TRANS CHOL@S, THE COLONIALITY OF GENDER, AND SEXUAL VIOLENCE in Helena María Viramontes' *Their Dogs Came with Them*

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Abstract: *This article argues that, alluding to more than five hundred years of colonialism in the Americas, Helena María Viramontes' 2007 novel* Their Dogs Came with Them *simultaneously depicts and disrupts the coloniality of gender binaries. This argument is developed through a focus on Turtle, one of the novel's complex protagonists, characterized as gender-bending, macha, malflora, trans, masculine, homeless, and a chol@. The article traces the ways in which Turtle contradictorily represents the possibility of a decolonial gender subjectivity that exceeds the binary categories of modernity and participates in the production and reproduction of a hypermasculine and violent cholo masculinity. Ultimately, Viramontes'* Their Dogs Came with Them *is a historical recovery project that centers on the colonized and engages in a Chicana feminist decolonial practice invested in imagining ways of being in the world that undo the violence of coloniality.*

Key Words: *Chicana feminist literature, Chicana/o gang literature, gender and coloniality, Helena María Viramontes, sexual violence,* Their Dogs Came with Them, *transgender identity*

Helena María Viramontes' novel *Their Dogs Came with Them* (2007) begins and ends with representations of more than five hundred years of colonial violence in the Americas while centering on the legacies of colonialism that permeate the twentieth century. By opening the novel with an epigraph from Miguel León-Portilla's *The Broken Spears: The Aztec Account of the Conquest of Mexico*, Viramontes positions her novel as part of a historical recovery project that focuses on the experiences and perspectives of the colonized. Viramontes draws an analogy between the arrival in the early 1500s of the Spanish with their dogs in what is now known as México City—built upon the Aztec city of Tenochtitlán—and the construction of the freeways through East Los Angeles during the 1960s and

1970s. In both cases, people and ways of life that were thought to have no value were marginalized, erased, and often killed through genocidal violence, displacement, poverty, and exploitation to make way for what is characterized as progress through a Eurocentric lens that constructs nonwhite people as less than human and in need of being "civilized." Viramontes's depictions suggest what decolonial theorists have called the logic of modernity and the coloniality of power, which posit Europeans as human and non-Europeans as nonhuman (Quijano 2007; Mignolo 2011; Lugones 2007, 2010). Within this dichotomous Eurocentric construction, modernity is imagined as a positive development that promises to usher in individual freedoms, democratic governments, infrastructural and economic development, and the potential of "civilizing" people who are thought to be primitive or less than human. However, as Walter Mignolo argues, "coloniality is constitutive of modernity" (2007, 476) and that entails recognizing that slavery, genocide, displacement, capitalist exploitation, racism, and misogyny go hand in hand with the so-called progress of modernity. María Lugones (2007, 2010) also contributes to conversations about the links between modernity and coloniality by tracing the ways these logics are intricately intertwined with constructions of gender and sexuality that rely on Eurocentric frameworks and seek to eliminate indigenous and other ways of being and thinking about the world. With this in mind, I trace Viramontes' poignant depiction of the coloniality of gender binaries through the difficult to compartmentalize eighteen-year-old, queer, gender-bending, macha, malflora, trans, masculine, homeless, chol@ character Turtle.[1] I argue that Turtle's character represents the possibility of a gender subjectivity that exceeds the categories of modernity, which rely on dichotomous understandings of what it means to be a man or a woman, even though she ultimately pays for her transgressions with her life.

In my reading of Turtle's character, scholarly conversations that focus on trans identities and the scholarship on Chicana/o gangs also prove useful. Researchers who focus on representations of Chicana/o gangs argue that they are often

understood and depicted as sites for the construction and performance of hypermasculine, homosocial, delinquent, and pathological behaviors that must be feared, criminalized, and policed (Pérez 2009; Brown 2002; Olguín 2009; Vásquez 2011; Mendoza-Denton 2008; Miranda 2003). Similarly, gender studies and trans studies scholars critique characterizations of transgender people as deviant, perverted, psychologically damaged, and in need of policing, punishment, and medical intervention (Galarte 2014a, 2014b; Heidenreich 2006; Butler 1999; Halberstam 1998, 2005; Stryker 2008; Lugones 2007). In conversation with these fields and drawing on decolonial theory, I examine how *Their Dogs*[2] challenges and represents trans identity and cholo masculinity through Turtle's character. Following Sandra Soto's (2010) theorization of Chican@ as a queer departure from Chicana/o, Chicana or Chicano, or Chicana and Chicano, in this article I use the term chol@ to suggest that Turtle queers gender binaries from her positionality as a member of a masculine-identified gang, the McBride Boys. While in the contemporary moment chola and cholo have been used to refer to the mainstream appropriation of what has long been considered gang style, my use of the term chol@ underscores that recent adoptions of chola and cholo style cannot be divorced from the historical context from which these styles emerge, including histories of disenfranchisement, economic marginalization, poverty, criminalization, and barrioization.[3] Thus, while some adopt chola or cholo style without being associated with a gang, in this case the term chol@ captures Turtle's involvement in a gang and her queer cholo style. Turtle's positionality is not without conflict, as there are many examples in the novel suggesting the limits of Turtle's masculinity in lines such as: "his brother who was really a sister" (11), "The Gamboa boy who was a real boy" (11), "he had a girl for a brother" (26), and "The boys knew Turtle was the only McBride Boy lacking, as in S for Sin Huevos" (229). These contradictions suggest Viramontes' complex representation of trans identity and cholo masculinity, underscoring that the logics of modernity can also be central to the formation of masculinities

of color, queer gender identities, and to the heteromasculinist narratives that are common in Chicana/o gang literature.

