

5-2021

## **Aztlán Potentialities: Queer Male Chicanx Affect and Temporalities**

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### **Recommended Citation**

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Aztlán Potentialities:  
Queer Male Chicanx Affect and Temporalities

A Thesis by  
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Wilkinson College of Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences  
Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts in English

May 2021

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The thesis of Ethan Trejo is approved.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Ian Barnard". The script is fluid and cursive.

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A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Joanna Levin". The script is cursive and elegant.

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Joanna Levin, Ph.D.

May 2021

# Aztlán Potentialities: Queer Male Chicanx Affect and Temporalities

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to start by acknowledging my committee, whose guidance and support helped me mold this thesis into something I am incredibly proud of. Ian Barnard, Justine Van Meter, and Joanna Levin, thank you for going on this journey with me. I would also like to thank Renee Hudson for the conversations and lessons that would become the building blocks for this thesis. Furthermore, to Ian, thank you for chairing this project and sharing your wealth of knowledge with me. Without you, it would not have been possible.

I would also like to thank my friends who have gone on this journey with me. Thank you for every time you've given me advice or looked over a paper at the last minute for me. Thank you for listening and giving me the close-knit support system of scholars that I needed. Thank you for your friendship.

I would like to thank my family. Specifically, I would like to thank my mother, brother, and grandmother for your continuous love and support. My success is your success.

Finally, I would like to dedicate this project to the queer Chicanxs who have been lost, killed, or otherwise oppressed because of our culture's hegemonizing heteronormativity and cisgenderism. We continue to have work to do, but we are not going anywhere. We continue to make our own way in a white, cishet world. *Nosotros somos el futuro.*

# ABSTRACT

Aztlán Potentialities: Queer Male Chicanx Affect and Temporalities

by Ethan Trejo

While there has been much critical attention paid to Aztlán, the mythical/historical Chicanx homeland, there is still work to be done in combatting the entrenched heteronormativity of Aztlán and of chicanidad more broadly. This thesis, born from my own identity as a queer Chicanx male, considers the potentialities of queer male Chicanx affect and temporalities, offering an affective turn as a resistance model to the heteronormativity that plagues the queer male Chicanx. The first chapter establishes a critical intervention in the field by putting Cherrie Moraga's dream of a "Queer Aztlán" in conversation with the queer futurity framework that José Esteban Muñoz theorizes in *Cruising Utopia*. In considering Aztlán as a queer futurity, I theorize a model of affective potentiality that offers a hopeful working towards, a politic to strive for that can help us arrive at a queer-inclusive chicanidad. The following chapters consider the temporal and affective performances that arise through working towards such a politic. In analyzing Gil Cuadros' *City of God* (Chapter 2) and Benjamin Alire Sáenz's *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* (Chapter 3), I specifically look at the affective and temporal models offered by these cultural productions. Notably, these cultural productions specifically address queer Chicanxs who are cisgender and male, so the potentialities observed in these texts are molded by this specific identity intersection. In the epilogue, I consider the personal need for a model that dismantles the continuous identarian negotiation often forced upon the queer of color. In examining such models of affective resistance, we can find a futurity to work toward. We may not arrive at this utopianism, this queer Aztlán, but we can certainly continue to try.

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# 1 Aztlán as a Reparative Queer Futurity and Unifying Affect

## 1.1 Introduction

In his introduction to *Cruising Utopia*, José Esteban Muñoz writes that “queerness exists for us as an ideality that can be distilled from the past and used to imagine a future” (1). In his book project, Muñoz validates the use of past and present aesthetic objects and performances in potentializing queer utopias and futurities. Taking inspiration from Muñoz’s framework and overall oeuvre, this thesis considers existing writings and theorizations of Aztlán as frameworks and exigencies for considering the potentiality of a queer Aztlán and the ramifications of such a potentiality in queer Chicana literature. Through a lens of affect theory and queer Chicana critique, this chapter, offering the thesis’ epistemological theoretical framework, theorizes Aztlán as a queer futurity, a potentiality that models a queer-inclusive unifying identarian affect for Chicanas.

The two key terms used here, “queer” and “Chicana,” offer an identarian model that beckons towards futurity and sits at the intersection of ethnicity and sexual orientation. The term queer has been reclaimed from its derogatory past to offer an inclusive label for those who lie outside of a heteronormative, cisgender, gender binary construction of normalcy. Muñoz establishes queerness as a futuristic potentiality, writing that “the future is queerness’s domain... queerness is essentially about the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world” (*Cruising Utopia* 1). Queer, in its truest definition, offers a liberatory, epistemological means of deviancy, a deconstruction of and resistance against prescriptive normalcy. This is a futurity worth an active working towards. The term “Chicana/o”

carries with it a history of the Chicano Movement (El Movimiento). The term signifies a resistance model of anti-assimilation, of individuals who are nationalistically neither wholly Mexican nor of the United States. “Chicanos are an occupied nation within a nation,” writes Cherrie Moraga, “without the specific naming of the nation, the nation will be lost... let us retain our radical naming but expand it to meet a broader and wiser revolution” (150). We find in the term a nationalistic claim to cling onto amidst an on-going affective liminality, a feeling of being incomplete. The Chicano label offers a way of identifying with each other via a commonality. Yet, the term also carries with it the burden of El Movimiento’s patriarchy and heteronormativity; as a result, queer Chicanos have sought out a label that points towards a queerer, racialized futurity, a “broader and wiser revolution” that is offered by the term “Chicanx.” My turn towards and self-identification with “Chicanx” rather than “Chicana/o,” as noted by scholars currently investigating the ramifications of a similar turn to “Latinx” (e.g., Milian 2019), marks a turn towards a queer-inclusive racialized futurity. Indeed, as Ricardo L. Ortiz notes: “The x acts here instead as a suspension in time’s unfolding... [that] saturates latinidad with queerness, with transness, insisting instead on an alternative construal of a latinidad that itself now becomes unthinkable, and unsayable, without queerness, without transness” (203). Although Ortiz is speaking specifically about the relationship between Latinx and queerness, a similar argument could be made in understanding a futuristic relationship between Chicanx (or chicanidad) and queerness. Indeed, such an argument is even more intentional in addressing a specific unfolding of the Chicano past. In suspending the non-inclusive past/present represented in the binary Chicana/o, the x allows us the queer futurity that we seek, a futurity that doesn’t forget the past wrongs of Aztlán. Rather the x orients us towards a futurity wherein queerness and Chicana/o/x-ness are intersectionally collaborative.

Moraga describes Aztlán as “that historical/mythical land where one set of Indian forebears, the Aztecs, were said to have resided” (151). For Chicanxs, Aztlán has come to represent an imagined homeland, an imagined nation of our own. The construction of Aztlán as a Chicanx homeland is rooted in the status of liminal nationality that Chicanx people carry in Anglo-America. While Aztlán was originally thought of by its ancient location, it has become, largely due to El Movimiento, a metaphysical construction used to unify and legitimize the Chicanx identity in resistance to their marginality through the idea of a collective ancestral history. Yet, this Aztlán was a heteronormative Aztlán that failed to generate a space for queer Chicanxs. Many other queer and feminist Chicanx scholars have traced the ways in which the traditional Aztlán is rooted in a heteronormative, cisgender, patriarchal idea of what and who is a Chicanx. Indeed, Gloria Anzaldúa writes of the legend wherein Huitzilopochtli, the God of War, guided the ancestral Mexican people to the spot that would become Mexico City, where they saw an eagle with a writhing serpent in its beak perched on a cactus. Such a legend would come to be immortalized in the Mexican flag. Anzaldúa recognizes the eagle and the serpent as masculine and feminine symbols respectively, arguing that “the symbolic sacrifice of the serpent to the ‘higher’ masculine powers indicates that the patriarchal order had already vanquished the feminine and matriarchal order in pre-Columbian America” (5). This symbolic subordination of the feminine is by no means the root of Chicano patriarchy, but can nonetheless be seen as a symbol origin of the patriarchy and heteronormativity that necessitates a new, queer Aztlán.

Moraga theorizes such a potential Queer Aztlán, writing that queer Chicanxs “seek a nation strong enough to embrace a full range of racial diversities, human sexualities, and expressions of gender” (164). Yet, Moraga’s theorized seeking reveals a queer potentiality: We, as Queer Chicanxs, have to “seek” Aztlán, a verb choice that demonstrates a status of “being

lost” as we seek out this supposed homeland. Being lost signifies a constant searching for a home, a home wherein we can be both queer and Chicana. Being a queer Chicana is a liminality wherein we are torn between an overwhelmingly white queerness or a heteronormative Chicanness. Being a queer Chicana is a “fear of going home. And of not being taken in... Most of us unconsciously believe that if we reveal this unacceptable [queer] aspect of the self our mother/culture/race will totally reject us” (Anzaldúa 20). Although Anzaldúa is talking about the familial Chicana home, this fear can be widened to talk about Aztlán, a fear based on a rejection that Anzaldúa characterizes as homophobic. Upon admitting our queerness, we turn our back on the traditional, heteronormative Aztlán, we turn our backs on the supposed ancestral homeland that is supposed to unify Chicanos. In having to seek out a queer Aztlán, this potential new Aztlán exists as a queer futurity, a potentiality that we may yet arrive at. If the original Aztlán supposedly generates a unified Chicana identity while perpetuating a heteronormative, cisgender, patriarchal vision of the Chicana identity, then queer Aztlán presents itself as a unifying futurity for queer Chicanos under which the aforementioned systems of hegemony are queered.

