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Ghosts in the Growth Machine

CRITICAL SPATIAL CONSCIOUSNESS IN LOS ANGELES CHICANO WRITING

Raúl Homero Villa

> The power of place—the power of ordinary urban landscapes to nurture citizens' public memory, to encompass shared time in the form of shared territory—remains untapped for most working people's neighborhoods in most American cities, and for most ethnic history and most women's history. The sense of civic identity that shared history can convey is missing. And even bitter experiences and fights communities have lost need to be remembered—so as not to diminish their importance.
> —Dolores Hayden, *The Power of Place*

> Today in the United States there are internal and external exiles, voluntary and involuntary, conscious and unconscious. The complexity of their experience has led to the notion of "deterritorialization." . . . This applies not only to those who have been voluntarily or involuntarily uprooted, but also to those who remain in their geographical home, only to find the ground moving beneath their feet.
> —Lucy Lippard, *Mixed Blessings*

Los Angeles's boosters have long narrated the city's modern development as epic, casting its great men and great works in a monumental and heroic aura. As this storied "progress" has transpired, the city's Mexican-descent population—from the early Californios and *pobladores* to present-day Chicanos—has been uniquely situated to observe its more ignoble consequences. Since the original Anglo-American makeover of the pueblo landscape in the 1870s, a particular nexus of dominant cultural institutions and agents—most notably metropolitan growth coalitions, the allied police-judicial system, and the mainstream media—has combined in conscious and unconscious fashion to culturally marginalize and spatially contain the Chicano (and now greater Latino) working-class residents of Los Angeles (Acuña 1984; Moore 1991). As their neighborhoods have been displaced, their cultural heritage objectified—whether as the exotic "Spanish romance" or the maligned "Mexican problem"—and their daily affairs policed, Mexicanos have been both forced and enabled to observe "the triumphal procession in which the present rulers step over those who are lying prostrate" (Benjamin 1968, 258). And yet, while Los Angeles has had no shortage of epic-debunkers, Chicano writers are rarely noted among the critics of the city's master narrative of development "from

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mission to metropolis." The erasure of Chicanos from Los Angeles's literary annals is a conspicuous distortion of reality, as resident Mexicanos have long contested their displacement from both the city's cultural landscape and its historical record.

From the very first period of urban transformation in the 1870s, Spanish-language journalists have interrogated the symbolic cultural implications and practical infrastructural consequences of the pueblo's Americanization. In 1877, José Rodríguez, writing in the weekly *El Joven*, adamantly protested the city council's disregard for the residents of the Sonora Town barrio. His critique of downtown urban designs made particular reference to the threat against Californio historical place-memory sited in the plaza district. According to Richard Griswold del Castillo, Rodríguez "was alarmed that the Anglo members of the Council had proposed destroying Pío Pico's house near the plaza. . . . That the Anglos should regard this monument with such callousness disgusted Rodríguez" (Griswold del Castillo 1979, 128). That same year, the editors of *La Crónica* interrogated the disparate allocation of infrastructural resources when they observed that "the 'barrio Latina' had inferior roads and public services. 'Why,' they asked, 'don't they give us the same services that the others had?'" In response to their own query, editors Pastor de Celis, Mariano J. Varela, and S. A. Cardona lay the blame squarely on the "discriminatory neglect of public officials" (ibid.).

More significant for my analysis is their declaration of resistance to the erasure of Mexicano social space. In calling for an organized response by the community, they make this poignant proclamation: "We still have a voice, tenacity and rights; we have not yet retired to the land of the dead" (qtd. in ibid., 128–29). The identified "voice" of the first clause, like that of the editors, calls a community to political action in organizational defense of its rights, while the language of the second clause—"we have not yet retired to the land of the dead"—introduces one of the most potent motifs of deconstructive Chicano expression, figuratively rendering the community's social and spatial marginalization within dominant urban planning as a form of social death. In the same early period of these editorials, many of the dispossessed Californio elites were committing their individual and collective testimonials to print and archives. Two separate and foundational studies of this text-genre have recently been published by Genaro Padilla (1993) and Rosaura Sánchez (1995). In Padilla's analysis of the texts, he notes the persistent figurations of death—social, symbolic, and literal—that pervaded the narration of the Californios' past memories and future prospects. These early testimonial mediations of individual and collective social death would find corollary representation in the ubiquitous imagery of ghosts, specters, palimpsests, and other phantom presences that haunt contemporary Chicano narratives of urban

displacement. These figurative images mark the present absences, or absent presences, of people, places, and histories that urban development often obscures or wipes out.[1] Even if such spectral images largely comprise a chronicle of defeat, they still serve a critical documentary function. This involves the necessary recognition of difficult or tragic social histories for aggrieved communities, since "even bitter experiences and fights communities have lost need to be remembered—so as not to diminish their importance" (Hayden 1995, 11).

The memorial and contestatory Californio discourses of the late 1800s have been repeated by subsequent generations of Chicano writers who similarly "brush history against the grain" (Benjamin 1968, 259) in mediating the disruptive consequences of capitalist urban restructuring on their community spaces. In the 1950s and 1960s, the central-city barrios were set upon by a particularly aggressive cycle of urban restructuring (Romo 1983, 170; Acuña 1984). While monumental urban renewal and freeway construction projects were transforming Los Angeles into the "super city" of urban planners' dreams, the master narrative for the barrios had a different plot; it involved "a community's efforts to preserve territorial integrity, to defend the residential character of their community against efforts to convert the land to higher utility use" (Acuña 1984). In contrast to the glib pronouncements of freeway boosters and urban developers, who promoted their projects as monuments of Southern California's celebrated "good life" (if not its very conditions of possibility), a collective critical discourse emerged in the texts of a generation of Raza writers whose ideas were informed by the determining experience of being raised in the path of "this modern marvel" (Parson 1993).

