisons: Horizon Production and Queer Temporalities in Prison Arts,” focuses on artistic production in women’s prisons in Mexico and the United States. It examines how time operates in prison to restrict inmates’ movement and to exclude them from the temporal practices of citizenship, or what I call “citizen-time.” In their works created while in prison, Chicana poets Judy Lucero and Lorrie Martinez and the collective of incarcerated muralists at Santa Martha Acatitla Prison in Mexico City produce spatial and temporal horizons to restructure their experience of space and time. They repurpose sacred temporalities to enter queer time, an anticipatory temporality that operates outside of majoritarian belonging.

In Chapter 3, “Factories: Vital Gestures in the Maquiladora Canon” I study the impact of gestures on subjectivities in what I call the “maquiladora canon,” the body of cultural production that responds to the border factory industry in Ciudad Juárez. The chapter examines the regulation of movement in assembly plants through the work of sociologists Melissa Wright and Leslie Salzinger, and the resulting “logic of disposability” that justifies high turnover rates of female factory workers and informs the state’s lack of response to the epidemic of feminicide (Wright 186). I create the terms mechanical gesture and vital gesture to distinguish between movements that work to constitute women workers as disposable and homogenous and those that affirm their lives by distinguishing their individuality, respectively. I identify vital gestures throughout the maquiladora canon, focusing on the poems and stories in the collection *Manufractura de sueños: Literatura sobre la maquila en Ciudad Juárez*, and on Juárez writer Arminé Arjona’s poetry and her urban mural-poems, or pintas.

Chapter 4, “Walls: Walking Women Transform the U.S.-Mexico Border” returns to the physical space of the U.S.-Mexico border. It centers on the figures of walking women in Luis Humberto Crosthwaite’s *Marcela y el Rey al fin juntos*, Yuri Herrera’s *Señales que precederán*...
al fin del mundo, and murals painted directly onto the border wall. Through the trope of walking, the works assert the permeability of the wall, make visible the physical suffering that migrants endure as a result of the militarized Border Patrol infrastructure, and engage with the realms of fantasy and spirituality in order to envision alternative possible border realities. I argue that these female walkers’ enactment of the notion of trace represents contemporary border reality in a way that surpasses theories of hybridity.
Chapter 1

Freeways: Cementation and Spiritual Mobility on Route Tenochtitlán-LA

When six high-speed lanes cut through the neighborhood, only one side of the street survived. The construction project bulldozed lemon trees and bedrooms, transforming the setting from a living network to a landscape of cement overpasses. The freeways built in Los Angeles in the late 1950s linked Anglo suburban communities with downtown businesses, displacing thousands of minority urban residents. Helena María Viramontes’ 2007 novel *Their Dogs Came with Them* describes the devastation: “Chavela’s side of the neighborhood, the dead side of the street, would disappear forever” (12). The cement and asphalt disrupt and restrict residents’ movement through the neighborhood. Disoriented under the imposing interstate, two women exhaust themselves “in a maze of unfamiliar streets. Whole residential blocks had been gutted since their departure, and they soon discovered that Kern Street abruptly dead-ended, forcing them to retrace their trail” (32). The freeways rerouted the city’s spatial relationships and rewrote residents’ social interactions, placing local communities of color into new marginal spaces. The freeway structure created a new border zone, which facilitates commuters’ mobility while displacing and limiting minority residents’ movements and connections.

In this chapter, I introduce and develop the concept of cementation, which links the physical hardening of the border landscape through cement infrastructure with the rigidity of institutional portrayals of border subjects. This concept responds to current border theory by bridging the symbolic with the physical, locating representations of border subjects in space and identifying the material impacts of the historical U.S.-Mexico relationship and the increased urbanization of the past fifty years. Viramontes’ *Their Dogs Came with Them* and the public
murals in San Diego’s Chicano Park demonstrate how cementation operates and show how spirituality serves as a form of mobility that responds to the immobilization of bodies and identities. More specifically, my reading focuses on the relation of gender to cementation, recognizing that moving through border space is a gendered experience. Viramontes’ novel and California’s murals use discourses of spirituality to challenge the limitations imposed on residents’ and characters’ mobility. The appropriation of spiritual imagery in the novel and murals facilitate mobile, fluid border subjectivities that challenge the logic governing freeway infrastructure, state disciplinary organizations, and the field’s current understanding of border subjects, which relies on transparent, adaptable identities.

Viramontes’ 2007 novel traces the movements of a series of characters in East Los Angeles from 1960 to 1970 as they navigate through heavily policed neighborhoods and around the cement freeway systems that cut through their community. Readers come to know the protagonists through their circuitous, overlapping routes through the streets. Pedestrians exchange glances as they cross First and Hastings, for example, as the narrative maps the characters’ paths and interactions. The protagonists include Ermila, a teenager raised by her grandparents, who travels with her pack of high-school friends and joyrides in her boyfriend’s car; Turtle, a homeless, AWOL member of the McBride Boys gang who runs between hidden retreats within the city streets; Tranquilina, a street missionary who walks East LA in search of food for her family’s ministry; Ben, a university student who struggles with mental illness; and his sister Ana, who dresses in formal business attire for her job at an insurance agency, and searches the streets for Ben after he goes missing. While novelists such as Thomas Pynchon or Jack Kerouac celebrate California’s freeways as symbols of American modernity and liberated exploration, and feature the lives of those who speed past on the interstate, Viramontes
demonstrates the uneven nature of that modernity, making visible the footsteps of those ignored and dislocated by the construction. Readers enter into the characters’ experience of displacement as the novel jumps unpredictably between protagonists, moments, and places. It alternates between 1960, when most of the characters are children and freeway construction begins, and 1970, when the protagonists move through early adulthood and the Quarantine Authority (QA) officers impose curfews and checkpoints on the neighborhood residents. Viramontes relies on readers to piece together the connections between characters, as memories and scene changes interrupt the narrative without warning. The nonlinear temporal and spatial structure of the novel reflects the lived experience of an invasion, as Viramontes explains in an interview: “How does one not only record but recreate trauma and the people who are traumatized by the disintegration of their collectivity? . . . [I]t had to be disjointed, since I’m trying to capture how the displacement and fragmentation caused by the freeways affected the community” (Rodríguez 255). By jumping between characters, eras, and pathways, Viramontes denies readers the experience of feeling at home in her words, recreating the experience of displacement. Both in content and form, she portrays Los Angeles as a battleground, and represents the freeway construction as a contemporary gesture of colonization.

*Their Dogs Came with Them* connects the freeway structures’ takeover of communal space with the armed invasion of the Spanish during conquest. Viramontes establishes the freeway construction as a modern conquest by describing the bulldozers and helicopters as trained attack dogs and armored conquerors. The novel opens with an excerpt from Miguel Leon-Portilla’s *The Broken Spears: The Aztec Account of the Conquest of Mexico*, a collection of indigenous descriptions of defeat in battle. Viramontes employs the vocabulary from the accounts of the 1521 conquest to depict the construction of the freeway system in Los Angeles.
Like bulldozers, the conquerors were made of “glistening iron,” they made dust rise from the earth, and “their weapons clashed and rattled” (Portilla, qtd. in Viramontes 1). The attack dogs that came with the conquerors “lifted their muzzles to the wind. They raced before with saliva dripping from their jaws” (Portilla, qtd. in Viramontes 1). Similarly, the animalized bulldozers move in to attack from far away, “their muzzles like sharpened metal teeth making way for the freeway” (Viramontes 6). By deploying the language of conquest in the description of the freeway construction, Viramontes asserts that the gesture of invasion spans the centuries and spaces between Tenochtitlán and Los Angeles. The conquerors and city planners employ a fixed, reductive representation of their victims in order to justify their invasion.

**Cementation**

The term cementation links the spatial effects of destructive infrastructure with the official representations of the residents of those spaces. Through my discussion of cementation, I explore the relationship between the damaging fixity of oversimplified minority identities and the immobilization of living relationships and systems as a result of invasion. The hardening of space, through the influx of cement to the landscape, parallels an increasingly rigid construction of otherness, as the infrastructure that restricts the flow of movement disproportionately impacts minority populations. The concrete machinery of contemporary conquests not only determines individuals’ physical mobility, but also shapes the range of movement of their subjectivities.

The dominant framework for talking about minority identities, which privileges the unity and readability of an individual, is inadvertently at the service of racist discourses that depend on fixed, fully knowable subjects, as Antonio Viego argues in his 2007 *Dead Subjects: Toward a Politics of Loss in Latino Studies*. He critiques scholars’ tendency to speak about marginalized identities with a simplistic and optimistic understanding of the individual, which focuses on
adjustment, adaptation, and autonomy with the assumption that human subjectivity can and should be made unified and readable. This dominant conceptualization of identity can be dangerous and damaging because representations of minorities as fully integrated and legible do not challenge racist discourses but rather enable them to operate effectively in controlling the people they represent. Viego calls this rigid construction of otherness that immobilizes identity “the fossilization of Chicano subjectivity” (140). What is missing from his study, which is grounded in the field of psychoanalysis, is an understanding of fossilization as not only a symbolic process, but also a physical, lived experience situated geographically.

My concept of cementation responds to this blind spot by locating fixed representations of identity spatially. The fossilization of minority identities takes place in the most economically depressed neighborhoods, in racially segregated and highly policed areas, and in places where asphalt and concrete surfaces outnumber green spaces. I address the rigid construction of identity as an issue of mobility, as the physical cement structures and institutional practices in these areas restrict residents’ ability to move through space and to speak freely.

In *Mexican Modernity*, Rubén Gallo celebrates cement architecture as an artifact of the functional internationalism of modernity in the 1920s and 1930s. By the 1970s, however, the material was no longer seen as an aesthetic innovation, but rather as a practical substance for sealing and fortifying structures. In her 2010 nonfiction book *The Death of Josseline: Immigration Stories from the Arizona Borderlands*, Margaret Regan notes the introduction of urban construction materials into the rural landscape: “During the first clampdown of the 1990s, the feds patched together a three-mile metal fence from military surplus . . . Now, in 2008, the rusty walls had been fortified with concrete” (108). The wall and the “metal vehicle barriers, filled with concrete,” obstruct the environment’s fluid movements, and leverage enormous costs
As cement works to control the landscape and the flow of people, cementation works to control residents’ representation in social and political discourse. While cementation is a function of all border spaces, I focus here on California’s massive freeway construction project, which displaced and isolated low-income Boyle Heights, Lincoln Heights, and City Terrace residents to facilitate the mobility of wealthy suburbanites.

Viramontes’ novel takes place at a major interchange of four freeway systems known as “the stack.” Mary Pat Brady explains the concrete invasion of the racially marked site: “even though the freeways plowed through and disappeared thriving Black and Chicana/o neighborhoods, the freeway authorities celebrated their projects’ beautifying attributes by claiming to slice through ‘thoroughly blighted’ areas identified by housing authorities as ‘slums’” (Metaphors” 174). Urban planners and federal agencies such as the Home Owners Loan Corporation used the reductive language of blight to describe neighborhoods with social and racial heterogeneity. Official representations of minority residents facilitated an attack on their space. Eric Ávila examines the policies that made this possible: “The defeat of public housing in the early ‘50s allowed downtown developers to pursue slum clearance and urban renewal without housing provisions for the displaced; thus highways could aid the city’s effort to destroy ‘blighted’ communities” (207-8). City planners deployed a rigid construction of otherness, simplifying and cementing the residents’ identities in order to cement and pave through their space.

**Spirituality as Mobility**

The deployment of illegibility responds to this reductive representation of minorities and the restrictive structures containing their movement. Viego positions unknowability as a key characteristic of anti-discriminatory discourse and action. Given that “racism depends on a
certain representational capture of the ethnic-racialized subject—rendered as transparent to the signifier, potentially whole and unified—in order to manage this subject more masterfully in discourse, then the insistence on the incalculable and indeterminate should be very welcome in our antiracist analysis” (Viego 48). That which cannot be easily deciphered, read, or represented cannot be easily controlled. While Viego turns to Lacanian theory for the fundamentally indecipherable dimensions of humanity, Viramontes’ characters engage with spiritual discourse, which, when appropriated outside of institutional religion, can serve a similar purpose in challenging the ability of those in power to represent and control border subjects.

Spiritual traditions place faith in that which cannot be fully seen. Popular religion’s fluidity, mobility, and lack of full representational capture challenge cementation’s rigidity. As discussed in the introduction, this dissertation examines spirituality as a system of constantly moving, renegotiated symbols that engage with social and political reality, and emphasizes works that appropriate spiritual discourses through strategies of disidentification. The spiritual, for Gloria Anzaldúa “seems an assemblage, a montage, a beaded work with several leitmotifs and with a central core, now appearing, now disappearing in a crazy dance” (66). Made up of parts, pieced together, and in constant motion, the “crazy dance” of spirituality challenges the fixity of cementation by demanding constant deciphering and reworking. In order to immobilize minority individuals, discourses of cementation depend on the idea of fully knowable identities, arrested spatially and conceptually. Spirituality and religion, in contrast, welcome ambiguity, relying on an acceptance of what cannot be fully known.

Processes of cementation invade autonomous places and immobilize bodies. “Colonized peoples in the Americas, however, never entirely surrendered control of the body, memory, and place; their control remained partially in the realm of the spiritual” through the deployment of
“the most powerful weapons in their arsenal: signs, myths, rituals, narratives, and symbols” (León 20; 5). Spirituality’s mobile, pieced-together, essentially ambiguous, continually contested systems of belief offer a materially engaged challenge to the violence of cementation, which arrests border subjects representationally and in space.

**Cemented Pedestrians**

Cementation creates border zones by layering the mobile over the immobile with divisive infrastructure. The freeways, rather than facilitating mobility for the pedestrians and bus riders who do not own cars, bisect and disperse communities. Viramontes juxtaposes descriptions of the vehicles speeding past Ermila’s window, which seem to gather speed as she describes them, with accounts of the character’s exhaustion from navigating a city with limited options: “Divergence and convergence, six freeways in Ermila’s front yard, right across from her bedroom window, though she rarely had use for the delineated corridors. Velocity and trucks, vans, motorbikes, speed blasts, trailers and more cars, right there. But Ermila couldn’t, even for a minute, imagine where to go but straight to bed” (313). She becomes increasingly more fatigued from the obstacles to her mobility throughout the novel, as she struggles to move between locations on time, asking people for rides, counting coins for bus fare, and sprinting in panic across city blocks. Her identity as a brown-skinned female without access to transit shapes her experience of space and contrasts with the mobile passengers in cars racing past her home.

Viramontes’ representation of the mass of people migrating across the city for work every day exacerbates this sense of fatigue from navigating the city without a car. The inaccessible pathway of the freeway system confronts the carless residents daily: “Four freeways crossing and interchanging, looping and stacking in the Eastside, but if you didn’t own a car, you were fucked. Many were” (176). The women of East Los Angeles wake before sunrise to
commute “one- or two- or two-and-a-half-hour bus rides that took them away from their families and familiarities” (177). They travel to the Westside to work as nannies or housekeepers, or downtown to work in the garment district or as hotel maids, dispersing the neighborhood’s vital human resources across the city. The freeways shorten the route in from the suburbs by car, but add hours to the bus routes. In this way, the design of the infrastructure places differing value on the time of inner and outer city residents. The regular bus exodus is a matter of survival, comprised of passengers who have very little choice in their occupations and modes of transit. They are in movement, but limited to the few routes available to them. Some are legal U.S. residents, and others are not, but what unites them, determines their cemented, simplistic official representation, and thus limits their options, is their class, ethnicity, and location within a “blighted” territory. Their extreme effort to cross the city’s borders mirrors the struggle and exertion of migrants crossing from Mexico into the U.S., who are similarly marked and restricted by their class and ethnicity, and incorporated into a national discourse of blight, as demonstrated, for example, in Rosario Sanmiguel’s short story collection Bajo el puente and Margaret Regan’s nonfiction The Death of Josseline: Immigration Stories from the Arizona Borderlands.

In Viramontes’ novel, cars transfer status, authority, and mobility to the cemented male residents, stranded in a city that privileges vehicular movement. Ermila and her friends admire while “Buicks paraded by, showy hydraulics bumping and dumping,” but the women remain pedestrians (51). The narrative describes the cars in more detail than the men who drive them, as signifiers of the masculinity of a population restricted by the city structure. Readers do not know what Alfonso looks like, but he owns “a fine pair of wheels, a hydraulic powder-blue Impala” (65). The men craft their vehicles out of discarded parts. They display more tenderness for the metal scraps than for the people in their lives, doting on “[j]unkyard parts welded into beloved
showboats, dismembered then lovingly remembered part by screw by bolt by piston, into another wholeness” (51). This resourcefulness evokes the practice of spirituality as a mobile, pieced together system of reworked beliefs and Tomás Ybarra-Frausto concept of rasquachismo, the Chicano verbal-visual vernacular characterized by the visceral, exuberant posture of underclass adaptability and resilience (155-58). The young men place their faith in fragments that, when welded into “another wholeness,” enable a form of agency or mobility—the ability to drive on the freeways rather than remain below them—grounded in partialness. This car worship seeks to compensate for a larger lack of mobility or options. Alfonso uses his car to doubly prove his masculinity, installing a hydraulic system despite his poverty and “bump[ing] and grunt[ing] inside” Ermila while in his car, despite his silenced preference for men (65). Santos wears driving gloves when he commandeers his Pontiac Bonneville, slipping into them like a costume for the roles he assumes behind the wheel. While he plays “the pilot in charge of his aircraft, the one and only jefe of the dash and panel knobs which adjusted sound and speed and escape,” exhilarated by his sensation and “posture of staunch control,” a surveillance helicopter tracks his vehicle from above (267). While it does allow access to ride the freeways rather than be paved over and discarded by the invading infrastructure, the mobility and control afforded by the vehicles is performative and partial.

**Space of Death**

Cementation entails a loss of life, replacing vital connections and living networks with rigid lines and hard surfaces. In *Extinct Lands, Temporal Geographies*, Mary Pat Brady claims that institutional infrastructure privileges profit, policy, and efficiency over human interactions, producing dead spaces where life does not thrive or move naturally. This “turn from lived, embodied space to the abstract space of capitalism” wipes out vital systems of social connections
in favor of lifeless, regulated, and cemented spatial relations (Brady *Extinct* 5). The “Historical Mural” in Chicano Park, created by the artist group Toltecas en Aztlán in 1973, captures this turn from lived to lifeless space, as it depicts the invasion of deathly figures, visually representing urban space as a specter of death (*see image 1.1*). Like Viramontes’ novel, the mural connects Spanish conquest with the cement of California, layering ghostly conquistadors onto the freeway architecture. The attackers appear as skeletons, already dead, charging amidst destructive flames. The cross crowning their assault reminds viewers of the spiritual justification and fervor behind their violence. A San Diego Police Department officer skeleton rushes alongside the conquistadors, his iron helmet mirroring those of the other invaders. The mural’s juxtaposition of the skeletons’ colonial helmets with the police helmet links the lethal gesture of conquest across centuries and countries. The physical location of the mural, which is painted directly onto a freeway pylon, as I will explore further, situates the cement structure itself as analogous to the violence depicted and as complicit in the legacy of conquest.

Lorna Dee Cervantes’ poem “Freeway 280,” first published in 1977 in *The Latin American Literary Review*, portrays the space of death produced by the invading freeway. The warmth and movement of homes and growing plants cedes to the rigid, efficient, cemented city infrastructure:

Las casitas near the gray cannery,  
nestled amid wild abrazos of climbing roses  
and man-high red geraniums  
are gone now. The freeway conceals it  
all beneath a raised scar.  
(Cervantes 39)
The gray cement of the cannery factory and the freeway replaces the geraniums and roses’ saturated floral hues. Cervantes humanizes the plants that precede the freeway, and celebrates their unpredictability. Using human stature as a measuring stick for the geraniums suggests human communion and interaction. The freeway and the canning factory, industries structured around profit, prohibit this flowing, growing expression of life. The image of the freeway as a raised concrete scar captures the hardening and loss of living tissues.

In *Their Dogs Came with Them*, the character Grandmother Zumaya similarly laments the cementation or loss of connection to the vitality of her community: “the construction of the freeway was ridding her neighborhood of everything that was familiar to her. The memory of who lived where, who buried their children’s umbilical cords or grew lemons the size of apples, done away” (146). The freeways obliterate residents’ connections to each other, the earth, and the body. The cement infrastructure deposits barriers between the community’s living channels, and particularly attacks means of reproduction. Tree roots, bodily connections, and integrated relationships across generations harden like cement, as the street itself becomes a space of death. Lost under the freeway, Tranquilina and her mother exhaust themselves though routes that now dead-end:

> The streets Mama remembered had once connected to other arteries of the city, rolling up and down hills, and in and out of neighborhoods where neighbors of different nationalities intersected with one another. . . . But now the freeways amputated the streets into stumped dead ends, and the lives of the neighbors itched like phantom limbs in Mama’s memory. (32-33)

The description portrays the neighborhood itself like a lifeless body after a botched surgery. The cementation of the area removes the guts, or eviscerates, whole blocks, disconnects vital arteries,
and illogically severs extremities. The corporeal language used to depict the blockages to movement further the freeways’ association with death and the loss of the community’s living forces.

The freeway’s link with death also surfaces in the ghost stories whispered between siblings Luis and Turtle about the bodies unearthed and incorporated into the pavement. In Luis’ story, the bulldozers behave like undiscerning attack dogs: “the bulldozers biting chingón bites too close to cemeteries, chewing up coffins. . . . Fuck it, keep plowing and acting like it’s no big deal, sabes? I swear to God. Who cares? Like it’s nothing to throw in the skulls and bones and shit into the cement mixer, act like they never found the bones” (218). The idea of plowing through human remains depicts the indifference with which the freeway invades and displaces neighborhoods. Through the boys’ image of bones mixed into cement, the material of the freeway symbolically becomes an extensive, violated cemetery. Turtle finds the site repugnant, and resists looking at “the trenches being readied for a mass burial” (172). Like a mass grave, the freeway decimates without marking the lives of the dead or creating space for mourning, denying the individuality and humanity of its victims.

Viramontes’ representation of the freeway as a massive gravesite evokes the border region’s deserts filled with lost migrants’ bones and also “resembles a vanquished Aztec burial ground of unearthed corpses,” layering sites of cementation (Reséndiz Ramírez 217). The cemetery bones mixed into the freeway cement in the novel demonstrate the colonial domination underlying urban restructuring through a disregard for casualties and ancestors. In the novel, the gang of McBride Boys meets in the gutted out earth where the freeways will rise. In her description of the destruction site, Viramontes employs gendered language to present the violation of the land as a sexual assault. The night of her brutal initiation into the gang, Turtle
follows her brother Luis into the “gouged out canyon of dirt” (225). The verbs used to describe the freeway’s impact on the earth reflect the violence that the gang members inflict on each other and their community members: here, dirt is gouged out; later it’s flesh. Turtle experiences her own body as a battle ground, where female and male characteristics compete. Her experience of the demolition site as an abused body parallels the way she relates to herself: “Turtle smelled the belly of the earth . . . 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” (225). The language endows the earth with living body parts spread apart and plowed through. The corporeal description of the location captures the violence of the construction project, the pain that produces a contradictory experience of being both “dead and alive.” Through its unrelenting modernizing gesture, the freeway project forecloses the possibility of mourning the lost land or altered lives.

As a result of the freeway structures’ spatial impact on the neighborhood environment, residents move with suspicion and defensive, protective measures. Ermila observes from her bedroom on the surviving side of the street: “The freeway bumble across First Street and the sporadic spray of bullets . . . floodlights jetted through the drawn blinds, drone of engines in and out of the hours” (75). These sounds and images invading her space resemble a military zone or a prison more than a residential neighborhood. The narrative emphasizes the experience of waste and loss that come with the freeway’s reshaping of the space. The traffic lays waste to the air, reducing it to “devastating fumes” that also work to limit the mobility of the neighborhood residents (127).

(Enfor)Cement
The enforcement and surveillance machinery that strategically targets the minority residents of “blighted” communities functions as an extension of the cement infrastructure already restricting their movement. Ten years after the freeway construction, the “invading engines” have replaced bulldozers with helicopters deployed to contain an alleged rabies outbreak, further restricting the residents’ freedom of movement through roadblocks, a strict curfew, and policing on air and by foot (12). The fictional Quarantine Authority (QA) organization blends with existing regulatory structures, disturbingly easy to imagine as it embodies the presence of police systems already in place and parallels common military logic and practices at the U.S.-Mexico border. 10 Viramontes presents the QA policies as an assault parallel to that of the freeways, and links both to the colonial invasion. Like the freeways, the QA works to immobilize and contain the neighborhood. The strategy maps the potential disease and increased vigilance onto the same area impacted by the freeway construction, imposing roadblocks and curfews specifically from “First Street to Boyle to Whittier and back to Pacific Boulevard” (54). The English-only pamphlet distributed throughout the area informs residents of the coming military strategies: “aerial observation and shooting of undomesticated mammals. Unchained and/or unlicensed mammals will not be exempt” (54). The zone under surveillance becomes littered with canine corpses, as all mammals become suspect, presumed undomesticated until they prove otherwise. Even more than the dogs, the humans considered unlicensed or unfit for citizenship become targets, and must constantly prove their legitimacy.

Cementation, both through urban infrastructure and policing strategies, masculinizes communal space, making communities more hostile for marginalized women to move through. Ermila and her friends jokingly but astutely link the bureaucratic regulation of spatial belonging with the regulation of women’s bodies. The policing of citizenship and reproduction blend in the
excess of acronyms that appear in the authorities’ demands for residents’ transparency: “Yea, Mousie added. You know some culero will be like, ‘You got your ID or INS or SS card wit you?’ For sure, like, ‘Hey, let me see your IUD?’ Lollie joked, opening her knees wide and then saying, ‘Yea, wanna check it out?’” (54) The particular inspection that the women are subjected to indicates the gendered nature of passing through surveillance checkpoints. The tedious process of observation and examination sexualizes the teenagers, and confers a baseless assumption of criminality onto their thoroughly scrutinized bodies. The disproportionate representation and harsher sentencing of gender-deviant women in prisons in the U.S. and Mexico demonstrate that at checkpoints, sexuality and gender expression are on trial as much as citizenship. Ermila and her friends become increasingly uncomfortable while they wait in line to pass through the roadblocks: “In a suspicious tone, the QA examined the girlfriends from sneakers to earrings, studied their IDs, long pauses of distrust to unnerve them, to convince them of some guilt” (55). Like the majority of the residents, the girls begin to internalize the suspicion directed towards them, presenting gas bills and birth certificates and navigating foreign urban routes in an effort to get home. Their experience of scrutiny resembles the racialized and gendered nature of national border checkpoints. The teenagers’ bodies, marked by ethnicity, gender, and aesthetics as outside the majoritarian belonging that QA officers enforce, demonstrate the suspicion and force that extends beyond the national border. Check points exist to police subjects into legible, controllable categories, and to punish those who deviate from the expectation of transparency.

Like the freeways, the QA shifts the space from an embodied, living environment, to a concrete desert: “Friday night and Whittier Boulevard, the cruising, happening place, was virtually deserted, compliments of the QA” (288). While the freeways pave the zone with its industrial logic of velocity and efficiency, the QA policies herald a defensive, militaristic
approach to containing the area. In the absence of evidence of rabies or physical violence, the QA, like the border patrol and criminal justice systems, imposes military defensive strategies that do not correspond to an actual threat. The officers are “plump with the weight of batons and flashlights, choke chains, handcuffs and Mace spray” (288). The layer of arms pads the officers like the conquerors’ coats of mail, metallic extensions of their bodies that separates them from the residents and turns them into exaggerated, hyper-masculinized, machine-like representatives of the state.

Viramontes portrays the authorities with biting sarcasm: “these stubborn QA culeros were unyielding in upholding safety. Fifteen, count them, fifteen officers worked the checkpoint, twelve of them leaning on the orange and green trucks sipping hot coffee, chatting and chilling” (288). The excessive, irrational patrol has more to do with maintaining a power imbalance than enforcing safety, just as the deployment of drones, infrared technology, and border patrol officers prioritizes internal political interest over human life. The officers take no actions to protect the Mexican and Chicano lives in the neighborhood beneath the freeway. For example, when Ana and Tranquilina search in the night for Ana’s unstable brother Ben, they reply with total confusion when someone suggests they ask the cops for help (320). For Turtle, the QA and police do not provide protection, but rather are forces that she must protect herself from. She coordinates her movements through the streets, avoiding authorities and other gangs in an effort to survive: “Curfew had landed her in the alley and she slept with her knees bunched to her chest, the screwdriver at arm’s length for protection. Patrol sirens and gunshot reports of the helicopters shot through her thin veil of sleep” (17). She experiences her own neighborhood like a refugee in a war zone, demonstrating the absurdity and ineffectiveness of the police state.

Ermila, waiting in the endless QA line to get home in the middle of the night, expresses how the
exhausting process of examination orients her actions around survival rather than resistance: “The scrutiny added to her weariness. This was the end of the line. Hold back. Self-preservation kept pulsing in Ermila’s head. Shad-up, she instructed herself, don’t say another word” (290).

The institutionalized policing systems control the population by activating a sense of survival, which produces self-regulation and self-silencing. These internalized process of control impact the ways in which the neighbors relate to one another, even beyond the spaces of institutional surveillance. Vigilance and suspicion becomes a way of life, and the resulting silencing is a form of immobility.

While cementation begins with reductive external representations of identity, residents adopt and extend this hardening to their communities. The altered space shapes the human interactions within it, even those that do not appear directly related to state institutions. An attitude oriented toward self-preservation and survival devastates neighbors’ relationality, or their ability to speak up or to be vulnerable with each other. Immobilization, then, does not only refer to restricted options for moving through space, but also to the limited ability to define and express oneself. Over and over, the characters’ voices face cementation, or the limited ability to move or speak due to their fear of the regulatory system and of each other. Despite her heroic community work, there are moments when “Tranquilina couldn’t bring herself to say a word” (211). The narrative demonstrates the way in which institutional and interpersonal fears feed into each other to restrict mobility.

While the state patrols to contain and maintain transparent, controllable ethnic-racialized subjects, the neighbors internalize that logic, and prohibit self-expression outside of rigid identity categories. Ermila and her friends, for example, groom, shop, and budget to consume beauty products in order to adhere to an ideal Chicana femininity, both sexualized and controlled
through procedures such as hairstyles and hair-removal. The McBride Boys gang only tolerates an aggressive, straight version of masculinity. As a result, a great deal goes unspoken. Alfonso hides his sexual orientation, even from himself. He “had always blamed the angel dust or the whiskey or the mota for his cocksucking because he wasn’t a joto like Lucho. Alfonso even had a girlfriend he fucked to prove he wasn’t a joto, never ever a joto like Lucho” (308). The group self-polices as much as the police immobilizes and threatens them. Belonging to the gang restricts members’ spatial movements, as they avoid rival territory and become highly sensitive to violations of territorial belonging, but even more than limiting movement, the gang restricts members by limiting what can be said. Turtle’s initiation into the gang depends on her demonstration of loyalty by remaining silent after the group brutally beats her. Her brother threatens: “you don’t tell nobody who did this to you” (233). The silence that comes from the community’s identity policing leaves few options, often producing more violence.

Cementation and Criminality

Restricted voices can turn quickly into “locked fists” (231). Violence in cemented communities is a result of this internalized criminalization, structural inequality, and the physical structures where crime occurs. As the narrative reveals characters’ stories, it shows that every criminal is also a victim of crime. When gang member Lucho is a small child, for example, his father holds him over a freeway overpass, threatening to drop him. The trauma results in a severe stutter, another form of immobility. The freeway clearly does not cause his father's brutality, but it does provide the scenery where the abuse becomes possible. Lucho, with his speech restricted, turns to physical violence to enable his movement through the world. Throughout the novel, perpetrators and victims suffer both at the hands of institutional structures and of neighbors who
internalize and perform the state’s discourse of criminality. The state, then, not only fails to protect, but also creates spaces of death, or environments that foster criminal activity.

Cementation creates the infrastructure in which violence thrives. Turtle’s experience of being sexually assaulted by the grocery bagger who catches her shoplifting as an adolescent reveals the intertwined relationship between structural and individual criminality. Multiple interrelated acts of crime surround the assault, implicating various perpetrators. Certainly, the structural inequity that leaves a young girl hungry enough to steal is criminal. Her robbery also violates the law, but so does the violation of her body and the bypassers’ indifference. Again, the dehumanizing landscape of the freeway lays the scene for the crime. The grocery bagger grabbed the collar of her mother’s overcoat and the candy and tins of black olives and tomato sauce rolled to the overpass. He forced her to stand spread-eagle. Disregarding the traffic, his big man fingers began to frisk her legs and poke into her cutoffs’ back pockets. . . . 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. . . . Not one driver from all those cars zooming on the new freeway bridge, not one driver driving the overpass of the 710 freeway construction, not one stopped to protest, to scream, What the hell do you think you’re doing, motherfucker, pinche puto, get your fingers off her tits, baboso! (24)

Crime undoubtedly existed in the neighborhood well before the freeways invaded, but the institutional infrastructure creates a new relationship between residents, or rather empties the relation between crime victims and perpetrators, literally distancing them from each other, and distancing neighbors from any sense of mutual accountability. The freeway provides the setting
of isolation and speed where this assault can take place without witnesses willing to intervene. While the grocery bagger assaults Turtle, the freeways impedes the community members’ responsibilities to each other. Viramontes’ text itself speaks up for Turtle when no one else will, calling out the “pinche puto” in the second person, and thus demanding that the readers acknowledge the inexcusability of the crime.

The larger, unspoken crime, for which Turtle does time throughout the novel, is the ambiguity of her gender presentation. She shaves her head and wears her brother’s clothes, perhaps as much out of self-protection as self-expression, aware that in her household, long hair gives her abusive father something to grab onto, and that in her world, women face increased dangers. Her refusal to reside neatly between gendered lines parallels her spatial practices. She cuts across territory without belonging in any one place, perpetually crossing boundaries, “never paying attention to the safe harbor of space between two painted fluorescent white lines on the pavement” (29). Her family, neighbors, and fellow gang members continually punish her for the violation of defying easy definition. Luis, her closest ally, treats her ruthlessly: “he had a girl for a brother and he profoundly resented it” (25). The McBride Boys beat her harder in her initiation and demand more brutality of her than they do of any male member, forcing her to forever compensate for her inability to fit their definition of masculinity. After the novel’s violent climax, a witness demonstrates the gravity of her gendered crime by going out of his way to correct the record, trekking to the police station to report that Turtle was certainly “a boy and not a girl,” as was reported in the headline (259). Even after her death, then, neighbors and language itself work to police her, as official representations of cemented identities require legibility, and thus cannot tolerate ambiguity or complexity.
Bodies converge in destruction at the final crime scene, where Turtle, caught by her gang members after going MIA, and hallucinating on PCP, obeys the gang’s demand that she “[w]aste him slow,” attacking Ermila’s Mexican cousin Nacho with her screwdriver because he tried to steal Ermila from Alfonso (322). The explanation, however, does not bring the crime any closer to making logical sense. Reeling and bleeding after the slaying as the drug wears off, Turtle cannot explain her actions. Through her act of violence, she becomes more immobilized and silenced than ever: “Why’ was not a word that meant something to Turtle. . . . Why? Turtle forgot why. Turtle didn’t know why. . . . Why? Go ask another. Turtle’s lips weighted down to muteness” (324). The compulsions behind the incident form part of a complex web of the community’s collective experiences of institutional and individual crimes. In the brutal mess of the scene, Nacho and Turtle’s bodies and their mutual demolitions become indistinguishable. The narrative represents the convergence of body parts and metal, disassociated, like Turtle, from the pain and reality of the actions: “Bits of flesh splattered on Turtle’s face . . . When she plunged the screwdriver in again, it went so deep through the pit of the boy’s belly, it hit the brick wall, and when she heard the snap-crack of bone, she took it to be the boy’s rib and not her own wrist and arm bones breaking” (322). Both bodies, destroyed through the violence, attain a new fluidity, as blood, muscle, and bones break and bleed into each other. Tranquilina holds both Nacho and Turtle while they die, and blends into the composition of broken human parts. She cannot “delineate herself from the murdered souls because these tears and blood and rain and bullet wounds belonged to her as well” (325). The narrative counts Turtle, the offender, among the murdered souls, equally a victim of her environment and the cause of another’s death.

This blurring of clear-cut categories challenges the state discourse of criminality that demands binary delineations between victims and perpetrators, citizens and criminals. The
anonymous rain of bullets from helicopters, which do not discern between mammals out after curfew, demonstrates that this threatening lack of transparency makes control and containment impossible, a state failure that in turn produces more violence. The cost of the fluidity and blurring of identity categories through violence, however, is ultimately fatal. Turtle and Nacho number among the casualties that blend the categories of culpability and victimhood, including Yoyo, who “returned from Vietnam in so many pieces, Mousie’s mother decided on cremation;” “Benjamin Brady, who moved like a junkyard of clunky body parts” after his childhood collision; and Turtle’s mother, physically abused by her husband, who “was part of the house, careless repaired with cardboard and duct tape like her cracked windows” (59-60, 117, 161). These fragmented bodies defy easy definition and through their rejection of legibility possibly elude institutional control. They tend toward partiality and destruction, attaining representational mobility at a fatal cost.

As Viramontes’ novel demonstrates, cementation is violence that alters space through rigid constructions of difference. Immobilized representations of identity parallel restricted movement through space and silenced speech acts. Through these processes, cement infrastructure, law enforcement, surveillance machinery, and internalized discourses of criminalization divide and devitalize communities, creating particularly hostile spaces for women to move through. Cultural production that responds to these urban border zones uses the language of violence as a challenge to representations of minority identities as readable and controllable, as well as the fluidity, ambiguity, and essential indeterminacy of spiritual discourse. While Viramontes deploys fiction to resist this physical and representational fixity, many local residents challenge cementation through material aesthetic intervention, transforming the impacted space through mural production.
Cementation and Resistance in Chicano Park

The processes of cementation formed border zones well beyond the geographic U.S.-Mexico border, limiting the movement of residents in areas throughout California. Logan Heights was a thriving Mexican-American neighborhood in San Diego in the early 1900s, but, as occurred in Los Angeles, the prioritization of Anglo profit and mobility decimated the area. In the 1950s, the U.S. Navy and defense industries claimed the waterfront properties, displacing the existing housing. Then, zoning laws allowed Anglo-owned auto junkyards to cement the residential land (Ferree 26). In 1963, Interstate 5 bisected the barrio, and in 1969, the Coronado Bay Bridge opened with on-ramps and support pillars stabbing through the community. The neighborhood’s population dropped dramatically, as businesses closed and families relocated. The area underneath the freeway interchange that goes right through Barrio Logan was intended to be a cement space of institutional regulation, but neighborhood residents claimed the area as a space for creative expression and community gathering. A movement to transform the massive cement pylons into community murals began in 1973, when, without a coherent design plan, over 300 residents collectively covered the cement with great bursts of color. “We exploded on the walls,” a resident remembers (Ferree 36). After the initial phase of covering the concrete with vibrant color, artists organized their resources and skills, producing more than 30 collective murals that reimagine the space underneath the speeding cars, represent the history and creativity of the community, and facilitate human interactions. Now, rather than a bleak cement landscape filled with patrol cars, this unlikely territory invites children to play and visitors to wander. The park continues to thrive as a locus of collective activity, an intentional site of memory production that hosts dance practices, rituals, and community organizing meetings. These vital community events, centered on the improbable site of a freeway interchange, demonstrate how visual art can
alter spatial and social relationships and the distribution of power. While the cement pylons and walls are visual reminders of the state’s power to displace and structure neighborhoods, the explosion of color on the concrete asserts the community’s ability to organize and create within those restrictions.