Viramontes is a renowned Chicana feminist creative writer, professor, and critic who is well established within the Chicana/o literary canon. She has published fiction and nonfiction, as well as critical essays, and her work has been translated into at least four languages (Gutiérrez y Muhs 2013, 4). Viramontes is committed to granting complexity, humanity, and dignity to Chicanas/os and other people of color, working-class people, and those most impacted by the violence of US imperialism. More specifically, Viramontes' fiction records the histories of Chican@ and Mexican@ people in East Los Angeles, as evidenced in *Their Dogs* and in her collection of short stories, *The Moths and Other Stories* (1985), as well as the struggles of migrant farmworkers in California as represented in the novel *Under the Feet of Jesus* (1996). Her fiction is invested in humanizing people who are dehumanized by Eurocentric logics, a commitment motivated by her experiences growing up in East LA. While much of her fiction is set in East LA, an internationalist focus is also palpable in her work, as demonstrated in "The Cariboo Cafe" from the collection *The Moths and Other Stories* and some of the plot lines in *Their Dogs*. Her complex representations of gender, sexuality, race, class, and nation have inspired many critical readings of her work that focus on these topics, and the recent anthology *Rebozos de Palabras: An Helena María Viramontes Critical Reader* (Gutiérrez y Muhs 2013) focuses on Viramontes' oeuvre, bringing together essays on a variety of topics by emerging and renowned literary scholars, including several contributions that analyze *Their Dogs*. When it comes to *Their Dogs*, scholarship has largely focused on the building of the freeways through East LA, questions of displacement, and environmental justice as shown in articles by Alicia Muñoz (2013), Sarah Wald (2013), Hsuan Hsu (2011), Mitchum Huehls (2012), and Dale Pattison (2014).

Among the growing scholarship on *Their Dogs*, T. Jackie Cuevas' (2014) essay, "Engendering a Queer Latin@ Time and Place in Helena María Viramontes' *Their Dogs Came with Them*," is one of the first to focus on Turtle's character. Cuevas locates Viramontes' novel within the genealogy of queer Latin@ fiction, listing her work alongside the creative writing of Arturo Islas, John Rechy, Terri de la Peña, Alicia Gaspar de Alba, and Emma Pérez. In conversation with Judith Jack Halberstam's (2005) concept of queer time, Cuevas notes that Viramontes disrupts linearity and heteronormativity by centering queer, non-normative, and marginalized subjects, such as Turtle. Cuevas (2014) reads Turtle as a "homeless gang member who lives her life on the streets passing as a man" (30–31), as an "ambiguously gendered gang member" (31), and as "Latin@ and genderqueer" (32). Similarly, in *Ends of Assimilation: The Formation of Chicano Literature*, John Alba Cutler (2015, 50n40) thematically locates *Their Dogs*, and Turtle more specifically, within a queer feminist genealogy. In their readings of *Their Dogs*, both Cuevas and Alba Cutler respond to—even if not overtly—Sandra Soto's (2010) call in *Reading Chican@ Like a Queer* by placing Viramontes within a Chicana feminist queer genealogy even though she does not identify as a queer or lesbian writer. Soto argues in favor of developing new reading practices within Chican@ literary studies, critiquing common practices within Chican@ and Latin@ studies that take notice of "racialized sexuality primarily when it is explicitly pronounced, if not announced, in representations by Chicana feminist writers and cultural workers, especially those who proudly violate sexual norms" (2010, 9). In this article, I extend Soto's critique to questions of racialized trans identity that go beyond racialized sexuality to consider racialized gender formations. Similarly, taking up Soto's call, Cuevas writes, "[M]y queer reading of the novel takes up the question of what the presence of genderqueer or queerly gendered bodies does for the telling of Latin@ histories" (2014, 29). While Cuevas's attention to representations of queerness in *Their Dogs* is critical,

I want to put pressure on her conclusion that Turtle is "passing" or "ambiguously gendered" to survive homelessness, familial abandonment, and gang violence. As I argue, Viramontes' characterization of Turtle's gender identity as a young child offers a complex representation that allows for a more concrete reading of Turtle as a transgender character.

While I am cautious about imposing contemporary labels on what is ultimately a character living during the 1960s and 1970s, based on Viramontes' representation of Turtle my reading makes a claim for understanding her as a trans character.[4] Admittedly, the term trans may appear to be anachronistic when discussing a novel set in the 1960s and 1970s; however, it becomes useful to recognizing and critiquing dominant gender binaries rooted in Western understandings and allowing for ruptures in otherwise rigid and overdetermined categories of analysis. Drawing on the work of Francisco Galarte (2014b) and Marcia Ochoa (2010), below I trace trans as a concept that is often understood as an umbrella category that refers to people whose gender is incongruent with the sex assigned to them at birth based on genitalia. Within this framework, it is important to recognize that Turtle is described as a trans character throughout the novel in lines such as: "The studs stapled on the curves of her ears at first to disguise the Turtle in her but later to disguise the Antonia in him" (21); "the one who was really a girl but didn't want to be" (133); "Turtle lunged at the boy with all the dynamite rage of all the fucked-up boys stored in her rented body" (322); and "Because a tall girl named Antonia never existed, because her history held no memory" (324). These depictions suggest that Turtle lives, dresses, and identifies in ways that do not coincide with the gender she was assigned at birth and into which she was initially socialized. Thus, while the term trans may not be entirely precise when it comes to the temporal setting of *Their Dogs*, contemporary theorizations of the term offer useful frameworks for analyzing Turtle's character.