The traditional Aztlán advocated for by El Movimiento was and is rooted in a past (anti-inclusive) history/mythology; the queer Aztlán that we queer Chicanos are now (still) seeking is an imagined futurity that Moraga describes as “the dream of a free [queer] world” (164). Noticeably, this queer Aztlán does not reject non-queer Chicanos, but rather posits a potentiality wherein Chicana heteronormativity and cisgenderism are deconstructed to affectively equalize all Chicanos, a “queering” of the biases of the traditional Aztlán. “Queer Aztlán is not limited to queer residents,” notes Christina Accomando, “but lesbians and gay men, drawing from ‘flesh and blood experiences,’ can help create a new Chicano movement” (121). These queer “flesh and blood experiences” are not solely confined to that of gay and lesbian Chicanos, but also Chicanos

whose identities align them with queerness; this extends to queer individuals such as bisexual, trans, and nonbinary Chicanxs, who have similarly been exiled from chicanidad. This is queer extension is critical, as the Chicano Movement and culture not only has deeply ingrained homophobia, but also transphobia, misogyny, and cisgenderism. As such, this need for a queer Chicanx futurity is rooted in the intersectional oppression experienced by queer Chicanxs and posits a model of queer work that is needed in considering the future of chicanidad. This futurity of Queer Aztlán is imagined, as “queer Aztlán” is not a tangible place that can be found. Rather, Moraga’s desire to seek out a queer Aztlán is a seeking of a collective, unifying affect. It is a minoritarian affect that generates a potential affective home for queer Chicanxs, a collective affect in the spirit of, and expanding upon, José Esteban Muñoz’s brown affect. If we cannot collectively be together in queer Aztlán, then it becomes a shared identity, a “safe affect” rather than a “safe space,” that deconstructs the liminality that characterizes the experience of being a queer Chicanx.

## **1.2 Orienting Queer Chicanidad: Aztlán as Space and Affect**

In *The Sense of Brown*, Muñoz, writing of a unifying affective “brown commons,” argues that “the brown commons is not about the production of the individual but instead about a movement, a flow, and an impulse to move beyond the singular subjectivity and individualized subjectivities” (2). Although Muñoz is using “brown” to signify a larger affective latinidad, his idea of a unifying affective commonality offers a comparable framework through which to understand the exigency of a Chicanx fixation on Aztlán and its potential as a collectivizing Chicanx affect. Indeed, understanding Aztlán as a sort of Chicanx commons, to vary Muñoz’s term, is to understand the need for seeking out a Chicanx commonality, to reiterate Moraga’s

chosen verbiage. Aztlán can be seen as acting in a similar affective fashion as the “brown commons,” in that Aztlán generates a “sense of being-in-common as it [affect] is transmitted, across people, place, and space... affect traverses the rhythmic spacing between those singularities that compose the plurality of a brown [or rather, a Chicana] commons” (Muñoz, *The Sense of Brown* 3). Indeed, Aztlán offers an affective unifier that provides a sense of collectivism, in that we no longer experience our marginality alone, but instead can find solace in each other.

In considering Aztlán as a sort of Chicana commons, we must consider why such a commons is affective rather than spatial, considering that the word “commons” may also refer to a physical communal space. We may find the answer to this question of spatiality by considering the role of the physical border in forcing Aztlán to exist as an affect rather than a unionizing space. Indeed, if Aztlán does exist as a physical space, why can’t Chicanas orient ourselves toward this space that is our ancestral home? Sara Ahmed’s discussion of orientation in the home offers an answer; in *Queer Phenomenology*, Ahmed defines orientation as the way in which the body inhabits a space and to what we direct ourselves. She notes that “if orientations are as much about feeling at home as they are about finding our way, then it becomes important to consider how ‘finding our way’ involves what we could call ‘homing devices’” (*Queer Phenomenology* 9). Chicanas having racial, nationalistic obstacles barring a return to our home is evidentiary of an inability to return to the physical space that is Aztlán, of having an inability to locate “homing devices.” This is especially true for those of us who are second-generation and beyond, having been born in the US and having no non-familial ties to a Mexican past. How can we be oriented in a Chicana way, how can we find our way home when we have never even been “home?”

An affective turn in considering Aztlán offers an alternative to this fixation on the physical space that is Aztlán. El Movimiento was largely concerned with reclaiming the colonized land that was Aztlán. As seen in “El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán,” El Movimiento argued for a reclamation of previously colonized lands as a means of rebuilding a spatialized Chicano Nationalism. Yet, the notion that “Chicanos must use their nationalism as the key or common denominator for mass mobilization and organization” (Anaya et al. 27) places a focus on reclaiming that which has been lost, an idealism that roots Chicane identity in the past. It is critical to note that I am not trying to disregard the activism that focused on reclaiming that which colonization has stolen from us. Rather, I am trying to consider an affective futurity that generates queer inclusivity within Chicane nationalism, an affective turn towards a queerer chicanidad. Indeed, moving beyond El Movimiento’s fixation on the physical past Aztlán allows the notion of a Chicane “home” to be a metaphysical affect rather than a spatial physicality. However, this turn is not a postcolonial forgetting of the land that is/was Aztlán, but rather roots Chicane identity in a queer-inclusive communal affect that we have yet to arrive wholly at. Momentarily returning to Moraga’s notion of a queer seeking, this notion of being lost is indeed largely descriptive of the queer Chicane experience. We are seeking a “home” that allows us to be wholly queer and Chicane; the greatest potentiality for this “home” lies not in that which is a constructed spatiality, but rather is an affective inhabitation. As queer Chicana scholar Rita E. Urquijo-Ruiz puts it, “the endless search for my own ‘home’ continued. It wasn’t until much later that I learned that home was and is with(in) me” (250). The searching for a queer-inclusive Chicane home can thus be understood as reliant on a transformative realization that we, the queer Chicane, are the home we have been searching for.

This affective “home” that is both queer and Chicanx can be seen as, to use Anzaldúa’s term, a borderland where these identities meet. This borderland is not a physical one, but rather an affective borderland that yet is both individually and communally inhabited. In her preface to *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Anzaldúa establishes a theoretical framework of the borderlands that can be used to describe Aztlán as both a space and an affect. Anzaldúa writes:

The actual physical borderland that I'm dealing with in this book is the Texas-U.S.

Southwest/Mexican border. The psychological borderlands, the sexual borderlands and the spiritual borderlands are not particular to the Southwest. In fact, the Borderlands are physically present wherever two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory, where under, lower, middle and upper classes touch, where the space between two individuals shrinks with intimacy. (Preface)

Aztlán, particularly in its usage from El Movimiento, exists as the roots of the Chicanx identity, the borderland where Mexico and the United States meet to form the Chicanx. Aztlán, in its status as both a physical place and unifying mythology, is the borderland where Chicanx space and Chicanx affect meet. Indeed, in personalizing Anzaldúa’s borderland framework, we arrive at a place where the Chicanx individual exists as a borderland. If, as Anzaldúa argues, the Borderlands are physically present where two or more cultures edge each other, is the intersectional Chicanx individual not a Borderland then? In acknowledging Chicanx culture as liminally inclusive, the intersectional Chicanx individual can be understood as a Borderland where queerness and Chicanxness meet; where feminism and Chicanxness meet; where multi-raciality and Chicanxness meet; where any identarian intersection between Chicanxness and non-hegemonized otherness meet. Queer Aztlán is then understood as that which generates an affective borderland of what Chicanxness can be, that affective home that is inhabited both

individually and communally. Indeed, this queer Aztlán is, to repeat Moraga's dream, "a nation strong enough to embrace a full range of racial diversities, human sexualities, and expressions of gender" (164). Moraga's nationalistic dream is not a physical nation, but rather a nationalistic sentiment of affective potentiality. Accomando notes, "Moraga doesn't recuperate nationalism but she does seek to re-imagine it-to queer it in fact. Queer Aztlán is not just additive-gay folks plus Chicano folks-instead it racializes 'queer' and queers [the Chicana] nation" (115). This affective turn also gives greater interest to a racialized queer performativity, to understanding the queer Chicana in the way that they perform and negotiate their racial and queer identities.

In affectively queering Aztlán, we arrive at a place where Chicana nationalism is not reliant on spatial orientation, on being in the physical home(land). Rather, it is a nationalistic affective orientation where we collectively feel our (queer-inclusive) Chicana-ness, regardless of bodily location. It is an affective nationalism that bypasses the manufactured arbitrary lines that divide the two nations. Rafael Pérez-Torres identifies Aztlán as an "empty signifier," meaning that Aztlán "names not that which is or has been, but that which is ever absent: nation, unity, liberation... the term 'Aztlán' consistently has named that which refers to an absence, an unfulfilled reality in response to various forms of oppression" ("Refiguring Aztlán" 37). It is easy to identify these absences as rooted in the racial oppression of Chicanas, as seen in the advocated reclaiming of the Aztlán land by "El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán." However, these absences can also be identified by the holes generated by Chicana patriarchy, heteronormativity, cisgenderism, and other hegemonizing systems of oppression. Such absences are not sedentary, but rather beget active Chicana work. Alicia Arrizón argues that such absences "make themselves present in the in-betweenness of border space and provide strategies for individual and collective identity" (27). Such absences must be filled affectively if they are to provide truer,

more inclusive models for Chicanidad. Aztlán as a means of filling those who have been absent in the Chicane identity then cements (Queer) Aztlán as a reparative affective futurity. Ergo, these absences must be filled by Aztlán, by a manner of identifying a chicanidad that can combat outside oppressing absences while similarly identifying and filling Aztlán's own (queer) absences. In inhabiting such absences, we affectively allow Aztlán to grow and orient itself/ourselves, to here conflate the Chicane communal individual and Aztlán, towards a queerer chicanidad. To affectively inhabit (Queer) Aztlán is to "queer" even the notion of bodily orientation. Indeed, if "orientation becomes, then, a question not only about how we 'find our way' but how we come to 'feel at home'" (Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology* 7), we become oriented towards other Chicanes through a recognition of similarity, of feeling "at home" with each other.

