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Crippling East Los Angeles: Enabling Environmental Justice in Helena María Viramontes's *Their Dogs Came with Them*

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In Helena María Viramontes's East Los Angeles, the construction of the 710 and Pomona 60 produces a fractured, maligned, and thoroughly disabled urban environment. Viramontes's novel *Their Dogs Came with Them* (2008), a Chicana coming-of-age narrative set in the age of freeway expansion, employs images of bodily mutilation to dramatize the effects of urban displacement. Freeways “[amputate] the streets into stumped dead ends”; an unfinished overpass “[resembles] a mangled limb”; and nearly every character carries the somatic imprint of prolonged systemic neglect (33, 169). Yet, while disability operates as shorthand for communal and geographic rupture in this historic Chicana/o enclave, it does not act as mere “narrative prosthesis.”¹ Rather, it grants key entry to the novel's formal and political concerns. As I argue in this paper, these fractured landscapes generate an infrastructural counter-imaginary, one that offers alternate mappings of East Los Angeles via the support networks on which it depends. As one might expect, this ecology of support diverges from the dominant urban imaginaries offered by Los Angeles metropolitan growth coalitions². But it also diverges from the narrative of self-ownership so central to ethnic American literary studies.

As literary scholar Rey Chow has observed, ethnic subjectivity has largely been conceptualized in terms of the teleological protest narrative, in which the subject as “resistant

¹ David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001). Narrative prosthesis, according to Mitchell and Snyder, refers to the use of disability as an “opportunistic metaphorical device” in American literature, in which the representation of disability operates as simple narrative shorthand rather than a reflection of disability's lived realities (47).

² For an extended explanation of the metropolitan growth coalition, see Harvey Molotch's “The City as Growth Machine: Toward a Political Economy of Place,” *American Journal of Sociology* 82.2 (September 1976): 309—332.

captive” engages in a linear “struggle toward liberation,” an endpoint imagined as “self-ownership and self-affirmation in both individual and collective senses.” This is, in many ways, the ur-narrative of Ethnic Studies: the recovery of a sovereign, self-determining subject through practices of resistance. In this essay, I argue that Viramontes’s novel posits a different relation between ethnic subjectivity and literary narrative, one that instead prioritizes the avenues afforded by bodily vulnerability and non-autonomous personhood. Far from a protest novel, *Their Dogs Came with Them* is an account of human enmeshment within—and dependency upon—systems of social support. In Viramontes’s novel, the conditions of environmental injustice invite critiques of self-sustaining personhood, as individual and social bodies become the sum of their disabling entanglements with the cityscape. Yet at the same time that the novel’s disabled bodies offer their testimony³ to urban re-development’s destructive force, they also become the foundation for a politic and aesthetic of interdependency. Rather than mobilizing narrative toward claims of self-determination or community coherency, then, *Their Dogs Came with Them* derives narrative and political strategies from the fractured landscape of East Los Angeles, evoking a disability politic that highlights our shared need for assistance. Throughout this essay, I demonstrate how the novel’s infrastructural counter-imaginary underpins an account of human-environmental interconnection, as well as a material politic of care.

This essay proceeds in three parts. First, I situate Viramontes’s novel in relation to the celebratory discourses of Chicana/o cultural nationalism and Los Angeles freeway expansion, both of which roughly coincide with the novel’s 1960—1970 timeline. I argue that both nationalism and freeway boosterism rely upon ableist rhetorics to champion, respectively, a

³ See the chapter “Body as Testimony” in Patricia Yaeger’s *Dirt and Desire: Reconstructing Southern Women’s Writing, 1930—1990* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000). Here, Yaeger theorizes a kind of somatic testimony in which bodies operate as living archives.

unified Chicana/o community and a unified Los Angeles region. In contrast, *Their Dogs* centers disability in its figuration of East L.A., thereby offering a narrative of Chicana/o urban life incommensurate with the still-resonant discourse of cultural nationalism. In the second section, I demonstrate how Viramontes's novel figures an account of human-environmental interpenetration, an enmeshment of skin and smog that suggests the impossibility of self-ownership. Drawing together theories of new materialism and disability studies, I highlight the little explored links between urban re-development, environmental racism, and mass disablement, foregrounding disability as a generative site that capacitates alternative political projects and urban epistemologies. In the final section, I shift from discussing disabling state infrastructures (the freeway) to informal infrastructures of care, developing further the novel's politic of interdependency. Here, I examine how *Their Dogs* figures the communal networks of material support both paved over and necessitated by freeway construction. Rather than devaluing or disavowing racialized, impoverished, and/ or disabled lives, I argue that the novel instead highlights the support systems that enable their endurance. In so doing, it proffers a narrative of ethnic American subjectivity centered around disabled embodiment.

Freeway Boosterism, Cultural Nationalism, and the Discourse of Ability

Set between the years of 1960—1970, *Their Dogs Came with Them* documents the everyday lives of several young characters growing up in the midst of freeway expansion and Chicana/o cultural nationalism, two discourses central to the novel that I will briefly gloss. In particular, I highlight how both redevelopment and Chicana/o nationalism idealize able-bodied subjects and communities, yoking the health of the region/ nation to the health of the body. While freeway expansion devastated communities of color, and in contrast, cultural nationalism

vied for the survival of Chicana/o community, both discourses nonetheless mobilize ableist metaphors of bodily wholeness to advocate for their respective sites: the city of Los Angeles and the Chicana/o spiritual homeland of Aztlàn.

Traveling toward East Los Angeles and Boyle Heights, freeway users encounter the concrete jumble known colloquially as “the stack,” a “four-freeway interchange⁴” that funnels “547,300 cars a day through the Eastside (169).” Together, East L.A. and Boyle Heights, the historic Chicana/o enclaves that host *Their Dogs*, contain no fewer than six major freeway systems. Between 1953 and 1972, East Los Angeles became “home to more freeways than any place in the country⁵,” despite decades of complaints by local residents. As scholars like Raúl Homero Villa, Eric Avila, and Rodolfo Acuña⁶ have noted, these networks upended Chicana/o community in the postwar period, disrupting families, businesses, and neighborhood life.

To justify these intrusions into Chicana/o neighborhoods, urban planners seized upon the medical language of blight, a term rooted in late-nineteenth-century immigrant slum reform efforts. Conflating racial difference with physical disability, the rhetoric of blight envisions racialized and/ or low-income neighborhoods as diseased sites waiting for excision. Indeed, the predominant urban-planning discourses of 1940s Los Angeles, which advocated both slum clearance and highway construction, cast professional planners as “surgeon generals⁷” vying for

⁴ Mary Pat Brady, “Metaphors to Love By: Toward a Chicana Aesthetics in *Their Dogs Came with Them*,” in *Rebozos de Palabras: An Helena María Viramontes Critical Reader*, ed. Gabriella Gutiérrez Y Muhs (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2013), 174.

