

Chronotopes of the City: Spatial Injustice and Narrative Form in Helena María Viramontes's *Their Dogs Came with Them*

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ABSTRACT

Combining Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the chronotope and Sarah Dillon's notion of the palimpsest, the essay highlights the dialogic relationship between narrative time and space in Chicana author Helena María Viramontes's novel, *Their Dogs Came with Them* (2007). Set in East Los Angeles in the 1960s and 1970s—the heyday of urban renewal projects and the rapid spread of freeways—the novel registers the geographical displacement and constrained socio-economic mobility of Mexican Americans whose homes are demolished by the freeway building bulldozers. The spatial form of intersectionality characterizing the architectural structure of the freeways also describes the narrative form of the novel. The non-linear narrative is structured upon multiple intersecting plotlines, each of which portrays the social struggles of a young Chicana woman inhabiting the city. Focusing on the interplay of environmental theme and narrative form, the paper explores the narrative representation of East Los Angeles as a spatially and temporally multilayered landscape that palimpsestously overlays and interconnects the personal memory of the characters and the collective history of Mexican Americans' socio-political oppression in North America. (BR)

KEYWORDS: environment, narrative, chronotope, palimpsest, Mexican American literature

Chicana author Helena María Viramontes's engagement with the entangled issues of environmental harm and social injustice targeting Mexican American communities pervades her fiction. In discussing the interconnection of these themes, Latina/o literary scholarship has largely remained confined to the author's first novel, *Under the Feet of Jesus* (1995), which depicts the interlacing medical, social, and psychological traumas of Chicana/o farmworkers who labor on pesticide-poisoned farmlands. While the novel was the first to draw attention to Viramontes's subtle treatment of "environmental issues as social justice concern" (Vázquez et. al. 164), her seminal short story collection, *The Moths and Other Stories* (1985)—which addresses the themes of Chicana feminism, female kinship, immigration, and exile—touches upon and prefigures certain socio-ecological themes that feature prominently in Viramontes's later works. Although rarely recognized for its environmental concern with urban expansion and gentrification, the closing piece of the collection, "Neighbors," bears on the social and environmental impacts of freeway expansions that dominated US urban politics between the 1950s and 1980s. In a recent interview, Viramontes articulates how this particular short story—featuring an elder Chicana woman who witnesses the elimination of the barrio (the residential neighborhood inhabited by Mexican Americans) by construction bulldozers—inspired her second novel, *Their Dogs Came with Them* (2007). Reflecting on her visceral memories of growing up in East Los Angeles during the heydays of freeway constructions, Viramontes notes: "I never consciously thought about writing about the freeways until after Raúl Homero Villa did an analysis of my short story 'Neighbors.' . . . When he pointed out how the freeways operate in that story I thought, 'Wow, it's there; it really is. I need to explore this!' That was when I began thinking about *Their Dogs Came with Them*" (Vázquez et. al. 166). By foregrounding the freeways as its central spatial image, *Their Dogs* further explores the complexities of urban Chicanos/as' geographical and social displacement Viramontes's earlier short story introduces.

Since both Western and Latina/o scholarship predominantly focuses on the thematic analysis of urban space in *Their Dogs*, Viramontes's formal innovations of narrative technique—including her experimentation with non-sequential storytelling, point of view, textual fragmentation, and multi-voicing—are rarely linked to the environmental imaginary of her narrative. Most analyses foreground how the multilinear narrative, which depicts the overlapping lives of four Mexican American women, emulates the intersectional architectural form of freeways. Reading the novel through ecocritical and postcolonial lenses, Paula M. L. Moya and Sarah D. Wald perceive the metaphoric potential of the multifocal narrative to reveal the entangled forces of historical and spatial injustices that perpetuate Mexican Americans' marginalized political status in the US (Moya 254, Wald "Refusing," 73). Gender-oriented scholarly examinations of the novel, on the other hand, tend to share Keri-Ann Blanco's perception regarding the link between multilinear narrative form and the female characters' fragmented subjectivities (234). Although these studies acknowledge and merit Viramontes's experimental narrative techniques, their analyses tend to favor narrative content over representational form. Consequently, they dismiss an in-depth analysis of the narrative techniques by which Viramontes represents the urban space of East Los Angeles as a critical landscape of Mexican Americans' enduring history of spatial subjugation. Notable exceptions include Alicia Muñoz's examination of the "interrupted narrative structure" characterizing the novel (23), and Hsuan L. Hsu's insightful discussion of Viramontes's use of figurative language (metaphors and metonymy) to portray relations between humans and urban spaces.