On their 1983 album *Internal Exile*, the rock band Los Illegals lashed out at the powerful urban interests that "rip out our houses / just to build a freeway." This imagery, underscored by a frenzied agit-pop melodic line, is just one detail in the band's broad lyrical deconstruction of the city's "landscape of power" (Zukin 1991). In their angriest anthem, "We Don't Need a Tan," Los Illegals attack the triumvirate of hegemonic practices identified above—urban development, media interpellation, and police vigilance—for its effect in "putting us down." The opening and closing refrains frankly characterize the conservative political and police state-of-rule constraining the barrios: "Policía nos manda, nos manda / Derechistas nos mandan, nos mandan" ["The police rule us . . . / Rightists rule us . . . "]. Having thus implicated the repressive state apparatus, the lyrics then take aim at the ideological and material spatial effects:

> We've got our own sector, where they keep us away
> rip out our houses

just to build a freeway
the media burns us
they rip out our pride
they stereotype us
like in Boulevard Nights.

The collusion of subordinating practices is figured through parallel ascription, as urban reconstruction of Chicano place and Hollywood interpellation of Chicano identity produce simultaneous eviscerations: ripping out "our houses" along with "our pride."

Los Illegals' lyrical declamations recall Marshall Berman's characterization of a critical modernist poetics, engendered by and against the dominant effects of contemporary urbanism, which was "at once more personal and more political . . . , [and] in which modern men and women could confront the new physical and social structures that had grown up around them. In this new modernism, the gigantic engines and systems of postwar construction played a central symbolic role" (Berman 1982, 310). Berman here describes a practice of expressive backlash against the physical and psychological ravages of the modern metropolis. In this vein the lyrics to "Rampage" decry both the material devastations of urban development and its intimate consequences on a youthful generation:

Tangled in a battlefield—Of mortar and steel
Wasting rows of innocence—Destroyed that's for real

Unexpected sounds of thunder—Shatter expectations
will we make it through the night? Or see a revelation?

Beyond documenting their community's ravaged social geography, Los Illegals stress the intentionality of powerful development interests by personifying the agents of this destructive reconstruction.

In his "howl" against the growth machinery of New York, Allen Ginsberg (1959) cast his metropolitan nemesis as Moloch, the nefarious Old Testament deity whose bloodlust demanded youthful sacrifices. For Los Illegals, similar offerings are demanded by their antagonist, whose name is drawn from a specific technology of urban destruction and construction:

Take the children in your arms—Help them to be strong

Cause Jack Hammer's in his suit—He's ordering intrusion
Cultured few stand up—Don't wait for the conclusion!

Though clothed in professional attire, Jack Hammer—like Ginsberg's Moloch, whom Berman equates with the monumental New York city

planner Robert Moses[2]—is exposed in his invasive and destructive capacity. Extrapolating beyond this single figure, Los Illegals inveigh against a generalized enemy:

> They charge us from the left—They charge us from the right
> Drive you on your head—till the red turns into white
>
> Damn the idiots—they know just what they're doing
> All our lives are at stake—save yourself from ruin
>
> Tangled in a battlefield—Of mortar and steel
> I am witness to a lifestyle—being destroyed, it's for real!

Although these social agents are rendered anonymously, the effects of their assaults clearly make the Eastside a "community under siege," in the phrase used by historian Rodolfo Acuña (1984) to characterize the growth machinery's impacts on the postwar barrios. This state of siege was marked by the community-disruptive impact of urban redevelopment since the 1950s. The eviscerations of residential places in Chávez Ravine and Bunker Hill—to respectively make room for the jewel projects of building Dodger Stadium and raising a corporate-cultural citadel in the massive Bunker Hill Urban Renewal Project—and the loss of nearly 12 percent of the land in East Los Angeles to freeway construction are signal instances of this protracted turf war. Los Illegals' imagery of indignation and warning is informed by the implicit social knowledge of such effects as they note the willful actions of their aggressors, who "know just what they're doing."[3]

By bearing "witness to a lifestyle—being destroyed," Los Illegals' critical lyrical activity falls squarely in the trajectory of contestatory discourses established by their California precursors a century earlier, who bore original witness to the destructive machinations of hegemonic planning.[4] In their declamatory mode, therefore, Los Illegals echo both the early soundings of their deterritorialized nineteenth-century precursors and the high modernist invectives of their immediate generational and countercultural predecessors. Drawing strength from both discursive (af)filiations, Los Illegals' lyrics are urgent counterexpressions to the positivist platitudes of the metropolitan growth machinery, as they identify the nexus of repressive apparatuses and effects that produce a social cordon around the barrios and that set the low limits of possibility for many of their residents.

Writer Gil Cuadros manifests a more individualized but no less critical social geographic consciousness in his vignette, "My Aztlan: White Place." Cuadros introduces us to the City Terrace neighborhood of his youth as a site of environmental and social malaise, setting the scene in

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chiaroscuro tones: "Black spray paint letters fuse into unlit alleys. Parked cars are tombstones. The air is sewer-scented" (Cuadros 1994, 54). Within this noirish milieu, Cuadros's palimpsestic vision recalls the site of his family's razed house: "I was born beneath this freeway, in a house with a picket fence now plowed under. It was the same street my uncle and tia lived on. . . . I've been here before, time after time, told my mother where our old house would be buried, near the call box, under the fast lane" (54). Cuadros evokes the persistent motifs of evisceration, burial, and social death common to much critical Chicano urban place narrative.[5] However, because Aztlán, the supposed region of origin for the indigenous *Mexica* people (ancestors of the Aztecs) is definitively *not* a "white place," the oxymoronic conceit of his title immediately implies to the reader that complex renderings of Chicano social space and place-identity will follow.