In "On Trans* Chican@s: Amor, Justicia, y Dignidad," Francisco Galarte offers a valuable definition of the term trans*: "Trans*…serves as an umbrella term that encompasses (but does not conflate) various gender nonconforming categories such as transgender, transbutch, andro, genderqueer, female to male (FTM), male to female (MTF), genderfucking, etc. . . . It…draw[s] attention to the diverse gender identities that are traditionally conflated under the term transgender" (2014b, 234 fn 1). In conversation with Susan Stryker, Paisley Currah, and Lisa Jean Moore (2008), Galarte (2014b, 234 fn 7) further distinguishes trans* from trans-: "Trans* is generally used as shorthand by transgender communities to indicate the multiple gender-nonnormative subject positions that can fall under the umbrella of trans, while trans- is a category of analysis proposed by Stryker, Currah, and Moore (2008)." Galarte's discussion of the terms trans* and trans- underscores the complexity of conversations within transgender studies when it comes to developing nuanced language for theorizing trans identities, subjectivities, and solidarities among gender nonconforming people that self-identify outside the dominant binary gender system, such as Turtle. Similarly, Marcia Ochoa contributes to building a multifaceted understanding of trans at the intersection with colonialism, sex, race, and ethnicity in her essay "Latina/o Transpopulations." Ochoa writes, "trans is a category that encompasses many terms used to describe living, dressing, or identifying—or some or all of these—as a member of a gender with which a person was not assigned at birth. This includes transsexual, transgender, and transvestite forms of social and personal identity" (2010, 230). This understanding of trans underscores the emphasis that many place on genitalia and sex assigned at birth when gendering people, which plays a large role in how Turtle is read by other characters in *Their Dogs*. Ochoa further considers the relevance of historical context to discussions of trans as a category of identification and analysis, writing, "I consider trans a broad category when looking at representations of people who lived in other times and within gender systems not overdetermined by Western

binarism" (2010, 230). Recognizing the role that power inequalities and Eurocentric binaries play in the construction of both gender and sex is critical to arriving at understandings of trans identity that allow for fluidity and complexity when it comes to gender categorization and self-identification.

Gender Identity and the State

Turtle does not fit into the normative gender binary because she was never intended to do so within rigid Western frameworks that do not take into account that gender is constituted at the intersection with other social positionalities, including race and class. As decolonial theorist María Lugones (2010, 743) argues, Europeans constructed dichotomous logics and established hierarchal distinctions between themselves, indigenous people in the Americas, and enslaved African people. Additionally, they produced inequalities and rankings based on sex, gender, sexuality, and class. Within these frameworks Turtle, like other people of color and gender-nonconforming people, is located on the nonhuman side of the Western binary and her racial and gender identities are considered aberrant within that dichotomy. Turtle's racial and gender identities are constructed within a state of constant surveillance and policing that dehumanizes her and the other characters in the novel in multiple ways. Within *Their Dogs* a flyer distributed by the Quarantine Authority (QA) presents a clear example of the ways that the personhood of Chican@s is foreclosed. During the course of the novel, there is a rabies outbreak in East Los Angeles and the QA establishes a curfew to contain the epidemic, disseminating a flyer to inform residents about the quarantine that reads: "*Rising cases of rabies reported in the neighborhood (see shaded area) have forced Health officials to approve, for limited time only, the aerial observation and shooting of undomesticated mammals. Unchained and/or unlicensed mammals will not be exempt*" (italics in original text, 54). One thing that is striking about these lines is the suggestion that the threat of death is

extended to people who inhabit the shaded area on the map since humans are mammals too. The suggestion that the residents of East LA are among the "*Unchained and/or unlicensed mammals*" that the QA will shoot without notice is a reminder that within the logics of colonialism the residents of East LA are located on the nonhuman side of the human/nonhuman binary. This order does not take into account, as one of the characters observes, "that in the Eastside getting valid ID was more complicated than a twelve-year-old purchasing a six-pack . . ." (63). For people such as Turtle, obstacles to gaining government identification cards include a lack of resources such as time and money, a lack of access to required forms of documentation (e.g., birth certificates, Social Security cards, utility bills), and also the possibility that some may be undocumented.

For Turtle, impediments to securing official government identification are exacerbated by the reality that she might have a difficult time getting an ID because of her nonconforming gender presentation, creating a situation where physical appearance does not concur with gender classification on official documents. Since the state claims a monopoly on classifying people by gender from birth to death and gender-nonconforming people do not fit into the gender binary, Turtle and others like her often become an impossibility within the state's legal infrastructure.[5] Thus, it is conceivable that Turtle lacks proper documentation because her gender performance would be inconsistent with the sex she was assigned at birth, along with some of the factors previously mentioned. As Dean Spade (2011) argues in *Normal Life*, the state's administration of gender categories and norms helps shape and produce those categories as well as creating infrastructures of surveillance and population control that foster conditions for premature death. Spade writes, "trans people are told by the law, state agencies, private discriminators, and our families that we are impossible people who cannot exist, cannot be seen, cannot be classified, and cannot fit anywhere" (2011, 41).

By the QA's standards, Turtle is presumably "unlicenseable," exposing her to a range of vulnerabilities including homelessness, constant surveillance, and ultimately premature death. For Turtle, the shaded borders of the map represent the enclosures created in the name of modernity and progress as represented by the freeways, which are then used to legitimize creating conditions for premature death for some in order to foster life for others (Inda 2007).

It is critical to recognize that the state's institutions are at the center of producing and reproducing a rigid gender binary that does not recognize fluid forms of gender identification and dictates categorization in a monopolistic manner (Spade 2011). In *Their Dogs*, this is further illustrated after Turtle's death when Ray (a Japanese-American character who owns a store in East LA) takes it upon himself to go to the police station to help correct the official police record, where Turtle is given the name Antonia instead of Antonio. Ray's persistence raises questions about his deep investment in claiming manhood for Turtle as represented by the masculine name Antonio. What exactly is at stake for Ray? As Ray maintains that Turtle was a boy, not a girl, the narrator reveals, "Ray described how scared he was of the boy, who wouldn't be?" (259–260). What, then, would it mean for Ray to be scared of a girl? The question "who wouldn't be?" implies common sense thinking about gangs and cholos as violent criminals and outlaws in order to explain why Ray is fearful. Aside from the ruptures in Ray's own masculinity, this scene underscores the state's and Ray's unwillingness to allow for the possibility of a trans chol@. This refusal suggests that Turtle unsettles ideas about the hypermasculine and homosocial organization of gangs and disrupts ideas about men's agency and women's passivity held dear by many of the characters in *Their Dogs*. Further, Ray has firsthand knowledge about the life altering consequences of gender and racial classification, having been interned during WWII under Executive Order 9066 and left with nothing but "the clothes on his back, and nothing, nothing else" (261). Because he is a Japanese American

man, his masculinity is always in question, and just as Turtle's masculinity is bureaucratically undone by the state, Ray was emasculated and dehumanized when he and other Japanese and Japanese Americans in the US were dispossessed of their liberty and property in the name of national security.