⁵ Robert D. Bullard and Glenn S. Johnson, eds. *Just Transportation: Dismantling Race and Class Barriers to Mobility*, (Stony Creek, CT: New Society Publishers, 1997), 18.

⁶ See Villa’s *Barrio-Logos*; Rodolfo Acuña’s *A Community Under Siege: A Chronicle of Chicanos East of the Los Angeles River 1945--1975* (Los Angeles: Chicano Studies Research Center, UCLA, 1984); and Eric Avila’s *The Folklore of the Freeway: Race and Revolt in The Modernist City* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014).

⁷ Robert Goodman, *After The Planners* (New York: Touchstone, 1971), 67.

the “physical, economic, and moral health of the metropolitan body⁸.” *Their Dogs* makes reference to such medically inflected policing by way of the Quarantine Authority, a fictional state entity that imposes on Eastsiders a mandatory neighborhood-wide curfew, ostensibly to contain a rabies outbreak. Viramontes’ Quarantine Authority, which entraps residents in their homes while combing neighborhoods for evidence of disease, references well-circulated fears about racialized communities, literalizing the state’s efforts to quell imagined contagion. The casting of racialized neighborhoods as public health hazards, as the Q.A. aptly demonstrates, subtends the regulation of these communities as well as their elimination.

Described by the editors of *Westways* magazine as the “sinews of a supercity,”⁹ the burgeoning freeway network was, in contrast, cast in terms of physical hyper-ability. Espousing a similar rhetoric, architecture critic Reyner Banham’s 1971 text *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies*—the “academic codex of the freeway faithful”¹⁰—celebrates the heightened sense of physical mobility the freeway imparts. It argues for mobility as itself a type of language, stating, “the city will never be fully understood by those who cannot move fluently through its diverse urban texture.”¹¹ Far from claiming an exceptional viewpoint, Banham’s study and *Westways* magazine mirrored the sentiments of other well-circulated and contemporaneous cultural narratives. From Disneyland’s *Autopia* ride to Thomas Pynchon’s 1966 novella *The Crying of Lot 49*, the open road in the postwar L.A. imaginary functioned as a narrative site of self-determination. And in accordance with this ableist rhetoric, the freeway was further imagined as a mechanism of regional cohesion. Expansionist boosters touted the freeway system

⁸ Raúl Homero Villa, *Barrio-Logos: Space and Place in Urban Chicano Literature and Culture* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2000), 71.

⁹ Larry L. Meyer, “Sinews of a Super City,” *Westways*, June 1965, 27.

¹⁰ Villa, *Barrio-Logos*, 84.

¹¹ Reyner Banham, *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies* (New York: Penguin Books, 1971),

as the unifying thread of the Los Angeles metropole, one that solidified a disjunctive collection of neighborhoods and towns into a cohesive whole. “Before an inch of concrete could be laid down,” writes Mary Pat Brady, the region’s “scalar imaginary” underwent a dramatic renovation, in which neighborhoods like Boyle Heights, Long Beach, and Pasadena became “mere nodules on a vertical and greatly expanded scaffold imaginary where the region claimed larger and overriding significance.”¹² The freeway, then, was envisioned as vital to Los Angeles, as it maintained the health and physical integrity of the city-region.

Arising at the tail end of freeway expansion, Chicana/o cultural nationalism similarly traded on metaphors of physical ability to articulate communal cohesion. A call for ethnic liberation grounded in decolonization, the Chicana/o Movement (El Movimiento) promoted ethnic and spiritual unity, identifying “the pre-Columbian Mexica (Aztec) homeland of Aztlàn as the basis for Chicana/o claims to cultural and political self determination¹³.” *El Plan Espiritual de Aztlàn*, a manifesto penned in 1969 by the poets Alurista and Rodolfo “Corky” Gonzales, articulated the ideas that would come to define Chicana/o nationalism. And akin to freeway boosterism, Chicana/o nationalist rhetoric also idealizes an able-bodied subject and community. Indeed, literary scholar María Josefina Saldaña-Portillo identifies the ideological overlap between between postwar revolutionary projects and neo-colonial development projects, both of which re-trench an independent “agent of transformation...one who is highly ethical, mobile, risk-taking, and masculinist¹⁴” *El Plan Espiritual* explicitly celebrates such an agent. The document’s privileged subject was not only “male, working-class, heterosexual and racially

¹² Brady, “Metaphors,” 174.

¹³ Julie Avril Minich, *Accessible Citizenships: Disability, Nation, and the Cultural Politics of Greater Mexico* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2014), 35.

¹⁴ María Josefina Saldaña-Portillo, *The Revolutionary Imagination in the Age of the Americas and the Age of Development* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 9.

marked as Indian/ mestizo¹⁵,” but as Julie Avril Minich observes, also endowed with the “capacity for physical labor¹⁶.” “Aztlàn,” *El Plan* states, “belongs to those who plant the seeds, water the fields, and gather the crops¹⁷.” Evoking images of laboring bodies, Chicana/o nationalism envisioned a unified homeland peopled by hale, able-bodied subjects.

Their Dogs Came with Them suggests, alternately, that a just social order cannot lay claim to bodily integrity—that integrity is, in fact, a fiction. Foregrounding the toxicity generated by freeway expansion, Viramontes’s novel instead charts the possibilities of political projects and narrative forms grounded in human-environmental interpenetration. As Stacy Alaimo has argued, the “recognition that human bodies, human health, and human rights are interconnected with the material, often toxic flows of particular places” profoundly affects the ideologies of movements such as cultural nationalism, civil rights, and identity politics, which take for granted that individuals are “bounded, coherent entities.”¹⁸ Following this, *Their Dogs* intervenes into the imaginaries of urban re-development and cultural nationalism by centering the disabled figures and environments excised from idealized visions of Los Angeles.

The novel presents a set of characters—mainly young women—irrevocably shaped by the “material, often toxic flows” of environmental racism. Viramontes’s cast features Ermila, an orphaned teenager who finds solace in her women’s social circle: the “F-Troop”; Ana, a mixed-race, low-paid administrative worker who looks after her troubled brother, Ben; Turtle, a trans-masculine gang member of the McBride Boys and recently-turned homeless drifter; and Tranquilina, a Christ-like religious worker who, alongside her parents, runs a charitable ministry

¹⁵ Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano, “Laying it Bare: The Queer/ Colored Body in Photography by Laura Aguilar,” in *Living Chicana Theory*, ed. Carla Trujillo (Berkeley, CA: Third Woman Press, 1998), 277.

¹⁶ Minich, *Accessible Citizenships*, 36.

¹⁷ “El Plan Espiritual de Aztlàn,” in *Aztlàn: Essays on the Chicano Homeland*, eds. Rudolfo A. Anaya and Francisco Lomelí (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1989), 1.