At first we see the speaker on a freeway, drunk and speeding toward East Los Angeles, in flight from the white gay club scene on the Westside: "Hours in Rage, Revolver, Motherlode and Mickeys have made me wish for my childhood home" (53). His intercultural alienation is revealed through the described difference of "those West Hollywood bar types—blond hair, blue eyes. . . . Their fingers are pale compared to my darker skin. They run them down my neck, under my lapel. They ask where I'm from, disappointed at my answer, as if *they* are the natives" (53; orig. emph.). The indignation toward the white usurpation of place-primacy ("as if *they* are the natives") intimates the claim of territorial primacy in the concept of Aztlán, the nationalist-identified Chicano homeland encompassing the greater U.S. Southwest. In fact, Cuadros adduces this indigenous-utopian concept to characterize his family's freeway-leveled homesite: "I imagine the house still intact, buried under dirt and asphalt, dust and neglect. Hidden under a modern city, this is my Aztlan, a glimpse of my ancient home, my family" (55). And yet, in this narrative moment most resonant with a nationalist place-consciousness, Cuadros questions the integrity of the ethnic topos by revealing a crack in the protective shell of its most intimate geography: "All it takes is a well-chosen phrase to cave in: Mom, why did you burn my hands with the iron and say it was an accident? Tattoo my arms with the car's cigarette lighter? make me wish your wish, that I was never born?" (55). Here, Cuadros scrutinizes the purported security of home from his internally marginalized position as a gay son. He thus reveals how his familial-ethnic milieu, his Raza microcommunity and personal Aztlán, is a compromised social space. While Cuadros does not explicitly accuse his mother of homophobic violence, the context of the story—where his problematic situation in various social spaces for being gay, dark-skinned, and Chicano is foregrounded—points strongly to this reading.

The specific issue of how barrio social space is compromised by homophobic repression is figured more overtly in another text from the same collection. In his poem, "There Are Places You Don't Walk Alone at Night," Cuadros extends this meditation on internally compromised social spaces beyond his family's home and onto the streets of East Los Angeles. Recalling the harassment he experienced in his youth in such areas as "Whittier Blvd., Beverly, Atlantic / over by Johnson's Market, / or the projects in Brooklyn" (112), Cuadros specifies that it was not a random threat of physical harm that he had to beware of, but the particular aggressions directed against him for being identifiably gay:

> The cholos . . .
> [. . . .]
> They'd cuff me from behind,
> their hands lingering on my neck, saying
> "Come here faggot, kiss me."
> Their shoes made me crawl,
> black mirrors, pointed tips,
> Imperials that my lips fell upon
> and leather soles
> that brushed the hair out of my face
> nearly blinding me. (112)

His difference as a gay child in a heterosocial and masculinist barrio culture marks his vulnerability within a familial and ethnic social space that might have served, under "straight" circumstances, as a haven against a hostile outside world. The speaker is rendered doubly displaced: by his alienation from the white Westside gay community as Chicano, and by his victimization in the Eastside barrio community as gay. Cuadros's multivalent interrogations of social space exemplify a progressive thematic current in critical Chicano spatial narrative. In this current the deconstructive gaze commonly applied to externally dominant social forces and agents is now simultaneously directed against oppressive elements within the ethnic social space, such as normative heterosexuality and patriarchal authority, which also compromise the community topos's claim to security and integrity.[6]

Playwright and poet Luis Alfaro contributes to this progressive direction in Chicano urban place narrative. Like Cuadros, he mediates his experience of double displacement, noting that neither the white gay nor the straight Chicano communities can wholly embrace his multiple identifications:

> The Mexicans only want me
> when they want me to

talk about Mexico.
But what about
Mexican Queers in L.A.?

The queers only want me
when they need
to add color,
add spice,
like *salsa picante*
on the side. (Alfaro 1994, 235; orig. emph.)

Alfaro is careful here, as throughout his work, not to comparatively rank his identification and (af)filiation with the social differences of being gay or Chicano (nor likewise his felt degrees of alienation from either community), understanding both to be clearly *social*, not natural or essential, constructions of identity. However, the title of this text, "Orphan of Aztlán" (echoing Cuadros's "My Aztlan" title), and the opening stanza from which it is taken, suggest Alfaro's particular interest in unpacking the contradictions of his familial-cum-ethnic nationalist moorings: "I am a Queer Chicano. / A native of no land. / An orphan of Aztlán / The pocho son of farmworker parents" (235).

Alfaro renders the contradictions of his familial and ethnic urban landscape in intimate but critically uncompromising terms in various texts of his larger dramatic and poetic corpus. Several of their titles—such as "Downtown," "Pico-Union," "On a Street Corner"—clearly call attention to their urban location, and not merely as scenic backdrop. Alfaro foregrounds substantial and specific details about the tangible environment of his central-city milieu. Through this precise scene setting he performs a localized and critical semiosis of recent urban development impinging on the physical and cultural habitus of his family, and that of his broader community in the predominantly Latino Pico-Union district immediately west of downtown. This richly textured semiosis is evident in the account of his extended family's efforts to live together against the pressures of this exacerbated social space:

> When I was ten, . . . my *Tia Ofelia* lived across the street with my *Tia Tita* who lived with my *Tio Tony* who lived next door to my *Tia Romie*. Back in those days, everybody on the block was either a *Tia* or a *Tio*. They lived in a big beautiful wood carved two-story house with a balcony overlooking the street below. We were crowded in by downtown skyscrapers, packs of roving *cholos*, the newly built Convention Center on Pico and portable *tamale* stands. But our families always managed to live together, Because you see, *blood is thicker than water, family is greater than friends, and the Virgin Mary watches over all of us*. (Alfaro 1992, 3; orig. emph.)