To demonstrate the interplay between environmental theme and narrative form, this paper explores the spatio-temporal narrative structure underlying Viramontes's urban imaginary in *Their Dogs*. Offering a formal investigation regarding the narrative elements of space and time in the novel, the analysis integrates them into an emerging mode of ecocritical reading, termed "econarratology." Formulated by Erin James, econarratology "maintains

[ecocriticism's] interest in studying the relationship between literature and the physical environment, but does so with sensitivity to the literary structures and devices that we use to communicate representations of the physical environment to each other via narratives" (23). As James emphasizes, by pairing ecocriticism and narrative scholarship, econarratology addresses the current lacuna of environmental readings that consider thematic and textual analysis alongside each other (4).

Paying attention to form in conveying environmental imaginary, the econarratological framework serves as an appropriate methodological tool to explore the connections Viramontes constructs between different temporal and spatial experiences that collide and coalesce in the diegetic space of the novel. To highlight the dialogic construction of narrative time and space, history and urban environment, I rely on the cross-pollination of two narrative concepts: Mikhail Bakhtin's chronotope and Sarah Dillon's notion of the palimpsest. Offering alternative narrative models to traditional forms of linear storytelling, these textual concepts facilitate an econarratological reading of *Their Dogs* by bringing forth "the complex relationship between literary representations and the [political and historical] contexts of specific physical environments" (James 38). In line with this thought, the chronotope (time-space)—which Bakhtin defines as "the intrinsic connectedness of spatial and temporal relationships that are artistically expressed in literature" ("Forms" 84)—highlights Viramontes's creative use of narrative time and space to expose the contiguity between temporally distant instances of spatial injustices in Mexican American history.

Relying on Bakhtin's dialogical configuration of the chronotope, I find that the various chronotopes that clash and intersect in the novel adopt the palimpsest as a dominant narrative form, which illustrates the spatially and temporally multilayered construction of urban places. Dillon's reconfiguration of the material palimpsest—defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary* as "a parchment or other writing-material written upon twice, the original writing having been

erased or rubbed out to make place for the second” (qtd. in Dillon 244)—into a “complex textual relationality” is essential for the Bakhtinian analysis of the novel. Emphasizing the relational or, in Dillon’s terms, palimpsestous structure the process of textual multilayering yields, Dillon redirects the focus from the violent act of textual erasure to the spatial and temporal co-existence and interplay of textual layers (245). Her reconceptualization of the palimpsest is instrumental to evincing memory as a key element in Viramontes’s chronotopic construction of narrative space and time. The characters in the novel interconnect distinct temporalities and geographies through the dynamics of remembering and forgetting. While the chapters constantly switch between four main narrative threads and, accordingly, move horizontally between different locations of the city, the reader also submerges vertically in the psyche of the female protagonists to follow their stream-of-consciousness recollections.

To embed Viramontes’s complex representational form in the historical context of Mexican Americans’ spatial subjugation, the paper opens with a brief contextualization of the narrative events in relation to the urban renewal projects of Los Angeles that took place between the 1950s and 1980s. Focusing on the individual plotlines of Ermila, Turtle, and Tranquilina, the study explores the dialogic constructions of narrative space and time by means of which Viramontes depicts the three women’s personal memories and experiences related to the modern urban practices of Mexican Americans’ environmental and cultural oppression.

Socio-historical context: Viramontes’s urban imaginary

Their Dogs presents four, largely independent plotlines, each of which follows the life of a young Mexican American woman coming of age in East Los Angeles during the 1960s and 1970s. While all four women are working-class Mexican Americans, they come from different socio-economic backgrounds and inhabit different parts of city. The orphan Ermila dates a gang member in the hope of escaping the socially confining place of her grandparents’ house, which

