

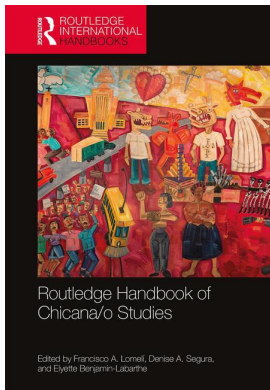
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### The aesthetics of healing and love

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## The aesthetics of healing and love

### An epistemic genealogy of jota/o aesthetic traditions<sup>1</sup>

William A. Calvo-Quirós

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Aesthetics has been an essential part of discourses of control and of the policing of queerness or *jotería*. Nevertheless, aesthetics has also been crucial in the emancipation, self-valorization, and self-determination processes of Latina/o queers, *jota/as*, *tortilleras* (tortilla makers), *maricones* (“faggots”), and *mariposas* (butterflies) – all variations of queerness. It is not only our sexual desires and fantasies that make jota/os unique and disturb others but also the manner in which we approach and customize spaces: in other words, how we “mariconize” the world around us. Therefore, we must ask: How does this process take place? What are some of the maricón or jota/o aesthetic approaches that emerge from our unique experiences?

One afternoon when I was a young boy of about 9 years old, three of my cousins met with me privately at my grandmother’s house. They were concerned about my behavior in public. They wanted to teach me the appropriate way to “be a man” in our elementary school. I was told that because I, their cousin, was too effeminate, they had been teased. For several hours they made me emulate them to learn the “correct” way to walk and talk and carry my books and backpack. They were determined to eradicate my maricón aesthetics and my joto mannerisms once and for all. I tried for a few days to carry myself the way my cousins had shown me, but I failed. I learned that society monitored me very closely, and my safety depended on how well I withstood this intense scrutiny. As a joto-kid, I kept my “mariposa wings” hidden in order to survive, but it was an exhausting affair that required a great deal of energy and vigilance on my part.

Being a jota/o is more than just being queer or homosexual. For me, it clearly includes the intersections of ethnicity, class, religion, cultural citizenship, and sexual boundaries as they have evolved over time. The sexual closet is also an aesthetic closet, since society reads very differently the aesthetics of those in the sexual center and those on the periphery. The heterosexual state, with its always-vigilant eye, constantly enacts its power over all its inhabitants. Being a joto/maricón is not just about my right to decide with whom I am going to engage, emotionally and physically, or about my right to marry or adopt, worship, find employment, and so on; it is also about my aesthetic rights. My sexual transgressions come with clear consequences for how society polices my aesthetic values, rights, and needs. This is more than just my appearance. My *jotería* aesthetic follows me everywhere I go. In this regard, I am always coming out.

Gloria Anzaldúa explains that, in the Western world, aesthetics works as a tyrannical system “dedicated to the validation of itself” (Anzaldúa 1999, p. 90). Society has constructed what I call a set of oppressive epistemologies of taste that frame mainstream notions of what is in good or bad taste, what needs to be preserved and promoted, and what needs to be rejected, eliminated, or sanctioned aesthetically. Just as my cousins did to me, society imposes a series of oppressive epistemic taste values meant to center heterosexuality as the valid point of departure and as reference for all sexual and aesthetic forms. This is why Emma Pérez has argued that we need to “train the eye to see with a decolonial queer gaze” (Pérez 2003, p. 124) in order to understand, read, and unveil what has been forced into invisibility. Jota/o existence already questions the centrality assigned to heterosexual aesthetics. However, we need a jota/o mariposa aesthetic theory that comes from our experience and values.