Treasured Mexican and Chicano historical figures such as Cesar Chávez, Pancho Villa, and Dolores Huerta populate the pylons, alongside cultural and nationalist imagery such as huelga eagles, decorated low-rider cars, and the Virgin of Guadalupe. From the use of the Virgin of Guadalupe banner at UFW protests to the Pre-Columbian deities and symbols in Chicano Park’s murals, visual imagery has proven central to the attempted unification of the Chicano nationalist movement. The extensive restoration of the murals completed in August 2012 demonstrates the community’s continued commitment to the park and the continued relevance of the community interactions and organizing that takes place among the images.

Aztec deities and such as Quetzalcóatl and Cuauhtémoc rise, reimagined, onto the pylons from traditional myths and religious imagery, in answer to the northward migration of the gesture of conquest through the cement of California’s freeways. Kelsey Mahler maintains that the use of Pre-Colombian imagery in Chicano murals helps to transform the spaces into a spiritual, regenerated Aztlán, allowing artists to communicate a sense of belonging to the American continent, contest their categorization as immigrants, assert their role as producers of culture, and distinguish themselves from dominant Anglo aesthetics. The gesture of turning to Pre-Colombian religious imagery also suggests recognition of the spiritual violation that accompanies colonization. The artists draw on religious tradition to renegotiate sanctity and seek restoration of conquest’s violation of the sacred.
“Inlakesh,” a mural completed in 1973 by Juanishi Orosco, a founding member of the mural movement in San Diego, reinvents Aztec symbolism within the Chicano Park context (see images 1.2 and 1.3). He covers the hardened, lifeless cement with vibrant color and energetic movement. The sensual curves of the image come to life in contrast with the angular structure of the freeway. The base depicts a verdant field and a flowing river, as the figures rising out of the earth suggest a spiritual connection with the land. A nude couple grows out of a stalk of corn as if they were part of the plant. Their intertwined bodies form an ollin, an Aztec knot symbolizing movement, while their closed eyes, arched backs, and backward tilted heads suggest ecstatic spiritual or sexual experience. A diamond-shaped eye-of-god symbol shines above the bodies, and a flaming mandala formed from four Chicano black huelga eagles bursts above the whole scene, drawing energy upwards. The ancient ollin symbol of movement and change takes on new meaning when layered on top of the freeway infrastructure, asserting the presence of life, growth, and even transcendent spiritual experience in the cement space once designated for a patrol station.

The Aztec earth goddess Coatlicue shares a pylon with the Virgin of Guadalupe. Viewers have perceived the figures, recreated outside of their original religious contexts, as both threatening and devotional. Michael Schnorr and Susan Yamagata completed the Coatlicue mural in 1978, which depicts the figure supporting the sun and the earth in her hands and giving birth to Tlaloc, a water god (see images 1.4, 1.5, and 1.6). The presence of the water god; the explosive orange, yellow, and red hues; and the mural’s vibrating, intricate base of snakes forming the goddess’s serpent skirt transform the cement into a flowing, dynamic space. By bringing movement and life to the concrete, the muralists create a sacred space under the freeway interchange. While the snakes and water god seem to pop off of the cement canvas, the
Guadalupe mural on the other side of the same pylon, created by Mario Torero, also in 1978, extends her consecrated ground into three-dimensional space. Visitors have cultivated rose bushes and created an altar in front of the mural, which is still carefully tended to and covered with prayers and mementos (see image 1.7). While the translation of sacred images from indigenous culture was a common tool of Chicano nationalism in the 1960s and 70s, the popular religious practice taking place before the goddess’ image and the continued renovations of the murals in Chicano Park shows the contemporary relevance of the imagery. The specificity of the site brings new meaning to the acts of reverence that take place there. The history of invasion at the community’s reclaimed freeway park endows the spiritual practice at the mural’s shrine with an ethos of resistance against cementation. Chicano Park’s colors, dynamic motion of the designs, and syncretic spiritual imagery challenge the rigidity of cementation and the violence imposed through the freeway structure.

**Flying over Freeways: Mobility through Spirituality**

The reworking of spiritual imagery in language can challenge border subjects’ representational and physical fixity as concretely as the spatial practice of painting murals. In the final stanza of “Freeway 280,” Cervantes finds both death and hope for rebirth in the altered urban landscape:

Maybe it’s here

en los campos extraños de esta ciudad

where I’ll find it, that part of me

mown under

like a corpse

or a loose seed (40)
The poetic voice identifies simultaneously with the victims who do not survive the loss of life, homes, and vitality, and with those who find new ways of moving and growing. The new setting, at once a massive unmarked grave and a fertile field, contains the potential for growth and motion even during invasion. In the interview “Praying for Knowledge,” Viramontes frames her writing as spiritual practice, “If I did not have writing, I don’t know what I would have done. It has really, really given me my prayer to the world” (145). She employs narrative to transform the space of death and spiritual violations of the continent’s ongoing invasions. The critical mobility of spirituality presents a system of thought that challenges the military logic of conquest and cementation.

Popular spirituality offers movements that do not fit within the criminal logic and structural injustice of the state. Although spiritual icons, rituals, and practices do not stop the crimes, they present alternative ways of moving, identifying, and subsisting within a brutal environment. Spirituality creates spaces where wholeness, transparency, and complete understanding are not expected, but where people find mobility in their fragmentation. Like the devotional practices and community gatherings at the site of the freeway underpass murals, Viramontes’ novel presents popular spirituality as a possible intervention in institutional and individual crime’s restriction of mobility.

Nobody enters a church in the novel, but spiritual language and experience pervade the entire text. The text’s spiritual figures are not priests, but prison inmates and immigrants, men and women immersed in the limitations of everyday life. Angels and saints do not reside in the heavens or in religious iconography, but rather come to life as characters: the convict Angel, who dances with pretty women at barbeques, and the gang member Santos, who shows off his car’s hydraulic system. Characters carve out spiritual sanctuaries and rituals where they can: cooking
over stoves or tattooing their flesh, stargazing on rooftops, hiding under floorboards, or speeding down freeways. Nacho, for example, paints the Virgin of Guadalupe on the “corner tiendita,” and depicts “holy figures on tin plates,” bringing spiritual devotion to the mundane undertakings of shopping and eating (71, 240). Communion, then, does not require a priest, and can take place in the streets and kitchens across the city. Nacho’s mannerisms, while in turn awkward and threatening are also described repeatedly as “prayerlike” (246, 294). The positioning of this adjective in secular scenes resituates the novel and the whole urban landscape as a space of devotional practice. Ermila’s friend Lollie escapes her crowded house to pray “atop a pile of shoe-wear in the closet, tightly grasping a greenish phosphorescent plastic mold of La Virgen like a baseball bat” (186). The plastic Guadalupe operates at once as a worldly and a divine instrument. Lollie holds her like a baseball bat, which can function in turn as a weapon, a toy, and a tool, a means of escaping and of surviving reality. Similarly, Tranquilina’s family’s ministry takes place in “the sanctuary of the kitchen” rather than in a worship hall, pursuing souls by first feeding hungry bodies (213). The novel grounds spiritual imagery and practice in mundane reality, not separate from the brutality and chaos of everyday life.

Turtle’s Tío Angel, both menacing and mysterious, blends the sacred and the secular. He moves in and out of prison, bringing Jesus and his apostles with him. He has all twelve of them tattooed across his belly, and tends to leave his shirt unbuttoned to show off the Jesus printed over his heart. Turtle’s family throws a fiesta every time he returns from prison, but they never speak about where he has been. This silencing increases her wonder at his presence: “He brought an aura behind him as bright as La Virgen de Guadalupe but also somber as Judas of The Last Supper. There was something holy and fearful about Tío. In her dreams, Turtle opened the door for him, and either brightness or darkness blinded her” (156). Like a spiritual apparition, his
presence provokes fear and awe. He carries with him both the scarring and defensive aggression from his time in prison and the cycle of violence that repeatedly lands him there, and a sense of sanctity conferred from the spiritual image written into his body. The narrative dedicates more textual space to describing Angel’s religious tattoos than portraying Angel himself, returning repeatedly to the Jesus of Angel’s flesh. At first, Viramontes specifies that Jesus appears on a tattoo, emphasizing the figure’s role as an accessory or adornment, while Angel’s character maintains power over language, speaking loudly: “Hey, badass, you got enough to eat or no? Tío Angel asked again, his Jesus of The Last Supper tattoo peering out between the curtains of his shirt” (158). In each subsequent appearance in the text, however, the tattoo becomes more and more of its own character, endowed with increasing mobility. In the kitchen, “Jesus of The Last Supper peered over the table” (167). The action of peering endows the image with curiosity and humanity. Within Angel’s body, Christ is made flesh. Then, with a gesture as mundane as Angel sucking in his gut, the tattoo seems to transcend its newly found humanity: “Tío Angel pulled in his girth, and Jesus appeared over the rim of the table like a rising sun” (168). The image of Jesus rising like a sun evokes the wonder of his resurrection, taking place at a dimly lit kitchen table in East LA. Intimacy with Angel, then, also involves intimacy with Jesus. Angel dances with Rosie at the barbeque to celebrate his recent release: “his arms wrapped around her, her ear and cheek pressed against the buttons of his chest, feeling the muscles below and then his heart beating through the eye sockets of Jesus below that” (169). Jesus is there between and with the lovers, with open eyes, participating in the living human warmth. The tattoo enables a new form of communion, in which Angel and Jesus share a single body and presence, both sacred and absolutely mundane. In a strange new form of mutual spirit possession, Angel embodies and contains Jesus, and vice versa. He is at once both Jesus and Angel, a recurring convicted
offender and the son of God. This ambiguity allows Angel to transcend, or at least survive the worldly temporality and space of doing time in prison, as he shares his body with a form of existence outside of and illegible to the state’s justice system.21

Just as the passages portraying Tío Angel draw the reader’s attention back to his Jesus tattoo over and over, the depiction of the gang member Santos returns repeatedly to the rosary hanging over his dashboard. The exchange between Turtle and Santos takes up four and a half pages of text, which mention the rosary four times, infusing the scene, filled with violence and velocity, with a meditative, spiritual resonance. The narrative comments on the rosary at regular intervals, as though the text itself is passing the beads of the sacred object through the story. The contemplative image of praying with a rosary contrasts with the confrontation between the gang members and their high-speed car chase. This contradiction between sacred and secular, like the tension between Angel’s history and his embodiment of Jesus, makes spiritual practice out of earthly encounters. Santos’ Pontiac Bonneville turns into both a crime scene and a spiritual sanctuary, blessed by the swinging rosary and watched by the pursuing helicopter.

The environment in Santos’ car evokes the immersive organ sounds and incense smells of a church, as it too creates a fully engaging sensory experience. When Turtle leaps from the cold street into the vehicle, she takes in the overwhelming “music, the scent, the rosary hanging from the rearview mirror” (267). Then, animated by active verbs, the rosary seems to dance: “Little Willie G. singing from the flickering light of the tape deck, the rosary so long it dangled over the dash” (269). While Santos speeds down the freeway away from the descending police helicopter, he comes into contact with the religious object: “He stroked the rosary beads as if the stroking delivered a form of comfort” (270). The rosary becomes the thread that connects the driver with the authority and control that his car represents, the connective tissue between the man and the
mobility and characteristics he identifies with his car. After they push the car to 117 mph, with
the helicopter in close pursuit, the police abandon the hunt to respond to a collision with
fatalities. The narrative describes the sudden disappearance of the surveillance vehicle as
miraculous: “The chase was on until the stunning white jets of spotlights suddenly lifted up and
pulled away, a miracle . . . The rosary that hung from his rearview mirror banged against the
dash as Santos navigated the swerving acceleration” (196-97). Viramontes’ continual
juxtaposition of the rosary with their rare experience of eluding the surveillance and policing
system suggests that the comfort the driver derives from the object augments his mobility. He
does not seem to pray to anyone or anything other than the power he associates with his car, in
this way repurposing the sacred object for his worldly survival.

Ermila, restricted by both the QA and her Grandmother Zumaya, recycles a traditional
Catholic object of worship to facilitate her own mobility. Reminiscent of police tactics, her
grandmother confuses protecting with controlling. Ermila comes home to her grandmother
nailing a heavy wooden cross over her bed: “Maybe this will protect you, Grandmother said,
slipping the wire hoop of the bulky metal and wood crucifix onto the nail, because I can’t
anymore” (72). Although she does not worship devoutly, Grandmother turns to the religious icon
to help control what she perceives as Ermila’s delinquency. Like the tattoo and the rosary, the
crucifix seems to take on more animate characteristics through its continuous appearances in the
text: “The large crucifix nailed above her headboard still swayed as she closed and locked her
bedroom door. The gunfire continued until dawn” (78). In the neighborhood turned military
zone, the cross seems to generate its own movement. It remains on Ermila’s mind as she asserts
her own sense of justice. When the girls vandalize Jan’s car in retribution for his violence against
their friend, “Ermila took the T’s because she had one hanging on her wall and because Concha
wore it years ago when she was a somebody” (199). For her, the cross does not evoke Christ’s
death, but rather the character Concha’s success as a female entrepreneur. She resignifies the
symbol as a sign of Chicana mobility. When a guard dog appears in Ermila’s room in the night
like an apparition, it is unclear whether the dog is meant to attack or protect her. Ermila reads the
dog’s ghostly presence in her bedroom as a strategy of her Grandmother’s to keep her in her
room, contain, and control her. Indeed, when she tries to move from her bed, “[t]he dog gnashed
its fangs, striking her, a mighty sting,” an injury described in language that again evokes the
image of colonial conquerors (75). When Lucho rushes to Ermila’s window in an attempt to
warn her of the gang’s plans to attack Nacho, the dog will not let her go to her window to speak
with him. At an impasse, “Ermila looked around the room. The crucifix hung right above her and
she leaned forward and slid the cross from its nail. The dog’s growl crescendoed . . . With a
powerful swing, she whacked the side of the dog’s head with a crucifix, forcing its jowls to
release and its sausage body to wheel clumsily across the room” (315). By knocking the dog out
with the cross, she takes a traditional icon, used as a gesture of control from Grandmother, and
repurposes it as a weapon, which allows her the freedom to move and speak. Although the dog
and the crucifix are both objects associated with Grandmother’s attempts to regulate Ermila, she
turns one against the other, reappropriating the cross to clear her own path.

Once Ermila has moved past the obstacle of the dog, she has no money for bus fare, so
she decides to run to the bus depot to warn Nacho. Her pace by foot, not quick enough to prevent
the attack, indicates the ways that economic class maps onto mobility: the money for cars or
even bus fare translates directly to velocity through the city. She laces her sneakers, and takes
off. Her footsteps turn into a regular, methodical prayer, reflected in the rhythm of the
description:
The only plan she had was to run, run her sneakers like she did in gym class while reciting the Hail Mary, for the rhythm of it, the chanting consuming her instead of the agony. Pray and run. Pray for the clouds to hold the rain. Pray her legs won’t fold. Pray that Nacho already sat on the bus. Pray that Lucho Libre hadn’t known what he was saying. Pray the Hail Mary for the beat of each rosary bead to tease her feet into believing it was possible to reach the depot in forty-five minutes.

(317)

Ermila prays while she runs in order to regulate her pace. This mundane spiritual practice imposes a workable temporality and spatiality onto her chaotic situation, enacting a form of prayer more direct and relevant than invoking a divine presence. The ritual of the repeated language provides a resource in and of itself. Like Santos, she directs her prayer more to her mode of transit than to a holy figure. As she chants and pounds “her feet into believing,” her running feet embody both the object and subject of her faith, becoming both the faithful and the deity in which she trusts. Rather than looking outside herself, Ermila becomes her own referent for her engagement with sacred objects and practices, as she blends the spiritual with the secular to facilitate her own mobility.

The character of Tranquilina further repositions spirituality within worldly life. Her family grounds their belief system in the immediate needs present before them and structures their lives by caring for the suffering, “[b]ecause everything happened here on these sidewalks or muddy swamps of vacant lots or in deep back alleys, not up in the heavens of God. Lost souls roamed here” (34). For Tranquilina, the sacred is inseparable from the secular, all mixed together in the stew she conjures for hungry neighbors by begging businesses for donations. In their kitchen, Mama tells of miracles in the same breath and tone that she complains about the heat.
Their services take place within their living quarters, with no candles or religious iconography, but rather centered on sharing a meal and creating a space for community members to connect and receive kindness. Their worship does not focus on doctrine or sacraments, but rather on fully embodied living: eating great gulps of communal soup and singing together at full volume. During the service, the congregation reveals their everyday concerns, praying for everything from safe border crossings for their relatives to: “[t]wenty cents more for my Thunderbird wine. Amen” (85). A homeless woman fed and baptized during a prayer session demonstrates the banality of the sacred within this environment. Mama holds the woman, convulsing while “The Holy Spirit entered, forcing evil to spew out like spittle,” while at the same time “a boy tried on the woman’s hats and the hats resembled an oversized bell on his small oval head” (97). The ceremony ranges from playful to demonic, as the motley congregation takes in the rancid, shuddering woman without flinching.

Tranquilina’s presence intertwines holiness and humanity in all its filth and suffering. She recognizes the miracle of her homeless, diseased, hungry, and lonely neighbors’ daily survival, bringing a hallowed reverence to her interactions with them, as she demonstrates her willingness to delve into another’s suffering. When mentally unsteady Ben goes missing, Ana and Tranquilina search the dark rainy streets for him. Ana watches from the car as Tranquilina searches down alleyway after alleyway, while the car’s headlights form an eerie halo of light around her. Ana prays that “Ben would recognize the suction of Tranquilina’s galoshes and watch her mythic figure. . . . He would say to his savior: I am drowning” (283). Her feet, wet and plodding through the rain declare her humanity, even as Ana describes her with spiritual devotion. Viramontes does not idolize Tranquilina. She depicts her profound compassion, but also her frustration with the demands on her, and her own struggle to survive.
sexually assaults her tests her faith and love for humanity, but she endures to continue extending her ministry to strangers.

Tranquilina grows up listening to the survival story of her own miraculous birth. Her parents escape indentured servitude, but Mama finds herself in labor in the desert, scorched and far from water or nourishment. She prays furiously, promising her child, if it should survive, to God. Tomás mobilizes to locate and bring her to water and shelter:

The pleas called for a milagro more powerful than the sun . . . In her delirium, Tomás became a blur, a rigid saguaro as he forked his fingers to the heavens and waited for the gusts of winds to glide him off the ground. . . . Since the first sun, she told Tranquilina, the Azteca priests singled out men like her father to be voladores. Strong but balsa-wood light, the chosen men held hefty faith in the wind to cradle their bodies on the breath of its sigh (43-44).

The voladores blend their worldly existence with sacred mobility through their faith, a force that does not fit within the logic of the institutional forces that immobilize individuals. Tranquilina’s birth story links her to a lineage of spiritual movement.

At the final crime scene, Tranquilina cradles and soothes Nacho and Turtle’s broken, blended bodies as they bleed out of this world. Her blood and tears merge with theirs, as bullets rain from sharp shooters above in helicopters. At an impasse,

[s]he summoned the stories of Papa and Mama’s miraculous escape. Shoulders back, Tranquilina raised her chin higher, as Mama had told her time and again, to fill up with the embrace of ancestral spirits. The rain on her face cleansed away the grievous exhaustion, and she ignored the command to place her hands on her head. Her arms by her side, her fists clenched, she would not fear them. Shouting
voices ordered her not to move, stay immobile, but she lifted one foot forward, then another, refusing to halt. Two inches, four, six, eight, riding the currents of the wilding wind. Riding it beyond the borders, past the cesarean scars of the earth, out to limited space where everything was possible if she believed. (325)

By summoning her family’s stories of survival and drawing on ancestral memories, she replaces fear with faith, obedience with defiance, immobility with flight. Her faith and refusal to obey the commands enable her to rise out of the crisis on the wind. Her feat blends and challenges spiritual traditions. While she is the first female voladora, connected to familial and Aztec stories, Viramontes also presents Tranquilina as a Christ-like figure, struggling with her humanity even as she transcends it, “[m]aking a meal out of nothing, like loaves and fishes,” and ultimately rising, resurrected, out of the crimes of her community (47). Her syncretic transcendence is most striking for her performance of bodily defiance against and confrontation of the systematic forces immobilizing her and her neighbors. Tranquilina’s physical gestures and movements are miraculous in the face of this systematic oppression. Commanded by armed men in helicopters to halt and place her hands up in deference, she clutches her fists and walks forwards and up.22 As she refuses to play into the cycle of fear, violence, and obedience that the surveillance machine runs on, the shouting voices demanding her immobility become superfluous. She enters a whole new world through a whole new illogical, illegible, spiritual relationship with space. Out of a scene of violent destruction, she realizes previously unimaginable movement.

**Cementation as a Function of Border Space**

The freeway’s displacement and regulation of California’s minority urban communities parallels the cementation of migrants at the U.S.-Mexico border, and the resulting 700 miles of
military surplus and concrete that mark the boundary. Regan’s *The Death of Josseline* describes border patrol presence in the Arizona desert with phrases that could be taken directly from Viramontes’ description of the freeway construction and QA helicopters and checkpoints. The surveillance and restriction at the U.S.-Mexico border, like the policing practices in Viramontes’ novel, physically and discursively divides those considered fit for citizenship from those with bodies excluded from majoritarian belonging. The physical hardening of the national border parallels an escalating xenophobic discourse that frames immigrants as invaders and relies on a rigid representation of their difference. By framing the cementation of her LA protagonists with a history of conquest, Viramontes tells multiple stories of limited mobility at once: that of LA’s urban residents of the 1960s, but also that of today’s migrants trekking through the desert borderlands and that of victims of colonial conquest in Tenochtitlán.

While this chapter centers on the impact of California’s freeways, cementation, I propose, is a defining attribute of all border space. The collision of cultures and formation of new margins accompanies a physical hardening that restricts border subjects’ mobility and a representational hardening that limits their subjectivity. In the United States, this takes the form of excessive policing; the use of surveillance machinery; the construction of freeways, prisons, and walls; and the deployment of social and legislative racial profiling. Cristina Rivera Garza points to the parallel processes in Mexico in *Dolerse: textos desde un país herido*. It is not an overactive state that restricts the nation’s movement, but rather an absent state that creates an environment of impunity for the narcotics traffickers that immobilize the country. Like the policing and profiling practices in the US, the horror of the narco violence in Mexico functions as a spectacle of power, crippling residents’ capacity to speak, act, or move freely. Rivera Garza defines the “Estado sin entrañas” as a complicit government that has given up its relationship to its residents and
renounced its responsibility to care for the social body (14). The state-citizen relationship emptied of entrañas, or both guts and a conscience, is neither dynamic nor living, but rather resembles an urban map of disconnected arteries where “freeways amputated the streets into stumped dead ends” (Viramontes 33). In both national contexts, this hardening reduces “al cuerpo a su condición más básica como productor de plusvalía” (Rivera Garza 15). Cementation occurs in Mexico, then, through the hardening of the state towards its citizenry, and through the simultaneous production of an environment of fear and extreme violence that paralyzes, silences, restricts residents’ travel, and often stiffens bodies after death.

Gunmen linked to cartels control many of Mexico’s highways, running checkpoints and holding up cars as a demonstration of their territorial control. Like border patrol agents, they ask for papers, check trunks, or charge for the right of passage. In other cases, they steal vehicles or kidnap passengers. Both the Zetas and the Gulf Cartel operate checkpoints in Tamaulipas, on the main border road from Reynosa to Nuevo Laredo and on roads in Coahuila, Durango, Sinaloa, Chihuahua, Guerrero and Michoacán (Grillo, n. pag.). The threat of these highway gunmen severely restricts residents’ mobility, as many abandon non-essential travel. There are people in Tamaulipas who have not been to neighboring towns for several years due to security concerns. The loss of state control over roads inhibits basic services and demonstrates the physical impacts of the “Estado sin entrañas.” 24

In the last sentence of her novel, Viramontes evokes borders as “the cesarean scars of the earth,” again connecting the Los Angeles narrative with transnational border zones, or spaces of cementation (325). In her “1848” series of digital prints, the artist Alma López accomplishes visually what Viramontes does through her narrative, layering scenes of trauma and sites of conquest on top of each other to illuminate their essential similarities. In “Ixta,” López places a
nocturnal Los Angeles skyline under the border wall, collapsing the cementation of the two spaces as the interconnected inheritance of the 1848 Guadalupe-Hidalgo treaty (see image 1.8). The repurposing of ancient myth layers the nations’ history of conquest into the narrative. “La Línea” similarly connects the sites, adding the maps of war dividing territories and an image of a brown body pursued by a police car to evoke the spatial and racialized practice of surveillance and policing (see image 1.9). The Virgin of Guadalupe graces the wall like the tattoo over the scar, or the mural over the cement, suggesting the possibility of spatial relationships transformed through spirituality. The child at play on the line becomes a hopeful, sacred figure, as the visual placement of the border wall under the girl converts the barrier into a crescent symbol, like the moon under the Virgin, perhaps transforming the obstacle itself into a holy vehicle, or turning the wall into a sacred space. In “Ixta,” López evokes and rewrites a spiritual story, connecting today’s border territory to the history of war in Mexico. “Ixta” queers and relocates the myth of Ixta and Popo, positioning the corpses at the border as fallen romantic heroes. Judith Huacuja reports that “Audience reception of her poster Ixta has been diverse. Viewers have read this as a tragic display of gang violence or as a sorrowful lament on the criminalization of chola (urban Chicano) culture” (109). Though poised as victims, the figures defy legibility, thus challenging their cementation. In the kneeling figure, I see a version of the character of Tranquilina, simultaneously in the moment of embracing and mourning Turtle as she dies, and of floating through faith up above the crime scene, mobile and indecipherable as she rides up beyond borders.

The assumption of human subjectivity as adaptable, integrated, and fully representable, Viego argues, results in an undertheorization of loss and trauma. Judith Butler, in Precarious Life, asks: When violence is perpetrated against those who are already negated or cemented,
“[w]hat and where is the loss, how does mourning take place?” (32). When victims are not fixed, fossilized, or cemented subjectivities, but rather display the range and fluid complexity of humanity, their loss can be more fully felt. Spirituality can account for the loss of the illegible, the demise of the partial. It creates a space for experiencing grief, and can possibly reinstate the ritual of mourning for all those immobilized throughout border territory. When we understand death within a framework of the indecipherable or the incalculable, which spirituality offers, the loss becomes immeasurable. In the domain of affect, where the deaths can be felt physically, perceptibly, rather than counted as statistics, the loss really counts.
Chapter 2

Prisons: Horizon Production and Queer Temporalities in Prison Arts

“Everyone is waiting out time, measuring time, sitting on time, finding ways to pass time, to kill time, so that finally, in a closed-in land of threat and continual exposure, time assumes a terrible intimacy, enveloping body and mind and heart” (Brewster 14).

In prison, there are no horizons, only walls. The penitentiary’s cement structures operate in many ways like urban highways, by limiting criminalized people’s mobility and range of vision. Victor Ochoa and Socorro Gamboa’s twin Chicano Park murals “All the Way to the Bay” and “Hasta la Bahia” express the community’s longing for horizons, based on the Chicano movement’s goal of reclaiming the occupied territory of Aztlán all the way up to the Pacific coast, including Barrio Logan’s waterfront property lost to industrial businesses in the 1940s (see images 2.1 and 2.2). The highway’s cement pylons obliterate the neighborhood’s horizons by blocking all views of the water and impeding the park’s growth towards the bay. Between the elevated Coronado Bridge, the car lots, and the apartment buildings that now fill the half-mile between the murals and the San Diego Bay, it is difficult to catch even a glimpse of water from the park. While the murals transform the area under the highway into a communal artistic space, the neighborhood remains visually and physically restricted by the cement structures. The pylons create obstacles, turning the neighborhood into an enclosure, a space isolated from the cultural and corporeal flows of the rest of the city. This chapter moves from the impact of policing and infrastructure on urban neighborhoods to the more severely restricted movements and schedules of women in prison. Barrio Logan inhabitants surrounding Chicano Park never do repossess the territory leading up the San Diego Bay, or see all the way to water from their neighborhood. Inmates in prisons experience a much more extreme form of this constrained motion and vision, as they live without horizons, rarely seeing beyond the walls that contain them. This analysis
examines the work of female inmates who challenge their limited mobility and vision by manipulating and redefining their experience of time. In her poem “Jail-Life Walk,” Judy Lucero mimics her guard’s commands and demonstrates her limited field of vision and movement: “Walk til you see…See the sign / Look at the sign…Walk in Line!” (n. pag.). The signifiers she points to are those of containment: walls blocking views, coded doors to restricted territories, a landscape of borders evoking the limited horizons of Barrio Logan. The rhythm of her single-syllable words, grouped in three and four word phrases, recreates the temporal regularity and strict policing of bodies in prison.

This chapter approaches women’s prisons in Mexico and the United States as gendered border spaces. Time in prison functions as the measure of punishment and primary means of control, creating a feeling of temporal stasis that operates as a form of immobility. This study explores the relationship of the restrictive temporal practices in prison to the temporalities associated with national citizenship. I argue that poets and artists restructure their experience of space and time while incarcerated by producing horizons where there are none, and imagining alternative futures outside of the authoritarian time tables of prison-time and “citizen-time,” the temporalities concerned with reproduction reserved for those deemed desirable for national belonging. The inmates’ creative strategies of temporal intervention enact queer time, as theorized by José Esteban Muñoz and Judith Halberstam, as a form of resistance against their immobilizing present. I link that gesture to the poets’ acts of repossessing sacred temporalities in order to draw on the authority associated with institutional religion.

This chapter positions the work of incarcerated Chicana poets Judy Lucero and Lorri Martinez and of muralists in a women’s prison in Mexico City as parts of the same aesthetic project, in that they all resist the experience of captivity in the space of the women’s penitentiary.
Prisons in both nations function as borders, understood as spaces that regulate subjects’ movement and citizenship. Despite the geographically central location of Mexico City within the nation, the prison houses border women, individuals excluded from national belonging. In this chapter, I put works by U.S. and Mexican inmates in dialogue with each other with a transnational framework that approaches the U.S. and Mexican prison structures as interconnected border systems. Although there are key differences between the two national prison systems, they also share many structures, as well as a flow of incarcerated bodies between the nations. I approach prisons as an important area of inquiry within border studies that connects both countries, given that they both face drastically escalated female incarceration rates.

Immigration detention centers—the fastest expanding facilities in the U.S. prison system—are spaces where the overlapping bordered experiences of immigration and incarceration converge. Ramiro Martínez argues that these inmates are marginalized into a position of “legal nonexistence” (165). In addition, fifteen percent of inmates held in federal U.S. prisons are Mexican citizens (“Prison” n. pag.). The fact that thirty-five percent of U.S. inmates are Latino reflects the “racial caste system” at work in the U.S. prison system, or the ways in which incarceration functions as a system of racialized social control (Alexander 3). Although women are the most quickly growing prison population worldwide, critical prison studies continue to focus mostly on men, making female prisoners doubly invisible (Pate 77). Inmates’ artistic production in both Mexico and the U.S. makes visible and resists the physical realities of women’s incarceration.

In collaboration with UNAM’s gender studies department in a project in Mexico City’s Santa Martha Acatitla Prison called Mujeres en espiral, the inmates took over the walls that contained them, painting enormous murals that transformed their experience of time and space
and produced a form of collective resistance against the cementation of the prison border zone. Marisa Belaustegui-goitia Rius coordinated the project and documented images of the murals and testimony from the muralists in the 2014 book *Pintar los muros: Deshacer la cárcel*. Fifty-three women collaborated on the four murals, produced between 2008 and 2013, in conjunction with an extensive educational project involving literary and artistic workshops to prepare for and design the murals, and ongoing educational outreach and legal clinics in the prison.28 As explored in the introduction, murals have long functioned in Mexico as sites of national identity, historical memory, and social critique. In painting onto the walls of their prison, the inmates at Santa Martha Acatitla lay claim to a space within this collective national medium, as they physically transform their confines. I read the murals and the artists’ statements published in *Pintar los muros* as texts that function together to establish a poetics of resistance that, like the works of Judy Lucero and Lorri Martinez, reinvent and repossess the women’s experience of time in prison.

Arts in prisons require institutional and activist support in order to access materials, teachers, and platforms for expression. Incarcerated artists also depend on external help for the publication, distribution, or sharing of their work. Due to recent legislation in Mexico, state support for educational and artistic programming in the country has increased drastically in the past five years, prompting programs such as yoga classes in a prison in Morelos, collage workshops in Santa Martha Acatitla, and performances by the Compañía de Teatro del Centro Femenil de Reinserción Social Tepepan.29 The *Mujeres en espiral* project is representative of this current wave of artistic rehabilitation efforts in Mexico. While there are an increasingly large number of activists and scholars addressing the issue of incarceration in the U.S., and while many theater, poetry, and college programs continue to operate in prisons through private
funding, the era of state support for such endeavors in the U.S. is long over. State and federal inmates became ineligible for Pell grants through a provision of the 1994 Crime Bill that President Bill Clinton signed into law, ending funding for continuing education programs in prison. Lucero and Martinez’s work come from an era of widespread support for the arts and education in U.S. prisons similar to the current range of programming in Mexico. Tobi Jarobi points to the extensive poetry writing workshops throughout U.S. prisons in the 1970s, many of which were part of programs that granted college credit to participants (178). Chicano prisoners’ work was financially supported and widely distributed during this time, as many members of the movement viewed incarceration as a facet of their community’s oppression, positioning prison poetry as a collective protest. The works chosen as the focus of this study represent moments of increased support for and circulation of prison arts in each country. They frame the period of extreme prison growth in both nations, and demonstrate an aesthetic and thematic continuity of women’s prison art across time. While the poems and images examined in this chapter come from distinct moments, they denounce a shared condition, and depict life in prison as an experience separated from the operations of time and space outside the institution. While the policies and politics of U.S. and Mexican prisons are distinct, the aesthetic production that emerges from both are surprisingly similar.

As the conditions and rates of female incarceration go essentially unnoticed by critics in comparison to studies focused on men, readers, scholars, and publishers largely ignore the cultural production produced by incarcerated women. Lucero’s poems were first published posthumously in the 1973 edition of the Chicano journal De Colores: Journal of Emerging Raza Philosophies. Hers is the only female voice in the issue, appearing alongside political manifestos and bilingual poems by foundational figures in the Chicano Movement: Chicano activist
Alurista’s “The Chicano Cultural Revolution” and canonical prison poet Ricardo Sánchez’s “Fuente o Noria: Soul/Mind Journey.” Although Lucero’s poetry has been anthologized and studied closely by B.V. Olguín, it has not received nearly the same critical attention as the movement’s male figures. The editors’ framing of her work in the journal’s introduction infantilizes her and emphasizes her biographical details—her introduction to drugs at age eleven and her suicide at twenty eight—in a narrative of victimhood that undermines her poetry’s impact. The description of her work as “the baring of a soul with all the naiveté and innocence and bewilderment of a child” as, perhaps, the condition for her inclusion alongside iconic Chicano voices, reveals the widespread sexism of the Chicano movement in the 1970s (51). The poems themselves resist her restricted living conditions and display self-awareness and understanding of the system that traps her. Lorri Martinez has received even less critical attention, though her poems appear in anthologies alongside Lucero and received well-known Chicano poet Ricardo Sánchez’s recognition as “vibrant and moving . . . one of the most accomplished” Chicana voices (Sánchez 2). This chapter situates Lucero and Martinez as fundamental border voices that represent the many women’s voices silenced within the Chicano movement. Both are also increasingly relevant today, as they depict and challenge conditions that have only become exacerbated as women’s incarceration rates have exploded in both the U.S. and Mexico. Their poems are confessional and deeply personal, but also capture a shared experience of imprisonment. Their aesthetic strategies overlap with those of the Santa Martha Acatitla muralists in tackling and transforming the space of prison.

**Prisons as Borders**

Gina Dent and Angela Davis define the prison as a border, based on their analysis from prisoners around the world, “who name the distinction between the ‘free world’ and the space
behind the walls of the prison” (1237). Inmates point to that boundary as one that defines their lives more than national borders, a point of connection with incarcerated women worldwide. Paula Bruno also argues that the conceptual framework around Chicana border space and borderlands discourse, concerned with recognizing the languages, cultures, and hybrid identities of border residents, needs to expand to include the growing population of Latina inmates (575). Current criticism is catching up with the fact that Chicano activists have long recognized inmates’ struggles and movement in and out of prison as deeply relevant to their communities, as demonstrated by Chicano Park’s prominent mural by Tony De Vargas dedicated to “Justicia para los pintos” (See images 2.3 and 2.4). The mural’s central location in the park indicates the community’s inclusion of incarcerated Chicano men, or pintos’ experiences as central to their movement. Similarly, the poetry of former inmates Raúl Salinas and Jimmy Santiago Baca presents pintos’ struggles as a microcosm of all Chicanos’ struggles. Artistic representation of inmates in Chicano cultural production, or that which receives critical attention, focuses on male experiences. Lucero, Martinez, and the Santa Martha muralists work to include women in a struggle for justice beyond the goals of the Chicano movement, as they highlight the commonalities of incarcerated women’s experiences beyond national borders.

The 2012 anthology *Beyond Walls and Cages: Prisons, Borders, and Global Crisis* places prisons and state borders in the same conversation on a global level, as parallel mechanisms of “neocolonial dispossession” that maintain social inequalities (1). Prison operates as a key territory within border space, necessitating a transnational framework for studying the incarceration of women, one that accounts for the particularities of each national context and their criminal punishment systems, and recognizes the ways in which prisons themselves operate as borders. Moreover, incarceration resembles deportation, as both prison and Border Patrol
officials police and enforce movement, criminalize bodies deemed deviant or “questionable,” and remove those bodies from visibility (Hernández 89). In both border zones, women face particular dangers that police their sexuality and reproductive rights. The migrant, like the inmate, is in a subordinate position in relationship to the citizen.