¹⁸ Stacy Alaimo, *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment and the Material Self* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 23.

on the Eastside. As some of the Eastside's most vulnerable and impoverished residents, these characters cannot find affirmation in the Movement's idealization of an abstract and cohesive community. These are the inhabitants of what Chicana feminist Gloria Anzaldúa once termed "El Mundo Zurdo," or "the left-handed world": "the colored, the queer, the poor, the female, the physically challenged."¹⁹

Given Viramontes's documented dedication to Chicana and women-of-color feminisms, one might expect skepticism toward an undeniably masculinist movement, which often sidelined feminist concerns to promote "*la familia de la raza*."²⁰ Indeed, much in *Their Dogs* critiques nationalist discourse. The novel features characters who are notably *bad* political subjects, and who dismiss the project of protest central to the Chicana/o Movement. After her²¹ initial introduction, Turtle comes across a "Che Guevara wannabe" with a "brown beret flopped on his head," a figure we later identify as Ben (17). This encounter broadcasts contempt for nationalist devotees, writing off the iconic brown beret with a simple declaration: "What a loser" (17). Later, we learn that Ben only dons the beret after meeting an attractive USC student at the MEChA table, who hands it to him as a gift (118). "Confused and terrified by the antiwar salvo of chanting and pro-civil rights demonstrations," the mixed-race Ben refuses "to be clearly defined as a Chicano, and for that...[refusing] to belong to a fluid movement, joining her, joining them, joining other Chicanos to become a part, to become a whole and not just stay forever in between" (118). And though Ermila and her teenage friends attend Garfield High, a key site of the burgeoning student movement, they pointedly do not identify as "politically active" (49).

¹⁹ Gloria Anzaldúa, "El Mundo Zurdo: The Vision," in *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings By Radical Women of Color*, 3rd ed. Eds Cherríe L. Moraga and Gloria E. Anzaldúa (Berkeley: Third Woman Press, 2001 (1981)), 218.

²⁰ Catherine S. Ramirez, *The Woman in the Zoot Suit: Gender, Nationalism, and the Cultural Politics of Memory* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 19.

²¹ Though *Their Dogs* figures Turtle as trans-masculine, I use feminine pronouns to remain consistent with the novel, which uses "she" and "her" in reference to Turtle.

They attend a single meeting of the “Young Citizens for Community Action” for “the fun of it,” “ditching school, rabble-rousing, everyone else thinking they held up banners or raised fists to demand a better education, declare Chicano Power” (49—50). In contrast to the ethnic subject constituted *through* protest, Viramontes’s characters gesture toward the limitations of protest as a mechanism of cultural solidarity; they explicitly seek out other modes of inhabiting the world.

Rather than the independent “agent of transformation,” then, *Their Dogs* traffics in ethnic subjects, communities, and landscapes constituted by their disabling encounters with environmental racism and infrastructural inequity. Indeed, in its treatment of infrastructure, *Their Dogs* contributes to a Chicana/o literary heritage that “has, from its inception, contested the terms of capitalist spatial formation, including the attempts to regulate the meanings and uses of spaces, especially the use of space to naturalize violent racial, gender, sexual, and class ideologies,” de-naturalizing urban capitalism’s violent ideologies and dramatizing the fallout of such spatial regulation (Brady 6). *Their Dogs* can be viewed as part of a larger archive of freeway-centric Chicana/o expressive culture—what urban historian Eric Avila calls “the folklore of the freeway.” Rather than just another utilitarian feature of the urban landscape, one that rarely becomes part of conscious consideration, the freeway inhabits the forefront of Chicana/o imaginaries. Particularly in the work of cultural figures from the L.A. region, in the “popular Chicano imaginative figurations of dominant urbanism, no other single element comes close to occupying the symbolic place of the freeways as a resonant symbol of the community’s historical geography” (Villa 82). In addition to protests, committee hearings, and other institutional forms of dissent, Chicana/os mobilized the “soft power” of cultural expression to generate alternate narratives of the freeway, supplanting dominant interpretations with contradictory systems of knowledge. From the poetry of Lorna Dee Cervantes to Ron Arias’

famed novel *The Road to Tamazunchale*, Chicana/o freeway iconography mythologizes the ongoing effects of redevelopment. While Henri Lefebvre insists that “the space of a (social) order is hidden in the order of space,”²² that is, built environments conceal and naturalize the hierarchical logic that spawn them, in Chicana/o freeway folklore the operations of power arrive in plain sight, sometimes emblemized as ravenous beast, sometimes remade into a stage for alternate communal longings (289). For Viramontes, the freeway’s significance resides in what it takes away more so than what it gives. Amplifying negative space, the novel trains focus on the presence of absence: the disappeared houses, residents, streets, and businesses of a truncated East Los Angeles.

Through the novel’s temporal and spatial formal aspects, as well as its content, Viramontes generates an infrastructural imaginary that evokes the destructive process of freeway construction. In an interview, Viramontes describes the stories comprising the novel as “[multiplying] like freeway interchanges,” likening its structure to “freeway intersections.”²³ *Their Dogs* toggles unpredictably between 1960 and 1970, featuring an inconsistent, stuttering temporality that parallels the fractures and fissures divvying up the urban landscape. It unfolds through a process of recursion, with each character arc resting loosely on the scaffolding of another. And though the storylines stack one upon the other, much like the Eastside’s four-freeway “stack” they “touch and intersect but never precisely connect²⁴.” Through these nodal points, *Their Dogs* records the subplots and sites of its characters’ respective lives, which become increasingly intertwined as the story progresses. Characters traverse the same streets,

²² Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*. Trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell Publishers, 1992): 289.

²³ Daniel Olivas, “Interview with Helena María Viramontes,” *La Bloga* (April 02, 2007), accessed August 12, 2014, <http://labloga.blogspot.com/2007/04/interview-with-helena-mara-viramontes.html>

²⁴ Brady, “Metaphors,” 177.

pass the same landmarks, and share memories of the same geographic touchstones: the unevenly demolished block on First St; Whittier Boulevard, the “main cruising drag of the Eastside”; and the freshly-built intersection connecting the 710 and the Pomona 60 (50).

While the novel’s first section documents a series of passing daytime encounters, by its final section the characters are collectively linked through a dual murder: one gang-related, one state-sanctioned. On the eve of his return to Reynosa, Ermila’s love-struck cousin Nacho locks Ermila’s boyfriend, the gangbanger Alfonso, in a lifeguard booth. Enraged, Alfonso commands his gang, the McBride Boys, to “waste” Nacho, and encourages Turtle to deliver the final blow. While combing the Eastside streets for Ben, who has gone missing, Ana and Tranquilina come across Nacho’s slain body, recently murdered by Turtle. They then witness Turtle’s untimely death by Quarantine Authority officers, who have been ordered to aerially observe and shoot all “undomesticated mammals” (54).