I do not think it is a coincidence that we jota/os, maricones, and tortilleras (accompanied by feminists and allies) have been at the forefront of the development of Chicana/o aesthetic theory. Let us remember the first-wave pioneering work of Tomás Ybarra-Frausto (1991) on *rasquachismo*; Gloria Anzaldúa (1999) on aesthetics and the self; Chela Sandoval (2000) on “radical semiotics” (p. 186 n. 5); Emma Pérez (1999) on the decoloniality of desires and performance; Ellie Hernández (2009) on the political significance of style; and Alicia Gaspar de Alba (1998) on border aesthetics. Many of these artists, performers, aesthetic activists, and scholars have been forced into invisibility or silenced because of the effects of homophobia and bigotry. Nevertheless they opened the gates to a second wave of jota/o aesthetic scholars such as Richard T. Rodríguez, Luz Calvo, Ramón H. Rivera-Servera, José Esteban Muñoz, Larry La Fountain-Stokes, Alicia Arrizón, and many more. A third wave of scholars is on the way. All this progress is the result of hard work and tears.

So far, for jota/os who are members of the Chicana/o community, concepts such as *rasquachismo* (Ybarra-Frausto 1991) and *domesticana* (Mesa-Bains 1995) have provided a valid framework in which to understand, centralize, and valorize the aesthetic project we have engaged in as a community, particularly through the axioms of race, class, and gender and their intersections with power. However, limiting our analysis of jota/o artists and their productions to these frameworks runs the risk of reducing, flattening, and failing to recognize the complexity of how jota/o sexuality and desire intersect and resignify unique aesthetic interventions. Therefore, how do we talk about jota/o aesthetics within Chicana/o aesthetics? Can we do that? Where do we start?

In this regard, I believe that our jota/o aesthetics has idiosyncratic characteristics. I do not claim that these are exclusive to jota/o cultural interventions, as some of them can also be identified in the context of the larger LGBTQ and the Chicana/o communities. In other words, these aesthetic interventions can be found in other marginalized communities, but they have been customized to accommodate unique jota/o realities. Therefore, we can also use these aesthetic interventions to understand the overall Chicana/o aesthetic productions. I perceive these idiosyncrasies as aesthetic qualities or characteristics that have been amplified or accentuated by jota/o mariposas in order to create new spaces and ruptures in aesthetic life. I identify five central axioms that emphasize our jota/o aesthetic spaces within the context of our Chicana/o and Latina/o experiences. They are (1) coalition as an activist praxis, (2) chaos as order, (3) spatiality, (4) body and pleasure, and (5) healing and love.

### Coalition as an activist praxis

Jon Binnie in his article “Coming Out of Geography: Towards a Queer Epistemology?” has studied the value of camp aesthetics as a site for knowledge production and as a repository of

collective knowledge. Binnie claims that because of the centrality given to heterosexism, as well as the toxic effects of homophobia, queer individuals are forced to develop a complementary aesthetic vision outside the constraints of the dominant normative gaze (Binnie 1997, p. 227). For Binnie, camp in this case exemplifies the unique perception that queer subjects develop in order to make sense of their condition and to challenge heterosexual and heteronormative ways of perceiving reality. As he clarifies,

In this sense camp is highly moral by asserting a right to be different in a society which punishes and refuses to value sexual difference. . . . Camp acts as a kind of insulation, a safe protective distance from homophobia. The shared meanings and values embodied in camp produce a particular queer geographical imagination.

*(Binnie 1997, p. 230)*

Therefore, we should not underestimate the importance of jota/o cultural productions, which can work as venues for the creation of community between and around us. For example, our jota/o *rasquache* interventions allow us to create spaces where others like us can gather, and we can feel safe. Our irreverent jota/o aesthetics, as a cultural mechanism, resists and fights homophobia and racism, creating spaces where we jota/os can live fully as humans and imagine a world where difference is embraced fully. This applies also to some of our word choices, bilingualisms, idiomatic expressions, and mannerisms, which work to keep “strangers” out and maintain spaces free from aesthetic normative rules. In this case, through the extreme specialization of our aesthetic productions, we can create safe spaces and sound geographies in order to survive heteronormative visual and audio assimilation.