Although I have established that Aztlán can be understood both as a space and affect, the unique temporality of Aztlán further justifies a turn to the affective as we aim to queer Aztlán. In one of her poems from *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Anzaldúa has climbed over the border into Mexico from the US and finds herself nationalistically torn by the barbed wire fence that symbolically and physically divides the countries. The fence

splits me       splits me

*me raja       me raja*

This is my home

this thin edge of barbwire. (2-3)

The fence divides Aztlán (the space), acting as a divider between Mexico and the US, a symbol of Chicane liminality wherein we cannot be wholly Mexican nor American. The poem even separates the English from the Spanish via separate lines and italicizes the Spanish, providing a

visualization of this Chicanx split. The splitting difference that the fence symbolizes, *me raja* (it splits me), keeps Chicanxs from being entirely in the space that is Aztlán. If we are on one side of the fence, we cannot be on the other. Rather, it physically keeps us from being wholly home. However, merely tearing down the fence would not solve the liminality that is the Chicanx existence. Anzaldúa “*soy mexicana de este lado*” (3), or Anzaldúa, on the Mexican side of the fence, is Mexican on this side. However, she is Mexican on the other side too, just as she is American on either side of the fence. She feels at home at the splitting fence because the fence physically divides her. Yet, it is not as if half of her body was Mexican and the other half American. Aztlán, just like Anzaldúa and every other mestiza, is a borderland that is both and neither. Indeed, this liminality is encapsulated by her advocacy that “this land was Mexican once, was Indian always and is. And will be again” (Anzaldúa 3). For the mestizas that are representative of the Chicanx race, of *la Raza*, we are all of these: Mexican, Indian, colonizer, colonized, American. Aztlán is all of these as well, it is a borderland containing, like us, both Mexico and the United States. Aztlán, like Chicanxs, is a symbol of former Mexican-ness, of being formerly nationalized as Mexican, but still having a Mexican history. Aztlán, like us, is and was mestiza, both indigenous and colonizer. Aztlán and we are, were, and will be. If Aztlán is the unifying signifier of the Chicanx identity, then Aztlán exists as an atemporal/omnitemporal borderland, as it is, was, and will continue to be. Anzaldúa recognizes this connection between temporality and an affective Chicanx identity, writing that “*lo pasado me estira pa’ ‘tras y lo presente pa’ ‘delante*” (3). Translating to “the past pulls me back and presents me forward,” we see that Aztlán best generates a potentiality for Chicanx inclusivity once understood as an affective subjectivity. Aztlán is the past that Chicanxs cannot forget as it is constantly pulling us back (to Mexico/our common ancestry). Aztlán is the present, carrying with it a hegemonizing

past, that largely fails to be queer-inclusive. Queer Aztlán is the future, a potentiality that we must actively work towards. Indeed, enacting strides towards a queer futurity allows us to “call for a new temporality, a new moment, one of social transformation and activist politics” (Muñoz, *The Sense of Brown* 61). In recognizing the liminality of the past/present Aztlán, we may strive towards a queer future. If indeed “queerness is not yet here. Queerness is an ideality” (Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia* 1), mustn't we engage in work that allows us to arrive at queerness?

This “working towards” is, according to Anita Tijerina Revilla and José Manuel Santillana, characteristic of the *jotería* identity. Moraga envisions Queer Aztlán as a “Chicano homeland that could embrace *all* its people, including its *jotería*” (147). Moraga includes a footnote that defines *jotería* as a term for describing queer Chicanos. However, amidst the rise of *Jotería* Studies as a subfield in Latinx/Queer Studies, the term begets further investigation. Daniel Enrique Pérez explains that “if there were a common denominator in *Jotería* studies, it would be the focus on nonheteronormative gender and sexuality as related to *mestiza/o* subjectivities and identities” (145). Revilla and Santillana identify characteristics that are key to *Jotería* identity, including: “is embedded in a Mexican, Latin American, Indigenous, and African diasporic past and present... is based on queer Latina/o and Chicana/o and gender-nonconforming realities or lived experience... is committed to multidimensional social justice and activism... [and] claims a queer Latina/o and Chicana/o ancestry (174). Although the term has since been widened to include queer Latinxs, not just Chicanxs, the presence of the term in relation to a Queer Aztlán futurity is to affirm the queer Chicanx “working towards.” Indeed, this futurity cannot come into existence without a conscious working towards inclusivity; this theoretical framework of affectively arriving at a queerer chicanidad works akin to the epistemology offered by the scholar-activists working in *Jotería* Studies.

If, as I have posited, Aztlán offers a (liminally inclusive) Chicana collective affect, queer Aztlán offers an inhabited affective potentiality that is both collective and individual, an (affective) place where we can collectively be queer Aztlán. Having to “seek” Queer Aztlán, to reiterate Moraga’s verbal exigency, warrants an active striving towards, a working potentiality that offers a direction in which to (affectively) orient ourselves. In *Cruising Utopia*, Muñoz offers a model of queerness that posits queerness as a futurity, a critical utopianism rooted in a critique of an inadequate present temporality. Indeed, in *The Sense of Brown*, Muñoz similarly takes up this idea of a queer utopian potentiality in his theorization of a brown commons. He writes that “critical utopianism is not borne of complacency... it is borne of the sense of indignation one feels at the harm that is visited upon groups, individuals, cultures,... the task at hand is not to enact a commons, but to touch an actually existing commons” (Muñoz, *The Sense of Brown* 6). As we work towards Queer Aztlán, understanding it as an affective queer Chicana commons, we must critique not only the homophobia, transphobia, and patriarchy embedded in Chicana-ness, but also critique the white supremacy inherent in queerness.

The critical utopianism that is Queer Aztlán is thus a potentiality to work towards. Indeed, amidst deeply ingrained hegemonic systems of oppression, such a commons offers hope and “not only a shared indignation but also a process of thinking and imagining otherwise in the face of shared wounding” (Muñoz, *The Sense of Brown* 6). This is a much-needed hopeful politic, as it offers an affective counterbalance to what Sara Ahmed calls “feeling depleted.” She writes that “social forms of oppression can be experienced as weather. They press and pound against the surface of a body... There is a politics to exhaustion. Feeling depleted can be a measure of just what we are up against” (Ahmed, “Feeling Depleted”). We experience depletion as we constantly work amidst those omnipresent systems of oppression that we are aiming to

counteract. Imaging such a futurity may seem idealistic, but it offers a potentiality that can motivate what seems like a never-ending battle for social justice and equality. Offering a bridge between Chicana theory and activism, acting as a “site of creative and political intervention, Aztlán both signals the heterogeneity of the subject and authorizes an alternative way of knowing that may offer a fantastic epistemological system” (Arrizón 27). This is especially true of Queer Aztlán, as Queer Aztlán offers one such affective framework with which to understand reparative temporality, especially speculative futurities, for Queer Chicanxs. In subsequent chapters, I reflect on affective potentialities and the ramifications of Queer Aztlán as they relate to gay male Chicana experience in particular cultural productions. Chapter 2 examines Gil Cuadros’ *City of God*, exploring the temporal state of the AIDS-ridden brown subject, the brown subject’s affective depletion as a consequence of being surrounded by whiteness, and the denial of Aztlán experienced by queer Chicanxs. Chapter 3 examines Benjamin Alire Sáenz’s *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe*, exploring the depressive affectation of the brown subject, brown botherance amidst white optimism, and the reparative abject potentiality of brown depression. I acknowledge the limitations in solely examining what this framework offers in relation to queer Chicana male identity, but hope to explore the ramifications of this framework in relation to other queer Chicana identities through further projects.

## 2 *City of God: Immortality, Temporality, and the AIDS Subject*

“I am protected by myth,  
a dream of immortality,  
enfolded in this theater’s  
tomb-like darkness”

-Cuadros 150

Chapter 1 explored how Queer Aztlán can be understood as a much-needed queer futurity, a working-towards epistemological model that presents a unifying, queer-inclusive affect for Chicanxs. This chapter will explore the ramifications of this framework as seen in Gil Cuadros’ *City of God*. Cuadros’ text features queer Chicanx male characters living in Los Angeles at the height of the AIDS pandemic. In these characters, we see the need for a queer Aztlán, as these characters seem to find themselves attached to both Chicanx and queer communities, but only liminally. However, this liminality is not necessarily rejection from these communities, as queer Latinxs must negotiate these two identity spaces as a means of clinging to both of these identities. As described by Muñoz, this liminality “characterizes the experience of being queer and of color” (*The Sense of Brown* 75), wherein either queer or Latinx identities must be suppressed or negotiated in order to maintain a communal relationship within these hegemonic communities. This suppression reinforces a status of being “in-between,” as these characters can never be fully communally accepted as queer and brown. This suppression is not

akin to “being in the closet,” as their queer and Latinx identities are openly present, just suppressed for the sake of fitting into communities that generate no place for their suppressed identity. Such suppression necessitates a model for liberation, a model for being a queer Chicanx.