is situated in the barrio gradually eviscerated by the construction bulldozers building the freeways. Growing up in the same neighborhood as Ermila, Turtle (born as Antonia Gamboa) turns into a homeless outlaw. She opts for criminal life to be able to leave her barrio home where she was abused as a child. Yearning for recognition and belonging, Turtle adopts a tough, masculine behavior and emasculated appearance to gain membership to the street gang, named the McBride Boys, which her brother is also a member of. After her beloved brother, Luis Lil Lizard's death in the Vietnam War, Turtle quits the gang and roams the streets alone, starving and living in a constant terror of being hunted down by her fellow criminals, who want to take revenge for her betrayal. Although as children living in the same barrio Ermila and Turtle do not know each other, their paths will cross in their late-teens. At the end of the novel, Ermila's boyfriend, the leader of the rival gang to the McBride Boys, murders Turtle in the street. The lives of the pious Tranquilina, the daughter of devoted Christian missionaries, and the overworked secretary, Ana, also intertwine. Beside running a small church together with her parents and helping the downtrodden in downtown alleys, Tranquilina often helps her friend, Ana, in looking after Ana's mentally sick brother. Overworked and underpaid by a white, male employer, Ana spends every minute of her spare time checking on her adult brother, whose condition is deteriorating over the years.

The novel unifies these diverging, yet overlapping plots by depicting each woman in relation to the urban places "they inhabit or traverse" (Hsu 153). Illustrating the psychological fragmentation that ensues from the protagonists' shared spatial experiences of constrained social and economic mobility, the novel bears testimony to the racist spatial practices that characterized the capitalist urban renewal projects of Los Angeles after the Second World War. The central events of the plot are set in the 1960s and 1970s, the heyday of metropolitan growth projects and the rapid spread of freeways across East Los Angeles. Viramontes's fictionalized account of the disrupted city registers the dire social and environmental impacts of the freeway

expansion projects which, between the 1950s and 1980s, “consumed 12 percent of the land in East Los Angeles while displacing approximately 10 percent of its residential population” (Villa 82). Environmental justice scholar, Robert Bullard explains that the federally subsidized constructions cut through low income neighborhoods. As a result, the urban expansion projects did not merely uproot people of color from the barrios, but also severed their access to business and labor opportunities in other parts of the city. In Bullard’s view, however, the most serious ramifications of the highway constructions were that they also dispersed ethnic communities and subjected residents to “elevated risks from accidents, spills, and explosions from vehicles carrying hazardous chemicals” (4).

Viramontes uses metaphoric images of dismemberment to express the social and environmental harm the construction vehicles cause by demolishing Mexican American homes. Envisioning the bulldozers with “bellies petroleum-readied to bite trenches wider than rivers” (Viramontes 12) and the “freeways that amputated the streets into dead end” (33) highlight the violence as simultaneously wreaked on land and community. The visceral images conveying the culturally and spatially mutilating effects of freeway constructions challenge the master narrative of urban development that lay at the heart of the state-sanctioned modernization projects of Los Angeles. Raúl Homero Villa notes the utopian rhetoric of the 1950s urban planners of L.A., whose vision to transform the city into a monumental “expressway metropolis” or “supercity” were seen as the key to resolving urban blight and improving the living and working conditions of the citizens (84). As Villa advances, the technocratic language of urban restructuring, however, conceals the inherent “contradictions that taint these epochal projects” (85). “The wholesale eviscerations of certain poor and working-class quarters,” (85) including the neighborhoods of Mexican American communities, exposes the way the expansion of freeways merely reproduced social, racial, and economic inequalities.¹

Owing to Latina/o cultures' enduring history of geographical displacement and various spatial forms of cultural oppression, the radical remapping of East Los Angeles by the freeways invokes earlier histories of Mexican Americans' land loss and inhibited mobility. While the Aztecs, the indigenous forbearers of Mexicans, were colonized by the Spanish in the sixteenth century, the 1848 cession of Mexican territory (which, then, encompassed the modern-day American Southwest) to the United States reproduced the Mexican colonial history of conquest. As Villa explicates, the US seized today's Los Angeles from Mexico during the Mexican War of 1846-48, "and the sense of displacement felt by the evicted families remains an element in the Mexican imagination" (82). Relying on Villa's reflections, Wald suggests that the urban imaginary of the novel delineates the "continuities between loss of indigenous land to the Spanish, the loss of Mexican land to the US government, and the loss of barrio to Los Angeles' urban renewal projects" ("Refusing," 73).

Contiguity of spatial domination

The dialogic interplay of narrative time and space becomes evident in the opening chapter, which juxtaposes the representatives of different generations of Mexican American women and portrays them in relation to their respective sources of uprootedness. Set in the 1960s, the first scene presents Ermila, the poor and malnourished child, who walks barefooted to her neighbor's, the old Chavela's soon-to-be-demolished house. Ermila witnesses how the Parkinson's-affected woman is desperately trying to remember her to-do list that she needs to complete before her house is destroyed to give way to the freeways. Incoherently recounting her earlier experience of an earthquake, the old woman foreshadows the future of Ermila, who, similarly to Chavela, will experience "how it feels to have no solid tierra under you" (Viramontes 7). Chavela's personal memories of dislocation warn the child that "displacement will always come down to two things: earthquakes and earthmovers." (Viramontes 8).

