RE-MAPPING QUEER DESIRE(S) ON GREATER LOS ANGELES: The Decolonial Topographies of Aurora Guerrero and Dalila Paola Méndez

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Abstract: *This essay explores the work of cultural producers who envision decolonial topographies across aesthetic disciplines to interrogate issues of sexuality, gender, class, and race in Los Angeles, thus remapping commercial representations of the metropolis. I focus on film director Aurora Guerrero and visual artist Dalila Paola Méndez who feature the experiences of queer, working-class and immigrant women in their visual renderings. Through their aesthetic representations, Guerrero and Méndez offer political mandates for cultural and economic transformation. They present these critical provocations asking audiences to examine sexual and gender identity alongside environmental racism and gentrification. Focusing on the critical interventions of these artists, I explore contemporary articulations of queer Latina subjectivities through multiple modes of artistic practice with particular attention to how their work remaps and reimagines the political and aesthetic landscapes of Los Angeles. I theorize how these artists rearticulate images of Los Angeles as topographies on which to negotiate divergent and analogous relationships to the urban landscape in relation to queer and working-class Latina/o communities.*

Key Words: *queer of color, Chicana cinema, queer Latina cultural production, Central American visual art, queer Los Angeles*

This essay explores the work of Latina[1] cultural producers who envision decolonial topographies across aesthetic disciplines to interrogate sexuality, gender, class, and race in Los Angeles, thus, queering and remapping the metropolis. I focus on film director Aurora Guerrero and visual artist Dalila Paola Méndez, who feature the experiences of queer, immigrant, and working-class women in their visual renderings. Through their artistic representations, Guerrero and Méndez offer political mandates for cultural and economic transformation. They present these critical provocations to

audiences, inviting them to explore sexual and gender identities alongside critiques of environmental racism and gentrification.

Focusing on these interventions by Guerrero and Méndez, I explore contemporary articulations of queer, immigrant, and working-class Latina subjectivities through modes of artistic practice, paying particular attention to how their work remaps and reimagines political and cultural landscapes of Los Angeles. I theorize how these artists rearticulate images of Los Angeles as topographies on which to negotiate divergent and analogous relationships to the urban landscape in relation to working-class and immigrant Latina/o communities.

Employing Emma Pérez's foundational theoretical framework of the "decolonial imaginary," which operates as a "theoretical tool for uncovering the hidden voices of Chicanas that have been relegated to silences, to passivity, to that third space where agency is enacted through third space feminism" (1999, xvi), I argue that Guerrero and Méndez present decolonial topographies on which they center these queer, immigrant, and working-class Latina subjectivities. Their intricately crafted aesthetic visions operate as interventions in and on landscapes not historically traversed by queer women of color in commercial media. Taking Pérez's mandate as a point of departure, I conceptualize these places as sites that facilitate the articulation of these gendered and racialized subjects but with a focus on how these subjects deploy agency in the face of economically and environmentally threatened spaces.[2]

The Oxford Dictionary defines "topography" as "the arrangement of the natural and artificial physical features of an area."[3] In employing this particular terminology, I am especially attentive to the industrial contours of the landscapes and the ways that people who traverse them contribute to the shaping and carving out of the spaces according to racialized and gendered desires.

I analyze *Mosquita y Mari* (2012), a film by Guerrero (with Méndez as production designer), and close with a brief analysis of Méndez's paintings "L.A. Reimagined" (2010) and "The Goddess Within" (2009), all of which offer us critical reflections on a queer, working-class, and immigrant imaginings of Los Angeles. While this work focuses on Los Angeles as a site of creative inspiration, both artists also invoke hemispheric iconographies of the Americas. They extend these invocations as aesthetic representations of another place/another home, existing both within and beyond Los Angeles, or in the case of Méndez, superimposed upon it. As M. Jacqui Alexander states, "Our knowledge-making projects must [therefore] move across state-constructed borders to develop frameworks that are simultaneously intersubjective, comparative, and relational, yet historically specific and grounded" (2005, 253–4). These visual and cinematic representations operate, not as objects of study, but as epistemic methodologies with which Guerrero and Méndez articulate decolonial queer desire on the city of Los Angeles; thus, remapping this landscape on the screen and the canvas.