José Esteban Muñoz, in *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, contends that camp must be contextualized beyond the limiting realms of representation by understanding how it allows self-empowerment against the pressures of rejection by the dominant culture (Muñoz 1999, p. 120). As Muñoz explains, camp works as an “outing” component for queer sexual minorities and is linked with a “survival mode of identity” (Muñoz 1999, p. 121) that is performed openly in the context of a naturalized phobic state. In this case, queer people of color use camp as a means to “out themselves” from the restrictive “normalized self” created by mainstream culture. Camp aesthetics works to fight the toxic effects created by the enactment of epistemologies of ignorance and injustice. In this case, *rasquachismo* as a unique aesthetic practice of Chicana/os can be understood as a means of survival and reaffirmation, because it creates spaces where non-normativity and difference can exist explicitly as an aesthetic “militant praxis” against modernity.

Jota/o unapologetic presence, as an aesthetic language, offers a visual medium for identity. It allows us to recognize others who are like us, and therefore map a jota/o community. Here, aesthetic recognition becomes possible because we share common codes through which we jota/os operate as a collective. In the process of sharing and recognizing our aesthetic practices as valuable, we reposition our traditionally subjugated and devalued jota/o forms of knowledge at the center of cultural expression. The process of turning our invisibility into visibility informs and reaffirms our *jotería*. As we emerge from the desert of hostility and homophobia, any interaction with jota/o cultural production becomes an oasis in which to rest and recharge. These jota/o spaces allow us to lower our guard, relax, and recover from the exhausting work of trying to survive in a world that has denied our existence or wants us dead. Our jota/o aesthetic interventions allow us to envision and create non-homophobic geographies.

As Muñoz has explained, through the performance of our aesthetics we jota/os do more than just question and dissect what is normative, correct, appropriate, or expected in modernity;

we “disassemble” those notions, and reconstruct ourselves using the parts to build an alternative visual reality (Muñoz 1999, p. 196). As a political move, dissident subjects use “the majoritarian culture as raw material to make a new world” (Muñoz 1999, p. 196). Through aesthetics, jota/os construct new subjectivities and new spaces of emancipation and valorization. Here, our *jotería* emerges as a means to recreate an alternative world, what Cherríe Moraga calls a “Queer Aztlán” (2003, p. 259). As she helps us understand, this project of emancipation is not self-contained or limited only to the jota/o community. On the contrary, the creation of this new queer (or jota/o) Aztlán provides a model of a new type of family and society for the entire Chicana/o community. This jota/o Aztlán constitutes, in my opinion, one of our crucial contributions to the decolonial project. Our jota/o visual interventions are part of the larger life-project of transformation inscribed in the borderlands.

### Chaos as order

A jota/o pride event, a performance by a drag queen, or even an altar may appear as chaos and randomness to the untrained eye. However, things are in place, organized by a complex, sophisticated system. Using Marguerite R. Waller’s work on order and chaos, we can argue that nontraditional communities have been forced to develop their own ways of doing things, ways that can be perceived erroneously as apparent chaos but that can be better understood as a complex system of “random orderliness” (Waller 2005, p. 158). As she explains, order (as one of the myths of modernity) works as a tool with which to impose and police particular epistemic aesthetic rules. In this sense, society uses notions about chaos to question and sanction the validity of vernacular productions under the premise that they are not rigorous, do not follow an order, or lack a method. As Waller points out, chaos is a threat to the aesthetics of modernity, as it questions the rigid “natural laws” promoted by positivism. In this case, jota/os are mobile sites of (dis)order or dissident order.

Our jota/o relationship to chaos constitutes a move towards survival, linked to our histories. It is defined by two main elements. First is the understanding that chaos and the decodification of jota/o signifiers works as a system that regulates the distribution of and disseminates information. Chaos works as a way to hide and unveil information about our *jotería*. Chaos is deceiving. Behind the apparent disorder, a defined pathway of information threads through our cultural productions. Second, chaos also works as a flexible mode for dealing with oppression. For jota/os, chaos functions as an aesthetic medicine for the effects of a rigid state heterosexuality, as a technology for flexibility and adaptability. Therefore, what is impossible for us, as socially rejected subjects, becomes tangible in our drag shows, parades, parties, outfits, poetry, altares, paints, hairdo, makeup, and impersonations. These aesthetic maneuvers allow us to survive, and along the way, we may have some fun!

