

## **Miraculous Migrations throughout a Chicax Los Angeles: Negotiating Othered Spaces in John Rechy's *The Miraculous Day of Amalia Gómez***

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### **Abstract:**

The search for a miraculous and more inclusive Aztlán within the ideological rubble of intracultural discrimination and violence is at the center of John Rechy's *The Miraculous Day of Amalia Gómez* (1991). The recovery of one's place/position in Los Angeles as a material site, a psychological location, and cultural sanctuary is an integral aspect in generating individual and collective narratives within Chicax identity construction. Rechy challenges Los Angeles' cultural cartography and the tensions it creates with identities. As a queer Chicano, he has focused on how gender and sexuality are represented and othered throughout the Latinx community. As such, *Miraculous Day of Amalia Gómez* reveals the spiritualized spaces of the "suburban barrios" hidden beneath the shadow of freeways, painted along neighborhood streets and walls, and sequestered behind domestic havens of those discredited and devalued within the Chicax community. We discover, in fact, that challenging hegemonic powers of domination can reverse the erasure and silencing despite the normalizing endeavors of the Chicano patriarchy, the Roman Catholic Church, or the dominant white culture.

Key words: Chicax Culture and Literature, Urbanism, Spatial Theory



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The developments, commercial centers, and neighborhoods that comprise what has long been spatially identified as “Los Angeles” have for countless decades simultaneously co-existed without interacting with other communities; have collided with each other because of ethno-classificatory altercations; and have coalesced into intercultural networks serving as socio-spatial landscapes. Historically, the city of Los Angeles (post U.S.-Mexican War) and its environs “was sold as a real estate development for settlement rather than developed as an industrial or commercial center,” Aaron Betsky argues. “Thus, developers created towns, cities, or communities all across the Southland with little interest in their adjacency to either one another or downtown Los Angeles” (1994, 101-102). These reconfigurations of community throughout Los Angeles have made it more than just a decentralized, post-modern

metropolis; they have created the model 21<sup>st</sup> century heterotopia, which has always had an influential impact on the Latinx/Chicanx community in this region.<sup>1</sup>

Unlike other minority populations throughout Los Angeles' history, Mexican Americans (or Chicanxes) have endured a "psychohistorical experience" of "subjugation" by the dominating U.S. white community within "what the indigenous peoples considered to be their own land" (Rodriguez 1994, 69). Since the close of the U.S.-Mexican War in 1848 and subsequent U.S. annexation of Mexico's northern lands, Mexican Americans in Southern California and the American Southwest have been marginalized socially, economically, and politically as "others": outside of the white, dominant, and conquering culture. Moreover, their historical colonization has generated a loss in identity through cultural fragmentation and constant mobility throughout these regions for over 170 years. What this means for Chicanxes is that Los Angeles has developed into

a nexus of borderlands and border criss-crossings. The city is an urbanized suburban kaleidoscope that grafts multiple, competing cultures and histories into a heterotopic system which often generates violence while paradoxically providing a vehicle through which to critique this violence....In his work "Of Other Spaces," Michel Foucault argues that a heterotopic site is an *other* space, one "that lies outside of all places and yet is actually localizable" (352). Likewise, such places, or "heterotopologies" as Edward Soja maintains, are distinct in and of themselves as separate sites and can serve as micro-reflections or embodiments of the larger cultures which produced them while acting as prolific insights into the system and ordering of such cultures (13-15). Comprised of a matrix of freeway systems that create an intricate landscape of borders and borderlands, Los Angeles becomes the ultimate urban heterotopia. When read as a borderland, this postmetropolis functions as a heterotopic site, a truly vibrant amalgamation of spaces that reveals the simultaneous co-existence, collision, and coalescing of cultures and communities (Morales 24). Moreover, Los Angeles has become synonymous with [Chicanx] activism while it remains as an interstice from which a broader [Latinx] discourse, identity, and culture can be recalibrated and then rearticulated. (Moreno and Brunnemer 2017, par. 3)

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<sup>1</sup> The twenty-first century terms "Latinx" or "Chicanx" are gender neutral markers to demonstrate greater inclusivity whereas "Latino/a" or "Chicano/a" are gender specific.

Rather than keeping Chicanxes silent or marginalized, their systemic displacement has cultivated a critical production of art which serves to articulate new sites of discourse and involves “the processes that shape how these places are understood, envisioned, defined, and variously experienced” (Brady 2002, 7). This is particularly significant when creative works and spaces (e.g., Chicana literature, performance art, music, murals, art installations, etc.) can offer intra-cultural critiques and articulations of the Chicana community itself and demonstrate the importance of molding an identity, both individually and communally, against the grain of the dominant discourse. In Rafael Pérez-Torres’s critical analysis *Movements in Chicano Poetry*, the author posits that identity construction for Chicanxes (and Latinxes by extension) involves a process of becoming rather than being (1995, 12). As such, this process develops innovative cultural-lexicons to communicate experiences and thoughts occurring simultaneously and manifested through art, music, performativity, and literature.