Ernesto Javier Martínez theorizes that “queer experiences are actually *coproduced and shared* by larger collectives, even though these larger collectives often deny their own implicatedness in queer sociality” (Martínez, cited in Minich 173). Queerness can be thus understood as not a solely queer concern, but instead bridges to other, normalized forms of identity. Indeed, this queer seeping into normalcy can be understand as affirming Muñoz’s notion of queerness as a futurity, a potentiality that we may *all* arrive at, not just a futurity model for queer individuals. Thus, if queerness is to be acknowledged in a larger collective form of Chicanidad, we need to acknowledge the queering potentiality of Chicanidad, with Queer Aztlán acting as one such queer model.

Yet, perhaps such a model does not need to separately accommodate every identity that makes up the composite individual. Sandra Soto theorizes that intersectionality is “perhaps too spatially rigid and exacting a metaphor to employ... [because] race, sexuality, and gender are much too complex, unsettled, porous... to travel independently of one another” (6). Rather than trying to understand how the subject formulation of racialized sexuality is constituted by independent, intersecting identities, Soto advocates for a model that acknowledges the messiness of cumulative identity, that queer and Chicanx identities are composite rather than independently intersectional. Queer Aztlán offers such an epistemological mode of being, as it offers not an instructional model, but rather a hopeful politic that is reliant on a messy working-towards. It is a process, a hope, rather than a prescription or a guarantee. We see such a messy working-towards

in *City of God*, as Cuadros offers a temporality complicated by AIDS. As seen in *City of God*, the AIDS epidemic connected the queer, AIDS-ridden body with a bleak futurity, an anti-corporeal temporality that only imagines a futurity. Indeed, AIDS begs a critical fault in Muñoz's statement that queerness is a futurity. What happens when queerness is understood as killing you, when queerness is what robs you of a futurity?

If El Movimiento's version of Aztlán is predicated on "its institutionalized heterosexism, its inbred machismo, and its lack of a cohesive national political strategy" (Moraga 148-149), then Queer Aztlán must actively contend against the anxieties that are rooted in our past. Particularly within Latinx hegemony, anti-queerness can be understood as a means of controlling the body, of regulating "normal" bodily constructions. Juana María Rodríguez writes that "Latinx sexuality is best understood by probing the ways it is mobilized, encountered, and sensed in the body and in the world" (196). Yet, a similar statement could be made about queerness. By queering the statement to include non-cisgender modes of gender expression, we can begin to think critically about the commonalities between queerness and Latinx identity, largely a concern with the body as manifested in white/non-queer anxieties. Queerness as a minoritarian category has historically placed critical and reliant importance on the queer body, from the homosexual who engages in intercourse with the same sex to the transgender individual who undergoes gender-affirming surgery. Although queer theory has moved beyond the physical as a means of defining queerness, there are still ongoing cultural concerns with the queer body. In *City of God*, the gay male Chicane characters have AIDS, a conflating of queerness with disease that reinforces homophobic anxieties regarding the queer body and roots queerness in a doomed, short-lived futurity.

In “My Aztlán: White Place,” one of the stories within *City of God*, the narrator reflects on how his family perpetuates homophobic anxieties regarding the gay body. As he is driving, he thinks about how his queerness haunts his mother’s dreams: his mother “doesn’t want to think about the white man who infected me... [she is] sick at the thought of his dick up my ass or in my mouth” (Cuadros 54). The mother’s perceptions of this queer intercourse demonstrate a gendered anxiety that typifies Latinx homophobia. Within the mother’s nightmarish sexual dream, the white lover is on top, his dick invading the brown body; her Chicanx son is on the bottom, a subordinate position that has traditionally been characterized as female. Anzaldúa describes a sensation of *hieros gamos*, or “the coming together of opposite qualities within” (19), as a metaphor for queerness lying in-between the male/female dichotomy. Anzaldúa notably roots this liminality in the body, describing it as the “two in one body” (19). This sensation can be used to think about how anxieties regarding the queer body are produced. Within a heteronormative context, the Latinx son should assumably carry on the male duty of reproducing. Instead, within the mother’s nightmare, he has chosen to reject this naturalized masculinity in favor of a queer femininity, as manifested in him bottoming. Rafael Pérez-Torres notes this capacity of queer sex to disrupt a heteronormative expectation of reproduction, writing of Cuadros’ narrator: “his sexuality and illness meld to disrupt the mother’s view of familial reproduction and perpetuation, his queer body rending the carefully woven heteronormative social fabric” (“The Transgressive Body and Sexual Mestizaje” 165-166). Here, the Latinx body is not autonomous, but rather hegemonically communal. AIDS here acts as an incarnation of the homophobic anxieties surrounding the queer, Latinx body and how the body is made perverse and diseased by queerness. Laura Westengard notes that, within the AIDS-ridden reality of *City of God*, “desire is never simply desire because [it is] inflected by this social and medical

narrative [i.e. AIDS]; desire is instead accompanied with the fear of a dangerous, unknowable disease implicating any kind of non-normative sexual contact in one's own infection" (279).

Within the mother's homophobic mindset that fuels her nightmares, the son's individual, perverse choices result in his infection as he rebelled against the Chicana heteronormative will.

The Latina heterosexual intercourse between the narrator's mother and father signifies a normalized collective Latina unity, one that produced the protagonist. Westengard notes that the narrator's mother "refuses to acknowledge the [white] lover because it threatens her understanding of discrete subjectivity, and this refusal erases her son's queer identity in the service of maintaining the racial and sexual demarcations that structure her world" (291). Even Westengard's usage of "it" rather than "he" demonstrates the dehumanization of the long-dead white man, the queer who corrupted and infected the mother's son. We see how the monstrous delegation of the unfavourable subject thus reifies the sexually normative system that sustains the mother's homophobic worldview, a sustaining of the Chicana heteronormativity she is representative of. Hypocritically, interracial crossbreeding is at the heart of "mejorar la raza," or "improving (whitening) the race," a Latin American ideology produced by colonization. The milky white semen of the white lover has made it into the brown body, which could help "better" the race if this sex resulted in pregnancy. However, in queer male sex where the brown body is not going to be impregnated by the white semen, this interracial sex is demonized. Anxieties over queer sex can thus be understood as predicated by an inability of queer sex to result in heteronormative reproduction. Anzaldúa describes this rejection of Chicana heteronormativity, a rejection of Chicana patrilineage, as one making "the choice to be queer... it is a way of balancing, of mitigating duality" (19). The choice that Anzaldúa is describing is not the choice to be queer, but rather the choice to reject heteronormativity and indulge in queerness. It is a

rejection of Latinx heteronormativity that generates the liminality that queers of color experience. Anzaldúa predicates this rejection as a choice to indulge in queer actions, a choice to actively disrupt Latinx heteronormative hegemony. One is always queer, but to act upon queerness, particularly through sex, is a choice, a choice that generates homophobic anxieties over what the queer body does. It is a choice to turn one's back on Aztlán's heteronormativity, necessitating an affective orientation towards Queer Aztlán if one is to attempt to reconcile the complex intersections of queerness and Chicanidad.

In addition to a gendered anxiety, the mother's dream sex presents a white, colonial anxiety regarding the brown Chicanx body. Moraga, writing of Chicana lesbians, speaks of how Queer Aztlán "decolonizes the brown and female body" (150) and how "any movement to decolonize them [the Chicanx people] must be culturally and sexually specific" (149). The project of decolonizing the queer, brown body requires a dismantling of the cultural and societal systems that actively maintain colonial oppression. We see these systems at work in the way that our narrator further describes the ramifications of his bottoming for the white lover: "A milky white fluid floats in my body's space, breaks into the secret bonding of her [the mother's] sex, my father's sex, and the marriage of their cells" (Cuadros 54). The intercourse between the Chicanx protagonist and his white lover reads as a colonial microcosm, particularly within the colonial history of disease transmission. The bareback invasion of the white dick into the Latinx body results in AIDS, a ramification that is perceived by the mother as a product of white queerness, a consequence of rejecting Latinx morality. The lover's "milky white" semen is an extension of the colonial white dick, the bodily absorption of that which is a queer white colonization. Within the mother's mindset, itself a symbol of Latinx hegemony, the son choosing to take this white semen is to turn his back on his Latinx identity, instead choosing a queerness

that the mother has conflated with whiteness. However, Julie Avril Minich emphasizes that “the narrator uses the phrase ‘breaks into’ instead of breaks, evoking not rupture but brutal comingling” (174), a distinction that emphasizes the son’s duality as a queer Latinx. While the son is indeed choosing a queerness that is perceived as white and feminine, this queerness is not an erasure of his Chicanxness. Regardless of how much white semen he takes, the son will always be Chicanx. However, as understood by his mother, he is a Chicanx tainted with a feminizing, failed whitening; the failure here lies in the son’s inability to become pregnant, a queer inversion of racialized whitening via interracial reproduction. Such a taint supposedly betrays the son’s Chicanx identity, a betrayal that is understood by his mother as a rejection of Aztlán, a rejection of the Chicanx home.