Dick Hebdige explains, referring to punk culture, that “in order to communicate disorder, the appropriate language must first be selected, even if it is to be subverted. For punk to be dismissed as chaos, it had first to ‘make sense’ as noise” (Hebdige 1979, p. 88). Furthermore, he argues that “chaos . . . was only possible because the style itself was so thoroughly ordered. The chaos is cohered as a meaningful whole [for unity]” (Hebdige 1979, p. 113). In other words, chaos emerges not when we ignore the aesthetic codes of the mainstream, but rather when we purposely manipulate them to create aesthetic noise. In the case of jota/os, chaos originates from the mastery of semiotic codes. Because jota/os are inscribed within a hostile system, constantly struggling with an imposed vulnerability, they need to create their own aesthetics-based support system, one that is extremely efficient, organized, and structured for survival. In order to prevent harassment and create my own jota/o aesthetic narratives, I had to be fully versed in how both

mainstream and Chicana/o aesthetic systems function. “Making sense” of my *jotería* was possible in part after I understood how the mainstream and other *jota/os* read me.

Mastering chaos is a key element of *jota/o* subversive visual identity, as the variety of elements allows us to build multiple points of connectivity and discourse. Rather than depending on single narratives, *jota/os*, as borderland subjects, create objects and spaces that speak to a diverse audience and target multiple needs at once, making them more adaptable and flexible and thus less vulnerable. This intentional chaos created by the multiplicity of aesthetic elements allows *jota/os*, as well as Chicana/os in general, to be less concerned with each individual element and more attentive to the overarching narrative that unifies our compositions. Mastering chaos allows us to build a collage of multiple objects from different places and geographies without compromising core aesthetic values. In borderland spaces, multiple realities coexist in harmony because these spaces are a reflection of multiple existences. As *joto/as*, we have developed a tolerance for ambiguity and contradiction and a taste for diversity.

This is evident in the aesthetics of drag shows, which construct visual coherence through the apparently chaotic display of symbols and images in their performances. The presence of multiple textures, treatments, colors, and materials and the juxtaposing of images from different geographies and time periods may confuse the outside observer. However, once observers insert themselves into the glamour and fantasy created by the performer – through clothing, music, lighting – they discover the existence of a thread that connects all the components. Unity prevails over rigor and formality. This also applies to our *jota/o* lives, where we are able to unify and reassemble a series of chaotic and painful events, not as victims but rather as master crafters of beautiful masterpieces stretched over many generations. Every second in our lives testifies to the victory of our existence.

## Spatiality

*Jotería* informs the way we *jota/os* deal with physical spaces and how we display the objects around us. I am referring here not only to limited notions of taste but also to our understandings of how power works and affects people in our immediate environment. Most *jota/os* develop a different spatial awareness in order to navigate the geosocial and geopolitical terrains around them. For example, as a kid, I knew that the road between my elementary school and my house was one of the most dangerous places for me. To avoid being harassed, I had two choices: stay in the school library after my classes, or be the first student leaving school and run home faster than anyone else. Since I was not an athlete, I decided to stay and read in the school library, and it paid off.