Prisons and national borders both work to police belonging, to discern, make legible, and impose a binary structure onto the distinctions between citizens and criminals, stripping the latter of rights and identity, while training the former for the successful continuation of the nation. Borders and prisons transform people in public discourse into criminals, aliens, and illegals, outside the human and unqualified for citizenship. Mary Pat Brady elaborates: “The border system attempts to disarticulate people from the signs of their subjectivity, to deprive them of meaning and identity” (53). Prisons, too, work to distance people from signs of their subjectivity. Both utilize restrictive structures and schedules in order to homogenize and control.31

Cementation, defined in the previous chapter as the physical, environmental hardening that restricts border subjects’ mobility and parallels a representational hardening that limits the representation of their subjectivity, is an essential attribute of border space. Throughout border zones, this takes the form of excessive policing; the use of surveillance machinery; the construction of freeways, prisons, factories and walls; and the deployment of social and legislative racialized and gendered profiling. Prison is particularly demonstrative of this dual hardening of space and subjectivity. In prison, cementation occurs as a homogenizing discourse of criminality deployed alongside rigid architecture that limits movement and vision. Already visually scrutinized for signs of illegality before coming to prison, incarcerated Latina and Mexican women are doubly criminalized. All women in prison, however, go through a process of “check-pointization,” or exclusion from national belonging, as evidenced by the extreme
difficulty of finding housing or employment after incarceration, regardless of ethnicity. Within
prison, the discourse of hyper-masculinized, violent criminality associated with men is extended
to women, despite the differences in the populations. As a result, prison designers and wardens
apply the enormous cement structures and disciplinary processes designed to control violence in
men’s prisons to female populations. Dent identifies a global trend in women’s prisons, away
from campus or cabin-style housing to the concrete fortresses that the U.S. is building at an
alarming rate and exporting as the go-to model to contain, control, and further produce violent
criminality globally (1239). The privatized, highly fortified prison is an artifact of globalization,
reproducing the immense cement structures, reductive stereotypes about who criminals are,
tactics for monitoring inmates, and common experiences of incarceration internationally.

When comparing her visits to prisons around the world, Davis notes that the structures
“are uncannily similar. I have always felt as if I am in the same place. No matter how far I have
traveled across time and space” (1237). Jane Evelyn Atwood’s *Too Much Time: Women in
Prison* displays in photographs this eerie sameness in women’s prisons across the globe.
Cementation homogenizes these border zones, imposing the same generalized discourse of
criminalization and the same architectural models and punitive practices that arrest inmates’
mobility. Notions of violent criminality and the tactics of control are reproduced globally, as
Davis notes: “We also have to consider the role that criminology and penology have played in
giving us this striking similarity, not only in the populations but in the methods of control,
architectural models, and custodial practices that devolve from the psychology of the criminal
generalized around the world” (1238). Although the particularities of crime and sentencing vary
widely between countries, the actual structures of prison buildings increasingly resemble each
other.
**Prisons across Borders**

The demand for these cement fortresses is not caused by a rise in criminal activity, but rather by the rise of an industry with vested interests in locking people up. The criminal punishment systems in Mexico and the United States resemble each other through their unequal and exacerbated application of incarceration as a strategy of social control. The U.S. locks up 760 people for every 100,000 citizens (Porter n. pag). Mexico follows with the world’s sixth largest prison population (214,450 people, or 11.1 for every 100,000) (Solís 9). Over half of the Mexico’s prisons are overcrowded, standing at 124 percent capacity at a national level with more than 242,000 prisoners in spaces designed for 195,000 (Solís 11). Preventative detention, the often long-term incarceration of individuals without a sentence, is widespread in Mexico. 43.1% of people in prison in Mexico remain unsentenced, a number that has more than doubled since the 1990s (Solís 9). In comparison, 21.2% of U.S. inmates await sentencing (Porter n. pag.). In both countries, for-profit prison corporations run over half of the facilities. This frames incarceration as a capitalist venture, producing an incentive to cut costs and a vested interest in not reforming the system, preventing crime, or lowering prison populations that results in reduced safety, access to healthcare, and resources for inmates.

In both countries, non-violent “criminals” are increasingly displaced out of their communities and into prison facilities, while governments, corporations, and institutions with impunity continue to wreak massive social and personal damage that is never labeled or tried as crime. The disconnect between the degree of social harm caused and what is prosecuted as crime empties the category of meaning and disconnects it from the sources of true violence in both countries. While many of the artists and poets explored in this chapter have committed damaging acts, the narrative that assumes they belong in prison fails to take into account the shifting
definition of crime in the interests of those with power and resources, the lack of correspondence between harm caused and sentencing, and the overrepresentation of low-income people of color in prison.

As discussed in the introduction, crime is a fluid construction that reflects changing social values, and classifications of crime shift over time and between cultures. Due to the fluid definition of what counts as crime, acts that cause harm and acts that result in incarceration do not correspond in any logical way, as Ruth Wilson Gilmore explains:

While common sense suggests a natural connection between “crime” and “prison,” what counts as crime in fact changes, and what happens to people convicted of crimes does not, in all times and places, result in prison sentences. Defined in the simple terms of the secular state, crime means a violation of the law. Laws change, depending on what, in a social order, counts as stability, and who, in a social order, needs to be controlled. (Gilmore 12)

The relationship of crime to prison is a function of social practice, the perception of social threats, and the interests of those with legislative and monetary power.32 The development of defining certain acts as criminal is not random, but rather systematically targets racialized subjects as a form of social control. Davis, in Are Prisons Obsolete?, traces the discourse of criminality around black bodies from the post-reconstruction era to the present, from the use of the 13th amendment to re-enslave freed Blacks by constructing them as criminals, to the passing of the Black Codes, laws that made unemployment or vagrancy a crime for black people. In The New Jim Crow, Michelle Alexander similarly links previous forms of racialized social control under slavery and segregation with the criminal justice policies that emerged in the 1980s and 90s through the War on Drugs, which target black men, such as mandatory minimums, selective
enforcement, and the exponentially harsher sentencing for crack cocaine—associated with black people—compared with the powder form of the drug, used more often by wealthier white people (53). Davis points to operations in prison as a continuation of the racial profiling that people of color experience in schools and in the streets.

While Alexander’s analysis focuses on the impacts of criminal justice policies on African American communities, Gilmore includes Latinos—particularly Chicanos—in her analysis of the differential sentencing and uneven outcomes applied to people of color in comparison to whites (224). She focuses on California prisons, where the percentage of incarcerated Latinos has surpassed that of black inmates since 1995 (111). Xenophobia and the processes of “check-pointization” explored in the introduction operate alongside anti-black racism to apply the law more severely to individuals who are preemptively criminalized due to their ethnic-racialized appearance. In addition, Katherine Van Wormer and Clemens Bartollas identify the huge increases in the imprisonment of women as a gendered consequence of the War on Drugs policies (13). The majority of these are women of color, as 67% of women in federal prisons are Black or Latina.

The prison system in Mexico also operates as a system of racialized social control, one that maintains indigenous communities’ marginalized position within the nation. The report “La cárcel en México: ¿Para qué?” compiled by the Centro de Análisis de Políticas Públicas finds similarly uneven applications of the law within Mexico. It finds that indigenous populations, mothers, and people living in poverty consistently receive much harsher sentences than non-indigenous, wealthier individuals for identical crimes, and as a result are disproportionately represented in prisons (Solís 48). Currently, twenty percent of incarcerated women in Mexico belong to indigenous communities (Solís 49). Translation services from Spanish to indigenous
languages are often not available at all stages of the criminal process, resulting in defendants who are convicted without fully understanding their cases (Solís 52). Juanita Diaz-Cotto identifies the increased incarceration of monolingual Spanish-speaking women as a result of the U.S. War on Drugs, suggesting that in both countries, language plays an important role alongside racial profiling to enact the differential application of sentences.

Race, ethnicity, and income are not only variables that impact sentencing; gender, too, shapes the differential application of justice. The processes of sentencing and imprisonment in both the U.S. and Mexico occur differently for women than for men, and often women, particularly mothers, receive much harsher sentences than men. 8.9% of U.S. inmates and 5.2% of prisoners in Mexico are women; and these numbers are on the rise. The Mexican population reflects a 175% growth since 1997. Kim Pate maintains that the fact that women are the fastest growing prison population worldwide is not accidental: “we are seeing the increased criminalization and institutionalization of women” (77). While many critics of the prison system recognize the impact of race and class on an individual’s likelihood of going to prison, gender, too, has an enormous impact on sentencing and on the experience of incarceration. Women are much less likely than men to commit violent crimes (almost all violent crimes involve intimate partner violence, and men’s homicide rate is ten times that of women), but the prison systems continue to treat them as high-risk, violent criminals in need of control.

The 2013 report “Violencia institucional ejercida en contra de las mujeres en situación de reclusión” by the non-profit Asistencia Legal por los Derechos Humanos in Mexico denounces the criminal punishment system’s failure to take gender into account. Most women in prison in Mexico are young (67% under 40), have little education (13% have a high school diploma), have children (41% have four or more), and live in poverty (“Violencia institucional” n. pag.).
Preventative detention, a primary fault in the Mexican justice system, is more extreme for women: more than half of the female inmates in Mexico have not been convicted of a crime, and 34% of them have been waiting for processing for over a year, with severely limited access to lawyers. Asistencia Legal documented cases of women detained without a trial for eight years, and found that women in Mexico tend to receive 25% longer sentences than men for identical crimes (n. pag.). The organization also cites extreme overcrowding in women’s prisons, a lack of basic nutrition such as fruit and dairy items, and the absence of access to basic health care services, including gynecological care.

Despite key differences between the Mexican and U.S. prison systems, such as the widespread use of preventative detention in Mexico, the profile of most women incarcerated in the U.S. resemble that of inmates in Mexico, and they also face particularly gendered abuses within the system. They are also young (averaging in their early thirties), and are often survivors of physical and sexual abuse. The fact that 80% of incarcerated women in the U.S. has at least one child under 18 and was a child’s primary care giver before prison impacts families and communities beyond the individual’s sentence. Like Mexican inmates, women in U.S. prisons are typically involved in economically driven crimes such as property, prostitution, and drug-related offenses. The majority of women in state prisons across the United States have not completed high school and many struggle with learning disabilities and literacy challenges. Most U.S. prisons, however, provide limited educational and vocational training, leaving women poorly prepared to successfully transition to the community following their release. Women in prison have higher rates of substance abuse and mental illness than those in the general population, and are more likely to be HIV positive or to have hepatitis C (Silliman 78). Prisons remain poorly equipped to handle these mental and physical health needs.
Attention to gender has long been absent from criminal justice policy. Women face life circumstances that are specific to their gender such as sexual abuse and assault, domestic violence, and the responsibility of being children’s primary caretaker. Women convicted of crimes differ from men in their levels of violence and threats to community safety in their offense patterns, responsibilities for children and other family members, exposure to staff abuse, and differences in programming and service needs while in custody, especially in terms of physical and mental health, substance abuse, and recovery from trauma. The approach to criminal justice that emphasizes punishment rather than treatment has unnecessarily brought masses of low-income, indigenous, and other women of color into the criminal justice system. Pate critiques the current social construction of crime: “Criminalizing poor women stamps them as somehow dangerous to the public, but the fact is, if we are truly interested in addressing actions that harm others . . . [t]hose responsible for and/or complicit in the destruction of our social safety net are in the greatest need of ‘correction’” (78-79). Welfare fraud, prostitution, drug trafficking, and other survival strategies are the acts now deemed worthy of incarceration.

Criminalized women are often punished more for their gender than for their offense. In both countries, drug charges are women’s most common charge, and often, women play small roles in larger crimes planned by men in their lives and receive the same or longer sentences. Criminality is constructed as an extension of deviant sexuality, as shown by the prevalence of harsher sentences for those who do not conform to standards of femininity in their gender presentation or who seem to violate social understandings of respectable motherhood. The current system of gender policing in prisons operates to produce sexual and gender conformity. In *Queer (In)justice*, for example, Ritchie Mogul and Kay Whitlock address stereotypes of queer criminals as inherently more deceptive, as well as carriers of disease. These associations, like
racialized generalizations, allow society and institutional policy to criminalize queerness by dehumanizing it. Queer criminals, the authors maintain, are punished for their queer expression, above and beyond any criminal acts they may commit. The policing of sex and gender, they maintain, “both bolsters and reinforces racial and gender inequalities” (133). Vikki Law argues that mothers in the U.S. tend to receive harsher sentences based on their violation of higher ethical standards associated with maternity (59). The incarcerated muralists and poets examined in this chapter respond to the shared experience of gender-specific exploitation in prison, as they navigate systems that criminalizes their existence without serving their basic needs.

**Prison-time**

Time functions not only as the measure of punishment, but also as a means of control, which plays an essential role in Michel Foucault's disciplinary system. He traces the processes through which prison infrastructure emerged, as sentences moved from public corporeal punishments to the efficient, enclosed space of the prison. He also links the regulation of time with the control of the body’s movements, as a rigid schedule dictates each gesture of the disciplined body: “Time penetrates the body and with it all the meticulous controls of power” (152). While it has replaced officially sanctioned, public physical brutality, time itself now functions as a form of corporal punishment, as it exercises powerful governance over the imprisoned body. Foucault describes the time-table as the strict scheduling and “precision in the breakdown of gestures and movements [that] . . . adjust . . . the body to temporal imperatives” (151). He identifies the interest in increasingly precise, productive, and regulated time as the inheritance of monastic communities, in which monks divided up the work day with religious rituals, in a “rhythmics of time punctuated by pious exercises” (150). The temporal practices of these disciplined religious orders extended into military and pedagogical structures, shaping the
ways that troops marched and schools operated. The time-table, then, developed at the service of the Church and the Nation, disciplining those who protected and labored in the interest of both institutions. As this chapter later explores, inmates’ artistic appropriations and subversion of time as a means of control in prison also draw on the inheritance of disciplinary time as a sign of power within religious institutions. The rescripting of prison’s temporal practices functions to threaten the disciplined use of time that upholds religious authority.

The strict regulation of space in prison, through architecture and policy, restricts inmates’ bodies and, in turn, their identities. Brady examines the spatial manifestations of dominance and control, asserting that “social power continues to solidify itself through the surveillance and manipulation of space” (xi). This is particularly true in the panoptic prison structures, where enclosed cement spaces block inmates’ sight and limit their movement. Their incomplete range of vision and movement contrasts with the penitentiary’s sweeping surveillance, as Belaustegui goitia notes in her description of the women at Santa Martha Acatitla: “Las mujeres están siendo observadas por cámaras y custodios en todos los pasillos y espacios del penal. La visión limitada es para ellas, extensiva para la autoridad” (66). This spatial and visual restriction wears on inmates’ wills and minds, as they express in their comments and artistic production. Belaustegui goitia points to the physical and intellectual deterioration of bodies stuck in space: “En la cárcel, lo que abundan son actividades que aplanan y domestican, que engordan, paralizan y opacan . . . Las mujeres invisibles, en sus barrios, acaban por desaparecer en la cárcel: la piel opaca, gris, la mirada limitada, el intelecto atrofiado. Cuando se hace cárcel, se pasma el cuerpo y la voluntad” (12). She observes lethargic, pallid women, with minds and bodies moving increasingly slowly. The freezing bodies and wills, the gray skin, and the dull stares she
attributes to Santa Martha’s inmates seem to describe corpses in a mortuary more than living women.

Lucero depicts the closed, paralyzing prison border environment as a disarticulated space of death: “Hidden in Prisons a dismal gloom / Dark and Silent and Cold, / like a tomb // This shell that once was a Woman” (n. pag.). Inhabiting prison implies a loss of the life that she now situates in the past tense. She links, then, the physical restrictions of the cold, enclosed, silent cement space to the loss of subjectivity. The line “This shell that once was a Woman” suggests prison’s homogenizing discourses of criminality that does not take gendered differences into account. This experience of cementation encloses her in an in-between territory of death-like stasis: “But for now / Am I alive or am I dead?” She punctuates her poetry with the temporal markers of a perpetual present that allows her neither the refuge of memory nor the peace of death. She remains alive only to the persistent materiality of her containment, as she reminds us “the bonds are real” (n. pag.).

Lucero and Martinez similarly depict the psychological effects of inhabiting the tightly controlled prison space. In an untitled poem, Lucero alludes to the same atrophied, stagnant mental state that Belausteguiigoitia identifies, due to the lack of physical or intellectual movement available: “Here love is lost to bitterness / And the mind rots in idleness” (n. pag.). The sparse economy of her words, simplicity of her terms, and repetitiveness of her rhymes evoke a space in which language itself is a struggle to produce. Martinez laments the limited spatial range of her voice: “when / I call—my voice / reaches the uniformed / guard who only / brings a tray of / cold food” (n. pag.). The ineffectual speech act solidifies the reality of her confines.
A muralist at Santa Martha named Marisa points to the same connection between voice and space when she speaks about silence as a form of immobility. She links the walls that limit her physical movement with the difficulty of speaking: “Silencio son paredes grises” (30). She describes the lack of adequate representation in her trial and in prison as a collective silencing experience: “Fue la voz justamente lo primero que perdimos . . . Solas sin voz, en un silencio vacío somos víctimas. Ser víctima es no poder contar, ser víctima es haber perdido la voz” (40). She uses a spatial adjective, one of concavity and absence, vacío, to describe the lost capacity for speech she feels in prison. In a similar gesture, Lucero captures the dehumanizing, silencing force of prison by signing each of her poems with her prison identification number, #21918. This action, however, is diametrically opposed to the direct, deeply personal voice of the content of her poems. Through this opposition, she at once reproduces and resists the prison’s official representation of her. B.V. Olguín points to prisons’ “rigidly enforced speech codes that prohibit ‘unladylike’ words (including cursing),” demonstrating that the inmates’ experience of lost speech is not purely metaphorical, but also a material feature of prisons’ restrictions (69).

In “A Question of Why?” Martinez also emphasizes the fact of her physical limitations: “three and four inmates / living in 6x8 cells, overcrowded,” and in “Slow Death” she links the enclosed space with her limited range of vision: “The cold solid / bar with only / a tiny rectangular / window” (n. pag.). Her depiction of a confined, stagnant space (“the musty smell, the / cobwebs / that touch my / face”) leads to a longing for the ability to see past the walls that contain her, in lines such as “I miss the stars” and “I lost my way, / and couldn’t find the sun” (n. pag.). As in Lucero’s verses, the prolonged experience of enclosure and the visual constraints produces an environment in which the dead resemble the living: “I could / smell the dead bodies / and those who survived / huddled in // state issue blankets.” The uniform and constricted nature
of the container results in a uniform, immobile population of inmates that, in their morbid stasis, resemble each other. This death-like life becomes the entire foreseeable future, negating any other possible realities: “There’s nothing left to say / I will die a slow death” (n. pag.). Her experience of death in life extends forward in time, in a prediction of stagnant sameness that forecloses the prospect of further speech. Prison’s restricted space produces a distinct experience of time, as a measure of monotonous uniformity.

Both poets display an almost obsessive awareness of time. They scatter temporal markers through their poems, aware that time is the very material of their punishment. In writing the date of her act of writing into her poem, Martinez dwells perpetually in that moment: “cold and hungry on / February 2, 1980,” while she continues to count: “Two and a half more years / left in this rotting place” (n. pag.). In the space of the poem, readers remain suspended in 1980, anticipating time that never progresses. A line of Martinez’s poetry cited by critics as an indictment of racial profiling, indicates an awareness that punishment and discipline are composed of time: “Remember—technically, / I’m doing time / because I used to be / a drug addict” (n. pag.). She defamiliarizes the common phrase “doing time,” to emphasize the materiality of the act of living through time in prison. The muralists, too, refer repeatedly to time as the substance structuring their experience: the length of their sentences, the time that shapes the prison schedule, or the time that they have been waiting for bureaucratic processing. The artist Lucy explains: “Me tuvieron 6 meses en proceso y me dieron 22 años de sentencia, yo no sabía por qué,” and Aída adds that “a un hombre con robo agravado le dieron 2 años y a una mujer le dieron 6” (74, 166). They present the numbers like coded variables of an equation that fails to add up, signifying the measurement system that contains them, dictating their reality despite its flawed metrics.
In prison, the disciplinary time-tables, or “[p]ower articulated directly onto time,” coerce and control inmates’ bodies (Foucault 160). In the poem “Jail-Life Walk,” Lucero links the control of time in prison with the regulation of bodily movement. The temporal regularity imposed by the prison schedule dictates the duration and range of each physical gesture: “Walk in the day…Walk in the night / Count off the time…One to Ten” (n. pag.). The spatial restriction of movement similarly parallels the use of time as a mechanism of control in Mexican muralist Maria Isela’s description of life in prison. Both limit her mobility: “Estar rodeadas de alambres de púas, escuchar el candado que se cierra cada noche a las ocho, estar infestadas de ratas, llenarte de chinches” (76). The regularity of the prison time-table, her gate’s closure every night at the same time, like the rigidity of the architecture itself, restricts and regulates movement.

The uniformity of the repeated schedule ensures that in prison, nothing changes. The strict adherence to the time-table creates the experience of time standing still, a loop on repeat that does not vary. Writing about the experience of wasted time in Beckett’s Waiting for Godot, critic Judith Halberstam argues that, “Temporal stasis is figured as immobility” (7). This is true, too, in prison, where the repetition of prison’s monotonous scheduling operates alongside its cement walls as a strategy of containment. Time stands still in the perpetual sameness of prison in Martinez’s poem “Twenty-Two Minutes”: “Twenty-two minutes / before eight o’clock / nothing ever changes” (n. pag). Controlled, repeated movement devoid of self-expression, as in Lucero’s refrain “Walk in the night / Count off the time,” like controlled, repeated time-tables, in their circularity, produce a form of stasis comparable to the absence of physical movement. Lucero’s heavy use of ellipses and repetition drags out the experience of each poem, suspending readers between words and bringing them back continually to the same words: “The night is dark / The night is cold . . . The night is long” (n. pag.). Belaustegui-goitia describes this prison-time as
“tiempo estancado,” blocked, or stagnant time that, in its perpetual repetition, does not progress (145). The muralist Aída states her longing for an experience of time that moves: “En esta situación de encierro el tiempo para mí significa otra cosa. No me fijo en la vejez de la persona, veo el tiempo de diferente manera, en cuánto tiempo voy a estar aquí; lo quiero ver rápido, pero no en arrugas sino en velocidad, en días que pasan” (28-29). She does not want temporal wrinkles, gaps that would absent her from her own experience, but rather desires speed, a spatial, physical experience that could break her out of the sensation of stagnant prison-time. In prison, time is everything—the measure of punishment and means of discipline—and nothing, a missing marker that refuses to move.

Prison-time’s tight control and repetitive stasis not only limit motion, but also the capacity for feeling. Ethel, another muralist at Santa Martha, experiences incarceration as a numbing paralysis, locked in time: “El dolor te adormece en la cárcel y te envuelve como en una capsula del tiempo donde no te acuerdas de nada (88). She describes pain as a lack of emotion or memory, an experience of being absented from her own affect. She imagines herself inside of a time capsule, linking this dulling of feeling with an image of both spatial and temporal isolation and enclosure. Martinez similarly articulates the loss of her ability to feel: “don’t worry, I’ve stopped / hurting” (n. pag.). This numbing is coupled with a loss of the physical movements that express feeling and maintain life: “I can’t breathe / or laugh” (n. pag.). Lucero’s verses also depict an emotional state of limbo: “I love and I don’t / I hate and I don’t / I sing and I don’t / I live and I don’t” (Lucero, n. pag.). She can only generate half-affects, in between the territory and temporality of the living and the dead, the speaking and the silent, the feeling and the numb. This in-between existence characterizes the prolonged experience of suspension in the border zone of the penitentiary.
Border crossing is not only a spatial activity, but also a temporal one. Mary Pat Brady describes state borders as boundaries in time, as each nation anxiously and ambiguously places itself on a temporal scale in relationship to modernity. “Crossing the border in this logic,” she argues, “involves crossing from one temporality into another (50). If physically or metaphorically crossing a border means moving from one temporality to another, from one state of relative modernity to another, then the border itself—in this case the prison—is a space outside of time, in-between time zones and barred from the development of the states that surround it. Nations exclude inmates from the rights of citizenship, and therefore also from their modernization efforts. The prison and border apparatuses’ technologies of containment progress with the nation, more efficiently immobilizing the border inhabitants in time and space.

Limitations on education while incarcerated, and on voting and employment after release in the U.S. ensure the impossibility of inmates’ reintegration into the nation. The prison’s control over inmates depends on the maintenance of prison-time: a tightly controlled time-table that suspends prisoners in a perpetual present and excludes them from the temporalities of those included in national citizenship.

Citizen-time

The time practices applied to ideal citizens maintain state borders by reproducing the values, goods, and subjects that ensure the continuation of the nation. Judith Halberstam defines the temporalities that uphold familial stability: “the time of inheritance,” the generational passing on of values and wealth; “reproductive time,” the measures by which couples plan the timing of their children; and “family time,” the daily time-table planned around child rearing (5). She associates these temporalities with “strict bourgeois rules of respectability and scheduling” and the assumption that they are natural, desirable, and healthy (5). I argue that the idealized position
of the family unit in both the U.S. and Mexico extends the temporalities associated with the perpetuation of the family to also represent national stability. Family time’s “normative scheduling of daily life (early to bed, early to rise)” resembles prison’s time-table, but aims to perpetuate productive citizens by forming and passing on notions of propriety efficiency, and progress, rather than to contain undesirable or criminalized people (Halberstam 5).

Inheritance time, reproductive time, and family time as facets of what I call citizen-time, as they do not only promote the heterosexual, wealthy familial structure, but also operate on a national level to supply the state with compliant, productive citizens. Citizen-time operates under “the logic of capital accumulation,” which is inaccessible to the inmates who produce capital for privatized prison factories but do not collect it (Halberstam 10). Female inmates, in violation of the requirements of desirable national and familial membership, are subjected to “a domesticating regimen of forced labor in prison jobs such as sewing, laundry, cooking, and cleaning” (Olguín 69). This occurs not to reintegrate incarcerated women as potential members of both nations, but rather to control their ethnically marked, “questionable” bodies. In exile from the project of familial and national reproduction, the failed subjects of citizen-time are condemned to prison-time.

Queer time, which occurs outside of the time structured around reproduction, inheritance, efficiency, and capital production, operates in opposition to both citizen-time and prison-time, which both aim to structure and control in order to promote and protect the nation. Halberstam situates this new temporal logic in relationship to literature produced in response to the AIDS epidemic. In this analysis queer temporality extends to the border space of women’s prisons, while examining the shifting meaning of agency in this space. Halberstam and Muñoz define queer subjects as those who engage in “willfully eccentric modes of being” and “opt to live
outside of reproductive and familial time as well as on the edges of logics of labor and production” (Halberstam 1, 10). In emphasizing the optionality of this positionality, she underestimates the extent to which, even outside of prison, dwelling outside of reproductive time is less a question of will and more often a question of forceful exclusion. Those considered unfit for citizenship are barred from the citizen-time, as the option to participate in that temporality is only available to those considered desirable citizens to begin with. Inmates in particular do not opt out of citizen-time; they are cast out of it. Incarcerated women exist outside of reproductive time and the logics of capital production by force, not as a willful choice. They become queer subjects not through the fact of this exclusion, but through their response to it.

Inmates’ exclusion from reproductive time does not mean that they do not reproduce. Indeed, over eighty percent of the inmates at Santa Martha Acatitla are mothers. Nationally, over eighty percent of women incarcerated in Mexico and seventy-eight percent of female U.S. inmates have children (Law 12). In prison, births occur outside of the timeline and structure considered respectable, and so the reproduction of those already outside of national belonging, cast out from citizen-time, is seen as threatening and destabilizing to the nation. The notion of motherhood-while-incarcerated (as well as art-making and poetry-writing in prison) functions as what I see as a queer positionality and temporality, as it challenges notions of who, how, and when reproduction or creativity should occur, opposing “a middle-class logic of reproductive temporality” and notions of respectability and normalcy within the institution of the family and the nation (Halberstam 4). Although same-sex intimacy is commonplace in prison, the penitentiary can act as a queer space beyond the physical realm, through the enactment of queer conceptions of time. My understanding of queerness here refers to the antinormative practice of temporalities outside of the majoritarian belonging of citizenship.
For prison inmates, exiled from the temporalities of citizenship, the present is a suspended experience of immobility. In Cruising Utopia, José Esteban Muñoz highlights the insufficiency, rigidity, and immobility of what he calls “the quagmire of the present” (1). “The here and now,” he says, “is a prison house. We must strive, in the face of here and now’s totalizing rendering of reality, to think and feel a then and there” (1). His metaphorical framing of the limitations of the present moment particularly resonates in actual prison environments, which constructs a totalizing present that negates movement and subjectivity. For citizens, adhering to the demands of citizen-time in the present ensures the benefits of national belonging, but for criminalized populations in particular, “[t]he present is not enough. It is impoverished and toxic for queers and other people who do not feel the privilege of majoritarian belonging,” a category that inmates are already always excluded from (Muñoz 27). In prison, the present moment operates as a strategy of containment that restricts possible alternative futures. Lucero articulates the sensation of enclosure within prison’s here and now: “in this place of sorrow nobody / ever talks about tomorrow” (n. pag.). Inmates’ aesthetic production that does dare to articulate a future, then, threatens citizen-time by queering, or operating independent from, the controlling prison time-table.

Queer Time

People who enact queer time imagine a future around temporal markers other than the normative measures of citizen-time (birth, marriage, reproduction, and death). Prison obliterates and obscures those life-markers, replacing them by force with cycles of conviction, sentencing, appeals, and parole, and with the stasis that characterizes prison-time. The forceful segregation from citizen-time and its markers of life experience does not in and of itself constitute a queer temporality. Those who defy the suspended, oppressive present of prison-time by imagining a
future distinct from and despite their expulsion from citizen-time, however, do enact queer time, or “the potentiality of a life unscripted by the conventions of family, inheritance, and child rearing” (Halberstam 2). The annihilation of familial and financial benefits of belonging occurs in prison by force. Inmates, criminalized individuals always already outside of the respectable conventions of citizenship, produce a queer temporality when they envision a potential future even within the violent annihilation of their normative temporal practices.

The enactment of alternative temporalities that dwell in the future as resistance to the rigid bounds of the present takes form through the production of horizons. Queer time occurs through the temporal and spatial intervention of horizon production. Muñoz frames the project of queer futurity: “We may never touch queerness, but we can feel it as the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality” (1). Horizons make possible the imagining of an alternative future and allow viewers to imagine “other ways of being in the world, and ultimately new worlds” (Muñoz 1). The muralist Natacha describes the effect of expanding her view by physically painting horizons onto the prison walls that surround her: “Ese hoyo me da horizontes, posibilidad de sonar” (124). (See image 2.5) The river in this mural’s window into another world creates the sensation of movement; beginning in the foreground and extending outward, it seems to carry the viewer with it into the landscape. As they produce these painted horizons, the women begin to speak in the future and the conditional tenses, imagining themselves into other potential realities. The muralist Lucero expresses “La esperanza de decir, un día, quizá, yo pasaré, yo pisaré la calle” (180-81). The fluidity of the movement the muralists produce in these images functions as a challenge to the border space of prisons and as a temporal take-over of the institution’s means of control.
The muralists take ownership of time, repositioning it from a form of institutional punishment and control to a creative resource and a space for imagining distinct futures, as Natacha shows with her statement that “Aquí tenemos todo el tiempo del mundo” (160-61). The murals appropriate prison-time to, as Muñoz puts it, “insist on an ordering of life that is not dictated by the spatial/temporal coordinates of straight time” (31). Barred from the temporalities of citizenship, the muralists visually produce other ways of experiencing and ordering time. The immense mural, called “Fuerza, tiempo y esperanza,” consists of hundreds of floating hourglasses floating through the cosmos, placing time itself in a spiraling motion, in opposition to the linear, rigid timetable and lines within prison. (See images 2.6-2.9). The hourglass functions as a visual representation of time that the artists can shape and control. “Para movilizar el tiempo,” Belausteguiigoitia states that the artists in collaboration with teachers designed “pequeños relojes de arena” (145). With the mural, the women interrupt prison-time to produce a queer, anticipatory temporality in active visual engagement with the concept of time, and a sense of ownership over their experience of time. They fill the hourglasses with images of movement: wings flying and women supporting each other as they climb beyond the confines of the hourglass (See image 2.8), a half-woman-half-tree creature with roots and branches growing outside the glass, boats sailing, and families journeying toward horizons (See image 2.9). As the muralists expand their visual environments, they also produce horizons that widen their spatial and subjective experiences. This visual reinvention of time not only enlarges the views available in prison and develops fantasies for possible futures, but also alters the way that the artists define themselves and move while in prison.

The enactment of queer time, while forward-gazing, creates movement in the present. The project of painting horizons and rescripting time, then, changes inmates’ experiences while
in prison. Muñoz discusses the production of a horizon of queer futurity as a thrust or force that creates motion in the here and now: “Queerness,” he writes, “is a longing that propels us onward” (1). It is propulsion in the present that moves subjects toward a horizon. The painted horizons of Santa Martha’s muralists function as a temporal and spatial intervention in the prison environment that remobilizes their bodies and identities in the present. The immensity of the mural medium necessitates motion, as muralist David Siqueiros stated: “A los murales hay que mirarlos con los pies” (qtd. in Belausteguiigoitia 240). As discussed in the introduction, Siqueiros, along with Rivera and Orozco, produced murals from within a central location in the nation, federally funded and commissioned, and painting onto the surfaces of institutional government buildings within Vasconcelos’ vision for the post-revolutionary nation. The Santa Martha Acatitla muralists perhaps share more with Chicano muralists, who painted from a marginalized, criminalized position, than with their Mexican forerunners. Mexico’s history of including art within official spaces, however, probably contributed to the governmental approval of the *Mujeres en espiral* project in the first place, which contrasts sharply with the gray institutional walls of U.S. facilities.

The bodily movements required to produce murals challenge the cementation of prison’s rigid, immense architecture and stagnant, blocked temporality. The muralists access new angles and perspectives as they paint. They rise onto ladders, see the walls from a different angle, and even see over them, coming into a new spatial relationship with the walls that confine them. *(See images 2.10 and 2.11).* Ethel expresses her thrill to: “Poder subir por el caracol, poder ver el cielo, poder ver a lo lejos, sin rejas es una emoción increíble” (116). The worlds and horizons imagined through the murals alter the inmates’ affect and physical experiences in the present. The act of planning and painting the images is demanding, puts bodies in motion, physically and
intellectually, and even shifts the bodily orientation and posture of many of the artists.

Belausteguigoitia states her desire for the muralists’ movement: “Queremos que las mujeres aquí levanten la cara, no se puede pintar un muro de estas dimensiones mirando para abajo” (90). This change in vision challenges the very mechanisms of control on which the prison border zone depends. The muralist Polo articulates the impact of her work on the cement structure around her: “Desbaratamos y le doblamos las dimensiones y los ángulos a la arquitectura carcelaria” (217). The physical, visual shift in the prison space parallels a bodily shift in the muralists, who find new movements, ways of seeing, and relationships to the future possible, no longer entirely contained by prison-time and architecture.

Given that prison-time operates in and through the body as a form of spatial, physical, control, queer time, in its propulsion toward the future, is equally physical, occurring through bodily movements and by imagining the physical body into its alternative worlds. In this large-scale beach-horizon mural at Santa Martha Acatitla, the artists include larger-than-life self-portraits, dressed in bright colors and striking exuberant postures: arms raised, legs strolling the beach and pedaling a bicycle (See image 2.12). They portray themselves, on this horizon, in motion, living, vibrant, and active, making their bodies and individual identities visible and distinct, projected into the imagined future of the mural.\(^{38}\) One woman paints herself with binoculars gazing outward towards the sea, in an act of self-representation that extends her horizon even beyond the canvas of the mural. The precolonial imagery of the Aztec sun’s enormous tongue in this mural signals the women’s ability to speak and create, in rejection of the silencing effects of prison-time and the narrative of victimhood that links spatial-temporal restrictions with the loss of speech. This mural’s vivid depiction of movement and its symbolic representation of speech are essential to the possibility of imaging a future. The artist Liz states
her newfound belief that “El mundo puede ser mejor cuando protestas, cuando no te quedas callado, cuando resistes” (126). The resistant voice of the muralists’ creative motion in the present produces the capacity to envision a potential future.

Employing language as a form of motion and protest, Lucero and Martinez both produce linguistic horizons. They use their poetic voices to first depict prison’s sensation of stasis and enclosure, as examined earlier in the chapter. Then, like the muralists, both poets articulate the possibility of a future outside of or beyond prison-time. Martinez envisions a horizon in the possibility of release from prison: “But remember, smiling, / they can’t keep us in / here forever” (n. pag.). She negates the sense of totality that prison-time works to produce. Lucero employs the conditional tense to indicate a wish for the future: “Somehow I wish it would get better…/ Even a visit or a letter even” (n. pag.). In stating this desire, Lucero positions herself within a possibility; setting up a relationship to time that differs enormously from the trapped, repetitive earlier poems in her collection. Martinez boldly creates potentiality in articulating her desire for a distinct time and space: “I want to cruise down / Central on Sunday afternoon” (Martinez). She imagines a specific time and place that exceed her current confines, and a bodily motion—cruising—that expresses whim and unboundedness. Embedded in Lucero’s wish and Martinez’s want is a deep longing. They enact an anticipatory, future-oriented “longing that propels” that is fundamentally connected to desire (Muñoz 1). Desire itself is an expression of queer time, a form of resistance in the face of prison-time’s numbing paralysis. It conceives of a future and articulates a yearning not possible within the affective and physical immobility of prison’s time tables.

Anticipatory affect functions as a sign of life and a form of movement into the future. Martinez claims her capacity to express emotion as a resource that separates her from prison-
time’s total control: “all my thoughts and feelings. This / they can’t take away” (n. pag.). Her ownership over her feelings, like the muralists’ ownership of their experience of time, undermines the prison disciplinary system. Lucero describes her feeling as capable of reshaping her surroundings: “And we can’t touch… / Only smile to fill in the space” (n. pag.). The gesture of smiling, which physically communicates feeling through the body, impacts the spatial regulation in prison. Lucero uses capital letters for the emotions associated with the future, turning Hope and Desire into active characters that allow her employ the future tense and speak of a possible different future: “Possibly madness now / only saves our ‘other’ sanity for tomorrow / for then we won’t just stare at each / other with Hope. // Hope will be repacked / by its Desire fulfilled” (n. pag.). By animating these forward-gazing feelings as proper nouns, she grants them materiality and links them to the articulation of future events.

The production of horizons is as much an affective project as a bodily one. Muñoz associates queer time with an extreme experience of emotion. He describes the horizon as an escape from temporal stasis coupled with highly heightened feeling: “To see queerness as horizon is to perceive it as a modality of ecstatic time in which the temporal stranglehold that I describe as straight time is interrupted or stepped out of. Ecstatic time is signaled at the moment one feels ecstasy, announced perhaps in a scream or grunt of pleasure” (Muñoz 32). This intensity of feeling, which suggests movement out of the here and now, is what propels the queer subject toward a future outside the rigidity and control of prison-time or citizen-time. The use of ecstasy as an access to queer time suggests sexual experience and drug use, both of which are commonplace though officially forbidden in prison. Some of the most dynamic images in the murals joyfully and overtly depict female sexuality, such as the upward-gazing nude portrait bursting with color, curves, and movement (See image 2.13). The corner at the seam of the large-
scale sea horizon and self-portrait mural is a well-known site of sexual encounters in the Santa Martha prison geography, and perhaps functions as a space of access to ecstatic time (See image 2.14). Martinez alludes to moments of affective ecstasy in the confessional drug narratives she includes in her verses, presenting drug use as moments of alternative experiences of space: “I was smoking a joint / & I saw the different colors” (n. pag.). When, as in prison, time and space are the mechanisms of control, sex and drug use offer the possibility of moving outside of the present time and space through heightened feeling. Their prohibition within prison, however, makes them the target of further prison regulation.