Mapping Silences in Aurora Guerrero's *Mosquita y Mari*

The directorial work of Aurora Guerrero is propelled by her early collaboration with the Los Angeles-based collective, Womyn Image Makers (WIM), founded in 1998. This collective was comprised of a group of Latina/Chicana/Indígena and queer-identified artists trained in different disciplines, including filmmaking, painting, photography, acting, sculpture, and video production. Together with members of WIM, Guerrero has written and directed films that feature queer and working-class Chicana and Latina experiences, among them the two short films *Viernes Girl* (2005) and *Pura Lengua* (2005). It is critical to acknowledge the importance of WIM in shaping Guerrero's creative trajectory, beginning as a member of a collective producing short films then moving on to larger collaborations that ultimately

Figure 1
Promotional poster for *Mosquita y Mari*. (2012). Permission granted by Aurora Guerrero.

propelled her to realize *Mosquita y Mari* as a feature film in which several members of WIM were creatively involved.[4] Guerrero debuted *Mosquita y Mari* at the 2012 Sundance Film Festival, making her the first Chicana filmmaker to debut a feature-length film at the festival.[5] In 2012, she was also selected as a Sundance Institute Fellow and *Mosquita y Mari* went on to tour the independent film festival circuit, earning Guerrero widespread acclaim and international accolades.[6]

Through collaboration with members of WIM, Guerrero has created a body of work by or about queer women of color not previously featured or circulated in mainstream production houses. Guerrero asserts "third-space feminism" as the directive for her cinematic interventions, as she has been influenced by the rich intellectual genealogy of Chicana feminist theory.[7]

In Rosa Linda Fregoso's foundational scholarship on Chicana filmmakers, she proffers that the practice of identifying as an "independent" filmmaker operates as a series of "self-conscious choices" (1992, 170). These independent cinematic interventions present decolonial topographies on which Guerrero's characters challenge heteronormative representations in Chicana/o film, as well as the lack of women of color in commercial queer films, on both sides of the camera. In the case of *Mosquita y Mari*, this topography is Huntington Park, a working-class immigrant community in Southeast Los Angeles.

Mosquita y Mari follows the relationship between two fifteen-year-old girls, Yolanda Olveros and Mari Rodríguez, both children of Mexican immigrants. Yolanda is an only child and an overachieving student with two parents who are vehemently committed to her academic success. Mari has recently moved to an apartment across the street from Yolanda with her mother and younger sister. Mari and her sister are being raised by a single mother who is struggling to make ends meet working at a local factory. Yolanda first notices Mari from across the street as she peers out of her dining room window one afternoon, but officially befriends her when Mari becomes a student in her geometry class. It is in this first encounter in the classroom where Mari playfully assigns Yolanda the nickname "Mosquita," declaring that she looks like "a little fly" (from this point on in the essay I will identify Yolanda and Mosquita interchangeably) to which Yolanda smiles with a sense of approval. After this endearing declaration of Yolanda's nickname, Mosquita and Mari become inseparable, developing a close friendship that develops into iterations of desire that neither can name.

"Huntington Park": Barrio as Character

As mentioned, the film takes place in the Southeast Los Angeles community of Huntington Park and this location operates as a departure from previous

Figure 2
(Left to right) Fenessa Piñeda as Yolanda/Mosquita Olveros and Venecia Troncoso as Mari Rodríguez in *Mosquita y Mari*. Permission granted by Aurora Guerrero.

Los Angeles-based Latina/o films predominantly set in East Los Angeles neighborhoods like Boyle Heights and Echo Park. This area of the metropolis remains underrepresented in Chicana/o popular culture and becomes the topography on which Yolanda and Mari map out the contours of their burgeoning desire for each other. It is also critical to acknowledge that the film was shot in Huntington Park, with many neighborhood residents as the principal actors and extras in the film.