Gender, Coloniality, Language, and Naming

Turtle does not fit into established gender binaries or existing language rules precisely because they are produced and reproduced to uphold the white supremacist and heteropatriarchal logics invested in denying her existence. She defiantly exceeds the categories of modernity, for, as Lugones writes: "Modernity organizes the world ontologically in terms of atomic, homogenous, and separable categories" (2011, 742). Turtle also provides a vivid and tragic example of the workings of coloniality long after colonial rule has purportedly been overthrown. Lugones's definition of the term coloniality is valuable to understanding the longevity of such violence. She uses the term coloniality to "name not just a classification of people in terms of the coloniality of power and gender, but also the process of active reduction of people, the dehumanization that fits them for the classification, the process of subjectification, the attempt to turn the colonized into less than human beings" (2010, 745). In *Their Dogs*, this process of dehumanization through classification is illustrated and perhaps also disrupted through the simultaneous use of feminine and masculine gender pronouns to refer to Turtle throughout the novel. The gender pronoun binary is clearly insufficient for grappling with the complexity of Turtle's character, and Viramontes navigates the limitations of language in ways that challenge taken-for-granted ideas about gender, language, and cultural practices.

Within the novel's dialogue, other characters, for the most part, speak about Turtle using masculine gender pronouns and acknowledge her as a brother, homeboy, and cholo. In so doing, the characters seem to recognize and honor Turtle's

masculinity from a very young age. This apparent recognition and acceptance of Turtle's masculinity challenges assumptions about the inherent transphobia and homophobia among Chicanas/os and Latinas/os, even if it appears to be an ambivalent and mitigated acknowledgment when they refer to her as "a girl" (26) and "really a sister" (11). Viramontes also jarringly challenges readers through the use of feminine gender pronouns when the story is told in third-person narrative voice. Her use of both masculine and feminine gender pronouns has the potential to create cognitive dissonance for those accustomed to thinking within the limitations of Western binaries. Like many of Viramontes' narrative choices—nonlinear narrative chronology, multiple points of view, code-switching, lack of quotation marks to mark dialogue—the use of both masculine and feminine pronouns in reference to Turtle can create a sense of disorientation that echoes the characters' chaotic experiences as they are displaced, policed, and surveilled. Thus, while the novel proposes the possibility for gender plurality it also reveals the limits of language that insists on producing and reproducing Western gender binaries, marking the impossibility of Turtle's existence within the language of modernity. By refusing to readily gender Turtle, Viramontes emphasizes the limits of modern gender binaries and the ways that people of color conform to, navigate, and challenge normative ways of being in the world. This ambiguity suggests that while Western binaries call for clearly defined identities and definitions, such terms do not always adequately describe how gender nonconforming people have experienced their lives either in the past or in the present. The fluidity with which masculine and feminine gender pronouns are used to refer to Turtle also suggests possibilities of being that do not rely on restrictive or limiting definitions, although admittedly that language is still rooted in the binary logics of modernity. However, it is also critical to keep in mind that from an early age, Turtle exercises autonomy when it comes to her gender performance and that her gender identity is represented as always in the process of becoming.

In *Their Dogs*, the power of the imagination and self-creation can be traced through the names Turtle is given and in some ways embodies during her life. She receives her first name, Antonia María, from her mother at birth. This name is inspired by films from the Golden Age of Mexican Cinema after Turtle's mother sees it "tenderly whispered into the ear of a Mexican movie actress . . . from the balcony of the Million Dollar Theatre" (16). This allusion to Mexican movie actresses invokes images of glamour, beauty, and romance, featuring women dressed and styled in feminine hair, makeup, and wardrobe who are often involved in loving and passionate relationships with men, representing heteronormative femininity. As she fills out government documents at Los Angeles County General Hospital, Turtle's Amá is filled with longing for the life depicted in Mexican cinema, a life she may have desired for herself and her newborn daughter. However, such images stand in contrast to the life Antonia María and her mother live in the heavily policed and alienating landscape of East Los Angeles, where Amá finds herself in a cycle of domestic violence that takes her youth and beauty and eventually leads her to become a single mother. Turtle also fails to fulfill the feminine ideal as she performs cholo masculinity from a young age, recalling "how deflated and lanky she was at eight, wearing her father's shirt" (18) and being scolded "over her choice of boxers under her cutoffs, of her erasure of breasts and dresses and all that was outwardly female, over her behaving like some unholy malflora" (25). Taking Amá's life as an indication, even if Turtle were gender-conforming, the normative femininity represented in Mexican films is not something Turtle could have achieved, not only because often such representations of femininity are an impossibility, but also because such standards are particularly unachievable for working-class women of color in the United States.

In junior high school, "a friendly Lucky Strikes-smoking gym instructor" (18) gives Turtle another nickname, Tony Game. While the name bears some resemblance to her birth name, Antonia Gamboa, the combination of Tony, a

gender-neutral nickname for names such as Antonia and Antonio, and Game, a word that connotes play and fun as well as deceitfulness and illegality, suggests Turtle's gender ambiguity as well as her assumed criminality and duplicity. Antonio Gamboa is another name that both the police and Ray use to refer to Turtle. The police use the name Antonio Gamboa to identify her during a high-speed pursuit, suggesting that they read her as a man and a cholo. However, after her death, presumably because of an autopsy report that would base gender on genitalia, police officials use the name Antonia to refer to Turtle, and this is the name they give news reporters who write about Turtle's death. These inconsistencies suggest the inability to capture Turtle's existence in an official capacity because of rigid naming and language norms and binary gender categories. This also underscores the ongoing invisibility and disappearance that *Their Dogs* traces particularly in relationship to people who cannot produce documentation proving their legitimacy within the "shaded borders" of East LA.