The borderlands have always been an active site of cross-exchanges and othering, particularly for Chicanxes throughout the Los Angeles basin and American Southwest. In this space of otherness and othering, the Chicana has cultivated a sense of identity and self-definition, drawn from the spatial-fragments of cross-cultural discord and displacement.

The borderlands represent the multiplicity and dynamism of Chicano experiences and cultures. They form a terrain in which Mexicans, Chicanos, and mestizos live among the various worlds comprising their cultural and political landscapes: Euramerican, Mexican, pre-Cortesian, indigenous, barrio, suburb, city, country, field, kitchen, boardroom, and stockroom. Viewing the borderlands as an interstitial site suggests a type of liminality. The betweenness leads to a becoming, a sense of cultural and personal identity that highlights flux and fluidity while connected by a strong memory of (a discredited) history and (a devalued) heritage. (Pérez-Torres 1995, 12)

Seminal to articulating Chicana voices through forces of disenfranchisement and erasure, is the reconfiguration of traditional images and narratives of domination within the community itself, namely, the Chicano patriarchy and the Roman Catholic Church. While members of the Chicana community have actively deflected violence generated by the dominant culture in the United States, which since the nineteenth century has been “locked into the fiction of white superiority” (Anzaldúa 1987, 7), Chicanas in the 1960s and 70s sought an artistic, political, and ideological return to (and return of) the lands known as Aztlán. Historically, the regions of Southern California and the American Southwest are native geographies of the Nahuatl, forerunners to the Mexicas, or Aztecs. Around 2000 BCE, groups of the Nahuatl migrated to central Mexico while others remained in Aztlán. Thus, Chicanas maintain that their lands have been occupied through a calculated history of colonization and genocide. The articulation of the Chicana people and the reclaiming of Aztlán as their ancestral homeland was further empowered in the drafting of the manifesto *El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán* in Denver, Colorado, in 1969. “The naming of the homeland created a Chicano spiritual awareness,” celebrated Chicano novelist Rudolfo Anaya explains, “which reverberated throughout the Southwest, and the naming ceremony was reenacted wherever Chicanos met to discuss their common identity” (1989, 232). However, the pursuit of inspiring and unifying the diasporic peoples of Aztlán, “el movimiento,” as it is called, has empowered Chicanos at the expense of marginalizing and silencing Chicanas and queer and transgender Chicanas, thus excluding them from fully participating in the realization of Aztlán.

What makes space important when discussing Chicana literature is the change in sites of empowerment that has occurred in the late twentieth century. According to Monica Kaup’s article “Architecture in Chicano Literature,” the shift of emphasis in writing was away from land — that is, the ancestral homeland — to the barrio and the

house, thus generating new constructions of Latinx identity (1997, 363). Indeed, both the dwelling and the landscape are ephemeral sites, for these can be de/constructed easily (Jackson 1984, 8). By the 1980s, there is a significant shift from the land, which was organized by the old hacienda system of the late nineteenth / early twentieth centuries, to the new house or new location brought about by either “barrioization” or migration. The home is privileged over the land since the land no longer exists but in myth, hence *el movimiento*’s emphasis on “Aztlán” as the lost homeland (Kaup 1997, 363).

As such, the search for a miraculous and more inclusive Aztlán within the ideological rubble of intracultural discrimination and violence is at the center of John Rechy’s *The Miraculous Day of Amalia Gómez* (1991). The recovery of one’s place/position in Los Angeles as a material site, a psychological location, and cultural sanctuary is an integral aspect in generating individual and collective narratives within Chicana identity construction. Indeed, “the concept of home seems to be tied in some way to the notion of identity—the story we all tell ourselves and which is also the story that others tell of us” (Sarup 1996, 3). Rechy challenges Los Angeles’ cultural cartography and the tensions it creates with identities. As a queer Chicano, he has focused on how gender and sexuality are represented and othered throughout the Latinx community. His literature demonstrates, in unique, unconventional ways “how such peoples and spaces can persist alongside hegemonic society within that larger nation-space and in spite of continued oppression, repression, and violence” (Hamilton 2011, 47). As such, *Miraculous Day* reveals the spiritualized spaces of the “suburban barrios” hidden beneath the shadow of freeways, painted along neighborhood streets and walls, and sequestered behind domestic havens of those discredited and devalued within the Chicana community.

In articulating the relationship between space and violence in Chicana literature, one must understand the origins of such violence and the varied definitions and spatial manifestations which have historically generated this trauma: the home, the barrio, the church, the street, or the freeway. In her examination of Chicana identity, Norma Alarcón writes that Chicanas have been historically and culturally incarcerated within the mother/ whore dichotomy since the early sixteenth century, while being denied other identities or voices through which to define themselves on their own terms. While La Malinche/Malintzin, the noblewoman “given” to Hernán Cortés during the sixteenth century Spanish conquest of what becomes New Spain/Mexico, has symbolized betrayal, the Lady of Guadalupe, on the other hand, who “appears” in the same century, serves as an icon for maternal nurturing and obedience; both images have served to legitimize and sustain the power and dominance of Latino patriarchy for generations. “Consciously or unconsciously the Mexican/Chicano patriarchal perspective assigns the role of servitude to woman particularly as heterosexual relationships are conceived today and in the past” (Alarcón 1983, 186). The othering role of betrayer to Chicano society manifests itself in many hypermasculine, Chicano narratives, thus cultivating and perpetuating a dominant position of heteronormativity, machismo, and entitlement for the Chicano patriarchy and the Latin American Catholic Church. In contrast, Chicana literature challenges this second-class status in the community’s discourses on gender and sexuality.