However, the industrial milieu of Huntington Park does not simply provide a backdrop; it operates as a topographic character facilitating a site of critique in which Mosquita and Mari play out the multiple iterations of desire and carve out the landscapes of their intimacy. Huntington Park functions as

an organizing metaphor for this potential intimacy in its simultaneous familiarity and unfamiliarity. Guerrero carefully articulates each scene so that it is situated and driven by the specific topography of this barrio. The neighborhood frames extensive cinematic sequences of Mosquita and Mari traversing the landscape, carving out spaces for themselves. In one scene, they decide to take a formal portrait at the local business where Mari is employed. Mari adjusts the positioning of their bodies in relation to each other and corrects Mosquita's gaze, directing her to look defiantly at the camera. As they examine the photograph Mari proclaims, "That says I'm here." Mosquita corrects her and declares, "No, *we're* here!" Mari affirms Mosquita's correction as she proudly states, "Yeah, it's me and you for life." In these moments, they seem to preside over Huntington Park, if only temporarily.

In one sequence, Yolanda stands on the back of Mari's bicycle, her arms outstretched as Mari pedals through the urban landscape. In slow motion, Guerrero captures intricate shots of Mosquita's hands moving as she blissfully feels the air move through her fingers while Mari smiles with the same euphoric expression. Throughout the narrative, Guerrero visualizes Huntington Park as not simply a setting for Mosquita and Mari to explore their relationship, but also a space that they carefully shape and narrate for themselves against the industrial backdrop. Propelled by their growing friendship, Mosquita and Mari enact a choreography through the busy streets and empty alleyways of Huntington Park re-mapping the topography for themselves. As they move through the neighborhood, they carve out interstitial spaces that are only visible to them, resonating the Anzaldúan third-space posited as "nepantla." The concept of "nepantla" prominently articulated in the theoretical offerings of Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) operates as central to many Chicana and Latina feminist and queer aesthetic mandates. In Anzaldúa's conceptualizations of borderlands consciousness, "nepantla"

functions as an "in-between" space, a third space. Throughout the film, Mosquita and Mari create these spaces. In the midst of these busy streets and empty alleyways, they shape these decolonial and interstitial topographies, making them their own.

Mosquita and Mari stand on a bridge overlooking the barren Los Angeles River with the smoggy downtown skyline in the distance. As they stand closely Mosquita expresses hope that Mari will find happiness in her new home.

> Yolanda/Mosquita: I hope you end up liking Huntington Park.
>
> Mari: Why wouldn't I?
>
> Yolanda/Mosquita: Cuz sometimes the air smells like pan dulce and others it smells like chemicals. Or like the cuatas say, "it smells like ass."[8]

Mosquita references Huntington Park as Mari's new residence, but implicit in the exchange is Mosquita's desire to *be* Mari's new home herself, to embody this new home. As they look out over the bridge they stand on either side of the empty riverbed and this concrete path leads the viewer's gaze into the horizon. The trajectory of the riverbed directs Mosquita and Mari on a path away from the neighborhood, a way out. And soon after this moment on the bridge, the burgeoning friendship shifts as Mosquita begins to recognize her explicit desire for Mari. Mosquita layers her own yearning for Mari with a reference to the environmental damage due to the industrial legacy of the neighborhood as if their growing intimacy operates as a delicately blooming possibility in the midst of urban sprawl, an intimate landscape worthy of careful protection.

Figure 3
Mosquita and Mari overlook the barren Los Angeles riverbed. Permission granted by Aurora Guerrero.

In the scene that follows, they discover an abandoned auto body shop that Mari fearlessly enters while Yolanda follows her with hesitation. With Yolanda uncomfortably sitting in the backseat of abandoned car, the two of them read aloud the graffiti etched on the roof of the rusty car: "I love Chuy" and "Güera and Chaparra, Friends Forever" among them. After exchanging glances through the rear-view mirror, Mari steps out of the car and inscribes their initials, "MyM," with her finger on the dirty windshield:

> Mari: "*Mosquita y Mari*" . . . fuck the rest. Whenever anybody gets on our nerves, this will be our kick-it spot.