In the novel’s somber ending, we mourn the material and social costs of environmental racism, which rend apart body, landscape, and community. Rather than narrating a “resistant captive²⁵” grasping toward self-ownership, then, the novel registers the dispersal of the ethnic subject across a toxic environment, and the vulnerability of brown bodies within a predatory landscape. By de-centering community, individual, and territorial unity as the foundation for a progressive Chicana/o politic, Viramontes’s novel diverges from the dominant rhetorics of cultural nationalism, and brings disability into the orbit of ethnic cultural production and critique.

A Disabled Somatics of Place

Envisioned in postwar L.A. iconography as an instrument of hyper-ability and hyper-

²⁵ Chow, *Protestant Ethnic*, 40.

mobility, in *Their Dogs* the freeway instead initiates a cycle of debilitating exchange between the local environment and its inhabitants. Freeway construction and its aftermath generate what I term a *disabled somatics of place*, wherein the violated, ruptured bodies of people and landscape invite a heightened transference of matter, and human and environment begin to mirror one another. Laden with leaky imagery, *Their Dogs* traffics in partial pieces, fragmented figures, and open forms as a means of illustrating the porous interface linking human and environmental elements. This interface assumes the form of “tar feet,” “tar-smudged” faces, “tobacco-stained” hands, human indentations on chairs and books, landscapes with “cesarean scars,” and rotting houses featuring curling “tongues of paint” (4, 5, 325, 14). Through the disabled somatics of place, an aesthetic mode in which disability operates as environmental ambience rather than personal attribute, *Their Dogs* proffers a narrative world centrally defined by disabled embodiment. Yet, the novel’s collective of disabled bodies do not function as signs of “political failure and decline,”²⁶ as the protest narrative might suggest, but as sites of knowledge production in their own right. While the disabled somatics of place may recall the oft-critiqued characterization of disability as pathology, impairment, or lack, the social politic that Viramontes puts forth situates disability as a generative site, one that 1) intervenes into a Chicana/o nationalism predicated on a false bodily integrity, 2) gives narrative form and urgency to the slow violence of environmental racism, and 3) complicates the dominant theoretical models governing our understanding of disabled subjectivity.

Akin to the eco-materialist focus on the significance of non-human agents—what new materialist critic Jane Bennett terms the “force of things”²⁷—Viramontes’s novel redraws the lines of relation between people and their surroundings, indicating a mutual and debilitating

²⁶ Minich, *Accessible Citizenships*, 34.

²⁷ See Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009).

exchange. That is, the fragments, leaks, and disappearances that constitute the disabled somatics of place signal the interpenetration of human and landscape, and further, emblemize the violence enacted through ostensibly “neutral” urban policy. This porous transit evokes what Stacy Alaimo terms “trans-corporeality,” an ontological model in which “the human is always enmeshed with the more-than-human world.”²⁸ Recognition of our porous condition, Alaimo contends, will foster an “environmental ethos” that cultivates a “tangible sense of connection to the material world.”²⁹ And in acknowledging human contingency on the “more-than-human world,” this ethos implicitly dispels the fantasy of self-ownership. Rather, it suggests that a more just social order must begin by acknowledging the body’s permeability. This is not an account of “taming” or “mastering” nature, but rather, an account of human-environmental contingency, of the shared transit between human and non-human entities.

In *Their Dogs*, human-environmental interconnection is envisioned through and intensified by the phenomenon of environmental racism, a disabling transit between body and landscape. While eco-materialist critics insist upon recognizing our enmeshment with the environment, and similarly, Disability Studies scholars “remind us that all bodies are shaped by their environments at the moment of conception,”³⁰ Viramontes’s novel suggests that such reminders of human-environmental interdependency prove unnecessary and unexceptional for her Eastside characters. Figuring a city steeped in pollutant byproducts, Viramontes employs dirty and invasive imagery to highlight the racially uneven consequences of urban re-development and the disproportionate toxic load borne by racialized communities. Indeed, communities of color, according to environmental justice scholars such as Robert D. Bullard,

²⁸ Alaimo, *Bodily Natures*, 2.

²⁹ Alaimo, *Bodily Natures*, 16.

³⁰ Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, “Disability and Representation,” *PMLA* 120, no. 2 (March 2005): 524.

“are subjected to a disproportionately large number of health and environmental risks in their neighborhoods...and on their jobs.”³¹ Race further impacts “accessibility to health care” and the proximity of “freeways, sewage treatment plants...and other noxious facilities”³² to neighborhoods. Indeed, for activists in the environmental justice movement, conceptions of “nature” cannot be de-imbricated from “uneven and contested patterns of housing, zoning, and transportation,” which reproduce differentiated life chances among the racialized poor (Hsu 147). And for those subject to these pernicious effects, the porous transit between human and landscape--which fosters a “tangible sense of connection to the material world”—is all-too-often incapacitating.

Yet, while studies of environmental racism invariably reference disability to denote environmental harm, few, if any, address the phenomenon from a critical disability perspective. In these primarily sociological studies, which seek to “quantify, measure, and ‘prove’ that environmental racism exists,”³³ disability figures as a constitutive feature of environmental racism, but is treated simply as a transparent measure of inequity.

In contrast, Viramontes’s novel enables a consideration of disability vis-à-vis environmental racism that goes beyond quantifiable evidence. In *Their Dogs*, disability operates as a mechanism of knowledge production and cultural critique. It posits modes of narrating and “knowing” the Eastside barrio grounded in disabled experience, and of narrating and knowing disability via the Eastside barrio. In this way, the novel demonstrates one of the political labors specific to literary fiction: the excavation of occluded systems of knowledge, and the imaginative

³¹ Robert D. Bullard, “Introduction,” in *Confronting Environmental Racism: Voices from the Grassroots*, eds. Robert D. Bullard and Benjamin Chavis, Jr. (Cambridge: South End Press, 1993), 10.

³² Robert D. Bullard, “The Threat of Environmental Racism.” *Natural Resources and Environment* 7, no. 3 (Winter 1993), 23.

³³ Julie Sze, “‘Not by Politics Alone’: Gender and Environmental Justice in Karen Tei Yamashita’s *Tropic of Orange*,” *Bucknell Review* 44, no. 1 (2000), 33.

recuperation of fragmentary, peripheral, or ephemeral information absent from historical record. Across a range of physiological and psychological states, disability is a definitive characteristic of Viramontes's Eastside community. The landscape and residents alike bear the stigma of poverty-induced environmental stress: years of manual labor, inadequate health infrastructures, forced displacement, and freeway construction. Subject to an erratic upbringing and a traumatic truck accident, once-promising student Ben Brady grapples with waves of an undisclosed mental illness. He struggles to secure adequate care at the public hospital system, which can only offer him "72 hours" worth of medical attention, thereby signaling the inadequacy of public infrastructure aimed at supporting Eastsiders (90). Lollie, one of Ermila's high school girlfriends, endures "degrees of deafness" due to the "bombarding pinions of earsplitting stitching" at her mother's garment factory (188). And though one never learns the occupation of Ermila's Grandfather Zumaya, references to his "hunchback stuffed with endless scolding" and "steel-tip leather boots" suggest a lifetime's worth of stiffening labor (10). Further, as car-less pedestrians, characters like Ermila, Turtle, Ben, and Tranquilina never enjoy the advantages of freeway transit, but must tolerate the "thick, choking stench of blackened diesel" and the haze of "carbon dust" on their winding walks through the city (27). As Ermila remarks upon observing the largely bus-bound population of East L.A., "Four freeways crossing and interchanging, looping and stacking in the Eastside, but if you didn't own a car, you were fucked" (176). This is a narrative of somatic intrusion, not autopian transcendence, in which the by-products of private transit work to degrade one's body, neighborhood, and quality of life.