In Rechy’s *The Miraculous Day*, Amalia Gómez, a Chicana maid and the novel’s protagonist, criss-crosses the trichotomous borders of the domesticated mother, the criminalized whore, and the suffering “virginal” saint. Her unsuccessful history with husbands and domestic violence has isolated her in many cases. Amalia’s “lush” beauty and her unabashed desire to express her sensuality (Rechy 1991, 4), likewise, renders her both object and Hollywood-like persona, while marking her as a woman

with loose morals by the abusive men who enter her life. As she attempts to cultivate a sense of spirituality on her own terms and to seek out a Los Angeles home in which she can nurture her children as a liberated woman, she is, time and again, prohibited from actualizing her dreams and hopes. Because of her status as a divorcee in the eyes of the Catholic Church, she has socially disgraced herself beyond redemption, according to Teresa, her cold and unforgiving mother. The violence, the physical assaults, the verbal abuse, the disenfranchisement and patriarchal control over her body all underscore the marginalization and othering the Chicana experiences in her community. However, she learns that redemption comes through self-empowerment and agency and not through suffering or victimization. “The question, then, of whether or not Amalia can persist within this world, and thus this novel’s textualization of ‘persistence,’ depends upon altering, for herself as well as for the reader, the role these forces and their world enforce on her and her reaction to them” (Hamilton 2011, 57). She discovers, in fact, that challenging hegemonic powers of domination can reverse the erasure and silencing despite the normalizing endeavors of the Chicano patriarchy, the Church, or the dominant white culture.

Amalia’s desire to keep her family together and to control her own destiny draws her from her home in El Paso, Texas, to the suburban metropolis of Los Angeles. After living in East Los Angeles, for a stint, she escapes the growing gang and drug violence there to a Hollywood bungalow, the site of manufactured dreams and myths, and attempts to secure her position by creating a viable space for her children and herself, a unique place within “the ubiquitous clutches of stucco courts that proliferate throughout Los Angeles” (Rechy 1991, 73). Denied her position in the Chicano Aztlán for being a woman, barred from ritual participation in the Catholic Church for being a *divorciada*, disowned by her mother for “being promiscuous” and having an abortion

resulting from rape as a teenager, and stigmatized for being poor and brown, Amalia creates her own miraculous Aztlán in the suburbanized barrio she inhabits.

For Amalia, Los Angeles offers a new life, distanced from the brutality of rape, rejection, and degradation from her childhood home in Texas. Los Angeles was protected by the divine presence and ubiquity of the Catholic pantheon, as Amalia believes. “It would delight her to discover how many streets, plazas, nearby cities are named after saints—Nuestra Señora del Pueblo, San Vicente, Santa Monica, San Diego, San Juan Capistrano. She would come to love the city of angels and flowers and saints’ names” (Rechy 1991, 41). Moreover, because she has been relegated to the edges of her culture and the dominant system, Amalia insists that a direct encounter with the divine will absolve her of the pain she has endured and the violence and othering which she has long suffered.

To witness a sign from God, then, would elevate her and bring a sense of purpose and hope to her immediate world, she maintains. *Miraculous Day* opens with Amalia awakening with a slight hangover from the evening before to the surreal vision of a vibrant, glowing cross in the sky, high above the omnipresent gaze of the famous Hollywood sign. The dazzling cross is visible “past the screenless iron-barred window of her stucco bungalow unit in one of the many decaying neighborhoods that sprout off the shabbiest part of Hollywood Boulevard” (Rechy 1991, 3). The mundane world in her working-class, suburban neighborhood is suddenly transformed into a sacred space. Hidden from the high, incarcerating walls of the nearby Fox Studio and in the shadow of the Hollywood Freeway, Amalia’s neighborhood possesses nothing of the glamor or filmic magic which resonates with the legacy of Tinsel Town. What Amalia dwells in is merely the palimpsest of a once prosperous and promising suburban ecology eventually abandoned by whites escaping waves of immigrants and the de-territorializing freeway networks of Los Angeles’s sprawl.