This "kick-it spot" operates as the private sanctuary for Mosquita and Mari providing a space for them to not only escape from the pressures of family,

friends and school but also serves as a refuge for them to navigate their growing desire for each other.

Fregoso critiques the privileging of the heteropatriarchal "familia" in cinematic Chicano nationalist narratives. She writes:

> Not only did the masculinist equation of family with nation inhibit feminist critiques of la familia, but the rigid binaries of "them" versus "us" fostered by Chicano nationalists meant that any insurgent voices within the movement had to be positioned outside the familia romance, on the side of the colonialist enemies of the Chicano nation (2003, 85).

In *Mosquita y Mari*, Guerrero carefully challenges this regime of heteropatriarchal representations as Yolanda and Mari make familia with each other as they drift away from their biological families, and at critical moments invoke Cherríe Moraga's theorizations of "making familia from scratch" (1994, 35).[9] However, it is clear that Mari is in charge and despite the liberatory possibilities of their growing intimacy, the power dynamic between the two determines the trajectory of these possibilities. As Mari drives the bicycle on which both of them move over and across this topography, she takes the lead and ultimately is in control of the relationship, oftentimes determining when and where they spend time together.

Mari's mother is unable to provide sufficiently for her two daughters requiring Mari to seek out supplemental employment in the neighborhood. Mari's mother finds a substantial amount of cash in Mari's bedroom drawer and immediately becomes suspicious about how her daughter is earning this money. She later learns from the local grocery store owner, Don Pedro, that

Mari is "on the street" distributing flyers for a local business. Despite the legitimacy of Mari's employment, Don Pedro's comments to her mother that Mari has to be "on the street" late into the afternoons implies illicit behavior. Mari's initiative to provide for her family are propelled by the absence of her father and in many ways Mari operates as both patriarchal and matriarchal figure taking care of her younger sister and mother.

We learn about what happened to Mari's father as she and Mosquita look out on one of the main arteries of the neighborhood from the rooftop of a building. Mosquita asks Mari about her father and Mari coldly shrugs stating that, "He died . . . some sort of accident." Despite the frigidity with which she delivers the response she lights up and continues, "He used to drive one of those big-ass 18 wheelers up and down and all around this place." In this moment, Mari finds solace as she invokes the pride of what it means to traverse the landscape below with such authority and freedom. She mirrors this absent patriarch as she also fearlessly navigates Huntington Park, riding her bicycle "up and down and all around this place." Don Pedro's statement clearly illustrates a patriarchal surveillance of Huntington Park and the ways that Mosquita and Mari traverse the neighborhood. Despite this policing, Mosquita and Mari continue to arrange an intimate topographic space within the clandestine framings of the auto body shop, Don Pedro's store, and other spots in the neighborhood.

During one of their work sessions in the "kick-it spot," Mosquita stares deep in thought while Mari works on a geometry equation. After Mari strokes the outline of Yolanda's ear with the end of her pencil, there is a playful tussle and Mari breaks the silence inquiring about Yolanda/Mosquita's reflective state.

> Mari: Just tell me what you're thinking about.

Yolanda/Mosquita: Nothing, just about my parents.

Mari: What about them?

Yolanda/Mosquita: I was remembering this one day a while back. My dad put on this CD that he got from this guy on Pacific. He put it on and went and pulled out this old cowboy hat I've never seen him in and then approached my mom and they waltzed around the room not caring about their usual resting-up for work the next day. It was like they were somewhere else for that moment. It was kinda beautiful.

Mosquita experiences a romantic nostalgia for a moment she witnessed once. After another series of exchanged glances, Mosquita takes a deep breath returning to her pensive state and in that moment, she desires the kind of domestic choreography that she witnessed between her mother and father but in this case for herself and Mari.

In a scene that follows, we witness Mosquita staring at herself wearing her father's vaquero (cowboy hat) glowing as she dances to music played on Mari's personal CD player. Mosquita's mother calls out for Yolanda and discovers her daughter blissfully dancing in the mirror:

Mama: Yolanda, ¿Qué haces, mija?