Indeed, this story presents a portrait of gay Chicanx displacement wherein the individual is denied Aztlán and whose subsequent turn to queerness is complicated by his resulting seropositivity. Moraga’s dream, this imagined unifying affective futurity offered by Queer Aztlán, is one that the AIDS-ridden characters in *City of God* cannot expect to arrive at. This welcoming futurity is a dream corrupted by the grim reality of the disease. The lack of governmental response to AIDS was a gentrifying attempt at eradicating queerness. Such a gentrification was an attempt to cement queer people into the past via AIDS death, a governmental erasure of any possibility of a queer futurity. In “My Aztlán: White Place,” the unnamed protagonist, while driving home from a night out at a gay club, reflects that “driving the San Bernadino is the closest I get to Mecca... hidden under a modern city, this is my Aztlán, a glimpse of my ancient home, my family” (Cuadros 54-55). The narrator characterizes his childhood home as both Mecca and Aztlán, two holy cities that call for affirming pilgrimages. Mecca as an epicenter for Islam and Aztlán as an epicenter for Chicanxs establishes the nature of

his childhood home. Although the house has long since been demolished, he is constantly drawn back to this spot, the spot where the house once stood. This house is a home space, which Ahmed claims necessitates “homing devices,” calls that drive a constant return to this space, whether the return is physical and/or emotional. Here, the narrator is constantly reorienting himself towards this long-gone home. Yet this home is a past, idealized space, as, “like the house, these words spiral in on themselves, stab into the moist earth and rot” (Cuadros 55). These words are the protagonist’s memories of this familial home, of an unhappy upbringing. Yet, such a characterization of rotting points to a futurity that decomposes the past. This Chicana unhappiness the protagonist is reflecting upon is in the past, but infringes on his future because he constantly reorients himself towards this past.

Given that he is dying of AIDS, the narrator’s desire for a long-past childhood could be a pre-queer longing, a longing for a time when he was unaware of or hid a queerness that would become equated with his disease. If the future is a future of queer death, then this longing for a Chicana past is an imagined regression into a closeted facade of heterosexuality. Yet, the past Aztlán he yearns for has been erased through gentrification; it is now, as the story title indicates, a “white place.” If the symbol for his Chicanxness, his Chicana ancestral home, has been wiped out by (white) modernization, does that just leave him with his murdering queerness? He is left searching, as many queer Chicanxs do, for the queer Aztlán described by Moraga. As Greg A. Mullins describes it, *City of God* “invite[s] us to question the bifurcations between interior worlds of meaning... and exterior worlds of meaning” (114). The text invites analysis within a vision of otherness that is multi-layered: queer, Chicana, AIDS. How then can we imagine a reconciliation that creates a world that is compositely queer and Chicana?

With this seeming lack of inclusivity, one would assume that queer Latinxs are constantly in conflict with themselves, having to choose either their queer identity or their Latinx identity. However, as queer Latinxs, we find ourselves constantly negotiating these intersectional identities and modifying ourselves based on the situation. As brown people, the characters have their racial identities sexualized or erased in (overwhelmingly white) queer circles. As queer people, many of the characters have tense relationships with their families. Muñoz notes how “for queers of color, family can often be a place of conflict and potential violence, it is also one where [Latinx] ethnicity and cultural difference are produced and nurtured” (*The Sense of Brown* 73). This is a key rationale for why queer Latinxs choose to remain in liminal family relationships where they are unable to be openly queer. The narrator has a tenuous relationship with his mother; she “questions me about what my doctor has said” while she also “turns in her sleep” (Cuadros 54). She is supposedly concerned about her son while also fueled by nightmares of the white man who fucks her son. Her concern and empathy only extend so far, up to the point where she is confronted with his queerness. Indeed, “she knows when I ramble it’s the virus” (Cuadros 54), as if merely delegating AIDS as “the virus” erases the queerness that gave her son AIDS.

The same could also be said as a rationale for why queer Latinxs choose to participate in queer communities that continue to value hegemonic whiteness. The narrator, leaving a night of clubbing in West Hollywood, reflects that “I don’t know why I’m attracted to those West Hollywood bar types—blond hair, blue eyes... They ask where I’m from, disappointed at my answer, as if *they* are the natives” (Cuadros 53). Here, the narrator has spent the night club-hopping in West Hollywood, where he finds himself constantly drawn towards white gay men. The way the white men are exotically fetishizing him demonstrates that he is one of the few, if

not the only, person of color in the club. The protagonist is a foreign visitor in *their* (white) nightclub. Sara Ahmed writes that “to be surrounded by whiteness can be to feel the cause of your own disturbance” (“Being Surrounded”). The narrator encroaching upon the white boys’ space generates a disturbance in the space, generating a notable difference, a blemish upon the club’s unspotted landscape of white bodies. The narrator notes his own racial contrast and how it sticks out amongst this surrounding whiteness, as “their fingers are pale compared to my darker skin” (Cuadros 53). Given the characterization of the white boys as “native”, this moment could be read as a forced foreignness. The Chicano narrator arrives at the club but rather than disrupt and conquer the native (white) culture, the natives stake their hegemonic claim to the land. Although the club is a queer space, it is not created for all queer people. Both narrator and the white boys share a land identifier, queerness; ergo, they should share the same land, the queer nightclub. However, the narrator is made aware of his constructed foreignness on what is supposedly his own land. Muñoz describes brownness as that which is “conferred by the ways in which one’s spatial coordinates are contested, and the ways in which one’s right to residency is challenged by those who make false claims to nativity” (*The Sense of Brown* 3). The narrator’s sense of belonging within the queer nightclub is contested based on his indicated brownness, a contrasting brownness that he notices himself. Indeed, the white boys’ facade of nativity reifies his sensed affect of brown otherness. Yet, despite this facade of foreignness, the narrator is still attracted to the white boys and chooses to frequent their space. Perhaps queer Latinxs choose to engage in queer communities because we feel an ability to be openly queer in these circles in a way that we cannot in Latinx circles. Although he is othered because of his brownness, the narrator still recognizes a commonality of queerness with this club and these boys, despite how

white that queerness is. However, such a rationale could also be read as an erasure of race within these queer circles.

Queer Chicanxs hold tenuous relationship to this sort of compulsory whiteness held up in queer circles. However, rather than passively white-wash himself, this burden of foreignness as mandated by the surrounding whiteness makes the narrator strive for a sort of Chicanx being, as “hours in Rage, Revolver, Motherlode, and Mickey’s have made me wish for my childhood home” (Cuadros 53). In this night, the narrator has experienced a reminder of a white, queer hegemony, leading him to seek out a Chicanx space that will generate an affect of belonging. This wishing is a desire to counteract his current sensation of being a brown disturbance, an anti-white blemish. Ahmed writes of the importance of colored spatial worldmaking, that “with each other we find ways of becoming re-energised in the face of the ongoing reality of what causes our sense of depletion... we can recognize each other, find each other, create spaces of relief, spaces that might be breathing spaces” (“Feeling Depleted”). Yet, as previously discussed, this childhood home has long since been destroyed and fails to allow the narrator’s haunting queerness. The narrator is thus left with his depletion, with no way of reenergizing himself. The destruction of his childhood home, his Aztlán, thus necessitates a turn towards the affective, the post-spatial in attempting such a brown reenergizing. Yet, how can this reenergization be achieved when the narrator has no one else with which to generate an affective sense of belonging that meets at the intersection of queerness and Chicanidad?

How is this sense of depletion complicated when the narrator willingly participates in the erasure of his Chicanx identity? The narrator recollects how his older white lover, the very same one who gave him AIDS, “made it easy to leave my folks behind. I became white, too, uncolored... I believed that the color of our skin didn’t matter... revenge was on my parents, to

be gay and not speak Spanish” (Cuadros 56). Earlier in his life, this submergence into queer whiteness provided the narrator an escape from his oppressive, homophobic parents and the Chicana hegemony they represent. During this time, the narrator sought out queerness so actively that he was willing to sacrifice his brownness for it. Indeed, Muñoz roots brownness in its commonality, as “brown is a common color shared by a commons that is of *and* for the multitude” (*The Sense of Brown* 2). To feel brown, to experience a brown affect necessitates a communal transfer or enforcement of commonality. In leaving his family for this life of white queer privilege, the narrator thought he was erasing his brownness, that he was becoming white by transmission. In his description of parties hosted by his lover, it seems that the narrator would play bottom to his lover’s white, affluent friends. As if the bodily absorption of countless loads of white semen somehow justified his place in this white circle. However, these white-washing fluids did not make him any whiter, as the older white men treated him like this “little Mexican boy. They’d say, ‘You’re not like the rest’... they said stuff like, ‘Hot latin, brown-skinned, warm, exotic, dark’” (Cuadros 58). The men recognize the narrator in this adolescent, sexually passive role, as if he is merely a colored toy for their use. In their eyes, he is not any whiter by his association with them, he is still characterized by his contrasting skin color, by his brownness. Within Muñoz’s model of a brown commons, brownness is reliant on shared suffering. Alone, the young narrator feels his prescribed brownness, but is unable to forge an affective resilience, as he suffers a colored depletion without any chance of re-energization.