Evidently, violence against marginalized communities is always mediated through the disruption of the land, be it naturally-induced or socially-produced forms of displacement. Therefore, the interrupted land as the dominant source of people of color's social inequality underlines the historical reproduction of geographical violence that interconnects Chavela and the younger generation of Mexican American women, represented by Ermila.

Viramontes's chronotopic construction of narrative time and space also fashions a contiguity between different historical periods of spatial regulation in East Los Angeles. After a typographically unmarked time-shift to 1970, in the second half of the opening chapter the adolescent Ermila appears. Ten years after the era of massive freeway expansions and house demolitions, the Quarantine Authority (QA) is introduced to control an (alleged) outbreak of dog rabies. As part of the health regulations and safety measures, quarantine roadblocks and late-night curfews are set up, which are accompanied by a police surveillance of the infected low-income neighborhoods, including Ermila's barrio. Although the sharpshooting helicopters hovering over Mexican American homes are supposed to contain the spread of the disease, they indiscriminately shoot stray dogs and people who are out on the streets after curfew. Viramontes narrates as the teenager Ermila is "peering between the palm tree drapes of her grandparent's living room, . . . watching the QA helicopters burst out of the midnight sky to shoot dogs not chained up by curfew" (12). Witnessing police brutality from her confined space, Ermila realizes that the newly introduced health quarantine merely replicates the same racist logic of spatial control that characterized the urban expansion projects a decade ago. As Viramontes writes,

Ten years later the child becomes a young woman who will recognize the invading engines of the Quarantine Authority helicopters because their whirl of blades above the roof of her home, their earth-rattling explosive motors, will surpass in volume the

combustion of engines driving bulldozer tractors, slowly, methodically un-spooling the six freeways. (12)

Juxtaposing the temporally distant, yet spatially similar forms of regulating Mexican Americans' movement, Viramontes establishes a contiguity between the 1960s and 1970s urban capitalist practices of racism.

The complex entanglement of environmental and social injustices evident in this passage also links the capitalist practices of geographical oppression to the epoch of settler colonialism. The invasive images of the helicopters and bulldozers echo the epigraph to the novel, taken from Miguel Leon Portilla's *The Broken Spears: The Aztec Account of the Conquest of Mexico* (1959). The epigraph cites from Portilla's account of the Spanish conquest of the Aztecs:

They came in battle array, as conquerors, and whirlwinds on the roads. Their spears glinted in the sun, and their pennons fluttered like bats. They made a loud clamor as they marched, for their coats of mail and their weapons clashed and rattled. . . . Their dogs came with them, running ahead of the columns. They raised their muzzles high; they lifted their muzzles to the wind. They raced on before with saliva dripping from their jaws. (n.p.)

Ermila's observation of the acoustic effects of the surveillance helicopters—the “whir of [their] blades” and “their earth-rattling explosive motors” (Viramontes 12)—recalls the epigraph that portrays the encroachment of the Spanish conquerors through the “loud clamor” their weapons make and the aggressiveness of wild dogs accompanying them. The parallel drawn between neocolonial and colonial images of militarized environments illuminates that Viramontes

metaphorically ties urban capitalist methods of regulating territory to the colonial invasion of the land. Juxtaposing images of different historical epochs through their shared environmental practices of oppression underscores that the colonial logic of spatial subjugation is not fully eradicated in the twenty-first-century landscape of Los Angeles. It is reiterated in a different guise of freeway constructions and public health controls, which perpetuate the social and geographical dispersion of communities of color.

Palimpsest, memory, and the multitemporal city

The multilayered textual structure underlying the palimpsest appropriately describes the novel's chronotopic organization which conveys the simultaneity of distinct temporal planes in their dialogical engagement with one another. The second chapter of the novel accurately illustrates how the eighteen-year-old, homeless criminal, Turtle, envisions a temporally multilayered urban landscape in which personal memory, history, and geography interlink. The chapter opens with Turtle's survival of another night in the hostile streets. Although she is exhausted from avoiding the patrolling helicopters and the revengeful gang members who are looking for her, Turtle heads toward a crowded street corner. Hoping to be able to furtively steal food or money from the pedestrians, she takes her post next to a mailbox at the busy "intersection of Hastings and First" (Viramontes 17).