The recollective qualification of "back in those days" intimates the changes wrought on the built environment and social relations of his youthful neighborhood. Along with the external intrusions of recent redevelopment ("downtown skyscrapers," "the newly built Convention Center on Pico"), the neighborhood milieu is pressured internally: on one side by the exacerbation of intracommunity relations due to gang activity, and on another by the increasing immigration of Latinos. The latter is intimated by the commercial-cultural specificity of "portable *tamale* stands" and signals the increasing demographic variegation of the central-city barrios produced by the major influx of Central Americans to Los Angeles. In particular, the west-of-downtown barrios in Pico-Union, Westlake, and Echo Park now house large residential communities of Salvadorans, Guatemalans, and Nicaraguans.

The encroachments of urban renewal and gang activity coalesce with destructive force on the house of Alfaro's aunt. Its physical erasure from the neighborhood landscape is both a particular loss for Alfaro's extended family and a representative instance of how the community space of Pico-Union is subject to simultaneous external and internal pressures. The threat from within the community's social space is figured in a drive-by firebombing of the 18th Street gang members who lived on the first floor of his aunt's house. It consumes the entire structure, and with it the memorially imbued architecture of the aunt's memory, who had recently died of breast cancer: "My mom cried because the memory of my Tia Ofelia would now be an empty lot where bums would piss and tires would grow" (5). To symbolically mark and ritually nurture Tia Ofelia's place in the family's memorial geography, Alfaro's mother tends daily to a flower she planted in the now derelict space of his aunt's home. The mother's ritual consecration of this site enacts a popular Mexican cultural memorial practice: the construction of *descansos*, or shrines, at the sites of violent or accidental death. Typically identified with roadside markers, the concept of the descanso has been more recently applied to understanding "urban *lugares de recuerdo*" (places of memory) by cultural critic Amalia Mesa-Bains (1994). Alfaro's mother seeds the memory of her sister's life and home in such a site, which is simultaneously "public and personal."

Sadly, the aunt's *descanso* is relegated to a purely mnemonic geography by the definitive erasure of the site when "the Community Redevelopment Agency built the Pico-Union Projects over the memory of my Tia Ofelia" (Alfaro 1992, 5). The housing project is certainly a less spectacular manifestation of downtown urban development, and one not altogether debilitating to the neighboring residents, ever in need of affordable housing in this most densely populated section of the city. However, the Community Redevelopment Agency (CRA), often acting as an instrument of powerful private development interests, manifests its public space-making

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power in ways that are very clear to many residents of this central-city community. The particularly troubled history of the CRA's relations with Chicano residential communities has led many grassroots place-activists to translate the initials of its acronym into "Chicano Removal Agency."[7] Although he does not single out the CRA for criticism, Alfaro does interrogate the subordinate status that many individuals and groups outside the circles of influence occupy in the metropolitan order of things. In "Virgin Mary," Alfaro's image of encroaching skyscrapers on Bunker Hill complements the architectural semiosis in another of his vignettes, "Federal Building," to reveal how multinational corporate investment—which financed the private trophy-buildings—and the government (local, state, and federal)—which constructed the Federal Building and enabled Bunker Hill's corporate makeover through urban renewal subsidies and the CRA's powers of eminent domain—create a landscape of power in the central city.

In "Federal Building," Alfaro notes that "beautiful buildings, like chingona [*bad-ass*] sharp women have secrets that can scare the shit out of you" (39), adding that they "stare down at you with a *chale* stare" (40). He clearly senses their manifest authority and signals this to the reader through the twin semiotic registers of confrontational speech (the vernacular *chale* signifies disdain or defiance, roughly translatable as "no way") and condescending sight (the downward "stare") signified in the built environment. If the messages of civic and economic power inscribed in these architectural "texts" are misconstrued or go unread by the citizenry, it then falls to the repressive apparatuses at the service of both capital and the state to make their meanings clear. Alfaro has had these messages impressed on him over the course of repeated interactions with the Federal Building and its allied agents of the state. In the most recent of these encounters he is arrested for trespassing on the site during a rally to protest cuts in government support for the arts and AIDS research. While detained in a basement cell he recalls how "we have a long history together, this *ruca* and I" (38), and in that situation he feels an affinity with "distant Mexican relatives from *ranchos* in *Jalisco*" who similarly "share[d] intimate moments with justice deep in her bowels" (39).

His relatives are, of course, detained for a different "criminal" transgression from Alfaro's. Their offense lies not in what they have done, necessarily, but in who they are. They maintain a vulnerable civil status as immigrants—possibly undocumented and thus rendered "illegal" by the law—in a city, state, and nation that are increasingly antagonistic toward "aliens." Alfaro mocks the resurgent nativism of our time by relating some of the denigrating stereotypes that the dominant culture holds of immigrant culture: "*Mexicanos*, with an avenida for an address, bring illegally parked taco trucks, fake gold and Colombian drug smugglers on their backs" (38). Relatedly, he remembers spitting in the Federal Building's

"face at an immigration demonstration" (ibid.). Just as his recent activism for the arts and AIDS research is tied to intimate community affiliations, his earlier protest was partly in defense of an immediate social sphere since he was aware "that my dad can go back [to Mexico] anytime, just not when he wants to" (ibid.). As he contemplates the relationship between his past and present encounters at "her majesty's, the Federal Building," he neither ranks nor contrasts the social issues variously involved. Instead, he distills from their range a more foundational truth about his and others' access to the promise of the city as a space of individual and collective rights.