The eradicated Aztlán that the narrator longs for represents a common Chicana past that he must grapple with the loss of, but which may have already been lost to him because of his queerness. This seeking for a queer Aztlán should manifest itself in an ongoing search for a queer Aztlán futurity. However, under the specter of AIDS, this queer futurity seems

unachievable and the Chicana past seems irretrievable, leaving him isolated in a temporal purgatory awaiting imminent death. *City of God* demonstrates how AIDS complicates the imagined futurity that Queer Aztlán models. Cuadros, who would later die of AIDS, “allowed the frightening reality of mortality to enter his work while he entertained the vague and often evanescent possibility of immortality” (Westengard 275). At the height of the AIDS epidemic, death by the disease seemed a certainty, with the government failing to tackle the issue as a serious, non-queer matter. The resulting genocide of largely queer people of color is still felt today, as “Latinas/os accounted for more than one-fifth of all new HIV infections in 2010 despite representing only 16 percent of the US population, with most of these infections resulting from male-to-male sexual contact” (Minich 167). Indeed, we must still contend against what Claire Laurier Decoteau terms as the “aftermath narrative,” the AIDS mythology that the “mystery has been solved; people infected have been blamed; the crisis is over in the United States and now persists only in ‘uncivilized’ locations in the ‘Third World’” (Decoteau, quoted in Minich 167). AIDS is thus not in the eradicated past, but rather still threatens the affective, communal lineage of queer Chicanxs. The affective strength and commonality offered by a model such as Queer Aztlán only works if we have other queer Chicanxs to be in-common with. Moraga envisions Queer Aztlán as a “Chicano homeland that could embrace *all* its people, including its *jotería*” (147, emphasis in original). Yet, where are the *jotería* killed or waiting to be killed by AIDS?

We can understand AIDS as a counter-futurity, a spatial and temporal purgatory where queer Latinxs are caught in-between the past-future and queer-Latinx binaries, a viral killing of futurity models such as Queer Aztlán. However, this counter-futurity, this supposed death sentence that generates an affect of waiting, can also be understood as mandating an imagined hope, a dream. Death theoretically indicates an end of time, a finality. However, queer

individuals experience time differently. Jack Halberstam notes that queer modes of temporality allow for futurity models that “can be imagined according to logics that lie outside of the conventional forward-moving narratives of birth, marriage, reproduction and death” (314). In heteronormative models of reproductive temporality, death results in an individual’s ending time, but the individual is carried on by their children, a reproductive extension of an individual subject’s memory. However, queer death does not subscribe to this regeneration, as children are not commonly part of queer conventionality. This is certainly true of Cuadros’ characters, as they assumably do not have children. An AIDS-ridden queer death would thus be the end of a familial lineage. Yet, Cuadros does not leave his characters with a sense of ending demise. Westengard reflects on how we can understand Cuadros’ text as a futurity, that it depicts a queer subjectivity that is “future oriented and who deploys the darkness of gothicism not only to acknowledge the horrors of undeniable trauma, but also to powerfully reimagine what it means to be in a place of hopelessness and alienation” (277).

Cuadros’ ending poetic stanza, which I featured as this chapter’s fitting epigraph, reflects that “I am protected by myth, a dream of immortality, enfolded in this theater’s tomb-like darkness” (150). The narrator, in his seventh year after having been diagnosed with AIDS, has sneaked into the ruins of Grauman’s Egyptian Theatre in Hollywood. He reflects on sexual encounters he had in the theatre’s bathrooms prior to its dilapidation, a long-past memory of queerness. With his disease-enforced asexuality, he is merely awaiting death, reflecting on memories of a past, care-free life. Yet, although he finds an abject kinship with the theatre’s ruins, he is not morose in his reflections. AIDS is not a death sentence, but a spectre that allows for a strength-granting mythos of the soul. As the narrator states, “what is left after my body, torn down, is my soul” (Cuadros 149), a lasting queer soul that cannot be eradicated by AIDS-

genocide. The soul, in its very essence of being non-essentially corporeal, is an immortality, a lasting metaphysicality. This may seem to pale in comparison to a more tangible, living essence, but it is a consolation, a hope amidst the morbidity of AIDS. This is particularly powerful next to more popular images from the AIDS epidemic, images that showed “the excesses of the wasted queer body [that] were offered up to the public as the endpoint of queer identity—a monstrous confluence of non-normative desire, threat, infection, and abjection” (Westengard 283). Rather than ending his work with a portrait of the seemingly inevitable, AIDS-ridden, dead gay man, Cuadros grants us a hopeful subject, a soul that looks for and gives strength to other queer individuals. Indeed, *City of God* “consciously reappropriates the negative coding of sexual difference and transgression as monstrous, performing a disidentification with the popular narratives about queer and HIV-positive bodies” (Westengard 295). Cuadros’ abject disidentification of the AIDS queer subject demonstrates a critical need to reappropriate the AIDS subject, to generate an affect of strength for them. Queer Aztlán generates a futurity for *all* of its jotería, including those currently living with AIDS and those we lost to AIDS. This soul-lasting form of queer death is a way of remembering and honouring the queer individuals that came before us, some 30 years after Cuadros’ AIDS-ridden reality. Queer lineage and knowledge, in stark contrast to heteronormative lineage, is passed non-reproductively from the older generations to the younger ones. The queer children of the AIDS epidemic, those of us who came after Cuadros and his kin, have lost a sizeable population, an entire generation of queer family. We must orient ourselves towards a futurity that won’t eradicate queer Chicanxs anymore. Queer futurities, such as Queer Aztlán, offer hopeful politics that carry with them the injustices of the past; working towards a queer futurity carries with it memories of transgressions and those who were (and still are) gentrified by the AIDS crisis. This is the immortality that

Cuadros dreams of in this final stanza, a mark left by a post-death immortality that contains the memory of his eradication but gives future generations a queer mythology to remember and gather abject strength from as we continue to potentialize a queerer Chicanidad.

### 3 **Feeling Brown and Down in *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe***

“And then I heard him crying. So I just let him cry.

There was nothing I could do. Except listen to his pain”

-Sáenz 252

This chapter will explore the differing Chicanx affective models offered in Benjamin Alire Sáenz’s *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe*, hereafter referred to simply as *Aristotle and Dante*. *Aristotle and Dante* is a YA novel that centers on the friendship and eventual relationship between Aristotle, nicknamed Ari, and Dante, two queer Chicanx teens growing up in El Paso, Texas during the late 80s. This text offers a reconciliatory affect and future-oriented queer historicity that envisions queer futurity truly as a model potentiality rather than a prescriptive plan.

The cultural figure of the Child is that of a futurity, a world-making and world-changing individual, a potentiality that can reify or reconstruct the world that they are inheriting and directly influencing. In imaginarily constructing the queer futurities and queer childhoods offered by YA literature, authors attempt to “balance the act of crafting texts that offer queer readers a sense of hope about the future without diminishing the effects of the historical and contemporary realities that people have and will continue to face in a time that has yet-to-come” (Matos and Wargo 9). *Aristotle and Dante* features issues such as Dante being gay-bashed and Ari dealing with his internalized homophobia in contrast to his love for Dante, issues that still face

contemporary gay teens. However, these issues are overcome by the end of the novel, when Ari admits his love for Dante and kisses Dante in the back of Ari's pickup truck. Futurity models necessitate a reconciliation with the traditional narrative of the queer past as a deadly, AIDS-ridden genocide. While *Aristotle and Dante* certainly exists in the same temporal sphere as the desolate *City of God*, *Aristotle and Dante* offers a turn towards an abject brown politic wherein Ari and Dante are not necessarily experiencing queerness in the same way as our protagonist in *City of God* experiences his queerness. In producing imaginative queer futurities amidst contemporary queer oppression, we must reconcile with the fact that "an antihomophobic stance reacts within a good/bad binary without new opportunity; the task [of writing futurities] ultimately involves finding a new place to begin" (Crisp 344). *Aristotle and Dante*, published in 2012, looks back on the late 80s and reimagines a temporality that is not fixated on AIDS. Indeed, Sáenz fails to mention AIDS anywhere in the text. This is admittedly a privilege, as Sáenz is distancing his text from the queer reality that queer people of color faced at the time; this could be considered a perpetuation of the aftermath narrative highlighted in Chapter 2. Sáenz did not come out until 2008, at the age of 54 ("The Passion of Benjamin Sáenz"). Thus, he surely experienced the AIDS crisis of the late 80s and 90s drastically differently than Gil Cuadros, who died of AIDS in 1996. Yet, rather than dwell on this fact, we might, instead, view this privileged distancing as a means of finding this "new place to begin," as Thomas Crisp describes it.