In *Miraculous Day*, Rechy reveals an alternative literary image to the suburban topography of Los Angeles. This representation challenges the suburban compositions of earlier depictions of more privileged or fanciful versions of the city. Rather, Amalia's Hollywood neighborhood underscores the reality of decaying suburbs, neglected and abandoned by the city through the red-lining of poorer districts and blighted by *barrioization*, "the formation of residentially and socially segregated Chicano barrios and neighborhoods" (Villa 2000, 4). The immobilization and decentralization of peripheral communities, like the Chicana one, throughout Los Angeles, further ensured their political erasure, thus rendering them inconsequential to the visual landscape or collective memory of the city. "Racist spatial practices are thus part of the fabric of the transformation of cities like Los Angeles from formerly Mexican villages to global cities" (Vázquez 2018, 26). This broader cultural amnesia of decaying suburban neighborhoods throughout Los Angeles was also, in part, guaranteed by the "dense landscaping or concrete walls alongside freeway arteries [...which] obstructed the driver's passing glance at the sights of the city.

This kind of visual screening sustained ignorance of, or indifference to, the surrounding built environment and negated the sense of passing through the city's landscapes of work and community" (Avila 2014, 213). The evidence of unchecked crime and civic incarceration proliferates through Rechy's noir-like images and snapshots of a suburban postmetropolis entrapped by economic and ethnic evisceration. Amalia's neighborhood is one which defies the pockets of privilege and safety historically occupied by the upper classes.

Daily, the neighborhood decayed. Lawns surrendered to weeds and dirt. Cars were left mounted on bricks. Everywhere were iron bars on windows. Some houses were boarded up. At night, shadows of homeless men and women, carrying rags, moved in and left at dawn. And there was the hated graffiti, no longer even words, just tangled

scrawls like curses. [...] A few blocks away, on Sunset Boulevard, along a strip of fast-food stands and seedy motels, exaggeratedly painted women paraded the streets. (Rechy 1991, 6, 73)

Nevertheless, Amalia's ability to detect the miraculous in the dank and dismal portraits of her community provides her with the hope and persistence that if the spatial systems around her can be redeemed, then perhaps she, too, will participate in this redemption. Buying into the mirage of Hollywood, however, where all fantasies are allegedly possible, gives her a sense that her life with her two children, Juan and Gloria, and her live-in boyfriend, Raynaldo, could be different. The idea of upward-mobility, despite her economic status as a maid and a sweat-shop seamstress, resonates with Amalia and underscores the miraculousness of her quotidian landscape.

Still, she was glad to live in Hollywood. After all, that *was* impressive, wasn't it? Even the poorest sections retained a flashy prettiness, flowers pasted against cracking walls draped by splashes of bougainvillea. Even weeds had tiny buds. And sometimes, out of the gathering rubble on the streets, there would be the sudden sweetness of flowers. There were far worse places inhabited by Mexicans and the new aliens. (ibid., 7)

By re-reading the city along her walks, Amalia is able to sense sacredness and preciousness in the darkest of voids, underscoring her desire to map a miraculous Aztlán in her life. This is a psycho-spiritual realm where she becomes visible and relevant not only within the Chicana community but wherever she moves in Los Angeles. Thus, her pilgrimages as a *flâneuse* throughout the heterotopic armature of Los Angeles indicate that Amalia believes in the ancient Nahuatl ““place in the middle,”” the “*nepantla*,” (Mora 1993, 5). This other place, for her, exists between the degrading identity of La Malinche and the perpetually suffering mother-figure of La Dolorosa – the black-draped image of the Virgin Mary, the Mother of Sorrow, whose pain and loss are never redeemed.

Throughout *Miraculous Day*, sacred and secular rituals, images, and icons are replete in the characters' experiences and function as a means for articulating or reconceptualizing the spaces around them. At the center of Amalia's sphere of interactions are the multi-manifestations of Mary, the Madonna, the Immaculate Conception, the Queen of Heaven, Miraculous Mother, Mother of Sorrow, Our Lady of Guadalupe, etc. From television shows, Hollywood films, and street murals to domestic altars, shopping malls, and church niches, the ubiquity of the Virgin serves as a geographical compass that charts Amalia's comprehension of events which (con)textualizes and navigates her movements throughout the heterotopic cartography of Los Angeles.

Amalia derives great pleasure from her walks through the clusters of neighborhoods near her Hollywood home and her work place near Boyle Heights. Along with the growing presence of anonymous police cruisers prowling through the streets, she is cognizant of the socio-spatial aesthetics of the Chicana communities throughout Los Angeles, despite their diasporic arrangement. Strolling down the sidewalks of these places, Amalia, the Chicana *flâneuse*, begins to understand how these public strips "bring together people who do not know each other in an intimate, private social fashion and in most cases do not care to know each other in that fashion" (Jacobs 2000, 16). And yet, it is only through Amalia's wanderings that she can confront this otherwise fragmented and disparate ordering of Los Angeles. She also senses that "[p]eople these days tended to keep separate even though this was still a predominately Mexican-American neighborhood" (Rechy 1991, 111-12). Whereas Amalia's access to public sites serves to educate her about the disenfranchising hegemony, her mother's own strolls demonstrate that within a heterotopic realm such as suburban Los Angeles, it still possible to remain a stranger, cut off from what has been familiar in a rapidly transforming space. "Life in the chaos of heterotopia is a

perpetual act of self-definition gradually deterritorializing the individual. The individual becomes an ambiguity” (Morales 1996, 24) and must seek out new methods for orientating oneself with new lexicons for negotiating the cultural, linguistic, and spatial systems continuously othering and redefining the Chicax community.