The rhetoric of such promised citizenship was originally related to Alfaro as a young boy on a "fourth grade field trip to City Hall where I met the Mayor, Sam Yorty, got his picture and a lesson in becoming a model citizen of this great city of ours" (39). Taking this lesson to heart, years later he actively claimed the rhetorical promises offered to him by the former mayor. And so he reasons that "I didn't get arrested because government wants to control the content of art. Or because a Republican from Orange County thinks that all AIDS activists are a dying breed. I got arrested because Sam Yorty told me that we were all mayor" (40). However, in attempting to exercise their individual and collective power as "mayors" of the city, Alfaro and his fellow demonstrators reveal the limits of the liberal democratic public sphere. The rights and needs of some groups in this "public"—such as immigrants, progressive artists, and AIDS activists—do not rate the same consideration as other dominant group interests within the capitalist metropolis and nation. Consequently comprising a "counter-public" (Crawford 1995, 4) or "alternative public sphere" (Negt and Kluge 1988) of marginalized interests, these other groups with which Alfaro affiliates more often experience repression in the "house of justice . . . [built] by men in blue suits and badges" (Alfaro 1992, 38). What is more, Alfaro understands that it does not require any specific group identification or public protest for the house agents to exercise their police functions, "because a black and white can stop you anytime, anywhere, for whatever reason" (40).

In its simultaneously representational and repressive forms, the social authority exercised in the "*chale* stare" of downtown architecture functions at once through a "symbiosis of vision and power" (Zukin 1995, 261) and, at the same time, by way of a manifest speech act of the sort described by urban semiotician Raymond Ledut: "If modern monuments speak to the inhabitants of cities, what do they tell them, and who is expressed through them, if not the *powers* that surpass them and that are external to local social life and its character . . . a power transcending the life of the citizens" (Ledut 1986, 132–33; orig. emph.). In the last instance, this signified relation of unequal power between urban elites and the majority of the city's residents is intimately understood by Alfaro,

who reminds us that "I've lived here all my life and I've never owned anything. Much less the city" (Alfaro 1992, 40).

While Alfaro deconstructs the symbolized gaze and voice of power in the historic Federal Building, the upscale Bunker Hill financial and residential citadel, buttressed to the north by the elite cultural acropolis of the Music Center complex, is the most recent spectacular and specular expression of Los Angeles's super-city morphology. From the earliest stages of its development, Bunker Hill was the subject of significant Chicano discursive scrutiny, in letters written to City Councilman Edward Roybal (Parson 1993) and in critical reporting by the *Eastside Sun* community weekly. Recalling the Californio editorial interventions against the earliest postpueblo reconstructions, the journalistic work of political activist Rosalío Muñoz, printed in the *Eastside Sun* and *La Gente* (published by the UCLA Chicano student organization MEChA), chronicled the historical trajectory of spatial assaults on Chicano communities as informing documentation in support of barrio place-defense projects. In his 1973 essay "Our Moving Barrio: Why?," Muñoz (1973, 5) addressed the most recent "strategy of removing the Mexican population" in the form of the "Bunker Hill Urban Renewal Project which destroyed the last barrios immediately next to downtown."[8]

Muñoz was certainly not unique in his journalistic critique of the recurring impacts of urban development. I include him here, however, because his critical semiosis of the high-rising cultural and financial citadel includes an image that, like Luis Alfaro's reading of the Federal Building, figures its representational effect. Calling it a "Tower of Phallic Babelism" (ibid.), Muñoz metaphorically underscores its power-laden signification. Like the builders of the biblical tower, the architects of Bunker Hill signed their monumental self-image on the landscape for all of heaven and earth to see. The self-importance signaled in this architectural text was not unique to Bunker Hill developers. It was commensurate with the reigning self-importance shared by engineers, planners, scientists, and assorted technocrats who were collectively realizing the megaprojects of the 1960s and early 1970s—including super-highways, super-cities, and supra-terrestrial explorations.[9] The ethos of this "best and brightest" professional cohort was aptly characterized by Marshall Berman, who observed that the brave new world they were fashioning was presented "as the only possible modern world: to oppose them and their works was to oppose modernity itself, to fight history and progress, to be a Luddite, an escapist, afraid of life and adventure and change and growth" (Berman 1982, 313). Variants of this imperious attitude were regularly addressed to Los Angeles residents, Chicanos, and others who dared to oppose the emerging "modern marvel" on Bunker Hill and beyond (Parson 1993).

Such a position was aggressively expressed in a 1959 radio broadcast by Mayor Norris Poulson, under whose administration Los Angeles was first propelled into its super-city future:

> I am convinced that *Los Angeles is destined to be one of the truly great cities of the world*, not only in size but in beauty, cultural attainment, commerce, industry, and all the elements it takes for true greatness. If you are not prepared to be part of this greatness, *if you want Los Angeles to revert to pueblo status*, if you want nothing changed, if you are wedded to the status quo . . . then my best advice to you is to prepare to settle elsewhere, because whatever you may do or what I might be able to do, we, singularly, or collectively, cannot stop the momentum which is thundering this city to greatness. (Qtd. in Kovner 1959, 1; emph. added)

Poulson's preemptory challenge posited that all resistance to the city's destined progress was futile and regressive. His unmitigated self-righteousness further revealed a residual inheritance from "manifest destiny," the nineteenth-century ideology of racial superiority and geographic entitlement that buttressed Anglo-American territorial expansion.[10] In Poulson's contemporary application, to stand in the way of Los Angeles's thundering greatness was to identify with the defeated culture and "pueblo status" of the manifestly inferior Other. In light of such hegemonic attitudes, which Muñoz knew well, his disparaging image of Bunker Hill development may also intimate a sedimented fantasy of the vanquished: that this monumental construction might, as in the biblical parable of Babel, also someday crumble under the weight of its own hubristic designs.