At the age of twelve, Antonia María/Antonio Gamboa/Tony Game is christened Turtle by her brother Luis Lil Lizard and the McBride Boys. While Luis seems to call her by that name because she walks "like a pinche Turtle" (224), the potential meanings of her gang name are numerous. In the context of a novel that traces the ways in which colonialism lives on in the present, the name Turtle can be understood in relationship to American Indian mythology and origin stories, which hold that a turtle carries the earth on its back. Centering such belief systems can help counter the violence of European colonialism that *Their Dogs* represents by prioritizing the histories of indigenous people in the Americas. This may also be read as a critique of mainstream environmental activism that seeks to save endangered animals—such as turtles—while simultaneously ignoring the very real dangers people such as Turtle—the queer, trans, poor, of color, and criminalized—face as they endure structural violence, including the environmental racism that is represented in the novel. Additionally, as Alba Cutler notes:

> Turtle's name evokes a legacy of queer feminism, her homelessness echoing Gloria Anzaldúa's declaration, "I am a turtle, wherever I go I carry 'home' on my back" (*Borderlands*, 43), and her performance of masculine aggression resonating with Cherríe Moraga's reflection, "Nobody wants to be made to feel a turtle with its underside all exposed, just pink and folded flesh (*Loving*, 115)." (2015, 250n40)

Within this queer feminist genealogy, turtles also symbolize wisdom, sacredness, adaptability, longevity, tenacity, persistence, and their shell is seen as a natural source of protection and home, as well as a source of potential vulnerability. Many of these characteristics describe Turtle as she confronts the world as a homeless transgender cholo. Turtle is constantly adapting to her environment and, like the shells turtles carry on their back, her identity, body, and clothes are repeatedly described as being too tight and in need of shedding, symbolizing her transition from one phase of her life to another. For example, Viramontes writes, "Her bulky mass of marrow and flesh ballooned beyond her bones, beyond her outgrown clothes and spilled way too large into the streets" (20). The emphasis on the excessiveness of Turtle's body suggests that the shell she was born with cannot contain her, particularly her trans identity; thus she must shed the feminine gender identity she was socialized into as well as society's expectations of cholos. In a scene laced with the symbolism of death and rebirth, after Turtle is jumped into McBride, she "collapsed on a sodden grave, while she saw another self run away" (232–33). In this figurative death, Turtle drifts over Antonia, marking another moment of transition as she officially joins a fraternity of boys. These transformative experiences can be read as representations of Turtle's ongoing process of shedding as she grows into a shell that fits.

To avoid romanticizing her name, it is also crucial to recall that like other homeless people, Turtle must carry all her possessions with her at all times, as

well as suffering hunger, sleepless nights, unfavorable weather, and the constant threat of violence at the hands of the state, the McBride Boys, rival gangs, and other potential adversaries. Thus, Turtle's name simultaneously suggests that her masculine shell is both a form of protection and a symbol of vulnerability. Turtle challenges ideas about gender and public space by navigating the streets as a trans homeless cholo; however, she is constantly policed and reminded that she is queer, deviant, and potentially a criminal. Further, although Turtle does not perform femininity, Viramontes makes clear that she is vulnerable to the type of violence women face in the public sphere. Readers witness such violence after Turtle and her brother Lil Lizard go into a store to steal food. Turtle wears a winter coat and stuffs it with canned goods and other items, thinking she is in the clear she walks out and the bagman follows. As he frisks Turtle, the bagman realizes that the lumps under her shirt are breasts, not stolen produce, and begins sexually assaulting her, "groping her body" and placing his phallic "metal-cold fingers between her thighs" (24). This transpires as people continue to drive past the scene of sexual assault, suggesting the silence and complicity that are often coupled with experiences of sexual violence. This passage underscores that despite her masculine performance, Turtle is vulnerable to the types of violence to which other female-bodied people are susceptible, including sexual violence and silencing. Thus, while Turtle's performance of masculinity allows her to navigate the streets in ways that have the potential to challenge some of the vulnerabilities to sexual violence she might encounter otherwise, it does not entirely shield her from such assault and also exposes her to the violence that men of color know all too well.

This is precisely the contradictory rupture that Turtle's character emerges from and through, calling for a world in which unlimited and limitless ways of being are allowed without the threat of violence. Viramontes' use of multiple gender pronouns and first names to refer to Turtle's character suggests that gender, like other social categories and identities, is always in the process of becoming. This becomingness exceeds and escapes the limited language available within Western gender binaries

that require the use of gender pronouns that subscribe to the categorical binaries of modernity. In this sense, Turtle's character is part of the decolonial imaginary that Viramontes foregrounds in her novel by depicting the silenced and omitted histories of Chican@s in her representations of genderqueer people such as Turtle. As Emma Pérez suggests "the decolonial imaginary is enacted as hope, as love" (1999, 126) and "between what has been, what is, and what many of us hope will be" (127). Further, the decolonial imaginary can be understood as a way to "rethink history in a way that makes agency for those on the margins transformative," and it develops perspectives that take gender, sexuality, race, and class into account (2006, 8). Within this theoretical framework, Viramontes' depictions of Turtle as a complex character that offers the possibility of disrupting normative rigid gender, ethnic, and racial binaries work to rewrite Chican@ history using the methodology of creative writing and fit into the oppositional project rooted in hope and love that the decolonial imaginary helps enact. Moreover, Pérez theorizes the decolonial imaginary as "an interstitial space where differential politics and social dilemmas are negotiated" and where "fragmented identities, fragmented realities, that are 'real,' but a real that is in question" are produced (1999, 6). In Pérez and Viramontes, this space of opposition, reinvention, and becomingness permits that which is invisible or unseen to emerge and to be understood within historical context in order to shed light on the present. Viramontes writes Turtle's character through a decolonial lens in order to reclaim lives and histories that are cast as impossibilities within the discourses of modernity. While the dichotomous language of modernity itself may exclude Turtle from being, Viramontes' work suggests that creative writing can push the boundaries of language and can be central to writing non-normative people into being and into history.