There were many other *joto*-unfriendly places, including playgrounds and the church. Many of them were marked by the presence of the police, the “*migra*” (or immigration agents), tourists, our parents, gangs, and so on. As *jota/os* we understand that there are official and unofficial blueprints of the metropolis that overlap and sometimes even contradict themselves. As a *maricón*, I found that navigating the city was always situational, always conditioned on my gender performance, my *joto* desires, my class, my race, the perception of beauty, my age, and so forth. As Eddy F. Alvarez Jr. explains in his work on queer Chicana/o spatiality in Los Angeles, *jota/o* geographies are not only physical but also emotional (Alvarez 2012, p. 2). They carry with them *jota/o* histories of love and fear, of our dreams and desires. Some of these places can be safe at one moment and fatally unsafe at another (Alvarez 2012, p. 12). As Alvarez explains, *jota/o* maps are “made of the tangible and intangible, of the physical and metaphorical, the literary, of emotions, dreams, [and] memories” (Alvarez 2012, p. 13). Furthermore, a *jota/o* map is one that is “queer and brown, defies city limits, is transnational in nature, [and] is congruent with



the interconnected histories, local and transnational, of queer Latinos in the city” (Alvarez 2012, p. 13). Within the landscape of our lives, marked by the intersection of many contradictions, we jota/os are able to navigate almost the impossible, fixing our gaze on our own collective and individual success and happiness.

## Body and pleasure

Cindy Cruz reminds us that our brown bodies have memory, and they are full of scars. These scars tell their story of triumphs and despair. Our jota/o bodies not only hold a collective and individual memory; they also are also witnesses to the effect of colonial occupation (Cruz 2001, p. 660). As target subjects of a homophobic state, jota/os utilize their bodies as holders of knowledge. When I was around 7 or 8 years old, several neighborhood kids attacked me. While they were calling me maricón, one of them stabbed me in the face with a wooden stick. They ran away once they saw blood. These kids enacted social violence, and I was a target because I was a joto. In the hospital, the doctor explained to my grandmother that I was “very lucky,” as the stick had missed one of my eyes by only a few centimeters. This attack left two scars, one between my eyebrows and another on my soul. Many years later, a boyfriend asked me why I decided not to have plastic surgery to reduce the scar. I told him that this scar works as a constant reminder of the homophobic reality of my life and the lives of others like me. Our bodies bear witness to the process of survival, resiliency, and joy.

Nan Alamilla Boyd and Horacio N. Roque-Ramírez, in *Bodies of Evidence: The Practice of Queer Oral History*, argue that “the body, and how and what it remembers, should be central to all oral history work” (Boyd & Roque-Ramírez 2012, p. 7). For them, “body-based knowing . . . asserts that the sexuality of the body (or bodily desires) is an important, indeed material, aspect of the practice of doing oral history” (Boyd & Roque-Ramírez 2012, p. 1) and “in the production of queer oral histories” (Boyd & Roque-Ramírez 2012, p. 7). As they explain, jota/o body knowledge encompasses not only those aspects related to the “memories of disease, trauma, and death” (Boyd & Roque-Ramírez 2012, p. 9) but also the tacit, nonverbal, and hidden communications involved in the process and exchange of oral history (Boyd & Roque Ramírez 2012, p. 8).

For me, being a joto, both publicly and privately, has to do with recognizing and reclaiming my rights to feel, receive, and give pleasure. For jota/os, entering the domain of desire and the body, as well as of identity, cannot be separated from discourses of colonialism and citizenship or from ways in which our body’s knowledge is constructed. Embracing our desires is a central element in our jota/o politics of pleasure. This is why I believe that our jota/o aesthetics is embedded in our sensual consciousness as an epistemology of pleasure that is constituted within our bodies. I see our jota/o bodies not as victim corpses but rather as semiotic seducers and sensual meaning shifters for social change. It is paradoxical that our sexualities are condemned and forced into invisibility while our jota/o bodies are read as hypersensual, excessive, and disruptive. Nevertheless, it is because of this hypervigilance over our bodies that we can subversively amplify our visual statements. In other words, we twist the oppressive gaze of the state into a tool for amplification that spreads our emancipatory discourses. This is why, during a community march such as those for immigrant rights in 2006, we jota/os, rather than hide, have utilized our “inherent excessiveness” to expand and move forward our agenda for recognition and change. Jota/o hypervisibility is an effective tool for change because our bodies are hyper-monitored.