Such a retributive projection is represented in Gloria Alvarez's (1989, 120) indignant lyric poem, "Contrastes/Contrasts." The contrasts anticipated in the title refer to the telling signs of social inequity built into the dichotomous cultural geography of downtown Los Angeles. Bunker Hill's Manhattanized skyline is deconstructed by Alvarez to reveal its devastating impact on those past and present inner-city residents who fall under or are felled by its omnipotent shadows. The poem opens by describing the looming glacis of the new corporate citadel:

> Interminables, interminable silver gray cylinders
> reflecting their cool glitter
> against aging brown and brick red porous rectangles
> now dwarfed and anchored on skid row.

Like a cinematic establishing shot, this poetic mise-en-scène renders the unspecified contrasts of the title in precise architectonic imagery, indicating to the reader the importance of the urban landscape as semiotic text. The shiny, smooth, and monochrome towers are juxtaposed to the recti-

linear, textured, and polychromatic facades of the old city center, now become skid row.

Alvarez further employs filmic imagery, compounding it with olfactory detail to produce a critically revealing synaesthesia:

> Its slick disinfected shadows slip over
> the wide matte-finish corners of the collapsed tent city,
> as if masking los olores de vida, the smell of life,
> perfumed with pungent mustiness of yesterday

The specific nature and significance of the contrasts reveal themselves as Alvarez implicates the repressive impact of the cylinders over the landscape which they look down upon. Playing on the clinical rhetoric of urban malady with which growth interests often argue for the necessity of redeveloping socially "infected" low-income neighborhoods, Alvarez shows Bunker Hill's "disinfected shadows" neutralizing the fecund "olores de vida." The conspicuous use of Spanish further implies the intercultural differences of race and class manifest in the antithetical landscapes of skid row and Bunker Hill. If growth coalitions strategically appropriate the language of medical or biological (blight) intervention to justify their transformative actions in the ailing heart of the city, Alvarez offers a contrasting account of their effects. Far from curing social ills, the cool sterility of redevelopment has destroyed the very richness of people's lives and memories figured in the "pungent mustiness of yesterday."

This terrible destruction is not left to inference. Instead, through the familiar Chicano figurative language of social death and ghostly presences, Alvarez portrays the "sex zombies," "living hallucinations" and "pained souls" among the habitués of skid row. Her horrendous characterizations further reveal that these shadowed and shattered lives are not just normal consequences of urban society. In a strong indictment of social cause and effect, these denizens of the urban inferno are shown by the poet to have been specifically "manufactured in the dream factory / of the money gods" and "robbed of their essence" in the process. Here Alvarez exploits the semiotic implications of Bunker Hill topography. Like the mythical pantheon of Mount Olympus, Los Angeles's money gods in their corporate heights transcend the lives of the populations beneath.[11] At the same time, they depend on skid row, having stolen its residents' essence and worth.

These poetic intimations of a nefarious and criminal symbiosis between Bunker Hill prosperity and inner-city impoverishment mirror the zero-sum game of downtown redevelopment in the 1970s and 1980s. In this period, the inner-city revitalization that was promised after the urban conflagrations of the 1960s was redirected instead to the monumental reconstruction of Bunker Hill. By this turn of political favor, the down-

ward spiral of life-chances for many South Central and East Los Angeles residents was inversely reflected in the skyward spires of trophy-building construction. This spectacular corporate growth helped fuel the equally dramatic expansion of the homeless population in the skid row badlands. With the social safety net pulled out from under them, poor and working-class inner-city residents had little recourse against the devastating effects of the region's coming deindustrialization. For thousands of blacks and Chicanos who lost their factory jobs, the struggle to keep a home became a desperate scramble that many would lose.

Recognizing these perverse relationships of inverse benefit, where others praise the aesthetic grandeur of postmodern architecture, Alvarez sees "invading glass giants" aggressively consuming the lives and places of inner-city communities in their path. Los Illegals' narrative of cataclysmic urban restructuring in "Rampage" mirrors the critical thematic vision of "Contrastes/Contrasts." Both texts bear witness to "wasted rows of innocence" and a "lifestyle—being destroyed" (Los Illegals 1983) by aggressively personified constructions. In the final section of her poem, Alvarez figures this active destruction in a specific historical instance of the dialectic between corporate redevelopment and barrio deterritorialization, as the monstrous monoliths confidently "swept aside part of Varrio Diamond" immediately west of Bunker Hill. Speaking for those struck down by the city's thundering urban growth she then evokes a retributive fantasy that retaliates in symbolic measure against the barrio's evisceration. Although displaced from the visible landscape, the hearts of the former residents remain as phantom spirits who mete out a silent vengeance against their aggressors. Alvarez conjures the spirits of Varrio Diamond's displaced neighborhood, drawing on the community's popular knowledge ("it's said") to recount that the "Diamond Curse—Brillantes Vidriales—freezes the hearts" of Bunker Hill's new inhabitants.