With its leaky cache of images, *Their Dogs* gives form, momentum, and story to the quiet, quotidian theater of environmental racism. The novel's disabled somatics of place, which offer an alternate conceptual map of East Los Angeles, operate as a form of testimony: a living

archive in which the body itself operates as documentation. This aesthetic mode materializes the often-imperceptible and slow-moving intrusions of toxic exposure, which, in Viramontes' novel, are quite literally written on the body. It renders material the microscopic, slow-paced, and everyday intrusions not easily captured through narrative representation, the toxic everyday theorized by literary critic Rob Nixon as "slow violence."³⁴ These miasmatic phenomena become concrete through the novel's figurations of disabled landscapes, bodies, and their ever-constant transit. The toxic byproducts of freeway construction circulate throughout the novel and the bodies of Eastside residents, narrativizing the freeway's often-invisible, slow-paced effects on community health. Clouds of dirt, exhaust, and noise permeate both domestic interiors and public spaces, subjecting Eastsiders to a constant and inevitably lethal onslaught of contaminants. The residents of First Street, for example, must endure the "black fumes of the bulldozer exhaust hovering over the new pavements," the "jackhammering blasts and cacophony of earthmovers," and "floodlights [jetting] through the drawn blinds, drone of engines in and out of the hours" (8, 27, 75). Schoolchildren enjoy recess under the haze of a smog alert, and Ermila's grandmother breathes air "too thick to filter through her lungs," indicating future ill health (129). Fractured, overwhelming, and often threatening, the novel's environment presses itself upon the reader's consciousness, and the background matter of East L.A. accelerates to the fore, "[becoming] available for progressive acts of reading and perhaps even for change,"³⁵ That is, while

³⁴ Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011). Nixon defines "slow violence" as a "violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all (2)." He particularly focuses on the problem of representation presented by slow violence, as we as a culture seem to respond primarily to instances of spectacular, instantaneous violence. The medium of literature, Nixon argues, is ideal for materializing and narrativizing such slow-acting phenomena, and thus inciting us into action.

³⁵ Patricia Yaeger, *Dirt and Desire: Reconstructing Southern Women's Writing, 1930—1990* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 30—31.

sociological studies of environmental racism cast disability as mere *metric* of injustice, in *Their Dogs* disability instead functions as a platform for epistemological and social transformation.

The disabled somatics of place, too, solicits a revision of the dominant paradigms that have come to govern the field of Disability Studies. For many scholars of disability, disability theorizing has frequently “[worked] from the assumption that disability is a minority subject position,”³⁶ and thus conceives of disability as “*any* departure from an unstated physical and functional norm.”³⁷ That is, Disability Studies, and first-wave disability scholarship in particular, posit disability as a category of minority identity to which civil rights can adhere. In *Their Dogs*, however, disability *is* the norm, and mass disablement a symptom of prolonged physical duress and insufficient infrastructural support. Conceptions of disabled embodiment grounded in minority identity are thus contested by Viramontes’s *Eastside*, in which the confluence of racism, sexism, and poverty render disability nearly ubiquitous. In turn, the ubiquity of disability in the novel foregrounds the relation between systemic racism and the creation of disability, positing disability as a standard feature of low-income and racialized communities. To borrow a formulation from disability scholar Nirmala Erevelles, disability functions in Viramontes’ novel as not a “condition of being but of becoming,” a dynamic re-writing of the flesh. Rather than a static category of minority identity, disability operates here as a “historical event,”³⁸ one embedded in processes of neocolonialism, structural racism, and urban displacement. Indeed, the “eventness” of disability in *Their Dogs* is inextricably linked to postwar urban re-development, a form of neo-colonial displacement that fractured landscape and community alike. Diverging

³⁶ Claire Barker and Stuart Murray, “Disabling Postcolonialism: Global Disability Cultures and Democratic Criticism,” *Journal of Literary and Cultural Disability Studies* 4, no. 3 (2010), 229.

³⁷ Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Literature and Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 26.

³⁸ Nirmala Erevelles, *Disability and Difference in Global Contexts: Enabling a Transformative Body Politic* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011), 27.

from the theories of minority identity that have come to define the category of disability,³⁹ disability functions here as atmosphere, as ambience, as an event that continuously unfolds through the interpenetration of human and environment. The disabled somatics of place, then, demonstrate once more how “trans-corporeality” provokes a re-conceptualization of identity categories. And through the disabled somatics of place, *Their Dogs* compels us to reconsider the theoretical parameters of disability as category, and demonstrates how environmental racism solicits new theories of disabled embodiment.

Shaped by a public infrastructural system more invested in the flow of capital than the wellbeing of the least powerful, the disabled bodies and landscapes of *Their Dogs* offer a “space for reading the way that *bios* is determined by history,”⁴⁰ as well as the disabling transit between body and landscape amplified by processes of environmental racism. Though East Los Angeles is rent-through and covered-up by freeway construction, these bodies testify to the intrusions of a metropolitan order governed by white supremacy. They speak volumes about the biopolitical project of infrastructure and which subset of the public it is designed to support. And further, in offering an epistemology of somatic witness, *Their Dogs* reconfigures the way we think about ethnic American subjectivity vis-à-vis literary production. The disabling traffic between human and “more-than-human nature⁴¹” narrates a Chicana/o subject and community that is not self-contained and self-affirming, but rather, violated and transformed by the toxic flows of city life.

³⁹ For the most oft-cited examples of this theory, see Simi Linton, *Claiming Disability: Knowledge and Identity* (New York: NYU Press, 1998) and Tobin Siebers’ *Disability Theory* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008).

⁴⁰ Yaeger, *Dirt and Desire*, 221.

⁴¹ Alaimo, *Bodily Natures*, 2.

Infrastructures of Care as Environmental Justice

Given the concentration of disabled figures in Viramontes's East Los Angeles, how does the novel figure the process of healing, or even simply managing the onslaught of environmental duress? Notably, this is not a rehabilitative narrative in which one "overcomes" disability, an ableist storyline thoroughly critiqued by disability scholars. Viramontes refuses to organize the anarchic material of environmental crisis into a linear narrative of healing, one that papers over the ongoing toxicity generated through systemic racism.