Yolanda/Mosquita: Nada.

Mama: (motioning to the cowboy hat) ¿Te metiste en el closet de tu padre? (motioning to the headphones) ¿Y esos?

Yolanda/Mosquita: Me los prestarón.

> Mama: (takes headphones from Yolanda and puts them on). A ver. (She starts dancing and motions to Yolanda asking her to dance). ¿Bailamos?[10]

In this powerfully tender exchange between mother and daughter, Mosquita puts the cowboy hat on her mother and leads her in a dance, hand around her waist both of them laughing as they mirror the "beautiful" moment Mosquita described to Mari in their "kick-it spot." After a few seconds of dancing, Mosquita's mother catches a reflection of herself in the mirror donning her husband's cowboy hat and immediately stops dancing, her smile simultaneously disappearing. Clearly disappointed by this abrupt departure from their shared momentary bliss Mosquita engages with her mother:

> Yolanda/Mosquita: ¿Qué, amá?
>
> Mama: (shoving the cowboy hat to Yolanda) Llévatelo al closet de tu padre.
>
> Yolanda/Mosquita: ¿Cómo fue cuándo conociste a mi papá?... ¿Cuándo bailaron por la primera vez?
>
> Mama: ¿De qué hablas?
>
> Yolanda/Mosquita: Usted sabe, cosas de la vida.[11]

Yolanda's mother promptly dismisses her daughter's inquiries, reminding her to concentrate exclusively on her education. She extends this disciplinary measure by also reminding Yolanda that she does not work hard all day so that her daughter can throw it all away. After Yolanda walks out of the room in defeat, her mother turns to look at herself in the mirror with a final

solemn glance. The mother's scolding operates beyond a parental disciplining common in immigrant households about the sacrifices the first generation has endured in the interest of generations that follow. Señora Olveras' final glance in the mirror signals an element of loss, loss of a dream for herself or perhaps of her own desire for a different life.

Returning to the momentary dance sequence between mother and daughter, it is significant that Yolanda takes the lead position commonly occupied by male-identified dancers while her mother wears the patriarch's cowboy hat in a sort of shifting and layering of gender roles. Both of them "queer" the space, while reassigning prescriptive positionalities or what Ernesto Martínez articulates as "shifting the site of queer enunciation" (2011, 227).

My analysis of *Mosquita y Mari* is informed by Gayatri Gopinath's critical interventions, specifically her articulations of how the "queer racialized body" operates as "historical archive for both individuals and communities" (2005, 1). Despite their age, the main characters operate as archives who hold onto and challenge the hopes and dreams of their families and neighborhood. However, I am particularly interested in the politics of explicitly framing *Mosquita y Mari* as a "queer film." The investment in these naming practices or resistance to them, particularly by Guerrero herself, provides an opportunity to theorize ethnographically about the politics of spectatorship.

These inquiries are informed by Guerrero's 2013 visit to Smith College during which I asked a question about her investment in explicitly naming *Mosquita y Mari* a "queer film." Again, I am especially interested in how these "namings" shifted during and after the film's extensive circulation at international independent film festivals. For example, how did the framing of the film shift in divergent ways with regard to a screening in San Francisco

versus a screening in Berlin? In response to my query, Guerrero responded that she was less invested in categorizing the film as "queer" or a "message film" and more interested in it being received more generally as a "love story." The invocation of the "universality" of the love story between Mosquita and Mari operates as significant despite its cultural specificity as a film about working class and immigrant Latina/os in contemporary Huntington Park making this topography a space of queer possibility and enunciation. The strategic invocation of marketing strategies for the film such as "a love story" or "a coming of age narrative" reveals a split focus, allowing us to not only interrogate what is happening on the screen but also who is sitting in the audience.