This poetic account of Varrio Diamond's ghostly diurnal presences recalls Michel de Certeau's phenomenological argument that an experienced human *place* (as opposed to the abstract commodified *space* of functionalist urbanism) is "composed by . . . [a] series of displacements and effects among the fragmented strata that form it and that it plays on these moving layers" (de Certeau 1984, 108). Alvarez meditates on such active layers of Varrio Diamond's place-memory and place-identity. De Certeau is further relevant here for his contention that "there is no place that is not haunted by many different spirits hidden there in silence, spirits one can 'invoke' or not" (ibid.) Alvarez's closing invocation of residential spirits thus serves as a sort of poetic *plaqueaso* (to borrow from the lexicon of Chicano graffiti), or scripted declaration of territorial integrity and defense, for the barrio residents as well as for the captive inhabitants of skid row on the other side of Bunker Hill's panoptic circumference. More

precisely, the retaliatory Diamond Curse functions like the ubiquitous emblem signed on to Chicano territorial graffiti throughout the city: "C/S" or "Con Safos."

Of uncertain origin and without an exact translation, "C/S" is generally posted as a challenge or warning by the writer-artist to those who would disrespect the neighborhood by disfiguring the public imprint of place-identity. Although such damage has already been done to the social spaces poetically rendered by Alvarez, she nonetheless proffers her poetic *plaqueaso* as an indignant reminder to her readers.[12] Cultural activist and musician Rubén Guevara (1983) tactically exploits the defiant signification of *con safos* in his song lyric of the same name. The lyrics recount Mexicano presence and claims to territorial primacy in Los Angeles as a direct affront to their erasure by hegemonic ideological apparatuses. In doing so, his revisionary lyrics deploy the ubiquitous graffiti emblem to portend the return of the historically repressed, issuing a warning for all who hear his musical verse to "listen to what the walls have to say LA." Echoing the 1877 contestatory proclamation by the editors of *El Joven*, Guevara reminds us—as does each of the writers I have discussed—that contrary to appearances Chicanos and Chicanas have not been passively "retired to the land of the dead" by a dominant urban regime. Clearly, they "still have a voice, tenacity, and rights" which they use in a manner reminiscent of both their Californio ancestors and those *fin de siècle* avant-garde artists in Europe whom Edward Soja praised for having "perceptively sensed the instrumentality of space and the disciplining effects of the changing geography of capitalism" (Soja 1989, 34).

Through their textual mediations of the material geographic and existential consequences of life in the shape-shifting center of a true world-city, Los Angeles Chicana and Chicano writers thus represent compelling local instances of powerful global processes. In their collective complexity and contradiction, these multiform works underscore and contribute to the production of what de Certeau calls a "local authority," which works like "a crack in the [urbanistic] system that saturates places with signification (de Certeau 1984, 106). This interstitial discursive tactic of place-making surreptitiously battles dominant strategies of urban space-production. This place-space dialectic is at the heart of the struggle for control over the use and significance of the city by its citizens, who are more or less empowered to exercise such control according to their differentiation by such social factors as race, class, gender, and sexual orientation. As Manuel Castells points out, under the capitalist imperatives of urban growth "what tends to disappear is the meaning of place for people. Each place . . . will receive its social meaning from its location in the hierarchy of a network whose control and rhythm will escape from each place and, even more, from the people in each place" (Castells 1983,

314). Against such alienating processes, the local authority mediated by Chicano and Chicana writers discursively recovers some of this expropriated control for the barrio communities of Los Angeles.

Notes

1. These early editorial and testimonial intimations of social death were often literally substantiated through vigilante "justice" exercised against Mexicanos, most notably and spectacularly by lynching. The Spanish language press of the period played a significant role in mediating the community's implicit social knowledge of both legal and extralegal violations into a concrete *textual* form of cultural critique.

2. *Jack the Ripper* might ring truer as a moniker for Robert Moses, particularly considering the megalomaniacal challenge he directed to those who opposed the construction of his socially devastating Cross-Bronx Expressway: "When you operate in an overbuilt metropolis, you have to hack your way with a meat ax. I'm going to keep right on building. You do the best you can to stop it" (qtd. in Berman 1982, 290).

3. The conspiratorial perception of such urban infrastructural developments is a regular motif in Chicano urban narrative and popular culture. For example, in *Always Running, La Vida Loca: Gang Days in L.A.*, poet and journalist Luis Rodríguez describes scripting an *acto*, or brief didactic theatrical sketch, in which he represents the willful actions of urban planners. The sketch portrays a territorial gang conflict between two rival gangs, but "the upshot is as the two barrios fight, local government officials are on the side determining the site of a new mall or where the next freeway will go while making plans to uproot the very land the dudes were killing each other for" (1993, 177).

4. To wit, Rosaura Sánchez's analysis of the Californio *testimonios* identifies both their precedent critical spatial epistemologies and their homology with the structural subordination of late-twentieth-century Chicanos. Regarding the former, she notes that "the appropriation and domination of social space is the crucial problematic for the Californios, who by the time they are narrating their testimonials no longer occupy dominant social spaces or actively produce them" (1995, 45). Indicating the structural continuity between past and present Raza social spaces, she cites historical studies that reveal how "their descendants, the Chicanos, continue to face a number of social problems and contradictions that first came to the fore in the nineteenth century with invasion and modernization, that is, with conquest . . . and the definitive inclusion of the territory within capitalism" (ibid., 268).