Gangs, Gender, and Sexual Violence

While Chicano gangs are often represented as pathologically violent, criminal, hypermasculine, misogynist, homophobic, and transphobic, Viramontes

disrupts the cholo archetype and offers a complex range of masculinities through characters that symbolize the very bodies that are often thought to exemplify an excessive masculinity that must be feared, criminalized, and policed. Viramontes represents gangs as part of the legacy of colonial violence; that is, gangs are characterized as being rooted in segregation, poverty, criminalization, lack of access to adequate educational systems, displacement, familial abandonment, and other forms of violence. Scholars such as Daniel Enrique Pérez (2009), Monica Brown (2002), B.V. Olquin (2009), and David J. Vásquez (2011) have taken up Chicana/o and Latina/o as a site for the production and representation of complex identities in the face of stereotypes and one-dimensional archetypal representations of gangs, gang members, outlaws, and convicts. Chicana/o gang literature and films including *American Me* (Olmos 1992), *Mi Vida Loca* (Anders 1994), Luis J. Rodríguez's (1993) *Always Running: Gang Days in L.A.*, Yxta Maya Murray's (1997) *Locas*, and Mona Ruiz's (1997) *Two Badges* have all made it into the archive of gang cultural production. Following and expanding the imaginary offered in earlier cultural production, Viramontes continues to challenge oversimplified and vilifying ideas about gangs and gang members.

In their attempt to protect themselves and each other from state violence, gang violence, abandonment, heartbreak, and loneliness, the McBride Boys disrupt ideas about the inherent transphobia and homophobia among cholos. It is, after all, Turtle's hardened cholo brother, Lil Lizard, who honors Turtle's gender identity and assists her in the realization of her performance of cholo masculinity by defending her from the transphobia of their family, shaving her feminine brown curly hair, and vouching for her with the McBride Boys. However, therein emerge many contradictions since Turtle also repetitively experiences violence and harassment because of her gender identity, including at the hands of her brother. While Lil Lizard recognizes and honors Turtle's gender identity, he also

participates in misogynist beliefs that devalue and denigrate women. For instance, after being sexually assaulted by the bagman, Turtle freezes and is unable to defend herself from his "groping" hands and "digging" fingers. It is Lil Lizard who rescues her from the assault, yelling, "Leave my sister alone" (25). When Turtle begins to cry, Luis responds by telling her to "Shut up . . . because he had a girl for a brother and he profoundly resented it" (25). Similarly, Turtle and the other McBride Boys casually use misogynist language, such as "pussy" (27, 230, 231, 299, 305, 309), to refer to Turtle and the women characters in the novel as well as to emasculate men. In fact, Turtle even thinks about herself as "a fucken girl" (220, 225) and as being "[h]armless as a girl" (255) when she feels vulnerable and afraid, revealing Turtle's participation in misogynist beliefs as well as the fragility of masculinity in general and of Turtle's claim to masculinity in particular. Thus, Viramontes challenges stereotypical representations about transphobia and homophobia among cholos while also allowing space for contradiction and the reality that such attitudes indeed exist.

There are several moments in the novel when Turtle's performance of masculinity is in danger of being undone and is called into question by her homeboys. After she goes AWOL from McBride and becomes homeless, Turtle's previously seemingly impermeable masculine self-styling and body begin to wane and she is characterized as being "[h]armless as a girl" (255), having "queer stud mutilations on the ears" (255), and having an "unmanly timbre of voice" (265). Further, as she walks past the Sybil Brand Institute for Women "she crossed the street to avoid the entrance" (265), suggesting that the Los Angeles County jail for women threatens to swallow her in, undoing her life as a man. These descriptions of Turtle's fragile performance of masculinity are contrasted to the masculine performance of other gang members. In the same scene, Santos, another McBride Boy, is described as "all primped in his sterling white T-shirt, a navy blue wool beanie pulled over his forehead to cover his eyebrows. Wearing driving gloves, he knuckled the chain

steering wheel with the assurance of a man who commandeered his vehicle" (267). Viramontes' portrayal of Santos' performance of ideal cholo masculinity—symbolized by his claim to ownership, mobility, and cleanliness—contrasts starkly to the limits of Turtle's masculinity and mobility as a cholo who is homeless, AWOL, and persecuted by the Quarantine Authority as well as the police. However, it is also at this moment that Turtle is reassured by a screwdriver that she carries in her pocket, foreshadowing the screwdriver as a phallic symbol that she will use to attempt to regain her masculinity. The screwdriver is a reminder that while Turtle's character queers gender, she is also simultaneously invested in reinscribing cholo masculinity. This becomes most evident in the metaphoric rape scene at the end of the novel, which represents rape as a tool of heteropatriarchy and as a form of violence that can be perpetrated against both men and women.