The temporality of this particular intersection is grounded in a dialogical construction of time as subjectively experienced and remembered by Turtle and as socially produced by urban planners and government authorities. Turtle's memories of her troubled childhood irrupt into and infiltrate her present location at the intersection; when watching vehicles passing, she envisions her younger self appearing at the same crossroads she is standing at:

Turtle was five feet one inch by the time she was eight years old and she stood exactly the same corner as now, tall and awkward, crunching on a pickled pig's foot while she watched the men shoveling the smothering asphalt to feed the steamroller. The dense stench of tar hung tightly in the air. Turtle remembered how deflated and lanky she was at eight, . . . a knotty kid sucking on the rubbery skin of a pig's foot while crossing the intersection. At eight or eighteen—it was just like her—never paying attention to the safe harbor of space between two painted fluorescent white lines on the pavement. (Viramontes 17-18)

Turtle's erasure of temporal and spatial distinctions between past and present and "between two painted fluorescent white lines" (Viramontes 17) designed to regulate foot traffic underlines that her personal sense of time and the socially constructed rhythm of the freeway traffic fold into each other. The temporally multilayered representation of the intersection—in which the objective, standardized time of the city traffic and Turtle's subjective memories of this built environment overlap—exemplifies Bakhtin's thought that narrative "chronotopes are mutually inclusive, they co-exist, they may be interwoven with, replace, or oppose one another, contradict one another, or find themselves in even more complex interrelationships. . . . The general characteristic of these interactions is that they are *dialogical*" ("Forms" 252, emphasis in the original).

The interaction between the different temporal layers that collide in the intersection Turtle occupies also exhibits the "chronotopic visualizing of locality," which Bakhtin understands as the narrative representation of the interconnections between different historical epochs of land intervention. ("Bildungsroman" 36). In a Bakhtinian sense, Viramontes's dialogic treatment of narrative time and space makes visible the historically erased (and/or denied) connections between the 1960s' freeway constructions and the 1970s' Quarantine

Authority by uncovering how both of these practices of spatial regulation promote the social marginalization of Mexican Americans. Following Turtle's personal memories related to the intersection in the 1960s when she "watched the men shoveling the smothering asphalt to feed the steamroller" (Viramontes 17), the narrative suddenly shifts back to the present time and space of the young woman in the 1970s. Viramontes narrates as Turtle's immersion into her own thoughts and remembrances is interrupted by her sudden awareness of the events in the city:

Traffic lights changed and people crossed. The Black Cat TV Repair Shop remained closed but El Zócalo Fine Meats was opening and a sullen butcher who wore a bloodstained apron wrapped around his bony hips dragged a soggy mop across the storefront entrance. . . . The scent of pork rinds escaped from the open doors and the leafy tops of carrots peeking out of the woman's grocery bag agitated Turtle's hunger.

(18)

Images of food and hunger establish a link between the past and present spatio-temporal positions of Turtle; her child self in the 1960s who was "sucking on the rubbery skin of a pig's foot while crossing the intersection" (Viramontes 17) and her teenager self a decade later standing in the very same intersection starving and homeless.

The palimpsest as a metaphor of memory and the stratified structure of the mind is a suitable concept to convey the polyphony of voices that dialogically intertwine in Turtle's perception of the city. The internal dialogues the young outlaw has with the memory of her deceased brother exemplify Thomas De Quincey's nineteenth-century notion of "the palimpsest of the mind" (qtd. in Dillon 248). As Dillon explicates, De Quincey perceives the mind as a multilayered text in which memorial traces of the past frequently haunt the present (248). The

“spectral structure of the self” that Dillon identifies as a foundational element of the palimpsest of the mind (249) describes the way Turtle’s consciousness polyphonically interacts with and incorporates voices from the past.

The second chapter of the novel prefigures Turtle’s spectralized mind by invoking the Freudian trope of the double and its figurative images of repetition and the return of the repressed. The spectral effect of doubling is substantiated by the recurring motif of reflexive surfaces. Turtle’s agonizing recollections of her brother are interrupted several times by the events of the traffic. At one time, however, she gets startled by “her prismatic reflections in the blank monitors of the display televisions inside” the TV repair shop she is standing next to (Viramontes 21). In this abrupt moment of temporal shift from past to present, the figure of the double represented by Luis infiltrates into the current spatio-temporal position of Turtle. Registering her multiplied selves reflected by the screens, the young woman realizes that “the televisions inside the Black Cat [Repair Shop] multiplied” (21) her pain over the violent loss of her brother, who died in the Vietnam War. This instance of multiplication elicited by the mirroring of screens reflects Turtle’s divided sensibility of her own self that incorporates her brother as a co-constitutive, twin part of her identity.