Religious experience, also evoked by Muñoz’s use of the term “ecstatic time,” operates within prison as a state-sanctioned practice. In both Mexico and the U.S., religious programming exceeds educational and artistic opportunities in prison, a discrepancy that has grown in the U.S. since the 1994 revoking of Pell grant eligibility for all inmates. When the protagonist of Jennifer Clement’s Prayers for the Stolen enters the Santa Martha Acatitla prison as an inmate, for example, her cellmate initiates her: “They’re all trying to convert us, Luna said. Mormons, Evangelists, Baptists, Methodists, Catholics. Everyone. The missionaries come to the jail on Sunday, and sometimes they get in on other days, you’ll see. Every God is in this prison” (162). While the religious activity in prison often functions as an extension of institutional regulation, or as a further effort to domesticate and control the “fallen” convicts excluded from national belonging, the creative reframing of the vocabulary of spirituality also offers the possibility of resistance against prison-time’s immobilizing force. The range of Christian denominations that make up the evangelizing presence in prisons employ a variety of tactics, including the offering of communion, prayer services, and the singing of hymns. The Catholic evangelists worship with highly visual religious iconography, or pictorial representations of sanctity, while other traditions
fully reject such imagery or, given the sparse, controlled visual economy of prison, use alternative methods of worshipping and reaching out to inmates, such as prayer, song, and the reading of scripture. What the religious programs present in prisons have in common is a sacred schedule, or temporal practices that access divine experience. Lucero and Martinez evoke the temporal markers of the Christian calendar in their poetry, appropriating sacred measures of time in order to enact queer time’s anticipatory affect.

**Sacred Time**

The monastic and military origins of prisons’ time-tables that Foucault points out links prison, religion, and the nation through the shared rigidity of their temporal practices (150). Through this connection, they function as sites of national identity and the regulation of citizenship in both the U.S. and Mexico. The Christian Church’s cyclical calendar and structured operations resemble prison-time in their regularity, just as both institutions resemble each other in their authority and policing of belonging. By resituating religious time as a resource within prison, both Lucero and Martinez lay claim to and repossess the authority associated with the religious institution.

By using drawing on religious calendars to express queer temporalities, the artists and poets are “queering spirituality,” enacting a form of spirit possession that takes place through the appropriation of sacred temporal practices rather than of saints’ images (Delgadillo 4). I focus on the use of sacred time as a means of transferring authority and identity. By employing sacred temporalities to produce horizons and imagine futures beyond prison-time, Lucero and Martinez invoke religious measures of time in order to enact queer time and to endow it with the Church’s authority. This shifting of sacred temporality from institutional structure to prison resource also
involves a regendering, from patriarchal authority, the domain of male priests central to the nation, to female inmates and artists barred from citizenship.

The poem “Christmas Time” functions as the temporal epicenter of Lucero’s collection (n. pag.). She places her poetic voice within the religious calendar in order to transfer the holiday’s significance into her experience of time in prison. Advent season, in the Christian calendar, is full of the anticipatory affect of longing and expectancy, waiting and preparing for Christ’s birth. It is a time of dwelling in horizons. Lucero places the poetic voice of an incarcerated woman and her daughter at the core of the poems “A Little Girl’s Prayer” and “Christmas Sacrifice,” transferring Advent’s ritual expectancy and longing to existence in prison. The shifting of this affect from institutional ritual to inmate’s lament positions Advent’s longing as a horizon of queer time. Lucero first evokes the holiday in order to contrast the familial ritual celebration with the stasis of prison. “Now that Christmas Time is near / I can see the loneliness in the air,” she writes, emphasizing prison’s bleak existence by noting the absence of Christmas’ material excess (n. pag.). The contradiction exacerbates her experience of time as restricted mobility: “In my lonesome cell, alone with / bitterness and hurt for companions / the time slowly passes by” (n. pag.). By evoking the sacred time through the language of the poem, however, Christmas’ hopefulness and anticipation become present for the poetic voice. The mother and daughter become connected in the space of the poems despite prison’s restrictive control. In another move of spiritual repossession, the child repurposes prayer as a way of connecting with her mother rather than with a divine presence. They connect, too, through the simultaneous bodily gesture of praying on their knees, and through the shared sentiments of loneliness and longing.
Taking advantage of nativity’s affective economy, Lucero aligns her poetic voice with the ideal saintly motherhood of the Virgin Mary. She uses this displaced association to affirm a motherhood that takes place outside of the respectable bourgeois structure of reproductive time. Both Christmas poems focus on the mother’s separation from her daughter. She is not in the home to celebrate, nor is she there to enforce family-time’s healthy schedules. The girl remains awake in the middle of the night because the mother cannot tuck her in with a structured bed time. The daughter shows her lack of initiation within the Church’s educational methods, which resemble prison’s time-tables. The girl prays despite her lack of institutional training: “I don’t know how to pray real good… / But Mommy taught me the way she could” (n. pag.). Without mediation from patriarchal Church authorities, the prayer succeeds in linking the displaced family members, asserting the girl’s ownership over her own spiritual practices. With the line “But Mommy taught me the way she could,” the poetic voice claims the legitimacy of reproduction and education outside of citizen-time, forging alternative structures for familial existence that do not exist to uphold national security and belonging.

Lucero positions her poetic voice, rather than God or saints, as the focal point of the poems’ sacred references. While immersed within a spiritual temporality and religious discourse, the central questions of “Christmas Sacrifice” are “just who am I?” and “Am I alive or am I dead?” and the poem’s twenty lines contain the words “I” or “my” fourteen times (n. pag.). Her spiritual vocabulary, which she capitalizes to perhaps sanctify the words themselves, becomes increasingly self-referential. In the poem “Comfort,” for example, Lucero employs the vocabulary of spirituality—using words such as sanctuary, soul, and prayer—to address her internal psychological state: “I must not fret my present madness. It is / a Sanctuary for the lonely hours and so / very comforting to the Soul” (n. pag.). Retreating further inwards, rather
than seeking communion with an external divine figure, becomes a strategy for enduring prison-time, but it is the terminology of spirituality—that which evokes a horizon, or a reality or a future beyond that which is immediately visible—that allows her to articulate and enact that tactic.

In the final stanza of “Christmas Sacrifice,” Lucero locates the mother’s story of separation from her daughter within the narrative of Christ’s death:

But even tho I can’t help remember
That God’s son died to make things better, and
So also I know, that I must pay
No, sacrifice my Christmas day—my daughter’s gone (n. pag.)

With the words “my daughter’s gone,” she breaks the rhyme scheme and ends the poem, returning to the material reality of isolation in prison. Within the space of the poem, however, she enacts an alternative temporality, one in which the Christian discourse displaces prison-time and mediates the mother’s own experience. She draws on the affective power of the religious language and time in order to capture the intensity of her own experience. By making the emotion around the Christian Messiah’s death her own, she regenders the story of sacred sacrifice and sanctifies her own suffering. B.V. Olguín argues that through this move, Lucero displaces Christ in order to turn herself into a Goddess. She produces blasphemy against the Judeo-Christian God that betrayed her, he claims, in order to clear divine space for a series of new Gods to come: first the Penitentiary itself becomes a deity, the “barbed wire Penitentiary God,” then eventually Lucero canonizes herself as “Convict Mother Goddess” and “Convict Virgin of Guadalupe” (Olguín 67, 73). While I do not see evidence for Olguín’s argument that Lucero crowns and debunks a whole pantheon of new gods, I agree that she recognizes the
Christian God, Church, and religious practices as sites of authority, which she repossesses, transferring the power from the sacred to the secular, from the divine to the self. She invokes the vocabulary—particularly the temporal vocabulary—of Christianity in order to personalize and reclaim the divine institution’s authority and thus reshape her poetic voice’s immediate experience of time and space.

Both Lucero and Martinez return repeatedly to the theme of falling, evoking the Christian motifs of descent and rebirth as temporal and spatial events. In “Don’t Worry,” Martinez frames descent as a confession: “you already know / I’ve fallen a thousand times,” and in “Slow Death,” she uses the image of falling in the collection’s title line, *Where Eagles Fall*, to emphasize the limitations on mobility within prison, a place where limbs meant to move become useless: “this rotting place / where eagles fall” (n. pag). As subjects cast out of the spaces and temporalities open to citizens, they reclaim and rewrite their subjectivities as “fallen women.” Both revise the motif to affirm movement, Martinez turning to a narrative of earthly regeneration in the natural world, and Lucero to the Christian narrative of spiritual resurrection. In the poem “I am Fall,” Martinez depicts descent as a facet of nature’s seasonal beauty: “The leaves fluttering / down, gold and rust red” (n. pag.). The movement of her verb, “flutter,” is ornamental and superfluous, at odds with the rigid lines and movements structured by prison-time. The leaves’ movement leads to those of a human subject leisurely enjoying the sensation of contact with the natural world: “Hear the crunch of them / as you step” (n. pag.). This “Fall,” then, facilitates contact and motion that trigger sensorial delight, contrasting with the collection’s depictions of death-like life within prison.

In the poem “Face of Fear,” Lucero too finds movement and produces a horizon by narrating her fall:
Help me, O God, when Death is near, to
Mock the haggard Face of Fear.
Then when I fall, my soul may Triumph in the Dust… (n. pag.)

Though she speaks of her descent, she employs the future tense in the poem’s final line, breaking out of the prison house of the present’s temporal trappings, and making even downward motion into a new horizon. The lines appear on the surface a dogmatic glossing of Psalms, but Lucero in fact enters a queer temporality through her negotiation of the descent motif, in the simultaneous rejection of the concept of progress, linked to notions of bourgeois productivity and reproductive time tables, and conceptualization of an alternative future or world. Prison-time, a perpetual “when Death is near” cedes to the sacred time of her soul’s resurrection. In opposition to the penitentiary, she queers the spiritual discourse of envisioning a future beyond death.

In Martinez’s verses, the Catholic saints and rituals are signifiers of cultural belonging that express her longing for human intimacy. She writes with a tradition that situates the Virgin of Guadalupe as a living medium, a way to access the divine through the human. Martinez reverses this, seeking to access human connection through the divine.

I’ve prayed to the Virgen de Guadalupe
and lit thousands of candles to St. Jude
and the Santo Nino . . .
I want to reach out
to touch you (n. pag).

She links devotional communion with worldly connection and moves from the past tense to articulate a horizon, or desire for the future. Martinez continues, seeming to extend her yearning out through the poem to the reader, as she addresses an unnamed audience: “How can I really
touch you / so that you could understand” (n. pag.). This longing becomes realized in the last two poems of her collection, which employ a collective voice and the future tense, breaking out of the time and space of prison. The penultimate poem, “Take a Plane,” turns toward an entirely alternative world outside the penitentiary, joyful, anticipatory, and shared with a human partner:

Let’s take a plane
to New York City
let’s see if the skies
have pretty sunsets . . .
and if there’s hope
and laughter left
Let’s take a plane
and discover these things
together (n. pag).

The poem pushes readers toward affect, vision, and movement unimaginable within prison, as the view from an airplane is nothing but horizon. The image of flight contrasts with the limited sights and sense of enclosure depicted within prison, and with the collection’s title line, “where eagles fall,” which suggests a failure to move. The collective voice, employed for the first time in the collection, contrasts with the isolation of her previous first-person verses. Her final, untitled, poem, the only one in Spanish, is a love poem that delivers the intimacy she longs for earlier, and in doing so suggests internal, interpersonal horizons that exceed any landscape view: “El sol, ni tampoco las estrellas, / nunca comparan con la luz que // Usted me ha dado” (n. pag).

Her move to Spanish in the final poem crosses linguistic borders, suggesting connection and communication beyond the isolation of her cement cell, with another Spanish speakers in her
past. The plural voice and the sense of interpersonal connection that both poets arrive at by their final poems reflect the collective, collaborative nature of the muralists’ work at Santa Martha Acatitla.

**Conclusion**

Murals are by nature a collective genre, too massive and multifaceted to be realized without the cooperation of many participants. The mural “Fuerza, tiempo y esperanza,” which consists of hundreds of spiraling hourglasses filled with longing for alternative futures, is encased by the curved walkways painted with women’s intertwined hands (*See image 2.6*). The layering of the images, with one wall wrapping around another, makes it appear that the women’s hands collectively hold up the vision of temporal repossession. In a space where touching is regulated, the intimacy of the connected hands challenges prison’s physical policing, embracing potentiality in communal solidarity, with a gesture of protection towards the women’s visualized horizons.

In her final poem, Lucero too turns from the first person to a shared voice, but ends mid-breath, unable to articulate the complete collective thought. “The Right to Live (unfinished)” reads, in its entirety:

> The lost feeling is what I sometimes feel
> And it makes me stop and think
> If all this worthless misery
> Will drive us to (n. pag.)

The disarticulated, incomplete verse emphasizes the poetic voice’s affect, or capacity to feel. In the end, however, this does not save the poet. The blank silence of the page encloses the words, overtaking the poem to the point that speech itself becomes impossible. There is no horizon in
these closing words, no future propulsion or alternative world. Olguín argues that Lucero achieves release from prison “only through death,” sentimentalizing her suicide by reading it as an extended signifier of her poetry, and thus conflating her biography and poetic voice (69). This move does a disservice to her work, which on a linguistic and aesthetic level does enact strategies of resistance to prison’s regulation and uneven distribution of justice. The desperation of her final lines further illuminates the moments of resistance, and the horizon seen throughout the collection.

The incarcerated muralists and poets intervene in their sentences through their aesthetic production. Their work, which operates often on the level of metaphor and imagination, does alter the real experiences of women in prison. As a survival strategy in the numbing, controlled prison environment, their art and words reframe their perception of time and of their own identities. Murals and poems function as powerful tools of resistance, but they do not rewrite public policy, appeal sentences, reform abusive prison conditions, or even publicize problems with the criminal punishment system, given the small circulation of these works. Muñoz states that “Often we can glimpse the worlds proposed and promised by queerness in the realm of the aesthetic” (1). Prison activists committed to an alternative world of criminal justice find the glimpse of change offered through the arts insufficient. Collaborators in the Mujeres en espiral project have instituted an ongoing legal clinic, educational workshops inside and outside of the prison, and an initiative to circulate images of the women’s art beyond the prison. The legal clinic approaches justice from a gendered perspective and focuses on documenting and combatting gendered discrimination. In the U.S., prison activists similarly recognize the need for intervention to take place as a fully interdisciplinary venture. If prison abolitionism and a
redefined justice system is a horizon of queer futurity, ongoing artistic, educational, and legal engagement with incarcerated women is the propulsion toward that future.

The next chapter shifts to the blocked horizons of another border territory: the U.S.-owned maquiladora plants that line the cities of northern Mexico and draw female laborers from Central America and southern Mexico. Factories and prisons function as parallel institutions that render border women’s bodies disposable, police their citizenship, and deny responsibility for their safety, well-being, or development. Both types of massive cement structures reorganize communities and space, altering border territories and lives, and producing new migration patterns. Both profit-driven industries warehouse bodies, police movement and reproduction, and operate at maximum efficiency by adhering to strict time-tables and minimal wages. Like the prison arts examined here, the maquiladora canon transforms border women’s relationship to the cement spaces and policies that surround and discipline them. The verses and urban murals examined in the following chapter feature and defy the landscape of factories. They assert workers’ rights to safety and movement in public space and their value as creative, dynamic individuals and family members beyond their production of capital.
Chapter 3

Factories: Vital Gestures in the Maquiladora Canon

“‘What does it mean for the subject’ if, under the sway of advanced technology, only gestures ‘precise’ and ‘brutal’ may be executed?” (Carrie Noland, Migrations of Gesture ix, in response to Theodor Adorno's Minima Moralia).

In the factory, as in prison, schedules control movement. Workers' bodies move mechanically, according to the plant's plan for production. Supervisors with stopwatches observe workers from behind, measuring the precise gestures they must perform with each timed production cycle, correcting the extraneous movements of fingers, wrists, and eyes. Like prison, the factory is segregated by gender: women perform the repetitive motions of assembly work; male supervisors, like guards, watch and reprimand. The factory lay-out facilitates the constant surveillance of workers. “The building is a panopticon, an architecture designed to control through visibility,” Leslie Salzinger writes, not of prison, but of a television assembly plant in Ciudad Juárez (163). This highly structured environment and the bodily movements that it demands shape these workers' subjectivities. The maquiladora, or border assembly plant, is a space that requires machine-like gestures and works to produce mechanical subjects, but at the same time needs human operators. In his poem “Lazo Negro, Lazo Blanco,” Juárez poet Agustín García Delgado articulates the tension between the mechanized factory environment and its corporeal human actors: “maquila, hormiguero mecánico y profundamente humano” (Aboytia and Viguera 89). The movements that take place in U.S.-Mexico border factories—both mechanical and profoundly human—are the focus of this chapter. In particular, it examines the signifiers and subjects produced by the movements in border factories, considered as physical structures that alter spatial relationships and as matrices that generate cultural discourse.
Despite restrictions to mobility, border subjects move in dynamic ways every day. This chapter focuses on the nature of those movements, examining the meanings produced through gesture in the context of the maquiladora industry and the growing body of cultural production that responds to it. I assert that the grouping of literary and artistic works that feature the border factory comprise a “maquiladora canon,” as the industry has a major impact not only the region’s geography, but also in shaping its literature. I use the term canon here to center the fundamental role that the figure of the factory plays in the region’s cultural production. This chapter begins the work of assembling this canon by addressing the role of the factory space as a central figure in the poems and stories in the collection Manufractura de sueños: Literatura sobre la maquila en Ciudad Juárez, and in Juárez writer Arminé Arjona’s poetry and mural-poems, or pintas. After introducing the maquiladora industry and its developing canon, I develop the concept of gesture, distinguishing between my terms mechanical gesture and vital gesture, which homogenize and individualize, respectively. Spirituality functions as a central element of the analysis, as both vital and mechanical gestures employ religious discourse at the service of constituting particular forms of subjectivity. Through an examination of the simultaneous mechanicalization and sexualization of female workers, this chapter studies the “logic of disposability” produced through the bodily control of women in factories (Wright, Dialectics 186). This same construction of the female body as waste informs the state’s lack of response to the epidemic of feminicide throughout Ciudad Juárez. State and corporate officials, the chapter argues, respond to violence through gestural control that parallels the policies and operations designed to ensure productivity in factories. The chapter then identifies the maquiladora canon’s vital gestures that resist the derealization of maquila workers’ lives.

Maquiladoras: the Industry and Canon
The Bracero Program, which allowed Mexican agricultural workers to work in the U.S., ended in 1964, resulting in high levels of unemployment in northern Mexico. In response, the Border Industrialization Program began the next year, paving the way for the country’s export-processing industries, maquiladoras, or maquilas for short. As Mexico opened the border cities to foreign capital, corporations established factories where cheap labor was plentiful, and workers flocked to the maquilas from the south. Under the U.S.-Mexican Twin Plan Agreement, raw materials could be temporarily imported into Mexico duty free under the promise of future exportation. Products were assembled or manufactured using inexpensive Mexican labor and the finished products were exported back to the United States where taxes were paid only on the Mexican value added. The rise of the maquiladora industry transformed the border region into a quickly developing industrial zone. This massive border industry dominated the industrial makeup of the 2,000-mile border between the United States and Mexico. The produced goods — almost half of which were textiles and consumer electronics—ranked second only to oil in the Mexican economy. Ciudad Juárez became an international leader in low-cost, labor-intensive manufacturing. Its proximity to the U.S. market and steady supply of migrants from the south contributed to the city’s success and popularity with corporations seeking to cut costs.

The 1960s and 70s saw an increased incorporation of women into the labor force and the feminization of migration northward through Mexico and often into the U.S. Many corporations’ managers targeted women for assembly work because they associated them with patience, “nimble fingers and docility” (Segura and Zavella 12).³⁹ Young women migrated to Juárez at a rate of forty to sixty thousand each year to seek jobs in the maquiladoras, which paid higher wages than elsewhere in Mexico (Iturralde 243). Women’s entry into public space and the labor force and their increasing economic independence marked a major spatial and cultural shift in
Denise Segura and Patricia Zavella cite women's increased migration and maquila employment as a key feature of U.S.-Mexican economic interdependence throughout the past 40 years (5). The two countries’ operations, connected through neoliberal policies, intensified and became a tool of structural violence with the 1992 signing of the North American Free Trade Agreement. Miguel López-Lozano explains that “[o]ne of the basic tenets of neoliberal policies is the opening of the economy to allow for the flow of investors, materials, and merchandise, modifying the role of the state from being the promoting agent of modernity to instead being only a partner” (37). In compliance with NAFTA, Mexico deregulated investment and lifted taxes on foreign goods, to bring investors and employment to the territory. By the end of the 1990's, there were over 4,000 maquiladoras along the U.S.-Mexico border, employing over 1 million workers.

Although many of the critical studies of and aesthetic responses to the maquiladora industry included in this chapter come from this moment of massive female employment and industrial growth, the current landscape reflects enormous change resulting from widespread unemployment. After 2001, many companies relocated factories to Asia, where they sought even cheaper female labor, leaving Mexico without capital. Between 2001 and 2004, over fifty thousand maquila workers lost their jobs in Juárez, throwing the city's economy into a tailspin (Volk 131). Stephen Volk argues that this relocation and resulting unemployment intensified the city’s chaos, producing increasingly dangerous, violent public space (131). While jobs disappear, the impacts from the massive maquila buildings remain, including environmental effects and health issues such as respiratory infections from poor air quality in factories or lead poisoning from factory materials that leak into the water supply. The people of Ciudad Juárez still navigate the urban geography and the cultural discourses produced by the industry. Even as employment
becomes increasingly scarce, the cultural and spatial landscape of the border continues to be shaped by the maquiladora industry.

The works grouped in the maquiladora canon responds to the industry's transformation of the area, and feature the border factory as a central axis or protagonist. This chapter does not seek to provide a comprehensive list of the works that make up the maquiladora canon, but rather to demonstrate the extent to which the maquila plants have altered not only the geography of urban space in the border region, but also the landscape of social discourse and aesthetic production. Critical and fictional reactions to violence in Ciudad Juárez, such as Roberto Bolaño’s *2666*, Charles Bowden’s *Dreamland*, or on the level of Hollywood production, the 2015 film *Sicario*, proliferate internationally, often obscuring local responses to events and conditions in the city. This study privileges the local, in order to showcase the works with more limited access to distribution that capture the direct impact of the maquila system on spatial relationships and cultural discourse.

*Mi vida en Juárez: voces de mujeres*, a compilation of nonfiction stories from a 2006 literary contest sponsored by Movimiento Pacto por la Cultura in Juárez, demonstrates the primacy of the maquiladora system as part of the landscape and life experience of women in the city. While the local authors’ texts are representations of their lived experiences filtered through their own writing and emotional processes, they do demonstrate first-hand knowledge of the factory industry’s impact on the cultural and social landscape. Two of the accounts feature girls who alter their birth certificates in order to work in the maquila (29, 86). One story includes the maquila among the key spaces that define a woman’s life told through snap shots (40). While the story-telling techniques and content vary, the maquila emerges as a unifying trope in all of the volume’s texts. As the factories are physical structures that alter lived reality as well as cultural
tropes that generate discourses, these nonfiction texts work in tandem with the maquiladora canon’s fictional texts to develop the figure of the factory in the cultural imaginary. The nonfiction is produced in the maquilas’ spatial environment, in response to workers’ experiences and to cultural discourses about the factories, while the fiction both responds to and further develops the factory as a key cultural trope.

Attitudes toward the maquiladoras vary in the fictional texts included in the already mentioned *Manufractura de sueños*. The 2012 anthology, edited by José Juan Aboytia and Ricardo Viguera, originated through a 2009 workshop with Élmer Mendoza in Ciudad Juárez. In the prologue, Mendoza discusses the factory as a space of death, a common characterization of all four border spaces examined in this project: “La vida está en otra parte, dicen, menos en una maquiladora, esa entidad monstruosa de la modernidad . . . Las maquiladoras también son la antesala de la muerte” (Aboytia and Viguera 13). He frames the function of the collection as posing a challenge to the rigidity and routine of the factory: “Cada línea es un grito que lacera el asfalto” (14). Not all of the texts in the book demonstrate an oppositional stance towards the maquila, however. Silvana Balderrama's story “Simile,” for example, shows the maquila as a source of subsistence: “Porque desde pequeña sabe que la maquila da vida” (Aboytia and Viguera 53). Similarly, Mary Becerra's story “Hay que seguirle” captures the sense of freedom and the excitement for women earning a living outside of the home for the first time. While at times victims of institutional exploitation, the women in these stories are also actors shaping their own experiences. Becerra’s protagonist rejects a narrative of exploitation: “se esforzaba y aguantaba horarios interminables, pero era una mujer luchona, se sabía fuerte y con decisión se esforzaba para tener una vida mejor. No se sentía explotada, su progreso era palpable” (Aboytia and Viguera 45). The stories and poems in the collection demonstrate multiple dynamic
positions that workers can occupy in relationship to the maquiladora. In contrast with more quantitative analyses that address the large-scale operations of the maquiladora system, local writing focused on the industry translates workers’ individual experiences to reading audiences on a sensory, affective level. While the nonfiction accounts in *Mi vida en Juárez* show the primacy of the maquiladora space in the workers’ lived experiences, the fictional works in *Manufractura de sueños* demonstrate the range of cultural discourses produced around the trope of the maquila beyond the factories’ physical space.

Arminé Arjona is a primary figure contributing to the city’s maquila narrative. An acupuncturist, short story author, poet, and social activist born in Juárez in 1958, she establishes a poetics of resistance to the maquila industry’s exploitation of its workers. At times she tackles the maquilas directly, as in her text included in *Manufractura de sueños*, “Juana de Asbaje, a la mujer que trabaje…” a rewrite of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz's famous sonnet “Hombres necios que acusaís.” It implicates the factories as a synecdoche of misogyny, Sor Juana’s original target. She employs Sor Juana’s proto-feminist resonance to highlight and critique the industry’s gendered exploitation. Her poem maintains Sor Juana’s rhyme scheme, and repeats a number of her lines directly, shifting the focus from “Hombres necios” to the “Maquilas necias que explotáis / a la mujer sin razón” (39). Both poets show the impossible demands and double binds imposed on women: while Sor Juana exposes the hypocrisy of expecting women to be both chaste and sexually available, Arjona reveals the parallel injustice of demanding that women be willing to labor for insufficient pay: “¿por qué queréis que obren bien / si las remuneráis tan mal?” (Aboytia and Vigueras 39). Arjona denounces, too, the maquila supervisors’ strict policing of women's gestures, which eliminates dissent and produces docile workers: “la que bosteza, ofende, / y la que protesta, enfada” (41). Even after insufficient pay and continued exploitation,
the factory officials expect subservient workers: “después de explotadas / las queréis hallar muy buenas” (41). Sor Juana's oppositional legacy echoes through Arjona’s poem, discursively linking gendered exploitation in the colonial home and in the contemporary factory contexts. Arjona responds to the maquilas more indirectly in other works, such as her books Delicuentes: historias del narcotráfico, and Juárez, tan lleno de sol y desolado, both published through the small local press Chihuahua Arde Editoras in 2004. In the latter collection, the poems mourn the victims of feminicide and denounce the state’s impunity and lack of responsibility. She tackles the factory industry in her books that reveal the city’s climate of violence and through her pintas, graffitied mural-poems that intervene in the urban geography shaped by the maquilas.⁴¹ (See image 3.1). Her pintas’ bold intervention in public space functions as a direct challenge to the mechanical gestures and exploitative policies in the maquilas and the environment that they produce. Further understanding of the contradictory stance that Arjona’s work takes towards the maquilas requires a definition of gesture and an understanding of how maquila workers’ bodies interact with machines to produce goods and meanings.

**Mechanical Gestures in the Maquiladora**

Gesture is communicative movement, motion that reaches outwards to connect the body to something beyond it. This study focuses mainly on physical gestures, expressed through the articulations of the human body and its parts. It also, though, includes larger social or political gestures, connected to and spreading out from the personal, “gestures that reach out to manipulate how energy and matter flow in the world,” the activist, state, or corporate actions that push, move, and block social forces (Rodríguez 4). The study of gesture as simultaneously intimate—housed and expressed through the body—and social—shaping larger structures in the world—facilitates an analysis that is both individual and structural. Gestures occur in a moment,
but also linger, leaving messages in their trace. Their ephemeral, momentary nature leads to an understanding of subjectivity and resistance that recognizes ambiguity and fluidity, rather than relying on fixed identities. The way people and matter move express what, and who, they value, as Carrie Noland maintains: “both instrumental and communicative gestures encode, express, and perpetuate the values of specific historical and cultural formations” (ix). These physically-communicated values shift constantly. Judith Butler explores how the human body, and the subject associated with it, is always in a process of production, as the physical embodiment of a social subject is never fully constructed (Gender xiii). Gesture is key to this ongoing, perpetually materializing process.

Gestures are acts that conjure something that is not present, that allude to the abstract, to that which cannot be fully articulated or known. For this reason, gesture is fundamental to religious practice, as bodily movements that make the sacred present, linking the human body to a divine presence beyond it. Rituals depend on gesture to generate sanctity. Through the moving of rosary beads, pressing of hands or kneeling motion in prayer, the bowing of a head, crossing of a chest, bodily touching during blessings or communion, practice of pilgrimage, or ecstatic dance, spirituality is felt through the movements of the body as a link to the divine. Spiritual practices employ gesture to connect the individual to the sacred, as well as to mediate between a subject and a priest or other spiritual leader. These distinct uses of movement fit into opposing theorizations of the meaning of gesture.

Theorists define gesture in multiple, differing ways: as movement exclusively related to the body’s natural expressiveness, as culture imposed on and expressed through the body, as the movement of operating chains that produce knowledge, and as movement generated by any human or nonhuman apparatus. In her introduction to Migrations of Gesture, Noland identifies a
primary divide in theorizations of gesture: the understanding of gesture as an act that affirms the actor's individuality and essential humanity because it can never be identically repeated, versus the understanding of gesture as a highly reproducible act that both humans and machines execute (xi). Noland does not seek to define gesture as inherently human or mechanized, but notes the tension between the distinct understandings, which exist side by side in different articles included in her volume. These are not necessarily contradictory arguments, as Noland suggests, but rather, I argue, two different types of gestures, which I call the mechanical and the vital, that both work to constitute different forms of subjectivity. Mechanical gestures’ repeated, productive, externally structured motions divide mind and body and homogenize populations, as vital gestures’ noniterable, expressive motions communicate and affirm individual agency. While vital and mechanical gestures can coexist, and while a physical movement cannot account for the full complexity of human subjectivity, the range of gestures permitted, encouraged, or able to be expressed in a given context point to the types of subjects constructed as desirable within that context.

The gestures required or enforced by a given location—the gestural environment—not only shape people’s physical experience, but also constitute their subjectivity in particular ways.42 In his 1951 *Minima Moralia*, Theodore Adorno suggests that the type of gestures a person performs determines the type of subject they become. He laments the impact of the gestures of modernization on human experience. He sees a “withering of experience” in the body's response to industrial technology and urban geography, a loss of recognizably human movements and a switch to the forceful precision of modernity (Adorno 55). These gestures, he suggests, produce subjects in their own image:
Technification is making gestures in the meantime precise and rough – and thereby human beings. . . . What does it mean for the subject, that there are no window shutters anymore, which can be opened, but only frames to be brusquely shoved. . . . In the movements which machines demand from their operators, lies already that which is violent. (Adorno 214)

The routine and architecture of the factory, or of the utilitarian home, foreclose certain gestures and require others, resulting in subjects that resemble the precise and rough nature of the movements demanded by their space. Both Noland and Adorno ask, but do not entirely answer: “‘What does it mean for the subject’ if, under the sway of advanced technology, only gestures ‘precise’ and ‘brutal’ may be executed within the modernist regime?” (Noland ix). Anxieties about the implications of the mechanization of life on human subjectivity predate Adorno, extending through avant-garde depictions of labor from middle and upper class intellectuals. Unlike the contemporary maquiladora canon, which includes the local voices of workers and people immersed in the factory environment who both narrate and experience the policing of gesture through advanced technology, these early twentieth-century texts express opinions the subject of labor from the perspective of elite intellectuals.

For example, German expressionist Fritz Lang’s 1927 science fiction film Metropolis animates anxieties about mechanization by blurring the distinction between humans and machines, in a stratified society utterly dependent on machines. Workers labor underground in concert with massive machines, with jerky, angular movements. While the camera lingers on the exaggerated facial expressions of the elite surface inhabitants, shots of the workers are much wider, depicting them in groups from behind, in dark uniforms with faces obscured and turned downward, limbs moving in synchronized choreography between bodies and mechanical parts.
Through these gestures, the workers’ bodies become indistinguishable from the machines, establishing a foundational divide between the supervisory mind of those above ground and the laboring mass of bodies and machines under the earth.\textsuperscript{44}

Within Mexico during the 1920s, Manuel Maples Arce and other \textit{estridentista} avant-garde intellectuals also express a concern with the mechanization of life. In his 1924 \textit{Urbe}, dedicated “A los obreros de México,” Maples Arce glorifies the factory worker as an anonymous, masculine, muscular mass associated with modernity, revolution, and virility.\textsuperscript{45} The adjectives Maples Arce uses to describe the new modern city resemble Adorno’s descriptions of human gestures under the influence of industrial technology: “brutal,” “fuerte / y múltiple, / hecha toda de hierro y de acero” (n. pag.). In his 1922 \textit{La Señorita Etcétera}, Arqueles Vela, founder of the \textit{estridentista} movement alongside Maples Arce, argues that industrial society’s new technologies transform human gestures beyond recognition. He frames this as a particularly gendered threat: “She was a woman-automaton. . . . Her movements were straight lines” (95). María Fernández argues that while the impact of technology on human lives and minds are still unclear for the \textit{estridentistas}, they see the mechanization of life as a necessary part of the process of industrialization (212).

The literature narrated from within the maquiladora offers a response to Noland and Adorno’s question about the fate of the subject in an environment that only permits precise and brutal gestures. In the border factory, a monument to modernization, mechanical gestures govern operations. Mainly, this functions as a form of labor control, to maintain maximum productivity. An examination of the particular gestures enforced by supervisors and managers at assembly plants reveals what the environment of the maquila industry means for the subject: the construction of the female worker as fundamentally untrainable and disposable.
In his prologue to *Manufractura de sueños*, Mendoza describes the gestures readers may expect to see in an assembly plant: mechanized, repetitive actions on an assembly line, designed to efficiently produce capital: “catorce horas de repetir los mismos movimientos” (Aboytia and Vigueras 13). Melissa Wright and Leslie Salzinger, sociologists who have both completed extensive field work in maquiladoras near Ciudad Juárez, both confirm and complicate this picture. A manager explains the typical gendered division of labor in a television assembly plant: “Women in assembly and men in supervision. It’s how it is in Mexico” (Wright 61).46 Maquila managers associate women with the bodies and traits considered desirable for tedious assembly work, and target them for the assembly jobs with no options for advancement. Managers explain this division—women seated as they focus on the assembly task before them, men circulating as they supervise—as suiting the skills of men and women's essential qualities: “The men like to stand. Women don’t like to stand” (Wright 60). Salzinger describes the gendered nature of hiring practices in the maquiladora: “Supervisors request not only the number of workers they need for their line but the gender of each position as well” (168). She also cites youth, slimness, submissiveness, thin hands, short nails, and avoiding motherhood as traits that hiring managers consider desirable for female employees.47

Wright documents the specific mechanical gestures that workers perform during each 22-second production cycle at a television factory in Juárez. She traces the sequence, as dictated by the corporate production plan, for one worker on the assembly line, as a series of left and right hand motions: “1. Transport time 3.0 seconds. 2. Right hand inserts part A 1.8 seconds. 3. Left hand inserts part B 1.9 seconds. 4. Right hand inserts part C 1.8 seconds” and so on for a precise twenty-two seconds (Wright 55). Every cycle, workers repeat the same actions, in the same increments, fine-tuning their movements to adhere to the mandates of the time-table. A manager
explains the importance of syncing the motions of wrists, hands, and fingers to the temporal structure: “Assembly workers move to the clock. Our system depends on it” (Wright 56). The plant's success relies on the precision of these repetitive gestures.

Maquiladora assembly work is not entirely mechanical, but in fact increasingly requires a level of skilled labor from workers. In the late 1980s, most border factories converted to flexible production models in order to compete with markets in China. Flexible production refers to a factory's ability to adjust output quantity and model types quickly, in response to momentary changes in demand, and thus to offer a flexible production climate, skilled work, and sophisticated processes to investors. Within this model, workers still perform repetitive motions, but must learn to perform multiple tasks, as they need to be able to switch between three or more distinct sequences for each timed production cycle in response to model changes. The worker must move her body according to the scripted time-table and switch between complex sequences at any time.

Layers of surveillance ensure adherence to this production plan. Salzinger describes a maquila she studies as a panopticon, a space that enables visual control of all operations at all times (163). Both Salzinger and Wright describe the maquiladora as an extremely visual environment, one that positions female workers as highly visible to male supervisors and characterizes these same women as “fundamentally myopic,” so blind to the large picture of what goes on around them that they have “eyesight suitable only for the tedious tasks set immediately in front” of them (Wright 59). This gendered arrangement is reflected in maquila fiction, such as Deimos Arredondo's story in *Manufractura de sueños*, “La nave,” which illustrates the female workers' gaze, in which “nadie mira a nadie, se ven delantales y manos, extremidades que se multiplican sobre las líneas de producción” (Aboytia and Vigueras 137). Backs to their
supervisors, eyes to their work, they repeat the same mechanical gestures thousands of times each shift, and their limbs themselves seem to multiply with the goods they produce. In the factory, male, usually Mexican supervisors watch female workers, while U.S. and European managers watch the supervisors through windows from above. Two supervisors describe their awareness of both the assembly workers and the managers, respectively: “I have to watch them very carefully,” and “All the time you know they’re watching you” (Salzinger 171, Wright 64). Aware of the managerial gaze, supervisors circulate with stop watches, timing the women to ensure that their physical gestures conform to the factory plan.

Supervisors may not perform actual labor; their job is to transmit their specialized knowledge to the female operator's body and enforce the mechanical gestures of production. A supervisor named Javier paused behind a worker, timing each movement in order to maintain compliance with the time-table: “‘No, like this,’ he demanded, as he moved her arm in a straight line from bin to table and back again. The whole exercise resembled a physical therapy session, something meant to train her how to move her body in a more acceptable fashion” (Wright 67). In their training, supervisors are taught to express themselves and correct their operators through gesture. “Use body language,” a trainer instructed, “They need to do things as if your ideas were already in their heads . . . They need to feel your knowledge” (Wright 53-54). This gestural enforcement positions the operators' bodies as conduits for the supervisors’ superior knowledge about their work.