It is within our bodies that we jota/os first created and claimed our jota/o Aztlán, in part because our bodies represent, by their mere existence, an in-the-flesh counter-discourse to hegemonic ownership. For the homophobic state, the brown bodies of jota/os are unincorporated

territories that must be conquered in order to preserve the apparent stability and balance of the nation-state and its heterosexual epistemologies. Fighting the imposition of these “epistemologies of taste” is essential for jota/o survival, as our bodies are territories of a colonial project. For jota/os, our bodies emerge as territories with our own epistemic set of aesthetics. We refuse colonization by mastering the aesthetics around our bodies and our fashion, by loving our curves and our movements, by acknowledging our mestiza/o shapes, and by keeping ourselves alive, healthy, and sane as much as possible. Consequently, in our pursuit of happiness and justice, we understand that our physical, mental, and spiritual health is not negotiable!

## Healing and love

Colonial genocide has spiritual components. It is not coincidental that many cultures have correlated queerness with special spiritual sensibilities. Love and healing, for jota/os, is a lifelong project that involves the contested territories of the soul and the spirit. Our trajectories of love mark our jota/o histories.

In many ways, I am a lucky joto, one surrounded by people who love and support me. I am not an exception; many Latina/o Chicana/o families choose to love us. The fact that my family has an openly joto member has changed many things. It has opened the door for other family members to be different. It has reinscribed a new typology of family within my family. It has transformed our family and extended relationships with institutions like the Catholic Church and the nation-state, as well as our perspectives about the politics around sex and reproductive rights, by recentering the importance of pleasure. It has changed how we tell the history of our family, as we look back and search for queer members in the past. It has reframed the centrality of love to the definition of a family.

Being a joto is as much about the collective maturing of our communities and families as it is about our individual transformations. It is because of the love for a jota/o daughter or son that some of our parents are capable of overcoming centuries of misinformation and homophobia – as is the case in a growing number of Latina/o Chicana/o families. Something dies and something more powerful is born in these subversive acts of love. The love for our jota/o brothers, sisters, uncles, and parents transforms families, towns, institutions, and policies. Love creates long-lasting miracles.

Nevertheless, much work still needs to be done, as many of us jota/os are rejected by our families – sometimes violently. As Moraga tells us, “Lesbians and gay men were not envisioned as members of the ‘house’” (Moraga 1993, p. 159), and therefore we have been forced to make “familia from scratch” (Moraga 1986, p. 75). Furthermore, Richard T. Rodríguez, in *Next of Kin: The Family in Chicano/a Cultural Politics* (2009), elaborates on this process of creating alternative kinship models in the context of the Chicana/o community. As he argues, we have been engaged in loving relationships with others in many ways, but this love has not always been reciprocated. Because of this, we have built alternative networks of love. We have understood that part of our jota/o emancipatory project includes recognition of our rights to be loved and the systematic practice of recovering the love stories hidden in our community histories. We must honor our jota/o *tíos* and *tías* (uncles and aunts), great aunts and great uncles, and those special “friends of the family” who came before us. We must recognize those who loved others like us. We must trace, with respect and dignity, our genealogies of love and rewrite our family histories, without fear and as an expression of love. We are the product of all our love relationships.

Each jota/o develops a unique archive of epistemologies of healing. As a borderland subject, I follow healing practices that are a mix of Indigenous, Christian, and humanist elements. My life is a mosaic of Catholic saints and holiday rituals, but also of *curandera/os* and *bruja/os* (healers



and sorcerers), that work together to provide meaningful explanations and epistemic remedies for everyday struggles. In my case, as a joto *nepantlero* (someone who occupies the in-between), I have created unique healing products that have emerged not from mere syncretism but rather from my simultaneous existence within multiple worlds that are sometimes contradictory. For example, I remember walking as a kid with my grandmother around the city in search of herbs and remedies. What appeared to be garden decoration plants for many were a source of healing knowledge for my *abuela* (grandmother). Ironically, it is because of her that I grew up attending Catholic rosaries, posadas, and praying to Saint Anthony for a good man in my life.