The mirror surface of television screens also enables a dialogue between the temporally and spatially distant Vietnam and Los Angeles by metonymically interconnecting Turtle’s hardships of staying alive in the militarized barrio with her brother’s failure to survive in the Vietnam War. Turtle’s attempt to “remember if Luis was with her the day she watched the steamroller, the day she sucked on a pigfoot” is disrupted when suddenly “someone had turned on all ten televisions to the same station” with “the Vietnam war casualties broadcasted like sports scores” (Viramontes 22). Analogously to the material palimpsest that generates an interface between the surface text and the erased original writing, the palimpsestous narrative structure of this passage yields a contiguity between the militarized landscape of Vietnam and

East Los Angeles. As such, Turtle's spectralized consciousness produces both a multitemporal and multispatial city topography.

Apart from the city traffic, the chronotopic representation of the suburban cemetery as a liminal site—located inside the borders of the city, yet outside the perimeters of residential areas—also provides an intersection for narratives of past and present, personal and communal. Focusing again on the storyline of Turtle, chapter eleven dramatizes the disappearance and historical erasure of people of color by configuring the cemetery as its central geographical setting. Wandering the streets in search for shelter for the night, Turtle visits the ethnic cemeteries scattered around the Interstate 710 and attempts to break into them. The memories that resurface and fragment her mind during her sorrowful journey include trespassing into an abandoned construction terrain with her brother and the cruelty of her initiation ritual into the McBride Boys gang at the site of the Chinese cemetery. Images of her twelve-year-old self almost beaten to death flash through her mind, as well as recollections of Chavela's motherly care that eased the domestic abuses she endured as a child inhabiting the barrio of First Street.

The polyphony of voices and memories haunting Turtle's mind produces a multilayered narrative fabric that overlays texts and voices. Turtle communicates with the memory of Luis Lil Lizard by reciting her brother's copy of the U.S. Army Field Manual 21-71, SURVIVAL, a guidebook issued by the American government for soldiers. Turtle's repeated citations of the manual's lines—of which the first letters spell out the word "survival"—highlight the interacting consciousness of sister and brother, who respond to the textual meaning of survival in different ways. This textually mediated interaction corresponds to Bakhtin's notion of the inherently dialogic nature of discourses, which gains expression when Turtle's recollection of the book cross-voices with her brother: "S for *Size up the situation*, Luis voice instructed. Or was Turtle imagining his instruction? She adjusted to the darkness and then sized up the area" (Viramontes 219, emphasis in the original). The instructions are applicable to Turtle's own

endangered situation in the hostile and fragmented barrio. The night when she visits one cemetery after another, Turtle frequently recites the lines of the manual, which help her to navigate safely through the night city and its numerous dangers encompassing the shooting from surveillance helicopters and murderous street criminals. The survival strategies Turtle learns from her brother's manual underline that violence and death are not necessarily displaced to the spatio-temporally distant Vietnam, but permeates the exact land she walks on. Therefore, the contiguity the textual medium of the manual engenders between the voices of Luis and Turtle erases the temporal distinctions between the dead and the living and, at the same time, shrinks the spatial distance between the military violence in Vietnam and Los Angeles.

Chronotopes of materiality and spirituality

The dynamics between the palimpsest of the mind and the chronotope also undergird the storyline of Tranquilina who conscientiously carries out her missionary work by helping the poor and the outcasts of East Los Angeles. Despite showing love and compassion for the marginalized living on the streets, she wrestles with her religious commitment and questions her saintliness all through the novel. Her internal struggles render her a liminal character, simultaneously tied to the spiritual and the physical world. Tranquilina's origin story, presented by her mother in chapter three, explains how the young woman's indigenous family heritage informs her liminality. As the mother claims, Tranquilina's father, Papa Tomás, is a descendant of the *voladores*, god-chosen men, who acquire the power of levitation through an indigenous Mesoamerican ritual.² Mama narrates how Tomás's miraculous ability came to him for the first time when Papa and Mama—who was pregnant with Tranquilina—decided to flee the Mexican plantation where they worked as indentured servants. During their exhausting journey across a desert landscape, they found themselves trapped in an unnavigable mountain ridge. Papa's summoned ability to fly and find a route out of the harsh and pernicious environment saved