Mosquita y Mari is driven by a series of moments when Yolanda and Mari *almost* kiss—they *almost* touch. These scenes are marked by heavy silences, enunciations of restraint and suspense. Silences operate as instances of not having the language to articulate the desire between them. These moments are so pronounced it is as if silence also operates as a character in the film. There are no words to put to feelings. Or as Alberto Sandoval-Sánchez posited after the Smith College screening, "These young women have no tools to question heteronormativity at that age."[12] However, possibilities remain and potential fuels an agency in that which we *don't* hear and what we *don't* see, a potentiality. Guerrero states:

> Though I understand how important it is to capture the raw sexual connections between people (of color, women, and queer which I do in *Pura Lengua* and *Viernes Girl*), I felt that there was this whole space that hadn't really been explored as erotic—that space that is hard to put into words but is as sexual as the actual making out and fucking. The gaze, the touching, the sharing of herstories as being a space where the desire brews and lives. I wanted to claim this space as

> a space of intimacy, of potential love, desire rather than "friendship" and "platonic."[13]

Guerrero's intentionality resonates with Audre Lorde's theorizations about the "erotic" being represented as always explicitly "sexual." In Lorde's influential essay, "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power," she explicates the political potential in reclaiming the "erotic" as "an assertion of the lifeforce of women: of that creative energy empowered, the knowledge and use of which we are now reclaiming in our language, our history, our dancing, our work, our lives" (1984, 55). Lorde articulates a feminist departure from the ways in which the "erotic" has been employed by limiting masculinist rhetoric as purely "sexual" and linked to the pornographic. She calls for a revisionist conception of the erotic as that which bridges the imposed dichotomy of the spiritual and political, "providing the power which comes from sharing deeply any pursuit with another person" (1984, 56). These intricate moments/cinematic portraits of intimacy pulsate beyond sexual desire and operate as erotic in this sense in *Mosquita y Mari*. Guerrero states, "I am definitely looking at intimacy and erotic through the non-overly sexualized expression that is often found in film."[14] This withholding resists a sense of completion and always carries with it a potentiality while Guerrero so intricately authors the political possibility of restraint.

During a presentation to the American Studies Association, Gayatri Gopinath states that queer diasporic aesthetic practices offer a very different understanding of the "good life" and its visions of domesticity than are enshrined within liberal affirmations of both gay and immigrant rights. She recognized *Mosquita y Mari* as "one instance of how queer diasporic aesthetic practices offer us a powerful repudiation of the developmental logic of both gay and immigrant good life fantasies. Queer desire functions as a

kind of propulsive force that throws one off a normative life course and into a different kind of life trajectory that is in fact open-ended, with no fixed itinerary or ending."[15] In the final scene, we witness Mosquita and Mari defiantly staring at each other from opposite sides of the street offering no definitive trajectory for their relationship. We are presented with yet another moment of suspenseful silence, yet there is material movement as they continue to walk along their respective paths.

Returning to Emma Pérez's (1999) theorization of the "decolonial imaginary," I assert that the decolonial signals a process and not a final location or destination. Guerrero participates in developing a decolonial aesthetic by resisting the logic of completion. She offers us images of desire that disarticulate heteronormative notions of intimacy that ultimately leads to this final destination.

"Re-Imagining LA:" The Urban Mappings of Dalila Paola Méndez

I close with a brief discussion of paintings by visual artist, Dalila Paola Méndez, positioning *Mosquita y Mari* in conversation with these canvased visual renderings.[16] Primarily a painter and photographer, Méndez has been collaborating with Guerrero for two decades working as a production designer for Guerrero's short films produced with Womyn Image Makers (WIM) and most recently *Mosquita y Mari*. Sharing ideological and aesthetic mandates with Guerrero, Méndez traces the changing landscape of Los Angeles through a lens that privileges queer, immigrant, and working-class subjectivities, what she identifies as "mujerista" identities.