The spirituality of jota/os, as people of color, has been shaped by the reality of our mortality, since homophobia and racism define our access to health care. For many of us, AIDS has directly affected our spiritual lives, since many of our friends, classmates, mentors, and loved ones have died as a result of this epidemic. As we know, the HIV virus has disproportionately affected jota/os and communities of color in the United States. In my case, AIDS, more than anything else, has defined my relationship to mortality. As a young joto, I grew up with the fear that I would die of AIDS. Several of my friends have died of the disease, including one of my life partners, Brian, in 2003. We jota/os have a long tradition of activism in the fight for access to HIV/AIDS medication and health care. We helped organize ACT UP from its beginnings, though this history is not always recognized. The truth is that we have lost a generation of jota/o activists, scholars, and mentors, and we are dealing with the consequences of this loss. This is why, for many of us, our living spaces, our homes, or our bodies have become installations, or *altares* (altars), for the transcending memory of deceased love ones and living friends in need. In this sense, every joto/a has an altar, sometimes invisible, as we carry it in our hearts.

I believe that in our jota/o Aztlán, the spiritual and the corporeal are not separated, but fused. Our jota/o spiritual aesthetics is informed by our need to heal the social body from the effects of homophobia, oppression, and violence. As Laura Pérez explains in her book *Chicana Art*, borderland “spirituality . . . is inseparable from questions of social justice, with respect to class, gender, sexuality, culture, and ‘race’” (L Pérez 2007, p. 20). For jota/os, our spiritual aesthetics is nurtured by, as Pérez explains, the “conscious [and unconscious] acts of healing the cultural *susto*; that is, the ‘frightening’ of the spirit” (L Pérez 2007, p. 21). Therefore, our healing borderland practices emerge as part of our collective process meant to suture the dismembered brown body. As many *tortilleras* have pointed out (Cruz 2001; Anzaldúa 1999), suturing the Coyolxauhqui within constitutes an essential component of our healing project as a way to keep recrafting our communities and ourselves.

This suturing of the human and the transcendental, I believe, is behind the aesthetic work of queer painter and digital media artist Alma López in her piece “Our Lady” (2001). In this case, her digital print becomes an offering to la Virgen de Guadalupe, one that recognizes the Virgin as both fully human and fully holy. This understanding allows López to recenter the value of pleasure and desire as part of the spiritual character of the Virgin as a full woman. The artist employs a non-normative, *rasquache* aesthetic (Calvo 2011, p. 112) to create this subversive intervention in which the sensual and the spiritual are connected.

Because we were not meant to survive, most jota/os have forged a unique spiritual maturity, one located on the margins of traditional institutions. This maturity has allowed us to focus our energies on fighting colonialism and oppression and to assemble an archive of healing spaces and practices that fulfill our spiritual needs. Laura Pérez points to the use of “spirit glyphs” by Chicanas who repurpose cultural symbols of “gendered, raced, and sexed spirituality” and create images that are “pre- or postgendered, powerful, and empowering” (L Pérez 1998, pp. 41–42). In this case, Chicana art conveys “ancient but relevant alternative knowledges” (L Pérez 2007, p. 27) for the artists and their communities. Chicana artists become “glyph-makers” and “sage

readers” (L Pérez 2007, p. 27) for sociopolitical and spiritual healing. These artists engage in a process of change by “reclaiming and reformulating spiritual worldviews that are empowering to them” (L Pérez 2007, p. 21). Here, art productions and aesthetics become instruments for “citing or constructing culturally hybrid spiritualities in their work [and] mapping of pathways beyond . . . alienation and disempowerment” (L Pérez 2007, p. 22). I argue that jota/os have become in many cases tangible “miracles” of space reclamation, social change, organized resiliency, and spiritual enlightenment for everyone.