Wright describes this corporeal link, the dynamic between supervisors and operators as organized around a “prosthetic body of supervision” (46). The plant's ideal subject, produced by the repetitive motions of the operator's arms and hands and the supervisor's temporal and gestural monitoring, is an “entity built of some pieces of a brainless female laboring body that functions
according to signals sent to it by a bodiless and free-floating male, supervisory head” (Wright 47). What this prosthetic arrangement facilitates is a discourse that locates all specialized knowledge of skilled labor within the male supervisor's brain. He transmits his skill and training through gesture into the unskilled, laboring hands and arms, facilitating operations without requiring that the corporation invest resources in training or preserving that female worker. Although the operators do actually produce skilled work—switching between multiple complex assembly sequences—the environment of gestural scrutiny and control preserves the maquila's story that their female operators are fundamentally unskilled and untrainable, justifying their high turnover.

The gestures dictated by institutional Catholicism, like those of the maquiladora industry, can be mechanical, producing submissive postures. Priests call for heads bowed in prayer; supervisors require heads bowed over work. Both proscribe repetitive motions, such as moving beads on a rosary or inserting parts on an assembly line. The Church's structure is hierarchical and locates divine knowledge and authority in the male figure of the priest. Like a supervisor channeling his training and specialized knowledge through the female operator's body, the priest dictates the worshiper’s repetitive, devotional gestures to ensure their salvation, or to construct them as desirable subjects within the Church. The supervisory, thinking mind with access to divine knowledge that dictates the motions of the faithful resembles the division constructed between male managers’ minds and female workers’ bodies.

The maquiladora canon expresses workers' experiences in the maquiladora’s rigid production environment. José Juan Aboytia's “La letra chiquita,” meld religious discourse and the monotony of factories' repetitive motions taken to the extreme, as the protagonist, after death, finds himself in Maquilhades, on the devil's infinite production line 666, faced with a demon

Blanca Cruz's poem “Arrullo,” the opening text of *Manufractura de sueños*, expresses the female worker's focused gaze and the tedium of the endless repetition of mechanical gesture, through the repeated refrain that suggests the motions of assembly. Cruz portrays a subject produced by the discourse that sees female workers as myopic and moving according to external dictates:

Aire,
máquina,
golpe.
Y la mirada en un punto fijo,
arrulladora cadencia de sonidos.
Aire,
máquina,
golpe.
Colocar la siguiente pieza,
la vista se cierra,
perdiendo en un instante la consciencia. (Aboytia and Vigueras 23)

The worker's vision becomes increasingly narrowed, to the point of blindness. Perhaps she faints, but another possible reading suggests that she cedes her conscious mind entirely to her supervisor, allowing him to channel his knowledge, to place the next piece, through the medium of her body, rendering her sight and mind unnecessary.

As if the gestures of storytelling were also controlled by temporal dictates or cycles of production, many of the stories in *Manufractura de sueños* express a distinct concern with time.

In a number of the texts, time structures the movement of words on the page. Mario García
Jiménez begins each paragraph with a specific temporal marker: “Son las cuatro de la tarde con cincuenta minutos,” or “Son las cuatro cincuenta y nueve cuando ella entra” (Aboytia and Vigueras 50). Silvana Balderrama's “Simile” uses the same organizational device: “A las 5:15 Regina se levanta;” “A las 9:18, Regina acomoda piezas de plástico que en quince puestos más adelante será una televisión de plasma;” as does Aboytia's story which begins “Son las 4:49 a.m., el despertador está a nada de sonar” (Aboytia and Vigueras 53, 117). The temporal framing of the stories belies an obsessive awareness of time on the part of the narrators and factory workers. Just as the movements of their bodies depend on the clock, the movement of the story relies on the temporal cues, recreating the experience of regulated temporality.

Although maquila supervisors order the female workers' gestures into strict temporal, machine-like precision, they do not ignore the women's corporeality and sexuality. Rather, sexuality and desire operate as key organizing principles within the maquiladora, harnessed to foster an environment of competition that ensures productivity. Salzinger explains that “sexuality is an integral part of the fabric of production, an essential aspect of the process through which labor is transformed into labor power and women into the ‘docile and dexterous’ workers of transnational repute. . . . [Sexuality] is fundamental to efficient labor control and hence to production itself” (162). The highly visual environment in which mobile male supervisors intensely observe stationary young women creates a sexually charged space, in which the gestures of flirtation and sexual competition exist side by side with those of mechanical production. Sexualized supervisory attention simultaneously enforces notions of ideal femininity and productivity, marking recipients as both sexually available and obedient laborers. In a single gesture, supervisors’ approval can mark a woman as both productive and desirable. These gestures take the form of flirtatious comments, favors such as allowing a worker to complete her...
shift even after arriving late, and pointed eye movements which monitor “efficiency and legs simultaneously, their gaze focused sometimes on fingers at work, sometimes on the nail polish that adorns them” (Salzinger 176). These gestures, which position men as voyeurs, women as both sexual and productive subjects, operate as a form of labor enforcement. Supervisors’ sexualization of workers on the shop floor operates as a control strategy to make women compete for attention and productivity, pushing them towards a single homogenous form of ideal femininity.

“La reina del segundo turno,” a woman that all other operators seek to imitate in Mario García Jiménez's story “La Chica Dorada,” embodies the sexualization of femininity on the shop floor. The text’s title equates the sexualized assembly worker with Mexican pop singer Paulina Rubio, suggesting a fetishized celebrity status for the most-watched female worker. The narration adopts the supervisory gaze, scrutinizing the physical movements and garments of the woman's figure, fetishizing both her immobilized position and her productive capability: “Un ancho cinturón blanco circunnavega su cintura, una blusa elástica aprisiona el resto de su cuerpo . . . los dedos de la reina manipulan los componentes electrónicos con habilidad a pesar de la exagerada longitud de sus uñas postizas” (Aboytia and Vigueras 50-51). The description simultaneously emphasizes her attractive, sexualized appearance and her role in assembling goods. Her touch, as it manipulates the electrical components, is at once productive and sexualized. This regulatory, eroticized surveillance produces an environment of flirtation and favoritism, in which women compete, both as operators and feminine subjects, for signs of male approval: “Víctor, el supervisor, le lleva siempre chocolates con mensajes de amor” (Aboytia and Vigueras 51). The strategy of shop-floor sexualization, which constructs the workers themselves as products available for male consumption, in tandem with the myth of female
workers' fundamental untrainability and the gestures that preserve it, produce a discourse of female disposability.

Turn-over rates for female operators are high in the maquiladoras. A supervisor explains, as if it were inevitable: “none of these girls will be here in three years. That’s how it is here” (Wright 57).\textsuperscript{49} Gabriela Carsi Díaz, in \textit{Manufractura de sueños} ‘“Pancho y su Adelita,” reveals the managerial logic behind this unavoidable turnover, describing a worker who “lleva a cabo \textit{ad nauseam}, el mismo movimiento todos los días del año. Qué digo año, sólo unos meses porque luego los ‘descansan’ para que no adquieran antigüedad” (88). Maquila administrators’ turnover story functions as a discourse that frames the Mexican woman as disposable: essentially unskilled, untrainable, and declining in value from the moment she is hired. Although the products she makes generates value, the worker herself becomes waste, declining into a “living state of worthlessness,” at which point she is “discarded and replaced” (Wright 2). Corporations continue to target female workers because, despite their inescapable demise, the construction of the “disposable third world woman” possesses desirable traits: dexterity, patience, and attentiveness.\textsuperscript{50} The maquila management remains invested in constructing the idea of their workers’ unskilled status, disposability, and eventual replacement as natural and inevitable in order to absolve corporations from investing in the workers or taking responsibility for their well-being, growth, or development. Workers’ movements, and the gestural enforcement from supervisors, create goods with quantifiable value while producing subjects of waning value.

Butler’s notion of derealization, as explained in the introduction, examines the immobilizing processes through which certain human beings come to be perceived as incomplete subjects, or through which they lose their recognition as humans in the social imaginary. The primary violence inflicted on the derealized is that of being excluded from subjectivity or
“culturally viable notions of the human” (33). The function of mechanical gesture is to produce subjects excluded from these cultural definitions of full humanity. The mechanicalization of the worker’s body, the reduction of her individuality and corporeality to productivity, dehumanizes her. The maquila’s logic of disposability parallels this derealization, as the gestures of the derealized are mechanical, precise and brutal.

Carsi Díaz’s story articulates the derealization, or loss of the value of worker's lives: “Actualmente parecería que las empresas se manejan solas,” the narrator explains, “Sólo conocemos el nombre de la institución, fábrica, banco o escuela, pero nunca a las personas que la trabajan” (Aboytia and Vigueras 84). The maquila derealizes by depersonalizing, working to produce homogenous subjects that repeat the same mechanical gestures: “Todo este trabajo despersonaliza, ya que los estatutos de este tipo de empresas dictan que si deseas laborar allí, tendrás que olvidarte de tu creatividad, porque en una maquila todos son iguales” (Aboytia and Vigueras 88). Arredondo’s story similarly depicts the loss of individual identity in the factory: “La maquila te borra en serie, lenta y eficaz, sólo queda tu sombra entre almacenes, una presencia de aire, una burla que te disipa con disciplina administrativa” (Aboytia and Vigueras 137). The worker’s corporeality fades to a shadow, demonstrating disappearance as an effect of the mechanical gestures’ logic of disposability. In a region where young women disappear regularly, this gesture of erasure from the maquiladora is particularly threatening.

Butler argues that, beyond the primary violence of exclusion from subjectivity, any violence perpetrated against these derealized non-subjects is represented as unremarkable and ungrievable: “Violence against those who are not quite living leaves a mark that is no mark” (Precarious 36). The derealized are usually the people most vulnerable to violence, who live in the least protected conditions. In Frames of War: When is Life Grievable? Butler further
discusses the abstract concept of the value of human life, through an analysis of the ever-shifting frames that create norms of human intelligibility and recognizability. Butler questions why governments and society deem some human lives worthy of protection, and others not, and argues: “Only under conditions in which the loss would matter does the value of the life appear. Thus, grievability is a presupposition for the life that matters” (Butler, Frames 14). Populations that are not constructed as grievable usually look to governments for protection, even though “the state is precisely that from which they require protection. To be protected from violence by the nation-state is to be exposed to the violence wielded by the nation-state” (Frames 28). When a life no longer falls within a state’s frame of grievability, it loses its claim to the rights and protections of citizenship, and its recognition as human. Rivera Garza understands this as the “Estado sin entrañas,” a complicit government that has given up its relationship to its citizens and renounced its responsibility to care for the social body (14). The nation-state’s refusal to care for its precarious living bodies reduces “al cuerpo a su condición más básica como productor de plusvalía” (Rivera Garza 15). This is particularly true of the border women working in the maquiladoras.

When a population is rendered ungrievable, they experience a narrowing of choices and rights, accompanied by a restriction of mobility, or the loss of moving freely and without fear. The poem “Sólo son mujeres,” Arjona’s most commonly republished text, shows how the processes of derealization operate to restrict women’s mobility. She highlights the fact that the word “woman” is not always synonymous with human being, complete and deserving of respect, but rather “En esta frontera / el decir mujeres / equivale a muerte / enigma y silencio. / Seres desechables / que desaparecen” (Arjona, Desolado 22). These lines describe the many victims of
feminicide in Ciudad Juárez, but could also apply to the bodies of female maquila workers, also
derealized and rendered ungrievable.

Feminicide and the Maquiladora

Femicide is the murder of women and girls because they are female. This label is limited
in scope, while the term feminicide takes into account the gendered power structures underneath
each act of violence. Rosa-Linda Fregoso and Cynthia Bejarano define feminicide as “gender-
based violence that is both public and private, implicating both the state (directly or indirectly)
and individual perpetrators (private or actors); it thus encompasses systemic, widespread, and
everyday interpersonal . . . feminicide is systemic violence rooted in social, political, economic,
and cultural inequities” (5). While this type of systemic violence takes place globally, their study
focuses on the epidemic of violently murdered women in Ciudad Juárez that has been occurring
since 1993. Estimates of the number of women killed in the city over the past two decades vary
widely between activist groups and state reports, though data from a 2015 UN-affiliated report
called “Global Burden of Armed Violence” reports 673 feminicides in the city between 2009 and
2012, the peak period of violence.52 Half of these confirmed deaths occurred in public spaces
such as the streets, and another 7 percent in commercial areas. The rate of female murders
increased during that peak period 20 percent more than the male homicide rate. The female
homicide rate in Ciudad Juárez has dropped from the 2010 high, when it was roughly 20 times
the global average, but the rate there is still higher than the national average, prompting the
recent report to call Juárez “a lethal city for women” (“Global Burden” 69).53

The maquiladora industry is implicated in this violence, through its participation in the
production of economic and social inequalities and its lack of intervention in circumstances of
violence. In “Sólo son mujeres,” Arjona denounces both the direct, subjective act of violence and
the underlying structures that make it possible. She names “manos cobardes,” evoking and
denouncing the physical acts of destruction. Arjona dedicates more poetic space, however, to the
structural violence that excludes victims from subjectivity. She involves her audience in her
denunciation, but includes her own responsibility for action as well, in her use of the plural
voice: “todos nos vamos volviendo asesinos,” we all “las juzgamos: / ‘gente de tercera’ / ‘carne
de desierto’” (Arjona, Desolado 22). She labels citizens as well as state and corporate actors as
assassins, implicated for their actions and lack of actions that permit the murders and
disappearances.

Feminicide is discursively and critically linked with the maquilas. Discourse about the
violence against women in the region evokes the figure of the maquiladora, as the sequence of
sexual assaults and homicides have come to be known in popular culture and criticism as the
“maquiladora murders,” as in a 2003 conference held at UCLA titled “The Maquiladora
Murders, Or, Who is Killing the Women of Juárez?” It is important to note here that the
maquiladora industry does not provide an explanation for the feminicides of Juárez, but does
function as an integral element of the violent border landscape, one that participates in the
environment in which the violence is possible, and one that has altered the cultural and artistic
climate of the city as dramatically as the murders themselves. The maquiladoras shaped the
physical and social climate in which the murders happen, and foster an environment of state and
corporate impunity.

The extent of the factories’ connection with and responsibility for the murders is
the topic of much debate. Estimates calculate that one fourth to one third of the women murdered
violently in Ciudad Juárez worked in maquiladoras (Fregoso and Bejarano 137, Arriola
“Accountability” 26). Critics disagree about whether a discussion of globalization and its role in
producing the maquiladora industry can account for the occurrence of feminicide in the city. With the 2001 unearthing of the bodies of eight women in the empty lot adjacent to the headquarters of the Maquiladora Association and increasing pairing of murder and the maquiladoras in the social imaginary, criticism, and popular culture, the maquilas' exploitation of its workforce is often presented as a direct cause of the violence. Elvia Arriola, for example, places the murders on a spectrum of mistreatment of factories towards their workers: “the Ciudad Juárez murders are an extreme manifestation of the systematic patterns of abuse, harassment, and violence against women who work in the maquiladoras;” and Debbie Nathan sees feminicide as part of the “violence of work on the global assembly line” (“Accountability” 28, Nathan 40). Fregoso argues against theorizing the maquiladora as the embodiment of economic globalization, as the top-down “discourse of globalism equate[s] exploitation with the extermination of gendered bodies,” over-simplifying the complexity of feminicide and neglecting the multiple variables and structures of oppression that its full analysis requires (40). While she dismisses the narrative that links maquilas directly to murder, or the common act of attributing the murders to processes of globalization, as a persistent myth, she does agree that state and corporate policies have contributed to the production of a culture of violence and a less secure landscape for all women living in poverty.

Corporations benefit from the unregulated state in which they operate, and may through their inaction contribute directly to the violence. Fregoso argues that Mexico's neoliberal policies, “its disinvestments in the public sphere, instituted by the shift from a welfare state to a state that facilitated globalization” have produced an environment of violence and impunity (52). Given the fact that international labor standards are not enforced, corporations show little concern with complying with them. This absence of strict parameters is due partly to the
deregulation of industries under the 1993 North American Free Trade Agreement. Arriola sees a direct link between these free trade laws that license the exploitation of workers and the murders, as does Christina Iturralde, who advocates for litigation against the region's corporations. A legal case would examine whether corporations are doing enough to provide adequate resources for their workers to make it to the workplace safely, and “would help prevent these powerful actors from avoiding responsibility, even if indirect, for the crimes committed in their ‘own backyards’” (Iturralde 250). Arguing that corporations have a duty to protect their workers and direct responsibility for many of the murders, critics point to evidence that victims are targeted on their way to and from the maquiladoras and to specific instances in which corporate policies and practices led quite tangibly to workers' deaths, such as Lilia Alejandra García Andrade, whose body was found directly in front of the factory where she worked, or Claudia Ivette González, who disappeared after being dismissed from work for arriving two minutes late (Domínguez-Ruvalcaba and Ravelo Blancas 193). This final case suggests that the maquila supervisors' gestures of temporal regulation that ensure productivity directly endanger the female workers that they work to derealize.

The maquilas have changed the northern Mexican geography, contributing to the production of an environment in which murder happens at an alarming rate. The systematic sexual violation and annihilation of women cannot be explained simply as an extreme instance of exploitation workers suffer in factories. At the same time, however, the murders cannot be understood without recognizing that the maquiladora industry and its economic liberalization policies have impacted both the political and the sexual economy of the border. Feminicide and the maquilas are part of the same environment, one characterized by population dislocation, worker exploitation, “the demise of organizations that protect workers, the degradation of
physical space, the lack of resources for social services, and the conditions that contribute to drug trafficking” (Weissman 802). The rapid expansion of the factories physically transformed the territory, which Stephen Volk and Marian Schlotterbeck argue produced new zones of marginality and increased danger for populations of women with no choice but to navigate these neighborhoods (128-29). While Fregoso rejects the myth that most of the feminicide victims worked in maquiladoras, she too points to increased vulnerability and victimization of women living in the spaces structured around the maquila industry (41). The murderers disproportionately target the economically insecure population of women who migrate from southern Mexico and Central America and live in the colonias surrounding Ciudad Juárez. Although critics disagree about the extent to which the maquiladoras are implicated in the murders and disappearances, they agree that the population most vulnerable to exploitation in the factory is also the population most directly impacted by feminicide. This link becomes illuminated in the maquiladora canon, which circulates this population’s experiences. Mary Beccera's “Hay que seguirle,” for example, tells the account of a factory worker's mundane but satisfying routine, which collapses around her when her daughter goes missing. “Hasta que un día la llamaron para que identificara un cuerpo. Sí era su hija, su Chatita, y tenía diecisiete años” (48). Her coworkers have stories that resemble her own.

Despite the devastating normality of these occurrences, the maquila officials claim no responsibility to protect the life of their workers or to prevent kidnappings and murders, and there is no legislation or state controls that obligate them to do so. When Juárez activists met with the Association of Maquiladoras to ask for assistance in curbing violence, the director denied any relation between the maquilas and the murders. “Therefore, even though thousands of workers have to cross unlit, unpatrolled, and remote stretches of desert as they make their way to
the buses that stop only on main thoroughfares, and even though many victims disappear while on such commutes, there is nothing that the industry can do to stop the violence” (Wright, “Dialectics” 189). By rejecting any connection between the violence and the maquila-produced landscape, the corporations absolve themselves of any duty to fund security personnel, street lighting, or changes in production schedules. None of these actions, by their logic, would help. Arriola points to Mexican state officials’ complicity with corporations in neglecting the health and safety needs of maquila operators, and calls this “systemic, structural disregard by corporations and their agents for the humanity of the laborer” “fatal indifference” (“Accountability” 33). By failing to take any action to preserve the lives of their workers, maquiladora officials enact a process of derealization, calculating their worth as replaceable, disposable labor.

The same logic of disposability that operates through mechanical gesture in the maquilas to constitute female operators as expendable, unskilled waste appears outside the factory, through corporations' official responses to feminicide. “The feminicidio,” Alicia Schmidt Camacho argues, “aims to produce a society where victims’ subjectivity is reduced to the instrumental value of the “‘homo sacer’, dispensable noncitizens” (23). Similarly, factory managers’ view of female workers as of disposable value reflects their lack of reaction to or prevention of their deaths. The discourse that justifies high turnover rates also absolves the maquilas of responsibility for preserving workers' lives. A female worker's corporeal and corporate deaths are linked to a discourse of her as impossible to train. The Mexican woman's construction as essentially unskilled on the assembly line parallels “the managerial discourses of noninvolvement” in response to feminicide (Wright, Disposable 186). Arjona's pintas, painted throughout Ciudad Juárez, denounce this lack of action. Her one-line poetic murals critique the
environment of state and corporate impunity that perpetuates a logic of female disposability. One asks: “¿Qué fue primero: la impunidad o el matadero?” while others decry the state's rejection of responsibility for its citizens’ lives and well-being in favor of market-centered policies: “Papá gobierno: no perdono tu abandono” and “Somos más los menos…preciados por nuestro gobierno.” State impunity, she suggests, brings with it a logic of mass derealization, a willful blindness to citizens’ suffering and to their inherent worth. Through her public mural verses, she identifies with the many lives of unrecognized, derealized value.

Official responses to feminicide, like supervisors' surveillance on the shop floor, take the form of gestural control. The state's victim-blaming answers to the violence operate like the mechanical maquila gestures that both sexualize workers and constitute them as disposable. The “maquiloca” or “doble vida” narrative used to fault women for their own murders and publicized by government officials depicts operators as leading wild lives and engaging in transgressive sexual behavior. State prevention campaigns imply that women can avoid violence simply by controlling their sexuality and their movements, mandating preventative gestures that women should perform in order to protect themselves. Their directives include: avoid dark streets and miniskirts, “If you think someone is following you, turn around and look,” “Leave the lights on in your home,” and “Carry a whistle” (Tabuenca Cordoba 101). Like the disembodied supervisory mind prescribing women's bodily movements in the factory, these gestural dictates function as mechanical gestures in and of themselves, constructing subjects as expendable by absolving corporate responsibility for their well-being or lives’ value. Becerra’s protagonist, the maquila worker who loses her daughter, expresses her frustration with the gestural orders the state offers as its only response: “Dicen que las muchachas tengan a la mano las llaves de su carro y suban con rapidez, y es de todos sabido que la mayoría son muchachas obreras,
trabajadoras de maquila, humildes, que vienen de fuera y sólo su familia las conoce. La impunidad total” (Aboytia and Vigueras 48). The absurdity, ineffectualness, and dehumanizing violence of such state responses particularly resonates when contrasted with the narration of the mother’s mourning. By articulating, valuing, and circulating the individual lived experiences of maquila workers, the maquila canon counters the violence of discourses that perpetuate a logic of female disposability.

The literature of the maquiladora repeatedly forms discursive and aesthetic connections between the violence of feminicide and the maquiladora industry. The poets that denounce the violence and murders continually juxtapose their critiques with condemnations of factory abuses, framing both as patriarchal institutions that violate women. Chicana poet and critic Alicia Gaspar de Alba’s “Kyrie Eleison for La Llorona,” which functions as a ceremonial mass to mourn the death of the figure of la Llorona, links death and factory work through the enjambment in the lines:

You've traded your midnight cry for the graveyard
shift and a paycheck at the maquila.
That mushroom cloud hovering
over mount Cristo Rey
is your shadow. (Gaspar de Alba 108)

As an assembly worker subjected to the maquila's mechanical gestures, productive temporality, and capitalist logic of the paycheck, the mythic figure fades to waste, her physicality and subjectivity dissipating cloud-like into the air. By invoking a mythic figure to stand in for actual workers, and by dissolving her corporeal existence, Gaspar de Alba seems to perform an act of derealization, or to mimic the state and the maquila’s own processes. Cultural production overtly
that protests the violence often does this, by dwelling on the figure of the corpse. Schmidt Camacho warns that “those invested in stopping the crimes must not collude with any depiction of vulnerable Mexican women as less than fully human, less than fully alive” (23). She cautions against the reification of feminicide victims as wasted humanity in international artistic responses and anti-globalization discourse that protest the murders in Juárez, because, she argues, this often inadvertently contributes to “the theft of mexicana subjectivity” (23). Non-local campaigns and responses in particular tend to uncritically reproduce “constructions of Mexican women as bodies without consciousness,” excluding Mexican women living near the border from the very debates meant to be about them (32). For this reason, this chapter centers on works produced within Chihuahua, as the fundamental figures of the maquiladora canon are the voices most capable of responding to their own environment.

Arjona, in “Páramo,” suggests systemic links between feminicide and the maquiladora industry by juxtaposing references to each. With very few words, she efficiently connects the destructive forces in the city she lives in and moves through. The economy of her language—the poem consists of thirty-one one-word lines—captures the difficulty of producing speech or art in the face of violence. A stanza that conjures the maquilas—“fábricas / ávidas / cómplices / frívolas / tóxicas”—appears directly before one that evokes feminicide—“víctimas / lánguidas”—and another that points to drug trade—“tráfico / “pútrido” (Arjona 31). The close positioning of these stanzas together on the page and the repetition of trisyllabic words with first-syllable accents create a parallelism between these distinct but interconnected elements that mold the geography and discourse of the border landscape.

Much of the maquila canon conveys a sense of loss at the city’s decayed public spaces and the dangers encountered in community zones that were formerly full of life. Eva Arce's
poem “Calles” laments not only the reality of the constant threat of violence in her neighborhood, but also the internalized, always present awareness of potential attackers' surveillance: “Por las calles de Juárez / ya no se puede andar / porque no sabemos quién / anda atrás de nosotros / para podernos atacar” (112). The works that mourn or condemn the loss of free movement through public space form part of the maquiladora canon even when they do not focus directly on the industry, as they respond to the altered city that the factory system produced. The poem “Rotos ángeles” in Arjona's collection Juárez, tan lleno de sol y desolado expresses a sense of despair and fear in response to the danger of moving through public space by immobilizing the typically transcendent spiritual icon of an angel. Her lines describe the angels' “alas marchitas,” and their “alas caídas a destiempo,” centering on their inability to move through time or space (23). Unable to imagine a possible future, the angels “Sólo palpan la negrura del abismo” (23). Arjona's poem “La justicia agoniza con la espalda rota” similarly connects imagery of a broken or fragmented body, which cannot move fluidly, with systemic violence (30).

Her poem “Fragilidad,” begins with the line “Hay dolores que pesan,” and expresses the anguish of the disappearances and murders as a material weight that limits the speaker's capacity for movement or gesture. Prison-like images of increasingly restricted spaces repeat through the poem: “candados,” “miserias que cierran,” un bosque interior / que se ha incendiado” (24). She describes “el miedo que ronda / nuestros duendes,” and the “silencios que ahogan / lentamente,” presenting fear and silence as expressions or extensions of the experience of limited mobility in public space. The characterization and reality of the city's public space as dangerous for women to move through produces constricted, contained, hurried—or mechanical—gestures from those who must transverse it, such as maquila operators on the way to work in the dark early morning.
hours. An intervention in public space, or a gesture that is intentionally not mechanical—neither precise nor brutal—is an intervention in the geography that the maquiladora industry created, challenging the accepted discourse of public streets as necessarily dangerous for women.

**Vital Gestures in the Maquila Canon**

While what I call mechanical gestures work to exclude maquila operators from “culturally viable notions of the human,” vital gestures reinstall and center them within recognized humanity (Butler, *Precarious* 33). According to my definition, vital gestures are movements that insist on the integral value of human life in the face of derealization, and that facilitate rather than restrict subjects’ mobility. Mechanical gestures depend on a division between mind and body—a supervisor, priest, or state authority who dictates the motions of another’s body—while vital gestures work instead to reintegrate, to restore each individual’s agency over their own movement. The aesthetic works examined here denounce mechanical gestures’ processes of derealization and, most importantly, enact gestures that affirm “culturally viable notions of the human.” Vital gestures point to distinct human subjectivities, assert the right to move freely through public space, and are found particularly in the realm of art and literature. The following key characteristics of vital gestures distinguish these movements from mechanical gestures. First, they communicate a particularly human emotional charge, or “vitality affect” (Noland xiv). Second, vital gestures are corporeal and embodied; they cannot be performed by machines. Third, they are unpredictable and ephemeral; they happen quickly and can never be repeated identically. Finally, while they affirm individual difference, they move toward collectivity; their communicative, social nature contains an anticipatory, utopian impulse. The following section identifies the maquiladora canon’s enactment of these four fundamental attributes of vital gesture.
Vital gestures highlight the distinctly human by expressing strong emotion. Derealization occurs alongside the precise and brutal mechanical gestures that operate through force, in the interest of profit, producing subjects that move identically and efficiently to produce identical goods. While the maquila industry works to standardize workers’ movements, the maquila canon responds by individualizing, interrupting routine and emphasizing that which is distinct in each worker’s voice or experience. Giorgio Agamben positions gesture, or what I call vital gesture, as fundamentally human because it requires emotionally responsive movement that varies between bodies and contexts (57). These “noniterable instantiations of meaning making forms of movement” operate as codes that communicate pre-agreed meanings, but at the same time, they also express something more, “an energetic charge or ‘vitality affect’ that overflows the meaning transmitted” (Noland xii, xiv). Vital gestures produce meaning and feeling beyond the content of its signifiers; it communicates a sense of aliveness that surpasses and challenges the force of mechanical gesture.

Ameyalli Sánchez’s poem “Caminante Obrero,” in Manufractura de sueños conveys this vitality affect through the use of active verbs and the expression of strong feeling as she moves through the city and her routine at the maquila:

Empuja de la cama al cuerpo la esperanza,

muestro mi cara, valiente andanza.

¡Ciudad mía! En ti camino por mi vida,
tesoros agotado a mí, caminante,
sueño mientras los anhelos;
quiero, puedo, sueño, actúo, muero.

Así, rutina mortuoria, valiente búsqueda
The emotion that the speaker expresses through the poem exceeds the energy required for working her factory shift. Affect—hope—is the active subject of the first line, the agent that puts her body in motion. The repetition of active first-person verbs and strong personal presence, as in the gesture “muestro mi cara,” asserts her individual subjectivity, even as she inhabits the maquila landscape. The repeated references to walking, and the linking of that movement to strong feeling, as in the line “valiente andanza,” affirms her right and will to move through public space. The exclamation points and address she directs toward the city shows an emotionally charged relationship with her surroundings, a human excess of feeling. In an interview, Arjona articulates a similar overflow of emotion for Ciudad Juárez: “Es una ciudad a la que no puedo querer más y por eso salgo a las calles a escribir. Es la única actividad que me salva” (López García 7). A pinta on one city wall performs a vital gesture by showing her affective relationship with the city, a mixture of love and pain: “Juaritos yo te quiero a pesar del matadero.” While Sánchez poeticizes her walk through the city's streets, Arjona physically enters them to paint her messages onto its walls.

Vital gestures are embodied movement, motions that cannot exist without a human body. Gesture is at once physical—it requires a body—and ephemeral—it does not last. It employs a body that is both present and disappearing; it enacts communication that is over as soon as it is delivered. Ephemera are the remains left behind communicative gestures, the traces that continue to signify after the embodied act is complete. José Muñoz locates an ethics of queer or antinormative resistance in the simultaneously absent and present residue that remains in the wake of a performance. “Through small gestures,” he argues, “particular intonations, and other ephemeral traces, queer energies and lives are laid bare,” establishing “a queer optic that permits
us to take in the queerness that is embedded in gesture” (Muñoz 72). In the geography of the maquila, vital gestures are queer in that their embodied signs operate in opposition to the enforced behavior of majoritarian belonging, the homogenizing mechanical gesture.

Arjona performs vital gestures that are at once both embodied and ephemeral, by painting her pintas onto the walls of Ciudad Juárez. Her physical body occupies public space as she paints onto the walls that surround her, and the gesture extends outward from that act, intervening in the environment long after she has left. Her pintas are as much about what she writes as they are an assertion of her physical presence, her right to inhabit the city's public space and to mark it through the bodily gesture of spraying words in a space where female bodies are perpetually threatened. Murals are material. Embedded in them is the trace of the artist's physical movements in their production, the reach and sweep of their limbs to apply paint to the wall. Each pinta communicates the legible message of the painted words and carries with it the trace of Arjona's body, the vitality affect that lingers through her corporeality. The gestures expressed through the writing—the pintas’ words—are active and full of movement. Their affective, kinetic nature, like Arjona’s physical presence, challenges mechanical gestures’ homogenizing operations. Arjona surprises with her wry, forceful lines, which include: “La poesía se voló la barda,” “Los balazos rompen lazos,” “Mi ciudad está loca de remates,” “La vida es muy corta para las armas largas,” and “¿Quién da alas a las balas?” The recurring gestures embedded in her words are acts of flying, shooting, and floating; breakages and departures that demand pedestrians’ attention. Her protest of the city’s dehumanizing violence is clear in her gestural mandate is to “Regale abrazos, no balazos.” The sing-song tone, assonant rhyme, and brevity of Arjona's pintas make them accessible, allowing her to take possession of public space. Her words seem humorous and inoffensive, but at their core are efficient and direct, forming a strong political denunciation, an
affirmation of her right and the right of all the city’s inhabitants to move through public space without fear. Her pintas’ pithy statements, coupled with the trace of her physical movements used to create them, perform vital gestures that insist on the value of human life.

Arjona’s published texts create ephemeral embodiment through figurative gestures, language that evokes corporeal support. In her poems, she constructs the city itself as a suffering woman, a large-scale personification. The female body not only occupies the city’s public zones as an individual human subject; it becomes a synecdoche for the entire city. The gestures performed by the city in the space of the poem, then, contain the female figure’s embodied presence. In “Elegía,” the first poem in Arjona's collection, each stanza begins with “la ciudad,” a refrain that laments the loss of life and lively gesture in Juárez: “La ciudad se asfixia lentamente,” “La ciudad se muere poco a poco / no hay auxilio que llegue a rescatarla,” “La ciudad está descuartizada: / cada quien su trozo de violencia.” In this fragmentation of the city, Arjona also expresses the disintegration of the victimized female body and its subjectivity as a whole, complete human being. The city/woman receives the action here, rather than generating it. The acts performed on her body are precise and brutal, mechanical gestures that corrode or derealize both her physical integrity and her subjectivity as a vital city or human life with recognized value. The poetic voice addresses the city directly: “¿hasta cuándo vivirás, ciudad abyecta?” Her personification of the city itself expresses her emotional relationship with Juárez and her mourning, as much for the victims of feminicide as for the loss of public space in which women could move without fear. In the poem “Los gritos del silencio,” Arjona again establishes a parallel between the pain of individual victims and that of the entire city: “Una fiera al acecho / se adueña de mujeres / y su llanto / con la ciudad perece.” The cry of the city/woman disappears in the silence, but in the space of the poem, her existence and the gesture of her scream are
rearticulated, embodied in the written trace that circulates with the text. Arjona’s written and visual works gather particular meaning from their location of enunciation, as they intervene directly in the space and discourse of Ciudad Juárez. Her act of spraying words on public walls becomes vital gesture in a place where women’s bodies are continually threatened.

A gesture’s meaning depends on where, when, and by whom it is performed. A subject’s identity markers—ethnicity, gender, and class—both add and receive meaning from the performance of gesture. Noland argues that location is fundamental to understanding how gesture signifies, but is a variable that has been left out of most studies on gesture (Noland xv). Juana María Rodríguez articulates an understanding on the over-the-top gestures associated with Latinos and queers—swishing limbs and loud voices—that is specific to queer U.S. performances. “[T]he colorful extravagances of latinidad and the flaming gestures of queer fabulousness,” she argues, “are ways to counteract the demands for corporeal conformity, to refuse to alter our bodies and our movements” (6). She celebrates overt, excessive gestures as self-expression that affirms life and difference, as the vital challenge to mainstream gestural conformity. The environment of Northern Mexico complicates this characterization, as it is an area that is already characterized as space of excess, associated with disproportionate violence, drugs, and sexuality. Fregoso explains that “the stereotype of maquila workers as ‘prostitutes’ is part of a much longer history of othering practices derived from colonialist fantasies about the border as a zone of ‘sexual excess’ and border women as culturally bound to sexual chaos” (45). Much of the rest of Mexico perceives the north as an area of violence and sexual excess, while the popular culture, critics, and cultural figures such as Charles Bowden construct the border as a sexually-charged zone of violent criminality for U.S. audiences. This eroticized, criminalized discourse of border women is imposed from outside locations. While the local voices of the
maquiladora canon tell a different story, the figures outside Juárez have access to the cultural resources—publication and distribution—to control the narrative from afar. This dominant narrative of border women’s sexual excess extends into factory operations.

In the maquila, the narrative of sexual availability and that of productivity both dehumanize; both equate the female worker's body to waste. Operators’ bodies are excessively sexualized and mechanized as a labor control strategy, so in this location, the expression of excess in and of itself does not, as Rodríguez suggests, constitute a queer or vital gesture. In some cases, a worker's excessive wrist flick, wandering eyes, or other extraneous gestures may operate as vital resistance—they do challenge the temporal regularity that mechanical gesture depends on—but this comes at a cost to her. She will be fired or disciplined back into corporeal conformity. In an area and in bodies already associated with excess, queer or resistant vital gestures operate in the margins of mechanical gesture; they elusively emphasize the noniterable, embodied, ephemeral individuality.

The maquiladora canon’s literary production invokes and repositions the vocabulary of religion without censuring female sexuality. Balderrama's story “Simile,” for example, juxtaposes the daily gestures of a maquila worker and a prostitute through parallel religious references. At 8:08pm, Regina, the assembly worker, gets her Bible out to study, while at the same time Candy meets with her first client: “abre las piernas y finge gozo exclamando en voz sensual: ‘¡Oh Dios!’” (Aboytia and Vigueras 55). She is the only character that speaks in the story, and when she does, it is to invoke God during sex work. The story does not condemn her, but rather presents the movements of her daily routine like a logbook, citing gestures that parallel Regina’s, despite their distinct occupations. By tracing their everyday gestures, which engage with religious discourse in very different ways, the story shows an essential commonality.
between them based on the relatability of their movements. Luna Fuentes’ poem “En una maquiladora” also links sexuality to religiosity, with lines such as “si el santo milagroso recordara tu sexo hambriento,” locating religious experience in the maquila worker’s own experience of her body. The worker, here, connects (conditionally) with her own sexual desire, rather than functioning as the object of a supervisor’s sexualizing gaze. Religiosity, expressed through vital gestures, places both physical and spiritual authority at least momentarily within each individual maquila worker.

The brevity of vital gestures does not diminish their impact, but in fact allows them to function effectively. Gesture’s momentary nature permits resistance in spaces where other forms of disruption could not happen, as Muñoz explains: “it is a moment when that overwhelming frame of a here and now, a spatial and temporal order that is calibrated against one, is resisted” (162). In a moment, vital gestures can interrupt mechanical gestures, create a disruption in the machinery that produces a logic of disposability. They can preserve the bodily integrity of the person performing the gesture, because instead of evidence, they produce a trace. A momentary queer or vital gesture does not necessarily point to or belie a larger, fixed identity, allowing fluidity of resistance and identity, as any agent can stand momentarily outside of majoritarian belonging. Vital gestures in the maquila canon eschew a logic of productivity and use trace as a strategy more subtle than excess, and more safe. Arjona's pintas, for example, maintain their oppositional message long after the artist has returned to more secure territory; in her absence they continue to insist on female corporeality in public space and to assert her presence and her ability to communicate.