In Méndez's 2010 painting, "LA Re-Imagined," she features the style of Salvadoran artisan aesthetics with the urban cityscape of downtown Los Angeles and the surrounding neighborhoods in the background. She privileges

Figure 4
"LA Re-Imagined" (2010, 24 × 36, acrylic on canvas). Permission granted by Dalila Paola Méndez.

the rural landscape reminiscent of the Central American countryside yet the houses in the forefront also represent communities in Los Angeles that have been historically displaced due to industrial development. With detailed attention to iconographic images, Méndez brilliantly juxtaposes these discourses of modernity creating a decolonial topography, superimposing these two distinct milieus on one another. On the canvas, she makes critical interventions that position queer, immigrant and working-class subjectivities as central to the viewer informed by her own experiences growing up as a queer Guatemalteca/Salvadoreña in Los Angeles. She intricately crafts the vibrantly colorful rural milieu with a detailed array of animals and plants native to Los Angeles while the tall buildings of downtown loom in the background against the yellow sky. Méndez remaps this topography sowing

the seeds while laying the groundwork for an alternative view of Los Angeles, a topography on which queer, immigrant, and feminist ideologies thrive. With a literal nod to "perspective," Méndez conceptualized this painting from where she was living at the time providing the view from the Northeast toward downtown. In the distance, we see the same river featured in the scene as Mosquita and Mari stood on the bridge in Huntington Park placing Guerrero's film and Méndez's paintings in direct conversation as they remap Los Angeles with queer, immigrant and working-class lenses.

In 2009, Méndez painted "The Goddess Within," invoking the matrilineal as a foundational mandate that, not only informs the content of her painting, but operates as a narrative technique that decenters masculinity. While not explicitly situated in Los Angeles, the painting invokes hemispheric iconographies. Asserting spectatorial and discursive agency, I argue that this painting is constantly in flux, traveling as a hemispheric text south to north and back again from Los Angeles to El Salvador and Guatemala and back again.

"The Goddess Within" is not static and the movement is implicit in how Méndez intricately crafts a decolonial topography signifying the process of migration, not only geographically but with regard to gender and sexuality. On the canvas, Méndez inscribes this movement with a cinematic sensibility. Méndez painted "The Goddess Within" on lava rock and the rugged surface of the canvas beckons the spectator to trace the texture creating a topographic landscape, a spectatorial map. The central figure is a sacred ceiba tree native to Central America in the shape of a female with prominent breasts and hips claiming space as a deity or what Méndez identifies as the "sacred feminine."[17] To the right of the ceiba are four female figures drawn in the style of classic Mayan portraiture with a quetzal bird flying closely above their heads. The first figure kneels before the sacred ceiba presenting an offering while the other

Figure 5
"The Goddess Within" (2009, 24 x 48, acrylic, lava rock on canvas). Permission granted by Dalila Paola Méndez.

three await their turn for veneration. The four figures operate as a generational progression with the first woman topless in loincloth and the last one wearing pants, reminiscent of blue jeans. The canvas is framed at the top and bottom by Mayan glyphs as another explicit reference to Méndez's ancestral heritage. With the ceiba tree occupying the focal point of the painting, Méndez decenters masculine iconographies, creating a decolonial topography on which we bear witness to ritual (re)remembering by generations of mujeres as goddesses that not only surround us, but also occupy us.

Aurora Guerrero and Dalila Paola Méndez adhere to the specificity of place, yet remap the city of Los Angeles, carefully crafting decolonial topographies on which queer, mujerista, immigrant and working-class characters carve out spaces for themselves. They intricately re-envision landscapes, creating topographies that offer liberatory contours and through their characters, these space-makers imagine other ways of being in the world.

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Notes

[1] I recognize the multiplicity of gendered identities articulated by spellings like "Chican@" and "Chicanx" as a critical intervention in discourses of gender binaries.

[2] Raquel Gutiérrez address the environmental racism of this area in her 2009 solo show, *Malathion: Low Human Toxicity*. She writes:

The railroad tracks ran a long line
through my town your town our town

like they ran across
my hand,
Bell Gardens
Bell
Maywood
Cudahy
Vernon
Huntington Park
Lifelines crisscrossed
a dual economy.
Crisscrossed a river full of water
with questionable potability (134).