Soon after [the Gómez family] had moved into their new [Los Angeles] neighborhood, [Teresa] set out to investigate her surroundings. She came back indignant. “Who would have thought I would come to live so near Filipinos and Protestants.” She had discovered that several blocks away from this area that was populated mainly by Mexicans, there were pockets of other groups—Armenians, Asians, a smattering of black people. To Teresa they were all “Filipinos” because there had been some in the tenement where she had lived and they had been Protestants. “I saw stores with names written in God knows what language. Certainly not Spanish. And all those Protestant churches—one with a star instead of a crucifix. (Rechy 1991, 74)

Teresa’s xenophobic (mis)interpretations of the heterotopic Hollywood (sub)urbanized neighborhood are significant because they reveal a model of cultural and ideological orientation which has weakened the wider Chicax community. Because the members of the collective community have been historically and politically severed from the land and forced into migratory patterns throughout Aztlán, they have been fractured. They have been “made [...] strangers in their own land, not knowing who they are, where they come from, nor where they are going. They fail to understand that identity is not fixed, that nothing is certain in the Southwestern heterotopia border zone” (Morales 1996, 24). Despite the historical and contemporary transformations and in light of the dynamics of a heterotopic realm, “Chicana/os need a cultural foundation, a recognizable cultural place composed of memory, nostalgia, history, mythology, spirituality, tierra, family, the elders’ world” (ibid., 24). A multivalent base comprised of these elements does not so much fix a community of displacement — such as with the Chicax community — as it provides its members with a language enabling them

to interpret signs that are only “perceptible by change” (ibid., 22) in the spatio-cultural composition of the neighborhood.

Amalia’s attraction to the countless murals, “paintings as colorful as those on calendars, sprawled on whole walls” (Rechy 1991, 45) and dispersed through the neighborhoods, brings her time and again to a particular piece of work. This one, which she recalls during her tenure in East Los Angeles, depicts a powerful looking Aztec prince flanked by warriors who watch mounted conquistadores emerging from the horizon. An old Chicano notices Amalia’s engrossment and proudly offers a running commentary of the artwork: ““The *conquistadores* are about to subdue the Indians with weapons, as they did, but over there [...] are the *revolutionarios*, who will triumph and bring about *Aztlán*, our promised land of justice”” (ibid., 45). While the old man retells his narrative about historical injustices and violence committed against the community, Amalia can only notice the absence of women in the composition. “Where were they,” she wonders. “Had *they* survived?” (ibid., 45). The man utters “no mas [no more]” to signify that Chicanas will no longer tolerate the socio-political erasure of their “barrios, campos, pueblos, lands, [their] economy, [their] culture, and [their] political life” according to *El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán* (qtd. in Anaya and Lomelí 1989, 2), and this phrase lingers with Amalia, and she finds herself uttering it to herself.

For the old Chicano, “no mas” is the community’s call-to-arms; however, Amalia recognizes it as her own appellation to challenge the silencing of women by the Chicano patriarchy, the Catholic Church, and the white-dominant culture. It is this initial act of resistance to the multi-layers of colonization that, “[i]n memory and cultural movement, Amalia recreates her world” (Leon 1999, 214) and recognizes that *Chicanismo* is not a monolithic ideology, but rather a heterotopic one in which multiple identities can exist and declare agency. This is the threshold to her own miraculous *Aztlán*.

Rechy, however, reminds us that *Miraculous Day* is still a novel that takes place within a fragmented urban constellation, one in which Hollywood images and simulacral illusions culminate in a whirlpool of Disneyfied spaces and monuments to capitalism and consumption. Furthermore, *Miraculous Day* demonstrates the miraculousness in syncretizing and juxtaposing the cultural wealth of many groups and ideological systems that simultaneously complement, compete with, and contradict one another. “[This novel] is also a place where a vision from God appearing over the Hollywood sign can be just as real, just as comforting to Amalia Gómez—who survives in a world of empty pockets, gang violence and revolving-door husbands—as the bougainvilleas in front of her stucco bungalow” (Easton 1993, 14). Indeed, as Alejandro Morales argues, “[p]eople [throughout the Los Angeles communities] cling to the dream of utopia and fail to recognize that they create and live in heterotopia” (1996, 23). Standing on the corner of Sunset and Western, Amalia wonders if it is possible to misunderstand Marian signs sent to a person. However, Amalia fantasizes that she is called to construct a shrine in the midst of her urbanized stage.

She had imagined that the Blessed Mother had asked her to tell the priests that a chapel must be built on this lot, to replace Carl’s Jr., M. Zolotow’s All-Week Check Cashing, McDonald’s, Tommy’s Famous, El Pollo Loco [...] “I understand, Blessed Mother. The chapel must be right here, in this shopping center. (Rechy 1991, 130-1)

The thought of being chosen like this, of being worthy of such a mission, creates a sense of value and purpose within Amalia who fantasizes through the language of media tabloids—“AMALIA GÓMEZ OF HOLLYWOOD CLAIMS VISITATION BY THE HOLY MOTHER!” (ibid., 131)—to rectify her losses and terrify “some of the other men she had known” (ibid., 131) who were cruel to her.