While mechanical gestures separate and silence, vital gestures connect and articulate, centering their subjects within the realm of the human by celebrating their capacity for
communication. Agamben defines gesture as the “communication of a communicability,” and explains, that “what is relayed to human beings in gestures is not the sphere of an end in itself but rather the sphere of a pure and endless mediality” (59). He links gesture to the human ability to communicate or the relationality that communication initiates. Vital gestures communicate their own dynamic capacity to form kinetic connections and send relational messages through embodied movement. Mechanical gestures restrict communication; they divide and isolate body parts: the disembodied male supervisory head, the operator’s productive limbs, segregated from the rest of her in the interest of productivity. Vital gestures restore a subject’s bodily awareness by connecting separated parts, by affirming the maquila operator's mind's communication with her hands, eyes, and arms. Arjona's pintas perform vital gestures by announcing their own communicability. The materiality and the content of a mural that reads “Las palabras son balas de tinta,” proclaim the artist’s ability to communicate after she has physically left the site.

Vital gesture’s communicative capability points to the possibility of collective future action. It suggests further gestures that reach outward into the future to form connections with others. Muñoz understands Agamben's politics of a “means without end” as a suggestive mode of movement that points to the future by evading permanence: “The gesture is utopian in that it resists the goal-oriented tautological present. The gesture is a cultural supplement that, in its incompleteness, promises another time and place” (Muñoz 162). Like a horizon, a vital gesture suggests other possible worlds and ways of being without ever fully arriving. Muñoz sees utopian possibility as aesthetic surplus, a supplementary value of artistic creation that exceeds productive functionality and provides “other modes of being that do not conform to capitalist maps of the world . . . utopian traces of other ways of moving within the world,” and beyond it, evoking alternative sacred realms (147). Many of the artists enacting vital gestures engage with
spiritual discourse as a way to evoke alternatives to the present reality. Vital gestures in artistic production can express that anticipatory bearing in the present.

The possibility of collectivity occurs through vital gestures’ embrace of sociality. While mechanical gestures isolate, producing workers’ myopic gaze and precise motions, vital gestures “extend the reach of the self into the space between us; they bring into being the possibility of a ‘we’” (Rodríguez 2). Arjona generates utopian possibility and collectivity by bringing her poems into the shared space of the city streets. Many of her public pintas suggest collectivity through their plural voice: “Aunque nos bañen en sangre flotaremos.” Other artists repeat and imitate her words, in a process of collective multiplication. Arjona comments: “Es curioso. A veces encuentro una de mis frases en lugares inesperados. Los chavos las toman y las pintan en otros sitios. Me gusta esa réplica” (López García 7). This outward expansion of Arjona's gesture creates a community of ephemeral bodies in the wake of the multiplying pintas, and suggests the possibility of further collective solidarity that can be expressed through individual artistic action.

Popular religious practices that locate religious authority within each practitioner’s own motions employ vital gestures to assert the ability to communicate directly between the worshipper and the divine. When the maquila canon's writers and artists draw on the imagery and vocabulary from religion, they reclaim ownership over and intent behind their own gestures, reintegrating the mind and the body, and employing the religious imagery’s cultural resonance for their own uses. They re-purpose the gestures of religiosity to affirm humanity and agency rather than to suppress it. When used in this way, religiosity communicates a vitality affect, transforming the ritual acts and repetitive motions of religion into an overflow of artistic expression. Sacred vital gestures are both embodied and ephemeral: they reach beyond the realm of the knowable and the human to confirm the value of human experience and life. Location
particularly matters with these gestures: they draw on the authority and cultural power associated with local manifestations of religion. As vital gestures, prayers and rituals are anticipatory, collective acts of communication that make a point of their communicability.

Religious communities and experiences are formed through bodily movement, gestures that bind human bodies together and that reach toward the divine. Judith Gleason and the Colectivo Feminista de Xalapa’s 1996 documentary *Flores para Guadalupe* shows the centrality of movement in women’s religious rituals in Mexico. The film documents a range of devotional acts of homage to the Virgin of Guadalupe, in which bodily movement, such as processions, pilgrimages, and dance, plays a central role in creating an experience of connection to the sacred as well as building spiritual community between participants. The first is a women-only pilgrimage from the state of Querétaro to the Guadalupe basilica in Tepeyac, in which participants walk 150 miles in eight days, through harsh weather and road conditions, to join other marching groups. Another ritual in the film features women who return the 200 miles home from their pilgrimage to Mexico City through a relay race that requires months of physical training. The film’s narrator links the practices of pilgrimage, group runs, and dance with pre-Colombian religious rituals of homage to the goddess Tonantzin. The importance of gesture, of bodily movements that connect worshippers to each other and reach toward the divine, functions as a unifying thread between the Catholic and indigenous religious traditions. Theresa Delgadillo highlights the spiritual communities formed through these rituals as activated through “the power and beauty of Mexicana brown bodies in motion,” understanding spirituality itself as related to movement: “a critical mobility” (117, 6). Within these traditions, it is physical movement that makes the sacred present. The centrality of the moving body in spiritual practice asserts the value
of human life within the physical world. In the context of the lives rendered ungrievable in Ciudad Juárez, the work of spiritual movement is to mourn the loss of life and living movement.

Mourning, the collective acknowledgment of loss, performs a vital gesture that affirms the value of the life lost. Butler notes that “The derealization of loss—the insensitivity to human suffering and death—becomes the mechanism through which dehumanization is accomplished” (148). Mechanical gesture constructs subjects as figures who do not merit mourning, because they are represented as less than human, as “not quite a life” (34). They have been systematically constructed as disposable, so their loss becomes ungrievable, not recognized as loss. The act of joining together in grief, in recognizing loss, also recognizes and recenters humanity. Butler notes the important work of mourning in generating reverence for human life: “without the capacity to mourn, we lose that deeper sense of life we need in order to oppose violence” (xviii-xix). Mourning, performed as a vital gesture, is relational and communicative; it forms connections even through death. The maquila canon does a great deal of mourning, composing lamentations to make loss visible and felt. The theme for a recent poets’ seminar in Ciudad Juárez was “Elegía a una ciudad,” and Arjona’s collection also begins with a lament for the dead: her first poem is titled “Elegía.” Beccera’s “Hay que seguirle,” the story of the maquila worker’s murdered daughter, closes with a gesture of mourning. The mourning mother’s neighbor narrates: “No pude ayudarla. Nos abrazamos y lloramos juntas. Ella me dijo: hay que seguir, lo importante es que no dejemos que la gente se acostumbre” (Aboytia and Vigueras 49). There is in this gesture the trace of the daughter’s corporeality and a noniterable expression of grief that affirms the value of the lost woman's humanity. By hugging and crying together, the women form a small collectivity, which begins to point toward future collective action, intervening in their environment by insisting that their community not accept the normalization of violence.
The maquila canon positions the vital gesture of mourning within a discourse of religiosity. Black crosses painted on pink backgrounds began appearing on telephone poles throughout Juárez in early 1999 as gestures of public grieving that made loss visible within public space. (See image 3.2). Voces sin eco, a grassroots group of families of the murdered women, painted the crosses, though since the group’s disbandment, the crosses have continued to multiply, even after the city’s mayor banned them. The crosses, each representing a victim of feminicide, employ the religious symbol as a challenge to state impunity. The crosses function as visual interventions in public space or as “abrasions in public discourse” that, like Arjona's pintas, forge “a new public identity for women, claiming public space for them as citizens of the nation” (Fregoso 61, 54). By marking public space, the crosses gesture less toward Christ, and more toward the lives lost, refusing to allow subjects constructed as disposable to disappear without a trace. As vital gestures that reinstall and center feminicide victims within the realm of the human, the crosses suggest both embodiment—the lost body as the site of violence re-marked into the public sphere—and the ephemeral—always disappearing, they remain only through signs and gesture. Broadcast through the voices of women in the public space of Ciudad Juárez rather than through priests’ official statements, religious rhetoric draws public attention. Fregoso discusses the use of religiosity as a strategy for visibility employed by activists who mourn the murdered women and denounce the lack of state response. In addition to the crosses, protestors and victims' families gather for vigils and employ religious rhetoric in their critiques of the state. At these events, victims’ mothers lead prayers and speak publicly, both asserting their presence and the trace of their daughters’ presence in public space and claiming authority over religious language, demonstrating their own capacity for communication. This religious discourse performs an anticipatory, collective gesture, by summoning the possibility of
alternative futures: “Faced with such literalness and explicitness, religiosity is a mode for reimagining the murdered, violate body otherwise” (Fregoso 54). Through these multiplying cross-murals and within the larger maquiladora canon, artists and authors deploy religious imagery as an activist gesture, a movement of spatial and social forces that challenges the derealization of women’s lives.

The maquiladora industry, a dominant force of the border landscape, has a vested interest in derealization, in maintaining a disposable female workforce, and in erasing the loss of its mechanical subjects. In making loss invisible and un grievable, mechanical gesture regulates public space. Butler notes the restrictions on public mourning: “The public will be created on the condition that certain images do not appear in the media, certain names of the dead are not utterable, certain losses are not avowed as losses, and violence is derealized and diffused” (37-38). Public space operates on the condition that certain gestures—those of mourning, of embodied, anticipatory, collective vitality—are not performed. By locating her pintas directly within the public sphere, by entering the space of gestural prohibitions and the large-scale site of sexual violence and murder, Arjona commits herself to publicly uttering the name of loss, to occupying and altering that public space. She labels violence directly, counts its victims, and rejects the narrative that blames victims for the violence against them. While the logic of disposability works to homogenize workers and excuse state and corporate complicity in the violence against them, the maquiladora canon’s vital gestures both mourn and denounce, affirming the visibility and humanity of the derealized.
Chapter 4

Walls: Walking Women Transform the U.S.-Mexico Border

A woman in a black cocktail dress walks through a beach in Tijuana, placing one stiletto heel in front of the other in the sand. Armed with a brush, she climbs a ladder that leans against a metal wall, and begins to paint the border blue. In her mural-performance *Borrando la Frontera*, Tampico artist Ana Teresa Fernández creates the illusion of a gap in the U.S.-Mexico border fence, making the permeability of the nation and of the border patrol infrastructure visible (see images 1.1 and 1.2). She describes the project as “a silent cry of exacerbation with immigration policies . . . I chose to erase the physical obstacle that gets in the way for opportunity or families to be united. I bring the sky back over the fence that divides the U.S. and Mexico by painting it sky blue as a peaceful protest or offering” (Fernández n. pag.). The border wall, on the beach between San Diego and Tijuana, is made of used train track rails set vertically in the sand, tools of mobility repurposed as obstacles. Fernández’s 2012 performance transforms the Tijuana side of these barriers into a fantasy of sky.69

While painting, she performs femininity through her formal attire, which is entirely at odds with her task. Her tube top dress and black pumps infuse a code of glamour into the stark physical reality of the border wall, and evoke associations of northern Mexican women with unrestrained sexuality.70 The outfit functions as a displaced referent that brings an incongruent tone to her self-representation, as a laboring female body at the border constrained by restrictive notions of femininity. Rosario Castellanos critiques feminine beauty ideals that “convierten a la mujer que los encarna en una inválida,” or limit her ability to move freely (11). She notes that while patriarchal standards declare big, strong feet ugly, they are the tools that support women as
they walk. Strapped into high heel shoes, women cannot move far: “el talón se prolonga merced a un agudo estilete que no proporciona la base de sustentación para el cuerpo, que hace precario el equilibrio, fácil la caída, imposible la caminata” (Castellanos 11). Fernández’s apparel may exist “para inmovilizarla, para convertirle en irrealizable todo proyecto de acción,” but she nonetheless places her glamourized female body into motion (Castellanos 13). She walks and paints with strength and balance, performing her labor within systems that limit women’s mobility, from immigration policy and infrastructure to gendered cultural expectations.71

The protest embedded in Borrando la frontera communicates its own futility. The act of painting the rails highlights the rigidity of the wall as much as it imagines a trajectory through the barrier. In his review of the work, Joe Shepter writes: “The task is hopeless: One person could no more paint the entire fence than resolve the issues that led to its construction” (n. pag.).72 The contrast of sky blue next to rusted metal and the individual scope of her act against the hundreds of miles of border wall make the impossibility of her task clear even as she envisions an alternative to current reality. Fernández notes the similarities between border and prison infrastructure, two systems that police movement and citizenship: “These tracks stand vertically next to each other, like prison bars across the sand and into the ocean, dividing land, sea, and sky. In my ideal world I wanted to topple them. The only way I knew how was through my own weapon: paint. I could paint them out” (Fernández n. pag.). Her mural makes her ideal world symbolically present. She critically engages viewers’ imagination to showcase the current impossibility of her ideal and the physical reality of restriction while at the same time conjuring an alternative, making a different reality imaginable.73

This chapter examines works that, like Borrando la frontera, by aesthetically transforming the U.S.-Mexico border wall into something other than a demonstration of state
force, both highlight the injustices and physical suffering imposed by the militarized border patrol system, and at the same time engage fantasy or imagination to envision alternative possible realities. This chapter is populated by walking women, who like Fernández move through restrictive systems, placing one foot in front of the other to produce new forms of mobility. My analysis centers on the footsteps of Marcela and Makina, protagonists of the title story in Luis Humberto Crosthwaite’s 1988 Marcela y el Rey al fin juntos and Yuri Herrera’s 2009 Señales que precederán al fin del mundo, respectively. While most theories of walking assume a default male body, these migrant characters challenge the particular constraints of walking while female. These authors reject the discourse that frames the wall as a protective measure against the invasion of immigrants, to instead represent the wall as a sacred space, an open door, or a dissolving imaginary line. Crosthwaite and Herrera represent the border wall as utterly penetrable, in the face of legislation and material borders that seek to render it impermeable. Their works aesthetically or symbolically transform the border wall without dissolving the physical experiences of border residents and migrants. Instead, they make the impact and harm visible, while also articulating an alternative vision of border reality. Walking emerges as a dominant trope in these narratives and images, as a sign of mobility and means of representation on the border that replaces notions of hybridity, portraying harsh material reality at the border and at the same time moving beyond material experience or existence. The works engage spirituality—both Catholic and Pre-Columbian—and traditions of pilgrimage to transform and challenge the militarized border infrastructure.

The Wall

Building seven hundred miles of barriers from of military surplus materials and concrete at the U.S.-Mexico border functions as a material show of state power. The wall is designed to
work as a machine that separates citizens from those socially and politically constructed as criminals. In a perpetually failing project, it seeks to make impenetrable that which is ultimately always permeable. The wall operates on a physical, spatial level, enormously impacting the flows of people, animals, water, and on a discursive level, generating and perpetuating discourses of separateness, of threat and invasion, and a myth of the state as capable of sealing borders. In “Marcela y el Rey al fin juntos,” Crosthwaite makes explicit the symbolic message of power and impermeability that the walls sends to migrants: “La frontera era un muro bastante grande que decía: ‘HEY TÚ. ¡PRECAUCIÓN! ESTÁS ENTRANDO A LOS ESTADOS UNIDOS DE AMÉRICA, EL PAÍS MÁS PODEROSO DEL MUNDO. ¡NO LO HAGAS!’” (18). In reaction to a dominant social narrative in the U.S. of migration as a threatening invasion, the wall operates as a material embodiment of the ideal of an impenetrable nation, a demonstration of state officials’ desire to seal the nation’s borders through which they deploy inflated patrol agent forces, drones, fortified barriers, and surveillance technology. In her video “Traces,” digital artist Fiamma Montezemolo points to the failed project of impermeability and ultimate surveillance, calling the border wall “an impossible panopticon” (n. pag.). Despite state efforts at containment and surveillance, “[th]e daunting metallic wall with a thick and deep concrete base that has now cost upwards of seven billion dollars is in fact a leaking vessel” (Casey 24). New ways to transport drugs, arms, money, and people across the border emerge constantly, confirming the absolute permeability of the boundary between nations.

Migrants’ stories portray the suffering experienced by those who seek to walk through and around the restrictive border infrastructure. Urrea’s The Devil’s Highway relates the deaths of fourteen men trying to cross the border into the southern Arizona desert in 2001, detailing the corporeal processes through which the human body fails when severely dehydrated and
overheated. Regan’s *The Death of Josseline* travels to a morgue to count the distressing details of migrants’ corpses. Even when they do not portray death, stories of border crossing, particularly migrants’ first-hand accounts, are intensely physical. They show the movements of survival, the panic and relief of close-calls and captures by Border Patrol agents. In *The Border Patrol Ate My Dust*, for example, Alicia Alarcón collects the gritty testimonies of border crossers, from young women to old men. Their stories of walking, running, and hiding share a material immediacy and a concern with the bodily movements necessary to escape from Border Patrol agents’ surveillance. A woman named Sheila shares her story of the moments after crossing the border: “We hid behind a grove of trees. Around five minutes later, we had to run, run, and run again until we reached the second hiding place . . . We massaged our tired limbs” (184). Another migrant named Magdalena remembers her coyotes’ demands: “We walked for a stretch, and then we threw ourselves on the ground. They ordered over and over again, ‘Run! Run!’ I yelled, ‘I can’t!’ One of the men pulled on one of my arms. ‘Run! Hit the dirt! Run! The helicopters are right on top of us.’ Before we could catch our breath, they ordered us to hide in some bushes. The Border Patrol could be seen just a few yards away” (169). While these accounts are nonfiction testimony interested primarily in narrating past experiences, the absolute lack of metaphor in the collection is notable, as the migrants all concentrate solely on conveying the intensity of their material reality. In their fiction, a number of northern Mexican authors such as Rosario Sanmiguel and Rosina Conde also narrate the border in terse realistic prose to emphasize the harsh lived reality of border crossers and dwellers and the physicality of encounters with the border wall and surveillance system.

**Beyond Hybridity**
Theoretical and academic approaches to the border that emerged in the U.S. in the 1990s differ from the urgent physicality of migrant narratives, as they consider the border an abstract entity that impacts identity, rather than a physical reality that impedes motion. Gloria Anzaldúa’s foundational border and Chicano studies text *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* weaves together material and metaphorical borders, along with Pre-Colombian and modern references, to articulate the experience of living in between multiple identities and cultures, and to present the idea of the border as a third space between two countries. Following Anzaldúa, critics including Homi Bhabha, Nestor García Canclini, Walter Mignolo, and Renato Rosaldo theorize the border as a liminal space, exploring new forms of hybridity that emerge in border subjects. They discuss the zone as a third country, or as a space of cultural crossing. Focusing on the border city of Tijuana as a “laboratory of postmodernity,” García Canclini develops the idea of “hybrid cultures,” in which the modern and the traditional meld into a new third culture. Mignolo focuses on the psychological dimension of border subjects, bringing the discussion of geographical borders within individual psyches. Stemming from this wave of U.S. academic theory, critics such as Emily Hicks in her 1991 *Border Writing: The Multidimensional Text* understand writing of the region as capturing bicultural, bilingual social and individual border identities. These approaches develop the idea of a conceptual border as a metaphor for identity formation, displacing the materiality of migrants’ experiences and the physical reality of the border wall.

In contrast, Mexican scholars such as Gabriel Trujillo, Humberto Félix Berumen, Sergio Gómez Montero, and María Socorro Tabuenca Córdoba articulate the border as a physical rather than an abstract space, emphasizing that not all artistic and literary production from the area shares the hybrid and deterritorialized character suggested by Canclini and other border theorists.
Many northern Mexican authors narrate the border as a physical space rather than a cultural abstraction. For example, Daniel Sada and Ricardo Elizondo emphasize the geography of physical space in northern Mexico, while authors such as Crosthwaite and Conde show the material conditions and conflicts that result from the wall. Debra Castillo and Tabuenca Córdoba critique postmodern border theories that too-neatly turn the border into a metaphor, erasing physical reality, or the lived experiences of border residents and migrants. In addition to the displacement of border life through metaphor, Tabuenca-Córdoba also critiques scholars who do not include literature produced on the Mexican side in their discussion of the border, and who reduce border residents to bicultural stereotypes, as many writers in northern Mexico are not bilingual and do not identify as bicultural. Canclini himself notes that his understanding of processes of hybridization has evolved over the years, as he notes in a 2009 interview that hybridity needs “to be articulated along with concepts of contradiction and inequality. . . . it is not enough to look at what can be fused together: we must also consider what is left out, other processes of contradiction and of conflict.” (Montezemolo and Canclini 740). His later comments and new introduction to the 2001 version of Hybrid Cultures suggest a desire to merge the notion of hybridity with material conditions of inequality, but other critics maintain that border studies needs to move beyond the concept.

Ignacio Sánchez Prado points to the inability of the concept of hybridity to narrate border reality. Space thought of “desde una concepción quasi-turística de lo híbrido,” he argues, leads to a crisis of representation at the border, due to the incapacity of the vocabulary of hybridity to capture the experiences of loss and violence that make up the territory (47-49). He identifies this crisis of representation in the work of Crosthwaite, who builds dissipating worlds that bring an ironic gaze to the daily geopolitical state of the border through constantly disappearing referents,
Crosthwaite, Sánchez Prado argues, moves beyond the use of national myths or icons to explain border space, instead using irony to constantly displace the narrative. He blends and dislocates linguistic registers, U.S. and Mexican popular culture references, colonial history, and discursive codes in a process that questions language’s capacity to convey border reality. Sánchez Prado explains that “Crosthwaite afantasma el lenguaje fronterizo para imposibilitar incluso esa identificación. Ni los contenidos ni las formas son fijas en la narrativa fronteriza: todo lo sólido, para usar un viejo cliché, se desvanece en el aire” (47). The author articulates his critique of border conditions and policies through the traces left, as each referent dissolves.

Tijuana author and critic Heriberto Yépez, who discusses hybridity as a neocolonial discourse because it forecloses any possibility of resistance, also locates his analysis in the complex displacements in border space where “todo lo híbrido se desvanece” (n. pag.). At a 2014 Latin American Studies Association presentation on the future of border studies, he proposed the concept of trace or residue as a trope that operates beyond the discourse of hybridity and is more capable of representing the border. In an area populated by the physical traces of constantly displaced migrants, he points to the vanishing of concrete referents, an untranslatable “pulverización” or “vaporización” of the Other, that leaves a spectral aura or ethereal smoke. The narration of the border through the concepts of displacement and trace moves beyond earlier border studies debates’ binary understanding of physical versus abstract borders, which tend to position critics in the U.S. and Mexico at odds with each other.

As explored with regards to gesture in the previous chapter, traces are both material and metaphorical, both present and absent. The border deserts contain unidentified human remains and the material residues of migrants’ journeys. At the same time, traces are intangible,
continually displaced by new signifiers. José Muñoz discusses ephemera as the traces that continue to signify after an embodied act is complete. He locates an ethics of resistance in “the hermeneutics of residue that looks to understand the wake of performance. What is left? What remains? Ephemera remain. They are absent and they are present, disrupting a predictable metaphysics of presence” (71). The signifiers of remnants after a performance represent a disruptive, shifting reality. Luis Humberto Crosthwaite’s narrative strategy of ironic displacement employs trace to represent the border, and in doing so renders the vocabulary of hybridity obsolete, as Sánchez Prado finds in his analysis of “Marcela y el Rey al fin juntos,” which “atestigua simultáneamente la incapacidad de narrar la vida cotidiana de la frontera y la construcción de fantasías que enmascaran su experiencia” (44). In this love story, Crosthwaite responds to the border’s crisis of representation through the use of dissipating referents that convey the border wall’s conflicts on a material level and employs fantasy to not only make reality visible, but also imagine an alternative reality.

**Marcela’s Fantasy Walk**

Marcela, the protagonist of Crosthwaite’s story, works in a monotonous office job, “frente al mismo escritorio, frente a la misma máquina de escribir y frente a las mismas tareas” repeating the same mechanical gestures for eight hours every day, like a maquiladora worker (13). She complains that no one invites her for coffee or dancing, and her only companion, a cat, has recently departed. In her forties, she notes the homogenization that occurs as a result of her tedious, isolated routine: “Descubrió que muchos de los que caminaban por ahí se parecían a ella. Se acostumbró a mirarlos. Todos con su propio estilo y a la vez idénticos” (15). In a decaying Paseo Costero, she meets the U.S. rock legend Elvis, equally isolated and in ruin. Unable to find work, he loses his garment’s diamonds in a Tijuana jail, then roams the streets
and bus routes seeking an audience for his crooning rock and roll lines: “I’ve been so lonely I could die” (16). When the two meet, they understand and accept each other as no one else can, and fall in love immediately. By walking across the border hand in hand, they enact a fantasy of mobility that grants them freedom of movement and immunity from Border Patrol agents’ acts of force.

The narration is marked by the traces of displaced referents. Crosthwaite blends codes of glamour and soap opera drama with a love story narrative, all at odds with the border wall’s material and political reality. These fictional discourses, deployed in place of a factual account, demonstrate the impossibility of narrating border reality directly. The figure of Elvis, a dislocated U.S. rock icon, is himself a trace of his mythic past: “dejó de peinarse y enflaqueció grotescamente; su ropa se convirtió en harapos” (16-17). Sánchez Prado reads him as a deterritorialized ghost, “el espectro de una cultura norteamericana que existe como ruina y decadencia en el espacio de Tijuana” (43). Elvis mimics his own dissolution by writing, “su nombre en la arena y mirando cómo desaparece entre espuma y sargazo” (Crosthwaite 17-18). His footsteps, along with the mark of his presence and Crosthwaite’s arsenal of border referents, dissolve as soon as they are deployed. The story takes place in the residue of Tijuana’s Paseo Costero, a site in ruin after a huge storm devastated the shore. The space itself is dissolved and displaced, made into a trace: “sitios bonitos hechos pedazos . . . esquinas sin semáforos. Las cuadras sin esquinas” (17). These characters and spaces in ruin, incongruously narrated through romance and rock and roll, convey an experience of the border as residue in motion. Even the landscape eludes direct representational capture, as it disintegrates into missing, moving pieces. This collection of displaced referents and shifting parts depicts the precariousness and the displacements of lived, material reality at the border.
Underneath the story’s fictionalized discourses, the banal reality and physical suffering imposed through the border wall and immigration policy are visible, discernable in the traces of multiple codes of narration. Glimpses of harsh lived experiences resonate more forcefully when they stand in contrast to the dream-like quality of the love story. For example, the story alludes to a large population of people living in the streets in Tijuana: “seres como Elvis. Vagabundos que, a menudo borrachos, rondan los parques, duermen sobre las bancas” (15). This excess of people living without homes are not, like Elvis, former rock icons, but most likely are migrants, exposed to the elements as they wait to cross. Similarly, when Elvis walks to the border wall, the story shifts quickly from a tone of narcissistic nostalgia to an awareness of real danger, the bodily threat posed by Border Patrol agents: “Hubo días de heroísmo en que el Rey intentó traspasarlo; pero tan sólo se introducía unos cuantos metros al vecino país y los guardianes se acercaban con sus pistolotas” (18). Nuria Vilanova argues that “Marcela y el Rey” is one of Crosthwaite’s stories that best conveys the border as a real, physical space, and materializes its socio-economic conflict (96). Her argument of the primacy of material reality in the story is noteworthy, given that the story is also one that relies most heavily on the fantastical.

Hand in hand and in love, Marcela and Elvis walk north without stopping, crossing into the territory of fantasy. When they decide to walk across “el famoso límite que llaman La Frontera,” U.S. Border Patrol agents arrive almost immediately, along with their extensive surveillance and enforcement systems (Crosthwaite, Marcela 19). Crosthwaite writes: “Marcela y Elvis al fin juntos. Los otros, los tontos, gritaron STOP. Aparecieron los helicópteros con sus mejores lámparas para señalarlos. Elvis se sintió en concierto” (20). By displacing the dangerous context into one marked by entertainment and cultural consumption, Elvis negates the agents’ impact, carelessly singing his greatest hits under the helicopters’ glare. The codes of glamourized
performance and fairy tale love that infuse the narration obscure the violence taking place but
also, through the sharp contrast in narrative modes, reveal it. When the agents begin to shoot
their firearms, the couple keeps walking, and through this movement transcend the physical
reality taking place around them. The act of walking oblivious to concrete violent actions turns
the protagonists themselves into traces, as they move forwards toward a distinct horizon. As
bullets shower them, they ask: “¿Sirven las balas para algo? Marcela y Elvis siguieron
caminando. . . . ni ellos ni sus pistolas existían para Marcela y el Rey” (20). The ability to render
bullets impotent, through the gesture of walking, is a fantasy, but at the same time, it points to
the ultimate permeability of the Border Patrol infrastructure, and to the reality of lives that flow
across the border wall despite its militarization. Walking, the anticipatory act of moving towards
an imagined future, makes their fantasy present. Crosthwaite’s incongruous references and forms
of storytelling narrate the border as a space marked by displacement, residue, and trace, and also
engage fantasy to reveal, critique, and undermine immigration policy.

In his analysis of the story, Sánchez Prado uses Zizek’s definition of fantasy as a device
that anticipates its own impossibility, or “el medio que tiene la ideología de tener en cuenta de
antemano su propia falla” (Zizek 139). He argues that the use of fantasy in “Marcela” makes
miserable reality more starkly present: “la fantasía no hace sino evidenciar el carácter monótono
y solitario para un sector más empobrecido y vulnerable de la sociedad postindustrial” (Sánchez
Prado 45). Elvis and Marcela cross the border under the shield of idealized love, he maintains,
only to demonstrate the actual impossibility of crossing it: “Sólo de la mano de Elvis las balas se
vuelven inútiles” (49). The use of fantasy in the story does make the distress of real life
conditions stand out more prominently, but that is not, as Sánchez Prado argues, all that it does.
The depiction of Marcela crossing the border freely, immune to Border Patrol’s demands and
bullets, highlights the fact that guns, helicopters, and border walls actually do exist as a material reality for women like Marcela who try to walk across the border. The work of fantasy does not end there, however, as it both defines the boundaries of the real and operates to make different realities conceivable.

Fantasy can be a way of acting out alternate possible worlds. There is a utopian horizon in fantasy that makes the impossible imaginable, a gesture towards something beyond the real. Judith Butler’s understanding of fantasy opposes Zizek’s: “Fantasy is what allows us to imagine ourselves and others otherwise; it establishes the possible in excess of the real; it points elsewhere” (Butler, *Undoing Gender* 29). Protest or resistance to oppressive material conditions can occur powerfully on this level, in representing an alternative through aesthetic production. Given the reality of U.S. social and political discourse on immigration, and the billions of dollars put towards shoring up the futile fortress of the border wall, fantasy is necessary, within the space of literature or imagination, to imagine a distinct future reality.74 Juana María Rodríguez depends on fantasy as “a way of reaching into psychic life and forming a vision of the world and of ourselves that exceeds the present. Through its relation to imagination, fantasy urges us to suppose potentialities beyond and before the now, to step across the borders of the possible” (27). The imagination is not separate from real life; it is a resource when real life feels impossible. A border theory that truly moves beyond hybridity needs to examine how “the ephemeral, the imaginary, and the material bleed into each other,” or how the traces of the fantastical and the physical reveal each other to envision a different world (Rodríguez 24).

Given the severe demands of labor and everyday life for many border residents and migrants, Sánchez Prado points to “la trivialidad de los espacios imaginarios en la vida de la región” (49). Indeed, some northern Mexican writers do “banish any fantasy of the border’s
dissolution or easy permeability” (Schmidt Camacho 281). Fantasy is not the only effective mode of protest. Sanmiguel, for example, narrates the border as a constant physical presence that impacts residents’ lives and movements. The impact that fantasy can have, however, is not inconsequential. Crosthwaite’s “Marcela” emphasizes the dominating reality of the border, and at the same time conceives of an alternative. Fantasy is not solely the domain of those who do not have to confront the border’s harsh daily reality. It can also be a strategy for living within oppressive circumstances, to envision other ways of existing. Fantasy can be a tool of survival, as Butler argues: “The struggle to survive is not really separable from the cultural life of fantasy, and the foreclosure of fantasy—through censorship, degradation, or other means—is one strategy for providing the social death of persons” (28). Creation and imagination in the face of rigid reality make continued existence possible. In Borrando la frontera, Fernández creates a fantasy of sky: her paint does not actually erase the border wall, but the illusion makes the contemplation of a gap in the infrastructure imaginable. In the second version of the work, completed in 2015 in Nogales, she enrolls local residents and migrants in a collective act of painting. The creation of the fantasy on the border wall does not strike her collaborators in Mexico as trivial, but rather as transformative. It disarms the wall’s symbolic message of totalitarian power and impermeability. Similarly, Marcela’s walk across the border rewrites the space on an aesthetic level. Her motion asserts the penetrability of the real wall, and denaturalizes its existence. In sending his protagonist on a walk through the border wall, Crosthwaite reveals its constructed nature, making a world without it conceivable. By walking, Marcela enacts a fantasy of movement and becomes, herself, a trace; each step leaves a trace as it displaces the previous step, moving her towards an imagined future.

Pilgrimage to Another World
Migrants, like Marcela, survive by walking, and they define the border as a boundary by walking through it. The trope of walking depicts the border in a way that prioritizes physical experience, the material reality of movement through the body, and at the same time moves readers and walkers beyond the physical, accessing a space of fantasy or sacred experience. Walking is a transformative, border-defying act, whether framed within the spiritual traditions of pilgrimage or within a secular context; by always moving toward a displaced horizon, it makes the realm of fantasy present, and makes present worlds beyond those immediately visible. 

Peregrinus, the root of pilgrim, means foreigner, exile, or stranger. A pilgrim, then, like a migrant, is a person who searches through walking, “one who is not at home where he is walking” (Gros 107). While migrants and pilgrims have a great deal in common, the categories are not synonymous. The search on which migrants embark is principally grounded in material experience, and is often motivated by economic necessity, while a pilgrim’s search begins with the intention of transcending tangible experience to encounter the divine. These distinct types of searches can overlap and cross into each other. Makina is both, as her material search for her brother also becomes a transcendent spiritual journey.

The categories of migration and pilgrimage share the experience of walking through foreign territory. Migrants and pilgrims are themselves the border’s displaced referents, dislocated bodies that leave a physical trace in their wake. They become, in crossing, traces of their past selves, taking on complex new identities through their journeys, which cannot be reduced to a narrative of hybridity. Through its repetitive acts of displacement and its continuous searching gesture towards an experience beyond the immediate, walking presents a realm in which fantasy becomes imaginable.
Walking begins through material experience and moves beyond it. It grounds the body spatially and moves it beyond its existing circumstances, as explored in theories of pilgrimage. Rebecca Solnit explains that “The pilgrimage is one of the basic modes of walking, walking in search of something intangible” (45). Simon Coleman and John Elsner, in Pilgrimage Past and Present in the World Religions, examine movement as what distinguishes pilgrimage from other rituals, and argue that all global religions incorporate a version of pilgrimage. Walking is a universal mode of transit, at once transcendent and physical. It leaves a bodily trace. In a constant act of displacement, one foot continually replaces the other. Crosthwaite’s Marcela, through the act of walking across the border, critiques the Border Patrol and makes possible the fantastical vision of a different border reality. In Yuri Herrera’s Señales que precederán al fin del mundo, a female protagonist similarly walks across the border, critiquing the militarized border infrastructure and entering an alternative, imagined world. These texts, like the act of walking, make the physical experience of crossing, and the reality of migrants, visible and immediate, while at the same time extending forward onto another plane, transforming the wall into something other than a demonstration of state force. Through the figures of walking women, these texts bring attention to the physical impact of the wall, and they envision a distinct future.

Herrera’s 2009 novel, translated into English by Lisa Dillman in 2015, narrates a contemporary border-crossing journey as an allegorical descent into the nine levels of the Aztec underworld, Mictán. The protagonist, Makina, operates the only telephone in her town, where she acts as a translator between cultural codes and between “lengua,” “lengua latina,” and “gabacho”: “Makina hablaba las tres, y en las tres sabía callarse” (Herrera 19). Her role as a bridge between cultures and languages becomes evident when her mother Cora sends her north to deliver a message to her brother, who crossed the border years earlier in search of a homeland,
driven by rumors of a home territory that his father had left in his name. The entire book is marked by walking. It follows Makina’s footsteps as she crosses the border, comes into contact with U.S. culture, searches for her brother, and has encounters with Border Patrol officers, immigrants, citizens, and crime bosses. Makina navigates the U.S.-underworld by foot; the narrative returns over and over to her steps, her walking forward as integral to her journey.

 Alone, with others, processing, searching, or fleeing: her default mode is walking. Her walking form is more definitive and persistent than any verbal expression: “ya no le pudieron decir nada porque ella había echado a andar de nuevo y sólo alcanzaron a divisar su silueta recortada contra el sol” (Herrera 111). Each chapter, or level of the underworld, closes with the image of Makina’s walking body in movement.

The alternative world that Herrera makes present is, quite possibly, the end of the world, as indicated by the title. The novel opens with death, or the illusion of death, and from that point forward, continues to blur the border between the real and the fantastical: “Estoy muerta, se dijo Makina cuando todas las cosas respingaron . . . el suelo se abrió bajo sus pies: se tragó al hombre, y con él un auto y un perro, todo el oxígeno a su alrededor y hasta los gritos de los transeúntes” (Herrera 11). The beginning of Makina’s journey into the U.S., which is also the start of her descent into the Pre-Colombian underworld, begins with her possible death. Frédéric Gros notes that the departure of medieval pilgrims was also treated “like a small death” (111). Makina’s story opens into an alternative plane of existence through her encounter with death, just as early pilgrims opened to transcendent experience by leaving all known life behind.

In her analysis of the novel, Ivonne Sánchez Becerril maps the characters in Señales onto the spiritual figures that appear in representations of Mictlán in the Codex Vaticanus and in Fray Bernardino de Sahagún’s Historia general de las cosas de la Nueva España. She identifies the
three powerful men that Makina goes to in preparation for her journey, for help crossing, finding her brother, and ensuring return, respectively, as Nahuatl deities that appear in accounts of the underworld. Makina goes in search “del Señor Dobleú—Tláloc—del Señor Hache—Huitzilopochtli—y de del Señor Q—Quetzalcóatl,” sacred figures reimagined as narcotics smugglers (Becerril 110-11). Each of the nine chapters in the short novel corresponds to a level of the Aztec underworld, as Makina descends further into her journey, deeper into her physical exhaustion and bodily pain, and also deeper into an otherworldly experience. Becerril links each chapter with its Pre-Colombian corollary. For example, the first chapter, “La Tierra” depicts Makina’s departure northward, and corresponds to Mictlán’s first level, Tlalticpac; chapter seven, “El lugar donde son comidos los corazones de la gente,” is a military base in the contemporary narrative, Teyollocoyoyan in the mythic one; and the deepest level of the underworld, Itzmitlán, corresponds to “El sitio de obsidiana, donde no hay ventanas, ni orificios para el humo,” where reality disintegrates around Makina, as she enters an subterranean room filled with people smoking, and surrounded by the sound of running water. Herrera avoids proper nouns; he does not refer to cities in Mexico or the U.S., nor the levels of Mictlán, by name, giving the narrative a timeless, ethereal quality, untethered to concrete referents in this world or any other. In addition to the Aztec allegory, the text mirrors biblical language from Genesis in describing Makina’s encounter with the new world of the U.S.: “Primero no había nada. Nomás una tira de cemento deshilachándose en medio de la tierra blanca” (Herrera 47). In this way, he blends sacred origin story with contemporary reality. By infusing the texts with codes of spirituality, Herrera grants a mythic tone to Makina’s journey, and creates a text that moves between the material world and a realm that is not physically present.
While the narration renders the setting abstract, fluidly occupying both contemporary and
mythic moments, Makina’s body remains explicitly marked—as a young Mexican woman—as
she walks. Like Fernández moving symbolically within restrictive notions of femininity, in her
cocktail dress and heels, Makina is aware that she lives and moves “en un mundo de hombres”
(Herrera 28). She notes the urgency of teaching her younger sister how to survive in an
environment where men will approach her as sexually available. When men harass her in the line
for the bus, Makina stays alert: “Makina no estaba acostumbrada a esas cosas. No que no las
hubiera padecido, es que no se había permitido acostumbrarse” (32). When a man touches her
thigh on the bus, she forces his finger all the way backwards, sending him silent and embarrassed
to the back of the vehicle. Like Fernández painting in her tight dress, Makina moves with force
and balance through the restrictions imposed on her as a travelling woman. Female walkers,
especially those excluded from the category of citizenship, face distinctly gendered obstacles to
their mobility. As a result, women who walk must display more grit and determination than most
male walkers are ever required to exhibit.