To begin, *Their Dogs* suggests that the debilitating processes of environmental racism necessitate alternate forms of social, political, and cultural expression—narratives that, in short, go beyond the teleological narrative of self-ownership. In *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature*, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson argues that the disabled body inherently critiques the "American Ideal" promoted by "liberal individualism," particularly its ideological principles of "self-government, self-determination, autonomy, and progress" (42). Because the disabled figure registers environmental stress, presenting the body as dynamic process, it posits a body that "refuses to be governed and cannot carry out the will to self-determination" (44). To be clear, while I do not wish to dismiss the project of Chicana/o self-determination, and in fact insist upon its continuing relevance, I nonetheless contend that social justice models—and "progressive" models of literary interpretation, for that matter—cannot be wholly conditioned by the binaries of resistance or complicity, protest or acquiescence. And so, rather than mapping the barrio exclusively in terms of "blight" or political resistance, *Their Dogs* charts the relations of care that underpin neighborhood life. It exhumes the sites and figures that salve environmental racism while critiquing the conditions that necessitate these informal support networks. The novel figures

ostensibly public infrastructures, such as the freeway and the General Hospital, as contributing to the community's ill health, and in turn, constructs an alternate infrastructural imaginary by underscoring informal systems of support. In short, it envisions environmental and social justice in terms of interdependency; here, environmental justice⁴² entails enabling the survival of vulnerable life.

To articulate a politic of interdependence, *Their Dogs* foregrounds the marginal figures and sites that simply make life more possible: Ermila's social circle; an elderly woman's nurturing blue house; Turtle's sibling bond with Luis Lil Lizard; and Tranquilina's charitable ministry. These informal safety nets, which I term *infrastructures of care*, have received scant attention in the novel's critical reception, despite underpinning what I identify as its primary vision of social recuperation. However, even these safety nets do not escape critique, and raise a battery of questions: Does the lack of adequate public infrastructure force Eastsiders to construct informal support structures, thereby generating an extra burden of labor? Do these informal infrastructures allow the city to shirk its responsibilities, thereby coercing its residents to make do with fewer and fewer resources? The novel's ambivalence toward some of these informal networks, such as Tranquilina's ministry, provokes reflection on the dilemma of state care in an era wrought by infrastructural abandonment. On the one hand, state infrastructures and safety nets work to discipline the racialized poor and thus will always operate as mechanisms of violence; and yet, on the other hand, informal infrastructures and privatized models of care erode state accountability to the public. Through its ambivalent figuration of informal infrastructure, *Their Dogs* complicates the roles that nurturing elders and local charities serve in impoverished

⁴² The official and oft-cited definition of Environmental Justice, borrowed here from the Environmental Protection Agency, is "the fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, color, national origin, or income with respect to the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies."

urban communities, thus disallowing any easy romanticization of “community.”

Though the novel offers no easy remedies, it nonetheless elicits reflection on the supporting operations of East Los Angeles, and the ways in which subjects and communities simply cannot make do without safety nets. Indeed, as Mitchum Huehls argues, the Eastsiders in the novel have “immediate material [needs]”⁴³ that must be addressed one way or another. Rather than mapping the barrio exclusively in terms of blight, *Their Dogs* generates a literary cartography that charts relations of care, both exhuming the networks that salve environmental injustice and critiquing the conditions that necessitate these networks in the first place. Most significantly, it hinges survival upon an acknowledgement of the self/ community as multiply determined and embedded in wider webs of support. Indeed, the only “independent” subject in the novel, Turtle Gamboa, inevitably perishes. Stripped of home, resources, family, and friends, she simply cannot survive.

Their Dogs foregrounds care as, above all, a social project to be shouldered by all, rather than a private endeavor relegated to the domestic sphere. Resonant with feminist disability scholarship’s “ethic of care,” the novel’s figuration of disability suggests that “human interdependence and the universal need for assistance:⁴⁴ fundamentally affect narrative forms-- like the protest narrative—that shore up a self-governing ideal of subjectivity. And in contrast to the widespread de-valuation of care work, which leads in part to the “asymmetries of care relations,”⁴⁵ *Their Dogs* pays proper homage to the sites and figures that provide support. The novel foregrounds Freudian “anaclitic love,” or what Judith Butler describes as “the type of love

⁴³ Mitchum Huehls, “Private Property as Story: Helena Viramontes’ *Their Dogs Came with Them*.” *Arizona Quarterly: A Journal of American Literature, Culture, and Theory* 68, no. 4 (Winter 2012), 162.

⁴⁴ Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, “Integrating Disability, Transforming Feminist Theory,” in *The Disability Studies Reader* 4th edition, ed. Lennard J. Davis (New York: Routledge, 2013), 344.

⁴⁵ Garland-Thomson, “Integrating Disability,” 344.

that is characterized by the need for support or by the love of those who support⁴⁶” And certainly, anaclitic love on a “wider social scale”⁴⁷ guides much of the affective force behind the novel’s intimate descriptions of Chicana/o urban life. Viramontes offers a paean, a “kind of praise-song for laboring Chicana/os⁴⁸,” for the nannies, housekeepers, nursing aides, and garment workers that sustain the city’s everyday operations. While such laboring figures often occupy the margins of consideration, here they emerge made of “gut and grist and a gleam of determination as blinding as a California sun” (176).

In parallel, *Their Dogs* begins with an elegy and memorial for the elder Chavela’s house, which provides much-needed refuge for the neighborhood’s children. It is also one of the first houses destroyed by the project of freeway expansion. At this initial scene of displacement, we observe Chavela organizing her belongings into boxes and inventorying her life: “**cobijas**, one note said; **Cosa del baño**, said another. **No good dresses. Josie’s typewriter. Fotos**” (5, emphasis in original). Her exhaustive list lends detail and texture to a house marked for removal, a seemingly marginal site that nonetheless gives sanctuary to the neighborhood’s children. Ermila, then identified as the “Zumaya child,” visits with Chavela to escape the disciplinarian atmosphere of her grandparents’ house, luxuriating in the old woman’s company (5). Following Chavela’s removal, Ermila feels a “slow swelling lump of desire for Chavela and the blue house on First Street with its damp scent of tobacco and burnt out matchsticks” (144). Though she dispenses “croaky” criticisms and furiously chain-smokes, qualities perhaps atypical of a nurturing figure, Chavela is nonetheless linked with rejuvenation, sensuous order, herbaceous plenty, and rooted history (6). Associated throughout the novel with ferns and hibiscus, Chavela

⁴⁶ Judith Butler and Shannon Jackson, “What Makes Performance Possible?” (lecture, Colorado College, October 2009).

⁴⁷ Shannon Jackson, *Social Works: Performing Art, Supporting Publics* (New York: Routledge 2011), 36.