While a number of women characters in *Their Dogs* are survivors of rape and other forms of sexual violence, in the last scene of the novel Turtle and the McBride boys attempt to reestablish their masculinity by metaphorically raping a man. Nacho becomes the target of violent retaliation after he brutally beats Alfonso, leader of the McBride Boys, thereby symbolically injuring the masculinity of all the McBride Boys. Alfonso becomes leader and founder of McBride when the gang is founded on his couch after his father abandons him and his mother; hence he has claims to ownership and gang turf through which his masculinity is often mediated. In contrast, Nacho is an immigrant from Mexico and has no claim to gang turf or the US as a home. In the novel, Nacho's masculinity is questioned by the other characters who are critical of his citizenship status and his unwillingness to perform the hard manual labor that Mexican immigrant men are expected to do; instead he is interested in "painting murals, not houses" (71), which may not be readily recognizable as a form of masculine labor. These positionalities—gang member, immigrant, and artist—suggest the complexities of racialized masculinities, which are often constructed as either excessive or insufficient. Viramontes describes

the assault on Nacho drawing on the language of sexual violence and rape, thus suggesting his emasculation and that the process through which the McBride Boys reclaim their masculinity is an act of homosocial bonding. As Carl Gutierrez-Jones argues, rape can be understood as "an opportunity for the attackers to codify their relationship among themselves, even their desire for each other" (1995, 135). Viramontes portrays the McBride Boys' unity and desire for each other as they emerge from the car in unison to attack Nacho "because all they had was each other" (321). Meanwhile, Turtle does not seem to be part of their bonding ritual because "The movement made her nauseous again and she fell to her knees again" (321). Focalizing the scene through Turtle's perspective, Viramontes depicts Turtle's initial failure to participate in her homeboys' homosocial bonding as a disorienting and nauseating experience that makes her unable to walk, marking her vulnerability, the fragility of her masculinity, and her exclusion from McBride as she watches them while high on PCP.

The development of ties between the McBride Boys takes place through Nacho's emasculation and dehumanization. Nacho, an already vulnerable subject because of his presumably undocumented status, is further marked as susceptible to violence through feminization and this is also represented when he is metaphorically raped. His rape ensures the continuation of a heteropatriarchal order—claimed by the McBride Boys—as well as symbolizing the violence of colonialism through the takeover of land and the forced displacement of people in East LA that is represented in the novel. Viramontes suggests the potential for forced penetration as well as Nacho's feminization when Alfonso physically rips multiple holes into Nacho, "Alfonso's teeth clamped down on the boy's ear tearing it to leave a hole as deep as the boy's howling mouth" (321). Nacho's howls and missing ear represent his dehumanization and simultaneous inability to speak or be heard, recalling the experience of many victims and survivors of sexual violence. The symbolism of the holes Alfonso tears into Nacho becomes

more profound when considering that in an act of homoerotic desire Alfonso's homeboy, Lucho Libre, sexually penetrates "the wet hole of Al's mouth" (308). Thus, Alfonso's homoerotic desires are further revealed, though they also remain repressed as he distinguishes his desires from Lucho's because he "even had a girlfriend he fucked in order to prove he wasn't a joto, never ever a joto like Lucho" (308). Alfonso's "ambivalence" (308) reveals that homoerotic desire can exist even in the context of homophobia and that at times that desire is enacted through violence. Thus, while Alfonso perpetrates violence against Nacho in order to reclaim his heteromasculinity, his actions also contradictorily reveal his homoerotic desires. Further, the image of Alfonso's teeth tearing into Nacho's flesh alludes to the novel's title and the dogs that Spanish invaders brought with them whose teeth also tore into the flesh of indigenous people who were dehumanized within Eurocentric logics. The tearing of flesh also conjures images of the displacement brought by the bulldozers used to tear through homes and land in East LA in order to build the freeways that now run through that part of Los Angeles. Thus, this scene brilliantly encapsulates the ideologies behind the multiple forms of violence represented in Their Dogs, including imperialism, heteropatriarchy, homophobia, transphobia, and misogyny.

In the context of all this violence, Turtle's screwdriver is central to her final claim to masculinity, as it becomes a violent phallic symbol that she uses to stab Nacho. Including her in their ritual of homosocial bonding, Santos and the other McBride Boys encourage Turtle to "Waste him slow" and "Turtle grew larger and invincible," suggesting sexual arousal, penetration, and in this case rape. However, while she appears to become aroused, her impotence and inability to properly perform masculinity leads her to feel that suffocation will "render her motionless" (321) with the screwdriver in her hand. Further developing the rape metaphor, Viramontes uses the language of sexual penetration to describe Turtle's actions, as she "pushed," "thrust," and "plunged" the screwdriver "deep through the pit of the boy's belly"

and "[b]its of flesh splattered on Turtle's face" (322). María Herrera-Sobek's analysis of the screwdriver used in a rape scene in Cherríe Moraga's *Giving Up the Ghost* proves helpful to understanding the symbolic significance of the screwdriver in *Their Dogs*. Herrera-Sobek writes, "the screwdriver [in *Giving up the Ghost*] adds to the metaphoric structurization of the rape scene, for the vocable 'screw' is associated with sexual intercourse of the hostile, hurting kind: to screw someone is to inflict some kind of violence either metaphorically or literally" (1996, 248). Similarly, in *Their Dogs*, Turtle both participates in "screwing" Nacho and gets "screwed" by the McBride Boys. Thus, while Herrera-Sobek suggests "the screwdriver, a phallocratic symbol, serves to link father and rapist into the one unbroken chain of patriarchal 'screwers'" (1996, 248), the symbolic sexual violence that is depicted by Viramontes does not reassert Turtle's masculinity. After they metaphorically rape and murder Nacho, Turtle is abandoned by the McBride Boys once again marking her failed masculinity by excluding her from their fraternity of boys as they leave her to take responsibility for Nacho's murder. While the McBride Boys simultaneously construct Nacho and Turtle as impossible subjects within the limits of heteropatriarchal masculinity, they are all also targets of similar treatment. Tragically, such constructions lead to Turtle's death at the end of the novel, as the state continues to wage war on all "*Unchained and/or unlicensed mammals*."