Most writing on walking approaches the topic as a historically male trope, and does not
account for the particular difficulties of walking while female. In his theorization of the
wandering figure of the urban flaneur, for example, Walter Benjamin assumes a default
masculine subject walking in public space. In French, he uses a grammatically masculine term to
describe the figure, erasing female walkers even on the level of linguistic feasibility. More
recently, in his 2014 The Philosophy of Walking, Frederic Gros automatically genders his walker
male, and recounts the work of the great the walking intellectuals, from Socrates to Thoreau, all
male. Elizabeth Grosz examines the relationship between bodies and cities, arguing that bodies
are always marked by gender and that pedestrians and urban spaces mutually shape each other.
Interestingly, male northern Mexican writers such as Crosthwaite and Herrera are gendering their walkers female, reenvisioning walking as expression of women’s mobility. Recent decades have seen a feminization of migration, as women now account for 30-45 percent of Mexican immigrants (Donato and Paterson 48). Women are walking across the border in large numbers, and face particular dangers and challenges on their journeys. Migrant rape so common that contraception is seen as an essential tool for travelling with a coyote (Falcón 204). In addition to gender, a person’s ethnicity and citizenship status impact the context and conditions of what it means for them to walk. The bibliography on walking dwells on the wealthy white men who approach the movement as a liberating leisure activity that gives them relief from their daily existence, work, and identities. However, for migrants as “for pilgrims, walking is work” (Solnit 45). The exertion and ordeal of the act moves walkers towards a goal. For most migrants, this goal is concrete economic employment, while pilgrims move towards a more abstract, sacred objective. For both types of walkers, however, the physical experience of the journey itself functions as a form of labor.

Walking foregrounds the physical. Gros describes walking as a “repeated enlacement with the earth” that makes him increasingly aware of the weight and capacities of his body (185). “Walking,” he explains, “is to experience gravity at every step, the inexorable attraction of the earth’s mass” (186). Walking facilitates a heightened experience of sensory awareness, a presence that takes time to establish. In the tradition of pilgrimage, the physicality of walking is key. The hardship and fatigue of the repeated, sustained effort of walking enact a process of purification. In writings on pilgrimage, feet are a focal point of suffering. The material experience of pilgrimage gives it meaning. A pilgrim can be directly present with the trace of a saint’s body, but only after investing the time and bodily energy into establishing that presence.
Walking demands little more than a mobile body. Solnit conceptualizes the body as an active subject in motion, the site of sensation and physical experience rather than abstract theorization. “When corporeality gets mobile,” she notes, “it walks” (27). The primacy of this corporeality is clear in Makina’s journey.

As she walks, Makina details her sensations, and the hardship of journey becomes clear through physical details: “Siguió caminando según le habían indicado unos paisanos gabachos con los que habló, y conforme avanzaba el cielo se ponía más rojo y el aire comenzaba a helarse. Tenía los labios partidos y las palmas de las manos se resquebrajaban” (Herrera 75). Herrera recreates migrants’ physical vulnerability, through Makina’s experiences of robbery, attacks, a dangerous river crossing, dehydration and exhaustion trekking through the desert, and a violent confrontation with Border Patrol. Makina endures extreme physical danger and harm, making visible the harsh material conditions that migrants bear in crossing the border. Herrera describes the physical experience of crossing the frigid river in vivid terms. The journey turns Makina’s world upside down: “De súbito el mundo se volvió gélido y verdoso y se pobló de invisibles monstruos de agua que la arrancaban de la balsa de caucho; intentó bracear, pateó lo que fuera que la secuestraba pero no conseguía ubicar de qué lado estaba la superficie” (Herrera 42-43). She crosses successfully to later, in an encounter with a border vigilante, sustain a bullet would that she inexplicably heals from while walking. By subjecting his protagonist to this abuse, Herrera highlights the material reality of conditions that migrants do face. The constancy of the trope of Makina’s walking repeatedly returns the narration to the physical.

By grounding the body in “pure sensation of being” on a physical level, walking can move one beyond material experience, into the potentiality of a horizon, onto a distinct plane of experience (Gros 83). Walking links physical and transcendent experience; its spatial movement
propels one toward a distinct future: “Walking returns the body to its original limits again, to something supple, sensitive, and vulnerable, but walking itself extends into the world” (Solnit 29). Walkers move forward physically in space and time, and also, through this movement, can access a realm of fantasy or sanctity, transcending physical experience. In traditions of pilgrimage, the physical suffering of walking functions as a means of moving beyond the physical, to access divine presence: “asceticism and physical exertion are almost universally understood as means of spiritual development” (Solnit 46). Pilgrimage depends on the notion that the divine can be accessed through the material, “that there is a geography of spiritual power” (Solnit 50). Pilgrimage’s search for spiritual growth uses the material in order to transcend it. Fernández, Crosthwaite, and Herrera enact the inverse of this: they engage with the fantastical or immaterial in order to critique and advocate change in material reality at the border.

Makina’s journey can be understood as a pilgrimage of sorts, a journey in which the intensity of her physical experience corresponds to the fantastical nature of her descent into the abstract underworld. When she thinks that she has at last found the object of her search—her brother—she has an experience of transcending the physical. Address in hand, “Makina voló; literalmente sentía que sus pies no tocaban el piso, que flotaría tijereando las piernas hasta encontrar a su hermano y que lo devolvería a casa sin volver a poner pie en tierra extraña” (Herrera 85). As her search continues, the mythic and the mundane increasingly blend, becoming indistinguishable. The daydream territory she enters in the final chapter heightens both her physical sensations and her awareness of moving beyond corporeal reality. Herrera describes the space as simultaneously tangible and abstract: “concreto y distante, algo irreal pero vivido” (118). She accesses this plane through her total immersion in the ongoing exertion of walking. When Makina finds her brother changed beyond recognition, and realizes that he will never
return home, walking serves as her resource, the only action that makes sense for her. The physicality of the act, the grounding of her body’s rhythm in interaction with the earth, seems to affirm her physical existence, within her disorienting, dislocating migrant experience.

No podía detenerse, debía seguir caminando aunque no supiera cómo iba a regresar. Era el ritmo, era su cuerpo sin lastre, era el leve sonido de su resuello lo que la impulsaba. Apuró el paso... y al andar sus pies—pat, pat, pat—dejaban huella sobre la tierra. La tarde se nubló hasta que fue imposible ver más allá del paso siguiente, sin embargo Makina no se detuvo: caminó rápidamente—pat, pat, pat—. (Herrera 115)

Through this repeated material contact with the ground, Makina leaves a trace on the earth, and enters an experience of “pure sensation of being” (Gros 83). It is this final, intensely physical, rather desperate walk that leads Makina directly to the final level of Mictlán. The concentrated materiality of her movement transfers her onto a different plane and into a sacred space.

Walking can make the sacred present. “‘The sacred’ is always socially constructed,” and is a variable, shifting referent (Badone 26). I use the term broadly to refer to experiences that occur beyond the tangible physical realm. Pilgrimage and continuous, immersive secular walking can operate facets of the same experience: journeys conducted in search or service that result in a transcendent experience, fantasy, or contact with a world that is not materially present. While some critics argue for a more rigid, solely sacred definition of pilgrimage, my analysis aligns with that of Ellen Badone, who argues for a broad interpretive pilgrimage framework that includes any journey in which people have transcendent experiences.77 The absorption of the body in the earth it treads facilitates a particular intensity of presence, in which the perception of time and space becomes altered, and the walker becomes able to dwell in that which is not
materially present. By acting out a search through the body and the imagination, pilgrims undergo transformation, as they relate to geography as “spiritualized” (Solnit 50). Through the repeated ritual of footsteps’ contact with the earth, walkers “access eternity,” or step outside of an everyday relationship to land and to the present and future, to enter a fantastical spatial-temporal experience (Gros 82). Gros notes, for example, the experiences of Tibetan monks, who experience a “hallucinatory trance state produced by the repetition of [their] tread” (216). Similarly, through the rapid repetitive rhythm of her feet, Makina enters a dream-like, post-death fantasy, a space beyond material reality where sensory experience is simultaneously heightened and absent.

She departs from physical reality and encounters the sacred when she descends into an odorless underground room that echoes with the sound of running water, the deepest level of Mictlán. The primacy of her physical experience subsides, as she realizes that “hacía mucho no se había bañado, y sin embargo no estaba sucia ni olía mal—no olía a nada” (118). Her body becomes secondary to the encounter in the cavern. It is a space filled with people smoking but no smoke, where a tall, thin man gives her a file with an entirely new identity: “Ahí estaba ella, con otro nombre y otra ciudad de nacimiento. Su foto, nuevos números, nuevo oficio, nuevo hogar. Me han desollado, musitó” (Herrera 118-19). Makina experiences this abstract identity transfer as the physically violent act of being skinned. The painful loss of her body and identity, in this fantastical space beyond the physical world, and the entire ethereal pilgrimage that transforms her, surpass the straightforward cultural blending that could be narrated through the concept of hybridity. Notions of hybridity cannot, like Herrera’s narration, depict a border reality or subject that encompasses mysterious, sacred traces and displacements. Herrera represents and critiques border reality through Makina’s transformation, which is at once intensely physical, or grounded
in bodily experience, and metaphorical, reaching beyond that what can be seen or understood. In order to narrate the border, Makina must go to the underworld, and emerge from a space of fantasy. Only through the displaced referents of her journey, the strange traces gathered and lost through the exertion of her walking, and through an engagement with the fantastical or sacred, does she arrive at her new manifestation.

After a moment of love and mourning for her body, she accepts her circumstances, on both a physical and a spiritual level: “entendió que todo lo que le sucedía no era un cataclismo; lo comprendió con todo el cuerpo y con toda su memoria, lo comprendió de verdad y finalmente se dijo Estoy lista cuando todas las cosas del mundo se quedaron en silencio” (Herrera 119). This could be the protagonist’s death, her rebirth, her dream, or the end of the world. Gros suggests that in moving beyond the immediately present world, walking occasions a “utopia of rebirth” (122). Or, perhaps, Makina dies in the sinkhole on the first page, as she imagines, and her entire journey is a posthumous one. In refusing to explicitly define Makina’s fate, or to distinguish physical reality from Aztec underworld, or even life from death, Herrera converts Makina herself into a displaced referent, into a trace that readers cannot entirely follow. Similarly, Crosthwaite refuses to explain whether Marcela’s immunity to Border Patrol’s bullets exists only in her mind or not, whether she becomes a migrant corpse or lives gleefully with Elvis forever, protected within the discourse of fantasy. The authors’ engagement with the fantastical in both texts is not separate from material reality, but rather merges with the violence and physicality of the border wall to produce traces, dissipating female walkers who cannot be fully tracked.

Walkers’ Dissipating Traces

Crosthwaite and Herrera mobilize the trope of walking to narrate the border in a way that fits within Yépez’s proposal of trace or residue as an apt metaphor for contemporary border
reality. Like the Paseo Costero in “Marcela y el Rey,” the spaces Makina passes through as she makes her way north towards the border are in ruin, haunted remnants of cities: “ciudades perdidas: literalmente: ciudades perdidas dentro de otras ciudades perdidas, deambulando todas sobre una superficie impenetrable” (Herrera 35). Herrera depicts the space as dissipating and ephemeral. Like Crosthwaite’s shifting narrative modes, the scenes that Makina sees while walking continually displace each other. For example, she thinks it must be a good omen when she sees a pregnant woman resting under a tree in the desert, but a sign of death brutally dislocates the positive referent: “Pero conforme se acercaban discernió los rasgos de la gente, que no era mujer; ni era la suya panza de embarazo; era un pobre infeliz hinchado de putrefacción al que los zopilotes ya le habían comido los ojos y la lengua” (Herrera 48). This abrupt dislocation makes the reality of migrants’ dead bodies in the desert stark, as it startles readers in contrast to the previous image.

The act of walking itself produces perpetually dissipating referents; it is an action of continual displacement in which one foot replaces the other in order to move forward and avoid falling. As the body moves progresses in space, it leaves traces of footsteps, marks of a body’s presence and absence in a territory. Walking projects forward into a future horizon and leaves a trace in its wake.79 In addition to footsteps, the average migrant leaves a strangely intimate trace—eight pounds of trash and personal items—behind them in desert (Santa Ana 57). Catalogues of the things they carried, the objects deemed essential to people on the move, affirm the fact of migration as a human experience.80 Urrea enumerates the items found on migrants’ bodies found dead in the desert: “a wallet, a few coins, a comb with hair and dandruff in its teeth, and a Catholic scapular. The picture on the scapular is of the Virgin of Guadalupe” (Urrea 36). These traces, like, perhaps, the experiences of those who carried the items, bridge the physical
and the spiritual. As she walks through the desert, Makina sees the traces of those who preceded her: “Morrales. Qué se lleva la gente a la que aquí se le acaba la vida. Makina veía sus morrales atascados de tiempo. Amuletos, cartas, a veces un violín huapanguero, a veces un arpa jaranera. Chamarras. . . . Fotos, fotos, fotos. Se llevaban las fotos como una promesa pero cuando volvían ya las habían dilapidado” (Herrera 55-56). The photos in particular are traces of lost moments, the echoes of previous lives. Makina passes the remains of the items and prayers that, displaced into the border desert, are rendered sun bleached and obsolete.

Upon her departure from Mexico, Makina dreads the irreversible process of assimilation that she perceives as a loss of Mexican identity in other migrants. She wants to return home as quickly as possible, so that she does not end up a trace of her former self, like a friend who “se mantuvo lejos demasiado tiempo, tal vez un día de más o una hora de más, en todo casa bastante tiempo de más como para que le pasara que cuando volvió todo seguía igual pero ya todo era otra cosa” (Herrera 21). Through walking and migration, identity can become more fluid. Foundational pilgrimage studies scholars Victor and Edith Turner discuss pilgrimage in terms that resemble many theorizations of border space. They “talk about pilgrimage as a liminal state—a state of being between one’s past and future identities and thus outside the established order, in a state of possibility” (Solnit 51). In their walking, migrants leave behind their material trappings, carrying only traces of their previous lives, photos and instruments that point to a past.

Gros suggests that the loss of material identity markers heralds a state of possibility. He writes about the fluidity of identity that walking facilitates with the vocabulary of liberation: “The freedom in walking lies in not being anyone” (Gros 7). “By walking,” he argues, “you escape from the very idea of identity, the temptation to be someone, to have a name and a history” (Gros 6). In the final chapter, Makina does shed her name and history, as a final result of
her pilgrimage, not as a liberatory escape, but rather as a painful process followed by acceptance. Of course, for a white male philosopher to discuss the freedom that walking grants him from his job, habits, and complicated identities carries different meaning from a migrant’s process of walking in a body that social discourse marks as criminal and coerces towards invisibility. Migrants’ names and ability to access resources are often lost through the act of crossing the border. As she walks through U.S. cities, Makina becomes aware of the ephemeral presence of undocumented workers: “En medio del llano de concreto y varilla, sin embargo, luego sintió otra presencia . . . efímeras miradas de reconocimiento que de inmediato se ocultaban para convertirse en huida. Era el paisanaje armado de chambas . . . estaban ahí para recibir órdenes” (Herrera 63). In a country that does not recognize the legality of their existence, criminalized migrants become traces, displaced, necessarily invisible presences that, like Marcela and Makina, cannot be fully tracked.

Makina fears becoming a displaced body that does not return home. At the bus depot in Mexico City, she treads lightly, avoids leaving a trace in order to avoid becoming a trace:

No podía perderse. Cada vez que volvía al Gran Chilango plantaba el pie suavecito porque no era éso el sitio donde quería dejar huella, y se repetía que no podía perderse, y con perderse se refería no a un desvío ni a un rodeo sino a perderse de veras, perderse para siempre en las lomas de lomas que encementaban el horizonte; o perderse en el asombro de tanta carne viva levantando palacios. (Herrera 27)

Her thought process belies an anxiety on the level of identity, but also an awareness of the reality of feminicide in Mexico and a lifetime spent in a body marked as female. On a physical level,
she does not want to be reduced to remains. Even within these restraints and anxieties, she continues walking.

**Walking/Writing through the Wall**

Until she does ultimately shed her identity and perhaps her body, in her final underground encounter, Makina moves powerfully within the obstacles and restrictive systems that she navigates. Despite the physical harm and disorienting descent of her journey, she models the insistent movement of migrants who, despite the fortification of border walls and deployment of sensors, helicopters, and officers, continue to cross the border. Her continued act of walking demonstrates the penetrability of the militarized border infrastructure. Makina first shows her dogged determination when, at a checkpoint of sorts, a guard tries to impede her access to Señor Dobleú, and she continues walking toward her goal despite his threatening presence. When, in a run-in with police and a vigilante, she is hit in her ribs by a bullet, “continuó moviéndose pero había perdido la orientación . . . echó a correr, con armas y cabrones a ambos lados. Escuchó a sus espaldas que le ordenaban Parese, échase al suelo, pero no se dio media vuelta” (Herrera 54). Despite injury, dislocation, and direct orders to halt, she continues placing one foot ahead of the other. Her resolute mobility despite physical restriction resembles Marcela’s walk, as she too continued to move forward, ignoring Border agents’ bullets, helicopters, and orders, through engagement with the fantastical.

Later, an immigration officer forces Makina to join a half dozen men on their knees in parking lot as he rants about the invading force of migrants, performing the state’s criminalizing discourse. When the officer mocks a man who carries a book of poems, demanding at gunpoint that he write a poem, Makina grabs the pencil and begins to write with the same determination and consistency as she walks:
Nosotros somos los culpables de esta destrucción, los que no hablamos su lengua, ni sabemos estar en silencio . . . Los que venimos a quitarles el trabajo, los que aspiramos a limpiar su mierda, los que anhelamos trabajar a deshoras . . . los que merecemos ser amarrados del cuello y de los pies . . . Nosotros los oscuros, los chaparros, los grasientos, los mustios, los obesos, los anémicos. Nosotros, los bárbaros. (Herrera 109-10)

The officer reads her words to the detained group, mockingly at first, then in a whisper. He then drops the paper and wanders off, without charging or pursuing the deportation of anyone in the group. Before anyone can respond, Makina is back on her feet, walking toward the horizon.

Through this literary defense, Makina literally disarms the officer, using the ironic admission of guilt as a tool of mobility that returns her to her walking. The scene is a fantasy: Border Patrol officers do not tend to be convinced by poetry. The fantastical, however, suggests the capacity of aesthetic production to intervene in material conditions of oppression.

As the physical act of walking leads towards an engagement with the abstract domains of imagination or spirituality, so the intangible act of writing can intervene in the physical world. Michel de Certeau examines walking and writing as intimately related, parallel acts of realizing or practicing space (104). Similarly, Santiago Vaquera Vásquez understands walking as “to write one’s story with one’s footsteps” (121). Writing, like walking, defines reality and moves towards alternatives; both acts encounter the world and tread new paths into it. The acts of writing and walking both bridge physical and immaterial experiences, and can both represent futures beyond current reality. The repeated use of the term “jarchar” in Herrera’s novel blends the motions and impacts of walking with those of writing. Herrera uses the verb, derived from jarchas colloquially throughout the novel, as a movement verb that refers to walking, passing through,
leaving, and crossing. The term originates in literature: *jarchas* were vernacular Mozarabic verses tagged onto longer Arabic or Hebrew poems in Al-Andalus, as transitions that move a text forward, or as textual bridges between languages and cultures (Dillman 112). Herrera’s inventive, idiomatic appropriation of the early poetic form to refer to acts of walking positions physical movement as an act of creation, or as a way of writing with the body. In translating “jarchar” as “to verse,” Dillman further highlights the similarities between writing and walking, and suggests the potential of acts of movement to evoke realities beyond those that are immediately evident.

When Makina enters the final level of Mictlán, accessing a spiritual space through the exertion of her journey, she descends down a spiral staircase: “Comenzó a bajar . . . Sobre la puerta había un cartel que decía *Jarcha*” (Herrera 117). Behind that door, she enters an ethereal space where the writing of verses meets the act of walking, a zone of intense simultaneous physicality and loss of physicality where she encounters, through her descent, a new form of mobility. Crosthwaite’s “Marcela,” Herrera’s *Señales*, and Fernández’s *Borrando* all perform a similar gesture: they evoke a fantastical or sacred realm through walking, which allows them to move through the border, transforming and disarming its machinery. Their movements employ the physical in order to move beyond it, to a transcendent fantasy or spiritual experience.

**Border Wall as Sacred Space**

Crosthwaite engages with spirituality through moves that blend written language with the physical land that migrants walk, in “Misa fronteriza,” from his 2002 *Instrucciones para cruzar la frontera*, which he has performed on multiple occasions as an ironic ritual. Writing the border into the body and the page, as both metaphor and material reality, he works to transform the wall into a sacred space:
Bienvenidos todos a esta misa fronteriza

[Haciendo la señal de la cruz, bendiciendo al(254,212),(599,739)público.]

En el norte

Estados Unidos, en el sur, México;

en medio,

de este

a oeste,

una franja. (Crosthwaite, Instrucciones 161)

He sculpts the religious symbol into the border geography, into the words, and into sensory experience, through the cross gesture appropriated from the Catholic Church, the textual layout that creates a spatial image on the page, and by evoking the physical space of the border wall. His textual-physical gesture sanctifies the space by turning the territory itself into part of a religious ritual. In “Oración de los fieles,” a later section of “Misa fronteriza,” Crosthwaite evokes the materiality of the militarized border infrastructure and constructs the act of crossing the border as a pilgrimage, a sacred mission: “Construyeron un muro de concreto / y dijeron con esto / ya no van a cruzar / los desgraciados. // Pero seguimos cruzando. // Levantaron detrás de ese muro / otra gran muralla / y dijeron ahora sí, / ahora sí los vamos a detener. // Pero seguimos cruzando. . . . Pero seguimos cruzando” (Crosthwaite, Instrucciones 172). He not only affirms the ultimate permeability of the border infrastructure, despite the militarized systems deployed to seal the nation’s boundaries; he adopts the language of religiosity to turn the flow of migrants into a sacred promise or covenant. He turns the U.S. social discourse of invasion and threat associated with immigration into a declaration of faith. The repetition of the refrain “seguimos
cruzando” evokes the collective group of migrants that continue to cross the border, and transforms the statement from discourse that is threatening to the state to a ritual that appears to participate in a tradition of religious authority.

To undermine the state’s demonstration of force materialized through the border wall, the 2004 mural-installation *Paseo de la humanidad* in Nogales, Mexico, similarly sanctifies the space of the wall. Like the work of Fernández, Crosthwaite, and Herrera, the project critiques the material reality of today’s militarized border infrastructure, as it puts walking figures into motion to engage with experience beyond the material and to imagine an alternative possible future for the territory. The metal installation, applied directly to the border wall and exhibited until 2010, is a transnational collaboration between U.S. and Mexican artists that consists of sixteen giant milagros, or religious charms, made by Alfred Quiroz, and nineteen enormous walking human figures, created by Guadalupe Serrano and Alberto Morackis with Taller Yonke Arte Público (*see images 4.4-4.7*). Traditionally, milagros are tiny icons that represent the object of a person’s prayers, or their gratitude for a blessing. Like Crosthwaite’s “Misa fronteriza,” the large-scale milagros cloak the border wall in the discourse and imagery of spirituality, converting the wall into a sacred space in order to challenge its infrastructure: “On the very wall that asserts power, control, and inhospitality, Quiroz suggests a different way to be with the border: treating it as a holy place, a play to pray for well-being and health” (Watkins 215). At the same time, Quiroz’s milagros also mark the border as a space of death, adopting spirituality ironically, and through images particular to the installation’s geography and violence, such as the truck full of skulls or the form of a leg, a common milagro figure, represented in sneakers and jeans, running away from Border Patrol.
The central portion of the installation portrays migrants walking as they both leave and return to Mexico, crossing the border, represented as a revolving red door. The representation of the wall as a door, along with the vibrant parade moving both ways, emphasizes the permeability of the border wall, the failure of the state, despite the deployment of massive construction and enforcement projects, to seal the territory. The figures make the flow of life between the countries visible on a large scale. The traces of the migrants’ paths and of the lives they have left behind, like Makina’s footsteps and the traces of actual migrants, are discernable in the things they carry. The metal figures moving into the U.S. carry instruments, babies, the Virgin of Guadalupe, and other cultural and spiritual icons that accompany their pilgrimage. Those returning to Mexico transport manufactured goods, from boots to a washing, along with a shrouded body—the actual remains of a life—carried on the shoulders of two walking figures. These traces do not dissipate, like those of so many migrants, but instead are made material, larger-than-life, and bright, installed in thick metal and vibrant painted colors directly onto the border wall. A figure made to represent a Border Patrol agent has a chest and heart made out of a piece of the border wall’s corrugated metal, showing the materiality of the militarized infrastructure, which extends beyond the wall itself. The migrants’ expressions and postures convey fatigue and suffering, from the continued physical exertion of walking. At the same time, like Marcela and Makina, they move beyond a purely physical experience, as they carry their sacred images that borrow from Catholic, Aztec, and Mayan iconographies with them. Their parade creates a fantasy of visibility, in which migrants are not perpetually displaced traces, but rather move freely through spaces and a society that recognizes their humanity.

Publically, vibrantly displayed, the large-scale walking figures in *Paseo de la humanidad* visually declare Crosthwaite’s refrain: “seguimos cruzando” (*Instrucciones* 172). The images
attest to the footsteps and traces of migrants who demonstrate the penetrability of the border wall daily. In Señales, Herrera describes the myth of U.S. citizens’ separation and singularity that circulates as a result of the border infrastructure: “La ciudad era un arreglo nervioso de partículas de cemento y pintura amarilla. Carteles de prohibición hormigueaban calle a calle inspirando a los nacionales a verse siempre protegidos, seguros, amables, inocentes, soberbios, intermitentemente azorados, livianos y desbordantes; sal de la única tierra que vale la pena conocer” (Herrera 62). The visual and textual border walkers examined in this chapter expose the unfeasibility of that discourse of sealing the nation, and move resolutely through restrictive systems. Just as Fernández, in her cocktail dress and heels, moves capably within rigid expectations of femininity and the restraints of the immigration system; Makina, Marcela, and Crosthwaite’s chorus of migrants continue walking despite physical harm and the ongoing obstacles to their mobility. They deploy walking as a trope that bridges physical and metaphorical border experiences. Through walking, they engage with the fantastical and the sacred, moving beyond notions of hybridity to embody the concept of trace as a representation of contemporary border reality.
Women navigate obstacles in the borders between the U.S. and Mexico and in those that emerge through freeway construction, in prisons, and in factories. In these spaces, officers, supervisors, and border patrol agents tell women how to move and when to stop. This dissertation showcases the resourceful movements of border women in creative works that forge new forms of mobility despite these demands. Material institutional structures work alongside criminalizing discourses to impede women’s motions throughout the works examined in these chapters. Apter notes the diffuse, amorphous nature of the contemporary borders that restrict their mobility: “Every person becomes a potential checkpoint in the ‘war on terror,’ a body-scan medium, a transporter of cellular data, a first-responder, a civilian backup to law enforcement . . . Border guards actively embody ‘check-pointization,’ a process set in motion when a ‘person of interest’ moves into the crosshairs of a raised gun” (48). Through their responses to these processes of “check-pointization,” these border characters consistently render the state’s arms ineffective in arresting their bodies.

When bullets rain down from authorities in helicopters onto Viramontes’ urban missionary character Tranquilina, she generates a mode of escape that eludes their military logic, and begins to fly: “she ignored the command to place her hands on her head. Her arms by her side, her fists clenched, she would not fear them. Shouting voices ordered her not to move, stay immobile, but she lifted one foot forward, then another, refusing to halt. Two inches, four, six, eight, riding the currents of the wilding wind” (Viramontes 325). In this act of disobedience to
the shooters ordering her immobility, she draws on her family’s spiritual discourse of the Aztec priests *voladores*.

When a police officer shoots Herrera’s border-crossing character Makina in the ribs, she similarly moves beyond his domain of control or understanding: “continuó moviéndose pero había perdido la orientación . . . echó a correr, con armas y cabrones a ambos lados. Escuchó a sus espaldas que le ordenaban Parese, échase al suelo, pero no se dio media vuelta” (Herrera 54). She continues moving, despite the officer’s direct orders to halt and the bullet lodged in her body. Her injury inexplicably heals as she moves, as she too accesses a realm beyond human comprehension.

In an analogous confrontation, officers in helicopters demand that Crosthwaite’s Marcela cease her movement, and fire their weapons on her. As she crosses the border hand-in-hand with Elvis, border patrol officers, “los tontos, gritaron STOP. Aparecieron los helicópteros con sus mejores lámparas para señalárs. . . . ¿Sirven las balas para algo? Marcela y Elvis siguieron caminando . . . ni ellos ni sus pistolas existían para Marcela y el Rey” (Crosthwaite 20). Like Makina and Tranquilina, she establishes her own mobility, or ability to move freely outside the reach of the border system’s obstacles, by entering a fantastical discourse that operates beyond material reality. Within this space, the bullets fail to harm her or to restrict her movement.

Throughout these works, border women make shots fired from institutional authorities futile, enacting a fantasy of state impotence. In the maquiladora and prison contexts, women similarly craft mobility strategies that allow them a range of movement beyond institutional dictates. Despite authorities’ ban on graffiti in Ciudad Juárez, for example, Arjona’s *pintas* continue to proliferate, as she and her imitators continue to mark their presence and voice in public space. Similarly, when an inmate at Santa Martha Acatitla follows an officer’s orders to
line up for the daily counting of prisoners, the traces of her movements linger in the marks of her mural on the prison wall. Her vibrant, larger-than-life self-portrait allows her movement to extend into a spatial and temporal horizon beyond the time-tables and confines of the prison. In regulatory border zones, women keep moving in creative ways, demonstrating the ultimate incapability of state forces to contain, control, or destroy their bodies. The mobility that these women claim through their aesthetic production not only grants them an increased range of physical movement in space, but also operates as a challenge to and escape from the criminalizing discourses that position them outside national belonging.

In the range of border zones examined in this dissertation, authorities regulate citizenship and movement through physical and discursive systems of surveillance. Prisons, factories, highways, and border checkpoints are parallel panopticons, structures designed to seal off and control subjects through isolated observation. Foucault explains that the effectiveness of the disciplinary apparatus relies on the visibility of those it contains: “Hence the major effect of the Panopticon: to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power” (201). The panoptic architecture of Santa Martha Acatitla restricts inmates’ vision and movement while ensuring their visibility to officers: “Las mujeres están siendo observadas por cámaras y custodios en todos los pasillos y espacios del penal. La visión limitada es para ellas, extensiva para la autoridad” (Belaustegui 66). The maquiladora assembly plant is similarly designed to facilitate supervisors’ absolute surveillance of workers on the shop floor, and managers’ surveillance of supervisors from above, as Salzinger notes: “The building is a panopticon, an architecture designed to control through visibility” (163). State attempts to achieve the permanent visibility of border subjects take place through material means such as helicopters, patrol agent forces, drones, fortified barriers, and
surveillance technology. The perpetually incomplete project of sealing the national border is “an impossible panopticon” (Montezemolo n. pag.). Viramontes’ fictional Quarantine Authority, the organization tasked with maintaining the structural divisions built into the urban geography, restricts the movements of residents near the highways, through roadblocks, curfews, checkpoints, helicopters, and other structures that resemble the machinery at the national border.

While these tactics and the panoptic architecture throughout these border zones strive for prison-like containment by seeking the permanent visibility of border subjects on a physical level, the discourses produced about these border women also aim for ultimate transparency. Viego calls the representation of minority identities as fully readable and knowable, and therefore easily regulated, “the fossilization of subjectivity” (140). This rigid construction of otherness operates as a discursive or representative panopticon, as its criminalizing discourses attempt to make minority identities fully visible and fixed, and thus fully controllable. This representational rigidity, deployed alongside material obstacles, is what I call cementation. The first chapter examines how cementation works in the discourse of blight applied to minority communities in Los Angeles, which justified the construction of freeways that bulldozed their homes and divided their neighborhoods. The same discursive-material rigidity at the service of permanent visibility appears throughout the border zones examined in this dissertation. The discourse of female factory workers as untrainable and disposable, for example, emerges alongside supervisors’ tactics that control and observe their every movement. Similarly, the escalated construction of prisons and border walls accompanies the institutionalized discourse of the criminality of migrants and Latinos.

This cementation, or deployment of parallel narratives and infrastructure that restrict women’s mobility, in the border region, urban neighborhoods, criminal justice system, and
manufacturing system heralds a state of crisis in each of these border spaces. Well over 5,000 migrants’ corpses have been found in the borderland deserts since Operation Gatekeeper began pushing border-crossers into more dangerous territory in 1994 (Regan 162). The logic of disposability in the maquilas contributes to corporate and state complicity in the ongoing epidemic of feminicide. The excessive incarceration of women of color—the U.S. and Mexico have the highest and sixth highest incarceration rates in the world, respectively, and both have seen enormous rises in female inmate populations in recent years—devastates communities, as does the spatial isolation imposed through the construction of freeway systems.

These border zones function as interrelated systems, regulating movement and belonging in connected ways. While the maquila industry attracts migrants from Central America and southern Mexico, the northward flows of migration shape the labor force and enforcement tactics at the U.S.-Mexico border, as well as the populations in Chicano neighborhoods and in prisons and detention centers. Due to the shift in border enforcement policy from a strategy of “prevention through deterrence” to “high consequence enforcement outcomes,” immigration and incarceration have become increasingly intertwined (Seghetti n. pag.). This new form of “checkpointization” has led to the five-fold growth of the U.S. immigrant detention system between 1994 and 2013, and the current detention of 33,000 people by Immigration and Customs Enforcement, separate from any criminal proceedings (“Unlocking” n. pag.). In a recent claim against the U.S. government, a group of immigrant mothers and their children held in detention centers reported psychological and physical damage from conditions including sexual abuse, overcrowding, threats to separate children from their families, and lack of access to medical care (Tobia n. pag.). The ACLU report “Fatal Neglect: How ICE Ignores Deaths in Detention” details the systemic, at times fatal conditions suffered by immigrants while detained in ICE facilities.
The report examines the violations of medical care standards that contributed to a series of in-custody deaths from 2010 to 2012 in a facility in Texas. The culture of secrecy around these deaths, and the insufficient investigations or responses to them, reflect the process that Butler calls derealization. These doubly marginalized incarcerated migrants experience the dehumanizing violence of being excluded not only from the rights and protections of citizenship, but also from “culturally viable notions of the human” (33). After the primary violence of this exclusion, Butler argues, neither society nor the state recognizes the lives of the derealized as worth protecting or mourning.

I use the concept of mechanical gesture to refer to the physical acts that contribute to the derealization of people in each of these border zones, the repetitive, homogenizing motions that dehumanize populations. For example, policing at checkpoints functions as a mechanical gesture in Viramontes’ novel and the Historical Mural in Chicano Park, which depict police officers as hyper-masculinized, machine-like representatives of the state moving under layers of metal protection as they filter protected citizens from those constructed as criminals. The motions required by officers and supervisors in prisons, factories, and at border crossings are equally regulatory. The impacts of these sites of crisis call for urgent responses from actors other than the “Estado sin entrañas,” which has washed its hands of all responsibility for the lives of these criminalized, derealized subjects (Rivera Garza 52).

By forging new forms of mobility, border women assert their humanity and establish new categories of belonging beyond the exclusive discourses of citizenship. The works analyzed in these chapters employ horizon production, vital gesture, and the trope of walking as strategies for imagining alternative possible futures outside of the exclusive temporal and spatial practices of citizenship that derealize border women’s existence. Their aesthetic expressions of mobility
enable peripheral forms of resistance despite the institutionalized structures and discourses of cementation. The mobility these subjects create is not only movement; it is a challenge to the spatial panoptic practices in border spaces and to the production of discourses that visually scrutinize and construct border subjects as “questionable bodies” unfit for citizenship (Hernández 89). The mobility examined in this dissertation refers to border women’s creative, resilient acts that affirm their capacity to move within these border zones’ physical impediments and in opposition to their criminalizing discourses.

The artists and authors I study adopt spiritual images, vocabularies, and gestures as a key tool in establishing these new forms of mobility and articulating alternative futures. Throughout these works, they employ the sacred as a means of engagement with political and social oppression. These border subjects approach spirituality, like Delgadillo, as a “critical mobility,” as a constantly shifting, transferrable and renegotiable system of symbols (1). They draw on spirituality as a discourse that operates outside of what is fully knowable or visible, which positions it as a powerful instrument of resistance against panoptic tactics and restrictive constructions of border subjects that rely on permanent visibility and discursive transparency. In an interview, Viramontes positions the act of writing as a form of spiritual practice, as a discourse that is crucial to her own mobility and to her ability to impact other border women’s obstacles: “writing is the only way I know how to pray, because writing helps me to understand reality. Writing is resuscitative and empowering in the light of political struggles . . . the faith in my imagination is as important as any religion” (Gutiérrez y Muhs 241-42). Both discourses—that of aesthetic production through writing and that of spirituality—offer the means to engage with and impact the institutional violence that occurs in border spaces.
This work probes sites of transnational crisis where the derealization of border subjects’
lives occurs, areas where Mexican and U.S. government officials seek to control women’s
bodies without assuming responsibility for their lives or wellbeing. My study of these expansive
border zones centers aesthetic work as a powerful tool of social change that can articulate
knowledge and experiences in a way that quantitative analysis alone cannot. Through this
dissertation, I assert the capacity of cultural production to transform spatial and social
relationships. I take popular culture seriously as aesthetic production that intervenes in cultural
discourses, alters geographies, and intervenes in relationships of power. I establish visual and
textual works as mutually informative, or complementary in performing the work of representing
material injustices and acts of resistance in these border spaces.

This dissertation prioritizes local and material cultural production to accesses larger
questions of mobility and criminality through the works of border women who write, paint, and
move from the border. While international work about the border often overshadows local
responses to the region’s violence and militarization, I prioritize border residents’ work in order
to bring critical attention to the artistic voices that are most directly able to respond to their
surrounding circumstances. I situate border and Latino studies as part of Latin American studies,
by examining the cultural flows between aesthetic production on both sides of the U.S.-Mexico
border. Rather than emphasizing the freeway, prison, factory, and border tropes within
canonical U.S. literature and criticism, I locate resistance and knowledge most centrally in the
local context and in works that engage directly with the material structures that restrict border
subjects’ mobility.