[3] Web. 1 September 2016. https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/topography

[4] As a graduate student, I participated in one of the first readings of *Mosquita y Mari* in Cherríe Moraga's 2005 intensive playwriting class at Stanford University. Guerrero explicitly names Moraga as central to her intellectual and creative genealogy having studied with her as an undergraduate at the University of California, Berkeley.

[5] The production of *Mosquita y Mari* was also supported by a successful Kickstarter Campaign.

[6] These accolades include "Official Selection" at the Sundance Film Festival, the San Francisco International Film Festival, and Outfest Los Angeles, The John Cassavetes Spirit Award Nomination (2013), Best First Narrative Feature, Outfest (2012), Best Narrative Feature, Festival Las Americas, Chicago (2012), Best Narrative Feature, CineFestival (2012), Best Screenplay, Santa Fe Independent Film Festival (2012), Queer Award, Torino International LGBT Film Festival (2012), Audience Award, Pink Film Festival Zurich (2012) and Best Director, awarded to Aurora Guerrero, Long Beach QFilm Festival (2012). The film was also nominated for Film Independent Spirit Award and GLAAD Media Award.

[7] The second credit after the film reads: "Grateful to the honest writing of Cherríe Moraga and Gloria E. Anzaldúa."

[8] The *cuatas* are a set of twins who are Yolanda's closest friends at school. Their playful banter and frank commentary throughout the film are reminiscent of the chorus in a classical Greek theatrical narrative.

[9] The closing monologue by Marisa in Cherríe Moraga's first play, *Giving Up the Ghost* (1986 and republished in 1994) she declares:

MARISA: It's like making familia from scratch
each time all over again…
with strangers, if I must.
If I must, I will.
I am preparing myself for the worst

so I cling to her in my heart
my daydream with pencil in my mouth
when I put my fingers to my own forgotten places.

[10] Mama: Yolanda, what are you doing, mija?

Yolanda: Nothing

Mama: (motioning to the cowboy hat) You got into your father's closet? (motioning to the headphones) And those?

Yolanda: They were lent to me.

Mama: (takes headphones from Yolanda and puts them on). Let me see. (she starts dancing and motions to Yolanda asking her to dance). You want to dance?

[11] Yolanda: What, mom?

Mama: (shoving the cowboy hat to Yolanda) Return it to your father's closet.

Yolanda: What was it like when you first met my father? When you danced for the first time?

Mama: What are you talking about?

Yolanda: You know, life stuff.

[12] Sandoval-Sánchez, Alberto. Personal correspondence with the author, November 2013.

[13] Guerrero. Personal correspondence with the author, July 2014.

[14] Guerrero. Personal correspondence with the author, July 2014.

[15] Gopinath. "States of Suspension: Queer Diaspora Re-Visions of Family and Futurity." Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Studies Association Annual Meeting, Hilton Washington, Washington, DC, 2014-12-10.

[16] Méndez's Artist Statement: "Dalila Paola Méndez is a first-generation Guatemalan/Salvadoran queer artist born and raised in Los Angeles. At a young age, she found herself sitting in libraries drawing from books of birds, horses and comics. She credits Barnsdall Art park classes for igniting her love for both photography and painting as an adolescent.

"Even though she began art at a young age she wasn't always able to create art due to life's challenges. Yet, whenever possible, she would use her 35mm camera or paint brush to explore color and subjects. Dalila went on to get her BA in International Relations at USC and upon graduating she became a Bilingual Teacher with LAUSD. She was a co-founder of the Chicana/ Latina art and film collective Womyn Image Makers.

"She is a versatile artist who works in several media including photography, painting, serigraph, and film. In 2012, the film *Mosquita y Mari* was selected for Sundance Film Festival, a feature film she production designed. The visual images she creates whether in painting, photography,

print work or film communicate stories about nature, urban environments, indigenous cultures, feminism, and social justice. When she is not creating art, she is a master gardener creating organic kitchen gardens in people's private residences and community gardens" (dalilamendez.com, Web. July 2016).

[17] Méndez. Personal correspondence with the artist, June 2015.