their lives. As Mama recalls: “He didn’t turn into a bird or bat; didn’t even need wings. The wind took hold and a strong current whipped him up and Tomás rode it with measured speed” (Viramontes 43). The mother vividly pictures how—while expecting to perish in the desert—she went through incredible pain trying to keep the baby tranquil “inside the broth of her belly” (Viramontes 48) until Tomás returned for her. To thank God for saving their lives and preventing her giving birth prematurely, Mama promised her baby girl to God. The magical realist element of Papa Tomás’s miraculous levitation—which implies his ability to eliminate the boundaries between the physical and the spiritual world—is tantamount to understanding Tranquilina’s overwhelming doubt about living up to her father’s legacy and mediating between people and God, the material and the non-material worlds.

Tranquilina’s burdensome legacy to straddle the rift between the mundane and sacred realms is conveyed through the narrative technique of contrasting and palimpsestously overlaying distinct temporal and spatial planes. The kitchen scene in chapter three depicts Tranquilina cooking a meal together with her mother for the poor, while, at the same time, she is listening to and mentally elaborating on her mother’s fragmented recollections regarding the family tale about Tranquilina’s indigenous roots. By juxtaposing images regarding the mental activity of reconstructing a narrative and the corporeality of assembling food, Viramontes establishes a chronotopic interaction between the temporal dimension of memory (embedded in storytelling) and the concrete, physical space of the kitchen. The opening lines of the following citation illustrate this interplay by portraying a narrative switch from the mother’s consciousness to Tranquilina’s present physical labor in the kitchen:

Tranquilina washed the celery in the salt water. She submerged her hands, kept them under water. She tested Mama: If Papa Tomás could fly away, why didn’t he just escape the Horseback’s ranch?

I don't know, Mama replied, rubbing her swollen ankle. Your papa didn't want to leave me behind. Maybe because humans have little control over the divine. Maybe because miracles happen when they choose. Mama perspired. Maybe we need a fan.

In the distance a dump truck moved sluggishly between the warehouse buildings. The struggling engine roared, spilling black exhaust in the air [. . .] An acid stench of unflushed toilets entered the kitchen through the open window. Flustered, Mama stood up, bumping into the table and spilling pepper from the shaker. (Viramontes 44-45)³

Elements of the external, physical environment—signified by the images of unpleasant urban noises and foul smells—simultaneously pervade the kitchen and interfere with the thought processes of both mother and daughter. The dialogic relation between the different narrative layers of time and space, mind and matter, past and present evidenced by the quotation also signal that the urban images of dirt and pollution are not mere immobile background details. The environmental images facilitate the narrative by mobilizing Mama's reminiscences about the circumstances of giving birth to Tranquilina. The sudden physical weakness Mama experiences in the kitchen due to the humid and stinking air of the city reminds her of the torturous heat in the desert where, left alone by Tomás for long hours, she went through incredible labor pains. The images of heat interconnect the distinct time-spaces of Mama's suffering in the hostile natural landscape of the Mexican desert and her physical distress in the city. The interrelatedness of these spatio-temporal planes are evinced when the narrative switches back from Mama's physical exhaustion in the kitchen to her consciousness as it recollects the desert events.

You better rest too, Tranquilina said [to her mother].

I better rest, Mama told herself as she leaned under the shade of mesquite, searching the clouds. The child in her, once dead still, suddenly pushed against the muscles of her belly. (Viramontes 45)

Continuing her account, Mama recalls with detailed precision the physical and psychological terror she went through until Tomás miraculously returned and saved their lives. After Mama finishes the story, the narrative again switches back to the spatio-temporal plane of East Los Angeles and juxtaposes Tranquilina's physical and mental actions of assembling the meal and reconstructing her mother's narrative fragments. As Viramontes narrates: "Tranquilina didn't look up from the cutting board. Long after Mama's voice had trailed off, Tranquilina tried reconstructing Mama's stories. An iguana man who raised his chin to the sky. Against all odds of their salvation, he cast their old lives, threw off the leather of their skins and thus eliminated the borders between human and nonhuman" (47-48).