5. Two precursory fictions that anticipated Cuadros's scenic imagery reveal a range of deathly figurations in contemporary literary expression. In her story "Neighbors," Helena María Viramontes gives a chilling introduction to her character's barrio milieu: "Aura Rodríguez . . . was quite aware that the neighborhood had slowly metamorphosed into a graveyard. . . . She shared the streets and corner stores and midnights with . . . tough-minded young men who threw empty beer cans into her yard. . . . Aura had resigned herself to live with the caution and silence of an apparition" (1985, 102). Echoing Viramontes's description, the opening scene in *The Road to Tamazunchale*, by Ron Arias, introduces the novel's

central figure ailing in the solitude of his barrio milieu: "Fausto lay still, listening to the faint groan of the freeway traffic. . . . Slowly he stood, then shuffled to the window and peered through the rusty screen, across the river to the tracks. More smog. For six years he had shuffled to the window, to the bathroom, . . . through gloomy rooms . . . turning thin, impatient, waiting for the end" (1987, 29).

6. Many Chicana writers and critics have called to task the patriarchal power endemic to the familial community sphere of the barrio, even as they still "throw punches for their race" (Chabram-Dernersesian 1992) against external social threats. While numerous texts engage in simultaneous intra- and intercultural critiques, several key works do so with specific reference to the material-spatial organization of patriarchy. A select list of such exemplary representations includes Helena María Viramontes's story "The Moths" (1985), where the authoritarian and alienating sites of a father's home and the patriarchal church are indicted by contrast with the security and nurturing milieu of the Chicana protagonist's *abuela*; several poems in Lorna Dee Cervantes' collection *Emplumada* (1981), which are related by key figurations of freeways and women's domestic spaces (gardens and houses); and the widely recognized vignettes of intimate Chicana social spaces in Sandra Cisneros's *House on Mango Street* (1984). I should note that only Viramontes's fiction refers to Los Angeles. Cervantes's and Cisneros's texts are set in San José and Chicago, respectively. For a discussion of how Cervantes negotiates multiple parameters of identity and place-politics see my chapter on her work in Villa forthcoming.

7. Formed in 1947, the Los Angeles Community Redevelopment Agency was enabled by the California Community Redevelopment Act of 1945 (Parson 1982, 399). This legislation was designed to help developers bypass public housing requirements, considered too cumbersome and even potentially "socialistic," attached to federal urban development subsidies. Through empowerment of local public development corporations, run by political appointees rather than elected representatives, it opened the way for slum clearance and private investment projects to be financed through the sale of public bonds, while granting the CRA necessary police powers of eminent domain. Working closely with the City Planning Department and Bureau of Engineering, the Los Angeles CRA often proved to be the nemesis of local poor and working-class communities, often in direct conflict with the city's Housing Authority, in a range of land-grabs and land-use battles up to the present, most infamously in the evisceration of the old Bunker Hill neighborhood in the 1960s.

8. Responding to drafts of the new city and county Master Plans (they were made final in 1974), the essay took direct aim at the prospects of a new wave of urban renewal in the Eastside. In the Master Plan rhetoric that called for "recycling the inner city," Muñoz saw a thinly veiled effort by the "political economic elite" to forestall the "imminence of Chicano political strength and domination in the heart of one of the largest metropolitan areas of the world" (1973, 5). A grounded historical consciousness informs his suspicions of coming Eastside community displacement. Muñoz argued his suspicions by offering a concise chronological account of previous cyclical "strateg[ies] for removing the Mexican population" (ibid.).

9. The "Prayer for America's Road Builders," an official text of the American Road Builders' Association, is an audacious example of this self-worth rendered as hyperbolic rhetoric:

> O Almighty God, who has given us this earth and has appointed men to have domination over it; who has commanded us to make straight the highways, to lift up the valleys and to make the mountains low, we ask thy blessing upon these men who do just that. Fill them with a sense of accomplishment, not just for the roads built, but for the ways opened for the lengthening of visions, the broader hopes and the greater joys which make these highways a possibility for mankind.
>
> Bless these, our Nation's road builders, and their friends. For the benefits we reap from their labors, we praise thee; may thy glory be revealed in us. Amen. (Qtd. in Goodman 1971, 78–79)

10. In retrospect, Mayor Poulson would describe the conflict over Chávez Ravine, the site of another epic Mexican removal project in the 1950s (Hines 1982; Valdéz 1983), as "the hottest battle in California since the war with Mexico" (Parson 1982, 403). In his unwittingly revealing rhetoric, Poulson intimates the racial-geographic politics of this turf battle, which were a matter of implicit knowledge for many Chicanos: Chávez Ravine was but another wrinkle in the continuing deterritorialization of Mexicanos under the manifest destiny-cum-eminent domain of Anglo-American capitalism.

11. The starkly rendered hierarchical city and social structure in Fritz Lang's classic expressionist film, *Metropolis*, is also brought to mind by Alvarez's imagery.

12. There are compelling instances of how graffiti scripting may act as a symbolic *text*(ile) weaving together torn shreds of barrio social space. One example is offered in Jerry and Sally Romotsky's (1976, 42) description of tagging in an Eastside barrio called Jim Town Hoyo, on the border of Pico Rivera and Whittier, which was split by the San Gabriel (I-605) Freeway during the 1960s:

> Plaqueasos stating 'Jim Town Hoyo' bloom all over the general area, both east and west of the freeway. The bridges and streets passing over or under the freeway connect the east neighborhood to the west neighborhood in a strictly geographical fashion. In a symbolic manner, these bridges and streets have attracted a great display of plaqueasos that strive to unify the former neighborhood. The plaqueasos are being used to reunite the once geographically whole neighborhood that the freeway and other forces of progress have ripped asunder.

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