⁴⁸ Brady, “Metaphors,” 181.

tends a small yard with a “lemon tree that yielded lemons every other year,” “potted ferns” that “[hang] from the shanty arbor built by a married man she had once loved,” and “shrubs of bursting red hibiscus bushes that bloomed lush and rich as only ancient deep-rooted hibiscus shrubs can do” (7). Her yard anchors intimate histories; indeed, the “earthmovers” do not only displace people, they also uproot “vast networks of affiliations and place-linked memories⁴⁹.” Though she, and later Ermila, attempt to commit the details of her beloved house to memory, Chavela warns Ermila to always “pay attention,” because “displacement will always come down to two things: earthquakes or earthmovers” (8). Through this piece of counsel, she suggests that land and property can never serve as the foundation for a communal politic, implicitly challenging the mythological ideal of Aztlàn, the nationalist spiritual homeland. Instead of lobbying for “solid tierra,” then, Chavela offers restorative gestures that reinforce the value of racialized, impoverished, and disabled life, demonstrating a practice and politic of interdependency. In addition to Ermila, Chavela also provides comfort for a young Turtle, whose “rented house” on First Street carries the ghosts of “Amá’s broken bones, tiles eroded and fallen to the ground like teeth, Luis’s locura, paint peeled, Frank’s explosive temper and the stink of a thousand regrets like an old discarded refrigerator” (221). Over the toxic ambience of freeway construction, the “pulverizing dust of heaved-up dirt and cement,” Chavela mixes the lemons from her yard into a refreshing lemonade: “Across the jackhammering blasts and cacophony of earthmovers and over the sound of passing cars on First Street, the old woman dropped three lemon cubes in a cupful of water, spooned sugar and stirred and tweaked as the water and sugar and cubes created lemonade so cold the aluminum tumbler beaded” (27). Though Turtle’s childhood is not uniformly traumatic—Viramontes takes care to describe both the joys as well as

⁴⁹ Brady, “Metaphors,” 178.

the trials of Eastside life—Chavela’s nurturing acts nonetheless impress themselves on her, remaining embedded in her memory. Ten years after Chavela’s disappearance, Turtle seeks refuge in cemeteries to avoid curfew, and while there, reminisces about Chavela’s “potted ferns and her hibiscus flowers” (235):

V for *Value living*. Living was made up of a bouquet of details. Chavela’s warm towel carried the fragrance of Dove soap. She wiped Turtle’s face and the moist cleansing made her feel refreshed, lovely. For some reason, the viejita liked Turtle and tweaked her chin and gave her lemonade because as far back as Turtle could remember, she always had an unquenchable thirst. (235, emphasis in original)

During a taxing night dodging QA surveillance and the Lote M Homeboys (the McBride Boys’ rival gang), Turtle reflects on the life circumstances and pattern of decisions that brought her to “this,” to “wishing she were safely inside a fucking cemetery” (224). Viramontes weaves an anagrammatic poem for **SURVIVAL** throughout the chapter, a nod to Luis Lil Lizard’s Army Manual, but also to Turtle’s austere, unsupported mode of living. “V for Value living” evokes memories of Chavela, whose love, care, and rejuvenation of the Eastside youth presents an oppositional categorization of life value to that of urban redevelopment. Her lovely, restorative gestures set into motion, if only momentarily and in limited scale, a Los Angeles where all life is supported, rather than just an affluent few. While Chavela may practically function as a band-aid for traumatized youth—after all, for Ermila she must pick up where “Mrs. M of the Child Services or any one of the three foster parents” fall short—absent her presence, both Turtle and Ermila are left fractured and incomplete, aching for care (14).

While the novel figures social and environmental support as vital to Viramontes’s Eastside, it also problematizes the systematic privatization of care that has come to transform

East L.A.'s landscape. Much in *Their Dogs* meditates on the problem of offering love and shelter in a place where protective acts are anathema. Overwhelmed by Ermila's perceived vulnerability, her grandmother becomes paralyzed with the anxiety of protection: "You cannot protect her from a world whose largeness invades every corner of your house. You cannot protect her even from the wilderness of herself" (147). Powerless to shield her, Grandmother instead uses Ermila as a repository of resentment, a child standing in for "was what was left of Inez," her disappeared daughter (147). Though Viramontes highlights momentary relations of care, her East Los Angeles is a landscape largely characterized by need and vulnerability, in which conventional protective forces—family, police—contain, criminalize, and further abuse the body politic.

The absence of truly supportive public infrastructures for Eastsiders, then, yields informal infrastructures, represented in part by Chavela's house and Tranquilina's charitable ministry. Peopled on its peripheries by "congealed squatters like scabs on a wound," East L.A.'s unsupported populace gives rise to what Michael Dear and Jennifer Wolch term "zones of dependence," urban sites "dominated by service clients and their professional helpers"⁵⁰ (276). Accelerated by welfare state restructuring in the 1970s, community care has undergone a "programmatic deinstitutionalization of social support," and the labor of care "is increasingly provided by a diverse, non-government human service sector, made up of a panoply of voluntary and for-profit agencies"⁵¹. This transition exemplifies the shifting of public responsibility to the private sphere; indeed, "any 'contracting out' of human services by the state is a form of privatization, irrespective of whether the supplier is motivated by profit or by altruism"⁵². And as Eva Feder Kittay, Evelyn Nakano Glenn, and other feminist scholars have noted, these workers

⁵⁰ Michael J. Dear and Jennifer R. Wolch, *Landscapes of Despair: From Deinstitutionalization to Homelessness* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 60.

⁵¹ Brendan Gleeson, *Geographies of Disability*, (New York: Routledge, 1998), 153.

⁵² Gleeson, *Geographies*, 153.

are given little to no financial compensation, devaluing further the labors of care⁵³. Viramontes's East L.A. teems with the latest incarnation of community care. In addition to the Little Brothers of the Poor Rest Home where Turtle gulps "lukewarm broth" and the Sacred Heart Church where migratory laborers gather in search of employment, Tranquilina, Mama, and Papa Tomás run a ministry that doles out both spiritual and physical sustenance to the Eastside's most impoverished, dependent, and disabled residents (18). They index the apparatus of charity that emerges in the absence of public support.

Grappling with the conundrum of public care in the midst of welfare erosion, Viramontes's figuration of their charitable ministry expresses both hesitation regarding and recognition of their work's necessity. Tranquilina, the primary figure in their trinity of caretaking, carries reservations about the ministry, despite laboring tirelessly to provide "simmering beef cocido," comfort, and attention to parishioners (84). "The constant flow of pitiless doubters and forever larger supply of ravished believers" strains Tranquilina's vigilance, her dedication now "buried in layers of decaying convictions" (31) Her efforts to shift the ministry sermon to topics of immediate material concern--the "quarantine and the roadblocks"—are met with Mama's refusal, as their church "had no room for a discussion regarding government rules" (86). Though Mama and Papa Tomás cling to the idea of spiritual uplift for Eastsiders, Tranquilina recognizes that the ministry operates best as an instrument of bodily rejuvenation. She knows that, for the down-and-out parishioners, "their ministry was no better than another bottle of Thunderbird wine, a quick fix of heroin, another prescription drug for temporal relief" (97).