Although most do not experience a first-hand encounter with the Virgin as others have claimed throughout the centuries, “the apparition is the primordial

experience that is kept alive in the cultural and psychological memory of the community” (Rodriguez 1994, 47). Indeed, Marian apparitions have long been a spiritual portal for many, allowing generations to participate in a collective consciousness centered on religious renewal, and “Mexican-American women share in the memory of the orientating experience. [In fact, s]ome internalize the memory so that it becomes for them a personal religious experience” (ibid., 47). This process often leads to imbuing a Marian relic, image, or representation with life-like qualities or miraculous abilities. In a Los Angeles church, kneeling intently before a Marian statue, Amalia closely watches its shifting eyes and inspects the statue’s body for some sign of acknowledgment or reciprocity.

Amalia placed her hands on her forehead, pressing her palms over her eyes, resuming her prayers, words out of sequence now: [...] *You’re a woman, like me!* In reaction against that assaulting thought, Amalia reached for the top of her dress, to raise it still farther. But she didn’t—her fingers had brushed her full breasts. She allowed her eyes to flow back to the statue. *Your woman’s body is always hidden in the folds of your beautiful dress.* The Blessed Mother had turned away from her. No, the weaving light of candles had created that impression. No, there *had* been a frown on the face, and then the Madonna had looked away. (Rechy 1991, 195, original italics)

Imagining the Virgin Mary as a sentient woman transforms this divine presence into one which is tangible, sensual, and relevant to Amalia’s troubled and fractured world. Eyeing another image in the church of Mary holding her dead son further confirms Amalia’s connection to Mary’s historical experience, for Amalia, too, has lost her oldest son, Manny, to gang culture and alleged suicide in prison. Believing that she has always remained faithful to Mary and to God, Amalia accounts for her own suffering and the sacrifices she has made because of men, family members, strangers, and children in her life. In her state of confession and defense, she realizes how important her living children, Juan and Gloria, are to her as never before. Juan, who propositions

other men for money, and Gloria, who now associates with gang members, need a deep sort of love only a devoted mother could give.

Humanizing the Marian experience illustrates that while Amalia is “rejecting the Virgin as the church’s embodiment of chastity and hence someone who would condemn her” (Leon 1999, 223), she embraces Mary by redefining her as a tool of affirmation and empowerment. This act designates the Virgin Mary as a model of fortitude, perhaps even resistance, against forces that would otherwise silence a woman’s voice and render her invisible. “Against the tremendous potential and limitations of the [Chicano] movement, Chicanas opened up new spaces of participation through fostering a culturally rooted feminism” (Bobout 2011, 114). Like a number of “Chicanas seeking a feminist nationalism” they, as exemplified in Amalia’s example, “embraced the strengths and cultural significance of La Virgen but criticized the idealized and passive interpretation of her. These Chicanas created a feminism of their own, by incorporating and reconceptualizing nationalist tropes in a new, more liberationist vision” (ibid., 122). For the difficult road Amalia has been given, she now “*demand[s] a miracle*” (Rechy 1991, 199, original italics) from the Miraculous Mother.

In an instant, *Miraculous Day* transports the reader and Amalia to the sleek and shimmering shopping mall apparatus “at the edge of Beverly Hills” (Rechy ibid., 199). With its dazzling paradoxes of climate-controlled vegetation, gleaming signs and images of whirling color, and its sanitized surfaces, this cathedral of consumption is an architectural and social masterpiece of illusion, committed solely to manufacturing public mingling and “the glory of triumphant capitalism and neo-American living for business” (Lévy 2006, 56). The indoor mall, an answer to the decaying downtown of urban America, has become the Disneyfied version of a Main Street gathering, predicated on hyper-consumption and popularized by its private status as a secure,

privileged, and purified experience for family consumers. In reality, this middle-class system of private space seeks to homogenize individuals, and through its litany of consumption along its tiled and waxed streets, “THE HARD ROCK CAFÉ [...] EPISODE ... LAURA ASHLEY ... LENZO OF PARIS [...] EDDIE BAUER ... ABERCROMBIE & FITCH ... PRIVILEGE” (Rechy 1991, 200, 201), the indoor mall fosters a culture of coercive advertising that makes even the “young Mexicans here [look] prosperous and untroubled in this world of chrome” (ibid., 200). Amalia carefully observes these late twentieth century signs and symbols of American culture while strolling through its vortex of floating escalators and translucent mezzanines.