This framework facilitates the representation of fluid, mobile identities that cannot be
fully captured, and the recognition of acts of resistance that are not overt, that can be expressed
in a bodily gesture, a word or a brushstroke. Anticipatory horizons that envision alternative possible futures free of institutional regulation emerge in the vital moments when border women step outside of the rigid demands on their bodily movement and expression. When Marcela holds Elvis’ hand, when Tranquilina prays with the movement of her feet, or when Arjona leaves the trace of her body in her spray-painted letters, they interrupt the border machinery and reveal its ultimate failure to contain and immobilize them. These peripheral acts of resistance elude panoptic visibility, and thus at least momentarily escape institutional control.

Viramontes’ 2007 novel, as well as many of the works examined in this dissertation, come from the period of highest Mexican immigration rates into the U.S., and reflect that moment of crisis. While this dissertation focuses predominantly on works that represent Mexican experiences, the conversation has shifted in recent years, as rates of Mexican migration drop and that of non-Mexicans rises. In recent years, numbers of Mexican immigrants into the U.S. have declined substantially, but at the same time, right-wing political rhetoric criminalizing and dehumanizing this population has intensified, fueling the perception of migrants and even ethnically-marked legal residents as a threat to the nation. Unauthorized immigrants from Mexico are crossing into the U.S. much less often than they did before the U.S. economic recession, although the estimated 5.9 million Mexican immigrants currently in the U.S. still make up more than half of the country’s unauthorized immigrant population. For the first time on record, Border Patrol officers apprehended more non-Mexicans than Mexicans in 2014. About 229,000 Mexicans were apprehended by the Border Patrol that year, compared to 257,000 non-Mexicans (Krogstad n. pag.). The last time Mexican apprehensions were this low was in 1970. The recent increase in non-Mexican apprehensions is due in part to a surge in unaccompanied Central American children crossing the border, as well as a rise in unauthorized immigration
from Asia. The derealization of Central American children occurs through a related but distinct process to that of adult migrants, one that merits its own study.

Despite the standstill in Mexican immigration and slowing of migration into the U.S. at large, the U.S. public continues to place an escalating emphasis on border security. This results in an increasingly hostile reality for immigrants already in the country, as well as for legal residents and citizens of Latin American descent, who are equally scrutinized for the “look of illegality” (Hernández 99). The current political climate indicates a shift from more covert narratives of criminalization to overt, extreme rhetoric that intensifies resentment and violence towards Mexicans and Mexican Americans. Donald Trump’s announcement for his 2016 presidential bid included this statement: “When Mexico sends its people, they’re not sending their best . . . They’re sending people that have lots of problems, and they’re bringing those problems with us. They’re bringing drugs. They’re bringing crime. They’re rapists” (Capehart n. pag.). As evidenced by his success in polls and state caucuses, this directly criminalizing rhetoric holds a great deal of appeal for white U.S. voters, regardless of the reality of immigration patterns. This narrative of Mexican criminality accompanies not only Trump’s plan to build what he calls a “beautiful” wall along the border, but also Latino presidential candidates Marco Rubio and Ted Cruz’s promises to fortify and construct more extensive barriers between the U.S. and Mexico.

Migrants worldwide are subjected to criminalizing, dehumanizing narratives and physical barriers, or processes of “check-pointization” that reflect operations at the U.S.-Mexico border. Globally, borders are increasingly becoming spaces of death and entering states of crisis. David Horsey argues that Europe currently faces an immigration emergency “exponentially bigger” than that of the U.S. (n. pag.). According to data from the United Nations and the International
Organization for Migration, more than one million migrants and refugees arrived in Europe in 2015, fleeing persecution, conflict and poverty (Grammaticas n. pag.). Most of these people—972,500—arrived by crossing the Mediterranean Sea (Grammaticas n. pag.). Half of those crossing the Mediterranean were Syrians trying to escape the violence of war. Numbers crossing the Mediterranean increased steadily to a peak of more than 221,000 people in October from around 5,500 in January 2015 (Simpson n. pag.). An estimated 3,800 people drowned in the Mediterranean in 2015, making the journey to Greece or Italy in unseaworthy boats loaded beyond capacity. By March 2016, another 129,500 migrants had arrived by sea, plus 1,545 by land, and already, 418 people had drowned or were missing (“Migrant” n. pag.).

This enormous surge of immigrants has led to unprecedented measures to restrict the migrants’ movements from countries with traditionally open immigration policies. Germany introduced border checks in September 2015, as did Sweden in November. Sweden is also taking steps to keep migrants from even reaching the border and requires passengers boarding Sweden-bound trains in neighboring Denmark to show identification. Border closures are exacerbated by the refusal of many migrants’ countries of origin, such as Pakistan, to accept forcible returns, leaving migrants stranded outside checkpoints. As Greece and other countries struggle to cope with these arrivals, their tactics for controlling the flow of migrants become increasingly militarized, such as Macedonia’s recent use of tear gas on a crowd of migrants (Grammaticas n. pag.). As at the U.S.-Mexico border, the language and operations of war and armed conflict become progressively more intertwined with the human process of migration. While migration and border crossing has been a constant throughout history, this kind of militarization of borders is a more recent phenomenon.
As migrant numbers, tensions, and border fortification measures all rise, so does the increasingly hostile anti-immigrant sentiment in Europe. Many European politicians and public figures deploy the same criminalizing, dehumanizing discourses used to justify the restriction of Mexican migrants’ mobility in the U.S. In a most egregious example, two days before a mass drowning of Syrian refugees, British columnist Katie Hopkins published a column in the Sun, Britain’s most popular newspaper, in which she suggested using gun boats on migrants, and compared them to cockroaches and viruses: “Make no mistake, these migrants are like cockroaches. They might look a bit ‘Bob Geldof’s Ethiopia circa 1984’, but they are built to survive a nuclear bomb” (Williams n. pag.). The blatant xenophobia in this statement evokes the exact language used in anti-Semitic Nazi propaganda and that used to demonize Tutsis in the Rwandan genocide. As at the U.S.-Mexico border, this discursive “check-pointization” endangers humans’ lives. It justifies the fortification and closing of Europe’s borders, as well as indifference and insufficient responses to the growing numbers of deaths, by derealizing migrants, or overtly excluding them from recognizable humanity.

This dissertation has focused on aesthetic production as a humanizing force that can challenge the operations of militarized borders, or as a survival strategy and a tactic for movement in the face of diffuse regulatory checkpoints. While the capacity to produce art is a luxury not accessible to those in the most dire circumstances, survival entails more than the access to food, shelter, medical care, and other basic services that humanitarian organizations are able to provide in refugee camps. As at the U.S.-Mexico border, displaced migrant artists in Europe employ artistic expression as a way to process trauma, reestablish community, and physically transform their surroundings.
For example, a large-scale mural painting project in the Za’atari Camp in northern Jordan, the world’s second-largest refugee camp, demonstrates many of the same tropes and techniques seen in the muralism at the U.S.-Mexico border wall and in Mexico City’s Santa Martha Acatitla Prison. The camp’s more than 100,000 residents live in a colorless desert environment that contrasts dramatically with their verdant native region of Daraa, Syria, and while they have access to basic services for survival, the camp offers few opportunities for education, artistic expression, or cultural engagement. Muralist Joel Bergner, along with Syrian artist Ali Kiwan and Palestinian immigrant Yusra Ali collaborated with the children in Za’atari, in partnership with UNICEF and Mercy Corp, to bring vibrant color and movement to the walls of the camp. The murals’ large designs structured by the professional artists incorporate children’s work within the colored squares that make up larger figures. Inside of the massive portrait of a woman, for example, children painted images of what they missed most from their homes (see image 5.1). As in the Santa Martha Acatitla murals, the images demonstrate the beginnings of an anticipatory temporality and the formation of a collectivity. Inside the figures in the mural “I Dream of …” for example, the children paint their goals and hopes for their futures, and in “The Future is in Our Hands,” they depict what they would like to see in their future neighborhoods, wherever those communities form (see images 5.2 and 5.3). The three-dimensional indoor mural “One Day I Will Catch My Dreams” employs the imagery of flowing water, challenging the experience of immobility for residents suspended in the rigid, dry space of the refugee camp.

A similar initiative, the Castle Art Project, is part of the Rise Foundation, a small NGO based in the Kurdish region of Iraq that teaches visual art to young Syrian refugees, many of whom are survivors of dangerous Mediterranean crossings whose family members have
drowned. In a new overlapping of incarceration and migration, the project takes place in a refugee camp housed in Akre Prison, a space that was used under Saddam Hussein to detain and torture political prisoners. The former prison presents a gray, forbidding cement landscape full of the traces of the totalitarian regime. When stocking a library for the camp, Lucy Tyndall and Nils Henrik came up with the idea of transforming the former cells by painting murals on the walls with the help of the camp’s refugee children. The project now offers ongoing, extensive art training for residents, with the stated goals of giving “the children ways of punching through the walls of their prison and retaking some control over their lives” as well as to “rehumanize them in the eyes of the world” (McTighe n. pag.). When one young artist was asked what she would do to rebuild Syria, she replied that she would paint all the walls of Damascus, demonstrating her faith in the transformative power of aesthetic production (McTighe n. pag.). In my fantasy of mobility, the army of Border Patrol officers, prison guards, vigilantes, citizens and politicians currently regulating border women’s movement and belonging would instead begin painting the surfaces of every prison wall, highway pylon, factory, and border in the world.
Image 1.2. Chicano Park. Detail from “Inlakesh.”
Photograph by Britta Anderson August 2013.

Photograph by Britta Anderson August 2013.


Image 1.10. Chicano Park under the interchange of Interstate 5 and Coronado Bay Bridge. Google Maps.


Image 2.5. (Belaustegui-goiitia 123)

Image 2.6 “Fuerza, tiempo y esperanza” (Belaustegui-goiitia 157)
Image 2.7 “Fuerza, tiempo y esperanza” (Belausteguigoitia 159)

Image 2.8 detail from “Fuerza, tiempo y esperanza” (Belausteguigoitia 161)
Image 2.9 detail from “Fuerza, tiempo y esperanza” (Belaustegui 167)

Image 2.10 (Belaustegui 215)
Esa parte libre, que no te pueden quitar, esa parte que no tiene rejas, no tiene alambre, no tiene púas, no tiene navajas.

Se necesita más formación, no sólo popotillo, raña y cosas manuales.
Image 2.13 (Belausteguigoitia 167)

Image 2.14 (Belausteguigoitia 195)
Image 3.1. Arminé Arjona in front of one of her pintas in Ciudad Juárez (López García 7).

Image 3.2. Black cross on a Ciudad Juárez telephone pole. Photo by Debbie Nathan.
Image 4.1. Ana Teresa Fernández painting the border wall on the Tijuana beach in “Borrando la frontera,” 2012

Image 4.2. “Borrando la frontera”
Image 4.3. Ana Teresa Fernández, “Borrando la Frontera,” oil on canvas, Foreign Bodies exhibit, Gallery Wendi Norris, San Francisco

Image 4.4. Paseo de la humanidad
Image 4.5. Paseo de la humanidad

Image 4.6. Paseo de la humanidad
Image 4.7. Paseo de la humanidad


Lang, Fritz, dir. *Metropolis*. Paramount Pictures, 1927. Film


Regan, Margaret. *The Death of Josseline: Immigration Stories from the Arizona Borderlands.*


Sánchez, Ricardo. Review of *I am Waiting to be Free*, anthology of writing from the Penitentiary of New Mexico.


The 1853 Gadsden Purchase modified the border’s location, as did the 1963 modification of “El Chamizal,” an area of land just north of the Rio Grande in El Paso.

2 Michael Taussig coined this term in his “Culture of Terror, Space of Death. Roger Casement’s Putumayo Report and the Explanation of Torture,” in his analysis of the environment that results from acts of violence and terror. He introduces the concept in his analysis of the tactics that British rubber barons used in attempts to impose capitalist modes of production of indigenous populations.

Regan visits the Pima County Morgue in Arizona to detail the loss of human life. The record high temperatures during the summer of 2005 led to an unprecedented number of migrant corpses piling up awaiting autopsy and identification. Medical examiner Dr. Bruce Parks notes the impossibility of properly autopsying each person: “the morgue could hold only 120 corpses, and so many bodies piled up that the doctor ran out of room . . . It got so bad that he had to rent a refrigerated storage truck. He parked the overflow bodies in the truck out back” (Regan 155-56).

The concept of Aztlán first arose in Chicano discourse introduced by Chicano poet Alurista in 1969, and it was quickly embraced by the nationalist movement in the following years. Aztlán, the legendary Aztec homeland, refers to land within the boundaries of the Mexican Cession, the land that Pope Alexander VI granted to Spain in 1493, which was then claimed by the First Mexican Empire in 1821 when Spain signed the Treaty of Córdoba at the conclusion of the Mexican War of Independence, and was later claimed as territories in the 1824 Constitution, and finally ceded to the United States in 1848 as an outcome of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. Chicano independence activists of the 1960s and 1970s adopted the name Aztlán to refer to these lands as a symbol for activists’ primordial right to the land. Luis Leal writes that “as a Chicano symbol, Aztlán has two meanings: first, it represents the geographic region known as the Southwestern United States . . . second, and more important, Aztlán symbolized the spiritual union of the Chicanos, something that is carried within the heart, no matter where they may live or where they may find themselves” (Leal 8).

As more on the use of attack dogs in conquest, see Aldo Ulisses Reséndiz Ramírez, “Our Dogs Came with Us: Viramontes Prays to Xólotl with Digna Rabia.”

In a public debate about the nature of indigenous people’s souls in Valladolid in 1551, for example, Juan Ginés de la Sepulveda argued that Indians were natural slaves, while Fray Bartolomé de las Casas advocated for their salvation. They concluded that the Indians were a simpler, animalistic form of humanity, which facilitated and justified their conversions. This reductive colonial line of thinking continues today, when the simplistic, antagonistic portrayal of migrants enables legislators to portray them as criminals, and to deploy invasive military machinery based on that inflexible representation.

Cement is no longer categorized as a purely urban material, as the distinction between urban and rural invasions and stories blurs. Migration patterns and policing tactics span cities and less populated areas, which become interrelated systems, and have come to resemble each other, now that no area is untouched by policing forces and cement obstacles. The increased border security operations in cities shifted the migration flow from urban to rural areas, producing a market for coyotes to act as guides and forcing immigrants onto more dangerous paths, as shown by the sharp increase in deaths of border crossers. The increase in migration through rural areas, particularly through the deserts of the Arizona borderlands, led to a corresponding rise in border security operations, which Regan’s book frames as an invasion.

For more on the rhetoric of blight, see Raúl Vila: “Advocating highway construction, ‘slum clearance,’ and ‘higher-use’ redevelopment of prime central-city property, urban-planning campaigns ‘took on the spirit of war-time propaganda, particularly aerial bombings,’ suggesting the urgent need for scorched-earth policies to raze the ‘infected’ central-city neighborhoods as a check against their spreading to the better areas of the city. . . . In this period ‘blight’ emerged as the mantra of redevelopment boosters, who drew on the pseudoscientific rhetoric of professional planners self-designated as ‘surgeon generals’” (71).

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

In an interview with José Antonio Rodríguez, Viramontes describes the real-life inspiration for the fictional Quarantine Authority institution: “that comes from a very direct experience with having the curfew and the roadblocks right after the Chicano Moratorium uprising. I mean, you couldn’t get into certain areas without showing
proof of living there. How horrific is that? How fucked up is that, when you can’t freely go into your own home? Or by giving proof, by being forced to give proof, it automatically feels like you’ve committed some crime and you have to prove your innocence” (257-58).

Margarita Cota-Cárdenas’ 1985 novella Puppet depicts the police murder of a young Chicano man, depicting the authorities as not only threatening and ambivalent to safety, but as in fact a danger to minority residents’ lives.

When bulldozers appeared on the morning of April 22, 1970 to clear the site for a highway patrol station, neighborhood residents mobilized, forming a human chain around the machines, forcing the work to stop, and prompting negotiations that led to the creation of a community park on the land. The day of the take-over, residents raised the Chicano flag on a telephone pole, and gathered with tools to work the land, planting cacti and flowers that still grow there today. The gesture of investing in the growth of living plants in an increasingly hardened, paved area shows the community’s commitment to and faith in their ability to change the underpass into a thriving community center.

Image 1.10 shows the location of Chicano Park, under the interchange of Interstate 5 and the Coronado Bay Bridge. Image 1.11 shows the surrounding industrial sites and car lots that took over the waterfront properties and displaced many residences, and image 1.12, a close-up on the site, show the tennis courts, green spaces, and foliage currently present in the park underneath the busy freeway traffic.

In 1962, César Chávez’s brother Richard Chávez designed the angular black and red Aztec eagle symbol that became the United Farm Workers’ insignia. Today the Chicano labor movement image appears in many prison tattoos, as the northern Californian gang the Nortenos lays claim to the symbol.

Kelsey Mahler argues that Pre-Colombian visual culture in particular united the Chicano nationalist movement across differences: “Chicano community was an extremely heterogeneous one, but, despite their differences, most people found resonance with their shared pre-Columbian past. Embracing indigeneity gave artists, scholars and activists a way to make their message relatable for the entire community, cutting across generational and regional lines” (Mahler 7).

The Aztec feathered serpent deity, called Quetzalcoatl in Nahuatl, appears often in Chicano murals. The symbol’s critical role in the Aztec myth makes the deity a logical choice for the representation of a new nationalist consciousness. Quetzalcoatl appears with a long, vibrating orange body in the 1978 Chicano Park mural “Sueño Serpiente” designed by Socorro Gamboa and painted by Felipe Adame and Roger Lucero.

The scene evokes the 1949 novel Hombres de maíz by Guatemalan Nobel Prize winner Miguel Ángel Asturias. The title, which comes from the sacred Mayan text Popul Vuh, refers to the Maya Indians’ belief that their flesh was made of corn. The novel addresses the conflict between those who consider corn to be a sacred food and those who see it solely as a commercial product. The thematic similarities between Orozco’s mural and Asturias’ novel demonstrate the ongoing, transnational recuperation of pre-Columbian indigenous imagery at the service of twentieth-century struggles for justice.

The monumental Aztec sculpture of Coatlicue, now located in the National Museum of Anthropology in Mexico City, was actually reburied shortly after its 1790 discovery, as Spaniards at the university where it was displayed became uncomfortable about the presence of a pre-Columbian goddess, concerned that the figure could revive Aztec religion among native Mexican students. The vibrant mural under the freeway proved equally threatening. Two months after completion, vandals violated the mural by throwing glass bottles filled with white paint from the Coronado Bay Bridge. The artists incorporated the scar from the attack into their repairs. The paint splatters, which now have dragon heads emerging from them, at once resemble both dripping blood and bursts of energy, endowing the goddess with additional ferocity and mobility despite her cement foundation. Exposed to the elements, residents, and time, the park’s murals are in continual flux.

The site of the original Guadalupe space of worship, Tepeyac hill, was associated with the pre-Columbian mother goddess Tonantzin, which allowed indigenous worshippers to continue to honor their beliefs under the guise of Catholicism.

For more on spirit possession and the ambivalence and contradiction of secular sanctity, see Desirée Martín, Borderlands Saints: Secular Sanctity in Chicano/a and Mexican Culture.

For an analysis of Chicano inmates’ tattooing practices in prison as resistance to the systematic emasculation of incarcerated men, see B.V. Olquín’s article “Tattoos, Abjection, and the Political Unconscious: Toward a Semiotics of the Pinto Visual Vernacular.”

In Viramontes’ first novel Under the Feet of Jesus (1995), the protagonist Estrella finds freedom of movement through faith in her own abilities. Like Tranquilina, she secularizes and individualizes the spiritual language by turning her faith inwards to enable her own action: “The termite-softened shakes crunched beneath her bare feet like
the serpent under the feet of Jesus... she had to trust the soles of her feet, her hands, the shovel of her back, and the pounding bells of her heart” (Viramontes, Under 175).

23 Cement is no longer categorized as a purely urban material, as the distinction between urban and rural invasions and stories blurs. Migration patterns and policing tactics span cities and less populated areas, which become interrelated systems, and have come to resemble each other, now that no area is untouched by policing forces and cement obstacles. The increased border security operations in cities shifted the migration flow from urban to rural areas, producing a market for coyotes to act as guides and forcing immigrants onto more dangerous paths, as shown by the sharp increase in deaths of border crossers. The increase in migration through rural areas, particularly through the deserts of the Arizona borderlands, led to a corresponding rise in border security operations, which Regan’s book frames as an invasion.

24 Alejandro Almazán’s narco-detective novel Entre perros, fictionalizes highway narco violence, tracing the path of the bandit, highway robber, police officer, and drug dealer Cástulo Bojórquez. The text is representative of a whole industry that turns narco violence into entertainment, but also situates the rural highway as a key site of crime, highlighting the blockages to residents’ freedom of movement.

25 Chicano Park’s plans to extend to the nearby bay were rejected by city authorities when the industrial businesses along the bay refused to relocate (Feree 12). The small bay-front Cesar Chavez Park three blocks away from Chicano Park was a compromise between community activists and city developers.

26 Women account for 5.2% of Mexico’s prison population of 246,000, according to the International Centre for Prison Studies. Over the past three years there has been a 400 percent increase in the number of women imprisoned for federal crimes in Mexico (Orlinsky 1).

27 The number of women in prison in the U.S., a third of whom are incarcerated for drug offenses, is increasing at nearly double the rate for men. In the last 25 years, women have been the fastest growing prison population in the United States. Since the 1970s, the number of female inmates in state prisons in the U.S. serving a sentence of over a year has grown by 757%. In Mexico, the population of incarcerated women has increased since 1997 by 175%.

28 The project took place through the intervention of Professor Marisa Belausteguigoitia Rius and legal and artistic experts at UNAM. While the incarcerated muralists played large roles in the planning and painting of the murals, their actions would not have been possible without the political leverage of the project’s organizers. This does not subtract from the impact of the work for the artists or their audiences.

29 Increased funding and support for prison arts programming does not correspond with funding to address overcrowding, lack of healthcare and adequate nutrition, and sexual violence within prisons. Andrea Borbolla traces the impact of the yoga program in Atlachololaya, Morelos in the 2010 documentary Interno. The collage workshops with multimedia artist Luis Manuel Serrano is explored in the documentary Linternas de Santa Martha.

30 Lucero’s poetry appears in The Third Woman: Minority Women Writers in the U.S. and Wall Tappings: An International Anthology of Women’s Prison Writings. Martinez’s work has been published in Wall Tappings with Lucero and in I am Waiting to Be Free, an anthology of writing from the Penitentiary of New Mexico.

31 Prisons themselves include networks of internal borders. In Missouri’s Vandalia Women’s Prison, for example, yellow lines painted throughout the buildings denote restricted territories, with captions outlining the hours and populations for whom the spaces are forbidden.

32 For example, during Prohibition in the U.S., most drugs that are now illegal were not. Today it is legal in the state of Texas to drink alcohol while driving a car, though the possession of a single marijuana seed could result in a prison sentence.

33 Foucault explains the disciplinary apparatus of the panopticon as a primarily visual tool: “Hence the major effect of the Panopticon: to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power” (201).

34 Due to legal restrictions, Belausteguigoitia provides only artists’ first names when quoting their statements in her book Pintar los muros: Deshacer la cárcel.

35 Barbara Harlow, in Barred: Women, Writing, and Political Detention and Cary Nelson, in The Oxford Handbook of Modern and Contemporary American Poetry, emphasize the poem as a critique of the policing of drug crime as a means to control racial minorities. Both critics cite Martinez as an important voice of prison activism and American poetry, but neither quotes or further analyzes the rest of her work.

36 130 children under the age of six live in Santa Martha Acatitla with their mothers. This indicates a key legal difference between Mexico and the U.S., where infants born to women in prison are typically separated from their...
mothers almost immediately. Pilot programs in the U.S., such as that at Bedford Hills Correctional Facility in New York, however, are moving towards the Mexican model, and working to keep infants with the incarcerated mothers. Researchers have found drastically lower recidivism rates for women who were able to care for their infants in a prison nursery while incarcerated (Yager n. pag).

37 María Isela, an inmate at Santa Martha Acatitla, describes the normalization of same-sex relationships in prison: “Aquí es muy común que tú puedas andar con tu pareja y besarla en los pasillos, y ninguna de tus compañerases te critican ni te dice cochina” (105). The understanding of queerness in this project is more concerned with the inmates’ reframing or queering of prison-time.

38 This self-representation into an alternative world distinguishes Muñoz’s understanding of the future (as an expression of queerness) from Lee Edelman’s indictment of the future as a symptom of straight society’s obsession with reproduction. The two theories of the future seem directly opposed, but while Edelman’s future focuses on the next generation of children, Muñoz’s future projects the queer subject into an alternative world. Edelman’s “reproductive futurism” fits within the concept of citizen-time, as it demonstrates a concern for shaping the ideal future citizens of the nation and requires parents to structure their lives around a strict time table for the perceived health and protection of the child. The muralists’ portraits prioritize self-representation into their horizons over the figure of the child, which rarely appears in the murals.

39 After 1980, the maquilas started hiring more men, but despite this remasculinization of the workforce, the division of labor within the factories remains highly gendered, with almost entirely women performing detail-oriented, repetitive assembly work, and men performing lifting, packaging, and supervisory tasks.

40 “The maquila worker came to transgress different spaces in the city’s (and the nation’s) usos y costumbres” (Tabuenca Cordoba 97).

41 Her urban poetry resembles the literary movement called Acción Poética. The idea, started by Armando Alanís in 1996, has resulted in youth collectives armed with black paint that adorn the walls of Spanish-speaking cities throughout the world with verses of poetry. In fact, in 2014 Arjona and Alanís co-taught a workshop about the poetization of urban space at a writers’ conference called “Los Santos Días de la Poesía.” The original movement avoided politics and religion, with the intention of increasing the presence of poetry in everyday life, which resulted in many optimistic love poems across the continents. Arjona, however, does not avoid political conflict nor the spiritual practices of her city, but rather interacts with them directly each time she takes to the street of Juárez armed with a can of spray paint.

42 For more on the role of gesture in subject formation, see Salzinger, Wright, and Noland. Wright writes that “Salzinger’s book on the discursive production of gender within Mexican-based global firms illustrates how managerial discourses of their female workers are not solely descriptive but also productive of these workers’ subjectivity” (Wright 7).

43 Well before avant-garde movements take up these concerns, Karl Marx addresses the struggle between the worker and the machine and expresses concern over the impact of large-scale industry on human life, particularly in Vol. 1, Ch. 15 of his 1867 Capital: Critique of Political Economy.

44 A full analysis of the tension between the mechanical and the human in Lang’s Metropolis, particularly through the figure of the robot Maria, is not within the scope of this study, but has been analyzed at length, by critics such as Keith M. Johnston in Science Fiction Film: A Critical Introduction, Anton Kaes in Shell Shock Cinema: Weimar Culture and the Wounds of War, or Amanda Fernbach in Fantasies of Fetishism: From Decadence to the Post-Human.

45 “For estridentistas, as the poem of Maples Arce shows, avant-garde was synonymous with revolution, which was synonymous with modern, which, in turn, was synonymous with virility” (Hernández-Rodríguez n. pag.).

46 While the manager expresses this division of labor as a local phenomenon, Wright finds similar arrangements in assembly plants globally, particularly in China.

47 Volk and Schlottterbeck cite common practices of monitoring female reproduction, in which pregnant women are routinely denied, and in many plants, women must show supervisors their bloody tampons each month in order to remain employed (127). A woman’s story in Voces de mujeres refers to this common occurrence: “Al inicio del embarazo me despidieron, al enterarse en enfermería de mi embarazo” (Pacto 35). For more on the sexual monitoring of female factory workers, see Livingston 62, Fernández-Kelly 528, and Arriola, “Voices” 788.

48 The gendered workforce practices and sexualization of the female workers is particularly extreme at the television assembly plant that Salzinger labels PanoptimeX. Salzinger notes that this is a case-study, not a comprehensive report on all factory operations in the region, and Rosa Linda Fregoso discourages a blanket application of Salzinger’s analysis to all maquiladoras, particularly as a simplistic explanation for the surrounding culture of
violence. While this factory's sexualization of the female workforce is extreme, it does point to familiar trends elsewhere. The maquila canon, which represents experiences from a wide range of sites, reflects similar tendencies, suggesting trends rather than isolated operations.

49 In the television plant that Salzinger studies, 75% of the workforce is replaced every year (171).

50 Wright explores the myth of the disposable third world woman as a global construction employed in factories world-wide, not just a local figure particular to the border maquiladoras (9). Her research in assembly plants in China found that women were targeted for the same traits, and discarded at the same rates, as workers in Mexico.

51 The poem appears in recent journals and international collections such as Tan lejos de Dios: poesía mexicana en la frontera norte (Uberto Stabile) and Sangre mía: poesía de la frontera: violencia, género e identidad en Ciudad Juárez (Jennifer Rathbun y Juan Armando Joo).

52 Nationwide in Mexico, the number of officially verified feminicides during the period of 2007-2012 is 1,909 (Global Burden of Armed Violence 68).

53 The drop in Juárez’s feminicide rate since 2010 has been offset by rising rates in other areas of Mexico, particularly the state of Guerrero.

54 Fregoso emphasizes the state’s role in generating and circulating the “maquiloca” narrative. She explains that “[t]he subject constructed within the state’s discourse is an ‘immoral’ one. The patriarchal state’s initial preoccupation with women’s morality and decency is a form of institutional violence that makes women primarily responsible for the violence directed against them” (Fregoso 38).

55 Eva Arce is the mother of Susana Arce, and activist and poet whose verse “Ni una mas” became a rallying cry for protesters calling for accountability for the murderers and the state and corporate policies that enable them. Susana disappeared in 1998.

56 The characterization of public space as dangerous does not necessarily mean that the private sphere is safer. Violence against women happens in domestic and public spaces, and often the home is not a refuge from danger, but another zone of fear, danger, and restricted movement.

57 Wright situates her sociological analysis as an “implicit call for subversive strategies . . . to create a politics or coalition that confronts the myth” of female disposability, noting that she does not yet have the answer to the problems that she identifies in the maquila (14). The realm of aesthetic production answers this call in a way that social science or legal intervention alone cannot, by creating a space for the expression of vital gesture.

58 Noland notes: “gesturing may very well remain a resource for resistance to homogenization, a way to place pressure on the routines demanded by technical and technological standardization” (x).

59 “What characterizes [vital] gesture is that in it nothing is being produced or acted, but rather something is being endured and supported. The gesture, in other words, opens the sphere of ethos as the more proper sphere of that which is human” (Agamben 57).

60 Noland distinguishes gesture as corporal communication: “gestural signs are materially different from other types of signs: they require, after all, a corporeal support (xxiv).

61 Susan Phillips' description of the gestures of dance apply equally to Arjona's pintas, which “bind what is supposedly insulated from physicality (writing) to the very epicenter of sensation, feeling, and emotion (the body)” (Phillips in Noland xix).

62 The association of the border with excessive sexuality is part of a lasting narrative, as Fregoso explains: “The devaluation of border female sexuality . . . is part of a more generalized narrative about the border as a place of excess, violence, drugs, and contraband that circulates in the Mexican popular imaginary” and in the U.S. (45).

63 Charles Bowden contributes to the construction of Ciudad Juárez as a zone of violence and excessive sexuality in works that depict graphic violence, portray women most often as corpses, and narrate his sexual fantasies about former maquila workers include: Juárez: The Laboratory of our Future (with sections by Noam Chomsky and Eduardo Galeano) (1998), Exodus/Éxodo (with photographs by Julián Cardona) (2008), Dreamland: The Way Out of Juárez (with illustrations by Alice Leora Briggs) (2010), and Murder City: Ciudad Juárez and the Global Economy's New Killing Fields (2010).

64 Julian Carter finds a similar anticipatory aspect of gesture by looking at “the future intentionality embedded in the word’s root” (131). He maintains that gesture conveys utopian possibility and the ability to imagine: “gesture is not only physical. The English word derives from the Latin gesturus, a future active participle of the verb gerere, to carry or bear; gesturus means ‘I am about to carry.’ Gesture is an anticipatory performance of our physical bearing” (131).

65 The film evokes revisionist Chicana interpretations of Guadalupe since the 1970s by focusing on the direct relationships between the Virgin and living women, and by depicting Mexican or Chicana women’s bodies in motion as powerful. Yolada Lopéz’s “Walking Guadalupe, her “Portrait of the Artist as the Virgin of Guadalupe,” and her “Tableaux Vivant,” all from 1978, along with her 1977 “¿Adónde vas, Chicana? Getting through College”
series particularly celebrate the musculature and mobility of women’s bodies, and reimagine Guadalupe as an icon activated through motion.

66 The attention they receive is not always positive, but rather generates violent responses: “This new pedagogy of struggle has unleashed a second wave of gender crimes: mothers themselves are targets of the state’s repressive violence. Police routinely tell mothers that if they wish to see their daughters alive again they should refrain from ‘creating scandal in the streets’” (Schmidt Camacho 42).

67 A number of cultural products that respond to femicide draw on religion as a story-telling strategy. Lourdes Portillo’s film Señorita extraviada, for example; “employs religious symbolism and iconography subversively. She enshrins her film in the discourse of religiosity . . . crosses, montages of crucifixes and home altars, along with a musical score of Gregorian chants . . . a ‘requiem’ . . . an artistic composition for the dead” (Fregoso 59).

68 Groups of femicide protestors also use religious discourse to contradict the state’s association of maquila workers with prostitution, a narrative that constructs the victims as sexually inexperienced, obedient daughters. This is a shortcoming of their strategy, as it positions these qualities as conditions for recognizing the value their lives.

69 A major contrast between the two sides of the border wall is the lack of art in the U.S. and the proliferations of statements and images written onto the Mexican side. Mary Casey notes: “Any graffiti placed on the U.S. side of the wall has been erased or blacked out. Artists’ proposals have been rejected by the Department of Homeland Security. On the Mexican side, however, the arts of contestation, protest, memorial, outrage, and prophetic imagination thrive” (209).

70 See chapter 3 for a discussion of the maquiloca stereotype that associates low-income working women who have migrated to northern Mexico with sexual promiscuity and prostitution.

71 Yolanda Lopez’s 1978 print Walking Guadalupe similarly depicts mobility within restrictive cultural expectations of femininity. She represents the Virgin of Guadalupe, an icon associated with Mexican national identity and cultural ideals of femininity, in a knee-length skirt and heels, walking. The image sparked many protests and outrage within the Catholic Church.

72 Her second iteration of the project, performed in Nogales, Mexico in October 2015, gestures toward the possibility of a collectivity capable of transforming border politics in a way that an individual cannot. She builds community through the art making process by assembling a team that collaboratively paints a section of the border wall near Nogales the same sky blue, with the knowledge and permission of border patrol authorities. Fernández’s collaboration with local Nogales authorities and border patrol officers in the 2015 installation distinguishes this work from the 2012 project, which involved a clash with San Diego border patrol officers, although they ultimately allowed her to complete the painting.

73 After the mural-performance, Fernández locates her work further within the space of the imaginary, by painting a series of portraits that portray the act, which appeared in her exhibit Foreign Bodies (see image 1.3). The paintings do not aim for photographic accuracy, but rather bring a sensuality and an awareness of brush strokes to her representation, further engaging the space of imagination or fantasy in order to critique the physical reality of the border wall and the real lived results of immigration policy while at the same time making an alternative imaginable.

74 Fantasy can operate as tool of survival for marginalized populations without access to concrete material forms of resistance. It can also, however, be deployed by institutional forces in power, such as the radical political right in the U.S. in their promise to further fortify the borders, or to deport all undocumented residents. This, too, constitutes the use of discourse as a means of articulating a vision in excess of the real. The current border patrol infrastructure demonstrates the ways in which these fantastical discourses can be converted into physical forms.

75 While some pilgrimage studies scholars such as Greeley and Badone argue for a broad understanding of pilgrimage as physical movement paired with transcendent experience, others such as Margry have more rigid guidelines for the concept. Scholars agree that pilgrimage traditionally has four purposes for communicating with the divine: first, to demonstrate faith; second, to do penance; third, to request assistance; and finally, to give thanks for a past favor granted (Gros 111). David Gitlitz explains the fundamental concepts at the core of religious pilgrimage: First, pilgrims across religious traditions believe that a divine entity is accessible to humans, at particular place and time. Second, visits to holy places count as a merit when humans are judged for their actions. Third, pilgrimage involves transaction, such as an act of devotion and physical suffering in exchange for rewards. These guidelines apply to Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, and Christian pilgrimages.

76 Janet Wolff, in “The Invisible Flâneuse: Women and the Literature of Modernity,” responds to the default masculinity of bodies in public space, using feminist sociology to account for women’s experience of modernity and the segregation of the sexes.
Peter Jan Margry, in *Shines and Pilgrimages in the Modern World*, cautions against broadening the term, class “secular pilgrimage” an “oxymoron or contradiction in terms” (14). He defines pilgrimage as journeys with spiritual inspiration, and the desire to “seek a transcendental encounter with a specific cult object” (36). He admits, though, that religious journeys can happen outside of institutional religion; people can have spiritual encounters with secular places or objects.

Gros suggests that the act of walking exists outside of everyday perception of time and routine: “When you walk, the world has neither present nor future: nothing but the cycle of mornings and evenings” (84). Later, he argues that walking enables an experience that exists outside of time, or in opposition to it: “Walking makes time reversible” (128).

As Solnit argues, the infrastructure built around and enabling walking is its own trace. It projects, on the level of imagination, and also marks physical routes: “The path is an extension of walking, . . . and walking is a mode of making the world as well as being in it. Thus the walking body can be traced in the places it has made; paths, parks, and sidewalks are traces of the acting out of imagination and desire” (Solnit 29).

Robert Neustat, in “Recontextualizing Migrants’ Trash, Reframing the Migrant as Human” examines the work of Arizona artist Valerie James, who recontextualizes and sanctifies migrant trash by transforming it into art, in order to urge audiences to recognize the common humanity in the traces migrants leave behind in their journeys: “I feel like my job is, as an artist, is to reveal the sacred in what’s been deemed profane. We have to remember that all of us, our culture, it’s in what’s left behind” (James n. pag.). Similarly, Alicia Peña, in her exhibit “State of Reception,” critiques the militarization of border and denounces the deaths of migrants by contextualizing border crossers’ lost objects as prized museum objects, placed on velvet and ornately framed. In this way, she centralized the migrants’ trace, and, like Crosthwaite’s Elvis, replaces a code of misery and violence with one of glamour.

This scene resembles the climax scene of Viramontes’ *Their Dogs Came with Them*, analyzed in the first chapter of this dissertation, in which Tranquilina walks upwards into the sky despite the orders from officers firing guns from helicopters to halt. In this text as well, the protagonist’s continued motion is the result of an engagement with the fantastical or sacred, as her mobility stems from her faith in the tradition of *voladores*.