⁵³ See Eva Feder Kittay, *Love's Labor: Essays on Women, Equality, and Dependency* (New York: Routledge, 1999).

Regardless, Tranquilina remains dedicated to meeting the yawning material need of the Eastside: “Even with assassinations, assaults, and the slaughter of planet and people, [her] love for this world remained a conflicted, loyal love...Because everything happened here on these sidewalks or muddy swamps of vacant lots or in deep back alleys, not up in the heavens of God” (34). At thirty-three years of age, she is explicitly associated with Christ, and commits herself to the earthly concerns of the Eastside. Yoking herself to the ministry’s needy in an interdependent, trans-corporeal relation, Tranquilina believes that “boundaries didn’t exist between her life and their lives,” and desires to be “their nourishment, their milk and muscle” (97, 37). Like Chavela, Tranquilina practices a politic of care for the dependent body, administering to some of its most basic, sensuous needs. When Ana and Tranquilina find Ben cocooned in his filthy apartment, wrapped in an army blanket, it is “Tranquilina who [inspires] his trust,” though Ana attempts to coax him out (207—208). They then begin the thankless work of scrubbing his home, echoing the cleansing exchange between Chavela and Turtle. And when an old soldier at the local convalescent home suffers from brief delusion and sorrow, it is Tranquilina who “[bends] down and [whispers] a defrosting warm breath of prayer in his ear,” then “[strokes] his liver spotted hand” (37). Committed to both mapping and facilitating relations of care, Tranquilina remains dedicated to supporting East LA: “This is why their ministry returned. The angels were never lacking here, and thus explained the name of the city” (37). And yet, in expressing frustration regarding the sheer volume of parishioners, she also implicitly critiques the injustices of environmental racism and the systemic production of disability that necessitates informal infrastructure.

Chavela and Tranquilina thus exemplify a politic grounded in the condition of bodily and environmental vulnerability. They assert value for life that is destitute, deviant, and defenseless,

both acknowledging and salvaging the conditions that perpetuate mass disablement for the racialized urban poor. Invested in the salvaging of life value, Tranquilina's politic of interdependency surfaces most clearly in the novel's violent conclusion. Searching futilely for Ben, Tranquilina and Ana encounter Nacho's lifeless body, recently "wasted" by Turtle: "And then like a *déjà vu*, Turtle recognized the woman who bent over the boy, removed her cape, a superman's cape, and pillowed it under the boy's mess of black water" (324). Devastated by Nacho's death, Tranquilina soon bears witness to another thoughtless killing. Turtle, mistaken by the Quarantine Authority helicopters as an "undomesticated mammal," is gunned down:

Turtle's chest burned down to her belly. Although she stood in the shower of rain, her face flamed something fierce. She dropped to her knees, quietly, into a puddle of oily water. Someone cradled her, held her as tight and strong as her brother, held all of her together until sleep came to her fully welcomed. *We'rrrrre not doggggs!* Tranquilina roared in the direction of the shooters. (324)

Faced with two lifeless bodies, Tranquilina "[rearranges] the boy in an effort to make him comfortable in his eternal sleep, just as she had done with the other boy lying a few yards away" (325). In this moment, she becomes the sum of their fatal entanglements with the cityscape, embodying their injuries in an act of intense empathy: "Absolutely drenched in the black waters of blood and torrents of rain, Tranquilina couldn't delineate herself from the murdered souls because these tears and blood and rain and bullet wounds belonged to her as well" (325).

While scholars like Hsuan Hsu, Sarah Wald, and Alicia Muñoz⁵⁴ have interpreted the final scene as a gesture of resistance, prioritizing Tranquilina's "[refusal] to halt" before the

⁵⁴ See Hsu's "Fatal Contiguities"; Sarah Wald's "Refusing to Halt: Mobility and the Quest for Spatial Justice in Helena María Viramontes's *Their Dogs Came with Them* and Karen Tei Yamashita's *Tropic of Orange*"; and Alicia Muñoz's "Articulating a Geography of Pain: Metaphor, Memory and Movement in Helena María Viramontes's *Their Dogs Came with Them*."

Quarantine Authority, I identify it as a reenactment of the famous *Pietà* scene, the ultimate gesture of care (325). Instead of adjusting the story to fit a protest narrative, then, I prioritize the apparatus of support that the novel itself highlights. Here, Tranquilina transforms into the mourning Mary and gives tribute to bodies considered either invisible or disposable. The representation of violence inflicted upon the racialized urban poor is largely either nonexistent or victim blaming, and those slain at the hands of state-sanctioned violence rarely paid vigil⁵⁵. This absence of empathy speaks to the systematic devaluation of life that is the work of environmental racism; after all, in the words of Judith Butler, “for [life] to be regarded as valuable, it has to first be regarded as grievable⁵⁶.” For Tranquilina, the social project of care necessitates abolishing the logic that prioritizes some bodies and some neighborhoods over others, indeed, the logic underpinning freeway construction. To move toward care as a social project—a politic of interdependency—we must begin with grief, with the recognition that no subject or landscape is inherently disposable.

While Viramontes’s Chicana coming-of-age novel might initially call to mind the ethnic protest narrative or the quintessential narrative of development—the *bildungsroman*—it ultimately eschews the agential subject of resistance of Chicana/o cultural nationalism, and relatedly, the subject of self-ownership idealized by ethnic literary studies. It closes with a tableau of grief and interpersonal empathy, an image in accordance with its politic and aesthetic of interdependency: the social project of care and the disabled somatics of place. As such,

⁵⁵ The black, brown, and disabled lives lost to state-imposed violence are rarely paid vigil in mainstream media outlets, though social media campaigns like #BlackLivesMatter and #ICan’tBreathe have garnered attention in a number of underground and mainstream spheres and are doing the crucial work of grieving black/ brown lives.

⁵⁶ Judith Butler, “A Carefully Crafted F*ck you: Nathan Schneider interviews Judith Butler,” *Guernica: A Magazine of Art and Politics* (March 15, 2010), accessed August 24, 2014, https://www.guernicamag.com/interviews/a_carefully_crafted_fk_you/

Viramontes's novel solicits alternate paths for ethnic American literary and disability scholarship. It both models and calls for stories that accommodate the debilitating reality of environmental racism, and in so doing, proffers a transformative disability politic that incorporates considerations of race, neo-colonialism, state violence, and urban displacement. Through its critique of state-sponsored infrastructures and its emphasis on informal infrastructures of care, *Their Dogs* disarticulates the relation of protest linking ethnic subjectivity and cultural production. Instead, it offers an infrastructural imaginary that testifies to the undervalued labor of care and the slow violence of racialized disablement, foregrounding the supporting operations that enable Eastsiders to endure.

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