This new place to begin, for Sáenz, may well be rooted in trying to reconcile the past as to reimagine the future. Some of his anxiety about coming out may have stemmed from having lived through the AIDS crisis, albeit in the closet. In imagining an AIDS-less past, Sáenz's queer future becomes less equated with the AIDS specter. As Muñoz describes it, "historical existence in the past allowed for subjects to act with a mind toward 'future possibilities.'" Thus, futurity

becomes history's dominant principle" (*Cruising Utopia* 16). In decentering AIDS from his narrative, Sáenz is exploring the affective potentialities of a temporality free of AIDS. This temporality is not the temporality that Cuadros experienced and wrote about, but instead is an alternative, speculative temporality that enables a futurity, a potentiality that is free of AIDS. This is not a futurity that we will arrive at, as we cannot and should not forget the genocide caused, then and now, by AIDS against queer people of color. Angel Daniel Matos argues that the reparative potentiality of *Aristotle and Dante* lies in the historical inaccuracies, finding that these inaccuracies generate a futurity that "imbues a queer Latinx narrative with optimistic discourse and positive affect by highlighting and disrupting the boundaries that exist between historical realities and fiction" (Matos 52). However, I find that this argument optimizes the depressive reality of the brown subject and the different affective states between Ari and Dante. Rather, the potentiality generated within *Aristotle and Dante* is one of depressive abjection. The speculative historicity of the text models not an AIDS-ridden queer subject, but depressive Chicanx subjects who happen to be queer. By decentering AIDS from his narrative, Sáenz guarantees that Ari and Dante's affective orientations are not instructed by the harsh, queer of color reality of AIDS. Instead, they are oriented by an abject, affective brownness that hopes for a liberatory affective futurism that is not predicated on white optimism.

By calling into question what it means to be and feel "Mexican," *Aristotle and Dante* roots itself, not in an AIDS queer abjection, but in an investigation of how depressive brown affect allows for a world-making potentiality, an abject affective turn to Crisp's "new place to start." Ari and Dante, as Chicanx teens with Mexican heritage, align themselves with their sense of Chicanx identity in different ways. In a moment when Ari and Dante are discussing their worldviews after having read Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, Ari characterizes himself with

a darker affection than Dante. Ari reflects that “I was darker than he was. And I’m not just talking about our skin coloring. He told me I had a tragic vision of life” (Sáenz 20). This scene reveals a difference in how Ari and Dante affectively experience the world, a difference that is attributed to a Mexican difference. Both Ari and Dante are second-generation Chicanxs, having been born in the United States and having a Mexican lineage. But Ari speaks Spanish far better than Dante. As seen in the above quote, Ari is dark-skinned while Dante is more fair-skinned. Dante has a higher socioeconomic status than Ari, as Dante’s father is an English professor and Dante is even able to escape El Paso and spend a year in Chicago when his father accepts a visiting teaching position there. These differences contribute to the affective difference experienced by Dante and Ari.

Such an affective difference is codified within a Mexican-American binary; as Ari tells Dante, “‘I’m just more Mexican,’ I said. ‘Mexicans are a tragic people... you’re the optimistic American’” (Sáenz 20). This moment differentiates between an abject, depressive Mexican affect and a positive, hopeful American<sup>1</sup> affect. Both Ari and Dante are Chicanx, but Ari expressing this differentiation in racialized affect demonstrates that he and Dante experience their racialization differently. Ari, who has a traceable Mexican lineage, darker skin, and is bilingual, embodies a racialized brown affect, to recall Muñoz’s notion of brownness discussed in Chapter 1. This brown affect carries with it a depletion amidst white hegemony; this is a depletion that, for Ari, manifests into a darker affective orientation, particularly in contrast to Dante’s optimism. This darker affect is a depressive state that Muñoz calls “feeling brown, feeling down,” an affective brownness that “chronicles a certain ethics of the self that is utilized

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<sup>1</sup> Sáenz’s use of the term in referring to citizens of the United States

and deployed by people of color... who don't feel quite right within the protocols of normative affect" ("Feeling Brown, Feeling Down" 676). This depression, as Muñoz explains it, is not depression in the clinical sense or depression as generic, albeit extreme, morosity. Rather it is a state of melancholic burden that carries with it the weight and depletion of surrounding whiteness. This depleting capacity of depression is particularly evident when we consider that to depress something is to reduce the subject to a lower position by pressing down upon the subject or weighing it down. Depressive affect, as experienced by the brown subject, thus is a burdensome, efforted, negatory symbolism that is an ongoing performativity, as it mandates a constant working against. As Muñoz describes it, "feeling brown is a mode of racial performativity, a doing within the social that surpasses limitations of epistemological renderings of race" ("Feeling Brown, Feeling Down" 687). Yet, this effort also offers an affective, collectivizing potentiality, as Ari's sense of his Mexican heritage is linked to his shared tragedy. In lacking Dante's white-coded privilege, he develops an abject sense of chicanidad that offers a shared melancholia amidst an overwhelming, depleting white optimism.

The alienation that Dante feels from his Mexican heritage also demonstrates a manipulated disidentification with both Mexican and American cultures. Muñoz describes disidentification as "the survival strategies the minority subject practices in order to negotiate a phobic majoritarian public sphere that continuously elides or punishes the existence of subjects who do not conform to the phantasm of normative citizenship" (*Disidentifications* 4). Disidentification is a counter-politic that both assimilates and fails to assimilate into the hegemony of white heteronormativity. This is a process by which queers of color may rework the oppressive institutions from the inside, as to produce a future-oriented change; such a politic Muñoz later temporalizes in *Cruising Utopia*, in writing that "[queerness is] a temporal

arrangement in which the past is a field of possibility in which subjects can act in the present in the service of a new futurity” (Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia* 16). Dante’s attempted disidentification is a strategy that allows him to retain his privileged status without turning his back on his Mexican lineage. The notion that “Mexicans don’t like me” allows him to alleviate himself from any pseudo-white guilt, as it is Mexicans who turned their backs on Dante, not the other way around. It allows him to turn his back on Mexico, equating it with a past, while Dante is able to freely assimilate into white America guilt-free. Yet, this is a false disidentification, as Muñoz centers disidentification as a strategy for *transformative change*, as seen in cultural performances that use disidentification to “circulate in subcultural circuits and strive to envision and activate new social relations. These new social relations would be the blueprint for minoritarian counterpublic spheres” (*Disidentifications* 5). Transformative minoritarian politics necessitate a utilization of identity politics, of the minoritarian subject creating a potentiality for the marginalized identity rather than assimilating into the hegemonic institution. Ari recognizes this and points out to Dante the need for embracing a Chicanx identity. Yes, Dante possesses traits and statuses that grant him privilege under an American system, but he still has a part of him that is born of a Mexican lineage. The sense of chicanidad that Dante seeks out is different from that which Ari seeks out. Dante has the privilege to ignore his Mexican lineage, but is confronted by his friendship with the identifiably “more Mexican” Ari, to repeat the phrasing that Ari himself uses to describe his racialization against Dante’s.

I again turn to Sara Ahmed in describing the effects of a depleting whiteness upon the minoritarian subject, as being surrounded by whiteness depletes the brown subject through a heightened, laborious efforting. Unlike the surrounding whiteness in the gay club discussed in Chapter 2, we here see Ari and Dante experience whiteness as an optimistic, privileging affect.

Ari referring to Dante as the “optimistic American” indicates the white, privileged affect that Dante embodies, particularly in contrast to Ari’s browner, depressive affective state. Ahmed connects effort to racialized privilege, reflecting on “social privilege as an energy saving device: less effort is required to pass through. For other some bodies so much more effort is required to get through, to stand up; to stay standing” (“Feeling Depleted”). Brown depression is a consequence of the mountainous effort required in surviving amidst surrounding whiteness. Whiteness is the weight that depresses the brown subject, a seemingly immovable weight that depresses any hopeful optimism that would inflate the brown subject, just as a weight upon a balloon deflates the balloon and leaves it with no air.

Dante, despite being Chicana himself, is able to enjoy the white privilege of optimism because of his fair skin and socioeconomic privilege. This is a privilege that Ari is unable to enjoy because of the sheer depletion that he suffers, both by white people and people who perpetuate a mandated optimism. When Ari claims that “the world is a dark place. Conrad’s right about that,” Dante responds with, “maybe your world, Ari, but not mine” (Sáenz 19-20). Ari’s world is darker because he endures a browner affect and is less trusting of the world as a result. Dante has the privilege to ignore this darkness and put it off on people like Ari, people whose world is different than Dante’s. Even the character’s names reveal their cultural and socioeconomic status. When Dante and Ari meet, they laugh at the shared ridiculousness of their names. Dante explains his name through his father’s profession, that “my father’s an English professor,” to which Ari replies, “at least you have an excuse. My father’s a mailman” (Sáenz 18). Dante’s name is a clear homage to the Italian poet, a privileged naming that is explained as the byproduct of his father’s academic profession. Meanwhile, Ari, in revealing his father’s blue-collar profession, is set on a lower socioeconomic status. Even though his full name is Aristotle,

a clear reference to the Greek philosopher, Ari explains his namesake: “‘Aristotle is the English version of my grandfather’s name.’ And then I pronounced my grandfather’s name with this really formal Mexican accent, ‘*Aristotiles*. And my real first name is Angel.’ And then I said it in Spanish, ‘*Angel*’” (Sáenz 18). Although both Dante and Ari share the name of famous figures in Western culture, Ari makes the effort of Mexicanizing it, a clear distancing from any assumptions of white privilege or attempts at assimilation.

This effort of retaining a sense of Mexican identity amidst white hegemony is made by Ari, while Dante thrives in the pseudo-white privilege offered to him by his assimilationist name and socioeconomic status. Dante embodies a discomfort with his Mexican roots, a discomfort that Ari questions him about:

“It bothers you that you’re Mexican, doesn’t it?”

“No.”

I looked at him.

“Yes, it bothers me.”

I offered him some of my PayDay.