In this illusive space of material dreams, Amalia fantasizes that she has credibility here and belongs to this spectacle of privilege and prosperity. From the vantage point of the escalator, Los Angeles gives the impression that “it was all cleansed by night, turned lustrous by thousands of lights” (ibid., 200), and made linear and unfragmented through the homogenizing lens of the mall. This illusive acumen generated by this spatial façade further magnifies the mis-navigation and misperceptions which occur within the very heterotopic complex of the mall. Because she is exhausted both mentally and physically, Amalia fails to notice that the shopping patrons who pass her by are bewildered, if not bemused, by her unkempt and desperate looking deportment. Amalia mistakenly enjoys the attention and believes that the surveillance from consumers and security guards alike comes not from ridicule or suspicion, but admiration, if not envy. Like the game she would play with her live-in boyfriend Raynaldo, the one of picking out the house of her dreams while driving through expensive Los Angeles neighborhoods, Amalia “imagine[s] she had come here to shop, [and] exhausted from all she had purchased, would resume her buying” if she could “dredge up the energy” to leave the comfort of the benches (ibid., 201). Along with the other inhabitants of this multivalent space, Amalia’s belief is temporarily

suspended like a Hollywood mirage, and she finds herself participating in the cult of consumption that places her, if only psychologically, in alignment with the wider constellations of consumerism that scintillate across the firmament of the suburban metropolis. For a fleeting moment, she is among the privileged and no longer the other.

As she dreams within the simulacral grip of this Disneyfied enclosure, one that “disrupts this unity and juxtaposes several spaces upon a singular stage” (Hamilton 2011, 58), Amalia continues to grow more and more weary, unable and unwilling to go on. While she remains invisible on one level and as someone who does not have purchasing power enough to belong in a privileged space like this, she now becomes cognizant of her othered position as a poor brown Chicana:

She stood in the middle of the mall, aware of herself in this glistening palace. So many people...Did they see her? Yes, they saw a woman who looked out of place, tired, perspiring. But did they see her? She felt invisible [...] as if her life had been lived unseen and in silence filled with unheard cries. [...] At the same moment, she felt the paralyzing fatigue she recognized so well, which came with fear and then surrender. (Rechy 1991, 203)

Stripped of her delusions, Amalia slowly enters a social death as the weights of suffering and the long-sought after miraculous moment of redemption acquire a lighter, yet somber, resonance that unleashes a chain reaction of private epiphanies. She recognizes that her children have “*been suffering for me, too, because they do love me, and they need me, because without my help they can’t survive, I have to teach them how to survive—if I can find how to myself—if I can find the strength*” (ibid., 203, original italics). This sagacity of maternal resolution, however, does not resurrect her, for she moves on through the mall, taking the escalator down to the ground floor as though descending into the underworld depths of consciousness from the heaviness that continues to deplete her energy and psychological reserves.

However, it takes a sudden violent disruption in the sanctuary of consumption for Amalia to recognize that her own re-scripting of Marian associations can also serve as “[h]idden...or submerged feminist insurgencies, [which] are vital practices within feminism that often go unrecognized” in mainstream feminist discourses (Blackwell 2001, 25, 24). In an explosive rush that causes Amalia to imagine a California earthquake, suddenly “everything was in jagged motion, a whorl of faces and bodies and colors” (Rechy 1991, 204). The monotonous and predictable serenity governing the mall is transmuted instantly into a movie-like set of flashing lights, replete with crouching police officers, fearful patrons, and pending doom: Amalia is taken hostage by a screaming gun-man. Her world of suffering, of bearing ethnic, class, and gender marks of discrimination—like a secular stigmata that inscribes her martyr’s status—miraculously dissolves in a public protest: “*No more!*” she commands, thrust[ing] the man away from her with ferocious strength” (ibid., 205). This proclamation is the long-lasting echo from her moment at the Aztlán mural. “*No más*” is what the old man recalls shouting in protest against the indignity of the community. “*No more!*” to “a thousand policemen [who] gassed us, beat us with their clubs. Yes, men, women, children” (ibid., 45). Like a howl embodying the mytho-historical protests of La Malinche or La Llorona, the pronouncement emerges from Amalia not only from her inner being, but from the very center of the Chicana community, othered and rendered irrelevant by the Chicano patriarchy, the Church, and the white-dominant culture.

Reclaiming power over her mind and body is integral to Amalia’s transformation into an agent of independence and significance. Born into the negation and suffering endured for a life time, Amalia must move toward resurrection and redemption, Rechy believes, through the crucible of androcentric violence and pain. While Amalia lies on the ground between the assailant and the authorities, rounds of ammunition are discharged, and in the end, the gun-man is wounded in the chest. A

final shot explodes from his chamber, and in an instant “Amalia saw a beautiful spatter of blue shards that glinted and gleamed like shooting stars as they fell on splotches of [blood] like huge blossoms, red roses,” (Rechy 1991, 205). Astonishingly, the young man asks Amalia to bless him as he dies. In an unconventional Pietá image, Amalia cradles a criminal in the midst of a shopping mall and absolves “a man who wanted to kill her” (ibid., 205). The ritual act she performs provides a “startling clarity” for her that signifies an awareness that “she would be blessing away something in her whose death she welcomed” (ibid., 205). It is within the surreal, movie-like set that Amalia believes she sees the Virgin Mary, and “felt resurrected with new life” (ibid., 205). In short, her social protest and benediction release her from the othered identity of a disenfranchised Chicana and from a negated position in society. This subsequently places her on a course of activism that will render her not only visible, but powerful. As a spectacle in the mall, Amalia, as both the interloper of middle-class sites and the priestess of absolution,