Although Tranquilina struggles to embrace her paternal legacy of eliminating the boundaries between the earthly and spiritual realms, in the closing scene of the novel she claims relationship to her indigenous ancestors of voladores. After witnessing the death of Turtle—who, shortly before her own demise, kills a gang member boy in a dead-end alley—Tranquilina regains her faith in her religious mission to protect and care for the vulnerable. Ignoring the ethical call to differentiate between perpetrator and victim, the preacher woman shields both dead bodies from the heavy rain and the hovering sharpshooting helicopters that arrive to the scene of the murder. Shocked by the brutality of the dog-hunting helicopters that, irrespective of the humanity of their targets, open fire on Tranquilina and the dead bodies, the young woman refuses to live up to her own name and stay tranquil. She confronts the police and angrily shouts at the helicopters: "We'rrre not dogggs!" (Viramontes 324). Realizing her failed attempt to stop the shooting, Tranquilina

summoned the stories of Papa and Mama's miraculous escape. . . . Shouting voices ordered her not move, stay immobile, but she lifted one foot forward, then, another, refusing to halt. Two inches, four, six, eight, riding the currents of the wilding wind. Riding it beyond the borders, past, the caesarean scars of the earth, out to limitless space where everything was possible if she believed. (Viramontes 325)

The closing lines of the novel raise questions about whether Tranquilina actually performs a miracle or is shot and gains transcendence in the moment of her death. While scholarly criticisms of the novel waver between these interpretations, they largely share the view that Tranquilina's reenactment of her father's mythical levitation constitutes a decolonial act. By transcending the spatial limitations set by the authorities, Tranquilina enacts a collective act of resistance against the racist practices of spatial domination that are inflicted on the Mexican American residents of Los Angeles.

Viramontes's incorporation of the magical realist element of Tranquilina's levitation into the realist narrative space of the novel radically transforms the disrupted relationship between land and people. Although, within the diegetic space of the novel, Viramontes offers no resolution for the problem of spatial injustice, Tranquilina's flight raises hope in the accessibility of a "limitless space" which may exist outside the narrative space and time, beyond "the caesarean scars of the earth" the freeways represent (Viramontes 325). As Dean Franco observes, Viramontes invites readers to believe in the possible existence of this timeless and unbound place for Tranquilina and, by extension, for the whole Mexican American community (358). Thus, the spatial and temporal configuration of the closing lines imply that Viramontes considers the readers as part of the diegetic space of the narrative and invests them with the

power to imaginatively reconstruct an alternative place to Los Angeles, where people of color have equal rights to mobility.

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Notes

¹ The evisceration of Chavez Ravine, a residential area with sizeable Mexican (and Chinese) communities in Los Angeles approximates the symbolic significance of the freeway expansion's deterritorialization of Mexican Americans. In the 1950s, the government started to perceive Chavez Ravine as a source of urban blight. Owing to the increasing popularity of federally-funded urban renewal and housing projects which promoted the redevelopment of slum areas, the city ordered the relocation of the Ravine's ethnic communities to give way to Elysian Park Heights, a building complex of multiple-story residential houses surrounded with playgrounds and schools (Villa 92). The loss of Chavez Ravine left an indelible mark in the Chicano/a cultural memory, as it signaled the beginning of "the multiple spatial assaults upon the barrios" that followed this incident, including the freeway expansions in the 1960s (Villa 90).

² In chapter three, Viramontes provides a vivid description of the pre-conquest ritual, the dance of the voladores, which originates in the territory of Mexico. Although the ritual has regional variations and has gone through modifications over the centuries, it is still performed by up to five men who impersonate birds by throwing themselves from the top of a straight tree trunk (pole), which they are attached to by ropes (Larsen 178). The strict choreography of the dance (containing the acts of jumping and gliding around the pole) is deeply symbolic and is embedded in the Mesoamerican spiritual worldview: "four sacred birds flew from the four cardinal points of the universe in thirteen circles, equivalent to the rhythmic calendar number

of fifty-two,” which marks one solar year in the Aztec calendar (Gipson 274). The ritual served to appease the gods of rain and agriculture, and prevent drought (Larsen 182). Thus, the voladores played an important part in maintaining the regenerative cycles of nature. Reading Tranquilina’s indigenous legacy from this perspective signals her ecological and social responsibility for restoring the environmental balance disrupted by freeway constructions.

³ Viramontes’s typographical layout is expressive of the fragmentary thought processes of mother and daughter which manifest in the broken narrative continuity of this passage.

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