In summary, I argue that all the jota/o aesthetic elements described previously – coalition as an activist praxis, chaos as order, spatiality, and body and pleasure – are, in essence, practices of at-large jota/o *curanderismo* for healing. In this sense, jota/o culture productions are in many ways deliberate and collective offerings and sacrifices for the construction of a new world; they inscribe new alternative spiritual geographies to honor our mutual love and collective holiness. We know, deep in the silence of our hearts, where home is, and we will keep walking until we all get there.

Many years after that infamous afternoon with my cousins at my grandmother’s house, I am finally claiming my own joto ways to walk, talk, and carry my books. Not as “false images of behavior,” as some antigay groups have proposed, but as true aesthetic forms for my joto emancipation, as epistemic tools for my happiness and my fulfillment as a person. I am no longer walking my joto ways alone. Instead I am a member of an ancestral tribe, accompanied by many other jota/os, tortilleras, and allies. For us, the most powerful, sustainable, and lasting force for transformation is love, and we are witness to that.

## Note

1 This article first appeared in *Aztlán* 39.1 (2014) and is reprinted with permission.

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## Part VI

# Violence, resistance, and empowerment

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### Introduction

The section concentrates on a wide variety of issues related to violence, resistance, and/or empowerment as manifested in migration, media, activism, and the search by Chicanas/os for a mode of expression they can call their own. Such topics cast a long shadow on the kinds of social pressures experienced by Chicana/o communities; for example, grappling with the effects of sexual violence among migrants within local and global structures of power that are often brutal. We also encounter detailed discussion on the role of media and how Chicanas/os and other Latinas/os have had to negotiate such mediums to resist cultural encroachment by the mainstream, but also as a way to counteract political disenfranchisement by resorting to the creation of their own media outlets. Chicanas/os are resourceful in their abilities to decipher the role of social organizations that exercise state violence against this community. The negative representations of Mexican migrants as law-breaking “illegal aliens,” working-class Chicano men as dangerous “machos”, the “virgin/whore” stereotypes associated with Chicanas and Mexican immigrant women, and intolerance towards gay/lesbian/gender-nonconforming subjects mask the state-sanctioned structural violence that pushes subjects into the shadows of the working poor and the migrant stream. How this kind of violence operates and is intertwined with multifaceted interpersonal, psychic, spiritual, or institutional violence perpetrated against Chicanas/os and Mexican migrants is examined in this section. In charting this landscape of pain and negation, a history of survival emerges through the devices of inventiveness and wherewithal by constructing forms of defense (i.e., radio stations and newspapers) in order to preserve their values, mores, and attitudes. At the same time, Chicanas/os are represented as not only possessing social and historical agency but developing the ability to navigate and resist hegemonic discourse and institutions that have systematically undermined Chicanas/os’ efforts in their quest for cultural and political autonomy. In other cases, the border functions as a war zone where feminicide has been rampant in the city of Juárez and where books are smuggled to counter state-sanctioned censorship. At the same time, Chicana/os are represented as not only possessing social and historical agency but also having the ability to figure out how to resist hegemonic discourse and institutions that have systematically undermined Chicanas/os’ efforts in their quest for cultural and political autonomy. The common threads of violence, resistance, and empowerment are

considered powerful motivators to seek solutions as well as strategies for coexisting with other cultures of the United States. An important area of consideration is how domination is perceived and experienced via language and how Chicanas/as, and Latinas/os in general, have struggled to legitimate their modes of expression by often claiming Spanglish as their unique contribution to the linguistic map within the United States. This encapsulates their quest of achieving new forms of social empowerment and cultural resilience. The collection of essays in this section clearly intersects with topical concerns of other sections, but their originality resides in how they vividly identify the origins and sources of abuses and marginalization that are often unseen or unnoticed by the mainstream culture.