[her] public performance represents a process of world reconstruction whereby space and time are symbolically remade through ritual to envision a world that coheres with a condition of marginality—one that sometimes enables religious agents to struggle and to overcome the oppressive conditions of their lives; at other times, it simply allows people to endure oppression. (Leon 1999, 224)

Amalia’s actions transform the spatio-temporal site of the Los Angeles mall, intertwining subject and space into a sacred receptacle in which the ritual of empowerment and agency is exercised. This sacred-secular gesture activates Amalia’s entire being and raises her beyond the confines of the public theater of which she is materially a part. “For those who participate in the realm of popular religiosity,” as Amalia does in the novel’s final scene, “religious experience permeates all space and time. There are spaces and times of special strength and power that are part of the

religious experience” (Rodriguez 1994, 147-8), and Amalia mandates that she be given control over her own destiny and mode of self-articulation. As a Catholic Chicana, she uses the vernacular of the Church to impart to herself the miraculousness of her experience.

When she finally receives that long anticipated visitation from the Virgin Mary during the novel’s final dramatic moments, it is through the flashing lights of news cameras intent on capturing the scene for widespread television consumption. In an instant, the image of Amalia cradling a criminal, arm raised in benediction, becomes yet another Marian portrait in the pantheon of reproductions available for mass-broadcast and religious veneration. Still, on this miraculous day of Amalia Gómez, it is the action of refusing to be colonized and othered while severing oneself from the psycho-physical pains of suffering that is Amalia’s true miracle. Redemption is achieved not through victimization nor the suffering and societal negation that has consumed her life, but it is manifest through activism and agency as she no longer recognizes nor accepts an othered status. The alleged appearance of Mary to Amalia alone becomes a cultural catalyst for this activism and an instrument for articulating Amalia’s progress and pilgrimage toward her own miraculous Aztlán. The vast array of sites and locations in this heterotopic city—the Hollywood bungalow; the courtyards and alcoves in the churches; the Hollywood sign; the Chicana murals; the tangled freeways, streets, and sidewalks of barrios—become ritual spaces for Amalia that reflect a sacred secularity which speaks to her as a Chicana. “Mary’s cult appeals strongly to the oppressed because she gives dignity to downtrodden people and thus renews their energy to resist assimilation into the dominant culture. [...] [T]he cult not only liberates downtrodden peoples but also liberates us from a restrictive idea of God” (Rodriguez 1994, 154-5) and of the othering or self-chastising of the body and mind.

Eradicating and erasing the trichotomy of the virgin/ mother/ whore that has incarcerated and stigmatized Amalia — and other Chicanas — since childhood, enables her to perceive the miraculous Aztlán. This is a state of being more than it is a physical site of political consciousness: “if we are truly living in an era of a new consciousness, we must reach further into our human potential and consider Aztlán a homeland without boundaries” (Anaya 1989, 240). It is also a homeland where Chicanxes are recognized features of the landscape, despite classificatory, sexual, or gendered constructions.

Although it cannot be psychologically erased, the spaces we inhabit as children and adolescents weave together layers of memories from our past and serve in directing, framing, and constituting our present and future. John Rechy’s *The Miraculous Day of Amalia Gómez* suggests the racial, cultural, religious, and political spheres which have determined our identities are forged by cyclical acts of violence and leave their marks on the physical and spiritual bodies of the individual and the community. As such, the link between memory and the stigma attached to these violent experiences makes it difficult to break the cycle of wounding and initiate a process that is both healing and empowering.

The legacy and practice of othering which informs all Latinx literatures is an evolving and revolving tension that fosters objectification while inviting revolt. Employing spatial constructions to examine Los Angeles’ Chicane literature is significant in comprehending how the identity of individuals and communities alike change and transform while responding to a history of barrioization. This can occur with “the increasingly visible presence of multiple social subjects [making] heterotopias of difference more visible” (Cenzatti 2008, 82). Undoubtedly, there is a calculated history of socio-spatial containment of Latinxes, and the uninterrupted, discriminatory design and evolution of Los Angeles is a testament to how barrios can

resemble suburbs, yet function as sites of othering. At the same time, however, the ongoing and disruptive “layering of different spaces in the same physical location brings counter-publics in contact and confrontation with each other” (Cenzatti 2008, 83). Essentially, Amalia’s “epiphany [by the novel’s end] is about seeing the world clearly—her coming out of a deep denial about her racial, sexual, and gendered self” (Aldama 2005, 70). Even though she has been prohibited from accessing a suburbanized version of Aztlán because of her stigmatized status, her intersectionality allows her to confront and critique the spaces through which she moves—not simply to “*demand a miracle*” (Rechy 1991, 199, original italics), but to demand recognition and agency.

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