The multiplicity of Turtle's sentiments and reactions to the attack on Nacho emphasizes the complexity of her identity, which does not meet normative expectations about cholo masculinity. Thus, Turtle feels that she is simultaneously not herself and that she must respond to what is expected of her as a member of McBride. Viramontes depicts Turtle lunging "with all the dynamite rage of all the fucked-up boys stored in her rented body" (322), underscoring her gender nonconformity and trans subjectivity as well as the histories of violence that Turtle and other trans boys have experienced. Viramontes' description of Turtle's body as "rented" underscores the fragility of human life and the sets of relations that

produce gender and attach gender codes to certain types of bodies. Viramontes' language suggests that the body is a product or instrument that is not "owned" by the conscious human that directs its expressions and movements. This is a reminder that while Turtle performs masculinity and is recognized as a cholo by the other characters in the novel she may just be buying time, paying to temporarily occupy a space that she can be evicted from by those who take it upon themselves to enforce the rental contract, just as the people of East Los Angeles were dispossessed of their homes to make way for the freeways. Within this rental pact, the asset or property that Turtle has temporary use of is her own body, and this implies that some external force can evict her from her physical body at any time, foreshadowing her impending death. Turtle pays for shaping and modeling her body as she sees fit by enduring constant structural and interpersonal violence. Turtle is all too conscious that the longevity of her life will not be determined by herself or by natural causes. Rather, as Luis Lil Lizard once told her, she knows that "them two lived in a stay of execution" (324), and that means that the time she has in her body is limited.

From Fiction to the Here and Now

At the conclusion of the novel, it is Tranquilina, one of the novel's other protagonists and herself a survivor of rape, who attempts to claim humanity for Turtle, Nacho, and for herself. After the McBride Boys abandon her, Turtle is the target of police gunfire and her body also becomes an object of penetration. As bullets pierce Turtle's body, Tranquilina shouts: "Don't shoot! . . . *We'rrre not dogggs!*" (324). This wrenching scene is a reminder of what all the characters know, that their lives are seen as worthless by state officials and sometimes even by their own neighbors, friends, and families—biological and otherwise. In the midst of all the dehumanization that Viramontes depicts, she also provides a glimmer of hope and the potential for solidarity and mutual recognition. Tranquilina becomes a symbol of possibility and love as she demonstrates her capacity to care for the undocumented immigrant,

Nacho, and the transgender cholo, Turtle, in the context of widespread violence that also represents a threat to her own life. In the end, imagining ways of being in the world that refuse to reproduce the coloniality of violence and dehumanization is the project that *Their Dogs* is invested in, even while centering depictions of such violence. Tranquilina represents a critique of dehumanization and the possibility that the devaluing of some lives can be challenged in everyday ways by for instance: refusing to silently witness violence; seeing and caring for homeless people; recognizing the humanity of undocumented people; and organizing against the displacement of poor people and people of color as an environmental issue.

This is the world Viramontes' fiction calls for while being rooted in the material realities of the colonial violence that continues on into the present. Instead of conceptualizing such violence as having ended when nation-states in the Americas gained independence from European control, Viramontes insists on remembering that within and outside the US, colonial violence is not a thing of the past. This prompts the question: what does such violence look like today? It manifests in a multiplicity of ways: Black and Brown people murdered and brutalized by representatives of the state—police, prison guards, immigration officials, members of the military, teachers, social workers, elected officials, among others—with impunity. Further, as Galarte reminds his readers, it is also evident in the growing violence against Chicana and Latina transgender women (2014, 230), and the reality that such violence continues to multiply and impacts not only trans women but trans men as well. One way to combat the brutality that trans people face on a daily basis is to think outside the dichotomous logics of coloniality. Through Turtle's character, Viramontes imagines ways of being outside Western gender binaries even while grappling with what it means to exist within them. Turtle and the other characters that Viramontes develops in *Their Dogs* also demand that the heterogeneity among people who are typically assumed to be the same be recognized. Moving away

from binaries and toward complex ways of being and thinking about the world, which is how humans actually live their lives and experience the world, holds the possibility of allowing all people to live more livable lives. Until then, the modern logics of coloniality will continue to expose people of color, poor people, homeless people, undocumented people, women, and trans people to premature death and the vulnerabilities to death will multiply as these categories intersect.

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Notes

[1] Sandra Soto (2010, 2–3) theorizes Chican@ as a queer departure from Chicana/o, Chicana or Chicano, or Chicana and Chicano that disrupts intelligibility and refuses what Monique Wittig calls "the mark of gender." In this article I use these various formulations, depending on context and meaning. Further, as T. Jackie Cuevas writes, "Turtle's aunt then refers to her as 'malflora'. Although 'malflora' literally means 'bad flora' or 'bad flower', it is a slang term for lesbian, synonymous with 'tortillera' or 'jota' and may be considered more offensive than 'lesbiana.' The term resonates with *manflora*, which can be used to describe an effeminate man, evoking the association of female masculinity with both failed masculinity and inadequate femininity" (2014, 23).

[2] Throughout this article I will abbreviate *Their Dogs Came with Them* as *Their Dogs*.

[3] For more on barrioization and Chicana/o literature see Raúl Homero Villa's *Barrio-Logos*.

[4] In their contribution to the anthology *Gay Latino Studies*, Luz Calvo and Catrióna Rueda Esquibel put some trans* identities more specifically in conversation with Chicana/o identity formation, writing, "The queer 1990s had a profound impact of Chicana and Chicano identity formation, and not just because there were Chicanos and Chicanas in the queer movement and being trained in queer theory. Rather the very terms of identity formation shifted in profound ways for a great many people. We might even say . . . the subject positions were 'scrambled' during that period. Previously 'legible' Chicana feminist lesbians became scrambled texts, emerging as transgendered subjects, bi-mujeres, or pansexual radicals . . . . Critically, queers demand an acknowledgment of transgender and gender queer to account for those who refuse or reoccupy the categories of male and female" (2011, 110).

[5] In *Impossible Subjects*, Mae Ngai (2004), discusses the construction of the "illegal alien" as a legal impossibility. My use of this term to read Turtle's character is inspired by Ngai's work.

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