

EDITORS' COMMENTARY

Demanding Dialogue and Pushing the Conversation

Josie Méndez-Negrete and Eliza Rodríguez y Gibson

Bridging Illegality and Belonging: Inside the Contradictions of Everyday Life by Josie Méndez-Negrete

Every time our journal staff, co-editors, and I begin to organize each of the issues that will be published, I am in awe of the ways in which spirit guides the publication of our works. The contributors reflect the energy and commitment of the organization—MALCS—as well as reveal the ever-changing dynamics of a continually evolving field. The Spring 12(2) issue of *Chicana/Latina Studies: The Journal of MALCS* explores topics of urgency, confronts the political discourse that shapes immigration policy, and offers a critical examination of the birthright movement and the rhetorics of illegality.

In addition to bridging the ways in which our thought and scholarship emerge, we continue to insist on our dignity, as we interrogate and contest the ways in which our sense of ourselves is compromised due to the multiple oppressions we face daily. Racialized, classed, gendered, and sexualized identities thus become moving targets for attack as we continue to struggle for self-determination and belonging in a nation that still casts doubt about our place in its imaginary.

With her art, Margaret Garcia evidences how we have carved spaces for ourselves inside the exclusionary and marginal sites in which we become ourselves. A daughter of an undocumented mother, Garcia claims her

revolutionary zeal with the reality of her birth: “I have always said that my first breath was a criminal act; my existence from the start was to identify outside of legality.” Originating among social outcasts who turned their marginality into opportunity, and nurtured by her ancestors who fed her creativity and quest for social justice, Garcia creates a world colored by the influence of Degas and other impressionists to rescue from oblivion those who die in the streets. She documents the urban landscape of Los Angeles, which has been her family’s home for over three generations, a legacy she proudly claims because of her paternal and maternal connections to the region. Action and politics are embedded in Garcia’s work, as she goes on about becoming an anthropologist of sorts who makes visible the things we have long forgotten or discarded.

While Garcia takes pride in the illegality of her birth by being the offspring of an undocumented mother, Martha Menchaca confronts the birthright movement, which argues for the suspension of the constitution for those who are born from parents who lack rights of legal citizenship. In her essay, Menchaca unpacks, critiques, and makes visible the machinations that have surfaced since the establishment of immigration laws and the Mexicanization of the United States became a *fait accompli*.

Spirituality and social justice come to the fore in Brenda Sendejo’s research on the *mujeres de La Raza Unida*—activists about whom she examines belief practices. Andrea Hernandez Holm calls upon Indigenous Knowledge to explore how her ancestral ways of knowing have maintained and informed her cultural identity. Rarámuri and Nahua connections thus become the basis by which the author examines “elements of thought surrounding rain and rainy weather” as a foundation for preserving cultural identity and Indigenous Knowledge in her family.

The creative pieces articulate a conversation with ideas of self-image and identity to carve multiple ways of speaking about life, love, and selfhood. Ilza Cisneros, Virgie Tovar, reina alejandro prado, and Ivonne Gordon Carrera Andrade make available for us the obsidian mirror where we can perceive ourselves—from here we can reclaim oppositional aesthetic and cultural practices. These creative writers articulate relations of love and care within which we can value one another. A book review by Alicia Contreras and a review essay by Jean Rockford Aguilar-Valdez document the ways in which we make visible our daily lives. In her review of Marisa K. López’s scholarship, Contreras reminds us of the “temporal and spatial boundaries of Chicana/o literary history,” while Rockford Aguilar-Valdez reviews the ways in which Luz María Umpierre-Herrera—renowned lesbian Puerto Rican poet, scholar, and human rights activist—writes about “life, love, pain, abuses, and healing” in her works.

As we take on life as academic/activists who make central the social justice and historical legacies we carry, it is imperative that we continue a reflexive examination of the places and spaces in which we do our cultural work. In that way, we can—in our collective and individual efforts—create the possibilities of change. *Ahora por ellos, mañana sera por nosotros*, this mantra of inclusion keeps us mindful of the work we do in the pursuit of social justice and social change. We are here because our ancestors carved a path for us.

Dancing with Screaming Queens and Bejeweled Chubsters
by Eliza Rodriguez y Gibson

Where my co-editor stresses the spirit,
the body, in all of its rowdiness and joy, drives my editorial debut for the

journal—the creative work in this issue circles around our materiality and what it means to live in our bodies. Sex and eating, singing and dancing. That's what keeps us going, what feeds us, what makes living more than struggle, more than survival.

Instead of illegitimacy and illegality, these writers offer up “flufeteos of white tulle” and “a beautiful bus bench to sleep on,” “softly cheese taquitos,” dancing, and more dancing. They give us platos de comida in which we can see ourselves. At the club, at home, in prayer, and in movement, the creative writing in this issue speaks from an insistently and defiantly embodied self whose boundaries resist fixity. In “I Am Word,” Ivonne Gordon Carrera Andrade writes a self that invokes logos only to explode it: “I am the one cleaning the toilet bowl, and I am the one praying to Buddha in Hebrew.”

As a reader, I'm drawn to expressions of movement and fluidity of experience that value contingency as a political position. Our identities are created and live among, around, and through our engagements with our own traditions and the mainstream.¹ Sometimes that means a rejection of the mainstream, and sometimes that means engaging and taking ownership of high culture. Ilza Cisneros's “How the Sabado Gigante Dancers Changed” traces a movement away from the alienation of trying to be like those iconic dancers on Spanish-language television to a self-loving satisfaction through dancing. Alternatively, in “Dancing Fawn, or Icarus Takes a Flying Leap,” reina alejandra prado lovingly imagines a gay Latino man through Greek myth and fine art found in museums. She creates an elegy out of outrageousness: “L.A. nocturnes and impromptu performances / Green Lantern endless vodka and men's white tighties offer a good mix,” writing the love for her “dancing fawn” as a celebration of his survival that resists respectability.

Being outside the bounds of propriety is liberating. *With or without papers*, goes a recent Internet meme, *I'm still illegal*. Refusing respectability is sometimes key to self-respect and self-determination. “You came under my skin in the quiet of night,” is the saucy opening to “Atado a ti,” in which Prado’s poetic speaker plays with herself both literally and figuratively in order to explore the bounds of that self and her agency. Virgie Tovar’s testimonio, “Freedom, Failure, and Rebellion: The Queer Art of Being a Fat, Mexican Chichona,” takes up the question of being shamelessly fat: “To be fat is to experience the freedom that marginality—failure—gives me: the freedom from the tyranny of straight life, freedom from the suffocation of externally determined success, freedom to push the envelope, the conversation, to hike up my skirt, to see the futility of apology, to sweat and love and fuck the way that rebels do.” This joyful resistance is surely critical, but the part I find most compelling is the queer insistence on her fat body. In refusing the rhetoric of health, Tovar is indeed pushing things: conversations, boundaries, patience. She is pushy. And we need her.

Notes

¹ I want to thank Tanya González for the conversation from which these prepositions and this description emerge.