He took a bit. “I don’t know,” he said.

“Yeah,” I said. “It bothers you.”

“You know what I think, Ari? I think Mexicans don’t like me.” (Sáenz 39-40)

Being affectively bothered carries with it a sense of constant irritation, as something bothers the subject until they either let it go, or do something to alleviate the bothering disturbance. But this botherance cannot be eliminated, as Dante will always have that Mexican lineage; that very racialization that bothers him creates an affective disturbance that he must reconcile. Indeed, he is constantly reminded that he is an outlier, someone who does not fit into his Mexican heritage.

He tells Ari that his cousins “don’t like me. They think I’m—well, they think I’m a little different. They’re *really Mexican*, you know” (Sáenz 87, emphasis added). Dante characterizing his cousins as “really Mexican” is a performative racialization, as Dante attributes a performative difference between them as Mexican and his more suppressed racial performance. Muñoz describes racial performativity as a means of understanding race as a reified performativity rather than as an abstract or biological essentialism; such performativity describes a “a political doing, the effects that the recognition of racial belonging, coherence, and divergence present in the world” (Muñoz, “Feeling Brown, Feeling Down” 679). Within the text’s binary of Mexican and American racial performance, Dante’s ascribed difference can be traced to his reluctance or inability to perform in a particularly Mexican way, instead choosing to perform his American privilege. Dante’s Americanized performance generates an affect of discomfort because he is rebelling against the Mexican affect and performance his cousins expect of him. Indeed, he confesses that “I feel like a freak” (Sáenz 88) when he is around “real Mexicans,” a bothered affect that generates a tense relationship with his sense of Chicanidad.

This affective botherance is perpetuated by his mother, a Chicanx woman whose parents were Mexican immigrants. Dante hates wearing shoes, Ari describes it as one of Dante’s defining characteristics. When Ari asks Dante why he hates wearing shoes, Dante claims that he just does not like them, that there is no deeper meaning to it. He goes on to explain that his mother hates Dante’s habit of walking around shoeless in public, that “she says that people will think I’m just another poor Mexican... She hates that people might mistake me for another Mexican” (Sáenz 45). El Paso is a border city that sits directly across from the Mexican city of Juárez, with the Rio Grande separating the two cities. Although the American mentality has constructed Mexico as “lower” or “other,” this distinction is made less clear in the borderlands.

As seen in Gloria Anzaldúa's framework of the borderlands discussed in Chapter 1, Aztlán, particularly in reference to the Texas-Mexico border, blurs the line between Mexico and the United States, spatially embodying the affective liminality experienced by Chicanxs. Dante's mother is concerned about Dante, in his shoeless form, reifying a Mexican performance that is present nonetheless in the borderland that is El Paso. The attempts to cling onto any American privilege she and her professor husband may have gained leave an impact on Dante. Dante describes a conversation with his mother where she says, "'Being Mexican doesn't have to mean you're poor.' And I [Dante] just want to tell her: 'Mom, this isn't about poor. And it isn't about being Mexican. I just don't like shoes.' But I know the whole thing about shoes has to do with the way she grew up" (Sáenz 45). Dante likewise clings to American privilege because it is what he knows, it is what his mother has impressed upon him. Her desire to leave Mexican poverty has pushed her son to cling to privilege so tightly that he now believes that Mexicans don't like him. Even Ari goes so far as to call Dante a "pocho," or a "half-assed Mexican" (Sáenz 45). Dante, despite being Chicanx, has clung so hard to an American privilege that he no longer feels Mexican, or feels "brown." This notion of "feeling brown" is a descriptor of the "racial performativity generated by an affective particularity that is... descriptive of the ways in which minoritarian affect is always, no matter what its register, partially illegible in relation to the normative affect performed by normative citizen subjects" (Muñoz, "Feeling Brown, Feeling Down" 679). Dante has unfortunately conflated Mexicans with poverty and feels that his privilege betrays him from being a "true Mexican." Indeed, he feels unable to perform in the same way that Ari or his cousins perform; Dante internalizes this contrast with more "real Mexicans" who also have lower socioeconomic statuses than him. Dante's inability to feel brown leaves him with the white affective alternative, which mandates optimism and positivity by the

virtue of its white privilege and only reinforces his perceived difference from a more, abject depressive Chicanidad. His performance of American privilege and dissonance with a Mexican racial performativity has left him with a bothered affect that carries over to the dynamic of his friendship with Ari. Under Dante's mandated performance of privileged, American, optimistic affect lies a sense of racialized self-hatred that necessitates, but also makes incredibly difficult, a reparative potentiality with his Chicanx identity.

Dante's self-hatred is not depressive in the way that Ari's brown affect is depressive; Ari's affective state opens him up to reparation while Dante, who chooses to or is unable to feel "brown and down," cannot gather a hopeful politic from brown depression's abject potentiality. Muñoz argues that "the depressive position is a site of potentiality and not simply a breakdown of the self or the social fabric. Reparation is part of the depressive position; it signals a certain kind of hope" ("Feeling Brown and Down" 687). Brown depression allows both for an abject strength and a hopeful reparative reconciliation. Indeed, Ari can gather strength from his depressive state and use it to generate a politic of hope. Such a politic is a working towards that liberates the brown subject from depleting, overbearing whiteness and white affect. This is a brown liberation that is an unlikely solution for Dante, as he has been steeped incredibly deep into an orientation towards white affect. But the white affect leaves Dante with a brown bothering affect that is irreconcilable until he releases himself from his optimized white affectation, keeping him from a brown depressive reparation.

## 4 Epilogue: A Place of Rest: Seeking Out and Working Towards Aztlán Potentialities

“Queerness is not here yet. Queerness is an ideality... We have never been queer, yet queerness exists for us as an ideality that can be distilled from the past and used to imagine a future. The future is queerness’s domain. Queerness is a structuring and educated mode of desiring that allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present”

-Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia* 1

In *The Sense of Brown*, Muñoz considers brownness as an affective subjectivity for the Latinx subject that we have already arrived at. Elsewhere, in *Cruising Utopia*, he considers queerness as a futurism, a potentiality that we have yet to arrive at. This is an oversimplification of the arguments he develops in these projects, but such a simplistic contrast justifies the task that this thesis undertakes: how do we understand the queer Latinx experience through its temporal models? If we have already arrived at brownness, but have yet to arrive at queerness, is our task to develop a politic that is rooted solely in queerness and aims to legitimize queerness amidst a hegemonizing brownness? For Chicanxs, the politic that we may indeed end up working towards is Moraga’s dream, the Queer Aztlán that she (and we) are seeking out. It seems to me that intersectionality is a model rooted in potentiality, that identity can be negotiated through the notion of the possible. As a queer Chicanx, I sit at the meeting point of two roads: the “Chicanx” road and the “queer” road. As someone situated at the intersection of these two roads, intersectional autonomy comes from my ability to choose either road to walk down. These

converging roads, these intersectional identities offer a negotiable potentiality, the choice of which depends on the situation. This is the identarian negotiation that Muñoz describes as characteristic of the queer of color. This negotiation is a “kind of cultural layering that queers of color often need to enact if they wish to maintain simultaneous memberships in queer communities and communities of color,” a positionality that complicates “the kind of reality that queers of color often negotiate” (Muñoz, *The Sense of Brown* 63, 65). Standing at the queer-Chicanx intersection, I am offered two paths. The one I progress down depends on the situation, but I always can return to this intersection, an intersection of negotiable potentiality.

Yet, all this walking is exhausting, constantly going down a path only to return to the intersection so that I may walk down the other path for a negotiation that warrants it. This exhaustion is even worsened by the weight I carry. As I walk between the paths, I carry with me a backpack filled with heavy rocks, rocks that are representative of the weight that whiteness and heteronormativity bear upon the queer of color. These rocks weigh me down, making this negotiation of the two paths even more difficult. Thus, Moraga’s dream becomes a place to rest, a place where I can be queer and Chicanx without having to negotiate the two paths. The intersection of the two paths is not this place of rest, as the intersection still offers a choice that necessitates the privileging of one path over the other. This place of rest is the reparation that Ari is offered and Dante is denied, a reparation that does not erase queer Chicanx identity and denies the normalizing erasure of white and heteronormative hegemony. This place of rest is the Queer Aztlán that Cuadros’ narrator is seeking out. Having been banished from the traditional space of Aztlán, he becomes similarly displaced, forced to walk between the two paths. In finding Aztlán in this utopic place of rest, he finds an immortality, a mythos that helps alleviate the sense of impending death conditioned into the brown AIDS subject. This place of rest is Queer Aztlán, a

center of chicanidad that, in its framework as a queer futurity, potentializes a model of being that eliminates negotiation between the two paths. It is critical to note that this utopic place of rest is not a stagnation that erases queer and racial difference. Rather, it is an alleviation from constant identarian negotiation that still acknowledges minoritarian difference. The utopia is not a white utopia, but rather a queerer Chicanidad. Our current status of intersectional negotiation is a present-ness that begets a working towards the future, a seeking out this place of rest that still recognizes an abject minoritarian communalism. This is the work that those of us working in Queer Chicane Studies, and Queer and Latinx Studies more generally, must continue to envision. We must continue to theorize, and even *live*, models of potentiality that are rooted in our own liminal experiences. We may not arrive at this place of rest, but we can certainly continue walking towards it, carving out a new, possible path for the future.

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